

## **GENERAL SYNOD 2012**

### **BOARD OF EDUCATION MOTION – PRIMARY SCHOOLS IN THE REPUBLIC OF IRELAND**

**Proposed by Dr Anne Lodge, Diocese of Dublin**

**EMBARGOED UNTIL DELIVERY**

**CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY**

Members of General Synod will be very well aware of the concerns throughout the Republic about the impact on primary education provision of a number of policy changes by the Department of Education and Skills and budgetary measures implemented by the Government. Financial cutbacks continue to impact negatively on all primary schools. Cutbacks impact on availability of funding for essential building and maintenance work. Cutbacks impact on provision of support services for the most vulnerable children. Cutbacks impact on the number of teachers employed in the system. Many schools face the prospect of losing a teacher this coming September because of a change to the teacher allocation schedule.

These cutbacks are felt across the system but have a particularly severe impact on small schools. Without doubt the loss of a teacher creates significant difficulty in any school, but is potentially catastrophic in a small school where it could reduce the staff by a quarter, a third or even half. Primary schools have always had to rely on fund-raising to top up state support. Schools try to top up shortfalls arising out of reductions in capitation grant along with reduced financial support for buildings and maintenance. Again this has a disproportionately negative impact on small schools that both serve and rely on a small community for this kind of additional financial support.

Small schools play a crucial role in their local communities – they are core institutions that give a sense of shared identity to scattered groups of people. They provide crucial opportunities for social interaction for children and the wider family. They also give a sense of hope for continuity in isolated communities. Most significantly they enable

children to develop a sense of belonging within their own community and to develop a strong sense of identity with their own place.

If we remove small schools from the Irish educational landscape, what is the alternative? Do we propose to force small children to spend lengthy periods of time each day travelling to larger schools in urban centres, taking them away from their own communities, undermining their sense of local identity? It is interesting to note that the particular educational benefits of small schools have been highlighted in recent years in a number of countries such as Finland and the UK. Those same countries followed policies of closing small primary schools during the 1970s and 1980s. Do we really propose to follow this mistaken policy when others have reflected on it and recognised the positive contribution that small schools make to the education of children?

Small primary schools proliferate across the Republic and reflect the variety of patronage models at primary level. However, small schools are an especially common feature among those 195 primary schools under Church of Ireland and other Protestant patronage. The 'Our School Our Community' survey conducted in June 2011 demonstrated very clearly that there was overwhelming support by parents for our primary schools as welcoming, inclusive, high quality places of learning that deeply valued the children in their care. The very high response rate to that survey reflected parental commitment to the schools under our patronage, and also reflected parental concern about perceived threats to small schools.

So what is it that should concern us here? Small schools are the lifeblood of the communities they serve. They are part of the heritage of that community, but crucially they also represent a commitment to its continued existence into the future. Such schools have a particular significance for minority faith groups like our own. We are well aware of being a minority group in the Republic of Ireland, one that has added to the richness and diversity of this society, and one that has sought actively to contribute to its growth and development since the foundation of the State nearly a century ago. We are told frequently that Ireland is now a multi-cultural society, something that we very much

welcome and of which we recognise ourselves as a part. Our primary schools have provided a genuine and much appreciated opportunity to retain that distinctiveness which has contributed to Irish society.

We fully appreciate the budgetary constraints under which the Government of the Republic is operating. We realise that hard decisions are being made everywhere. We wish to express our concern that the current policies may rapidly have potentially devastating consequences for our small schools. At best such policies do unintended damage. At worst, they could be construed as part of a wider homogenising agenda, one that seeks to remove diversity from the education system and replace it with a 'one-size-fits-all' model in which the richness of difference will be irrevocably lost.

Ladies and Gentlemen, members of General Synod, I commend this motion to you.