



National Association of COMPASS
Co-operation of Minority Religions & Protestant
Parent Associations (Post Primary)

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Minister R. Bruton T.D.,
Minister for Education and Skills,
Marlborough Street,
Dublin 1.

20th March 2017.

Re: COMPASS Response to School Admissions Proposals Consultation Paper

Dear Minister Bruton,

We are writing to you on behalf of the National Association of COMPASS, the statutory body representing Parent Associations of the Protestant and Minority Religion Post Primary Schools. We are a constituent part of the National Parents Council (post primary).

Following your invitation to make submissions on the 'Role of religion in school admissions' we are pleased to make ours herewith. Our submission comprises of two parts – a summary of observations (see below) and an Annex which is more specific in relation to a number of significant difficulties we have identified with the options presented.

Summary Observation 1: Relevance to Post-Primary Schools

Church of Ireland and other minority denominational primary schools operate as feeders to COMPASS schools. Any systematic changes to permitted admission policies which would in any way impede or alter conditions of access to such schools for pupils from minority faith backgrounds, is expected to have serious implications for COMPASS schools. In addition it is anticipated that, should such proposed changes take place under legislation for the primary sector, the subsequent co-harmonisation of admission policies for post-primary schools will become inevitable.

Summary Observation 2: Unacceptability of the proposed options

By reason of conclusions reached by our Executive and articulated in the submissions consulted by a number of our constituent members, none of the four proposed options for changes to admission policy suggested in the consultation paper are recognisable as being workable for COMPASS schools.

Summary Observation 3: Lack of evidence

To date no evidence has been provided in support of a need for change to admission policy in either the primary or post-primary educational sectors. The Minister has referred to a lack of school spaces in certain urban areas and oversubscription in the primary sector as affecting less than 20% of primary schools. Responding to a Parliamentary Question regarding information on oversubscription on 23/2/2017, the Minister stated that schools were not required to report on the numbers refused enrolment and (that therefore) the information was not available.

Observation 4: Catchment

Reflecting our dispersed minority-faith populations, the catchment for COMPASS schools and their patrons' organisations is and has historically been the island of Ireland. More than half of our schools offer boarding and, in addition, host family live-in arrangements can also be arranged. Our communities do not fit any of the catchment models proposed.

Observation 5: No Change in Admission Policy tied to Funding

In recent years the Department of Education and Skills has negotiated with a number of reformed faith schools to enter the 'Free Scheme'. At no time was it made clear that economic assistance was conditional upon the acceptance of a future change in admission policies. Conversely it is understood that COMPASS schools entering the free system appear to have received a guarantee that their admission policies would not be affected.

Observation 6: COMPASS Schools welcome All Faiths and None

While the majority of students attending COMPASS school are students from minority faith backgrounds, our schools have always welcomed students of all faiths and none where capacity allows. This position securely dismisses any suggestion of discriminatory admission based on religion that could be levelled at COMPASS schools.

Observation 7: Article 42 of the Constitution and Article 2 of Protocol of European Convention on HR.

As you are aware Article 42 of the Constitution recognizes the family as the primary educator of the child and makes particular mention of the rights of parents "in the matter of religious and moral formation" of their children. We also draw your attention to Article 2, of Protocol 1 of the European Convention on Human Rights which states 'No person shall be denied the right to education. In the exercise of any functions which it assumes in relation to education and to teaching, the State shall respect the right of parents to ensure such education and teaching is in conformity with their own religious and philosophical convictions.' We are of the view that this is a right against the State not against an education provider. We consider this a very legitimate right and would argue that, as a minority religion that could be discriminated by the proposed changes to Admissions, this Article is an important protection against such discrimination. Politically, we also feel that such discrimination would not be in the continuing interests of promoting harmony between differing groups and viewpoints on this island, whether religious or otherwise.

Observation 8: Denial of the principles upon which religious schools are founded

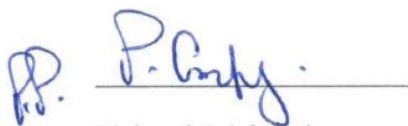
The extension to the post-primary school sector of an outright policy prohibition from using religion as a factor in admission is overtly against the principles upon which religious schools were founded. Allowing faith-based schools to exist and yet to restrict them from accommodating members of their own faith would seem to be a contradiction.

Conclusion

Reflecting the above observations and taking into account the points raised in the Annex, we believe that a 5th Option should be adopted - retaining the status quo. This is the only option that genuinely protects our minority status and respects the ethos to which we subscribe. Equally, we understand that this not a right that comes without a cost both for parents and members of our particular faith and for the State. We would point out that we too provide considerable additional resources, both in terms of actual finance but also of our own time and commitment to maintain our schools and insure the retention of an ethos we value.

We look forward to hearing the conclusions of the consultation process. We can assure you that this is a matter of utmost concern to us and we remain committed to ensuring that our schools and, by extension, the minority faiths affected by these proposals are neither disadvantaged nor discriminated against.

Yours



Richard Brickenden.

President – COMPASS

Attachments: Annex 1

Annex 1 – Specific Observations on the 4 Options

1 Catchment Area

The Catchment Area proposal, as outlined in the Consultation Paper, does not provide a workable approach for almost all the schools that COMPASS represents. The following points portray the reasons why we would object to this:

- Local geographic catchments cannot be defined for the dispersed Protestant community where the island of Ireland has effectively been its historic catchment. For example minority faith boarding schools – many of which are very closely aligned to the churches themselves - cater for students from the entire 32 counties (e.g. Wesley College - Methodist; Newtown School - Quaker) while others, such as Kilkenny College, have catchment areas of at least 9 counties.
- The proposal also contains an implied assumption that the ethos of one minority school is the same as another. It is critical to understand that not all Protestants are Anglican/Church of Ireland. As noted above, for example, Wesley College serves, in the first place, those of the Methodist faith, likewise Newtown for Quaker families, Stratford College, the Jewish community etc. Even for those schools that share denomination, tradition and ethos may vary significantly.
- This option would also seek to ignore long-standing family links with particular schools.
- Many of our schools provide boarding facilities in order to accommodate Protestant students from their far-reaching catchment area that is the entire country. To confine these schools to a more local “catchment” area will undermine boarding and almost certainly herald the end of this facility, one that has existed to serve the wider Protestant community on this island for centuries. It will also render a large capital investment programme redundant with huge costs likely to be incurred in any restructuring or closure of these facilities.

2 Nearest School Rule

This proposal is also considered totally inappropriate for minority faith boarding schools and schools where students reside with host families. We note the following points:

- As with the “catchment area” approach, it must be remembered that all minority faith schools (particularly at second level) are not the same.
- The Nearest School Rule also seeks to dismiss the relevance of family traditions and identity cohesion within dispersed minority communities. As we know only too well, whilst religious viewpoints have dominated our society in the past and it is a relief to embrace the egalitarian equanimity of secularism alongside religion, we must beware of allowing the pendulum to swing too far in the opposite direction.

3 Quota System

Overall, we find this a crude option and one that would create many problems. Limiting the proportion of denominational-based places within a school espousing to subscribe to that same religious ethos must surely be incompatible with its very identity. We consider that:

- It is entirely appropriate that a school founded and operated under a particular religious ethos should give preference to applicant students of that same ethos. There is no doubt that within some faiths, religious upbringing and education are seen as contemporaneous and the imposition of denominational quotas would be viewed as a completely irrational move.
- The number of protestant children seeking school places can change from year to year and a fixed quota system could lead to protestant children being turned away some years and not others. Those that would, basically, be randomly turned away would have to be accommodated in a school with a different ethos of to their own, while places would have to be offered to those of no connection to that ethos. This would lead to unfairness which would cause a great deal of hurt to families. Again this could lead to a dilution of the school's ethos
- While it is possible that this solution could possibly work in some urban areas, it would undoubtedly damage rural Protestant primary and post primary schools where there may be a higher proportion of Protestant applications for a smaller number of places.

A quota system that does not facilitate an accommodation of a scattered Protestant population will not be acceptable, and without clear exceptions being given may rule this option out entirely.

4 Outright Prohibition

An outright prohibition on religious primary schools or post primary schools using religion as a factor in admissions would be unacceptable as it would undermine the school's ethos and parents' right to educate their children in the ethos of their choice.

Such action, at either primary or second-level, would cause COMPASS related schools to rethink their position on the provision of schools. If the rationale for the existence of these schools is fundamentally undermined, then there is no reason for it to continue as a school.

We would also feel that, in addition to being wholly unacceptable it also points up the lack of any evidence-based decision making and removes an admission system that has largely worked; a system that while, clearly, in need of adjustment, does not require a complete abolition.

The extension to the Post-Primary sector of an outright policy prohibition from using religion as a factor in admission is overtly against the principles upon which religious schools were founded. To permit faith-based schools to exist and yet to restrict them from accommodating members of their own faith is an inherent contradiction. Whilst religious schools have welcomed State assistance in terms of payment of teacher salaries and in some cases complete State-funding, at no stage were these financial changes understood to be contingent upon the termination of their functionality as religious schools. At a stage when many schools have become economically dependent upon the State for their existence, a reversal to being wholly independent so as to protect their identity would not be possible.