

REPORT OF THE INTO TASKFORCE ON THE FUTURE OF PRIMARY SCHOOL PATRONAGE IN IRELAND





Background to the taskforce

A Congress 2024 resolution called on the CEC to survey members on issues relating to religious education and school patronage, and to establish a taskforce on the future of primary school patronage in Ireland that would examine the results of an INTO survey on this topic and report to Congress 2025.

In January 2025, the INTO surveyed a random sample of 5,000 members on the Republic of Ireland database regarding religion in primary schools. The survey aimed to gather the opinions, insights, and feedback of INTO members on a wide range of topics relating to religious education and school patronage in primary schools. The taskforce considered a presentation on the key findings of the research during its deliberations and responded to these findings in the forthcoming recommendations. The taskforce also considered and examined legislation, INTO and government policy documents, and other relevant information about primary school patronage in Ireland in advance of making its recommendations.

The taskforce comprised 15 members including the INTO President, INTO General Secretary, INTO Vice-President, representatives from the CEC, INTO's national committees (EDC/EQC/PDC), and five INTO divisions. INTO Head Office Officials were assigned to assist with the work of the taskforce.

Two day-long meetings of the taskforce took place on Wednesday, 12 and 26 March 2025. The meetings of the taskforce were held in-person in Dublin.

The terms of reference of the Taskforce on the Future of Primary School Patronage were to:

- Consider and examine the legislation, policy documents and other relevant information concerning primary school patronage in Ireland;
- b. Examine and analyse the results of the *INTO Religion in Primary Schools 2025 Survey*, and to compare the findings with previous surveys on these particular matters;
- c. Explore how primary school patronage could evolve in the future and to consider the possible impact on INTO members;
- d. Make recommendations which will address INTO policy options and priorities about the future of primary school patronage, denominational religious education and related matters; and
- e. Consider how best to deliver any recommendations to INTO Congress 2025.

Recommendations of the INTO Taskforce on the Future of Primary School Patronage in Ireland

Based on the INTO's 2025 research findings and the deliberations held during the taskforce meetings, the following recommendations have been formulated by the taskforce to address INTO policy options and priorities regarding the future of primary school patronage, denominational religious education, and other related matters:

Increasing plurality of patronage and diversity

1. Reconfiguration for diversity process

The taskforce noted the targets set in successive programmes for the Government to increase the number of non-denominational and multi-denominational schools, including the aim within the last government's programme of reaching at least 400 such schools by 2030. Divesting patronage enables schools to reflect the pluralistic nature of diverse school communities and provide greater choice for parents and pupils particularly those seeking multi-denominational education.

Since 2011, 51 out of the 52 new primary schools established have adopted a multi-denominational ethos. Between 2019 and 2024, the number of schools with a Catholic ethos fell by 38, from 2,760 to 2,722, while those with a multi-denominational ethos rose by 17, from 153 to 170. This is part of a longer-term trend whereby the number of Catholic schools has gradually fallen by 121 in the last 11 years, while the number of multi-denominational schools has risen from 104 to 170, an increase of 63%.

Separately, 12 primary schools have been established under the patronage divesting process, *Reconfiguration for Diversity*, all of which have adopted a multi-denominational ethos. However, the taskforce was deeply concerned with the limited progress made under this process. While this divestment marks a step forward in aligning school offerings with the diverse needs of pupils and their families in contemporary Ireland, the overall reconfiguration process has demonstrated significant shortfalls that must be addressed as a matter of urgency.

In particular, the taskforce expressed concern over the significantly slow pace of progress in expanding this divestment initiative. The current rate of change is considered unacceptable and insufficient given the urgent need for greater diversity in school patronage. There remains a significant gap between the growing demand for multi-denominational schools and the number that are being transitioned through the *Reconfiguration for Diversity* process. The taskforce noted with concern the last government's failure to progress towards targets for the establishment of multi-denominational schools contained in its programme for government and expressed its dismay with the failure of the new government to include any concrete targets in its current programme *Securing Ireland's Future*.

A strategic commitment to expediting the divestment of patronage from religiously affiliated schools to multi-denominational models and a clear roadmap showing how to scale these efforts must be implemented. Further, the taskforce submits that the pace of implementation should be informed by empirical evidence on demand, considering geographical areas with higher levels of religious diversity and parental preference for multi-denominational education.

The taskforce highlighted that there were inconsistencies in the way that the consultation process for reconfiguration was conducted, with some stakeholder voices not being adequately heard. For consultation to be truly effective, it must be conducted independently and ensure that a safe space is provided for those impacted to express their views and raise their concerns. Public support for divestment was most likely to be achieved when the consultation was conducted independently and when alternative patronage options were clearly communicated to all those affected. Additionally, it is crucial going forward that any form of engagement, whether through surveys or other methods, is accessible and inclusive.

Despite the shortcomings of the process, the taskforce welcomed the provision afforded to school leaders and teachers who wish to continue to work in schools under their preferred ethos involving the option of redeployment via the main panel of the outgoing patron.

Overall, the taskforce firmly believes that the *Reconfiguration for Diversity* process must be regenerated, re-energised and accelerated to meet the evolving needs of communities.

THE TASKFORCE RECOMMENDS THE INTO ENGAGES WITH THE DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION AND RELEVANT PATRONS AND SEEK AN ACCELERATION OF THE DIVESTMENT OF SCHOOLS, WHERE FEASIBLE.



The need for empirical national data on parental and teacher preferences relating to school patronage

The taskforce noted the INTO's ongoing engagement with the DE regarding the collection of empirical evidence on parental and school community (including teachers) opinions on preferred school patronage. The taskforce believes that this data is crucial in shaping future decision-making and ensuring that any reconfiguration of school patronage aligns with the needs and desires of the communities served by these schools. The taskforce has noted a commitment from successive governments to conduct this research, which, to date, has not materialised.

In any such survey, it will be crucial that maximum participation of parents and teachers is reached. This can only be achieved through a clear communication campaign and by providing support to ensure under-represented voices are heard including the provision of multilingual versions of the survey and adult literacy services as required to ensure full access and equal opportunity to participation. The taskforce also observed there is a lack of clarity around the language and descriptors used about the divestment of patronage process. It is essential to provide clear explanations and glossaries to ensure the language is accessible to all.

ACCORDINGLY, THE TASKFORCE RECOMMENDS THAT THE INTO ENGAGE WITH THE DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION AND DEMANDS THAT THE NATIONAL SURVEY OF PARENTS AND SCHOOL COMMUNITIES BE CONDUCTED WITHOUT DELAY.

3. An enhanced communication campaign is essential to support and promote the reconfiguration of school patronage

While the taskforce acknowledged the DE's efforts to publish information regarding the *Reconfiguration for Diversity* process, the taskforce was concerned that there remain significant gaps in information and understanding concerning the various school patronage options and the advantages of changing patronage. The taskforce submitted that these gaps must be addressed to provide a clearer, more comprehensive understanding of the process and its potential impact on schools, communities, and the stakeholders involved.

The work of the taskforce highlighted that a significant challenge is local reluctance to change school patronage and the comfort in school communities with familiar approaches. This understandably stems from a fear of uncertainty and the potential risks associated with change. The taskforce believes that any communication campaign should proactively address the inevitable concerns regarding change by highlighting the benefits of reconfiguration and showcasing successful transitions. The taskforce is of the view that by showcasing successful divestments, a public campaign should provide concrete evidence that change can be positive and beneficial. This would replace fear of the unknown with tangible examples of success.

THE TASKFORCE RECOMMENDS THE INTO ENGAGES WITH THE DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION AND RELEVANT PATRONS TO URGE THEM TO HIGHLIGHT THE SUCCESS OF DIVESTMENTS ON A NATIONAL AND LOCAL LEVEL BASIS.



4. A balanced approach to legal and property rights

The taskforce acknowledged that the divestment of school patronage often involves complex legal and property-related considerations, particularly regarding the ownership of school buildings.

While these issues must be managed carefully, they should not become barriers to the broader objective of meeting the educational needs and preferences of the community. The taskforce noted that the INTO previously recommended that school buildings, which have been largely funded by public contributions over the years, should primarily serve the interests of the community and not be seen solely through the lens of private patronage rights.

The transfer of school buildings in the divestment process should be directed towards public ownership, with the state assuming responsibility for these assets. Once in state ownership, the state should determine the most appropriate type of patronage based on the wishes of the local community. In doing so, the state should provide for a process where buildings are leased to alternative patrons for a defined and appropriate period, allowing for flexibility in how the schools operate while ensuring state oversight and community needs are consistently prioritised.

The taskforce believes the divestment of school patronage should be a process focused on ensuring the educational needs of the community are met, while also respecting the legal and property rights involved. By transferring school buildings to the state and allowing flexibility in the leasing of properties to new patrons, the state can ensure that schools continue to serve the best interests of pupils, parents, and the broader school community. Schools involved in lease agreements must have a reasonable degree of certainty and security regarding their future ensuring that schools can plan for long-term development. To adequately cater for their broader communities, schools must also have a reasonable degree of autonomy over their buildings.

THE TASKFORCE RECOMMENDS THAT THE INTO SHOULD REVIEW ITS POLICY POSITION ON THE TRANSFER OF SCHOOL BUILDINGS TO THE STATE WITH A VIEW TO CONSIDERING A RANGE OF APPROACHES TO ADDRESS THIS ISSUE.

Responding to the needs of teachers

5. Repeal of Section 37.1 of the Employment Equality Acts

The taskforce noted the INTO's earlier calls for the complete removal of Section 37.1 of the *Employment Equality Acts*. The legislation provides an exception that allows employers to prioritise certain employment decisions if it is deemed necessary to uphold the institution's ethos. As amended by *The Equality (Miscellaneous Provisions) Bill 2013*, the legislation now provides that any action taken under this provision must be objectively justified and considered an authentic occupational requirement based on the institution's goal of protecting its religious ethos. The action must be reasonable and proportionate. This provision effectively raises the threshold for discrimination.

However, the taskforce noted in the INTO's submission on the *Review of the Equality Acts* in 2021 the ongoing concerns of members whose personal lives may not fully align with the religious ethos of their schools. The taskforce was also deeply concerned about the well-being of INTO members who feel compelled to mask their true identity in order to appear aligned with the ethos of the school.

Notwithstanding the amendment, the taskforce believes that allowing denominational schools to give priority to teachers of their denomination or to discriminate against those, not of the school's denomination perpetuates unequal and unfair treatment and could potentially have a discriminatory impact on prospective employment and promotional opportunities for members. It is the organisation's clear view that Section 37.1 runs counter to the principles of inclusion and constitutes legislative barriers to the equal treatment of employees.

THEREFORE, THE TASKFORCE RECOMMENDS THAT THE INTO CONTINUES TO CAMPAIGN AND ADVOCATE FOR THE REMOVAL OF SECTION 37.1 IN ITS ENTIRETY FROM EMPLOYMENT EQUALITY LEGISLATION.



6. Addressing the barrier of religious education certification in teacher employment

The taskforce noted that the Certificate in Religious Education is an optional component of initial teacher education (ITE) that is separate from the BEd/PME qualification. However, the widespread expectation of religious patrons is that the certificate is a condition of employment in denominational schools. The taskforce observed a recent increase in the requirement for a certificate at a local level. Within this context, the taskforce believes that the requirement for a certificate inadvertently limits access to employment for those from diverse and underrepresented backgrounds.

While respecting the ethos of religious schools, there should be greater emphasis on providing opportunities for professional development in religious education without requiring a pre-employment certificate. It is worth noting that multi-denominational schools do not require teachers to have a pre-employment qualification in religious affiliation. Instead, teachers are expected to engage with programmes such as *Goodness Me*, *Goodness You* (Community National Schools) and *Learn Together* (Educate Together National Schools), and to participate in relevant in-service professional development opportunities related to these programmes. Another alternative approach could be to allow teachers the opportunity to complete the qualification within an agreed timeframe, rather than making it a pre-employment requirement. This approach would be similar to how those with Irish language requirements are managed.

The taskforce believes that the requirement for a religious certificate for employment in religious-run schools needs to be re-evaluated and made more flexible to ensure that it does not act as a barrier to qualified teachers taking up employment in these schools. The taskforce noted that the INTO had contacted both the Catholic Primary School Management Association (CPSMA) and the Irish Episcopal Conference to advise them of the INTO Congress 2024 Resolution and to alert them to the work of the taskforce whose report would be shared with them in due course.

THE TASKFORCE RECOMMENDS THAT THE UNION CONTINUE ITS EFFORTS TO ENGAGE WITH THE IRISH EPISCOPAL CONFERENCE AND SEEK A MORE FLEXIBLE APPROACH IN RELATION TO THE REQUIREMENT FOR A RELIGIOUS CERTIFICATE TO TEACH IN DENOMINATIONAL SCHOOLS.

7. Promote and support teacher diversity

The Irish teaching profession, particularly at primary level, remains largely homogeneous with little to no diversity. The taskforce believes that increasing teacher diversity would have a significantly positive impact on making schools more inclusive for pupils, particularly in terms of representation by ensuring the teaching body reflects the diversity of the pupil population.

However, as previously stated the taskforce submits that the requirement for a Certificate in Religious Education poses a significant barrier for teachers from non-majority faith backgrounds. To address this, the taskforce is of the view that a review of the current approach to religious education must be undertaken and that accommodations and alternative pathways must be implemented to ensure that the teaching profession remains a viable and accessible option for all individuals regardless of their religious background. The taskforce also noted the financial and geographical barriers to accessing the religious certificate in education.

A more diverse profession necessitates ongoing inclusive professional development focused on diversity, equity, and inclusion for all teachers. Furthermore, ITE needs continued reconfiguration to meet the needs of teachers from diverse backgrounds and minority faiths. A balanced and flexible approach to religious education in ITE is essential to allow for broader perspectives.



Additionally, the taskforce recognised that currently, most teachers in Ireland have received their teacher education within a denominational context, preparing them primarily for work in denominational school settings. However, the evolving educational landscape, with increasing diversity, calls for teachers to be prepared for a wider range of school contexts.

Particularly, if the *Reconfiguration for Diversity* initiative progresses, there will be an increasing need for teachers prepared to work in multi-denominational schools. These schools, designed to serve students from a broad spectrum of religious and cultural backgrounds, require teachers who not only understand the diverse belief systems and traditions of their students but also possess the tools to create inclusive, respectful, and supportive learning environments.

In that context, the taskforce is of the view that colleges of education/higher education institutions should continue to expand the range of modules focused on world religions, multi-faith education, and interfaith dialogue. These modules should be designed to provide prospective teachers with both theoretical knowledge and practical strategies to navigate and teach in diverse school settings.

Furthermore, these modules should also cover issues such as religious literacy, the social and cultural implications of religion in the classroom, and the role of religious education in building social cohesion. Given the complex nature of religious identity and its impact on students' experiences and learning, teachers must be prepared to address sensitive issues, promote critical thinking about religion, and engage in constructive interfaith dialogue. This will ensure that teachers are not only capable of teaching religious education in a way that respects all beliefs but also able to help students navigate the broader societal context of religious pluralism.

THE TASKFORCE RECOMMENDS THE INTO ENGAGE WITH THE COLLEGES OF EDUCATION/
HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS AND SEEK THAT THE RANGE OF MODULES FOCUSED ON
WORLD RELIGIONS, MULTI-FAITH EDUCATION AND INTERFAITH DIALOGUE BE EXPANDED.

THE TASKFORCE FURTHER RECOMMENDS THAT ANY EXPANDED PROGRAMMES BE ALIGNED WITH ONGOING PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT OPPORTUNITIES AND IN-SERVICE TRAINING FOR TEACHERS, ENSURING THAT THOSE ALREADY IN THE CLASSROOM CAN ALSO ACCESS TRAINING IN THESE CRITICAL AREAS AS THEY TRANSITION TO WORKING IN MORE DIVERSE SCHOOL SETTINGS.

THE TASKFORCE ALSO RECOMMENDS THAT THE UNION ENGAGES WITH THE DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION, THE TEACHING COUNCIL, HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS/COLLEGES OF EDUCATION AND OTHER RELEVANT BODIES AND DEMANDS THAT BARRIERS TO A MORE DIVERSE PROFESSION BE REMOVED AND ADDITIONAL ALTERNATIVE PATHWAYS BE PROVIDED.

Prioritising the needs of pupils

8. Addressing opt-out arrangements and alternatives to religious activities

In Ireland, while the *Constitution* guarantees parents the right to religious education for their children in state-funded schools, it's equally essential that parental rights to withdraw their children from such instruction are fully respected, accommodated and upheld. Under the provisions of the *Education (Admission to Schools) Act 2018*, where schools provide religious instruction they must clearly set out in their admission policies the school's arrangements for pupils where the parent or guardian has requested the pupil attend the school but without attending religious education in the school. However, the act does not prescribe the 'opt-out' arrangements and schools are required to determine the particular arrangements that are most appropriate in their circumstances having regard to local issues such as available space, supervision requirements and how the school concerned organises classes.



Within that context, the taskforce discussed and considered the current 'opt-out' arrangements from religious education and agreed that there was a need for more support and guidance for schools in accommodating pupils who 'opt-out' to ensure a consistency of experience across schools. This was especially true in schools with limited staff. The taskforce suggested the allocation of additional staff hours could help facilitate respectful and inclusive alternative activities that align with parents' preferences and pupils' needs.

The taskforce examined how sacramental preparation affects children who exercise their right to 'opt out' of religious education. The taskforce was of the view that specific consideration must also be given to the management of alternatives for pupils who do not participate in church visits and religious celebrations. These alternatives must be designed and implemented in a way that is consistent, meaningful and inclusive, ensuring that all pupils feel involved and valued. Furthermore, the *INTO Religion in Schools 2025 Survey* indicated a strong consensus that this sacramental preparation should be conducted entirely outside the school setting and fall under the purview of parents and parish communities.

ACCORDINGLY, THE TASKFORCE RECOMMENDS CLEAR GUIDANCE AND ADEQUATE RESOURCING BE PROVIDED TO SCHOOLS BY THE DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION TO SUPPORT THEM IN FACILITATING 'OPT-OUT' ARRANGEMENTS FOR THOSE WHO DO NOT WISH TO PARTICIPATE IN RELIGIOUS EDUCATION.

THE TASKFORCE FURTHER RECOMMENDS THE INTO ENGAGE WITH THE RELEVANT PATRONS AND SEEK THE PROVISION OF ALTERNATIVE MODELS FOR SACRAMENTAL PREPARATION OUTSIDE OF THE SCHOOL DAY.

9. Ensuring continued inclusive enrolment practices

The taskforce welcomed the findings of the recent review of the operation of Section 11 of the *Education (Admission to Schools) Act 2018* which highlights that no primary school is using religion as a selection criterion in admitting pupils and that the only priorities being applied are for children of a minority religion. The taskforce acknowledged that with the removal of religion as a selection criterion in primary schools, non-denominational families now have greater access to all schools. This provision is designed to prevent discrimination based on religious beliefs during the enrolment process. However, the taskforce expressed concern that some schools continue to include questions about religion on school enrolment forms and in other preenrolment data collection exercises.

The taskforce strongly believes that barriers to access on religious grounds should be identified and addressed and that admission policies and practices should be as inclusive as possible.

ACCORDINGLY, THE TASKFORCE RECOMMENDS THAT THE INTO ENGAGES WITH THE RELEVANT PATRONS AND EMPHASISES THE IMPORTANCE OF REGULARLY REVIEWING AND AUDITING THE ENROLMENT POLICIES AND PRACTICES OF SCHOOLS UNDER ITS PATRONAGE.

THE TASKFORCE FURTHER RECOMMENDS THAT THE INTO ENGAGES WITH THE DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION TO SEEK A CONTINUOUS REVIEW AND AUDITING OF THE OPERATIONS OF SECTION 11 OF THE EDUCATION (ADMISSIONS TO SCHOOLS) ACT 2018 TO ENSURE THAT THE LEGISLATION IS ACHIEVING ITS INTENDED OUTCOMES.



Conclusion

These taskforce recommendations represent a comprehensive approach to addressing the future of primary school patronage and religious education in Ireland. By accelerating the *Reconfiguration for Diversity* process, balancing legal and property rights, enhancing communication, securing empirical data, and most crucially prioritising the needs of pupils, a more equitable and diverse system can be achieved. This includes addressing the practical concerns of families opting out of religious education and specifically sacramental preparation. Furthermore, by addressing the needs of teachers through the repeal of Section 37.1, promoting teacher diversity, re-evaluating religious education certification requirements, and reconfiguring teacher education, the profession can better reflect and serve the evolving needs of Irish society. Implementing these recommendations will require a sustained commitment from all stakeholders. The potential benefits for pupils, teachers, and broader school communities must be pursued with vigour.



Summary of recommendations

The Taskforce of the Future of School Patronage in Ireland recommends:		
Accelerate divestment process	1.	The INTO engages with the Department of Education and relevant patrons to seek an acceleration of the divestment of schools where feasible.
Collect empirical national data	2.	The INTO engages with the Department of Education and demands that the national survey of parents and school communities be conducted without delay.
Enhanced Communications	3.	The INTO engage with the Department of Education and relevant patrons to urge them to raise more awareness of the reconfiguration process and to highlight the success of divestments on a national and local level.
A balanced approach to legal and property rights	4.	The INTO reviews its policy position on the transfer of school buildings to the state to consider a range of approaches to address this issue.
Repeal Section 37.1	5.	The INTO continues to campaign and advocate for the removal of Section 37.1 of the <i>Employment Equality Act</i> in its entirety.
Addressing religious education certification	6.	The INTO continues its efforts to engage with the Irish Episcopal Conference and seek a more flexible approach to the requirement for a religious certificate to teach in denominational schools.
Promote and support teacher diversity	7.	The INTO engage with the DE, the Teaching Council, higher education institutions/colleges of education and other relevant bodies and demands that barriers to a more diverse profession be removed and additional alternative pathways be provided;
	8.	The INTO engages with the colleges of education/ higher education institutions and seek that the range of modules focused on world religions, multi-faith education and interfaith dialogue be expanded;
	9.	The DE provides teachers with professional development and supports in multi-faith practice.
Addressing 'opt-out' arrangements	10.	The DE provides all schools with clear guidance and adequate resourcing to support the facilitation of 'opt-out' arrangements for pupils who do not wish to participate in religious education;
	11.	The INTO engages with the relevant patrons and seeks the provision of alternative models for sacramental preparation outside of the school day.
Ensuring continued inclusive enrolment processes	12.	The INTO engages with the relevant patrons and emphasises the importance of regularly reviewing and auditing the enrolment policies and practices of schools under their patronage;
	13.	The INTO engages with the Department of Education to seek a continuous review and auditing of the operations of Section 11 of the Education (Admissions to Schools) Act 2018.



Appendix A: Members of the taskforce

- Carmel Browne, INTO President Chair
- Louise Bolster
- John Boyle
- Sarah Bradley
- Siobhán Buckley
- M Diarmuid Connell
- Sinéad Crilly
- W Niall Crofton
- Ciarán Gallagher
- # Anne Horan
- Brendan Horan
- Gerard Murray
- M Alice O'Donnell
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- Tracie Tobin

The taskforce was supported by David O'Sullivan, Assistant General Secretary, Maeve McCafferty, Senior Official and INTO Equality Officer, and Joanna O'Byrne, Administrative Officer.





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