

# School starting age campaigners welcome Minister's response

## *Minister says he'll consider case for starting age flexibility*

Date issued: 29<sup>th</sup> April 2013  
For immediate use

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**A group of campaigners who want a more flexible approach towards the school starting age [in Northern Ireland] have welcomed an undertaking by the Education Minister to consider their case.**

The delegation, which included parents, the ATL teaching union, the Early Years charity, and a primary school vice principal, met the Minister, John O'Dowd, this afternoon [Monday, 29<sup>th</sup> April] at Parliament Buildings.

They're calling on the Minister to permit deferred school entry for the youngest for year children where the parents feel this would be in the child's best interests. They'd also like special consideration for other children with developmental issues.

Northern Ireland has the lowest statutory school starting age in Europe and children are required to start school as young as four years and two months, depending on their birth date. The campaign group highlighted to the Minister the more flexible systems used in both the Republic of Ireland and in Scotland.

Speaking after the meeting, one of the parents, Dr Liz Fawcett, said:

***"The current inflexible system means that, every year, some children are starting school at an inappropriately early age which may well handicap them throughout their school career.***

***"We are delighted that the Minister listened very sympathetically and told us he recognized that we are highlighting an issue which needs to be addressed.***

***"He has promised to consider our case with care and we hope that he will be able to act to tackle this problem."***

One of those at the meeting was Siobhan McQuaid who is Deputy Principal of Holy Family Primary School in north Belfast. She said she has considerable experience of the issue:

***"Every year, we have a couple of young for year children in P1 who really would have benefited from another year in a pre-school setting, better suited to their needs.***

***“They really struggle and, although we try to ensure they don’t feel like failures, it’s impossible for their self-confidence to remain unaffected.***

***“I’m so glad that the Minister recognizes that this is a problem which needs to be dealt with.”***

Another parent at the meeting was Roisin Gilheany from Omagh. She deferred school entry for her son, Leon (6), but says it wasn’t easy.

***“Most parents who try to get their child’s school enrolment deferred simply meet a road block – they’re told they can’t possibly do it.***

***“The only official way is to home school your child for a year – and then you may well be told your child has to go into P2 rather than P1 which isn’t satisfactory.***

***“All we want is a little bit of flexibility to ensure that every child has the best possible start – we’re so pleased that the Minister understood where we are coming from.”***

ENDS

**Editors’ notes:**

1. The campaign for a more flexible approach to the school starting age is supported by the parents’ group, ParentsOutLoud, the ATL teaching union, and the following charities: Early Years, Adoption UK, The Fostering Network, TinyLife, and TAMBA NI (which advocates for families with multiple-birth children).
2. **Photo 1 of 2: Pacemaker press 29/4/13 School starting age campaigners after their meeting with the Education Minister at Parliament Buildings. From L to R: Dr Martin McPhillips, School of Psychology, Queen’s University ; Roisin Gilheany, parent from Omagh; Siobhan McQuaid, Deputy Principal of Holy Family Primary School in north Belfast; Dr Liz Fawcett, NI Representative, ParentsOutLoud; Siobhan Fitzpatrick, CEO of Early Years, Amanda Larmour-McQuaide, parent from west Belfast, and Mark Langhammer, ATL. Picture: Mark Marlow.**
3. **Photo 2 of 2. Pacemaker press 29/4/13 Roisin Gilheany and her son, Leon McClean (6) at Parliament Buildings following campaigners’ positive meeting with Education Minister John O’Dowd on the case for flexibility in the school starting age. Roisin managed to defer her son’s school entry, but most parents who want to do so are told they can’t. Picture Mark Marlow**