

Topical Debate

The need for a fair, transparent and modern enrolment process for primary schools

- Deputy Eoghan Murphy

Deputy Eoghan Murphy: I do not want to labour my point because it is straightforward and I am conscious that it is not within the remit of the Minister for Finance. I have a problem in my constituency which probably exists in many constituencies. I am sure that Deputy Kevin Humphreys, who is present, gets the same phone calls as I get about the enrolment process in primary schools. I received a telephone call a few evenings ago from a young mother whose daughter is due to start school in September. She is worried sick because the child has not yet been offered a place. There are plenty of very good primary schools in the constituency. The problem is that the child has been on a waiting list since she was five weeks old. There is a problem in the system. One of the schools told the mother that it would not take her child because the mother does not speak Irish well enough. Another school refused her on religious grounds. She could not get into a third because it is so popular. Then the parents thought that if they could put the money together with help from their parents they might get the child into a fee-paying school but it turned out that she could not get in there. When I say the child was refused I mean that she was put on waiting lists but she was so far down that the schools told the parents informally not to hold their breath.

I have had this conversation many times with parents but never in September which makes me believe that children get school places eventually and not always in their locality. There is a real problem in the system and we need to address it in a comprehensive way because it causes worry for families. Parents then put their children's names on many lists to be sure of getting into a school, which is understandable. The schools are not sure how many pupils are coming in the following September so they cannot plan ahead. The system is inefficient and is wasting money and causing unnecessary stress in the community for many young parents and their families.

I will be interested to hear the plans of the Minister for Education and Skills and when we will see them. This week we heard proposals from the Irish Primary Principals Association to address this problem. They talked about a centralised web-based system with an agreed deadline for applications for primary schools and an agreed response time from those primary schools telling parents whether the child had been accepted. Parents would rank the schools by preference and hopefully in a fair system children would get into schools that way and everyone would know in plenty of time where the child would be going to school and come September the schools would know how many pupils they would have. That in turn would affect class size and teacher allocations. I am not advocating the idea as a whole. I do not think the Department should be given power but there is a more efficient community-based way to approach this problem and I will be interested hear the views of the Minister for Education and Skills on the issue.

Deputy Michael Noonan: The Minister for Education and Skills, Deputy Ruairí Quinn has asked me to reply on his behalf to Deputy Eoghan Murphy's query. He said that he spoke about the need for a fair and transparent enrolment process at the teacher union conferences that were held at Easter. I will quote from the Minister's speech in responding to the points raised by the Deputy:

The Education Act of 1998 set out quite clearly that schools are required to operate admissions policies that provide for maximum accessibility to the school. Put simply, schools should be inclusive.

Most schools in Ireland, most of the time, are inclusive and welcoming of all children. The Education Act, however, is light touch in terms of providing ways and means of ensuring that all schools welcome all children.

Other than Section 29, which has become cumbersome for schools and parents, the current legislation does not include provisions for resolving problems when they arise. At present in legislation we do not have any tailored measures that deal with different admission issues that can arise. For example, there is a difference between dealing with oversubscription which means that all simply cannot be accommodated in the school of first choice, and a situation where an individual child can find no place at all.

The Minister said that he will shortly bring to Government draft heads of the Education (Admission to School) Bill 2013. He said he will be publishing the Bill in draft form to allow a full public discussion, including inputs from the Oireachtas Joint Committee on Education and Social Protection and the education partners. He also plans to publish alongside the Bill the draft regulations that he plans to make when it is enacted. We do not want to intrude unnecessarily into how schools do business. The only policy objective is to ensure that the way in which schools decide on applications is more structured, fair and transparent.

The draft legislation will make it clear that some methods of controlling admissions will no longer be permitted. For example, the first-come, first-served basis for selecting students might look reasonable to some but it can mean that children who move to an area from other parts of the country, or from other countries, can be effectively excluded from schools that have more applicants than places. That situation, according to the Minister, cannot be allowed. The draft regulations will radically alter the operation of waiting lists, while accepting that schools need time to implement such change.

Schools will no longer be permitted to charge parents simply to apply for a place in a school. We have seen an over-use of preferential treatment for the children of past pupils, or more insidiously, the requirement for children and their parents to attend compulsory open days or be interviewed. These practices will be curtailed.

Any school that is faithful to the Education Act in providing maximum access will have nothing to fear from these proposals. He also wishes to clarify the point that schools will still be able to give priority to applicants whose siblings attend the school.

I thank the Deputy for raising this issue. It is the Minister's intention to publish the heads of a Bill and accompanying draft regulations to cover this area. These will then be referred to the Joint Committee on Education and Social Protection, while the various interest groups will be invited to make submissions on the Minister's proposals. We are at the start of the process and the Minister has set down the main tracks along which he hopes the discussion will run.

Deputy Eoghan Murphy: I thank the Minister for his response. He is correct that we do not want to unnecessarily intrude in the operation of schools, but I am glad he recognises that this issue needs to be addressed. I support his proposals in this regard. The sooner we can get the heads of the Bill drafted and the committee working on them, the better. Certain plans are welcome and I agree that it makes sense to allow siblings to go to the same school.

I raised this matter as a Topical Issue because this week the Irish Primary Principals' Network proposed a centralised admissions system. I was hoping to hear the Minister's response to that particular proposal and see if it would feed into his own framework. As he is not here, we are not able to probe that matter. I appreciate the time given to the debate by the Minister for Finance on his behalf.