

**GENERAL SYNOD 2008**

**BOARD OF EDUCATION REPORT**

**Proposed by the Right Revd Ken Good (Diocese of Derry & Raphoe)**

**EMBARGOED UNTIL DELIVERY**

**CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY**

**CHALLENGES FACING EDUCATION  
IN NORTHERN IRELAND**

Education in Northern Ireland is at a serious crossroads. And today, 15 May, could well prove to be a significant moment as the Minister for Education, Catriona Ruane, reveals her proposals for the way forward.

**SERIOUS ISSUES IN EDUCATION**

In many respects, we have a strong and successful education system, and there is much for which we can be very thankful. But there are also problems and challenges which need to be addressed. I will briefly highlight four serious issues facing us at this moment of decision.

1. **EMPTY DESKS.** By 2012 there will be at least 32,000 surplus primary school places and 16,000 surplus second level places in Northern Ireland. The demographic trends are undeniable. There will be too many empty desks, too many teachers and probably too many schools competing to attract too few pupils.
2. **ACADEMIC SELECTION AND UNDERACHIEVEMENT.** A substantial number of pupils, especially boys, have been de-motivated by

the stigma of personal failure, as declared by what is now generally regarded as an unhelpful selection instrument, the 11 plus, and too many of them leave school with few, if any qualifications.

I have a strong sense that the church has a responsibility to argue the case of the voiceless and the disadvantaged rather than merely to promote the case of the strong. Our concern must be to work for a fair deal for those who become underachievers largely because the system is unfairly stacked against them.

3. THE PRICE OF GRAMMAR SCHOOL SUCCESS. Within the grammar school sector, a sector which achieves excellent academic results, there are many people who believe it to be madness to abolish academic selection and to try to fix something which, from their perspective, is working perfectly well. There are many more people, however, who question the readiness of grammar schools to accept pupils who achieve Cs and Ds in the 11 plus, not for any academic reason, but rather to complete their enrolments, usually at the expense of neighbouring secondary schools.
4. REVIEW OF PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION. A major Review of Public Administration is underway in Northern Ireland, the purpose of which is to enable public services in health, education and local government to be more efficient and cost effective. The current uncertainty about the eventual outcome of RPA is making forward planning in education even more difficult than it already is. An Education Bill enabling the establishment of a single Education and Skills Authority has just been published and will soon be brought to the Assembly. An additional issue which has been drawn into the RPA debate is a significant change in the governance of controlled schools, with the removal of Protestant church nominees (historically known as Transferror Representatives), by right, from the Boards of Governors of a significant number of schools.

The size of the task confronting the Minister for Education in attempting to square these apparently ‘unsquarable circles’ is immense, and each of us, no doubt, has our own opinion as to whether Ms Catriona Ruane has tackled the task as helpfully, as collegially or as sympathetically as she might have done. Because of the way things have developed, levels of trust, unfortunately, are significantly less than they might have been.

## **FEARS FOR THE FUTURE**

Under current Assembly rules, cross-party support has to be obtained before a Minister’s proposals can be adopted. One of our major fears at this point must surely be that the diminished levels of trust may well result in an impasse or in the blocking of educational reform, with the result that pupils who are caught in the middle will be the ones who suffer.

Another fear we have is that some reforms may be pushed through without sufficient time for detailed and effective planning. The last thing we need is the educational equivalent of the chaotic opening of Heathrow’s Terminal 5. Rather than lost baggage as a consequence, the resulting disarray would be lost opportunities for children.

For any change to be successful there needs to be good foundations and we believe however well intentioned, unless there is parental confidence, clear admissions criteria, working area planning, huge investment in the schools estate and a settled administrative system, the Minister’s plans could fail disastrously.

## **A DAY OF OPPORTUNITY**

Today (15 May), we should discover in more detail what the Minister has in mind. I want to suggest five pointers which would be welcomed if they appear in her proposals.

1. An approach which is child-focussed, where each child is highly and equally valued, and where all children have an equal and real opportunity to reach their fullest potential, whether that potential be more vocational or more academic.
2. An approach in which informed parental choice will lead to each pupil being able to transfer from primary school to the most appropriate second level school in his or her local area, on the basis of the child's particular strengths and needs.
3. An approach where a vibrant and healthy diversity is being cultivated among local schools in the different sectors, a diversity in which each school can maintain its distinctive ethos, traditions and vitality, but is also reaching out to other schools in the locality with a genuine openness to work collaboratively. In such a framework, all sectors, including grammar schools, would have an important role to play, but in conjunction with other schools, not isolated from them.
4. An approach where each pupil can have access to the specialist resources and learning opportunities in other schools in the locality, because the schools share their particular specialisms rather than duplicate them unnecessarily.
5. An approach in which those schools, Principals and Boards of Governors which are not only visionary and forward-looking in developing their own schools' specialisms but also in fostering collaborative partnerships with other sectors, will be rewarded with the resources and funding to make things happen.

## **FAITH AND EDUCATION**

A lively debate is taking place in UK and in Republic of Ireland about the role which religious faith and churches should play in state education. Some are arguing for a break between faith groups and schooling, because of nervousness about ghettoisation and about the dangers of perpetuating social division.

And yet church-related schools in Britain continue to be among the most popular and over subscribed schools of all. Many parents clearly prefer to send their children to them, and it is not difficult to see why: the evidence shows again and again that where religious values are accepted as normative, discipline is often better, behavioural boundaries are more clearly understood, and a cohesive sense of school community is established, not least by acts of corporate worship, then the educational, personal and social outcomes are consistently better.

Parents can see that where education is rooted in Christian values applied with sensitivity and creativity, children learn the lessons of greatest worth – honesty, integrity, friendship, loyalty, interdependence, tolerance, faithfulness in relationships, care for others and care for God’s world.

For decades in Northern Ireland, church governors have brought this outlook and dedication and offered it to schools. Churches have created an effective partnership with parents, staff and community representatives on Boards of Governors. It does not make sense, therefore, that the Department of Education appears to be keen to cut churches out of this partnership, as of right, in the future through its new governance plans. These are proposals which we would want to challenge robustly at a political level and to demonstrate that we are prepared to work as an educational partner with the Department to find a solution which is more just and lawful.