

**GENERAL SYNOD 2009**

**REPORT OF THE BOARD OF EDUCATION**

**Proposed by the Right Reverend Paul Colton , Bishop of Cork, Cloyne & Ross**

**EMBARGOED UNTIL DELIVERY**

**CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY**

Your Grace, at the outset, I formally propose the adoption of the report of the Board of Education of the General Synod of the Church of Ireland.

I'm not going to observe the convention of referring to a variety of issues in a report that members have already read. I make one exception: that is to ask you to pay tribute to and say a heartfelt thank you to Canon John McCullagh for his work during his time as Education Officer.

Among the many budgetary cuts affecting the education sector in general, I'm going to speak about one in particular. The others are hugely important, but they've been widely highlighted by other interest groups. It's our responsibility, in this context, to give special attention to a concern unique to us.

I refer to the specific targeting of Protestant secondary schools in the October Budget, and the unilateral change of status – re-classification without consultation - of our schools by the Department of Education and Science.

Last Sunday I confirmed 12 children in the far west of Cork Diocese. When the children I confirmed, and the other children in that parish, head to secondary school, and if their parents exercise their constitutional right of parental choice to send them to a Protestant school, they will have to go as boarders: the closest protestant schools are Bandon Grammar School or Midleton College; and the next closest - either Newtown in Waterford or Villiers in Limerick. Some parents choose to send

their children to other local schools where they will, of course, be well received. But in a system that is denominational in its configuration, they are not our schools. In spite of the grants given by the Department via the Secondary Education Committee through the Block Grant Scheme many will still not be able to afford to choose a Protestant school.

This scenario is repeated all over the country. There's no Protestant secondary school in 14 of the 26 counties.<sup>1</sup> There's free education for Protestants in free protestant schools in only 4 of the 26.<sup>2</sup> Even in parts of those four, distance or other factors, make it impossible for all Protestants to avail of a free school.<sup>3</sup> As long as the system of education in this country is inherently denominational Protestants are as much entitled to choose to send their child to a Protestant school as anyone else is to send a child to a school of another ethos. This is not a debate on the desirability or otherwise of a universal secular system of education: that is a separate issue for now.

The fact is that, unlike the majority, many Protestant children in Ireland do not have access to free secondary education. This isn't new information. Forty years ago on 23rd October 1969, the Minister for Education himself made this point in *Dáil Éireann*.

It was in recognition of the dispersed nature of our population that the Block Grant Scheme was put in place. That is why, from the outset of free education for everyone else in the country, our schools were seen as being in a unique category. Consequently they were treated on the same basis as schools in the free scheme rather than as fee-paying schools. Our schools are neither fee-paying schools in the colloquial sense, nor exclusivist bastions of elitism as some education commentators are caricaturing them.

<sup>1</sup> Mayo, Galway, Longford, Leitrim, Roscommon, Clare, Offaly, Meath, Kildare, Carlow, Tipperary, Laois, Kerry and Wexford. <sup>2</sup> Donegal, Dublin, Wicklow and Cork. <sup>3</sup> e.g. West Dublin, West Cork and North and East Cork, and west Wicklow.

The best description of the status of our schools was given during the debate in *Dáil Éireann* on what became the Education Act 1998. The then Minister for Education – Micheál Martin – on 26<sup>th</sup> November 1998 referred to our schools and the Block Grant Scheme and said: ‘These schools are also eligible to receive all grants payable to schools in the free education scheme ...’<sup>4</sup>

It couldn’t be clearer than that, but this is what was changed in the October Budget! The knock on effect of the re-classification was a raid in the middle of the academic year on the budgets of the schools; the scuppering of essential grants that schools in the free scheme continue to get; and a change in pupil-teacher ratio that is worse than that in schools in the free scheme.

In my lifetime – decades that coincide with the free secondary education era in Ireland - I can’t recall an issue affecting us about which so many Irish Protestants are feeling so aggrieved with a Government. There is anger and distrust in our community that our children have been targeted in this way. The fact that the Bishops of the Church of Ireland jointly wrote to the Minister for Education and Science and circulated that letter to every member of the Oireachtas is unprecedented.

The Secondary Education Committee has been administering the Block Grant from the outset. I have ascertained that, on average, 54% of the Protestants in our schools are receiving a grant.<sup>5</sup> In the case of schools outside Dublin the average is higher: 77%. In a number of schools more than 95% of the Protestants need grants in order to afford their secondary schooling at a Protestant school.

<sup>4</sup> Vol. 497 Dáil Reports 26<sup>th</sup> November 1998 No. 187

<sup>5</sup> Figures supplied to me by the schools.

The grants' system is rigorously means-tested. Typically a recipient of the maximum grant is someone with limited disposable income. Many are on social welfare. Some are in great hardship and have to seek the assistance of other grant awarding bodies to survive. In the case of the maximum grant, the qualification is that the residual income of the applicants, after taking allowances for the number of children into account, must be less than that of a married couple, with two children, on Social Welfare.

The corollary of the figures I have given you is that 46% of the Protestants in the State who attend voluntary secondary schools have to pay for it. And what about those members of our churches who are not on the schools' radars because they don't make it to one of our schools? Take Cork, Cloyne and Ross for example: 37% of the children of secondary school age – the largest single group of secondary students in the Diocese - do not attend a Protestant school. <sup>6</sup> Undoubtedly that is the personal choice of some, but I've no doubt that financial constraints impede others.

I welcome the fact that the Minister has given assurances on many occasions in the Dáil since October that the Block Grant Scheme will continue. (*I am trying not to be distracted by the fact that those assurances are to be found in Volume 666 of the Dáil reports!*) As recently as yesterday I was at a meeting with officials at the Department about that Scheme. But it has to be pointed out, as I've already mentioned, that the assurance of the status and designation of our schools as being treated as within the free education scheme was also made on numerous occasions in the *Dáil* by different Ministers since 1969, but that has changed.

In the year since we last met, one of the great historical journeys to capture our imaginations has been that of the first black American President - Barack Obama - to the White House. It was another Democrat in an earlier era of global economic crisis

<sup>6</sup> 2006 Episcopal Visitation figures: Ashton School Cork – 17%; Bandon Grammar School – 35.5%; Midleton College – 10.8%; Other Protestant schools elsewhere - .2% and attending schools not under Protestant management – 36.5%

- Franklin D. Roosevelt who said: 'No democracy can long survive which does not treat as fundamental to its very existence the rights of its minorities.'

I do not make my points today at the expense of other minorities - religious or non-religious - nor to the exclusion of another's claim to space within an education system that is formulated on the basis of religious denomination. But it is for us in this General Synod to be free to say that the education of our children in Ireland matters to us. And this is, as far as we are concerned, a litmus of how the country treats and values us. Indeed, the mark of the maturity of a pluralist society is how it does provide for its minorities.

Let the message go out from this Synod today that, we want to be assured that the Block Grant Scheme will continue; and that we want the decision on the re-classification of our schools reversed. We want the unique situation our schools are catering for to be recognised anew, and we want them to be aligned afresh, as they always have been, for practical purposes, with schools in the free education scheme.

On behalf of our schools, on behalf of the children who go to them and those who, in the future, may want to go to them from our churches, I ask you to send this message from this Synod today.

- ENDS -