

The Educate Together Network of Schools

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For over 34 years Educate Together has been working with local communities to establish multi-denominational schools in the Republic of Ireland.

A registered charity, Educate Together relies on small government grants and financial supports from individuals, companies and charitable trusts to deliver choice to parents and services to our growing network of schools.

Today Educate Together operates 68 multi-denominational primary schools. Those figures represent just 2% of the primary schools in Ireland, as the vast majority of schools are denominational, with 96% of them controlled by either the Catholic or Protestant Churches. This is out of sync with the profile of Ireland's diverse population. In many parts of the country, there are no Educate Together schools available. In areas where they have been established, they quickly become oversubscribed. This lack of choice creates situations where many families are forced to send their children to Catholic schools because there is no other option.

In addition to opening and operating primary schools, Educate Together is actively involved in the establishment of Educate Together second-level (secondary) schools. In September 2014, the first three Educate Together second-level schools will open in Ireland, in Dublin and Co Louth.

The Educate Together Ethos

Educate Together schools are recognized by the Department of Education and Skills in Ireland (DES) and work under the same regulations and funding structures as other primary schools.

What distinguishes Educate Together schools is their work in developing a culturally inclusive and democratic ethos. This has pioneered unique approaches to the inclusion of minority opinions and faiths in the Irish context. Educate Together schools have developed education programmes that open the eyes of children to the naturally positive contribution that social, religious and cultural diversity and difference of viewpoint and opinion make to society.

The other characteristic feature of these schools is that they are democratically organised and governed. This maximises the potential for building a genuine part-

nership between the professional, objective role of the teacher and the personal involvement of the parent in their children's education.

The guiding principles of Educate Together schools are equality of esteem and access for all children, irrespective of their social, cultural or religious background. The principle of equality can be very important in helping to generate and maintain positive community relations – particularly in Ireland's newest suburbs.

Ethos

Educate Together schools have a distinct ethos. This has been defined in the following terms:

1. **Multi-denominational**, i.e. all children having equal rights of access to the school, and children of all social, cultural and religious backgrounds being equally respected.
2. **Co-educational** and committed to encouraging all children to explore their full range of abilities and opportunities.
3. **Child-centred** in their approach to education. Educate Together schools are committed to active learning techniques that encourage children to interact with their peers and teachers while they learn.
4. **Democratically run** with active participation by parents/guardians in the daily life of the school, whilst positively affirming the professional role of the teachers.

Ethical Education Curriculum

Students in Educate Together schools follow an ethical education curriculum, the *Learn Together* curriculum, which is taught in place of Religious instruction during the school day.

This curriculum has four strands or modules:

Strand 1: Moral & Spiritual

The general aim of the strand is to help develop in children a critical knowledge, understanding and awareness of right and wrong and a heightened awareness of social, ethical and moral standards through reflecting on the meaning and purposes of life. The strand should encourage and develop the individual on the journey to inner discovery and empower the child to make informed moral decisions.

Strand 2: Equality & Justice

The general aim of this strand is to develop in children a critical knowledge, understanding and awareness of issues relating to human rights, equality, culture and diversity, social justice and social inclusiveness and to empower them to make a difference.

94 **Strand 3: Belief Systems**

The general aim of this strand is to develop in children a critical knowledge, understanding and awareness of the teachings of religious and non-theistic belief systems and how these systems relate to our shared human experience. The emphasis will be placed on an exploration of the infinite variety and richness of humankind through nurturing a respect for a person's right to hold and practice individual belief systems and through creating spaces where values can be articulated and critically examined.

Strand 4: Ethics & the Environment

The aim of this strand is to develop in children knowledge, appreciation and respect for their environment and to empower them to take an active role in its stewardship.

Good practice

Under the Moral and Spiritual strand, for example, students develop and create an awareness of core values such as freedom, happiness, honesty, love, peace, respect, responsibility, kindness, caring, safety and security. They also address negative feelings, for example disappointment, isolation, frustration, and jealousy and are encouraged to talk about and, thereby, normalise these feelings. Stillness and meditation are also promoted in Educate Together schools and the sense of awe and wonder in the natural world that we tend to lose as we move into adulthood is acknowledged and celebrated.

An example of good practice in one of our schools would be that as a reward or affirmation, pupils are allowed to spend time in a quiet part of the classroom by themselves. They can read or look out of the window or simply sit there, but the message that it is hoped this practice sends is that spending time on your own is natural and good.

Developing our network

We work hard to raise funds and build alliances with local partners so that parents in every county can access an Educate Together primary or second-level school for their children. At the end of 2012 Educate Together was supporting 40 different groups of parents across Ireland who are campaigning for an Educate Together school in their area. While all of our schools are state-funded, our work with communities and partners is not, so we rely on the generosity of our supporters to give their time and money to help us change the Irish education system.

For more information, go to www.educatetogether.ie.