

ON A MISSION

Religious practices in NI primary schools:
external visitors, transparency and your rights

May 2024

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Introduction

Who are Parents for Inclusive Education?

Parents for Inclusive Education (PfIE) is a grassroots organisation of NI primary school parents. We came together because we want to see a more inclusive primary education for every child.

What started as scattered conversations about our own children's school experiences of Religious Education (RE), assemblies and collective worship (CW), developed into greater curiosity. Through conversations with parents and teachers, we found there were many shared concerns around religious practices in some schools: prayer in classrooms, religious beliefs presented as fact, the potential for social exclusion and feelings of otherness for those withdrawn from religious practices, and confusion for children whose home beliefs don't align with those promoted at school, to name a few.

We realised that, for many parents, there was a lack of clarity around how religious education is delivered and what rights parents have in this area. We felt it was important to open the conversation up on a wider societal level, because this is an important issue which many people, from a range of backgrounds, feel strongly about.

We know that this may sound complex and controversial, but we believe that people from all faiths and none can and will agree on a need for change. Regardless of background or belief, everyone should see value in transparency around religious practices in schools. Nobody would want their own children feeling confused, excluded or othered, and so nobody should accept that for any other child. Additionally, we can all agree that it is best for children when their families and school work as a team; and that, even in the context of diverse personal beliefs, there is actually plenty of room to do so when religious education is just that - education, not instruction.

We believe that inclusive education values, respects and includes all children and their families, no matter their background or beliefs, and celebrates the diversity in our society. We believe this is a message that all parents can rally behind. We created PfIE not just with the goal of challenging the system to do better and make those changes easier and faster, but also to inform, empower and support families. This report is our first step in doing so.



Our request

What did we ask, and why?

Information on religious practices in schools is not easily accessible. We had noticed a disparity in our experiences across different schools - it was unclear what the rules were, or why there was so much variety and so little information available to parents.

From our own children's accounts, we knew that external religious organisations were being given access to them at school. In our experience, this was mostly happening without prior communication - we either weren't told by school at all, or were told after the event. Most of these visits were by Christian churches or organisations and our initial research revealed that some held views we were deeply uncomfortable with. We were concerned about our children being exposed to these views.

At first we planned to contact our own schools to ask them who was given access and how this was communicated. But then we realised that other parents might want to be informed about these practices at their schools - they were entitled to answers too.

Given that we had only an anecdotal understanding, we decided to send a Freedom of Information request (FOI request) to every publicly funded primary school in NI (excluding special schools) - 772 in total. Our questions were designed to establish:

- **Access:** which churches and religious organisations were being given access to schools, and how that access was managed
- **Communication:** whether and how parents were made aware of: i) religious visitors; and ii) the options to withdraw their children from religious practices

This report contains our summary of their responses.

772

Number of Primary schools in Northern Ireland that we sent our FOI request to

98%

Of these schools (756) responded to our request for Information

Key findings

11,522

Estimated annual visits to NI primary schools from churches and religious organisations

99.9%

Of these visitors were from Christian churches or organisations

710

Estimated school visits from Child Evangelism Fellowship, the most prolific non-church organisation

13

Estimated total visits from representatives of all other religions and non-religious worldviews

77%

Of primary schools have no recorded process to determine which religious visitors are given access to pupils

53%

Of primary schools only make parents aware of religious visitors if parents request this information

290

Schools (38%) were not meeting the legal obligation to publish the withdrawal procedure in their prospectus

1.2%

Estimated percentage of pupils currently withdrawn from Religious Education and/or Collective Worship across NI

Our schools, our society: why does this all matter?

Christianity is dominant in our primary schools

Northern Ireland is unique within these islands in offering virtually no option of non-Christian mainstream primary schooling. We are served by a complex system of primary schools, and although most of these schools¹ state that they are 'open to all faiths and none', the privileged position Christianity holds across the board is plain:

- Daily acts of collective worship are legally required in all schools
- The statutory core RE syllabus focuses exclusively on Christianity and features no other religions or worldviews at primary level
- Christian churches are represented on the Boards of Governors of all Controlled and Catholic Maintained schools and Controlled Integrated schools
- Schools are legally obliged to give ministers of religion and other suitable persons (to whom the parents do not object) access to pupils to deliver RE
- Inspection of RE is conducted by churches, not the Department of Education

However, beliefs in NI are increasingly diverse and secular

In no way do we regard inclusion and respect as a numbers game. It is nonetheless important to acknowledge that our society is changing.

In simple terms, fewer of us identify as Christian compared with the past.

¹ Controlled, Catholic Maintained, Integrated.

21.2%

Of 0-14 year olds in Northern Ireland follow another religion than Christianity or no religion (NI Census 2021)

↑ 8.9%

increase in % of 0-14 year olds identifying with another religion or none (vs the 2011 census)

40%

Of 16-year olds in Northern Ireland don't regard themselves as 'belonging to any particular religion' (NI Young Life & Times survey 2023)

The need for change to RE in Northern Ireland is widely recognised

NI courts have found that the delivery of RE in NI is not objective

In April 2024 judgment was issued in an appeal brought by the Department of Education against a 2022 High Court ruling that the human rights of an NI primary school pupil had been breached in her experience of RE and collective worship ([2024] NICA 34). The appeal was successful, primarily due to the availability of the right to withdraw from the curriculum as opposed to the properties of the curriculum itself. The [summary of judgment](#) issued by the NI Judicial Communications Office led with the following statement:

*The Court of Appeal today upheld a High Court finding that **religious education and collective worship are not conveyed in an objective, critical or pluralist manner in Northern Ireland**. It observed that such findings were capable of constituting evidence that the **forbidden line of indoctrination** had been crossed. It stated that policy makers in this area are clearly minded to consider a refresh to the NI curriculum that will inevitably include consideration of religious instruction to take into account the complexion and changing needs of our society.*

A major independent review has also recommended change

The recent [Independent Review of Education](#) (Dec 2023) commissioned by the Department of Education also recommended several changes to the RE curriculum:

*the **increasing diversity** of Northern Irish society makes it highly desirable that a review [of the RE syllabus] be undertaken in the near future, regardless of the legal processes...*

*...it would now be desirable if [the four main churches], **together with representatives of other faiths and of those with no religious affiliation**, were to collaborate with the new curriculum body in devising a replacement course...*

*... [which is] **knowledge-based and separate from religious observance***

RE is already changing across the rest of the UK and Ireland

Across the other countries of the UK and Ireland, RE in primary schools is adapting to fit our changing societies.

In 2022, a new 'Religion, Values and Ethics' curriculum was adopted in Wales, while recommendations have been made for a new 'Religion and Worldviews' curriculum in England.

In the Republic of Ireland, there is a government commitment to the divestment of schools from Catholic to multi-denominational patronage, and there are now 117 Educate Together schools where no one religion or worldview is given priority over another. A major report on Identity and Ethos in Catholic Primary & Secondary Schools in Ireland (ROI), released in April 2024 has raised questions about how far both teachers and families in Catholic schools support that ethos and practise the faith, with implications for school patronage as well the teaching of RE.

PfIE are advocates for the changes suggested by the Independent Review.

However, whilst we strongly believe that extensive changes to RE are necessary in Northern Ireland, this report focuses on current practices within the existing system concerning external religious visitors, transparency and your rights.

In particular, we examine the access to pupils given by schools to churches and other external religious organisations, and how schools communicate to parents about these visitors as well as their right to withdraw.

What we asked

Our questions focused on religious visitors to schools who were given access to children for delivering RE, Collective Worship or assemblies, as well as schools' communication about these visitors and the parental option to withdraw. These questions may be viewed in full at [WhatDoTheyKnow.com](https://www.whatdotheyknow.com). In summary, we asked:

1. Whether a process was in place to determine who came in and if so, who was responsible for this process and whether Access NI checks were obtained.
2. Whether a record was kept of all visitors to the school.
3. Who came in during a one year period (6th Nov 2022 - 5th Nov 2023) and how frequently they visited.
4. How parents were informed of visitors.
5. Whether schools met the legal obligation to publish in their prospectus the procedure by which parents could withdraw children from religious practices.
6. How many children were currently withdrawn from religious practices.
7. What activities these children were engaged in.

How we asked

- We made our request under the Freedom of Information (FOI) Act 2000 - all public bodies must make recorded information available under this law.
- We sent our request to all primary schools that were open at the time of our request*.
- We made our requests via the [WhatDoTheyKnow](https://www.whatdotheyknow.com) platform so that there would be a public record of our requests and the schools' responses.
- We engaged with the Education Authority (EA) to inform them of our request prior to its launch - they subsequently issued guidance to all schools including a template response which many schools followed.
- Once the statutory time period for responding had passed, we sent reminders to the schools which hadn't replied.
- If no answer was forthcoming following our reminder, we made a request to the Information Commissioner's Office (ICO) to follow up with these schools.

*776 primary schools were showing as open on [Schools Plus NI](https://www.schoolsplusni.com) when we made our request. Two have since closed, one was a new school and one request failed, leaving 772 schools.

Summary of responses

 **772**

We sent our request to every
primary school in Northern
Ireland

 **98%**

Of these schools had responded
as of the date of this report

 **>3,000**

Total communications including our initial
request, schools' responses and additional
communications to clarify, follow-up and thank
schools for their cooperation

***Thank you to all the schools that
responded to our request - we
appreciate your time and effort!***

Findings

Aggregate findings

The findings presented in this section are aggregated at various levels (sector, geography etc) and grouped into four broad categories:

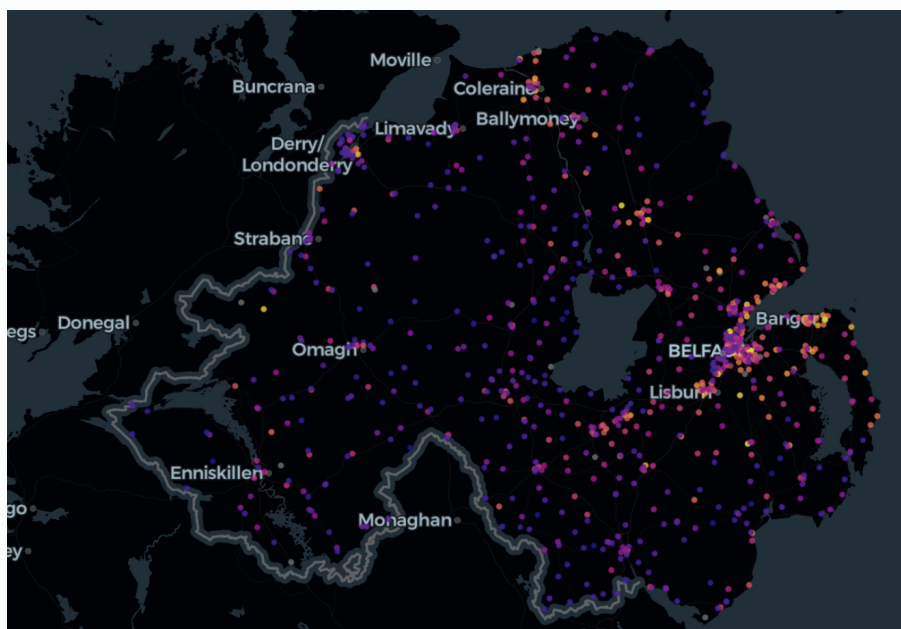
1. Management processes around giving access to visitors
2. The churches and religious organisations that visit schools
3. Communication with parents
4. The number of children withdrawn from RE/CW and alternative activities offered

While many schools gave exact numbers of visits, many replied with frequency ranges such as ‘1-3 times per month’, or ‘less than once per month’. Total visitor volumes have been estimated from these responses. Many schools also gave ranges for the number of children withdrawn from RE/CW to protect the identity of those children. Therefore all aggregate figures given in respect of numbers of visits and number of withdrawn children in this report are estimates. Full details of our approach can be found [here](#).

Detailed results

For parents wishing to access the specific results for their school, full details of our correspondence with them are available at WhatDoTheyKnow.com.

We have also prepared an interactive map that allows parents to search for any school to discover which visitors were allowed in during the period in question. This map also includes some demographic information about all schools, such as the number of pupils designated as each religious category. This map can be accessed [here](#).



Findings: Process

What we asked

We asked schools to ***confirm whether or not there is a process which your school follows to determine which external visitors are given access to pupils for the purposes of delivering Religious Education, Collective Worship or Assembly.***

We also asked who was responsible for this process, whether Access NI checks were requested, and whether a record of visitors was kept.

The Education Authority issued specific guidance to schools on how to answer this question. This guidance highlighted the fact that ‘the [FOI] Act only requires you to answer a question based on information in your records’, and advised schools to answer based on whether or not they had a record of such a process.

As a result, it is impossible to know exactly how many schools have unrecorded processes in place, although anecdotally many indicated in their responses that they do.

Of schools that did have a process in place, principals and governors were most likely to be responsible for this process, followed by nominated RE coordinators.

25.4%

Of schools that had religious visitors answered ‘Yes’ indicating that they did have a process to determine which religious organisations are invited or allowed to visit.

12.6%

Of schools that had religious visitors indicated that Access NI checks were a part of their process.

This represents 49% of schools with a record of a process in place.

95.4%

Of schools that had religious visitors kept a record of who came in.

Findings: Visitors

What we asked

We asked schools to *provide a list of all churches and religious or non-religious organisations which sent ministers or representatives to their school to deliver RE, Collective Worship or Assemblies between 6th Nov 2022 and 5th Nov 2023*. We also asked how frequently they came in and whether Access NI checks were obtained.

What we found

Controlled schools had 4x more visitors than Catholic Maintained

The majority of RE and CW in Catholic Maintained schools is led by teachers and internal staff, not external visitors. Around 20% of Catholic Maintained schools had no visitors, and those that did granted them access 2 or 3 times per term on average. In contrast, Controlled schools gave visitors access around 9 times per term on average.

A variety of churches visit schools, some with literalist views

In addition to the four churches* responsible for the RE syllabus, a wide variety of other denominations visit schools, including Baptist, Free Presbyterian, Elim, Reformed Presbyterian and Vineyard churches as well as non-denominational churches and Gospel Halls. A number of these churches have an explicitly stated belief in the literal truth of the Bible regarding all matters including sin, punishment, hell and the devil.

Evangelistic organisations have access to hundreds of schools

In addition to churches, we discovered that several organisations with an openly stated mission of evangelising or discipling children are being allowed access to primary school pupils at scale. Amongst these were Child Evangelism Fellowship, Scripture Union, Crown Jesus Ministries and Youth for Christ.

Some provide reading support and sport alongside prayer

Another category of visitor includes those who lead sporting activities or provide reading support, where this may be preceded or followed by group or individual prayer sessions. Coaching for Christ and Equipping for Life are examples.

The three least religious regions had the highest visitor volumes

Ards & North Down, Lisburn & Castlereagh and Mid & East Antrim have the highest non-religious populations according to [census data](#), yet these three areas received the highest volume of religious visitors to their primary schools.

*Roman Catholic Church, Presbyterian Church, Church of Ireland, Methodist Church

Visitor type by Sector

The vast majority of schools received only Christian visitors

Only 1% of schools (8) received visitors from other religions or non-religious worldviews. Seven of these were Integrated schools and one was a Controlled school. No Catholic Maintained schools received visitors representing other worldviews.

Sectoral division is reflected in the denomination of visitors

Very few Controlled (6%) or Catholic Maintained (3%) schools received any cross-community visitors at all. In these cases local demographics were usually significantly more mixed than is the average case across Northern Ireland.

Evangelistic organisations visit 76% of Controlled schools

Evangelistic organisations such as Child Evangelism Fellowship and Scripture Union visit 76% of Controlled primary schools and over a third (35%) of Integrated primaries.

A small but significant minority of schools don't receive any visitors

Very few Controlled schools (4%) received no religious visitors. In the Catholic Maintained sector this was more common (20%), in most cases because teachers delivered all aspects of religious practice. It was also more common in the Integrated (25%) and Other Maintained (23%) sectors (which are mainly Irish Medium schools). In these cases this is more likely to indicate that religious instruction was intentionally omitted.

Schools visited (% of sector)

Sector	Catholic church	Protestant churches	Christian organisations & volunteers	Other religions & humanists	Zero religious visitors
Catholic Maintained	260 (77%)	11 (3%)	21 (6%)	0 (0%)	67 (20%)
Controlled	21 (6%)	315 (92%)	261 (76%)	1 (0.3%)	14 (4%)
Integrated	16 (33%)	28 (58%)	18 (38%)	7 (15%)	12 (25%)
Other Maintained	15 (58%)	3 (12%)	4 (15%)	0 (0%)	6 (23%)
TOTAL	312 (41%)	357 (47%)	304 (40%)	8 (1%)	99 (13%)

Visit volume by Sector

Controlled schools had many more visits than other sectors

According to our estimates, based on their submissions, Controlled schools had over four times as many visits as Catholic Maintained schools. This reflects the fact that many Controlled schools invite external visitors in to lead the religious part of a weekly assembly. Visitors to Catholic Maintained schools visited less frequently, and were more likely to visit for sacramental preparation or inspection.

Integrated schools received many more visits from Protestants





Integrated schools that received Protestant visitors did so 12 times per year on average, compared to just 3 visits per year for those that received Catholic visitors. This meant that only 10% of total visits to Integrated schools were from the Catholic church (many for sacramental preparation), whilst only 2% of visits were from other religions and humanists. The remaining 88% were from Protestant churches (65%) or Christian organisations which are largely from a Protestant background (23%). (We recognise however that our data may not capture the varied ways in which RE may be delivered in integrated schools, such as having separate denominational streams.)

Irish Medium schools received the fewest religious visits

The Other Maintained sector (of which all bar 2 schools are Irish Medium schools) received an average of one visit per term. School responses indicated that this was usually for sacramental preparation for individual pupils at the request of parents.

Sector	Estimated total number of visits				Average annual visits per school
	Catholic church	Protestant churches	Christian organisations & volunteers	Other religions & humanists	
Catholic Maintained	1,790	57	159	0	5.9
Controlled	76	6,158	2,690	1	25.9
Integrated	49	331	112	12	10.5
Other Maintained	48	25	14	0	3.3
TOTAL	1,963	6,571	2,974	13	15.2



Visitors by Geography

LGD <i>(Local Government District)</i>	 # schools	 estimated total visits	 avg. visits per school	 non-Christian children*
Antrim & Newtownabbey	47	707	15.0	29.1%
Ards & North Down	44	879	20.0	41.4%
Armagh City, Banbridge & Craigavon	90	1,421	15.8	18.6%
Belfast	90	1,350	15.0	25.9%
Causeway Coast & Glens	75	1,218	16.2	19.9%
Derry City & Strabane	61	706	11.6	8.6%
Fermanagh & Omagh	74	1,046	14.1	9.2%
Lisburn & Castlereagh	37	622	16.8	31.1%
Mid Ulster	92	1,152	12.5	9.5%
Mid & East Antrim	54	1,299	24.1	29.7%
Newry, Mourne & Down	92	1,122	12.2	11.5%
NORTHERN IRELAND	756	11,522	15.2	21.2%

*0-14 year olds in 2021 Census identifying as 'Other religions' or 'No religion'
as % of respondents that answered the religion question


Visitors: Christian Churches

The organisations below were the most frequent church visitors to schools.

Church	 schools visited	 estimated total visits
<u>Catholic</u>	307	1,880
<u>Presbyterian</u>	280	2,350
<u>Church of Ireland</u>	239	1,470
<u>Baptist</u>	121	550
<u>Methodist</u>	100	520
<u>Free Presbyterian</u>	81	440
<u>Brethren / Gospel Halls</u>	66	370
<u>Elim Pentecostal</u>	34	160
<u>Reformed Presbyterian</u>	19	110
<u>Vineyard</u>	22	110
Other Christian Churches	134	720
TOTAL	638	8,680

Visitors: Organisations

The organisations below were the most frequent non-church visitors to schools. These include Evangelistic organisations, Christian RSE providers and Christian charities.

Organisation	 schools visited	 estimated total visits
<u>Child Evangelism Fellowship</u>	123	710
<u>Scripture Union</u>	160	590
<u>Equipping for Life</u>	10	230
<u>Coaching for Christ</u>	12	220
<u>Crown Jesus Ministries</u>	52	140
<u>Youth for Christ</u>	13	130
<u>Hope for Youth Ministries</u>	45	120
<u>Stand by Me</u>	38	120
<u>Love for Life</u>	16	47
Other Christian organisations	118	620
TOTAL Christian	304	2,974
Humanists and other religions	8	13

External Visitors - our concerns: Respect and Inclusion

We recognise and respect the important place that Christianity holds in our society, and the right of everyone to their own beliefs and world views. We also recognise that churches and other religious organisations play an important role in the lives of many people and communities, offering pastoral, spiritual and material support.

At the same time, we have concerns about the capacity of some of the organisations that are visiting schools to be respectful and inclusive of the faiths, worldviews and identities of all children, particularly when those groups state an explicit aim to evangelise and convert.

Child Evangelism Fellowship and Scripture Union were the most frequent non-church visitors to schools during our survey period. Here they describe their respective missions in their own words (the following quotations are taken from their public facing websites).

“

Our special mission in CEF is to evangelise every child ... [our] purpose is to evangelise boys and girls with the Gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ and to establish (disciple) them in the Word of God and in a local church for Christian living ... The greatest need of the unsaved child is to understand the gospel and choose to accept Christ as Saviour and Lord of her life

Child Evangelism Fellowship - 123 schools visited, 710 estimated total visits

”

“

*At Scripture Union we have a passion for children and young people ... but our passion for God goes even deeper ... it's His Good News that **we are desperate to reveal to every child** and every young person across Northern Ireland ... We are committed to teaching **basic Christian truths** as an essential part of evangelism ... [and] are passionate about making God's Good News known in primary, post primary and special schools*

Scripture Union - 160 schools visited, 590 estimated total visits

”

External Visitors - our concerns: Respect and Inclusion

Here are some of the other organisations that visited schools most frequently in their own words. All quotations are taken from their public facing websites:

We do evangelism...Our puppets love to adventure into schools, invading their assemblies with a production that encourages children to learn about a Bible story and the teachings of Jesus

Crown Jesus Ministries - 52 schools visited, 140 estimated total visits

[Our] number one strategic priority is intentional evangelism and seeing young people's lives changed by Jesus ... [we] have a plan to reach "unchurched" children via 5,000 RE teachers across the UK

Youth for Christ - 13 schools visited, 130 estimated total visits

Coaching for Christ seeks to equip and reach people for Christ through sport ... God has called each of us as believers to go into all the world and share his good news, we are called to evangelise

Coaching for Christ - 12 schools visited, 220 estimated total visits

Our concern with the statements above is clearly illustrated by a direct comparison with the following statement, which strikes a much more inclusive and pluralistic note:

*We believe that faith is a personal choice. We respect our children's identity and choices and will **never coerce them** to change their beliefs. We take this very seriously.*

Stand by Me - 38 schools visited, 120 estimated total visits

External Visitors - our concerns: Potential for Distress

Lack of transparency around external visitors means that outside the experiences of our own children, and those which teachers and principals have shared with us, we have little information on the actual content that visitors present to children.

Most of the churches and organisations mentioned in this report have statements of mission or belief on their publicly available websites which parents can review. Of course, these vary a good deal from one organisation to the next. We have, however, observed that in some cases, these statements refer to concepts like sin, the need for salvation and heaven/hell.

In our view, including in our own children's experiences, these could be confusing and frightening ideas, particularly (though by no means exclusively) to those children not familiar with those concepts from other settings. Ultimately, such concepts may not be appropriate subject matter in a primary school setting.

Greater transparency, and open and proactive communication from schools, would mean that parents can make their own judgement about the appropriateness of input from external visitors.

Findings: Communication regarding visitors

What we asked

We asked schools *whether parents were actively made aware of the churches and/or organisations that visit the school to deliver Religious Education, Collective Worship or Assembly, and whether this information was publicly available or available on request.*

Many schools responded with more than one option selected - these charts demonstrate the most proactive level of communication provided.

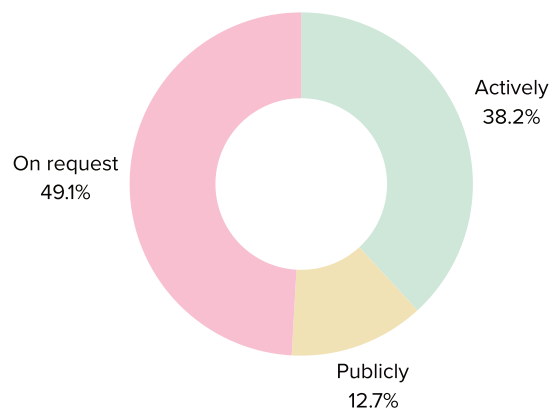
What we found

Two thirds of Controlled schools only make information about visitors available to parents on request

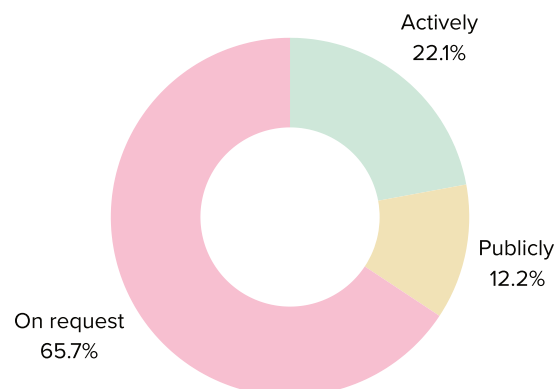
Maintained schools were most likely to actively communicate with parents about visitors or make this information publicly available (51%), followed by Integrated schools (44%).

Not only did Controlled schools have twice as many visitors on average as these two sectors, they were also the least likely to make this information publicly available (34%).

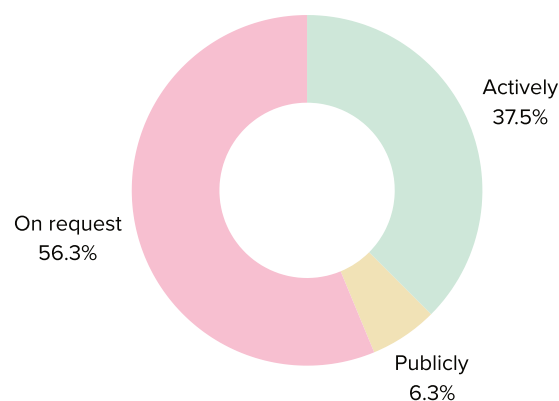
Catholic Maintained



Controlled



Integrated



Findings: Communication regarding the option to withdraw

What we asked

We asked schools *whether they were currently meeting the legal obligation to publish the procedure which parents must follow to withdraw their child from RE or Collective Worship in their prospectus*. The majority of schools (62%) make this information clear and easily accessible. However:

290

Schools (38%) were not meeting the legal obligation to publish this procedure in their prospectus

33

Of these schools told us that they are currently updating their prospectus to include this info or will do so soon

A number of schools' responses indicated a belief that parents implicitly opt-in to a Christian ethos by choosing their school

Yet in reality, parents have little choice beyond schools with a Christian ethos.

“ the school states in the prospectus that we follow a Christian ethos...acceptance of the schools' position is implied, however, if parents/guardians wish their child to be withdrawn from RE and or Collective Worship, this request...may be accommodated with the consent of the Principal and Board of Governors.

“ No. If the issue was to arise, parents are free to speak with me.

“ We are a Catholic primary school and all parents have chosen a Catholic education for their child.

“ We are a Catholic Maintained School. Most children who come are baptised and practising Catholics.

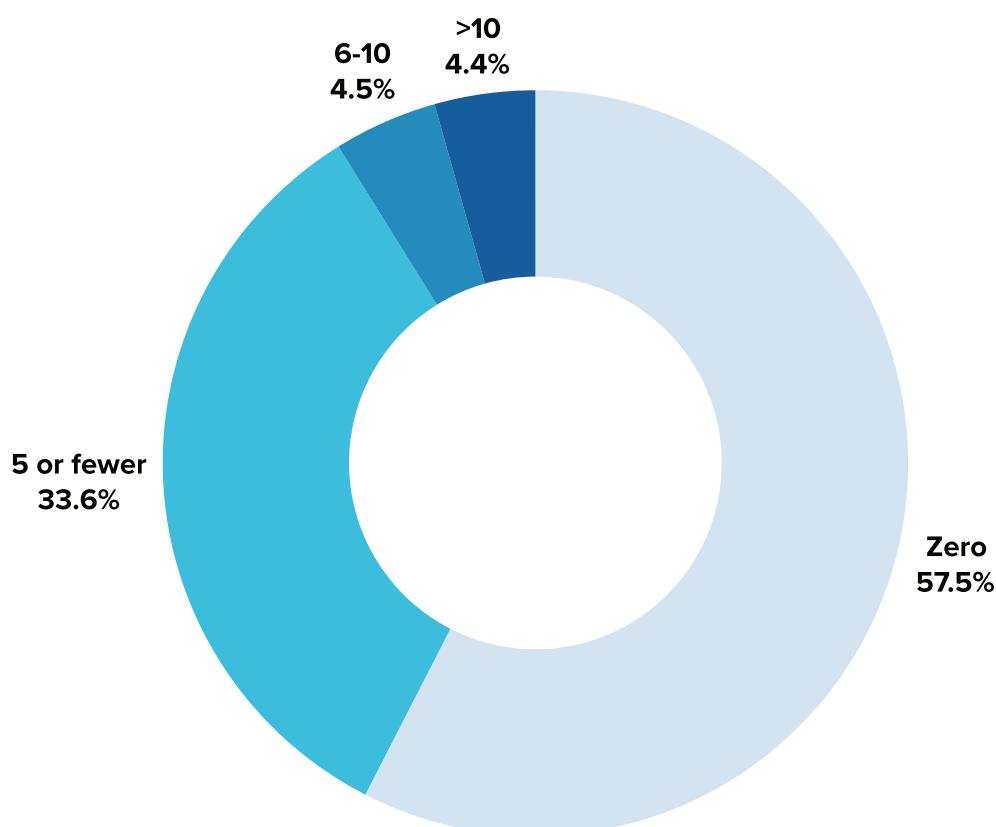
Findings: Withdrawal

Estimated number of pupils withdrawn by sector

Sector	Total pupils	Pupils withdrawn from RE/CW	% withdrawal rate
Catholic Maintained	79,154	1,099	1.4%
Controlled	80,186	860	1.1%
Integrated	12,191	75	0.6%
Other Maintained	4,058	102	2.5%
TOTAL	175,589	2,136	1.2%

Pupil withdrawal numbers by school

More than half of the schools who responded to our request (435 = 57.5%) had no pupils withdrawn from RE or Collective Worship. Only 33 schools (4.5%) had ten or more pupils withdrawn.

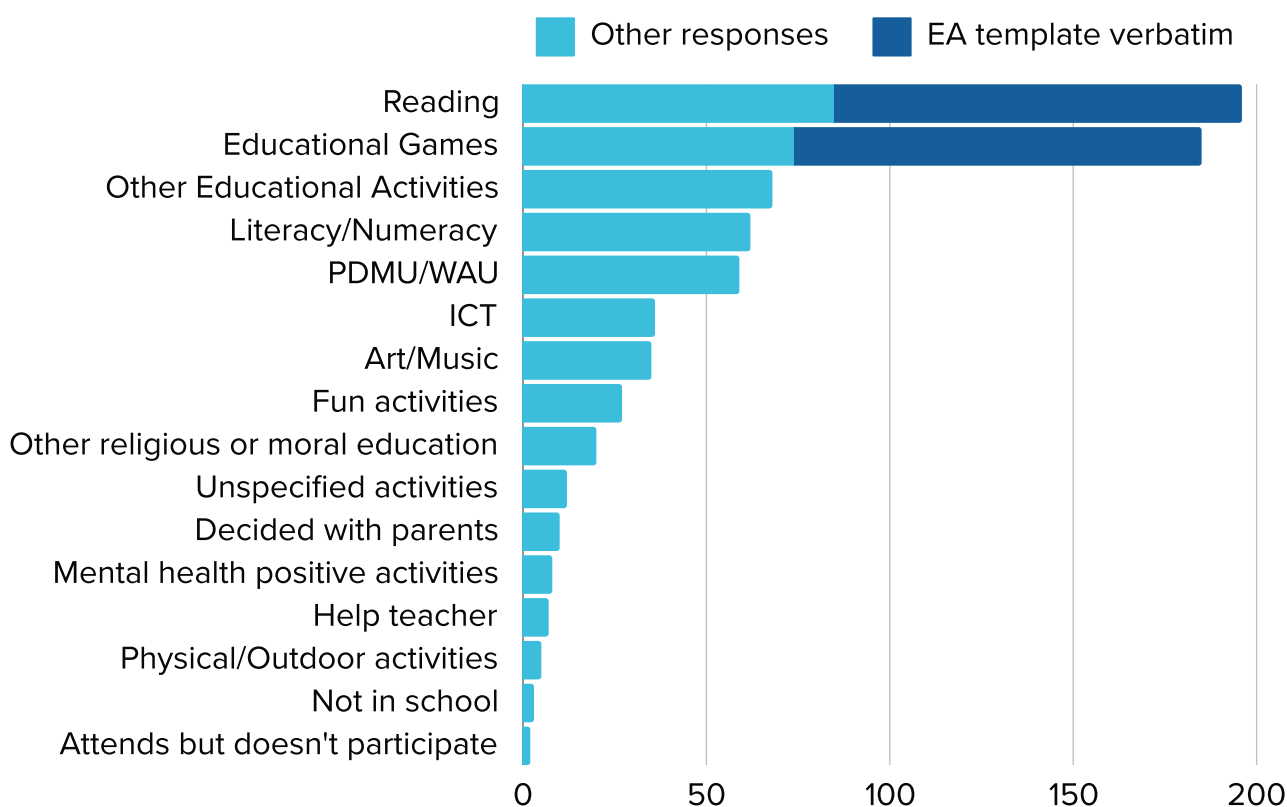


Findings: Withdrawal

Activities for pupils who are withdrawn from RE/CW

We asked schools to *provide examples of the alternative activities that pupils who are withdrawn from RE or Collective Worship are engaged in.* We also asked *whether these activities took place in a separate space, and whether or not these children were excluded from any whole school activities (such as celebrations of success) as a result of their withdrawal.*

The Education Authority provided a template response as part of their guidance which gave 'Reading & Educational Games' as example activities. 111 schools provided this response verbatim. However several schools did take care to provide more thoughtful responses. The activities which schools provided are summarised below.



Do these activities take place in a separate dedicated space?

75% 'yes'

Are withdrawn children excluded from any whole-school activities?

98% 'no'

Our Conclusions

As parents, we embarked on this exercise knowing that we didn't know much about religious practices in schools. From anecdotal evidence we suspected that in many schools, churches and organisations were being given access to pupils without parental knowledge, but we didn't know the extent of this access.

The differences between the practices of Catholic Maintained schools and Controlled schools soon became clear. In Catholic Maintained schools, RE is primarily delivered by teachers, with any external visits tending to be infrequent and from the local parish. In Controlled and Integrated schools however, in addition to RE delivered by teachers, visitors from a wide range of churches were common, as were visits from non-church Christian organisations.

Our main finding was the scale of visits from evangelistic churches and non-church organisations to primary schools. Many of these organisations have evangelism or discipling as an explicit aim, which many parents may feel is inappropriate, and hold uncompromising views based on a literal interpretation of the Bible, exposure to which could cause children distress. Currently they have widespread access to our children.

While a small majority (51%) of Maintained schools kept parents informed about visitors, in 56% of Integrated schools and in 66% of Controlled schools that information was only available on request. Although Controlled schools had over twice as many visitors on average as the other sectors, they were less likely to inform parents, unless asked. We also found that many schools were failing to communicate the right to withdraw children from RE: 38% of schools said their prospectus included no information on this, despite it being a legal obligation.

In this context - a lack of communication both about visitors and the right to withdraw - it is perhaps unsurprising that only 1.2% of pupils in Northern Ireland are currently withdrawn from RE and/or CW. Schools can do better here - transparent communication of religious practices and parental options should be the norm.

As for the activities provided for the children who are withdrawn, while a minority of schools described thoughtful alternatives, many gave an identical stock response. Whilst parents may be reassured that 98% of schools indicated these pupils are not excluded from all-school activities, a more inclusive approach would be welcome.

Questions that remain

We wanted our FOI request to elicit important information about religious practices in all primary schools, and it has done so. However, the inherent limitations of the FOI mechanism (essentially, that only recorded information can be requested) together with the fact that there are distinct different groups of schools within the primary sector in NI, mean that many important questions remain.

Across the board, we lack detail on the actual content being presented to children, and the mode of delivery of content by teachers, clergy and other visitors - do they aim to educate, or instruct? Ideally schools would make all of this clear to their parents or caregivers, but that is not always the case.

Particular note on the Catholic maintained sector

Responses from Catholic Maintained schools tended to reveal less than those from Controlled and Integrated schools. They had fewer external visitors (often solely the local parish priest) or none. However, many questions remain about the way that RE, prayer and sacramental (communion and confirmation) preparation takes place in Catholic maintained schools, and how this impacts on the educational experience of any non-Catholic pupils in attendance - as previously stated, Catholic schools are open to children of all faiths and none.

Ongoing public discussions about RE in the Republic of Ireland, where almost 90% of schools have a Catholic ethos, raise questions about the time spent on RE and prayer in the classroom, particularly in the communion and confirmation years. Given the time spent on religion in the classroom, and its closer integration into the school day, parents may have particular concerns about how the right to withdraw is communicated and managed, and the implications for the inclusion of all children in whole-school activities and celebrations.

Responses from Catholic schools were also more likely to state an assumption that families had accepted the school's Catholic ethos. Such assumptions may lead to less transparency since parental acceptance is assumed, and make it harder for parents to access information regarding their legal right to withdraw their children.

Next steps - our plans

Connect with you

We want to know what you think - whatever your perspective, and whether it relates to your school, the system, the law, this report, or something else. We are keen to hear from people of all faiths and of none - as an inclusive group we want as many viewpoints as possible. What changes do you want to see? If you share our concerns and want to help bring about change, join us!

You can email us at parents4inclusiveeducation@gmail.com and check out our [website](#), where you can sign up to our newsletter and join our WhatsApp community - this hosts a general chat, some specific working groups and a growing number of group chats for individual schools, which can be a great way to connect and make some waves locally. You can also engage with us on social media - follow us on [Instagram](#) and [Facebook](#) to share your experiences and opinions.

Speak to power

We know things could be better. So, we are writing to the Education Authority, the Minister for Education for NI, the Education Committee at Stormont, school support councils and our major political parties, to make them aware of the issues raised in this report and to hear what they have to say.

Help make changes

We know our schools deliver a brilliant educational experience for our children, and do so in spite of significant challenges in terms of funding and resources. That said, there is clear room for improvement in RE and collective worship, and parents should be much better informed. We want to work with our schools to develop and share more inclusive and transparent practices and will make materials and resources to support these best practices freely available online.

What can parents do?

Engage with your school

You can search your school's response to the FOI request [here](#) and much of this data is visualised on our [interactive map](#). However, this information is still limited. Most schools told us that information on their religious practices is only available upon request - if you don't ask, you won't know. Some good questions are:

- What do RE, Collective Worship and Religious Assemblies look like for my child's class and how often do they happen?
- Are these religious practices delivered by the teacher, a minister/clergy member, or a religious organisation?
- Which organisations routinely visit the school for assembly?
- Can I see a calendar of planned events where outside agencies will be visiting?
- What will my child be doing if I do decide to request withdrawal?
- Will they miss out on other things as a result of this?

For those with children in Catholic Maintained schools, consider asking extra questions about scheduled prayer, additional time spent on religion in the classroom (especially in the communion and confirmation years) and the impact on those who are opted out.

Know your rights

Withdrawing your children from religious practices

You can withdraw your child from any aspect of RE and collective worship you are not comfortable with, for any reason or none. Schools are obliged to comply with such requests, and to ensure that no pupil is disadvantaged as a result of their withdrawal.

Objecting to external visitors

The law sets out that ministers of religion and other suitable persons **to whom parents do not object** shall be given access to pupils to deliver RE. You may therefore wish to object due to unease with certain views of visiting organisations, or concern about problematic dynamics their message could create in school. As with withdrawal, you don't actually have to give a reason. Objections should be directed to the principal and/or governors.

Write to your representatives

This is a big issue, so you might also like to let your elected representatives know what you think. You can find details for your MP [here](#) and your MLAs [here](#).

Our message to schools

Why not take steps towards a better, more inclusive system from which no-one would want to withdraw - a system that works for everyone? We hope that systemic reform is coming, but for now the suggestions below can be implemented within the current legal framework.

Be transparent about all aspects of religious practice

Do you proactively inform parents and caregivers, in advance and meaningful detail, about religious practices at your school? Communicate:

- how RE is taught and who (apart from teachers) is responsible for delivering it
- how you interpret and deal with the legal requirement to provide daily collective worship
- the churches and religious organisations who visit your school, and what they will say to pupils
- how to object to visitors and/or withdraw from participation in religious practices
- details of alternative activities for children who are withdrawn from RE/CW

Prioritise objectivity and inclusivity

Don't undermine or ignore worldviews or religions outside the majority. Be educational, not instructional, and adopt approaches which:

- empower pupils with the critical thinking skills to make informed, responsible decisions
- are thoughtful as to how and when religious practices are incorporated, in particular ensuring that important aspects of school life such as assembly are for everyone
- support children withdrawn from religious practices, ensuring they do not feel excluded, and are provided with an equitable and rewarding alternative activity
- are respectful and inclusive of the diversity of your school community

Consider the ethics of hosting external visitors

If you host visiting religious organisations, be clear on a legitimate basis and purpose for the visit. If it's outsourced RE teaching, is this indicated in your prospectus? If you have regular religious assembly visitors, how do you ensure that withdrawn children don't feel routinely excluded?

Prior to allowing access, do some basic due diligence on your visitor - what do they and their wider organisation stand for? Some religious bodies take stances on sensitive issues which can hurt, exclude and other, creating harmful social dynamics and significant mental health risks. Consider the impact of your association with these visitors on your pupils, parents, caregivers, and staff.

Connect with us

If you work in a school or sit on a board of governors and want to connect, you can email us at parents4inclusiveeducation@gmail.com. You can also reach out and connect with like-minded colleagues at our partner organisation Teachers for Equality in Education: teachers.equalityeducation@gmail.com

Parents for Inclusive Education NI



Advocating for education
inclusive of **all** faiths,
backgrounds and beliefs.



INFORMING PARENTS



CONNECTING FAMILIES



SUPPORTING SCHOOLS

