



**Muslim Primary Education Board**

**Submission to Richard Bruton TD**

**Minister for Education and Skills**

**On**

**The Role of Denominational Religion in the School Admissions  
Process, Primary Sector**

The Muslim Primary Education Board is a voluntary body, representing the two Muslim Primary Schools in Dublin but also speaks on behalf of the thousands of Muslim children attending schools throughout Ireland.

According to the 2011 Census, there were almost 50,000 Muslims living in Ireland including over 8,000 primary school-aged children and 3,500 in secondary schools. The vast majority of these children attend schools locally, while there does not appear to be significant difficulties with admissions into the primary sector, over recent years, parents have found it increasingly difficult to obtain school places for their children in the secondary sector.

The current estimate of the Irish Muslim population is approximately 65,000, an increase of almost 30% from 2011 and it is an indicator that the numbers of Muslim children entering the Irish school system is increasing rapidly.

Muslim parents have encountered a number of problems at the point of admission into schools and they can be summarised as follows :

- The requirement for a baptismal certificate - Anecdotal evidence indicates that many non-practicing Catholic parents, parents of no faith and minority faiths, including Muslim parents, face the same obstacle. Where other parents can, if they wish, obtain a baptismal certificate, this is not an option for Muslims. From the outset, this places an obstacle for the Muslim community. While it has been stated that the number of children refused because of lack of baptismal certificate is small, this does not take in to account the parents who do not apply for admission into schools that they know may asked for a certificate.
- Current admission policy is ignoring local catchment area in preference to admitting children of a particular faith. Under the present system schools have refused children from feeder schools, siblings who have established links with the schools and children from local catchment areas, citing school admissions policies that prioritise children of one faith over another. The situation at present is that the majority of schools in Ireland have a Catholic ethos, leaving Muslim children at the mercy of these admission policies and are seriously curtailing parental and students' choice.
- Many Muslim parents, especially those of newer communities are unfamiliar with the Irish education system, causing additional barriers in understanding varied and unclear admission policies.

**The implications of the current policy and situation are as follows:**

- An imposition of seriously limited choice for both parents and students.
- An inequality of access to education may lead to long-term implications with regard to exclusion from social, economic and civic engagement of Muslims in Ireland.

A number of psychological reports indicate that there is a link between educational achievement and a child's sense of belonging. A feeling of being excluded or unwanted is not conducive to integration or children's well-being.

- Those schools, which have a more open admission policy, are then left to cater for large groupings of Muslim students instead of encouraging integration across the school system.

The Minister's four proposals on the role of religion on admissions to **primary schools** contains some elements that MPEB would support, based on a more equitable admission policy respecting both religious faith and equality.

**The MPEB would support and prefer option 1 ,put forward by the Minister, the establishment of catchment areas.**

### **Catchment Areas**

Establishment of catchment areas giving Muslim children increased access to local schools. Children from a locality attending school together would bond and strengthen local communities and encourage religious diversity and cultural tolerance. This would also prohibit the practice of maintaining ethos by preference of same ethos children from outside the catchment area.

It would be envisaged that the current two Muslim schools in Dublin would establish catchment area by dividing the greater Dublin area between them, this wide catchment area would allow for the schools to have the capacity to maintain their religious ethos. Catchment areas would be reviewed in the case of the development of any future Muslim schools.

In minority religion schools school transport would then also have to be based on catchment areas rather than the current nearest school approach.

**The Board would also hope for:**

- Removal of the baptismal requirement, this would allow a more equitable basis of admission.
- An admission policy, which would safeguard and respect all children's religious rights.

**In regard to other approaches put forward by the Minister**

### **Nearest School Rule**

The 'nearest school rule' may be applicable to the two current Muslim schools if based on the nearest religious school but would give little change in access to schools for the thousands of Muslim children who currently do not attend the Muslim schools, especially in areas where schools may already be oversubscribed by children of the majority ethos.

## Quota System

In order to strengthen and maintain religious ethos schools need to have a majority school cohort of that ethos. It may be possible to maintain ethos while allowing a percentage of children of another ethos to attend a school, as currently happens in much of the primary sector. Without clarification of criteria of quota size, how this quota system might be applied and what commitments would be required regarding, supporting and respecting the ethos of a school, it is difficult to envisage exactly how this quota system may work.

The concept of a quota system may be more pertinent to the secondary school sector where no Muslim option currently exists and where it is particularly difficult for Muslim children to access secondary sector places, especially in urban areas. Many families particularly living in the vicinity of larger mosques find themselves competing for places in oversubscribed, popular schools where places are filled from outside the area. Feeder school places, sibling places and catchment areas are all ignored in favour of children of the majority ethos.

## Outright Prohibition of Religion in Schools

The MPEB believes that both parents and students should have a choice with regard to religious and non-religious education and **that removal of religious ethos from the schools, as a blanket policy, is not a strategy that we would support.** The Board would hope for a solution that would allow a degree of choice for parents with regard to both religious and non religious education and that a balance be found that can accommodate both integration and ethos. It must also be noted that under resourcing and over subscription feed into the current debate, the provision of extra resources will allow more choice.

As a footnote the MPEB would also like to make the Minister aware that while fewer difficulties occur for Muslim parents accessing primary sector schools, a much larger problem exists as Muslim children leave primary schools and try to find places in the secondary sector. We would hope that the Minister would again consult educational partners when addressing admissions to the secondary sector.

The MPEB firmly believe that the way forward in education should be in seeking a balance between both ethos and diversity. A school community should reflect the wider society, both in its pupil cohort and its staff.

Muslim Primary Education Board

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