

Board of Education Report to The General Synod 2017

Your Grace and members of General Synod

I bring to your attention the Board of Education Report 2017.

So please sit up straight, put your books and pens away, no talking, give this report your fullest attention, there will be homework based on this class, you have been warned. Mobile phones are not permitted and will be confiscated as per Synod discipline policy.

This has been an extremely busy year for the Boards of Education and with direct reference to the Board of Education, Republic of Ireland, the proposed Admissions to Schools Bill is a topic that has been preeminent in The Education Boards meetings and actions since the Minister for Education and Skills announced his intentions from the offices of Equate ... interesting that the Minister chose the offices of a special interest lobby group opposed to religious orders managing schools, from which to announce a twelve week consultation period on School Admissions!

The issue of school admissions has received much media attention and debate driven mainly by two special interest groups; Equate and Education and Equality. Our concerns were heightened further when the Minister reduced the consultation period to four weeks from 12 weeks, subsequently increased to 8 weeks after much lobbying from the Board of Education, Schools from the National and Secondary sectors, Churches, Parents, past pupils, The Incorporated Society and other interested groups or individuals.

The Minister for Education and Skills, Mr Richard Bruton TD, has forwarded four options in relation to school admissions:

The removal of the Equal Status Act 2000 section 7(3) (c)
The introduction of the “nearest school” rule
The introduction of a “defined catchment” area
The introduction of a “quota system” based upon religious denomination.

All of the suggestions will impinge negatively on Church of Ireland Primary and Secondary schools. Indeed it is the Boards belief that the

proposed changes have the potential to fundamentally undermine the CHURCH OF IRELAND METHODIST PRESBYTERIAN SOCIETY OF FRIENDS PATRONAGE BODY schools at both Secondary and Primary level to serve the Protestant population in the Republic of Ireland ... Thus removing the very purpose for their existence.

“The Board of Education is aware of over 100 schools under protestant management throughout the country who have made a submission to the Minister as part of the consultation process. Almost every submission requested that section 7(3)(c) of the Equal Status Act, 2000 be retained in its current format. All but a few expressed the view that none of the four proposals put forward would allow them to continue to serve the protestant community adequately.

The Board of Education sought the views of parents of children who attend primary school under Church of Ireland patronage. Over 500 families took part. 87% of parents said that it is important for them to have access to schools that provide education within a Church of Ireland/Protestant ethos. 77% said they thought that the possible abolition of the right of their school to give priority to COI/Protestant pupils will undermine parental choice in their locality. Most of the parents submitted additional comments expressing dismay and anger that the proposals may result in their school no longer being able to serve their faith community.”

I am pleased to announce that we received confirmation yesterday that the Minister has taken up the offer to address the Church of Ireland Primary School Management Association conference to engage with us on the issues. We are grateful to him for affording us the opportunity to do so.

Separately, but closely intertwined, it was reported to 2016 General Synod that a Bill was being brought before the Oireachtas Committee on Education and Social Protection aimed at bringing stronger regulation to the area of Admissions to schools.

The Board has made a number of submissions in relation to this Bill and has appeared before the Oireachtas Committee on Education and Social Protection.

In 2017 I must report to General Synod that the Department of Education and Skills or the Minister did not accept our concerns; the Bill is proceeding through the Oireachtas.

In yet another development the Labour Party has introduced a Bill before the Oireachtas that seeks to limit the role of the Board of Management in managing school applications for admission to schools and legislating that Religious Education must be timetabled for the end of the school day.

In another change regarding school funding Protestant children attending many rural Church of Ireland Secondary Schools, are now in receipt of less funding support for their ICT education from the Department of Education and Skills than if they were to choose to attend their local Catholic Voluntary School or ETB school.

Protestant families living in rural Ireland face a significant dilemma. To attend a school within their locality or the nearest Church of Ireland or Protestant managed school. For parents of young children this often requires substantial personal sacrifice in order to meet travel commitments that enable their children to attend the National School that reflect their religious ethos.

To attend a Church of Ireland Secondary School often requires a commitment to Boarding. For parents opting for their children to attend a Protestant Faith School there are boarding fees.

Yet a student attending as a boarder whose parents must pay boarding costs is further penalised because the Department of Education and Skills per capita funding towards Information Communication Technology is 50% less than that of their neighbours attending the local Catholic Voluntary or ETB School. Indeed if a Church of Ireland student opted to attend their local Catholic Voluntary or ETB School they would receive 100% of the Department of Education and Skills funding for ICT. This is wrong.

The removal of all funding towards building works, secretarial and caretaking support, a pupil teacher ratio that provides many Church of Ireland Secondary Schools with 5 teachers less in a school of 500 pupils than other schools in the Republic of Ireland, less than 50% funding

towards Information Communications Technology and the potential for less funding towards Guidance in the future is wrong.

The Central Statistics Office Life in 1916 Ireland: Stories from Statistics states that “in 1916 close to 10% of the population was Protestant (Church of Ireland, Presbyterian or Methodist) compared with 3.6% in 2011. Over 20% of the population was protestant in counties Wicklow, Donegal and Monaghan while the proportion in Dublin was 19.3% and in Cavan it was 18.1%. By 2011 four counties had a Protestant population of just over 7%: Wicklow, Cavan, Donegal and Monaghan.”

To provide equality for a minority population requires additional AND ENHANCED funding and support beyond that provided to the majority population. Positive affirmation of a minority has proven extremely beneficial to the development of equality throughout the World. We do not ask for more funding than other schools, we are asking for the same along with equivalence of respect without discrimination.

Otherwise there is a danger that the Republic of Ireland might be looking at the “Last of the Anglicans!” by the mid to end of this century.

Another area of work that I would like to draw your attention to is that of Safeguarding Trust. At its meeting in June 2016 the Standing Committee of the General Synod agreed the establishment of a new Safeguarding Trust Board. This is a very significant development in the life of the Church. The formation of the Safeguarding Trust Board places safeguarding as a core concern of the Church in its governmental structures and reaffirms the strong commitment of the Church of Ireland to ensuring that its policies on child protection, vulnerable adults and safeguarding in general are robust and seek a standard of excellence.

I would like to take this opportunity to thank all those members of the Education Boards North and South for their strong sense of volunteerism, loyalty and dedication that allows the Boards of Education to work so efficiently. We thank our colleagues The Rt Rev Dr WP Colton, Bishop of Cork, Cloyne and Ross and Mr Samuel Harper for their tremendous contribution made to the work of the Board over their long and active tenure of membership.

We welcome to the Board Ms Hazel Corrigan as a lay Honorary Secretary in succession to Mr Harper and The Rt Rev Michael Burrows, Bishop of Cashel, Fearn and Ossary in succession to The Bishop of Cork.

There are many other important facets of the work of the Board of Education contained in the report that you have previously received and read in preparation for this class. I have selected specific areas to highlight in this report.

In conclusion I would once again draw your attention to the proposed changes to Admissions and funding that will negatively impinge on our schools, both National Schools and Secondary Schools and with unforeseen consequences for a minority that simply wishes to contribute to the common good of society.

I draw your attention to Article 2, Protocol 1 to the European Convention of Human Rights:

“No person shall be denied the right to education. In the exercise of any functions which it assumes in relation to education and to teaching, the State shall respect the right of parents to ensure such education and teaching in conformity with their own religious and philosophical convictions.”

In other words, apart from any interest that the church might have in educating children according to its ethos, parents who are members of the Church of Ireland have an entitlement, which the state must respect, to have their children educated on a church basis.

Teachers finish their class with relevant and purposeful homework. This one is no different. I implore you to bring our concerns to those of influence in the South, North, East and West. Do not put this on the long finger but place it in your homework diary for completion by the end of next week, Friday 12 May 2017.

You have been a wonderful class and I thank you for your good behaviour during this morning's lesson.