

# The irish education system history essay

[History](#)



During the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the Churches played an important role in terms of education in Ireland. They had control of the majority of education systems within the country. It can be argued that the dominance of the Churches in Ireland was a result of the country being colonized by England. The Church of Ireland had power due to the English rule at the time, while the Catholic Church had power in an attempt to deflect the influences of the English. The Catholic Church and the Church of Ireland battled for many years over the control of the education system. In the eighteenth century, the Protestant Church appeared to be in control of the education system. However, throughout the eighteenth century, the management turned in favour of the Catholics. This control continued into the twentieth century until the State slowly took over. There have been a number of factors that have contributed to this change in management and these will be discussed throughout the essay. This essay will go through the development of Irish education based on the role of the Churches, the factors and policies calling for change and finally, the position it is in now. The starting point for a discussion on this topic would bring us all the way back to the early nineteenth century. In 1831 the first national school system was established in Ireland. Lord Stanley, the Chief Secretary for Ireland called for the need for a school system that was run by the State. In his letter to His Grace the Duke of Leinster, Stanley outlined his concern "to unite in one system children of different creeds (Stanley 1831 p. 2). Essentially, Stanley wanted to integrate students of all sects into one national school system. The proposal led to conflict between many institutions: "the Roman Catholic Church fought the Church of Ireland, the government fought the churches, and the parents fought the government" (Carone 2012). Stanley's

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concern was addressed and a multid denominational elementary education system was established for the people of Ireland. This system was also subsidised by the State. The National Board was responsible for running the national school system and consisted of members from both religious backgrounds- Catholic and Protestant. The board worked together in order to finance the building of schools and teachers' salaries. However, as time progressed, conflict arose as the gap between the churches began to grow. Both parties sought out their own " ecological niche, seeking to use the system to gain social advantage while maintaining cultural/religious integrity" (Limond 2010 p. 452). This conflict went on for many years with both sides infiltrating and putting their own members on the National Board. Despite the State being run by the Protestants, the Catholics still accounted for 50% of the board members. This is a noteworthy statistic as it highlights the persistence and determination of the Catholic Church and this is evident throughout the essay. From here, the education battle between both churches continued. The Catholic Church attempted " to gain power over the Church of Ireland by winning a series of education battles against the government" and used education to hinder the effects of their religious counterparts (Akenson 1970 p. 390). In response to this, the Church Education Society was founded by the Protestants. Both Churches also continued to seek finance for their own educational systems. However, the Catholic Church lost a substantial amount of money trying to accomplish this and in 1860, the Protestant Church also realised that this was unattainable (Akenson 1985). The responses of the churches however, were quite contrasting. The Protestants drafted and submitted a petition for a grant that was widely discarded by the State. The Catholics took a somewhat

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alternative route and tried to tweak the national school system in order to satisfy their own requirements. The Catholic Church was defended by the fact that the initial construction of the national education system was done on the basis of an "informal letter". It was argued that the letter written by Lord Stanley to the Duke of Leinster was to be considered informal, simply because it was not followed an Education Act (Alvey 1991). This ultimately meant that the principles under which the system was grounded could be reformed in favour of the Catholic Church. As can be expected, the Catholics saw this as an opportunity and exerted a great deal of pressure on the government. In addition, the political stance of the Catholic Church began to grow and the image of the Church of Ireland was deteriorating in the eyes of those in control of the country (Akenson 1985). Thus began the emergence of the role of the Catholic Church in the 1850s, consistently pushing for a more denominational education system. The supremacy of the Catholics was assisted by Paul Cullen following his appointment as Archbishop of the Church. Cullen called for a reform of the Catholic Church and condemned them to align with the ethics and standards in Rome. With regards to the education system, he proposed that the Irish Catholic Church take responsibility for the supervision and control of it (Alvey 1991). It was Cullen who responsible for the abolishment of the National Education system as he claimed that such a system put the faith of Catholic children at risk. What he wanted was an official denominational system that provided Catholic schools with direct grant assistance (Farren 1870). The Commission of Inquiry (1870), also known as The Powis Commission, outlined the achievements of the current National School system and highlighted the negative aspects of it. They paid particular attention to poor attendance rates and achievements

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as well as the surprisingly low number of teachers receiving formal training (Royal Commission of Inquiry into Irish Education 1868-1870). It can be argued that the Catholic Church were to blame for the low number of trained teachers in 1850 due to the fact they had a "ban on entry to district model schools" (Ibid). The Commission also supported Cullen's idea of a denominational system and despite the governments' initial rejection of the matter, the end result saw the separation of the national schools (Carone 2012). The management of the third level education system in Ireland followed a similar pattern to that of the national school system. There was a close link between the two, again due to governmental and denominational impacts. At the time there were only two universities in Ireland. The University of Dublin was run by the Catholics while the Protestants had control over Trinity College. The Catholic Church disagreed with the ethos and practice of Trinity College and believed it was not satisfactory to educate Catholics. This led to the Catholic Church again pushing for state finance of a denominational system. While the state refused to finance such a system, they did however, offer an alternative by setting up non-denominational university called Queen's University. This body was set up in 1850 and consisted of three universities within the state: Belfast, Cork and Galway. However, the Catholics still remained uncertain as to whether or not Queen's University was a place to educate their believers (Keenan 1983). Following this, the Synod of Thurles (1850) agreed by stating that the Queen's University's tradition was not adequate for the education of Catholics. Due to the unhappiness and constant pressure of the Catholic Church, the State decided to intervene. Some finances were raised and the Catholic University was founded in Dublin in 1854- a purely Catholic University. However, the <https://assignbuster.com/the-irish-education-system-history-essay/>

University suffered a setback shortly after its foundation because of a lack of additional financing and State grants. The Royal University was an examining body established in 1882 and replaced the existing Queen's University. The Royal University offered indirect support to the Catholic Church and its board consisted of an even split between Catholics and Protestants. The institution also offered education to students from all denominations, meaning all students could sit the same examinations. Therefore, those who were not fond of the system of Trinity College and Queen's University could still obtain a third-level degree elsewhere (Coolahan 1981). The creation of the Royal University also helped the Catholic University by reconstructing and remodelling it. Henceforth, it became known as the University College Dublin. Irish education experienced many changes throughout its existence. Another change came about in 1878 through the Intermediate Education Act. The Act proposed variations such as the inclusion of the Gaelic language and girls 'as far as conveniently may be' (Coolahan 1981 p. 61). Again, we see great pressure being exerted by the Catholic Church as they aimed to improve the Gaelic language amongst its population. It can be argued that this was a defence mechanism used by the Catholics to fend off the impact of the English. The Act imposed a voluntary board and gave them the authority and responsibility of implementing and constituting a public examinations system (Ibid). The first set of examinations under the Act came the following year in 1879. Under the Act fees were allocated to schools who were in alignment with the regulations of the board. Furthermore, it gave students the opportunity to obtain awards and prizes for success and effort (Coolahan 1981). Although the Act was non-denominational, it did offer denominational support to schools. All that was required of the schools was

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that they adhere to the requirements of the examinations- everything else appeared irrelevant. However as time progressed, deficiencies arose in the Act and in 1898, it was reconstructed. State funding was finally made available for denominational teacher training in 1883. As mentioned earlier, Powis Commission outlined the need for such training as only 27% of Catholic teachers had received formal training prior to this. However, since State aid was made available, the situation improved and by 1900, 50% of all national teachers had received formal training (Royal Commission of Inquiry into Irish Education 1868-1870). This was a significant achievement for the Catholic Church. After decades of pressure and determination, they finally received denominational state finance. While it was the state that had the final decision in allocating finance, it was highly influenced by the actions of the Catholic Church. Although there was conflict between the government and the Catholic Church over the elementary and university educational systems, there was essentially no conflict with regards to secondary education. The number of Catholic schools significantly increased from 1850-1870 with the numbers surging from twenty-one to forty-eight respectively. Irish Catholic secondary education shared similar characteristics to that of a private school. The schools were managed by the Church and they had great influence over curriculum (O' Donoghue 1999). Furthermore, they had adopted a curriculum that was based around the Irish language and by the early 1920s, the Catholic Church was satisfied with the system they had in place (Duggan 2003). However, they still had an impact elsewhere. In order to promote Catholicism, they continued to reinforce religion in schools. The people of Ireland had faith in the Church in running the school's system. While the schools were managed and run by the Catholic Church, it is <https://assignbuster.com/the-irish-education-system-history-essay/>

important to mention that they were financed by the state as outlined in the Intermediate Education Act 1978. As we can see, the Catholic Church had control of the Irish education system in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Their influence over the system became increasingly powerful as time progressed. At the beginning (1831), the State had little involvement and their actions and strategies were highly opposed by the Catholic Church who developed their own ideas. It was only in 1922 when Ireland became a free state that things began to change. Since then, the State has taken a more proactive route in determining the ethos and tradition of Irish schools. Firstly they introduced teacher registration where the State became responsible for paying teacher salaries. In addition, the State contributed to the running of the schools with the aid of a capital grant scheme.

Compulsory attendance for students under 14 was also introduced. The Vocational School system was founded and implemented, and finally, both the Intermediate and Leaving Certificate Examination had been set up (Raftery & Hout 1993). Despite the conflict between the Church and State, there was some form of unity as they both aimed to revive the National identity after the English were banished: " The dominant societal powers, whether state, church, political party or private interest, are concerned to censor the vision of the past in order to inculcate their values with the goal of consolidating their position" (O' Callaghan 2013). In this sense, the history that was being taught in schools was being manipulated in order to represent the values of society. Once Ireland gained its independence, Minister for Education Eoin MacNeill introduced a new education policy. However, the policy was brought in on the basis of state-aid as opposed to state control. His logical being:" that to bring the whole direction of the <https://assignbuster.com/the-irish-education-system-history-essay/>



education of the young under political control would be a more radical and penetrating form of state socialism than the political control of the material means of economic production and distribution". (MacNeill 1932 p. 246) He further argued that in order for educational institutions to receive State-aid, they must adhere to certain criteria and that finance could not be distributed 'unconditionally'. He acknowledged that the University of Dublin and the National University met these requirements and allocated financial aid to both parties. Furthermore, the primary and secondary systems were held under supervision to determine if they qualified for State funding (MacNeill 1932). However, finances that were made available were not particular to any institution. He made it clear that the government's policy was to distribute State-aid to all institutions who comply with official regulations, regardless of their denomination. Finally, he stated that elementary education was "declared free to all by the Constitution, has been made compulsory to all by Statute" (MacNeill 1932 p. 248). One might expect that after the introduction of the aforementioned policies by the state, the Catholic Church would surrender their pursuit in trying to control the education system. Nevertheless, the Catholics were stubborn and instead, succeeded in utilising the curriculum being used in an attempt to influence the education system and ultimately, society. The State appeared to be getting more control of the education system since the Free State was established. Conversely, the development of the 1937 Constitution reversed this advancement. The Constitution merely reinforced the Church's right in education through Article 42. The Article states that parents hold the responsibility 'to provide, according to their means, for the religious and moral, intellectual, physical and social education of their children' (Article 42. <https://assignbuster.com/the-irish-education-system-history-essay/>

1). Moreover, the government had restricted themselves from interfering with the decisions of any parents by stating in Article 42. 3. 1, that the State will show " due regard... for the rights of parents, especially in the matter of religious and moral formation". Parents could enrol their children in any denominational school and the Constitution effectively constrained the State from interfering with the Churches. It has been suggested that the Constitution inevitably put the advancement of Irish education back in the hands of religious order (O' Donoghue 1999). Over the next twenty years, the education system remained relatively unchanged. Throughout the 1960s, many actions were taken by the State in order to improve the system. It is important to mention that the change in education policy came about as a result of the change in economic policy. Ireland's economic policy had become one that focused on " encouraging industrial growth and attracting foreign investment" (Raftery & Hout 1993 p. 44). To align with this policy, the education system aimed to increase the availability of secondary education to all social classes. During this time, government spending on education almost doubled (Raftery & Hout 1993). The State began by investing in to the creation and running of second level schools in 1964. To coincide with the development of numerous schools, in 1967, secondary school education fees were removed and replaced by grants. This marked the most significant point in Irish education's history. As a result of the free education scheme implemented by Minister for Education, Donagh O' Malley, it meant that people were no longer forced to turn to the Catholic Church for education. From this point, the power of the Catholic Church slowly began to decline. It can be argued that secularisation was another factor that contributed to the downfall of the Catholic Church. Catholicism was no longer

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the national identity as it was replaced by secularisation. Furthermore, powerful Irish leaders began to question the authority of the Catholic Church. Sean Lemass, in particular, was one of many politicians who has shaped modern Ireland. The former Taoiseach was responsible for implementing the aforementioned economic policy that changed the establishment of the Irish economy. He also put forward the proposal for free education encouraging young people to turn away from the influences of the Catholic Church and take advantage of Ireland's economic success (Carone 2012). Also, in 1965 there was a report published entitled "Investment in Education" which "promoted the planned development of education as a contribution to economic growth" (O' Callaghan 2013). In his panel review with the OECD, Minister for Education George Colley stated that the report had an instant impact on policy in Ireland. Since then, the Irish education system has been altered to cater for the requirement of the nation with the aim of encouraging economic growth. Therefore, since the 1960s, Irish education has been characterised by economic factors. Any changes to curriculum were made with the objective of industrialising the economy. In conclusion, it is evident in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries that the Catholic & Protestant Churches had complete control over the education system in Ireland. While the State had the final say on the policies, it was actions of the Churches that determined which policies were implemented. The pressure of the Catholic Church in trying to achieve a denominational education system had caused major conflict between the Catholics and Protestants. Their actions ultimately prevented the country being unified. The procedures taken by the Catholic Church were somewhat contradictory in the sense that they restricted Catholics attending model schools in the 1850s. As a result,

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the issues concerning Irish education in the nineteenth century were labelled by powerful Irishmen as "religious problems" (Akenson 1985). The supremacy of the Catholic Church grew and continued throughout the nineteenth century. Even in the early twentieth century, after the turn of the State, the Catholics' decisions were still reinforced. The late 1930s saw the last main impact of the Church that continued for two decades until their power eventually began to decline. Economic policies were implemented for the benefit of the State as a whole, as policy makers and politicians began to challenge the powers of the Church. Since then, education policies were constructed in connection with those of the economy and they have remained relatively stable until this present day (Buachalla 1985). While the Catholic Church's power is no longer striving today, it cannot be ignored that their efforts and success in influencing the State's decisions in the early nineteenth to mid-twentieth centuries were admirable.