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NEWS FOCUS

Children and parents will pay the price for Bruton's surrender to church power on the 'baptism barrier'

When it comes to priorities for a new Education Minister, one would have thought a law that discriminates against children on religious grounds would be first on the agenda. Apparently not, writes Colette Brown

According to Richard Bruton, the so-called 'baptism barrier', which prevents unbaptised children from attending their local de facto state school, is here to stay.

Courtesy of section 7(3)(c) of the Equal Status Act 2000, schools with a religious patronage - 96pc of primary schools in Ireland - can admit a child of that denomination in preference to others.

Given that more than 90pc of the State's 3,200 primary schools are under the patronage of the Catholic Church and that there are a mere 80 multidenominational schools, located in just 19 counties, children from minority faiths and none are routinely denied entry to their local schools.

Meanwhile, many parents opt to baptise their children, not because of any religious conviction but because they don't want their children to suffer when the time comes to enrol them in school.

Instead of repealing this law as a first step to ensuring the equal treatment of every child in Ireland, a succession of ministers have promised to work towards divesting Catholic-run schools to other patrons.

To date, there has been lots of talk about the need to divest schools and little action, with even Archbishop Diarmuid Martin recently accusing the "educational establishment" in the church of "dragging their feet".

The modest ambition of the last government was that 50 schools would be divested - but to date, only eight have changed hands. Of these, just two are in buildings vacated by the Catholic Church and just one - a Church of Ireland school - has transferred patronage.

With the church evidently refusing to countenance any dilution in its monopoly control of the State's primary schools, Mr Bruton has evidently decided to capitulate and change tack.

At the weekend, he announced that community national schools, run by local education boards (formerly VECs), were his preferred option when it came to Catholic schools divesting patronage.

While Educate Together schools provide religious education, teaching children about a range of different religions without preferring any one, community national schools provide religious instruction and faith formation to children.

In order to do this, pupils are divided along religious lines and segregated for religious instruction during the school day.

So Catholic children form one group, other Christians another, Muslims a third and the unlikely combination of "humanists, Buddhists and Hindus" a fourth.

It is worth noting that representatives from the Catholic Church were the only religious group to demand this kind of segregation for religious instruction.

Members of the Church of Ireland and Methodist religions specifically cautioned against it, with Canon John McCullough stating that it was "inappropriate to separate denominational groups for religious education as this runs counter to the concept of a school providing inclusive education".

Documents released under Freedom of Information to RTÉ a number of years ago also revealed that VEC members had similar concerns about this model.

Specifically, in 2008, they warned that it could be perceived as "the segregation of largely native white Catholic children from largely non-white newcomer children on religious grounds".

Education Equality, which campaigns for equality in the provision of education to children, reiterated those concerns yesterday.

"Segregation is something we should be working against, rather than actively encouraging. Anecdotal evidence gathered by Education Equality from parents reveals that these divisions are carried through into the playground, where children stick to groups of their own religions," said chairperson April Duff.

The minister's sudden championing of community national schools also makes little sense when one considers that they are a relatively new phenomenon and little is known about them.

Currently, there are 11 in the country, with the first one opening as part of a pilot programme in 2008.

In contrast, Educate Together has been in existence since 1978 and operates more than 70 schools.

An ESRI report published in 2012, on variations among primary schools in Ireland, excluded community national schools from its analysis because the data upon which the report was based predated the model, with the authors noting: "The composition of, and processes within, community national schools have yet to be subject to systematic research."

Instead of searching for the best multidenominational model to divest Catholic schools to, it appears as if the minister has opted for the only model the church is likely to agree to - the one that retains faith formation "from suitably qualified teachers" during school hours.

Given that this kind of segregation is what currently happens in Catholic-run schools, when children of minority faiths or none are forced to opt out of religious instruction, one has to wonder where is the reform and are these schools a real alternative for parents?

If Mr Bruton really wants to promote inclusivity and diversity in schools, then he should immediately repeal section 7(3)(c) of the Equal Status Act 2000, which allows schools to discriminate on the basis of a child's religion, and set down credible targets for the divestment of a sizeable number of the nearly 3,000 primary schools currently under Catholic control but entirely funded by the State.

He must also insist that religious instruction, in the State's Catholic-run schools, is confined to religion classes and does not permeate the entire day - at least until parents have a real choice about the patronage of the school they decide to enrol their children in.

Finally, Mr Bruton must explain if there are reasons, other than the church's "non-negotiable" demands, that he has endorsed community national schools as the State's preferred multidenominational school model.

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