Submission to the Forum on Patronage and Pluralism:

This submission seeks to address a number of core themes in relation to the advisory group’s call for proposals relating to:

a) Parental and community demand for diversity
b) Diversity within schools and the local community.

In this submission I want to draw attention to issues around segregation, inclusion and exclusion in a primary school system which is structured around faith/belief systems. I want to raise questions around the equation of parental choice with pluralism, and foreground the role of the state in providing a system of education for all citizens which centres on equality of recognition and opportunity. My perspective is informed by a sociological analysis of education, an ecological perspective on children’s well-being and a recognition of the central role of education in mediating in/equalities in society.

The role of the state in school governance:

Much of the recent debate around governance structures at primary level has focused on the need to reflect diversity within Irish society through the provision of a greater diversity of school choices at primary level. The establishment of the community national school model currently being developed is the latest example of this expanding provision. A number of questions arise in the development of this new layer of governance that relates to the socio-historical context of the development of Irish education. Sociologically, schools play a significant role in ‘shaping the nation’, the state signaling its priorities and values through the structures, policies and practices which it promotes in schools. The endorsement of state funded faith schooling has characterized the primary school system in Ireland for over 150 years and has become part of the taken for granted norms of governance, most recently endorsed through the Education Act in 1998. With the opening up of Irish society from the 1960’s and the vocal assertion of rights among an increasingly educated and confident parent body, a greater diversity in school choice at primary level has (very) gradually taken hold, most explicitly through the expansion of the Educate Together school sector. The rapidity of demographic growth in certain urban centres as a result of immigration, along with broader cultural and social change has consolidated its growth as a sector in recent years. What is significant is the perception by the state of its own role in policy change. O’Sullivan’s (2005) wide ranging analysis highlights the perception by the state of its role as neutral mediator between interest groups. This has given rise to a piecemeal approach to governance reform, as a reaction to and reflection of the interests of different groups, that has typically defined governance reform in terms of denominational/faith based differences. The current development of a new model of governance at primary level –
Community National Schools - while safe-guarding religious socialization (faith formation) as central to the educational experience of children in these schools, could signal the continued emphasis in the state toward ‘shaping the nation’ in religious based values, however the latter is defined. Indeed at a broader European level, there is a renewed interest in religious education and faith formation in promoting social cohesion and civic values, as advanced capitalist societies struggle with migration, globalization and secular individualism (Bauman 2001, Coulby 2008). Such policy also dovetails however with moves toward a more neo-liberal marketized approach to education, the education ‘market’ enhanced through competition and the provision of greater diversity of choice for parents as ‘consumers’ from a menu of school types. My argument in this submission is not one which is against faith schooling per se, acknowledging the growing literature on the benefits of a strong community ethos which can permeate such schools (see e.g. Grace 2007). Rather my concern arises from the different composition of schools arising from ‘choice’ that connects with broader questions of integration/segregation and the creation of an inclusive education system in a diverse society.

Parental choice – inclusion by exclusion?

Much of the debate on school governance is being shaped around the rights of parents to chose a school for their children, a right which is given considerable weight by the Irish constitution through the designation of parents as the primary educators of their children. While the exercise of choice has always been dependent upon the availability of schools in a local area, it is also significantly influenced by social class and religious/ethnic identities. While pluralist in intent, the demarcation of schools along religious lines can result in the segregation of children by ethnic and migrant status. This becomes especially marked during periods of intensive immigration. The diversity of school patronage that now exists at primary level (to include Catholic, Church of Ireland, Muslim, Jewish, Educate Together, An Foras Patrúnachta, and the community school model under the Vocational Education Committee (VEC)) provides more choice (in a minority of geographic areas) to parents, but in a manner which also copper-fastens a segregated approach to education. It can contribute to the establishment/legitimation of in effect ‘immigrant’ schools and racialised patterns of school choice and allocation. This is nowhere more evident, than in rapidly expanding urban areas, where a pattern may be established of schools (Educate Together and/or the new Community schools) that serve immigrant: mainly black African, Muslim and Asian communities, and schools which serve the [mainly white] Catholic communities. Indeed, the new community primary schools appear to have a minority of Catholic enrolments\(^1\), a majority of those enrolled coming from immigrant communities and minority faith traditions.

\(^1\) Educational effectiveness however is a complex phenomenon, and should not be reduced to faith status/culture of a school alone.
Yet the demarcation of school types and parental ‘choices’ by ethnic/immigrant status, is an issue which tends to be absent from debates, including for example submissions to the DES Technical group on School accommodation, with the exception of the submission of the Dublin 15 community council. Their reference to the need to avoid ghettoisation in the recognition of new schools highlights not only their own specific experiences but also how diversity of provision by parental choice alone, can result in inclusion by exclusion. The ‘stakes’ around school choice become especially prevalent in societies characterised by high educational levels, where prestige and value is added not by the right to go to school, but by which school one goes to. In such instances reputational criteria related not only to school performance but also student characteristics such as class and ethnicity comes increasingly to the fore. As competition for ever more scarce resources arises, choices in relation to which and what type of school one sends one’s child to become increasingly important, part of the classificatory systems which distinguish those in the ‘know’ (regarding the ‘best’ schools) and those who do not (Devine 2011). While distinct class patterns in terms of school choice at post-primary level became even more prominent during the boom period in Ireland, racial and ethnic dynamics will come increasingly to the fore in the coming years, including in the primary school sector. Of course such patterns are already firmly embedded in the school system with respect to Traveller children who, like immigrant children tend to be clustered in DEIS schools.

In/equalities and structural segregation in the school system

The issue in relation to school governance then is not simply one of ‘school choice’ as if this was a neutral phenomenon, but also of (in) equalities via a structurally segregated school system and the clustering of contrasting social and ethnic groups in different types of schools. Parental choice is strongly influenced by the capacities of parents to know and understand how the school system functions and works. It is dependent on the resources (economic, social, cultural) which parents can draw upon to facilitate the choices they wish to make. Some are more in the ‘know’ than others and exercise their choices strategically (Devine 2011). The transition points to school levels (most especially from primary to secondary, but increasingly to primary schooling) are especially important (Smyth, McCoy and Darmody 2004; McCoy et al 2010) setting children on a trajectory of educational experiences, social networks and community bonds which have considerable influences on their life chances and everyday experiences. It is these transition points which become the sites of differentiation on the basis of gender, social class and ethnic/racial background. The state clearly has an impact on broader policies of social segregation through urban planning and the mixtures in any given geographical area between social and private housing. It also has an impact however through the provision of public schooling and the criteria for entry to local schools – in other words through the regulation of the ‘market’ of education (or not) through the provision of schools in local areas. Internationally, we know that migrant children are consistently clustered in marginalised communities and vocationally oriented schools (Crul and Holdaway 2009, Gillborn 2008, OECD 2006) with
Smyth et al 2009 confirming trends in Ireland with respect to the over-representation of students of immigrant background in DEIS schools. Social (and ethnic) segregation becomes mirrored in the selection of different types of schools, as those ‘in the know’ and who have the resources make their choices strategically and seek out schools with children most like themselves. Parental choice then is not simply a matter of personal preference for schools with a defining curricular or religious ethos, but is also embedded in classed and racialised patterns of sorting and selecting (Devine 2011).

These dynamics are of relevance to debates over school enrolment and access to choice of schools in Ireland. Traditionally parents in Ireland have exercised considerable choice in relation to the post-primary schools their children attend (Smyth et al 1999), with over 50% of such choices outside of the ‘local’ school area. Class segregation is clearly evident in the vocational and traditional secondary school sector. It is also evident within the latter in terms of differences in status and positioning between religious run schools (Lynch and Moran 2006, Lynch and Lodge 2002). The significance of the choice of school for transition not only to higher education, but more and less prestigious forms of higher education is also quite marked in Ireland (Lynch and Moran 2006). Schools have also been identified as playing an active role in the sorting and selecting process, excluding certain groups on the basis of fees, ‘high’ voluntary subscriptions, expensive uniforms and elite sports cultures. Competitive/screening practices by certain schools have also been identified by the DES in their audit of school enrolment policies (DES 2007). With respect to immigrant communities, we see clear inter-connections between the spatial as well as social aspect to school choice, as immigrant communities in urban centres especially, become concentrated in working class areas, which also have a higher concentration of vocational/community/comprehensive schools. In a denominationally structured system, choices open to parents, influenced by their faith background, can operate as a mechanism of exclusion or inclusion (people ‘like’ us or not ‘like’ us), depending on the faith background of the immigrant children themselves. In an increasingly competitive school system, ‘faith’ can be used as a resource to gain access to what is perceived as ‘the best’ and more prestigious schools and schools which are ‘more like us’.

Social change and structural reform

Our society is going through profound shifts. At a period of profound change tensions arise between preservation and transformation, as taken for granted meanings and understandings become unsettled and exposed (Devine 2011). Nonetheless the intensity of change at so many levels of our society, provides the opportunity to ask if structures that have evolved within a particular economic, cultural, social and historical context serve the type of society we wish to create into the future. The operation of markets and choice mechanisms in education highlight in a very real way the structural dynamics that are play with respect to social class and increasingly race, ethnicity and immigration in Irish society. This gives rise to different patterns
of participation, representation and ultimately achievement in education which become especially pronounced in the second level system. Questions need to be asked as to why such patterns appear to be especially pronounced in the Irish context, and recently borne out in the OECD 2010 PISA results. School composition is a crucial factor in school climate, hence climate for learning and opportunities to learn and achieve in school. The system at second level is structurally segregated, clear dichotomies existing in the social profile of community/comprehensive schools in the vocational sector, and secondary schools. Such patterns have not been so firmly embedded in the primary school sector, a majority of children attending the local, (mainly Catholic) primary school. My concern is that the creation of further diversity of choices will simply copper-fasten (and will lead to more embedded patterns of) segregation, notionally on the basis of faith/belief, but in reality on the basis of immigrant status/ethnic background, into the primary education system in future years. My own research (Devine 2011, 2009, 2005; Devine et al 2002) highlights the struggles and contradictions which have existed for school principals in Catholic schools as they enrolled and accommodated children from non Catholic backgrounds in their schools. Similar challenges have been identified by Smyth et al (2009), and O’Gorman and Sugrue (2007). Varied practices exist across schools in how they have embraced this diversity (Bryan 2010, Kitching 2010), mediated not only by broader policy initiatives, but also by the leadership skills of principals and the growing confidence and understanding by language support and home school liaison teachers in schools (Devine 2011). Simple stereotypes of practices do not adequately capture the complexity of schools as organisations, nor the challenges that face school principals in an era of ‘reputation’ and increasing competition in the education marketplace. Models of excellence have been identified, that has included contrasting experiences and perceptions by principals themselves over the significant role of school governance/ethos in shaping their leadership for diversity in schools. However, an ethos that is embedded in a core philosophy of care and concern for members of the school community can also be one, which, albeit unintentionally, structures the school space as an exclusionary one, through its access and enrolment policies.

In the debate about school governance and the need for reform, fundamental questions arise about what is community? (Bauman 2001), who belongs to the community (who ‘is’ community) and ‘whose’ community is it? Is it to be defined in terms of religious belief and/or sense of belonging to the local physical space within a geographical area? This latter is especially important with respect to children (Zeiher et al 2007), influencing their sense of belonging and ‘otherness’ (Devine 2009/2006). Connections and friendships in school consolidate through shared after-school and playtime activities making the school an important bridging space in the local geographical community. The importance of locality to children’s everyday lives is borne out in other research (O’Connor 2009; Devine 2009, Ní Laoire et al 2009) through the significance migrant children attached to locally organised activities (sports, dance etc.) that provides them with access to ‘Irish’ ways of being and doing. In most cases immigrant children want to be the same as their indigenous Irish peers. They show both
determination and flexibility in negotiating contrasting experiences between home and school, keenly aware of the importance of integrating for present as well future well-being. As a signatory to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989), it is important to consider migrant children’s experiences in the context of the realisation of rights to both equality and quality in their educational experiences. In my view, segregation and ethnic clustering undercuts the realisation of those rights. Issues related to access to education are important here, especially access to a school in the local community that enhances belonging and wider social integration among the entire community – both indigenous and immigrant. School composition is a crucial factor in determining learning climate, pedagogy and practice that influences the learning opportunities created for different types of children (Devine et al 2010). Where students of similar profile are clustered together this will have a marked impact on outcomes in that school. It is factors such as these which also need to shape the debate we engage in around governance structures in schools.

For immigrant parents, the challenges in integrating and being included in the local community influences attitudes toward school governance. They have experienced confusion and uncertainty over accessing schools in densely populated areas, as well as in knowing which school is best and most appropriate for their children. These have been commented upon by the OECD (2009). While immigrant parents are themselves a diverse group, with contrasting economic, social and cultural backgrounds, consistently I have found them to be ambitious for their children and anxious that they do well in school (Devine 2011). Like Irish parents, they want a system that supports their children’s learning needs, attending schools that are of equal standing to those for indigenous children and which promote a sense of belonging and acceptance in Irish society.

The intersection between faith and ethnicity is key in this debate. Where a diversity of choices exists in a local area, the likely impact is for children living within that area to be segregated not only by faith but also by ethnic background. Adding an additional layer of schooling to the menu of choices available may provide access within the local area to a school which recognises in its governance the range of diversities. It may lead however to the clustering of children of immigrant background into the newer schools, while indigenous Irish children will be more likely to go to the traditional Catholic schools.

**Concluding comments**

Given that all children in the state are required to attend primary education, I advocate for the development of a common/universal system of public education at primary level that is provided
for all children in their local community. Schools are not neutral learning spaces but important civic spaces, key locales in which diversity intersects depending on how the school culture is shaped and defined. We live in a diverse society and that diversity should be reflected, as much as possible, in each school. It may be worth noting that Finland, which is now receiving world attention for its approach to education, moved along a progressive path of structural reform of their system (Sahlburg 2008) that included the creation of a common basic school for all. Over a period of thirty years, this has given rise to primary schools that are ‘heterogenous in terms of pupil profiles and diverse in terms of needs and expectations’ (ibid: 154). A core organisational principle, in spite of the re-structuring challenges involved, was that of equity.

At the core of publicly funded school governance models should be a concept of citizenship that embraces central tenets of the UNCRC (1989) to children’s rights to both equality and quality in educational provision. A common primary school would be inclusive of all in its enrolment policies, student allocation determined by the number of places available and guaranteed locally, rather than by criteria related to faith background. Both the Educate together school model and the Community national school models provide for such an option, a major difference being the provision of faith formation during the school day or out of school hours. The Educate Together model is well established and provides for the range of diversities in a local community, religious education and a core ethical curriculum during the school day. Community national schools are still in their infancy, evolving and exploring the challenges as well as opportunities which arise from multiple faith formation at designated times during the school day. I do not believe we need to have both models and would encourage the forum to consider further which and if either model would serve best as a common universal form of education provision for the primary school sector. If the state funded school system becomes increasingly fragmented in the interest of protecting parental choice, we will still be left with minority children attending a local Catholic school where it is impractical to offer to that community the range of school governance choices they might like to have. Furthermore, in larger urban centres, where a menu of choices is made available, the newer models of governance (Educate Together and Community national schools) will merely compete with the already established schools and will be characterized by high levels of ethnic clustering.

The state has a key role to play in funding a system that works against patterns of segregation, rather than consolidating it through the continual demarcation of school types. I believe such a fragmented approach to the provision of primary education undercuts the goals of inclusion recently articulated in the Intercultural Education Strategy (2010). If a decision is taken for pragmatic reasons to continue with the existing approach of adding further layers of governance to the primary school system, I would like the forum to consider the potential negative impact this will have on the inclusion and integration of minority ethnic students in Irish schools and society.
Dept. of Education and Science (2007) Audit of school enrolment policies, Dublin, DES.


O'Sullivan, D. (2005) Cultural politics and Irish education since the 1950s : policy paradigms and power, Dublin, IPA.


---

i Confirmed through personal correspondence with Dublin Vocational Education Committee (VEC)

ii This is at its most overt in the UK through the publication of school league tables, but evident also in Ireland through media driven league tables on access to third level education