

## General Synod of the Church of Ireland, 2015

### **Speech of the Right Reverend Dr Paul Colton, Bishop of Cork proposing the adoption of the Report of the Board of Education of the General Synod of the Church of Ireland**

Last January, I had the honour of being invited to be the keynote speaker at the Annual Conference - the largest educational gathering of its kind in Europe (an assembly of nearly 1300 primary school principals) - of the Irish Primary Principals' Network (IPPN). In his opening address to the Conference, the IPPN President, Brendan McCabe, focussed on the extent to which primary school principals are now being required to be skilled in and to fulfil functions that they were never trained for. This clearly struck a chord with everyone present.

One element in this burden is the complex regulatory framework of education in Ireland itself. Even before the human element - the key partners - children and parents/guardians, teachers, boards, patrons - are put into the mix at all, many find the framework itself inaccessible. Add to that political and economic factors, demographic changes, and ideological shifts in our society and we soon find that being involved in the organisation of schools and education is a challenging crucible of confusion to many, as well, of course, as being an immense privilege and trust.

The regulation of the life and work of our schools is found in many places: the Constitution, in Statutes, in statutory instruments, in ministerial orders, in executive decisions of Ministers for Education and Skills, in codes, in policies, in recommendations of good practice, and, most prevalent of all, in departmental circulars. If you look on the website of the Department of Education and Skills, for example, there are currently 589 such circulars listed as 'active' circulars. A further 661 are listed as archived - in other words they applied once, or at a given time, and may have been superseded or are no longer apply, but may have some relevance for past events in a school. That is all quite apart from the Rules for National Schools, the Rules for Secondary Schools, Programmes, Curriculum, and much more.

This year's report (pages 267-94), like the reports of this Board in previous years, underscores the point I am making. There is new legislation (the Education [Admissions to School] Bill 2015 - that will be a big

one; the Teaching Council [Amendment] Bill 2015); there are minor changes to the Constitution of Boards and Rules of Procedure; there are new administrative practicalities such as the Primary Online Database (POD); there are reports with recommendations to be taken on board (for example, the Ward Report, and the knock-on consequences of the Minister's decision in relation to the Value for Money Review of Small Schools); and there are new recommended resources for schools in relation to Data Protection.

This vortex of regulation is interwoven with many matrices of activity and implications for our schools. The Education Act 1998 was meant to do a lot to consolidate all this once and for all. Even before that, in 1991, Judge Costelloe, said that '[i]t is a remarkable feature of the Irish system of education that the administration by the Department of Education is largely uncontrolled by statute or statutory instruments and that many hundreds, perhaps thousands, of rules and regulations, memoranda, circulars and decisions are issued ...' Elsewhere, the courts have referred to all this as a hotchpotch' of regulation.

It is a bewildering and, in many ways, inaccessible world into which are thrown teachers whose primary vocation is to teach; clergy whose primary vocation is preaching the Gospel and pastoral ministry; and, most of all, legions of volunteers who, on our behalf as Patrons and as a Church, manage these schools for us. Their task is not easy. The current boards come to the end of their period in office later this year. We are indebted to them, especially the chairpersons, secretaries and treasurers. I ask the General Synod to acknowledge their work and that of everyone in our schools and to pay tribute to them.

The complex regulatory framework - a proverbial minefield - prompts me to highlight two things that emanate from this year's report, before concluding with a remark about the Secondary Education Committee.

First of all, we would be lost without the staff in our education department: Dr Ken Fennelly and Eimear Ryan. No doubt our seconder will pay tribute to the work of Canon Ian Ellis, and we in the Republic would want to be associated with those tributes also, as well as the welcome to Dr Peter Hamill. With

them I link also the Child Protection Officers - Renee English and Margaret Yarr - overseeing crucially our implementation of Safeguarding Trust.

These people, alongside their own professional skills, have developed knowledge, expertise and insights into the many-faceted framework of education in Ireland. Where they do not know, they find answers from other experts. They network and observe, monitor and analyse, make representations and seek clarification. With all of this they calm and mop the fevered brow of many a principal and chairperson, indeed, patrons too. Unlike some other education bodies with fewer schools, we have a much smaller number of staff. We rely heavily on our staff and at the same time we have to remember that we share them with other bodies such as the Secondary Education Committee and the Council of Governors, and the Teaching Council, for example.

We cannot expect anything of them that is humanly impossible. The financial resources we invest centrally in the staffing of our education work in the Republic of Ireland is relatively small; most is financed by the State. We get an awful lot back for the amount of money we ourselves put in centrally as a Church.

The second thing I wish to mention briefly is research. Unless we understand our multi-faceted sector, and unless we have facts, nuanced by human perspective, and sociological insights, unless we have research, we would be rudderless too. Research projects such as that now being undertaken and mentioned on page 271 are hugely important.

Finally, as chairperson of the Secondary Education Committee, which seldom gets mentioned since we forewent the pattern of always having a separate speech in the timetable, I want to refer to the last time I proposed this report at General Synod. On that occasion in 2009 I appealed to the Minister and Department for clarity about the security of the future of the Block Grant. It should be noted that not only did we indeed get that clarity, but also, for the first time in the history of the scheme, we managed to secure a formal written agreement with the Department, one which I signed again recently when it was being renewed on better terms, and indeed, the Minister, against the trend of cuts in recent years provided

an additional €250,000 bringing the total annual grant to €6.75m. This is welcome and very much needed.

Indeed, large numbers of eligible Church of Ireland families depend on it.

With these introductory insights focussing on the Republic of Ireland, I propose that the Report of the Board of Education of the General Synod of the Church of Ireland be adopted.