

School Choice in the Republic of Ireland

An Unqualified Commitment to Parental Choice

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ABSTRACT

Ireland's commitment to school choice is expressed in both school admission policies and the ease with which groups can establish new publicly-funded schools. Parents may choose between religion-based traditional 'national primary schools,' Irish language immersion gaelscoilenna, or multi-denominational 'Educate Together' schools. We describe attitudes and practices substantially more supportive of school choice than those found in America and cite current Irish laws and policy documents on which these practices are established. We present direct quotations and summaries from extensive interviews conducted with parents, that demonstrate an almost universal support for school choice even among groups who might have been expected to feel threatened by it.

Introduction

In the U.S., recent debate about school choice has focused on its purported influence on student performance (Hoxby, 2004; Nelson, Rosenberg, & Van Metter, 2004). Little attention appears to be paid to the phenomenon of school choice as an inherent virtue perhaps because it represents such a departure from American mainstream educational operation. We contrast this to the Republic of Ireland, where school choice is widely supported by the public and presented as an *explicit human right* in the Irish national constitution.

The educational system in the United States has evolved into a system of State Education Agencies (SEAs) and school districts or Local Education Agencies (LEAs). Arguably, this is the result of the Founders' deep distrust of centralized government enshrined in Amendment X of the U.S. Constitution, which states:

The powers not delegated to the United States by the Constitution, nor prohibited by it to the States, are reserved to the States respectively, *or to the people* [italics added].

In response to this, while the language may vary slightly from state to state, it is in state constitutions that we find language specifically calling for the state to provide some sort of free, universal public education. New York's, for instance, says "*The legislature shall provide for the maintenance and support of a system of free common schools, wherein all of the children of this state may be educated*" (New York Department of State, 2007). While it is true that the number of school districts has, in the 70 years from 1937 to 1997, declined from 119,001 to 14,841 (Public Purpose, 2007), the *district*, rather than either the federal government or the individual school, remains the most common unit from which education is delivered in the U.S.. While it does not, *a priori*, follow that district educational delivery must equate to district educational *control* (Friedman, 1955), most school districts, supported by state law, assert the right to compel citizens living within so-called geographical 'catchment areas' to send their children to specified

schools unless: (1) they are granted a waiver; (2) they choose to home-school their children; (3) the district chooses to provide school alternatives; (4) the parents opt into the private school system; or (5) they move. Parental school choice is neither the norm in the U.S. nor is it universally accepted as a good thing.

Current efforts in the U.S. to provide educational alternatives from which parents can exercise their right to choose are cloaked in litigation, limitation, confrontation, and aggravation. School choice in the U.S., when it is available at all, is achieved only with the greatest of difficulty (Russo, 2004). We describe, herein, a study of an educational system based on fundamentally different premises in an effort more fully to understand the U.S. system.

The Irish System of Educational Delivery and Parental Choice

In contrast to the legal system described above on which American educational delivery is based, citizens in the Republic of Ireland can point to Article 42 of their Constitution, which says, in part:

3a. The State shall not oblige parents in violation of their conscience and lawful preference to send their children to schools established by the State, or to any particular type of school designated by the State.

3b. The State shall, however, as guardian of the common good, require in view of actual conditions that the children receive a certain minimum education, *moral* [italics added], intellectual and social.

The Republic of Ireland interprets this language to permit any parent to select the school to which his child goes, essentially subject only to the availability of space (an admittedly significant caveat about which we will have more to say later in this paper). While many, but not all, Irish schools identify ‘catchment areas’ to which they consider themselves responsible for the provision of schooling, parents living in such areas are not, as in the United States, *assigned* by the state to such schools. In addition, parents

who are unable to find suitable neighborhood schools that meet their needs for a specific religious denomination, co-educational or single gender, English language or Irish language, sectarian, non-sectarian or multi-denominational, may exercise their right to choose by petitioning to form a new school (Commission on School Accommodation Steering Group, 2008). The essential spirits of each of these various school choices is widely referred to as the school's 'ethos.'

To the reader not familiar with the current Irish educational system, perhaps the most salient features are (1) the involvement of religious denominations in a public education system, (2) the centralized and national nature of school funding, curriculum, teacher certification and school assessment, (3) the unique role of the 'Patron' in Irish education and (4) the establishment of local Boards of Management analogous to the American charter school movement's Local School Boards (LSB). An understanding and appreciation of the attitudes and ethos which we identified as the result of our interviews requires some understanding of the philosophical environment in which they were created.

The origins of Ireland's denomination-based public school system are found in the middle years of the nineteenth century. Ireland in the nineteenth century was characterized by competition between the Catholic Church and the Church of Ireland for dominance in the various cultural components that made up the society. In 1831, while serving as Chief Secretary of Ireland, Lord Edward Stanley, 14th Earl of Darby, introduced the Irish Education Act, which, with the approval of the Catholic Church which was arguably *not* in the ascendant at the time, sought to establish multid denominational schools throughout the country (Bloy, n.d.). The quality of education established in response to the Act came into question almost immediately. The Royal Commission of Inquiry into Primary Education 1868-70, the Powis Commission, was highly critical of the state of education in Ireland and listed 129 conclusions and recommendations for its modification and improvement (Coolahan, 2000). Two results of these recommendations were the adoption of a results-based scheme of national financial support for teachers and education, which was not abolished until 1899 and, more germane to this paper, a retreat from multid denominational education.

The organizational and legal structures of today's Irish education system are largely described in the Education Act of 1998. It provides for a 'quality of education appropriate to meeting the needs and abilities of' children,' and seeks to 'promote equality of access,' to 'promote best practices in teaching methods,' etc. Some of its features are likely to appeal to American advocates of choice. These include:

- ✚ Promoting "the right of parents to send their children to a school of the parents' choice..." (article 6[e])

- ✚ Promoting "effective liaison and consultation between schools and centres for education, patrons, teachers, parents, the communities served by schools..." (article 6[g])

- ✚ "Enhance[ing] transparency in the making of decisions in the education system both locally and nationally." (article 6[m])

Unlike America's decentralized education system, in Ireland it is the function of the Minister of Education to determine national education policy, provide funding for each recognized school, monitor and assess the quality, efficiency and effectiveness of all schools in the system, and lease land and buildings to any person or body of persons for the purpose of establishing a school. Ireland's Department of Education and Science (DES) directly pays the salaries of all the country's public school teachers, reviews and approves applications for the establishment of new National Primary Schools, funds schools through per-pupil 'capitation' and special purpose grants, contributes to the costs of school facilities, certifies all Irish public school teachers, establishes a national curriculum and conducts periodic school inspections.

The DES carries out its responsibility to monitor school quality largely in two ways: supervision of probationary teachers and infrequent 'whole school visits.' Teachers graduating from the limited number of certified Teachers' Colleges enter into a one year probationary period beginning with their first hire. Each probationary teacher is placed under the supervision of a member of the DES Inspectorate, who is responsible at

the end of the first year, for determining whether the new teacher is ready for full certification. In some cases, a second year of probation is recommended. Apart from those occupying positions assigned to the school only temporarily, fully certified teachers may, for the most part, assume that their positions are secure with the equivalent of American ‘tenure.’

The phenomenon of Whole School Visits from a district member of the DES Inspectorate assigned to each school is receiving increased attention. The process, which is not new, elicits a fair amount of anxiety within schools but appears rarely to result in negative consequences. These days, an increasing interest in school accountability and, to a degree, uniformity, has resulted in expanded discussion of this subject both in the public media and within the profession. Nonetheless, the promise of more accountability is offset by current funding and staffing levels that suggest a frequency of once every nine years for such visits. One might expect increased pressure on the individual schools as this conversation continues.

Every public primary school in Ireland, as a pre-requisite for national recognition, must be established under the authority of one of a limited number of pre-approved individuals or organizations called ‘patrons.’ The name arguably evolved from the roles of local Bishops under whose ‘patronage’ schools were established but has been expanded to include a variety of religions and ethoi. In 1975 a system of Boards of Management was established for national schools. Each Board of Management serves as a Local School Board with the “duty to manage the school on behalf of the patron and for the benefit of the students and their parents.” Notable among the duties of the Board of Management is the duty to “uphold, and be accountable to the patron for so upholding the *characteristic spirit of the school as determined by the cultural, educational, moral, religious, social, linguistic and spiritual values and traditions which inform and are characteristics of the objects and conduct of the school* [italics added]” (DES, 2008b, p3). The Board of Management, while responsible to the Patron, has primary responsibility for the oversight and management of individual schools.

Irish educational documents are replete with references to moral, religious and spiritual values. The ‘characteristic spirit’ or ‘ethos’ of the school, as described above, is much a part of each school as its name or location. Even in cases where schools were established to get away from specific religious instruction, this inclusion of ‘ethos’ into the instructional life of the school remains pervasive.

Traditionally ethos related to the denominational patronage under which the school operated. Chapter IX RELIGIOUS INSTRUCTION, of the National School Rules (Irish Stationery Office, n.d.) begins by saying:

Of all the parts of a school curriculum Religious Instruction is by far the most important, as its subject-matter, God’s honour and service, includes the proper use of all man’s faculties and affords the most powerful inducements to their proper use. p. 38)

In the case, then, of schools operated under the Patronage of Bishops (Catholic, Church of Ireland, or equivalents in other religions), school ethos is closely associated with religion. But the recent emergence of gael scoileanna, dedicated to the delivery of all instruction in the Irish language, expands the definition of school ethos to include a commitment to indigenous language and culture. Further, since 1984, the Educate Together organization has operated schools dedicated to a multi-denominational ethos but may be said to have *expanded* the concept of ethos beyond denominational lines, rather than having *rejected* it, altogether. For the time, typically one half hour per day, assigned to religious instruction by the National School Rules, Educate Together, in 2004, developed a multi-denomination curriculum called ‘Learn Together’ which includes four strands: Moral and Spiritual Development; Equality and Justice; Belief Systems; and Ethics and the Environment (Educate Together, 2004). So the ethos of traditional schools relates to their religious identity, the ethos of gael scoileanna relates to their commitment to the language and culture, and the ethos of Educate Together schools relates to their commitment to multi-denominational, child-centered education embodied in the Learning Together curriculum. We note further that this is not a one-dimensional spectrum. For the 2007/2008 year, applications for new schools have been received from

a variety of patrons, including six different Catholic Bishops, Foras Patrúnaí na Scoileanna Lan-Ghailge Teo, Educate Together, One Church of Ireland Bishop, The Society of Friends, and several other groups. Of these, nine will have Catholic ethos, five will be multi-denominational, two will be 'inter-denominational,' several are not specified, 15 will be in the English medium and 6 will have an Irish language ethos.

Methodology

This paper is based on a qualitative study of a broad range of attitudes concerning school choice in the Republic of Ireland and of government policies and documents which actualize these attitudes. We confine this paper to that portion of the study which resulted from our school-site discussions with parents and with a back-up examination of national school policies through interviews with Irish national education officials and examination of documents.

The DES maintains a national data bank of all 3,300 primary schools which includes school size, religious affiliation, language of instruction and the patron. We used the DES school data profiles to select nine coeducational primary schools distributed in three clusters in Dublin, Cork and Limerick. In each city, we chose a traditional national primary school (more than 95% of which are Catholic), an Irish-language immersion *gaelscoil*, and a multi-denominational, alternative Educate Together project school which were close enough to each other so that transportation convenience could be expected to have been removed from the parental selection equation. Since the average American charter school has 300 students (CER 2008) and is coeducational, DES school data profiles led us to limit our study to primary schools which met these criteria.

We visited each school in the sample twice; once for several hours to meet the Principal and teachers so that we could introduce the study and a second whole-day visit to observe and conduct interviews. At the first meeting, we described the study, distributed sample copies of the questions which we would be asking of parent, teachers, Boards of Management, and principal teachers. The second visit consisted primarily of interviews, although we observed several class activities at the invitation of the Principal

Teacher. Each interview lasted approximately one hour and was recorded. Table 1 summarizes the participants in our school interviews.

Table 1. Number of Interview Participants by Type of Primary School

Participants	Total	Gaelscoileanna	Traditional	Educate Together
Principals	16	5	5	6
Teachers	27	11	7	9
Parents	27	6	11	10
BOM	12	4	4	4
TOTAL	82	26	27	29

We interviewed a total of 82 parents, teachers, members of Boards of Management and Principal Teachers (see Table 1, above). In some cases, individuals presented dual roles, such as teachers with students in their school, with the result that this sample represents 68 different individuals. Written lists of questions, different for each role group, were submitted in advance so that respondents would have time to consider their answers before coming to the interview. For the purposes of this paper, we confine ourselves to citing responses from parents. For the description of the procedure for starting a new school, we cite public documents.

In addition to school visits and on-site interviews, we met with officials from the DES the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA), the New Schools Advisory Council (NSAC), the Catholic Primary School Management Association (CPSMA) (which represents Catholic Bishops), the Irish National Teachers Organization (INTO) (the primary teachers' union), Gaelscoileanna (an organization devoted to the preservation of Irish as a language), and An Foras Pátrúnachta na Scoileanna LánGhaeilge Teo (which is a recognized 'patronage' body legally entitled to sponsor the creation of Irish immersion schools). These groups provided many of the documents on the basis of which we describe the Irish system. The key operational documents include the Rules for National Schools under the Department of Education (DES, no date), Recognition of New Primary Schools Criteria (DES, 2002), and the Education Act of 1998 (ISB, 2007), which, in turn, reflects Article 42 of the Constitution of Ireland. We also used documents privately supplied to us by the NSAC, which included information

on the numbers of applications over the last several years, the details and ‘characteristic spirit’ of each applicant, and the outcome of each application. The admission procedures, which each school is required to publish, were reviewed including parent right to places on multiple schools and even the right to apply for admission as *soon as their child is born*.

Both researchers listened to recordings of the interviews and individually identified themes. The theme lists were compared and, where similar themes existed on each list, were combined. Themes which appeared on only one list were discussed and added or omitted by agreement. This paper discusses parental school choice, the criteria on which parents base satisfaction with that choice, and the extent to which commitment to school choice is reflected in the process of new school approval.

Results

We begin by describing responses to our questions about why parents chose the particular school with which they were associated. We found school choice to be widely exercised by parents, who were informed for the most part by issues of school environment and ethos. The fundamental idea that they did, in fact, have a choice was taken for granted. We present most of our results in the form of brief quotations clustered according to the common threads which emerged.

A word of caution might be justified, here. As Americans, accustomed to daily negative public discourse about school quality and government intrusion, we might be expected to view Ireland’s education system through ‘rose-colored glasses.’ We do acknowledge that Ireland’s system is not perfect. Free school choice at the primary level can be accompanied by disappointment when desired seats are already filled and by frustration when parents encounter the other side of choice in secondary schools: rejection by school after school after school. In a similar vein, the discussion below concerning the ease with which new schools can be established speaks to the absence of bureaucratic interference in curriculum development but doesn’t discuss the frustrations of finding suitable accommodations in those areas of exploding real estate prices and active development which are the very ones most in need of new schools.

Parental School Choice

The first quotation below is a lengthy one which we present to give the reader a sense of the ‘flavor’ of the thoughtful responses we received from these Irish parents. Within this first quote, we see many of the features which we will describe below: school size, co-education, neighborhood convenience, the importance of early attention to school selection and the question of Irish language immersion.

We got them on the list...pretty much he was a year old. We needed to get him on the list that early...The other options in the parish [used in this context to indicate a geographical area] are boys-only and girls-only...and I just feel that a group of boys...I actually don't know how the teacher controls them. We looked at two boys-only schools...first of all we kind of felt that it was good for a child's overall development that they are mixed with boys and girls. We looked at a school that was private and it would be very multi-denominational but it would have been mixed and the class sizes are small. That, basically, was where we ended up (until a spot opened up here). I suppose that the deciding factor between the two, then, for us was, everybody I spoke to who had children older told me don't pass your local school unless you really need to from the point of view of...they said there is so much to be said for local friends, being in the community, they're all going to be in the local clubs together; football or hurling or gaelic football, rugby.

Suddenly you are faced with choice. So that was it for us, really. I speak Irish. I like Irish. My brother is a fluent Irish speaker. He's sending his children to a gaelscoil. But the problem with gaelscoils, all these schools and everything, is when you get to secondary. There is one way down in another town, but there is no continuity. So they kind of come to a dead end. They've learned all their stuff in Irish up to sixth class and there is no where for them to continue.

Parent A of a child at a traditional Catholic parish school

In an important way, this parent was quite typical. Her comments suggested that her considerations focused on the *kind* of school (traditional, gaelscoil, project school) and its social conditions and ethos, rather than reports of instructional effectiveness. Additional brief sample responses which follow illustrate this phenomenon. In not one single instance did parents speak to the academic reputation of schools in their

neighborhoods as a factor in making their initial choice. School ethos, friendliness, and convenience were most often mentioned. It is notable that none of the parents who chose traditional Catholic schools spoke directly to the religious nature of the school. Parents who chose the *alternatives* represented by gaelscoileanna or project schools tended to be more vocal in their commitment to the language immersion nature or multi-denominational nature of the schools which motivated their choice, but as with parents at traditional schools, attributed their choices to school climate or ethos, rather than instructional measures.

Parents of children at a traditional Catholic parish school spoke about:

Convenience

Traditional Primary School Parent 1

I'm very happy with the school, you know. It's very handy. We only live down the road. So, you know, it's very convenient as well.

Convenience and School Climate

Traditional Primary School Parent 2

...when we moved up here it was more convenient to change school for them and I found this very nice and easy to speak to people here so, when it was time for (my son) to come, I came to a meeting here and then I found that it was very friendly...you can deal very well with this school. You can approach teachers, principal, anything.

Traditional Primary School Parent 3

When we moved here, I was going to leave him in his school in (another town) but my mother-in-law said that I would be better off putting him in the school closest; that he would make friends and that I would make friends in the area...I'm glad I did because I did make great friends.

Class Size

Traditional Primary School Parent 4

My daughter wasn't meant to come here at all. We had a different school in mind. My Dad worked here so I said I would just put her in here for the year and my daughter is very shy and she was in a class of twelve. But when she was meant to go to the other school, she was meant to go from a class of twelve to a class of twenty-nine.

At a gaelscoil, parental responses reflected their decision to choose a school with an ethos of language immersion:

Gaelscoil Parent 1

For me, personally, it was to learn another language, our native language as well...it is our native language and it is a shame that you don't know it. I'm glad that my child will grow up knowing how to speak Irish.

Gaelscoil Parent 2

I had almost identical reasons...having that second language as part of growing up. I wasn't giving it at home because there wasn't enough of an atmosphere for it to happen all the time, whereas in school, where you are immersed in it.

Gaelscoil Parent 3

You're not actually being taught Irish; you're immersed in Irish. So you have two languages. And the evidence is there to show that children who grow up with two languages will take on other languages far easier.

The newest phenomenon in Irish education is the Project School, which, like the gaelscoileanna, was founded to offer an alternative choice to parents who reject the denominational nature of the traditional National Primary School but aren't attracted to Irish immersion. The Educate Together schools are among the fastest growing segment of Irish education. In 2008, more than 15 new Educate Together schools have been

proposed (ETEN, 2008). Some parents who selected more traditional schools for their children characterized the Educate Together movement as ‘artsy’ or bohemian; an image acknowledged by most Educate Together parents.

The parents who choose Educate Together schools, like those in the other two groups, cited the ethos, rather than academics, as their reason for their choice:.

Educate Together School Parent 1

My son went to (another school) for the first two years and it was a lovely school and it was local but it was a Catholic school and we don't practice any religion. I had collected nephews and nieces at (this Educate Together school) and I was always very impressed with the school. It seemed really, really friendly and small. Small is very important, I think.

Educate Together School Parent 2

Actually, we liked as well that it was multi-denomination so that they'd get to mix with other people.

Educate Together School Parent 3

...people are fascinated about it because they've heard good things about it but I think that some people, because it's not the same as all other schools, that they see it as sort of an arty place to go and they're a little bit afraid of not going with the regular school, I think.

Educate Together School Parent 4

For me it was a no-brainer because it would have to be somewhere that would dovetail with the ethos. It would have to be co-ed and as multi-denominational as possible.

Parental Satisfaction

As the responses above suggest, objective measures of instructional quality did not seem to play much role in initial school selection. In an effort to probe this issue

further, we asked parents to talk about what, now that their children were at the school, made them most happy or satisfied with that choice. Here, some parents raised academic issues, such as school support, that would be familiar to many Americans:

Parent 1

For the children it's the resources that they have...the Reading Resources. If your child is falling behind, they take your child out and the child gets extra reading and maths support. The resources here are brilliant, so you know your child is not falling behind.

Parent 2

For one of mine, now, he's brilliant at maths. He's flying ahead of the rest of the class. So rather than him getting bored, you know, there are four children who are flying ahead so, rather than them getting bored, they go out with the resource teacher.

Parent 3

The class size is a big issue...small classes which is quite good. You can't pay for that. No one in the world could pay for a class of twelve. All classes nearly have a classroom assistant. Each child is seen as an individual...it has better resources than some of the private schools in the area.

But, despite the increased awareness of instructional support that seemed to evolve after the choice was made, the single most common response to our questions to parents about how they know that their child is at a 'good' school was "He/she is happy."

Educate Together Parent 1

In my experience, anyway, it's been fantastic. It's very friendly. The children have a great relationship with the teacher. My kids have been happy since day one. They love school. They miss it, you know, in the summertime.

Educate Together Parent 2

The pupil's time was valued as well. Everybody's time is valued. There's never a 'no.'

Educate Together Parent 3

Our kids look happy.

All of the parents we interviewed were aware of their responsibility to select an appropriate school for their child/children. Depending upon the geographic area, number of schools and available places at the school, parents knew that they needed to get their child's name on a list as soon as possible. For some that meant as soon as their child was born and a birth certificate issued.

Educate Together School Parent

We moved into the area...I knew nobody. When they said, have you put your child down for school, I said, "WHAT!!" I mean he's only ten months old. I did not realize that that's the system.

Once parents made their choice, all expressed satisfaction about their experiences with the school ethos and academic curriculum. Despite the fact that parents were given one formal conference with the teacher, one written report at the end of the school year and no test scores, parents were happy with their chosen school.

Starting New National Primary Schools

In addition to school-based interviews, we met with officials from the DES, the National Teachers Union, the New Schools Advisory Committee, the Catholic Church, and a number of patronage organizations. During this process, we were provided with an extensive body of written materials describing formal and informal practices relating to the creation of new schools.

An almost universal commitment to the concept of parental choice remains nothing more than concept if the educational establishment cannot provide accommodations for that choice. The years since Ireland's 1973 entry into the European Common Market have been characterized as the 'Celtic Tiger' (McWilliams, 2006). This

term refers to the phenomenal increase in average income, the exploding real estate boom and, key to this discussion, the construction of thousands of apartments in new 'residential estates' (Reinhoudt, 2007, Redman, 2006) within which neither developers nor Local Councils have made much provision for the construction of new schools. While Local Councils in Ireland retain the authority to issue zoning approval for new schools, the fact that the national, rather than local, governments are responsible for education has resulted in dramatic shortages of schools in the most highly populated suburbs of Ireland's largest cities, particularly to the west and north of Dublin (see, for instance, RTE, 2007).

The provision of new school places in Ireland convolves two fundamentally different concerns; the construction of new school buildings and classrooms and the approval of new schools to occupy those structures. The former is the responsibility of the national DES and the latter is reserved for the individual Bishopsrics, Gaelscoileanna and Educate Together committees which are the entities to which school patronage are almost exclusively limited. Despite a DES commitment to deliver over 15,000 new pupil places in 2007 (Wyse, 2006), the deficit continues.

As a practical matter, therefore, to a growing degree, parental choice means the opportunity to participate in the establishment of new schools with ethoi consistent with their beliefs. How hard or easy does the DES make it for groups (Bishops, Educate Together, local committees, Gaelscoileanna) which seek to establish new schools to obtain the approvals which are required?

The Minister of Education has established a New Schools Advisory Committee (NSAC), staffed by the DES. Although members are appointed by the Minister, they are not employees of the DES and they function independently. Both the application process and the results would tend to indicate that the NSAC places few impediments in the way of applicants. The process begins each June with newspaper advertisements soliciting applications for new primary schools. Potential applicants have about three months simply to submit a 'formal notification of intent to apply for recognition' and then have four additional months to submit a formal application. The proportion of applications

from the three categories we have described is in a state of flux. Educate Together has begun a deliberate effort to expand its involvement, with 15-25 new applications anticipated in each of the next several years. The need for new schools to accommodate dramatic population movement within Ireland seems to have resulted in a renewed effort on the part of local bishops in affected neighborhoods. Applications for gael scoileanna appear both from bishops who support Catholic gael scoileanna and from An Foras Patrúnachta na Scoileanna LanGhaeilge Teo, which supports gael scoileanna of any ethos. It should be noted that there are no caps on the number of new schools which can be proposed or accepted. Once they have identified themselves and the ethos or ‘essential spirit’ which they seek to express, applications are required to address

1. The proposed school meets a need that is not already being met.
2. The local community has been consulted.
3. The applicant is a registered Patron and will appoint a Board of Management.
4. The new school promises to comply with the Rules for National Schools, the official Primary School Curriculum and to hire certified teachers.
5. The proposed school has a minimum initial enrolment of 17 junior infants who will be at least four years old and a projected enrolment of 51 after three years.
6. There is a suitable place in which to locate the school.

Those familiar with U.S. charter school enabling legislation will find many of these items familiar. However, one gets a hint at the non-obstructionist nature of the rules from the requirement of only 17 new pupils. The most important feature of Ireland’s new school procedures is not apparent until one looks more closely at the wording of item # 4. It provides that applicants *promise* to comply with Rules, deliver the standard curriculum and hire certified teachers. American applicants for school charters generally address these issues with extensive presentations of the details of their curricula, the internal business, governance, admission, faculty recruitment, and student discipline policies in applications running fifty, one hundred, or several hundred pages. In Ireland, applicants are only required to affirm their commitment to national norms; a submission that takes considerably less than a page.

The benevolence of this process is seen when one refers to the results. In 2003-2005, NSAC received 26 notifications of intention to apply (16 from Educate Together, 5 Catholic, 2 Gaelscoileanna, and 3 from groups not yet certified as Patrons). Of the eleven applications that were eventually received, ten were recommended for approval and all those were approved. In September 2006, of 19 notifications of intention, 8 eventually submitted complete applications and all eight were recommended. For 2007/2008, notifications for the establishment of 21 schools have been received. (Sr. E.Randall, personal communication, 30 March 2007). Thirteen were accepted; eight Catholic schools (six English and two gaelscoileanna), four multi-denominational (one Educate Together and three gaelscoileanna) and one operated by the Religious Society of Friends (DES, 2007). For 2008/2009, Educate Together alone has proposed fifteen new schools; seven in the Dublin area (ETEN, 2008).

In summary, the responses provided a clear picture of universal acceptance of the right of a parent to choose their child's school and the nature of the thought process that went into the choice. Many parents reported beginning the selection/application process when their children were still babies. Parents who sent their children to traditional Catholic national primary schools did so largely because of the convenience which results from such schools being the largest part of the Irish educational landscape. The importance of local community in contributing to the circle of friends, both for the children and the parents, was also cited often. Parents who opt into gaelscoileanna or Educate Together schools state that the special nature of these schools overrides the concerns described above. Parents who chose gaelscoileanna, while often not fluent in the Irish language, themselves, spoke either about the commitment to the Irish culture represented by Irish immersion education or about their belief that dual language education improves student learning. Parents who chose Educate Together schools invariably spoke about their multi-denominational nature.

Apart from some technical exceptions, neither the DES nor the New Schools Advisory Council operates schools, themselves. Therefore, the need for additional schools which either provide alternate ethoi or seats in newly developed housing estates must be met by new schools externally proposed. A review of the documents associated

with new school formation reveals that the New Schools Advisory Council actively solicits applications for new schools from those who, in attempting to exercise their right to choose, are unable to find schools suitable to them. Of the thirteen new schools most recently approved, only six (less than half) are traditional Catholic, English medium schools. Interestingly, current conversation within the teacher preparation community focuses more on expanding the standard teacher college curriculum from three years to four than it does to develop programs aimed at rapidly increasing the teacher pool.

Conclusions

In the United States, the debate about school choice has tended to focus on the playing field of educational effectiveness. In a dispute that will be years in the resolving, American educators *on both sides of the argument* (see, for instance, National Alliance for Public Charter Schools, 2007) appear to have taken for granted that the criteria against which contending educational delivery systems will (or should) be judged are educational effectiveness and efficient use of educational resources. In the Republic of Ireland, school choice appears to be ingrained in the national ethos and is unquestioningly accepted by both parents and educational administrators. Although teachers, principals and members of Board of Management are not specifically quoted in this paper, our study showed no differences in attitude and opinion between parents and these groups.

The result of this acceptance of the parent's right to choose has been the creation of three parallel systems of schooling: traditional denominational national primary schools, Irish language immersion gaelscoileanna, and Educate Together multi-denominational schools. They are all nationally funded, follow the same national curriculum, and are staffed by nationally certified teachers but they differ in ethos or 'essential spirit.' The generally accepted view in Ireland is that this national funding, curriculum and teacher certification results in schools of essentially equal quality. On the whole, the three systems are seen as differing in delivery methods; not quality. The education provided by each of the three systems is seen as essentially equal. Our study reveals that parents, in exercising their right to choose, place greatest emphasis on selecting convenient schools with small class sizes that also conform to the ethos that best

suits their family values and beliefs. In no instance did a parent report information about educational performance as a consideration in their choice until specifically asked about academic achievement. This raises questions about the inevitability of the criteria Americans tend to apply to their school systems.

When asked how they knew that their choice had been a good one and what they liked about their children's school, some parents began to cite instructional details (extra help for children with difficulties, pull out programs for gifted and talented children) but an equal number confined their evaluation to the extent to which their children seemed happy and content in the school. It appears to us that, having been granted a degree of freedom largely unknown in the United States, Irish parents are content to exercise that freedom at the point of choosing their children's school and then to let 'the professionals' whom they've chosen to perform their functions unimpeded. Parents were favorably inclined towards schools which made parent-teacher discussions easy and which made parents feel welcome in the schools, but this did not seem to translate into the expectation that, except for a universally-accepted obligation to check their children's homework, they would be included intimately in their children's education.

In cases where local school conditions inhibit a parent's ability to find a school which she considers suitable for her child, the Department of Education and Science has developed a process whereby groups can petition for the establishment of new, state-funded schools. This process might best be characterized as extremely user-friendly. The result is that energy that might have been expended by people on complaining about, or challenging, the system is currently being directed towards creating schools of their own.

To be sure, insights which might accrue from examination of another country's educational system must be moderated by an understanding of the differences in their political, historical, religious and ethical context. But the values of such efforts include both exposure to different ways of doing things and an increased insight into our own values. The United States may benefit from examining the fundamentally different philosophies which motivate the Irish system. The inherent value to the culture from a

school system which minimizes the dissonance between the public and its government deserves further study from policy makers as well as educational researchers. Arguably, considerable negative energy currently expended in the United States in debating the educational status quo and possible alternatives might be more productively spent in positively examining alternatives which seem to work in other countries. In some cases, alternate solutions might be productively modified to fit the American ethos. In others, perhaps the American ethos, itself, would benefit from greater introspection. The concept that an ethos of personal freedom might play a role equal to that of instructional effectiveness is largely a philosophical one; but it is one which deserves much greater discussion

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