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Ireland

## Primary education; ghettoised on racial and ethnic lines

School system needs to be “revolutionised”

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Dublin

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School system needs to be “revolutionised”

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The acute crisis in accommodating children starting primary school in the South is one of the most breathtaking demonstrations of the incompetence of the Fianna Fail [main governing party] dominated governments that have ruled for more than ten years. Here, Joe Higgins examines the reality of the situation and outlines a solution to the crisis.

**Despite presiding over the longest period of sustained economic growth in the history of the Irish state, there has been an abject failure to plan ahead and commit sufficient resources to the fundamental primary education needs of society. The result is that each spring when young parents come to enrol their children in their local primary school, dozens are turned away.**

The worst schools places crisis exists in areas of rapid population growth and most notably in the newer suburbs of Dublin and the so called commuter belt, north, south and west of the capital. Naturally this situation causes intense frustration and anger. It can result in parents being forced to look for places in schools long distances from their homes. If they are living in any of the bigger cities, it may mean endless hours in traffic gridlock resulting from a further failure of government to invest in adequate public transport infrastructure.

Invidious and dangerous social consequences arise from the school accommodation crisis because of the structures of the Irish primary education system.

The Catholic Church controls the vast bulk of primary schools. In Irish law, despite being heavily funded by the state, the management of any Catholic school can insist on the pupils being Catholic and can refuse entry to children of other religions or none. With the pressure on school places, a range of Catholic schools have begun to implement a Catholics first policy resulting in children of different religions being turned away even if they live close by. In an Ireland with changing demographic patterns arising from immigration, this is now resulting in blatant educational apartheid.

In September of this year, emergency action by the Department of Education saw two new primary schools opened in west and north Dublin to provide for children who could not find places in the local schools run by the Catholic Church. The pupils in both schools are almost exclusively of African origin.

It is a damning indictment of the political, religious and economic establishments in this state that in the Ireland of 2007, there is now a primary school system that has little children ghettoised on racial and eth-

nic lines as surely as if it were Arkansas or Alabama, USA fifty years ago.

The intent of those responsible for school policy may not be that of the racists in the 1950s deep south, but the separation of children along the lines of colour is just as real. This is the inevitable result of a primary education system that is sectarian based and of the unforgivable failure of government to prepare for a rapid population increase in Dublin and indeed, in many other places throughout the state.

The excuse that this could not be foreseen is patently false. Did the massive increase in house building over the last seven years go unnoticed by government? Hardly, considering the fabulous treasure trove of taxation that was raked in as a result. Not to mention the obscene profits made by the big developers, many of them supporters and financial contributors to the political parties in government.

And what of the government's active policy of attracting migrant workers to the Irish economy? A child would understand that these two factors alone would mean a big increase in young parents and therefore, young children needing education. Moreover, community activists have been screaming for several years about impending crises in the provision of school places. As indeed have Socialist Party public representatives.

The government also allowed the timely provision of enough schools in areas of rapidly expanding population to be further complicated by the hold over the designated sites by developers. Profiteers who often held out for outrageous prices for

the land or tried to blackmail the State and local authorities into conceding planning benefits as a price for the handover. A blatant example of this was seen in the rapidly expanding residential area of Ongar in west Dublin. In July 2006 the Department of Education paid €5.5 million for a primary school site of four acres. More land was needed to complete the site, so in March of 2007 the Department forked out a further €5 million – but this time for only two acres. The landowner in this case was a company subsidiary to Manor Park Homes, one of the biggest house builders in the state.

### Children's education jeopardized

This naked greed which jeopardises children's right to a proper education, is considered to be an acceptable part of the normal commercial process in the neo-liberal Ireland of Fianna Fail and the Progressive Democrats, now accompanied in government by the Greens.

Instead of attacking the real cause of the crisis we recently had the nauseating spectacle of some politicians advocating that children should have to present baptismal certificates to gain admission to their local primary school. The new Fine Gael Dail [main opposition right wing party] Deputy for Dublin West, Leo Varadkar, publicly advocated this disgusting sectarian approach. This is a way of diverting attention from a catastrophic failure to provide the necessary education infrastructure to meet the needs of all children in each neighbourhood. It is a sickening scapegoating of immigrant children for failures in the system.

It is to the great credit of some school boards, principals and teachers that they refuse to implement such a policy. However, recently it has been implemented in some areas of great pressure on school places. The consequences of this are stark. Dress it up as you will but, in the current Irish context, the implementation of a Catholic first policy in primary schools inevitably means a segregation of children along ethnic and racial lines. This arises from the obvious fact that most native born parents are, nominally at least, Catholic, whereas many immigrants will not be, particularly those from Africa and Asia.

The government's failure to plan for the present situation is nothing less than criminal political negligence. This is the government which sent Ministers abroad in the late 1990s to encourage foreign companies and workers to come to the South of Ireland. The same government which wanted large numbers of East European workers to come here with the enlargement of the European Union.

This encouragement of inward migration was not out of generosity toward the world's less well off, but rather a deliberate policy to create an employers' labour market with sharp competition between workers in order to hold down wages and attack working conditions achieved in many industries over decades of hard struggle. To make immigrant workers an important tool of economic policy and then fail to provide the necessary infrastructure to underpin this policy is reckless and irresponsible.

The issue of the size of classes is closely related to the provision of school places. If schools cannot physically cater for the children's accommodation, then of course there is no space to cater for smaller classes, even if the teachers were made available.

Figures compiled by the Irish National Teachers Organisation show that this state has the second highest class sizes in the European Union with a quarter of all primary school children in classes of 30 or more. This has serious implication for the learning process as teachers simply do not have the capacity to give time and space to those children who need more attention.

## Immigrant minorities

In schools with significant minorities of children from immigrant backgrounds there are more serious difficulties. If English is not a child's first language then naturally he or she will need far more personal tuition. The fact is that the resources to provide the necessary intense attention to these children have not been put in.

For a comprehensive solution to the crisis of school places, and to end the shameful segregation of children, emergency action and radical policy changes are called for. In the last Dail, I demanded an Emergency Response Unit be set up in the Department of Education which would be given all necessary resources to fast track the provision of facilities to ensure that no community is left without local school places in 2008 and without the odious division of children into religious groups.

As a matter of policy the first classes in new primary schools should be opened as people move into new housing areas. Planning for this means that school sites are identified early on and should be taken into public ownership. The speculators and developers should be cut out. The sites should be purchased at agricultural prices and should be sufficiently large to accommodate the school buildings, but also provide adequate space for sports and physical education for the children. The provision of community facilities such as meeting rooms and recreation facilities tied in with new schools is beginning to happen, but it should be the norm.

The management of the school system, both primary and secondary should be revolutionised. Rather than control by sectional interests, all schools should be run on a secular basis by democratically elected committees, genuinely representative of parents and teachers – and of students in second level.

Where required, religious instruction should be organised between parents and the relevant denominations, with school facilities made freely available where required. Drawing on their long experience, educators, such as the Educate Together group, can have a crucial input into how this can best be organised.

Crucial to the success of a democratic and non-sectarian school system with wide social support would be the provision of sufficient resources to enable every child to develop to its fullest potential. This would mean far smaller class sizes and sufficient support teachers and language specialist teachers to cater for those chil-

dren who need to learn or develop their language

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