Matching Practices for Elementary Schools – Ireland

Li Chen [1]

Relevant country background

The Department of Education and Skills administrates education policies at all levels, including the organization of schools, hours to be taught, curriculum etc. There are three types of primary schools: state-funded primary schools, special schools, and private primary schools, with most being state-funded. Schools' curriculum must cover languages, mathematics, social environmental and scientific studies, arts, sports, social, personal and health education, and religion (see Primary School Curriculum, 1999). There is however variation along linguistic and religious lines. Students and parents can choose religious schools (with most being Roman Catholic), non-denominational schools, multi-denominational schools and Gaelscoileanna, which are schools offering curriculum in Irish. Although schools in Ireland have historically largely been influenced by the Catholic Church, recent changes have been made to accommodate diversity.

School education is compulsory and free for children from the age of 6 (except for those attending private schools). However, preschools are common for children from age of 4 or 5. Home schooling is also allowed by the constitution. From now on, we refer to primary schools and preschools as elementary schools.

Schools are managed by a board of management, which typically consists of nominees of the patrons (e.g. catholic churches, limited companies or NGOs…), parents' representatives and teachers' representatives. The board of management can determine the school's admission policies in accordance with the government regulations (Education Act 1998, the Education (Welfare) Act 2000, and Equal Status Acts 2000 and 2004). They are asked to publicize their admission policies, and are prohibited to discriminate students on the grounds of gender, family status, age, disability, race, religious belief or the membership of the Travellers community, an Irish ethnic minority with nomadic tradition. Refusal is permitted if it is essential to maintain the religious code of the school. The available capacity of schools is also managed by the board of management given the available budget and facilities. The government

---

[1] ECARES, Université libre de Bruxelles, lichen@ulb.ac.be

pays teachers' salaries and pays a lump sum of 200 EUR per student and per year to each school.

Summary box

Organization of education	Mostly state-funded schools.
Stated objectives of enrolment policy	Fairness and equality are the main objectives along with other objectives depending on, for example, the denominational status of the school.
Who's in charge?	Individual schools, within guidelines of department of education.
Admissions system in place since	n/a
Available capacity	Decided by schools, subject to government funding.
Timing of enrolment	Left to decide by each school, usually around spring time.
Information available to parents prior to enrolment period	The list of schools with summary information is available on a website maintained by the Department of Education.
Restrictions on preference expression	None.
Matching procedure	Decentralized applications and admissions at the level of schools.
Priorities and quotas	Left to decide by the schools.
Tie-breaking	Large heterogeneity in practice, priority-ranking, cut-off birth date, or lottery etc.

Description of current practices

Elementary school admissions in Ireland are organized in a decentralized manner. Parents can apply to any school of their preferences directly. A list of schools can be found on the website of the Department of Education and Skills (http://www.education.ie/en/find-a-school). The information available there includes the name, the location and the type of school. Schools usually organize an open day for parents and children before the start of the enrolment process.

Schools decide on the start of their enrolment process independently, typically in the spring of the preceding school year. In theory, parents can express their interest in attending a school any time between the birth of the child and the start of the school year (in other words, registrations can be taken several years in advance). If students transfer or arrive later than the start of the school year, it is still possible to enroll provided there are still places available.

There is no formal mechanism/algorithm used to allocate children to schools. As a rule of thumb, many schools use the "first come, first served" rule to admit students. However when a school is oversubscribed, it can set its own priorities in line with the state regulation. These can vary from school to school, but typical priority criteria include: (1) children who already have siblings in the school, (2) children who are staff relatives, (3) children who practice a certain religion, (4) older children, (5) children from within the catchment area defined by the school (parish boundaries are commonly used,

geographic distance have also been proposed recently), and (6) language priority (for instance priority will be given to parents who support or have a good level of Irish at some Gaelscoileanna). In some cases, schools use a lottery to break ties, or adopt a "cut-off birth date" such that only children who are born before the cut-off birth date are taken.

When a child is declined enrolment in a school, parents can appeal to the board of management of the school, and subsequently to the Department of Education and Skills.

Performance

Since admissions are organized in a decentralized way and the boards of management have a large autonomy in managing the schools, there is no official evaluation of the performance of the current system. However the Economic and Social Research Institute (ESRI) has initiated a postal survey of principals from 746 of 1,200 selected elementary schools (the total number of elementary schools in 2007 in Ireland is 3,282). According to the survey, 81 per cent of principals reported that all students who applied to their schools were accepted, while 19 per cent of the schools applied selection procedures.[2]

Recent policy changes

The Department of Education and Skills has launched reforms in promoting pluralism in primary and secondary education. Most schools in Ireland are traditionally patronized by the Catholic Church. From the school year 2012-13 onwards, a number of schools, which were patronized by the Catholic Church, have started to allow parents to vote for the patronizing bodies for the schools.[3] This gives more autonomy to parents to decide how they would like the schools to run.

Perceived issues

Ireland has witnessed a demographic boom in the past decade (the total number of enrolled students at primary school level in 2011-2012 was 516,460, compared to 441,065 ten years ago[4]). The recent budget cuts have put school finances under pressure and exacerbated the capacity constraints. As a result, class sizes have increased and some small rural primary schools have closed down. Fund-raising activities by schools are also becoming popular. One concern is that these developments hurt pupils from lower socio-economic backgrounds.[5]

Another consequence of the increasing capacity constraint is the observed unraveling of application dates: parents apply increasingly earlier to schools in an attempt to secure a place for their children. Some parents already reserve a seat at a school shortly after their child's birth. Waiting lists are

---

[2] Adapting to Diversity: Irish Schools and Newcomer Students, Emer Smyth, Merike Darmody, Frances McGinnity and Delma Byrne, ESRI research series, No.8, 2009

[3] The Forum on Patronage and Pluralism in the Primary Sector — Report of the Forum's Advisory Group, 2012,http://www.education.ie/en/Press-Events/Conferences/Patronage-and-Pluralism-in-the-Primary-Sector/The-Forum-on-Patronage-and-Pluralism-in-the-Primary-Sector-Report-of-the-Forum%E2%80%99s-Advisory-Group.pdf

[4] Annual Statistics Report 2011/2012, the Department of Education and Skills.

[5] Barnardos School Costs Survey 2012, http://www.barnardos.ie/assets/files/Advocacy/2012-School-Costs-Report.pdf.

common. There is lack of regulation in the timing of enrolment in the current practice, and unraveling creates unnecessary inefficiency.[6]

In addition, priority-based selections can be biased against newcomers. This is a concern because Ireland has experienced a large influx of immigrants since 1990s. According to the ESRI report[7], 73 per cent of the surveyed schools who use priority-based selections responded that they gave priorities to "siblings in the school", making it the most frequently used priority rule. The same report shows that applying "siblings in the school" as priority decreases the chances that newcomers get accepted.

Over 90% of the primary schools in Ireland are Catholic[8], but there is a growing demand for multi-denominational schools. Since schools can set their own admission policies based religious grounds, this may disadvantage non-religious families. Some non-Catholic parents are reported to baptize their child just in order to get a seat at a local Catholic school, and schools are also encouraging parents to lie about their religion (see the survey by ESRI for more information[9]).

Existing data

1. Individual school data (including total number of students, teachers, gender ratio, class size etc.), can be found at the website of the Department of Education and Skills: http://www.education.ie/en/Publications/Statistics/Data-on-Individual-Schools/

2. Growing up in Ireland — the national longitudinal study of children provides educational achievements and progress for 19,500 children. http://www.growingup.ie/index.php?id=83

Legal texts

[1] Education Act 1998, http://www.irishstatutebook.ie/1998/en/act/pub/0051/index.html

[2] The Education (Welfare) Act 2000, http://www.irishstatutebook.ie/2000/en/act/pub/0022/index.html

[3] Equal Status Acts 2000, http://www.irishstatutebook.ie/2000/en/act/pub/0008/index.html

[4] Equality Act 2004, http://www.irishstatutebook.ie/2004/en/act/pub/0024/index.html

---

[6] Discussion Paper on a Regulatory Framework for School Enrolment, the Department of Education and Skills, Ireland, June 2011.
http://www.education.ie/en/Parents/Information/School-Enrolment/sp_enrolment_discussion_paper.pdf
[7] Adapting to Diversity: Irish Schools and Newcomer Students, Emer Smyth, Merike Darmody, Frances McGinnity and Delma Byrne, ESRI research series, No.8, 2009
[8] Annual Statistics Report 2011/2012, the Department of Education and Skills.
[9] Religion and Schooling in Ireland: Parents' Perspectives, Religious Education in a Multicultural Society, ESRI, 2009

MiP Country Profiles downloadable from matching-in-practice.eu

MiP Country Profile 1. Cantillon, Estelle (2011), Matching practices for elementary schools – Belgium (French-speaking region).

MiP Country Profile 2. Kübler, Dorothea (2011), University admission practices – Germany.

MiP Country Profile 3. Irving, Rob (2011), Matching practices for entry-labor markets – Scotland.

MiP Country Profile 4. Kiselgof, Sofya (2011), Matching practices for universities – Ukraine.

MiP Country Profile 5. Biró, Péter (2011), University admission practices – Hungary.

MiP Country Profile 6. Biró, Péter (2012), Matching practices for secondary schools – Hungary.

MiP Country Profile 7. Chen, Li (2012), University admission practices – UK.

MiP Country Profile 8. Chen, Li (2012), University admission practices – Ireland.

MiP Country Profile 9 Cantillon, Estelle and Koen Declercq (2012), University admission practices – Belgium.

MiP Country Profile 10. Chen, Li (2012), Matching practices for elementary schools – Ireland.

MiP Country Profile 11. Chen, Li (2012), Matching practices for secondary schools – Ireland.

MiP Country Profile 12. Manlove, David (2012), Matching practices for primary and secondary schools – Scotland.

MiP Country Profile 13. Merlino, Luca Paolo and Antonio Nicoló (2012), Matching practices for elementary schools – Italy.

MiP Country Profile 14. Merlino, Luca Paolo and Antonio Nicoló (2012), Matching practices for secondary schools – Italy.

MiP Country Profile 15. Merlino, Luca Paolo and Antonio Nicoló (2012), University admissions practices – Italy.

MiP Country Profile 16 Hiller, Victor and Olivier Tercieux (2013), Matching practices in secondary schools – France.

MiP Country Profile 17 Calsamiglia, Caterina (2014), Matching Practices for elementary and secondary Schools – Spain.

MiP Country Profile 18 Lauri, Triin, Kaire Põder, and André Veski (2014), Matching practices for elementary schools – Estonia.

MiP Country Profile 19. Salonen, Mikko A.A. (2014), Matching practices for secondary schools – Finland.

MiP Country Profile 20 Terrier, Camille (2014), Matching practices for secondary public school teachers – France.

MiP Country Profile 21 Basteck, Christian, Katharina Huesmann, and Heinrich Nax (2015), Matching practices for secondary schools – Germany

MiP Country Profile 22 Cantillon, Estelle (2015), Matching practices for secondary schools – Belgium (French-speaking region).