PROTESTANT SCHOOLS IN THE REPUBLIC OF IRELAND

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Introduction

The Protestants in the Republic of Ireland are a minority group constituting less than 5% of the national population. This minority, numbering about 120,000 persons, is divided amongst membership of the Church of Ireland (3.7%), the Presbyterians (0.7%), the Methodists (0.2%), and other denominations. Only in Dublin (where Protestants now represent 9% of the city’s population) are numbers rising, a reflection of the general drift from country to town living. In the sparsely populated rural provinces of Munster and Connacht there are only light concentrations although Protestant enclaves are found in Cork City and in County Donegal, the most north-westerly part of the Republic. On the whole, however, the Protestant population is diminishing.

School attendance by the Protestant, as well as by the majority Catholic population, is governed by the provisions of Article 42 of the Constitution of Ireland, 1937. This rules that:

"a) 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.

b) 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, intellectual and social.

c) The State shall provide for free education and shall endeavour to supplement and give reasonable aid to private and corporate educational initiative . . . ""

The position regarding religious groups is defined in the clauses of Article 44, viz:

"a) The State recognises the special position of the Holy Catholic Apostolic and Roman Church as the guardian of the Faith professed by the great majority of the citizens.

b) The State also recognises the Church of Ireland, the Presbyterian Church in Ireland, the Methodist Church in Ireland, as well as the Jewish congregations and the other religious denominations existing in Ireland . . .

c) Freedom of conscience and the free profession and practice of religion are, subject to public order and morality, guaranteed to every citizen.

d) The State guarantees not to endow any religion . . .

e) Legislation providing State aid for schools shall not discriminate between schools under the management of different religious denominations . . . ""
Primary Education

The great majority of Protestant schoolchildren begin their primary education at a State-supported national school at the age of 6 years although they can be enrolled at the age of 4 years onwards. This is in accordance with the School Attendance Act of 1926 whereby attendance at a national school or other suitable school is required of every child of 6 to 14 years of age who is not validly excused on certain defined grounds.

Almost all the national schools are parochial day-schools of a fully denominational character, with the school manager (usually a clergyman charged with the government of the school), the teachers, and the pupils all being of the same religion. The national schools, however, are also public schools and their fully denominational character does not preclude the right of any child to attend where there is sufficient accommodation available. It is thus possible, in remote areas, to find a few Protestant schoolchildren attending a national school under Catholic control without having to attend the religious instruction classes. Most children, however, attend one of the 450 or so national schools under Church of Ireland or other Protestant management.

These vary considerably in size and structure and it is a significant reflection of Protestant numbers that, while Protestant schools account for 9% of all the national schools, they make up almost 50% of those with less than 25 pupils, and comprise less than 1% of the schools with 100 pupils or more. In fact, many centres in the rural areas of the Republic have an average attendance of less than 20 pupils and some of these only survive with the aid of transport schemes subsidised by the Church and the State.\footnote{The Department of Education requires an average attendance of 20 pupils for the recognition of a school, unless in practice less than 7 children attend for two successive calendar years.} The largest is a six-teacher school drawing up to 300 pupils from residential areas of South Dublin. In fact, there are only 10 Protestant national schools with 100 pupils or more, and these are all found in the four County Boroughs of the Republic (i.e. Dublin, Cork, Limerick, Waterford) and Dun Laoghaire.

This situation can be compared with the overall position. In 1963 there were slightly more than 4,800 national schools of all denominations, of which 1,800 had fewer than 50 pupils each and about 750 had only one teacher. At that time nearly 3,200 were still being run by one or two teachers. For the future the Minister for Education advocates their gradual amalgamation into single central schools with three or more teachers, but some clerics view such a plan as encouraging emigration and the movement from rural to urban areas. Despite such controversy much