

Board of Education Report
Proposer – Canon Harry Gilmore
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My name is Harry Gilmore. I'm from the Diocese of Raphoe and I'm happy to propose the Board of Education report. It is in the Book of Reports if you have it in front of you from page 257 to 276. I'm proposing because I'm a member of the Southern Board and the Revd Catherine Simpson, who is a member of the Northern Board will be seconding the report.

As you see, there's quite a lot of detail in the report and I don't intend going into that at all. I assume you've read it or are reading it at the moment, and I would simply like to draw your attention to the fact that we all know that over the last year and a half, especially since Covid, things have been quite challenging in education and I'd like to echo what is said in the report about our thanks to various people. It is amazing, to my mind, that we have kept going so well in education at all levels be it primary secondary or third level, and the things that have been done that we never thought we would be able to do or should do. Many, many people have risen to the challenge.

I know that it has not been perfect and things have sometimes got a little bit difficult but I think the fact that we are here and involved in education still and learning new ways of doing things is not, by any means, bad. It's been said in society in general that we'll never be the same after Covid. We have a positive side to that – there are things in education that we will have learnt, and we'll be able to do them for the first time or we'll be able to do them better.

So thanks to everybody who has been involved and I would like just to mention one thing to do with the Southern Board – in the Republic – which didn't actually arrive in time to get put into report but it's close to my own heart and it's to do with small schools in the Republic, that is primary schools.

Over the years, I think it's true to say that the Department of Education – although they have been terribly supportive of small schools – have also wanted to get rid of many of them, small schools of four teachers or less. These schools are often the backbone of our parishes in the Republic. I'm not running down the notion of bigger schools at all but just to say that small schools often are very important in the local parish and community.

A new initiative has just been launched – the Small Schools Initiative – and we (the Protestant community) have been offered the opportunity to take part in the two-year project. And various other schools with a different patronage but because there are so many small schools in Donegal, it fell to us in Donegal to take part, and we're starting anytime now.

There are four small schools in a cluster in the north-west of the county – that's Dunfanaghy, Creeslough, Ballymore and Gartan – and because it's the important year in the history of Columba, I'm thinking of calling the project, 'The Columba Project'.

The idea is that these four schools will receive a co-ordinator who will work with them for the two years and will try to work out ways in which their administration can be shared. This is not to do with amalgamations or sharing principals or anything like that. The assurance from the Department is that it will simply be to help them to function better.

It's got the support of a unit in DCU and the Irish Primary Principals Network and the partners in education, and top of the list is the Department have actually got a budget for it – so once they put the money on the table, you know they're serious. So I'd just like to say that the initiative has been launched and you'll hear more about it in future, and I hope that whatever we learn from it might be of use to other small schools in years to come. With that, and a general thanks for everybody and the mention of the Small Schools Initiative, I would like to hand over to the seconder and say that I would be very happy to propose the adoption of this report.

Thank you.