

GENERAL SYNOD 2007**BOARD OF EDUCATION****Proposed by Revd Brian O'Rourke****EMBARGOED UNTIL DELIVERY****CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY**

The Board of Education Report is always handled in two parts because it reflects the difference in jurisdiction and practice, however this year there is a common link running through both reports and that is the question of the Church's role in education and how that role is being challenged. Furthermore the Church has increasingly to justify its commitment to education and its right to represent its communities. Therefore I would urge members of Synod to listen with even more care to both reports because there will be common elements and issues which we share North and South.

When I was a teacher I was always required to start with the known and move to the unknown. In commending this report to Synod may I draw a pen picture of a 5-teacher primary school. 5 Class teachers, one of whom is the principal, Synod members may think that the role of a teaching principal in a 5-teacher school is only moderately difficult. The principal has to teach full time except for a few days given for administrative purposes and to take responsibility for the work of his or her colleagues. However in this pen picture let me add in 3 teachers of English to newcomer children. Newcomer children are those whose mother tongue is not English. Let me add in 2 teachers who provide learning support and resource teaching for children with special education needs. Now we are talking about a 10 teacher school. Let me further add in a visiting teacher of French, let me add in a home school liaison teacher, let me add in a school secretary, a caretaker and cleaner, now a principal of a 5 teacher school is in charge of a unit with up to 13 or 14 employees and is

responsible for the day to day management of that unit and yet is required to teach full time and take responsibility for several classes. This is not a school I have plucked from my imagination it is one which exists in our community and I haven't finished this school is currently involved in undertaking a major capital building programme through the devolved grant, so the board of management has responsibility for a substantial capital sum and seeing that it is used properly and that a building project is completed within budget. These are the issues which face those involved in management and those involved in the governance of our schools. It is no wonder that the report expresses appreciation for the work of those on boards of management and mentions the need for ongoing training for such people. There are 1600 members of boards among our own national schools and over 25,000 serving all schools – doing the work of the Department as a service to the local communities. There is a reference in the report to school building and to the demands on schools. Let me go back to the school, it is not all pressure on the principal or pressure on the chairperson and Board of Management, that school is to be celebrated because it is welcoming and inclusive, it has welcomed newcomer children, it has welcomed children with special education needs, there is no suggestion in this school that there is any cherry picking of pupils.

Our schools have a very clear *ethos*, a *characteristic spirit* which needs to be protected through the Deeds of Variation but where the school is nonetheless welcoming of people with different traditions and specific needs and where the school endeavours to respond to those needs within the limited resources. Resources have improved and we must congratulate Minister Hanifin for all she has done but in the words of her own party's slogan *there is still much to do* – very much to do!

Our schools have a religious ethos, it is a Church of Ireland ethos and that ethos – characteristic spirit is built upon a number of connections, connections with the Diocesan Bishop as Patron, connections with the local parish, connections with the rector as chaplain

and sometimes as chairperson, connections with an excellent religious education programme *Follow Me*. Demand for places in our schools is very high. As parents make choices for the education of their children it is very often to our schools that they look for that education. Many of our schools have long waiting lists – the reason being that parents appreciate the way our ethos permeates every aspect of school life.

I have already referred to the religious education programme *Follow Me* and I am sure Synod will join with me in thanking Mrs Jacqui Wilkinson and those who advise her for their sterling work in producing a further module of the *Follow Me* programme for P 7 or 5th class. Indeed the *Follow Me* programme is coming to a stage when at next Synod we hope to be reporting that the project has been completed. Completed but it is likely that research will point to the need for a new stage of development and perhaps even a new programme. Nothing in education is static and always there is ongoing development and change.

Child Protection has always been the responsibility of the Board of Education through its support for *Safeguarding Trust* and it is good to note the work of those who resource *Safeguarding Trust* at Diocesan level. While the board has been unsuccessful in appointing a child protection officer this procedure is again in hand and it is hoped that there will be a positive outcome. In the meantime the introduction of vetting for volunteers in parishes, for paid youth workers, for clergy and in schools for ancillary staff is now firmly in place. Training has been provided in each diocese to ensure that school boards of management and parish panels know how to handle the vetting procedure and the Board is extremely appreciative of the skill and commitment of Mrs Jennifer Byrne who includes the role of authorised signatory among her many other duties. Vetting for teachers is provided through the Teaching Council.

The Board has been delighted to learn that the Church of Ireland College of Education, which trains our primary teachers, has put in place a working party to look at the provision of a specific qualification in religious education. This will provide continuing professional development for our teachers and will also assist selection panels when making difficult decisions in regard to appointments. It is understood that the working party has made considerable progress and is commencing the design of a course.

The process of appointing new Boards of Management will be put in place later this year.

Can I remind Synod that members of Boards are volunteers who are responsible for the direct governance of schools.

The duties of the board of management include the following:

- the appointment of teachers and ancillary staff;
- approving school closures;
- approving teacher absences for a variety of reasons;
- the appointment of teachers to deputy-principalship and other posts of responsibility;
- ensuring compliance with relevant legislation; and
- ensuring that schools are adequately insured and maintained.

As I have already stated there are approximately 25,000 volunteer members of Boards in Primary education in the Republic, of that figure approximately 1,600 serve on Boards under the Patronage of the Church of Ireland. In schools where there is no walking principal much of the day to day administration falls on the shoulders of already over burdened teaching principals. Boards of management were recently somewhat concerned when the Minister for Education & Science referred very firmly to the liability of Boards in the event of issues going wrong at school level. The Minister was and is technically correct but her particular approach was unhelpful in that she did not take account of the corporate nature of a board which protects the individual member who gives up so much spare time in serving boards. Her comment also did not take into account the provision of insurance which is there to protect the board of management, patron, trustees, teaching staff and pupils. Inevitably one

can never be completely satisfied with any provision and a risk evaluation and an evaluation of the insurances is being undertaken on a professional basis and the results will soon be available to schools and patrons.

I began with the *known* but I had referred to the challenge to schools in regard to the Church connection. At second level there is very understandable concern that a cross-sectoral redeployment scheme for teachers will be introduced. Considerable representations have been made on this matter and certain progress has been made. Nevertheless there is grave concern among our second level schools that a cross-sectoral redeployment scheme may damage and actually undermine the denominational nature of our schools by the forced employment of qualified teachers who may not have a particular sympathy or understanding of an individual's school's ethos. At primary level the board has also noted that in new areas of housing development that the Department of Education has now designed a 32 teacher school unit built on 3 floors. This kind of unit would never be undertaken by a denominational group such as ourselves or any other minority cultural group who would find it inappropriate to have a school which is more than 8 class teachers. Indeed many of our schools are much smaller than this. This point has been made to the State. There is an increasing disregard for the concerns of minority groups, be they religious or cultural in pressing ahead with decisions which are based purely financial demands. This is a matter of grave concern.

The Board has been consulted in relation to the development of a possible community national school but there is the practical difficulty of how such a school can respond to the needs of a tiny number of pupils within the enrolment who are members of a particular minority. The community national schools will no doubt endeavour to address this issue. The very fact that the child or children are such a tiny proportion of the total school population

makes it very difficult to provide appropriate spiritual and religious development for those children without in some way calling attention to their difference.

I would note that the Secondary Education Committee has again referred to the failure of the State to provide paid chaplains in voluntary secondary schools. There is what might be called a suicide epidemic throughout our country with teenage suicide sadly becoming all too common and schools badly need a pastoral presence which can support and encourage pupils who are finding the pressures of daily life so difficult they would contemplate such a terrible step.

May I end by paying tribute to my colleagues on the RI Board for their willingness to share expertise and to contribute valuable advice which enables our Secretary to represent our viewpoint to the other partners in education. Finally, may I also take this opportunity to extend our grateful thanks to Canon John McCullagh for another year of outstanding service to the Board of Education? Between him and Ms. Jennifer Byrne the sanity of so many principals and chairpersons survives the trauma that is education today.

I request that the Report be taken into consideration.

End.