

GENERAL SYNOD 2010

REPORT OF THE BOARD OF EDUCATION

(Refers to Section B of the Report- Book of Reports p365-373 & Appendix B p378-389)

Seconded by the Ven Robin Bantry White, Archdeacon of Cork, Cloyne and Ross.

EMBARGOED UNTIL DELIVERY

CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY

Your Grace,

First may I welcome Dr Ken Fennelly, who has taken up his duties as Secretary to the General Synod Board of Education and Education Officer in the Republic of Ireland. Dr Fennelly only took up his duties after Easter, but has already hit the ground running. May I thank Jennifer Byrne and Vickie Hastie for the excellent manner in which they “held the fort”, as it were, during the long interregnum lasting eighteen months. I would like to express the thanks of the board to a number of people: to the Very Rev. Norman Lynas for all his work on the SEC over a long period and also the Rev. Canon Doris Clements. Also to the Rev. David O’Donnell for his assistance.

I would like also to pay particular tribute to the late Mrs. Linda Clarke for all her work expertise and devotion to the cause of Religious education in Secondary Schools and for her many years of involvement with the Synod Exams.

At first sight the two parts of the Board’s report, referring as they do to two jurisdictions with two very different systems of educational management seem far apart. Yet when analysed, each jurisdiction similarly presents a troubled and glum picture for this church’s involvement and influence. For I regret to have to report that the picture of education at both primary and second-level in the Republic is quite bleak, and deeply frustrating.

At secondary level the decision by the then Minister for Education and Science Mr. Batt O'Keefe to realign our schools out of the free scheme are continuing to cause hardship and suffering to the students in our schools and their parents. A direct consequence of that decision has been the loss of IT support grants, school books grants and secretarial and administrative support grants. These are services which are available as of right to parents, students and staff in secondary schools across the country but are denied to parents, students and staff in our schools. The Board of Education still maintains that this is due to a persistent misunderstanding of the circumstances that pertain in our schools between the funding of and the provision of secondary education to our children.

This issue has been seen through the misleading focus of the seemingly wealthy south Dublin suburbs. We have persistently argued the case of the rural secondary schools, and of less than wealthy parents everywhere, for whom the system was designed in the 1960s. On a personal note I have worked alongside hard-pressed parents in the Skibbereen, or the Macroom areas, where, if they decide for the local schools, which are either explicitly or implicitly denominational, then they can have a free secondary education for their children. If they decide to send them to one of Secondary Schools under Protestant Management, as is their right, then even with the SEC Grant, they must make very considerable sacrifices of money and/ or seek help from a variety of education charities. The former minister worried about the legality of the perceived unequal way that the Protestant schools were treated. But did he consider the inequality that already exists, and which has been exacerbated by the change he made? We hope the new Minister for Education and Skills, Ms Mary Coughlan will be open to considering ways to restore a modicum of equality to us in the matter.

These are the issues that affect our children sitting in the classrooms of our schools this very day and who are facing their Junior and Leaving Certificates exams next month. Worry about the financing of their schools has been placed on their shoulders at a time when they are burdened with the concerns of the points race and future careers. Their parents worry about the widening gap between fees grants and fees charges. Staff worry about the effects of a one point rise in the pupil teacher ratio above that of every other

secondary school in the state and headmasters worry about the costs of running schools when sources of income have been removed and costs are increasing. This all places burdens of worry on people who should not have to worry about such concerns and the cause for that worry can be laid at the door of the Department of Education and Skills.

Members will notice from this years report that individual schools and the Board of Education, Secondary Education Committee, Committee on Management and Council of Governors have been collectively exploring options for a viable and prudent way forward for out schools. In this they have been greatly assisted by two working groups established for this purpose. It is no exaggeration to say that for many Protestant secondary schools, 2010 and 2011 will mark a cross roads where tough decisions will have to be made about the way they will provide secondary education into the future.

Cutbacks have not just affected secondary level but primary also. At primary level the pupil teacher ratio has been cut, language support teachers have been reduced as have special needs assistants. These present specific challenges to staff and Boards of Managements who are already demoralised from recent salary reductions. We all read with foreboding the suggestion in the McCarthy Report of last year which, if implemented, would have sounded the death knell for rural National Schools across the state. This would have taken Church of Ireland schools out of the reach of thousands of our children into the future. That proposal of decimation has been spared us for the moment it seems, and for that much, we are thankful.

There are also a number of other issues that we can be positive about. The training programme to Boards of Management across the country is now fully available. The “Follow me” RE curriculum for primary level has had its website revamped and relaunched and the board is committed to developing this and other online resources into the future. Much work and progress has also been made on the place and role of modern languages at Primary level and there have also been some new and exciting initiatives embarked on in partnership with Dublin VEC under the “Goodness Me! Goodness You!” multi-belief programme. Some of you might have seen a recent Primetime programme on

RTE in relation to this new RE initiative. I might take this opportunity to point out that the characteristic of the “Goodness Me! Goodness You!” programme is that all the children are taught RE together rather than being separated out and as part of the ordinary school day. Needless to say this is in its early stages as a model, but may prove of use to the Church of Ireland in the future. On the issue of RE curriculum, the Report also notes that this year marks the 10th year of the Junior Certificate RE syllabus. I think those who have come into contact with that syllabus will agree that it has been mostly successful.

In a year when churches have borne the burden of past issues to do with child protection, but in whose activities now, children are protected by well-administered and comprehensive codes, not least our own Safeguarding Trust, it is shocking to have to report that a key element in the State’s partnering of us is gravely deficient. Garda Vetting is an essential plank, indeed a compulsory one. Yet the waiting time, probably due to the cutbacks, has risen from an unacceptable eight weeks last year to a disgraceful sixteen weeks at present. It is increasing almost two weeks in every four. Safeguarding Trust training has had to be postponed on two occasions for three groups of volunteers in our Diocese. The Bishop of Cork has written to the Minister for Children, Mr Barry Andrews, urging the Minister’s urgent attention for this unsatisfactory and disappointing situation. We trust that those who cater for children and especially the voluntary bodies will be more correctly treated in the future.