

GENERAL SYNOD 2014

BOARD OF EDUCATION

Seconded by Bishop Patrick Rooke, Bishop of Tuam, Killala & Achonry

EMBARGOED UNTIL DELIVERY

CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY

Your Grace, Members of Synod,

In seconding the Report of the Board of Education, I speak on matters pertaining to the Republic of Ireland – page 292 following. In this regard, we are very well served by Dr Ken Fennelly and the team at Church House.

Change is always challenging and often unpopular. In terms of education in the Republic in recent years, it has been a matter of change, change, change and more change!

At Primary Level, the debate on Religion in schools continues. This is largely driven by the Minister and his Department, and the Church of Ireland BOE continues to defend the place of faith based schools as a choice Church of Ireland parents should be able to avail of, wherever possible, and there will be a resolution on this. Hence we find ourselves supporting small schools under Church of Ireland patronage in rural communities despite the challenges brought about by the reductions in teacher retention thresholds.

In urban areas where larger primary schools are the norm, the challenge is to define and maintain a meaningful Christian ethos of witness and faith expression whilst being inclusive of pupils from backgrounds of either another belief system or of no faith.

Whether small or large, most of the schools under Church of Ireland patronage are in essence ‘Community Schools.’ I believe all who send their children to so called ‘Church of Ireland’ schools want their children to be in a school where faith issues are taught in a broad and inclusive manner – and the ‘Follow Me’ course allows for this.

Hence there is some anxiety about the planned ‘Ethics and Religious Beliefs’ curriculum the Minister is intending to introduce to primary schools – see section 7 on page 299:

- What will be in it?
- Is it an attempt to replace the present RE curriculum with a broader dispassionate alternative?
- Or is the idea that it will be run in parallel for those who opt out, and if so, who will teach it?

- Will there be any forum for consultation with school patrons on this issue?
- What level of in-service training and support is envisaged?

You will see in the Report on Page 294 that there are major concerns too with the draft proposals for a new Schools Admissions Policy – and the submission made by the Board outlining our concerns to the joint Oireachtas Committee on Education and Social Protection is well worth reading.

As with changes at primary level, at secondary level too there is a real need for consultation. Major changes are planned for both junior and leaving certificates. Many willing, committed and professional teachers greeted the proposal for Junior Cycle Reform with enthusiasm. Yet, today many of these same teachers are involved in industrial action. The present dispute is not for pay or improved working conditions, but an expression of genuine concern that the reforms require further dialogue, planning and training if they are to meet the shared aspirations of the education partners.

Church of Ireland second-level schools are already adapting to other changes. The withdrawal of ancillary grants since 2008, the ceasing of capital funding grants and the incremental increase in the pupil-teacher ratio for fee-charging schools specifically has caused schools to critically reflect on their futures as fee-charging schools. For two schools, this has resulted in the removal of fees and the opening of access. For others it has meant a re-affirmation of the necessity to charge the student a fee to maintain the school facilities; whilst some are still on the journey of self-examination.

I don't need to remind you that following the major changes to initial teacher training education announced by the Department in 2012, Teacher Training has become a particular concern. The potential impact of these changes on the preparation of teachers for Church of Ireland primary schools was discussed at General Synod last year. As a result of that debate, two motions concerned with initial teacher education were passed. The first supporting the four core principles of the Board of Governors of the Church of Ireland College of Education; the second calling for an independent review of the Department of Education and Skills' proposal regarding initial teacher education and its potential impact on Church of Ireland primary schools. The subsequent report of the Independent Review group was circulated to all members of General Synod in April as Appendix D on Page 312 in the Book of Reports.

I can report to General Synod that the discussions between CICE, Dublin City University, the Higher Education Authority and the Department of Education and Skills have yielded some very encouraging and positive results in terms of the future safe-guarding of CICE's ethos within a university context in both legal and practical terms and those results will be made public asap.

Safeguarding Trust is an important and vital part of church life for us all. The safety of children and vulnerable adults is of paramount importance. The proposed Child and Family Bill will add to the obligations but it is to be welcomed as a further heightening of our duty to protect children. On page 299, there is mention of a recent training day on best practice for all Diocesan youth and communications Officers and we are grateful to BOE staff for this. The requirements in particular for permission to take, and to publish, photographs of children are complicated, and in the view of some, unrealistic. As a result, I sense a growing concern that we are in danger of removing from all church communications the celebration of children as a vital and fundamental part of church life. Hence, there is a need for a concise and workable summary of the essential requirements for the taking of such photographs and the sharing of them through church publications and social media.

I should like to pay tribute to two members of our Board: the Venerable Robin Bantry White, who has retired from active ministry and the Rev Anne Taylor, who is moving this month to take on an incumbency in the Diocese of Liverpool. We thank them both for their work with the BOE.

Your Grace, members of Synod, I wish to second the Report of the Board of Education.