

# **REPORT OF INTO SURVEY:** ***Religion in Primary Schools*** **2025**



**APRIL 2025**





## Research report

### Background

In January 2025, the INTO surveyed members on *Religion in Primary Schools 2025*. The survey aimed to gather the opinions, insights, and feedback of INTO members regarding religious education and school patronage in primary schools.

Drawing from previous INTO surveys conducted in 2002 and 2012, this research project sought to capture the evolving perspectives of members on the role of religion in primary education. In light of the patronage resolution adopted at Congress 2024, it was deemed an opportune year to re-issue the *INTO Religion in Schools Survey* to gather data from a representative sample of the INTO membership using the same methodology and consistent questions.

As per the Congress 2024 resolution, the latest iteration of the survey contained two additional, mandatory questions, specifically:

1. Should faith formation education take place in primary schools? and
2. Should primary school education in Ireland have secular or religious patrons?

The context for the 2024 patronage resolution was in response to a planned Department of Education (DE) survey which intended to establish parental preferences in relation to a broad range of school-related questions. At the time of writing, the DE has not yet issued the survey and despite repeated requests, the INTO has no confirmed timeline for same.

### Methodology

The methodology involved distributing an online questionnaire to a random, representative sample of 5,000 members selected from the INTO's Republic of Ireland database. Based on member engagement levels with previous similar surveys, it was decided that a random sample would reduce survey bias and give the most reliable and valid data that would most accurately reflect the entire membership. A key strength of using a random sample is that it provides a representative cross-section of the population, enhancing the representativeness of the findings.

The survey included 34 questions seeking a balance of quantitative data with qualitative insights. For comparative purposes, the questions were informed by two previous INTO surveys conducted in 2002 and 2012. To ensure comparability, the same or similar questions were asked across all three survey waves and a new randomly selected sample was taken from the INTO database at each juncture. Issuing a repeated cross-sectional survey approach that uses consistent questions and methodology allows the results to be directly compared across the different time periods, providing a clear picture of how opinions have changed and what factors might be influencing those changes.

The *Religion in Primary Schools 2025 Survey* was issued via email, with a reminder sent one week later, and the data collection period spanned from 8 to 17 January 2025. It was distributed by Civica on behalf of the INTO, and an update was issued in the member e-newsletter on 7 January alerting members to the survey, and encouraging those selected to participate.

The survey utilised a variety of question types to gather comprehensive data from respondents including multiple choice, Likert scale questions, open-ended questions and ranking questions. These diverse question types helped ensure a well-rounded understanding of respondents' views and experiences regarding religious education in primary schools.

The questions were organised into sections covering:

- ✎ Background information;
- ✎ Personal views on teaching religion;
- ✎ The practice of teaching religion in schools;
- ✎ Sacramental preparation;
- ✎ Teacher education;
- ✎ The religious ethos of schools.



Data analysis employed both statistical and thematic methods to provide a comprehensive understanding of members' views. The data collected was processed anonymously and used solely to inform INTO policy, with results presented in an aggregated manner in this final written report.

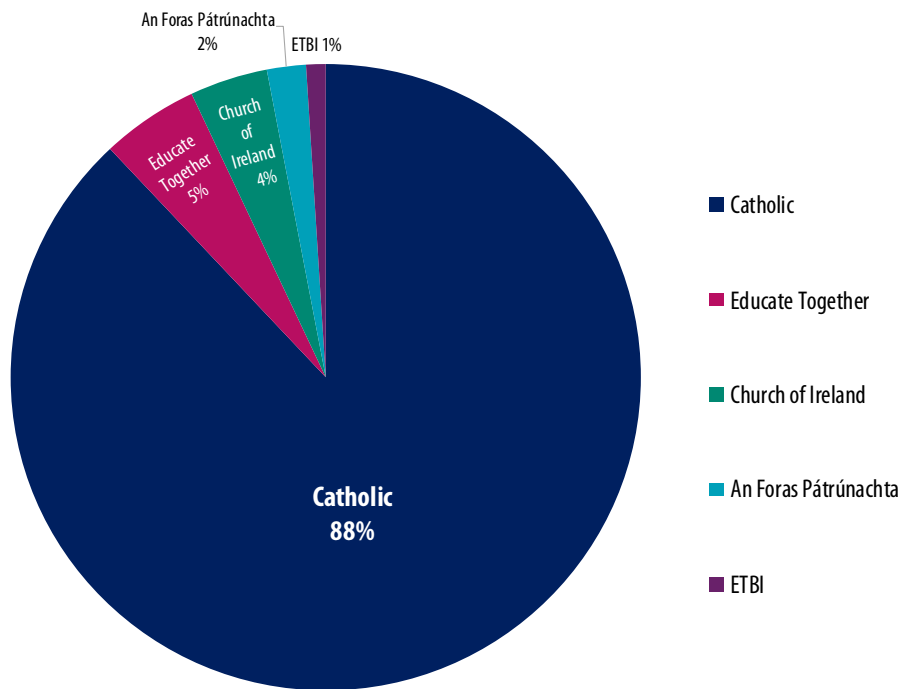
A total of 1,049 respondents participated in the survey, yielding a response rate of 21%. This level of participation provides a valid dataset for analysing the views and opinions of INTO members regarding religious education and school patronage in primary schools.

## Key findings

### Background information

The survey respondents' background data reveals that the majority were aged between 35-44 years (41%), followed by those aged 45-54 years (25%) and 25-34 years (19%). A smaller percentage were aged 55-70 years (13%), with very few respondents aged 18-24 years (0.3%). In terms of gender, a significant majority identify as women (83%), while men constitute 16% of the respondents. Regarding the patronage of schools, most respondents teach in Catholic schools (88%), with smaller proportions teaching in Educate Together (5%), Church of Ireland (4%), and other denominations. Additionally, 58% of respondents work in urban schools, while 41% work in rural schools.

Figure 1: Patronage of school

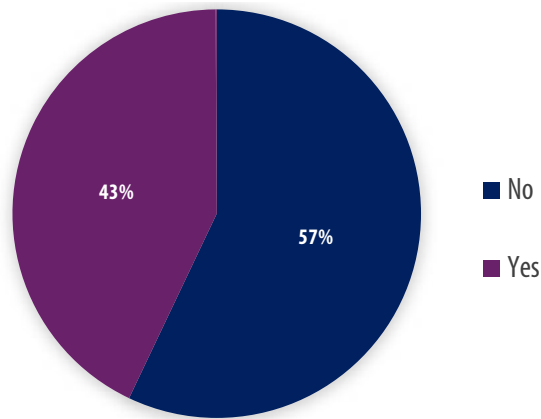




## Personal views on teaching religion

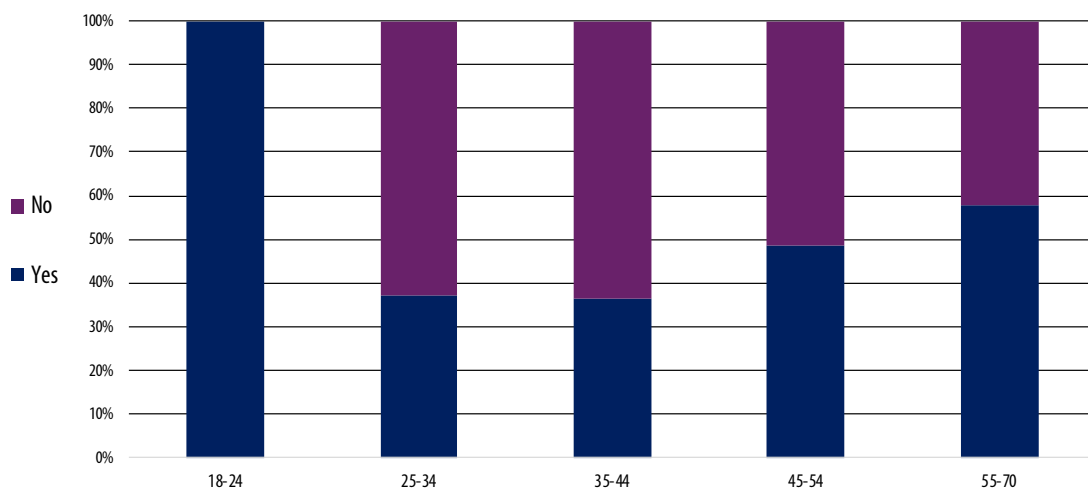
In relation to the first mandatory question on whether faith formation should take place in primary school, there was a significant division in opinion among the respondents, with a notable lean towards opposing faith formation in the primary school setting. The results show that a slight majority of respondents (57%) believe that faith formation should not take place in primary schools. Conversely, 43% support the inclusion of faith formation in primary schools.

**Figure 2: Should faith formation take place in primary schools?**



Opinions vary significantly across different age groups, with a general trend of more respondents supporting faith formation in primary schools as the age group increases.

**Figure 3: Age versus should faith formation take place in primary schools**



## Purpose of teaching religion in primary schools

A number of emerging themes arose in responses to an open-response question about the purpose of teaching religion in primary schools. Many respondents believe that teaching religion in primary schools serves to instil moral values, teach right from wrong, and foster a sense of empathy among pupils. Some see it as a way to pass on cultural and religious traditions, providing children with a grounding in their faith and preparing them for sacraments such as First Communion and Confirmation.

Conversely, others highlight the importance of teaching about a variety of world religions to promote tolerance, respect, and understanding of diverse beliefs. A significant number of respondents expressed concerns about the relevance and appropriateness of faith formation continuing to take place in primary schools today. They proffer that religion is a personal matter that should be taught at home or in the church community rather than in schools. Many respondents advocate for a more secular approach to education, where schools focus on teaching about various religions and ethical principles without promoting any particular faith.



Participants were asked to rate which statement most accurately described their attitude towards teaching religion. The results show that 33% of respondents teach religion willingly, while 19.5% would prefer not to teach it. Some 19% are willing to teach a broad religious education but would rather not teach a specific faith. Another 11% are not opposed to teaching religion, and 10% see it as just another subject they have to teach. The statements with which respondents agreed may indicate a sense of indifference towards the topic. This could suggest that the respondents either feel neutral or disconnected from the issue, possibly due to a lack of strong opinions or personal relevance. Overall, the data highlights the complexity of the topic and the diverse range of attitudes towards teaching religion.

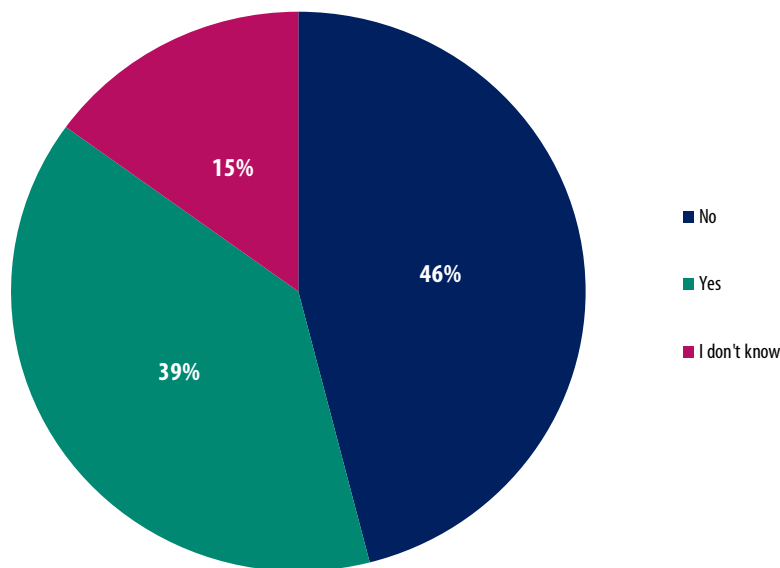
**Table 1: Which of the following statements most accurately describes your attitude towards teaching religion?**

I teach religion willingly	33%
I would prefer if I didn't have to teach religion	19.5%
I would teach a broad religious education willingly but would prefer not to teach religious education in a particular faith	19%
I am not opposed to teaching religion	11%
I just see religion as another subject I have to teach	10%
Other (please specify)	4%
I would like to have the option of opting out of religion	3%
No response	0.2%

Respondents were provided with an opportunity to expand on their views and experiences related to teaching religion in schools. The responses to the open-response question reveal a range of perspectives on teaching religion in primary schools. Some teachers expressed strong personal beliefs about conflict with the religious content they are required to teach, leading to feelings of discomfort and disillusionment, with one respondent highlighting the challenge of teaching religion in an environment where many families do not reinforce and/or practice their faith at home.

On the other hand, some teachers are happy to teach religion, even if they do not personally practice the faith. These respondents try to make religion more relevant to their pupils' lives or integrate religious education into the broader curriculum. A few teachers, particularly those in schools with a strong religious ethos, feel that teaching religion is essential for preparing students for sacraments and maintaining the school's religious ethos. However, there is a consensus that the primary responsibility for religious education should be shared with families, whose level of involvement determines the efficacy of faith formation.

**Figure 4: Do you agree religion should be taught by the class teacher?**



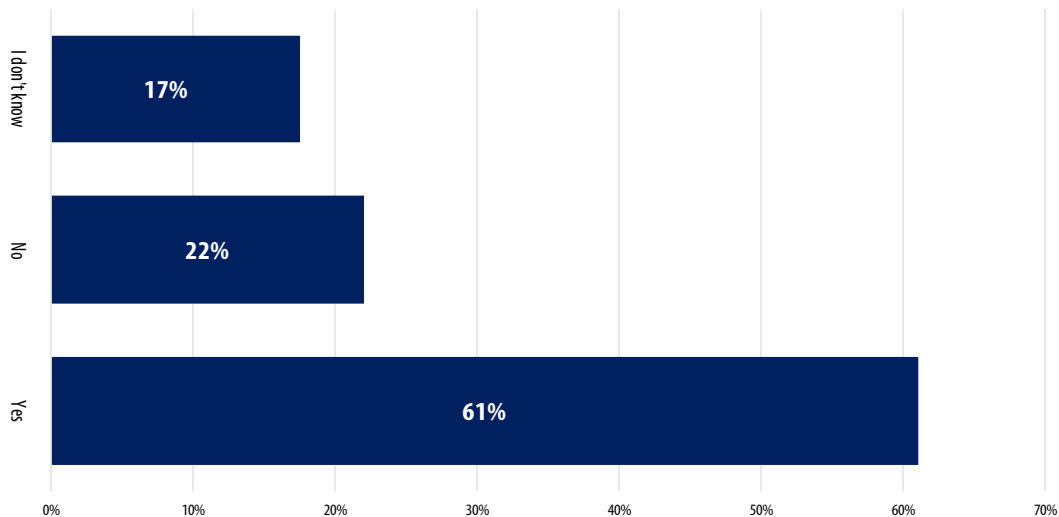


The survey results on whether religion should be taught by the class teacher show a divided opinion among respondents. Some 46% of participants believe that religion should not be taught by the class teacher, while 39% think it should be. Additionally, 15% of respondents are unsure, indicating a significant level of uncertainty on this issue. This division highlights the complexity of the topic and suggests that there is no clear consensus among respondents.

The respondents were encouraged to elaborate if they believed that someone other than the class teacher should be responsible. Many respondents believed that parents and religious institutions should take primary responsibility for faith formation, with some suggesting that religious education should be conducted by trained faith formation practitioners or members of the parish. Others propose that religion should be taught outside of school hours, possibly through Sunday school or similar programmes, to ensure that it remains a family and community matter. Some respondents also recommend that a dedicated religious education teacher or a willing colleague who is comfortable with the subject could take on this role if the class teacher is not comfortable with teaching religious instruction.

Respondents were asked to consider whether it is necessary for teachers to be believers in the faith they are required to teach. The results show that a slight majority of respondents, 53%, do not think it is necessary for teachers to be believers in the faith they teach. However, 33% believe it is necessary, while 13% are unsure. This indicates that while a significant portion of respondents feel that personal belief is not a prerequisite for teaching religion, there is still a considerable number who think it is important.

**Figure 5: Is it possible to teach religion if one is not the faith one is teaching?**

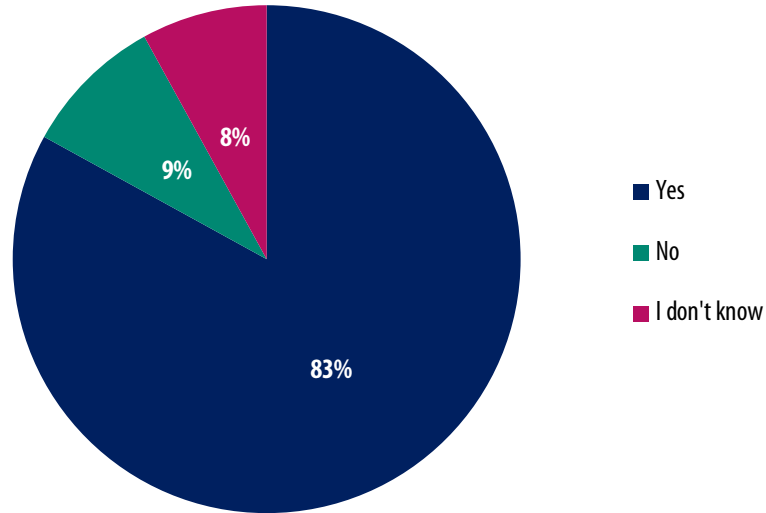


Participants were asked to reflect on whether it is possible to teach religion if one is not of the faith one is teaching. A greater majority of respondents, 61%, believe it is possible to teach religion without being a follower of that faith, 22% think it is not possible, and 17% are unsure. This suggests that most respondents feel that teachers can effectively teach religious education even if they do not personally adhere to the faith, although there is still a notable minority who disagree.

The survey findings on whether children in all primary schools should be taught about other religions reveal a strong consensus among respondents, with 83% in favour of including education about other religions in the curriculum. Only 9% oppose this idea, while 8% are unsure. This overwhelming support suggests there is a broad recognition of the importance of promoting understanding and respect for diverse beliefs in primary schools.



**Figure 6:** Should children in all schools be taught about other religions?



### Teaching religion in your school

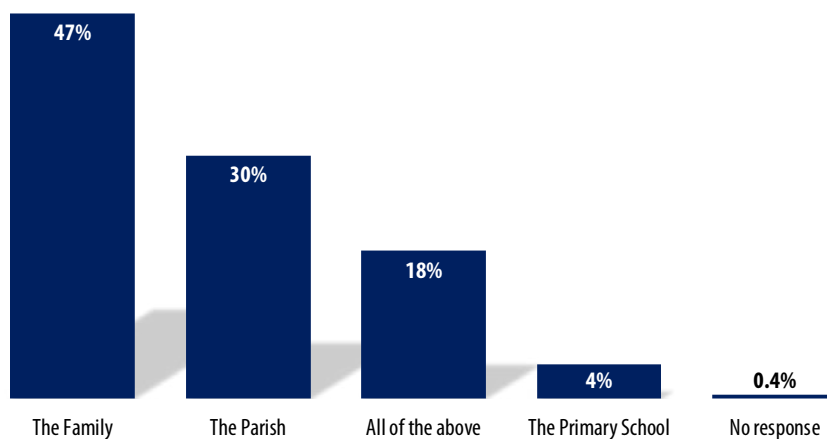
An overwhelming majority of participants (87%) indicated there are pupils attending their denominational school who are not of the faith of the school. The survey responses regarding the percentage of pupils not of the faith of their school show significant variation. Some schools have a very small percentage of non-faith pupils, while others have a substantial minority or even a majority. The data highlights the diverse religious composition of classrooms.

Respondents provided input on the alternatives afforded to pupils who opt out of religious education. Many indicated that these children are given alternative activities such as reading, completing other schoolwork, engaging in art or drawing, and using online learning tools. Some children remain in the classroom but do not participate in the religious lessons, instead, they work on other activities. Additionally, some children are supervised in another classroom during religious services and ceremonies. The findings highlight the need for more supports in accommodating these pupils – especially in schools with limited staff, and suggests that additional staff hours could help facilitate alternative activities.

### Sacramental preparation

The survey data on sacramental preparation reveals diverse opinions and practices. The majority of respondents, 47%, believe that the family should be responsible for preparing children for sacraments, followed by the parish (30%), with only 4% thinking it should be the primary school's responsibility.

**Figure 7:** Responsibility for preparing children for sacraments

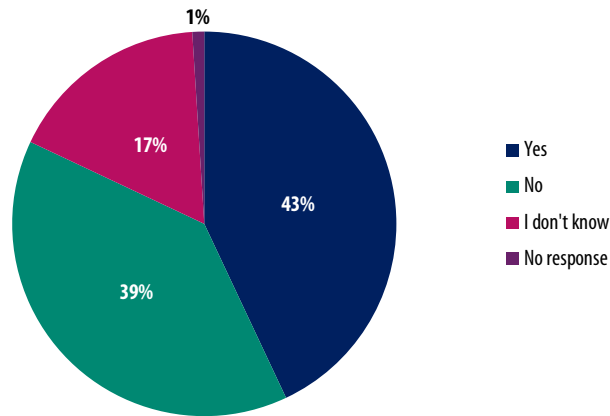






Regarding involvement in sacramental preparation outside of school, 43% of respondents indicated that children are involved, while 39% said they are not. Additionally, 80% noted that sacramental preparation takes up additional time beyond allocated religion time. Representatives from the local church are involved in various ways, with 39% making occasional visits to classes preparing for sacraments and 20% making occasional visits to all classes. These findings highlight the varied perspectives on the role of schools, families, and religious institutions in sacramental preparation and the significant time commitment involved.

**Figure 8: Are the children in your school involved in sacramental preparation outside of school?**



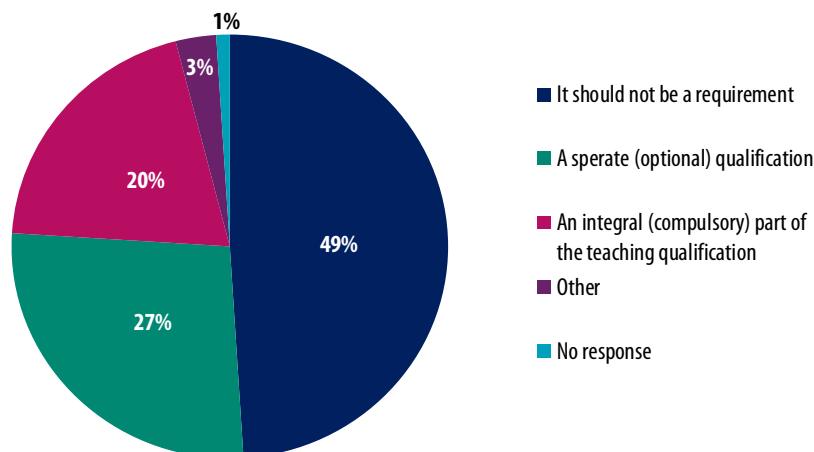
The survey responses regarding parental involvement in the preparation of their children for sacraments reveal a wide range of practices and levels of engagement. Many respondents indicated that parents are involved through parish programs such as *Do This in Memory*, attending specific preparation masses, and helping their children learn prayers and hymns. Some parents participate in meetings and preparatory ceremonies organised by the parish or school, while others assist with religious homework and encourage regular prayer at home. However, there is a notable variation in the extent of parental involvement, with some parents only attending the sacramental ceremonies or minimally participating in the preparation process.

Conversely, several respondents highlighted that parents often have limited or no involvement in sacramental preparation, with teachers and the parish taking on most of the responsibility. In some cases, parents' participation is minimal, such as attending a few meetings or masses, and there is a general sentiment that more active involvement from parents would be beneficial. Overall, the responses suggest a need for greater collaboration between parents, schools, and parishes to support children's religious education and sacramental preparation effectively.

### Teacher education

The survey data on qualifications for teaching religion in primary schools reveals that less than half of the respondents (49%) believe that a qualification for teaching religion should not be a requirement. However, 27% think it should be a separate (optional) qualification, and 20% believe it should be an integral (compulsory) part of the teaching qualification. A small percentage (3%) provided other suggestions.

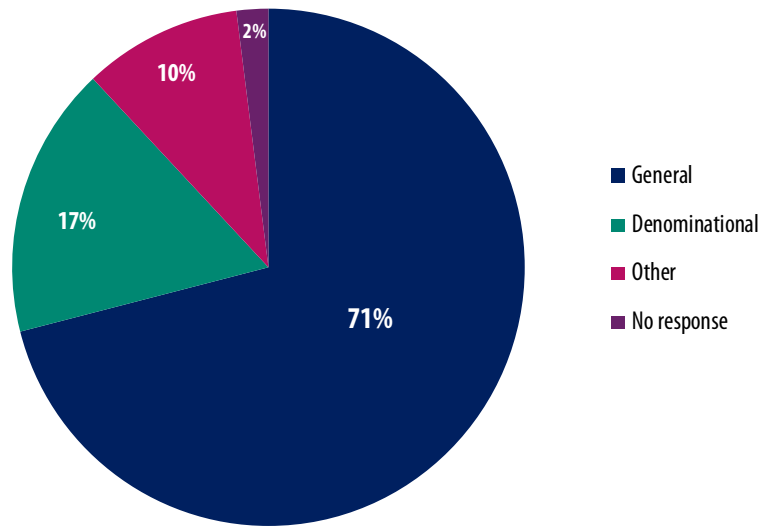
**Figure 9: Should a qualification for teaching religion in the primary school be:**





When asked whether the qualification should be general or denominational, a significant majority (71%) favoured a general qualification, while 17% supported a denominational qualification.

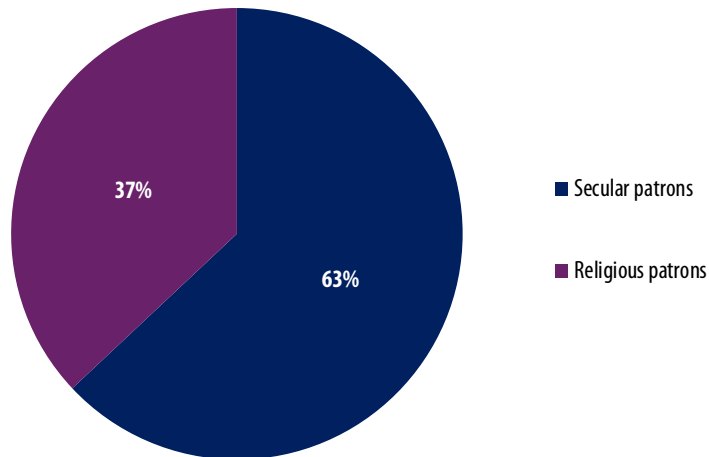
**Figure 10:** Should a qualification for teaching religion in the primary school be:



## The religious ethos of schools

Finally, the survey data on the second mandatory, resolution-related question on school patronage reveals several key insights. Most respondents (63%) believe that primary schools in Ireland should have secular patrons, while 37% support religious patrons.

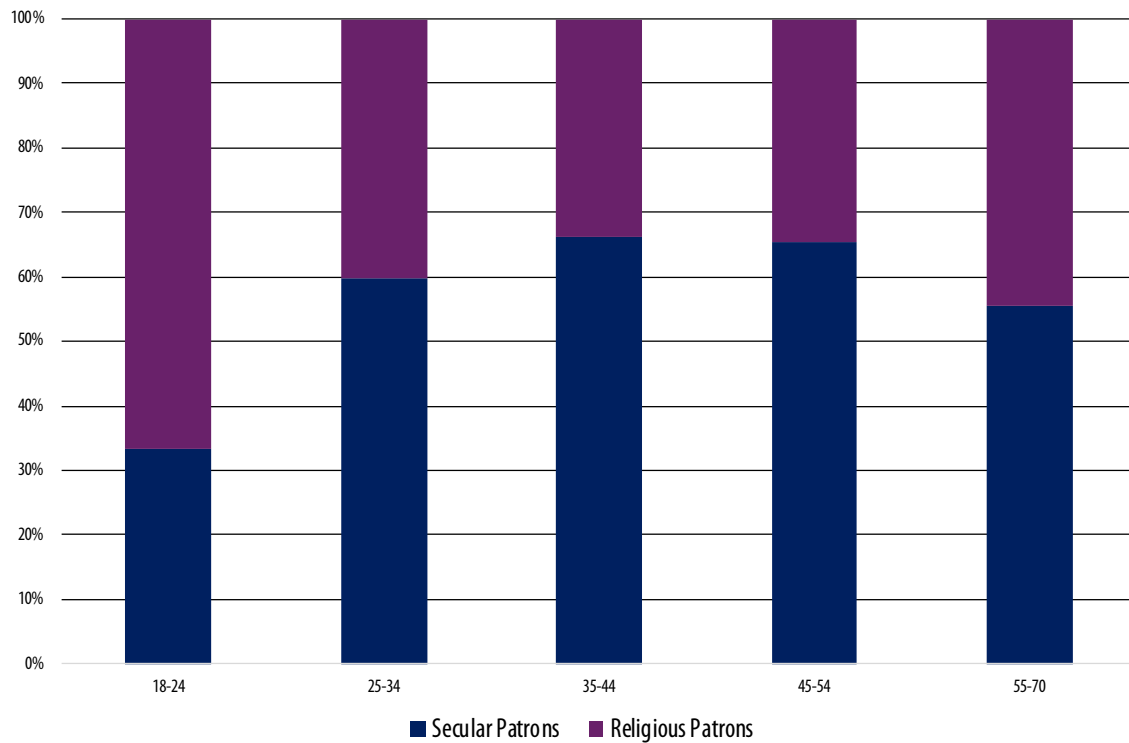
**Figure 11:** Should primary school education in Ireland have:-



This preference for secular patrons is consistent across different age groups, with the highest support among those aged 35-44 (66%) and the lowest among those aged 55-70 (55%).



**Figure 12: Age versus Should primary school education in Ireland have:-**



## Appendix A: Congress 2024 Resolution

### Patronage

Congress:

- a. recognises the important role religious organisations played in the primary school education of the children of Ireland since the foundation of national school education in 1831;
- b. notes:
  1. the new survey by the DE for the opinions of parents of primary and pre school parents on the subject of school patronage;
  2. the need for more diversity in our teacher workforce to reflect our student population;
- c. acknowledges the importance of inclusive education to all children and the right to same;
- d. instructs the CEC to survey all members on the questions:
  1. should faith formation education take place in primary schools? And
  2. should primary school education in Ireland have secular or religious patrons?;
- e. instructs the CEC to engage with the relevant primary school patron and management bodies to remove the requirement for a religious certificate in order to teach in schools; and
- f. further demands that the CEC construct a taskforce on the future of primary school patronage in Ireland to examine the results of the survey and to report to Congress 2025.



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