



CNI

COMMENT -

Ireland's religious schools are putting us off coming home

We want to give our kids an Irish childhood surrounded by the people and places that matter most to us. But at what cost?- writes Seattle resident Kevin O'Donnell

Leaving Ireland is easy. It's going home that's hard. The decision to leave is usually propelled by a yearning for new horizons or an urgent need to find a job. Sometimes both. The Irish brand of hard-working adaptability makes it easy to settle anywhere in the world. But the emotional pull of Ireland is hard-wired into an emigrant's soul. This complicates the decision to return: a list of pros and cons doesn't capture the intangible head-v-heart debate.

I left Ireland in the last-gasp days of the Celtic Tiger, in 2007, swapping rainy Dublin for rainy Seattle. Having just married, my wife and I found

the Pacific northwest the ideal place for new adventures. We intended to stay just a year or two, but life became busy. We had our first daughter, then, two years later, our second. In a blur, eight wonderfully hectic years passed by. Catching our breath, we started asking ourselves, "Is it time to go home?" We were missing family, friends and the unmistakable sense of home.

So it became a quality-of-life question. We want to give our kids an Irish childhood surrounded by the people and places that matter most to us. We thought it would be as simple as that until we stumbled on a moral dilemma.

Having parted ways with Catholicism some time ago, my wife and I are raising our daughters free of religious instruction. Although Americans wear their religion on their sleeve, it's not an issue in their public schools: religion is a personal matter, not something for the state to sanction. The classroom is neutral territory where all children are taught equally. Families that want religious education attend classes in their place of worship on Saturday or Sunday; those that don't don't. It's a straightforward separation that neither offends nor excludes anyone.

It's hard to imagine enrolling our daughters in anything other than a secular school. When we learned of the growing [Educate Together](#) movement in Ireland we got excited: the ethos and approach are clearly child-centred and forward-looking. Unfortunately, all Educate Together schools in Dublin have lengthy waiting lists.

Our most likely option is a school with religious patronage. Many are excellent, but their faith-based approach conflicts with our values – and, unbelievably, their admissions policies favour children who are baptised. Stories abound of families hastily arranging baptisms to help their children get into a school. Is this State-blessed hypocrisy – surely the worst example of an Irish solution to an Irish problem – the entrance fee for a decent Irish education? Families that don't baptise are relegated to the pool of leftover places, blatantly treated as less equal.

The Department of Education and Department of Equality gave me glib non-answers. Disappointingly, I sense no mainstream political motivation to change the status quo, despite repeated UN calls for Ireland to stop its religious discrimination in education.

As the Irish economy recovers, the Government will need to work hard to encourage ambitious emigrants to come home. There is talk of tax incentives to lure back professionals. That's just window dressing. For most emigrants returning home is about quality of life. The Government can make a big difference if it uses some imagination. A good start would be to throw off the last vestige of a conjoined church and state.

Our dilemma remains unresolved. Our enthusiasm for moving home has been dampened by the realisation that returning carries the price of an education mired in religious influence. For a country that recently gave the world a lesson in equality, by passing the marriage-equality referendum, it jars that education remains rooted in an outdated, unequal idea of Irish society.

First published in The Irish Times, August 1, 2015