



NUI Galway
OÉ Gaillimh



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Whitaker Institute Policy Brief Series

Policy Brief No.: 15

Cluster: Population and Migration

Theme: Sustainable and Inclusive Societies

Further Reading: Accommodating all applicants? School choice and the regulation of enrolment in Ireland. [The Canadian Geographer/Le Géographe canadien](#), 57(3), 318-326.

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Accommodating all applicants? School choice and the regulation of enrolment

It is clear from research on school choice that the decision about where a student attends school is far from straightforward. Indeed, the body of work suggests that school choice is a double-edged sword, simultaneously improving educational access and outcomes for some, while undermining the quality of the educational experience for others. Much of the school choice literature has emerged from research in the United States and England, where school choice operates in the context of geographically explicit catchment areas. This is not the case in Ireland, where all parents have the constitutional right to send their child to their school of choice. This research examines survey data from Galway City and urban fringe in combination with Department of Education and Skills (DES) documents relating to enrolment to consider how school choice operates on the ground.

Research Findings

Despite the absence of clearly demarcated school attendance zones or catchment areas, it is clear that access to schools in Ireland is highly regulated. In particular, the local is prioritized through the normative assumptions embedded in the selection criteria of schools, for example: school attendance by previous family members and/or attendance at local primary schools. This privileges the position of Irish-nationals with long-term ties to community over newer community members and maintains a discrete but decisive boundary between those who belong in the local school community and those who do not. Such mobilizations of localism are fundamentally exclusionary in their representation of localities as socially and culturally homogeneous. This is particularly true for migrants who do not have the intergenerational connections to the school community to provide them with local status.

Policy Implications

Reforming school enrolment policy to ensure equal access to schools is a complex issue, as demonstrated by the ongoing debates about the School Admissions Bill. The new legislation will ensure that where schools are not over-subscribed, all students applying must be admitted. However, the key issue is selection criteria in over-subscribed schools, which is not adequately dealt with in the current Admissions Bill. Future policy must move beyond merely re-writing enrolment policy and adequately tackle the ways in which policy is *implemented* at the local level to ensure all children and young people have equal access to schools.