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Research Center
for European Analysis
and Policy



EMUNA Brief 15/2025

TRAINING AND EDUCATION IN DIFFERENT CULTURES – 17 November 2025

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Secularism in Schools: Obstacles and Progress with Data in Hand

Update to Brief 2/2024 - Secularism and Pluralism in Schools

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The phenomenon of secularism and pluralism in Italian public schools must be studied by examining the available data, and it is indicative that civic access is necessary to obtain it. Unexpected news thus comes to light: the choice not to use Catholic religious education has the majority in Florentine schools, and in other parts of the country there is a close race. Together with the analysis of the adoption of the textbook for the Alternative Activities program, we see an Italy that is divided by macro-areas and with significant disparities among different provinces. While the UAAR's legal victories represent a barrier to discrimination in the exercise of the right to education and religious freedom, a surprisingly rejected appeal in 2025 provides new tools for awareness campaigns and legal action against institutions that fail to comply with the precise obligations set out in writing by the judges of the Lazio Regional Administrative Court.

Legal initiatives

Ruling No. 7653 of April 17, 2025 by the Lazio Regional Administrative Court provides further evidence supporting the rights to education and religious freedom of students who do not avail themselves of Catholic Religious Education (in Italian IRC, Insegnamento della Religione Cattolica), with particular reference to those who choose the "Educational and Training Activities" option in Supplementary Module C, the so-called Alternative activity (AA).

Unlike the legal victories obtained by the UAAR (Union of Rationalist Atheists and Agnostics) in 2010 and 2020, as detailed in last year's report, this time the appeal was rejected.¹ The Regional Administrative Court judges did not find sufficient grounds to annul the Ministry of Education's circular regarding school enrollment, as the UAAR requested. The provisions in force since 2020/21, which provide for differentiated enrollment paths, remain in effect: those who choose to avail themselves of the IRC fill out, submit, and complete the application between January and February, while those who choose not to avail themselves of it are forced to wait for an additional four months, until, between the end of May and the end of June, they can finally submit supplementary form C ("Supplementary Form for the Choices of Students Not Availing of Catholic Religious Education"). This dual track also creates organizational complications for the school system. According to the Lazio Regional Administrative Court, however, the failure or late activation of the AA that still occurs in many schools is not attributable to the differentiated path described above and decided by the ministry, but to the individual schools, which are required to observe very specific obligations set out in black and white in the following passages of the ruling (the underlining highlights the most relevant aspects also due to the clarity with which, probably for the first time, they are written in a ruling).

"It is therefore considered *jus receptum* that schools must include in their educational and training programs, alongside the teaching of the Catholic religion, an alternative course: this regardless of whether or not there are students who intend to avail themselves of it.

Individual schools can and must (re)organize their resources, contingently, if no students, in a given school year, intend to avail themselves of the alternative teaching. The scheduling of the latter, however, does not arise from the positive expressions of preference of those who do not avail themselves of it, but rather directly from the regulatory system.

From the foregoing, it follows that individual schools, knowing at the beginning of July how many students intend to avail themselves of the alternative teaching, should have no difficulty in designing their school timetable to include the provision of such teaching, which (it should) have already planned.

More generally, any disruptions in the provision of alternative activities (teaching and training, assisted or unassisted individual study, early entry or exit) to those who do not avail themselves of them are to be considered attributable to planning and/or organizational shortcomings of individual schools and must be remedied through the administrative and, where appropriate, judicial tools prescribed by law.

A legal initiative that has so far been unsuccessful² has yielded significant results for the secular nature of schools and the rights of those who do not avail themselves of IRC. Information campaigns can be

¹ Commentary on the ruling by Adele Orioli, head of Uaar legal initiatives:
<https://blog.uaar.it/2025/08/31/una-bella-sconfitta/>

² Uaar can still appeal to the Council of State.

launched for school principals regarding the obligation to structurally prepare for the academic year's provision "regardless of whether or not there are students who intend to avail themselves of it" and the need to promptly organize class schedules to take this into account, starting in July, as soon as the preferences expressed in the supplementary Model C are acquired.

And if non-attendance or late start of alternative teaching and learning activities to IRC continue, the effects of the legal initiative, which begins with the sending of the formal notice that UAAR makes freely available to parents and students,³ will be even more effective.

Data on non-attendance of IRC in Italian schools

The dataset relating to the decisions to avail or not to avail of IRC continues to be missing from the Single School Data Portal.⁴ The UAAR has therefore once again used the generalized civic access tool to obtain the most recent data (2024/25 school year) from all Italian schools from the Ministry of Education and Merit and the autonomous provinces of Trento and Bolzano. This data will soon be made publicly available⁵ in an elaborate format with interactive maps, multi-level aggregations, and detailed information down to the individual school level. As part of the datiBeneComune project, in which the UAAR participates, the original data received from public administrations will also be made available in the Association's GitHub repository,⁶ allowing anyone to conduct checks and produce further analyses.

Some results can already be anticipated. The trend measured in recent years through the ministerial data acquisition system is confirmed. Compared to 2023/24, the number of people choosing not to attend IRC in state schools has increased by approximately 40,000, a figure that is even more significant given the decline in the student population of over 100,000 students. The annual growth of approximately one point in the percentage of students not attending IRC is also confirmed: from 15.5% in 2022/23 it is expected to rise to approximately 17.5% in 2024/25.

As already observed last year, national data alone risks obscuring the most interesting part of the phenomenon. In four regions, the percentage of secular choices now exceeds 30% (Valle d'Aosta, Emilia Romagna, Tuscany, and Liguria), while this was the case only in Valle d'Aosta in 2023/24. In the province of Florence, the percentage exceeds 40%, and if we limit ourselves to the municipality of Florence alone, we see a "secular overtaking": students who attend classes taught "in accordance with Church doctrine"⁷ are a minority. It will be interesting to see whether this also occurs in other municipalities with a certain number of inhabitants. Moving south, however, we continue to find regions and provinces where more than 96% of students attend IRC.

³ <https://uaar.it/ora-alternativa-faq>

⁴ <https://dati.istruzione.it/opendata/>

⁵ <https://www.uaar.it/non-frequenza-irc-nelle-scuole-italiane/>

⁶ <https://github.com/UnioneAteiAgnosticiRazionalisti/dati-no-irc/>

⁷ Law 121/1985, additional protocol

To see in detail the territorial distribution of IRC non-attendance, please refer to the interactive maps relating to the 2024/25 school year, which will be made available online in about a month by region⁸ and province.⁹

Books for those entitled to them

The Unified School Data Portal provides a page¹⁰ from which to download, region by region, electronic archives of textbook adoptions approved by each school. Accessing and processing these datasets has allowed the UAAR to update the percentage of state primary school classes guaranteed a textbook for the Alternative Teaching and Learning Activities program. The growth has been significant: from 5.60% in 2023/24 to 9.54% in 2024/25, and eventually to 13.54% in 2025/26.

The analysis of the geographical distribution of the phenomenon¹¹ in 2025/26 confirms and reinforces last year's observations. Southern provinces are generally characterized by percentages in the order of units. In the North and Center the situation is changing, with much higher values and, in some cases, significant growth compared to the previous year. The national rankings see the province of Asti leading the way, with 49.90% of primary school classes adopting the textbook for the A-level curriculum (previously 37.72%); Genoa follows with 49.89% (up from 36.83%), Teramo with 47.06% (up from 36.60%), and Livorno with 46.95% (up from 44.1%).

To support the equal educational dignity of girls and boys who do not attend IRC and to encourage teachers to adopt the textbook for the Alternative Activities curriculum, note the letter sent to school principals¹² on May 2, 2025, and the 2025/26 edition of the "Books for those who have the right to have them" campaign.¹³

⁸ <https://public.flourish.studio/visualisation/27185921/>

⁹ <https://public.flourish.studio/visualisation/27185742/>

¹⁰ <https://dati.istruzione.it/opendata/opendata/catalogo/elements1/?area=Adozioni%20libri%20di%20testo>

¹¹ <https://public.flourish.studio/visualisation/25036937/>

¹² https://www.uaar.it/adozione_libro_di_testo_per_alternativa_irc_2025-26.pdf

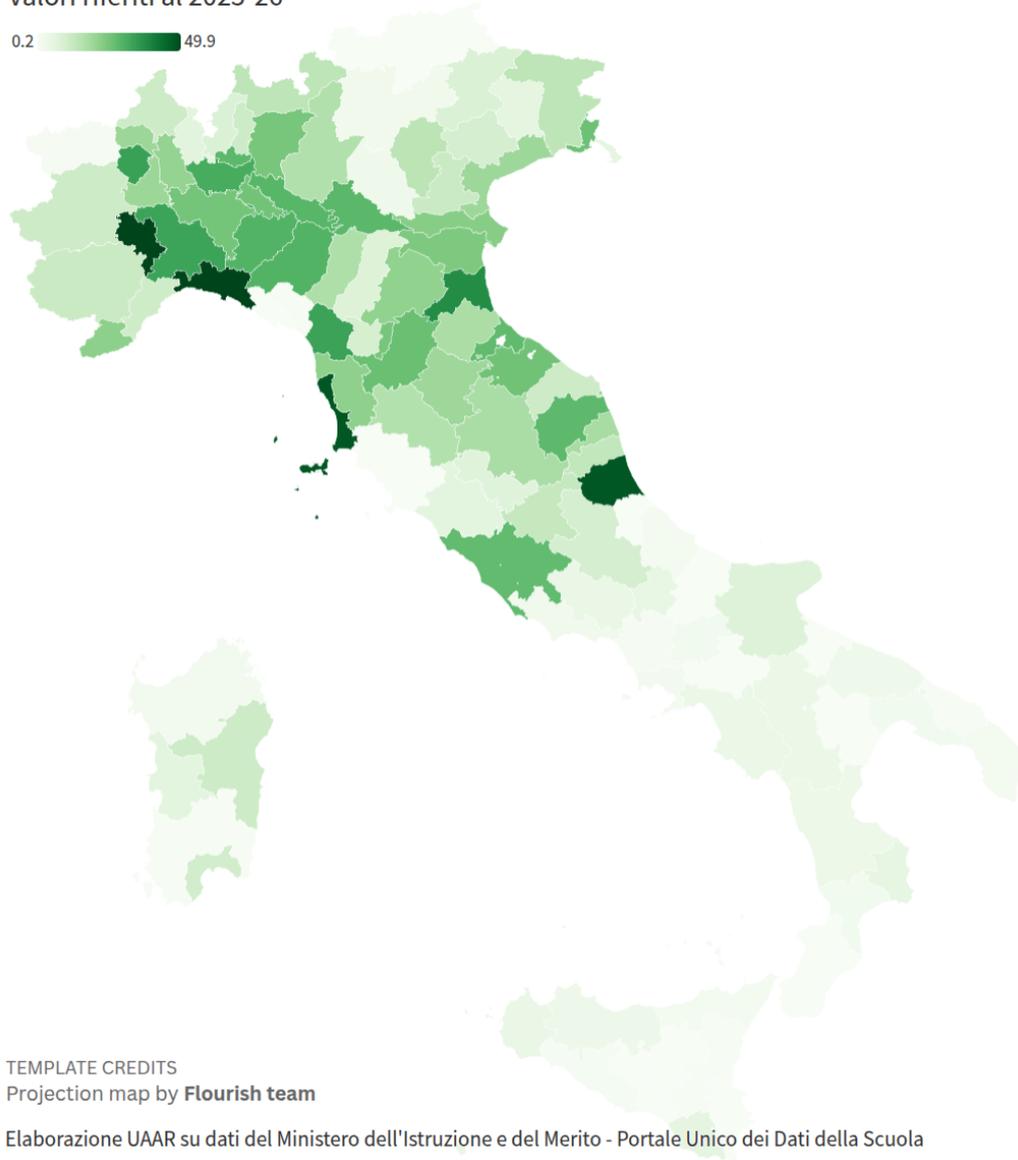
¹³ <http://uaar.it/kitdidattica>

Percentage of primary school classes using textbooks for alternative activities to Catholic religious instruction (by province). Figures refer to 2025-26

Percentuale di classi di scuole primarie in cui risulta l'adozione di libri di testo per l'attività alternativa all'insegnamento della religione cattolica (per provincia)

Valori riferiti al 2025-26

0.2  49.9



TEMPLATE CREDITS
Projection map by **Flourish team**

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