

Parental Values in Protestant Primary Schools: a new survey

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ON 19th APRIL 2011, the Minister for Education and Skills, Ruairi Quinn TD, announced the establishment of a Forum on Patronage and Pluralism in the Primary Sector to consider key questions about the current models of primary school patronage in the Republic of Ireland. In making the announcement, the Minister said that Irish society had changed significantly and that these changes had led to increased demand for multi-denominational and non-denominational schools as well as increased provision of Irish language schools. Interested parties were invited to make submissions to the Forum by 7th June addressing three key themes: (a) establishing parental and community demand for diversity; (b) managing the transfer or divesting of patronage and (c) diversity within a school or small number of schools in a locality. Representatives of various management bodies and other key stakeholders were invited to attend the three-day sitting of the Forum in late June to discuss their submissions in depth with the independent advisory group.

In order to adequately prepare its submission, the General Synod Board of Education, with the support of the Church of Ireland Primary School Managers' Association and the Church of Ireland College of Education, designed a detailed parental survey. In early May this survey was posted to all primary schools under Church of Ireland, Presbyterian, Methodist and Society of Friends patronage and was distributed internally to the parents of all Junior Infants and Sixth Class children. Surveys were returned from 166 of all schools under Protestant management (this represented 85% of all such primary schools in the Republic of Ireland). In total, 2,143 surveys were returned before the summer holidays. In spite of the very narrow time frame for the collection and analysis of the data, the team representing the General Synod Board of Education were able to use key elements of the material during its session with the advisory group on 22nd June.

The survey was in five sections. Section 1 asked respondents to give some background information about themselves and their partners including religious affiliation. Section 2 asked questions about their reasons for selecting their child's school. Section 3 asked questions about their expectations of their child's school. Section 4 asked about their experience of the school, and Section 5 asked about their own religious beliefs and practice. A full analysis of the survey has now been completed and it provides a snapshot of the views and attitudes of parents in early summer 2011. We provide a summary of some key findings of the survey focusing here on religious identities of parent respondents, their views on school patronage and religious education and some information about parental beliefs and religious practice.

Religious diversity in the school population

The school population shows a high level of religious diversity. The distribution of different Christian denominations and the integration of people of other faiths and of none indicate that primary schools under Protestant management provide an inclusive service through which people of different religious beliefs are educated together.

Religious Affiliation

Respondents were asked to indicate whether they were “Christian”, “Other Faith” or “No Religion”. In the case of the first two categories, respondents were asked to “please specify”. Based on their responses, six categories were developed:

Main Protestant. This encompassed the four denominations who are patrons of the Primary Schools being surveyed – Church of Ireland, Methodist, Presbyterian, Society of Friends.

Roman Catholic. Those who declared themselves as Catholic or Roman Catholic.

Other Protestant¹. The category includes a number of mainly evangelical groups

Christian - unspecified. This refers to those who did not give specific information, having declared themselves to be Christian.

Other Faith Buddhist, Hindu, Muslim.

No Religion Those who declared themselves as having no religion.

	Respondent	Partner	Total	%age
Main Protestant	932	698	1630	38.0
Roman Catholic	438	527	965	22.5
Christian - unspecified	446	412	858	20.0
Other Protestant	136	104	240	5.6
Other faith	24	23	47	1.1
No religion	136	181	317	7.4
No information	34	198	229	5.3

Table 1. The religious affiliation of respondents and their partners

Table 1 shows that, in total, 92.4% of the respondents indicated that they were Christian. 43.4% belonged to one of the four Patron groups. 6.3% belonged to what was termed “Other Protestant”. 20.4% of respondents were Roman Catholic – the majority denomination in the country. A further 20.8% described themselves as Christians, but did not indicate denominational affiliation.

The distribution of different Christian denominations and the inclusion of people of other faiths and of none, indicate that the Protestant schools cater for a high level of religious diversity. There is a strong commitment to serving the community in an inclusive way and there is evidence that a variety of religious traditions are being satisfactorily educated together.

The religious diversity in Protestant schools is not just in terms of the grouping of different religious affiliations. A comparison of the profile of respondents and that of their partners indicates that many families themselves model a level of religious diversity through inter-marriage. The Protestant schools attract and serve this religiously diverse group.

6.3% of respondents indicated that they had “no religion”. In subsequent analysis, a portion of these respondents indicated that they believed in a God who loved them and that they tried to live according to Gospel values. This indicates that the “no

¹ These groups included Baptist, Jehovah Witness and denominations from African homelands.

religion” group is a complex category. In some cases, it indicates non-affiliation to institutions rather than a rejection of religious beliefs.

Parental Views on School Patronage

	N	Very Important or Important	Moderate	Little or No importance
Main Protestant	932	73.3	18.1	8.6
Other Christians	1044	43.7	31.5	24.7
Non Christian/No Religion	160	10.2	16.5	73.4
		54.1	24.4	21.5

Table 2. The percentage of respondents within different faith affiliations who indicated positive, moderate or low support for the importance of Church Patronage in the choice of school

There was strong support for the Protestant ethos of the schools from respondents who were affiliated to the main Protestant denominations. Approximately 70% of this cohort of respondents said that both the institutional aspects (church patronage and link to the local faith community) were important reasons for choosing the school. Also, 70% chose the school because of the opportunity given by the Religious Education programme *Follow Me*.

For other Christian groups, for whom the main Protestant patrons were not their faith community, 43.7% gave a positive response to the importance of Church Patronage, and 31.5% were moderate. For many of this group, faith formation for their children was the important issue and they were less concerned about who ran the school. They found the general ethos positive and supportive of these aims. Others in this group, while seeming neutral to many issues in Religious Education as their own personal goals, ended up very pleased with their children’s experience of the school in this regard.

For the non-Christians or respondents of No Religion, 10.2% were positive about church patronage and 16.5% said it was moderately important in their choice of school. This confirmed the complex nature of this group and the openness of some of them to learning about Christianity. Like the non-“Main Protestant” Christians, this group seemed very happy with their choice of school. Whereas church patronage was not important to them, it did not seem to be an issue in their experience of the school.

Religious Affiliation	Church Ethos			Religious Education		
	Church Patronage	Link to local faith community	% choosing priority	To learn about Christian faith	To learn about Jesus and Christianity	% choosing priority
Main Protestant	73.3	67.6	24.0	69.7	67.5	3.4
Other Protestant	41.4	38.5	5.1	68.2	72.4	20.6
Roman Catholic	35.3	38.3	4.3	47.0	48.8	0.7
Christian- unspecified	52.5	52.3	10.3	58.9	58.9	4.0
Other faith	31.8	21.7	0.0	28.6	22.7	0.0
No Religion	6.6	5.2	0.0	11.1	6.7	0.0
Overall	54.3	51.9	14.0	58.4	57.7	3.8

Table 3. The average percentage of positive (“important” or “very important”) responses to the four items on the Faith scale. Two items refer to Church ethos and two items to Religious Education. The responses are broken down by religious affiliation of the respondents. The Table also shows the percentage of each group that chose items as priority reasons for choosing a primary school.

Two survey questions referred to church ethos and two to Religious Education (Table 3). Not surprisingly, the greatest support for church ethos came from the Main Protestant respondents and 24% of this group chose one of these two items as the most important reason for choosing the school. The focus of decision-making for this group is related to church affiliation. Clearly, there is a strong element of support and loyalty among the Main Protestant community for their schools.

The “Other Protestant” group showed support for Church ethos, but were much more supportive of the Religious Education programme. When they chose an item from this scale as the priority item, over 20% chose one related to religious education. Given that this group represents mainly evangelical denominations, this emphasis is not surprising.

Over half the “Christian – unspecified” group held Church ethos as important and 10% chose it as the most important reason for choosing the school. A slightly higher percentage thought that the focus of religious education was important and 4% chose it as the most important reason for choosing the school.

Despite the ambivalence of the terms “Church” and “local faith community” for them, over one third of Catholic respondents were supportive of church ethos, with approximately one half thinking the religious education programme was important. Some of the Roman Catholic respondents were partners in a mixed Catholic-Protestant marriage, which explains some of the support. However, there was also support from Roman Catholic couples, indicating that they felt accepted and supported in their faith issues within the school.

The support given by the “Other Faith” group to church ethos and the religious education programme, with the specifically Christian focus of the items, indicates a sense of multi-cultural acceptance and adaptation. It appears that a fair proportion of this group is supportive of the religious values of the school, and feel that their own faith issues are catered for.

Somewhat surprisingly, there was an element of support for both church ethos and for religious education among the “No Religion” group. This indicates that reading this category as having a uniform “anti-religious” identity may be somewhat problematic.

Religious Affiliation	N	Choosing the school	Expectations
		Faith Curriculum 2 questions	Faith Development 6 questions
Main Protestant	859	68.6	58.2
Other Protestant	134	70.3	63.4
Roman Catholic	415	48.0	41.1
Christian- unspecified	414	58.9	49.4
Other faith	23	25.7	30.7
No Religion	127	8.9	5.3

Table 4. A comparison of the average positive response for two faith based questions in relation to the reasons for choosing a school, and six faith based questions in respondents’ expectations of the school.

In asking parents why they chose a particular school, two faith outcome items were included in the list – the opportunity to learn about Christian faith and the opportunity to learn about Jesus and Christianity. Overall, parents were quite positive about these values. However, when it came to naming expectations of specific faith outcomes in the curriculum, they seemed less sure of themselves (Table 5). A close examination of these responses indicates possible contradictions. Of the 1217 respondents who indicated that the opportunity to learn about Christianity was an important reason for choosing the school, 173 (14%) did not expect the school to develop an understanding of the Christian faith. Similarly, 24% of those who thought that “the opportunity to learn about Jesus and Christianity” was an important reason for choosing the school did not rate the expectation that the school would “help pupils to come to know Jesus” as important.

Religious Affiliation	Understand Christian Faith	Teach Gospel values	Help pupils know Jesus	Teach RE at the level of other subjects	Encourage pupils to attend services	Teach pupils to pray
Main Protestant	70.7	58.9	59.4	54.4	56.9	49.0
Other Protestant	67.2	75.4	66.9	57.5	55.2	58.5
Roman Catholic	52.1	41.7	43.0	35.6	37.4	36.6
Christian- unspecified	60.4	50.5	49.3	45.3	45.3	44.6
Other faith	19.1	14.3	45.5	43.5	43.5	18.2
No Religion	5.9	6.7	5.2	6.7	3.7	3.7
	59.8	50.8	50.7	45.9	46.8	42.9

Table 5. The average percentage of positive (“important” or “very important”) responses to the six items on the Faith Formation scale, broken down by religious affiliation of the respondents.

Each of the faith groups bar one scored the generic item “understand the Christian faith” as the most important of these six questions on the Faith Formation scale (Table 5) - the “Other Protestants” preferring “Teach Gospel values”.) The more specific questions related to gospel values and knowing Jesus in general scored approximately 9% lower. Questions related to religious practice – “attending services” and being “taught to pray” scored 13-17% lower. Less than half the respondents thought that Religious Education should be taught at the same level as other subjects. This could be interpreted to mean that Religious Education should not be taught in school alongside other subjects, or it could mean that it is a different type of subject, and it should maintain that status. The pattern of thinking behind these responses was not clear.

There is considerable variation within the Faith Formation scale based on Religious Affiliation. The “Other Protestant” group had the highest expectations of school in relation to faith issues, consistently outscoring other groups. On the item “Teach Gospel values”, they scored 16.5% more than any other group. For the item “Helping pupils to know Jesus”, the difference was 7.5% and for “Teach pupils to pray”, it was 9.5% .

To conclude

The survey distributed to parents in May 2011 explored the attitudes and values of parents in Protestant Primary Schools. It elicited information on what parents thought important in choosing a school, the expectations they had of what the school would do

for their children and how well they thought the school was doing. The information covered a wide range of school-related topics – governance, academic excellence, social development and pastoral care of pupils, religious education and faith formation, inclusion and involvement of parents.

The survey gave a very detailed picture of the level of faith and cultural diversity in the population of the primary schools under Protestant patronage. The schools cater for a broad range of different Christian groups as well as people of other faiths and those who described themselves as being of no belief. We know that languages other than English are spoken in the homes of 10.6% of all respondents. These included a range of European, African and Asian languages.

The analysis of the survey has given us an insight into the life of primary schools under the patronage of the Church of Ireland, the Presbyterian and Methodist Churches and the Society of Friends through the eyes of parents whose children are at the beginning or end of their time in those schools. The survey results demonstrate universally high levels of support by parents for their children's schools with regard to social and academic development, their capacity to develop a sense of community in children and parents' own sense of involvement and inclusion in the school.

The diversity of views on faith formation and religious education reflects the religious diversity among the parents. There is very strong support among Protestants from the main denominations for Church involvement in schools and for religious education. Other groups are generally supportive of religious education and less concerned about who runs the schools.

A striking feature of the results is the universally high approval from all groups of what the schools are doing. This includes a high level of satisfaction with the way the schools promote faith issues. Whereas respondents sought a school for their children with very varied expectations, especially in the area of faith, their experience of the school seemed to be highly satisfactory. It would seem that faith issues are seen in a holistic way as part of what a child should learn about. Some parents are very committed to this dimension of education. Others are less interested but in general do not seem to be antagonistic or negative. Their sense of inclusion in the school and the clear benefits for their children result in a tolerance and acceptance of the religious dimension, and these parents are pleased with the outcome.

It appears from the views of parent respondents that schools under Protestant church patronage make a very valuable contribution to the lives of children and to the wider society. This is reflected in a strong ethos of academic excellence, pastoral care of the individual pupil and acceptance of diversity. There is a commitment to holistic education that is inclusive of the religious dimension of human development and culture. This is seen to enhance other values in education and is not simply an added extra.

The Patronage Forum was established to facilitate the exploration of parental and community demand for diversity. The responses to our survey indicate that our schools cater for a broad range of both cultural and belief diversity and appear to be doing so in ways that are at least satisfactory to the large majority of parents whose children attend our primary schools.

It was clear from the submissions and presentations by both the National Parents Council and the body representing primary principals and deputy principals (the IPPN) to the Minister's Forum in June 2011 that there is no evidence of a blanket demand and universal desire for significant changes in school patronage among parents or school leaders. Our survey results demonstrate that parents of children attending our primary schools are very happy with their experiences of the schools across a broad range of measures. We take a very positive view of the diversity of school patronage that currently exists and would strongly argue that our schools are a core part of that diversity of provision.