

Submission to the Small Primary Schools Value for Money Steering Committee from the Board of Education of the Church of Ireland. March 2011.

Introduction

The Department of Education and Skills will be aware of the importance of the nationwide network of Primary Schools to the Church of Ireland. Through its funding of both capital building projects, maintenance and the many other forms of funding schools receive, the support for Church of Ireland and minority religious denominational education by the Department of Education and Skills is demonstrable. This of course is appropriate. The Irish system of education and the provision of education at primary level have been denominational from its foundation and for much of the life of primary level education the building, funding and maintenance of primary schools were undertaken by religious denominations. The involvement of the State in taking on this form of maintenance has been a gradual one, beginning with small grants being awarded in the 1960's, such as those for the painting of National Schools under circular 0022/61 and developing to the current levels, where the State spent some €579 million on capital development projects at both primary and secondary level in 2010. This Board believes that this is a manifestation of the belief of the people of Ireland in the future of Ireland as a society. Capital expenditure on education, both on buildings and maintenance, is essential to the task of rebuilding Irish society. This Board is of the view that now more than ever, the State must ring-fence finance and commit to maintaining the network of primary schools as a strategic investment in the human capital foundation for our future economic growth and recovery. Both the Fine Gael and Labour parties committed to doing so in their programme for Government. In common with the consideration of this matter in other countries (such as the in the UK and the USA), this Board believes that any decision made in relation to the reorientation of capital spending on schools and/or support for small schools, should only be made at Cabinet level.

The work of the Steering Committee:

The Church of Ireland Board of Education recognises that the Department of Education and Skills has a duty to ensure that expenditure in Education is done in the most cost effective and prudent way while at the same time supporting the rights of pupils, parents, teachers and patrons – and indeed all involved in Education to have the best possible physical educational resources. As the Education Act 1998 makes clear, Irish Education is a collaborative exercise where the child is centre and all others are in support of the child's right to have the best possible education. The work of the Steering Committee is therefore especially important to that task. This Board is disappointed therefore, that the limited terms of reference supplied, are economically focussed, rather than being child centred or indeed education focussed. This Board would therefore question the context of the work of the Steering Committee. The Board also seeks clarification on the need for such a Steering Committee at this point considering the large amount of work and research undertaken in relation to the 'Small and Rural Schools Initiative and Permanent Accommodation Initiative' published by the Department of Education as recently as 2006. This report states that:

"The approach of the Department of Education and Science to small primary schools

is based on current Government policy: that one-teacher schools with twelve pupils should be allocated a second teacher. The clear import of this policy is that the existing network of small schools should be supported and maintained where possible.”¹

A Steering Committee established to examine the “viability” of schools with less than fifty students for capital support would seem to be starkly at variance with the contents of the ‘Small and Rural Schools Initiative’ document. It would also seem to be a remarkable reorientation of policy around capital funding for small schools and this Board would like clarification on whether the proposed review has the approval of the current Minister for Education and Skills.

The Steering Committee will no doubt be aware of international education policy practices in relation to the funding and operations of small (rural) primary schools. The work of Sugrue is especially relevant in this regard since he questions the term “small schools.”² Much research on this topic has been carried out in the UK, beginning with the Plowden Report in 1967. In the aftermath of that report, Forsyth reported that out of fifteen schools he surveyed, four made no savings after amalgamation and no advantage could be determined in the remaining eleven when all costs were taken into account.³ From a learning point of view, the PRISM (curriculum Provision In Small Schools) project in the UK, presented in the work of Galton and Patrick,⁴ concluded that the learning outcomes of children in smaller rural schools were measurably better than those in large urban schools. In research carried out in rural primary schools in Sweden, it has been shown that mixed age learning (which is the norm in small schools) is either of negligible effect or of benefit to the child. It should be noted that in the early 1990’s the Swedish Department of Education took the decision to close seventy six rural primary schools across Sweden on the basis that mixed age learning was not the ideal learning environment for primary level children.⁵ However, this decision came to be regretted when further research showed that this was not in fact the case and research was presented which agreed with the findings of Galton and Patrick in the UK. This Board would suggest that the Steering Committee should have regard to the learning environment of the child in its work, rather than focusing on economic factors alone.

The terms of reference for the work of the Steering Committee are to review, in economic and financial terms, the provision of educational resources in the Irish Educational system. It is understood the terms of reference of the Steering Committee

¹ See: ‘Expenditure Review, Small and Rural Schools Initiative and Permanent School Accommodation Initiative’, Department of Education and Skills, Government Publications, Molesworth St. Dublin, 2006; pp. 14

² See: Sugrue, C., ‘Small Rural Schools in Ireland: Problems and Possibilities’, paper presented to the European Conference on Educational Research (Saville, Spain, 1996) and see also: Sugrue, C., (Ed.), *The Future of Educational Change, International Perspectives*, Routledge, Oxon, 2008.

³ See: Forsyth, D., *The Rural Community and the Small School*, Aberdeen University Press, Aberdeen, Scotland, 1983.

⁴ See: Galton, M. and Patrick, H., *Curriculum Provision in the Small Primary School*, Routledge, London, 1990.

⁵ See: ‘Education in Small Rural Swedish Schools: An Initial Overview of the Field’, Aberg-Bengtsson, L., paper presented at the Annual European Conference on Educational Research (Saville, Spain, 1996).

is predicated on an understanding of education that focuses on achieving the best possible value from tangible resources. This Board is of the view that an overall review of the education “system” is needed, such a review should question whether what is being taught to children and young people in Irish classrooms is opening the minds of those young people to enable them to “grow into themselves” as individuals and citizens in Irish society? Is the experience of being educated in Ireland one that allows the individual to flourish and grow in a way that allows him/her to positively and responsibly interact as members of society. This Board is of the view that if the intangible learning environment of the exchange of ideas and information is positive, the costs relating to the provision of the physical learning environment are placed in their proper context.

This Board is of the view that the exchange of ideas and intellectual growth is the fundamental task of the work of education. Geographically, the Church of Ireland is a dispersed community. In general terms, its membership is sporadic in rural areas but concentrated in certain urban areas. The provision of Church of Ireland primary schools reflects this. Each primary school however, is a centre for the exchange of ideas and intellectual growth in its own distinctive way. That distinction is the learning environment of the school. This Board would be failing in its duty if it did not highlight to the Steering Committee that the Church of Ireland and other minority religious denominations in our society are entitled to transmit their distinctive Faith and culture to the next generation. It is this witness to Christian Faith that makes the classrooms of Church of Ireland and Protestant schools distinctive learning environments. The value of having this distinctive learning environment is incalculable to a local rural community. The cornerstone of the continued presence of the Church of Ireland and Protestant Churches in education is that by that presence, parents can be provided with the choice of a school of their own religious ethos.

In relative terms, Protestant primary schools are small in number to the rest of the primary schools in the state but their role is vitally important for Protestant parents around the country. They provide parents with the option of exercising their right to have their children educated in a school of their own ethos. This Board is pragmatic and recognises that it is impractical to expect a Church of Ireland school on every cross roads in rural Ireland. However, at the same time this Board is strongly of the view that the schools that are established and are viable (above the minimum number for the foreseeable future) must be maintained and supported. Nothing less than the rights of Protestant parents are at stake. This Board believes it should be highlighted that parents, the local parish and the local community should be considered collectively and decisions should not be made out of context. The parents and the children in the schools are likely to be the same people who live in the local parish and local community. It is the right of parents, especially where a school exists, to educate their children in their own community and their own religious tradition. This Board would ask the Steering Committee to be mindful of the damage that could be done to the Protestant churches/communities in Ireland should a recommendation be based on terms of reference that only consider their presence on economic factors alone. The importance of the school to the local community is internationally recognised. An interesting focus which bears many similarities to Ireland in this regard is Finland. 30% of Finnish primary schools are small rural schools with three to four teachers. Socio-educational research conducted there has highlighted the vital

importance of the rural school to the locality and may be of interest to the Steering Committee in this regard.⁶

As the Steering Committee begins to undertake its work, the Board feels that it is worth reminding the Steering Committee of the rights of religious groups under Article 44.2.5 of the Constitution to “manage its own affairs, own, acquire and administer property, movable and immovable, and maintain institutions for religious or charitable purposes.” The Board would remind the Steering Committee that this is an extension of the rights of parents to choose to educate their children in a manner harmonious with their own life view. This, as the Steering Committee will be aware is expressed in Article 42.1 of the Constitution. It is also worth highlighting that the role of the State is also set out in Article 42, which is to fund an education system in accordance with the wishes of parents. This provision places a duty on the State towards parents who are providing the funds through taxation, to ensure that such expenditure is made in a prudent and sensible way. Recent court judgements have also made it clear that while the State has a duty to provide for education, it is not obliged to cater for the demands of individual parents in regard to their choice of type of education.

However his Board is of the view that a school which is not large is not automatically inefficient and unnecessary. Such a school may be entirely necessary for the local community in which it serves and the future of that community may depend upon it. However, it is also recognised that the amalgamation of a number of small schools which are within close proximity to each other may in fact enhance the solidity of a local community. The approach this Board would take would be to ascertain, through consultation with the school communities, – (it is submitted that such communities only can truly determine what is right for their school) – the manner in which the needs of the children of that locality and the local Church community would be best served. It may be that the distinctive learning environment for that group could be best served in a larger group or it might be best nurtured in a small group where parents can more actively get involved in supporting their child’s education. This Board is certain however, that the future of any school should not be determined by economic and financial factors. In the reality of the world of education such factors are always of secondary concern. The education of the child is always the first concern and the State has an obligation to provide the best possible provision of physical facilities for the child and the delivery of the curriculum. It is regrettable that at a time when Irish society more than ever needs to invest in the human capital project of the children of our nation, a review of smaller schools is being undertaken. In the view of this Board, it would be better if every child had the opportunity to experience primary school in a learning environment of less than fifty pupils!

Small Schools as Educational Models:

In many ways small schools should be highlighted by the Steering Committee as models in the delivery of the curriculum and in the cultivation of a happy and positive child centred learning environment. In a school with two or three teachers which is well equipped and funded, a full curriculum can be taught in a very focused way. The

⁶ See: ‘Small rural primary schools in Finland: A pedagogically valuable part of the school network’, Kalaoja, E., and Pietainen, J., International Journal of Educational Research, 48:2:2009, pp. 109-116.

smallness of the class, even if mixed, enables a level of support and attention that provides that child with the best possible opportunity to learn. The group dynamic that is created within a smaller school can facilitate strong bonds of friendship and social interaction which may extend to the parents also. Parental and family support and involvement in the school can create its own dynamic of the development of a culture of learning among the pupils of the school within the context of the ethos of the group (Bourdieu). Evidence would suggest that this level of support and attention reduces levels of absenteeism among students and levels of indiscipline since pupils develop a sense of “ownership” of their classroom and within the group. Research has been carried out in this area internationally which indicates that a smaller religious school is the ideal learning and developmental environment for primary level children. The advantages of a small school environment for both children with special needs and their parents should be readily apparent. Not only is the environment of the classroom more informal but more time and resources are likely to be available and it is also more likely to facilitate the child with special needs to be fully integrated into the class. Research by Mulryne-Kyne shows that educational outcomes are no different for pupils in single-grade and multi-grade classes.⁷ It is therefore submitted to the Steering Committee -that it is not clear that arguments against small schools on curriculum delivery, mixed age, mixed grade or teaching and learning environments are grounds for the contemplation of the closure of small schools.

The Distinctiveness of Church of Ireland and Protestant Primary Schools:

Church of Ireland schools and the schools of other religious denominations are, by the nature of the demographics of the memberships of those churches, inclined to be smaller. This is a fact of the historical development of the social-religious culture of Irish society. This Board acknowledges that the Department of Education and Skills and successive Irish Governments since the foundation of the State have recognised this fact and sought to support the rights of Irish parents who are of a Protestant faith in providing for the option of a school with an ethos in their religious belief and tradition. This Board is satisfied that the current government will continue this proud tradition of social pluralism in the Republic of Ireland in regards to educational provision with Protestant and Anglican primary schools being a main pillar in that tradition. This is especially important in modern Ireland as Census returns indicate that the demographics of Protestant Churches have shown a consistent rise over the last ten years. The closure of nearly half of all Protestant Schools (which the fifty student mark implies) would be extremely short sighted on the basis of these numbers and may well be viewed as a sectarian measure. As already mentioned, the current Government parties have given assurances that they intend to do so, indeed members of the opposition of the 31st Dáil have already signalled in the media and elsewhere that they recognise the rights of Irish Southern Protestants to be supported by the State in maintaining their network of primary schools of their own ethos.

Summary of Submission

⁷ See: Mulryan-Kyne, C., ‘The Grouping Practices of Teachers in Small Two-Teacher Primary Schools in the Republic of Ireland’, *Journal of Research in Rural Education*, 20:17:2005, pp. 1-14.

The Church of Ireland Board of Education submits to the Steering Committee that, in reviewing the situation of Church of Ireland and Protestant Primary Schools in mainly rural but also urban settings that the following should be recognised:

- The viability of a school should not be only based on the number of students in that school. In the case of Church of Ireland Schools, it has been found that a school with less than fifty students can operate and perform very effectively.
- A starting point of fifty students is far too high and it is questionable if a school of fifty could really be regarded as “small”.
- The current minimum enrolment numbers, which have been in place for many years, would seem reasonable.
- Educational research on small schools must inform the thinking and work of the research group.
- Parental choice and the rights of parents to have their child in a school of their own religious ethos (where it already exists) must be respected.
- The rights of children to be educated in their locality and close to their family home.
- The importance of the school to the local community and the role and function of the school in serving that community and assisting in the social cohesiveness of the local community.
- The recommendation of reports recently published by the Department of Education and Skills.
- It is submitted that in most cases the current provision of Church of Ireland Schools is efficient in terms of the minimum allocation of resources.

In terms of alternative policies: the Board would suggest that, as in other countries, the Department of Education and Skills should encourage an increase in the sharing of facilities between primary schools in a locality where practical, such as for sporting and cultural activities.

The Church of Ireland Board of Education is therefore anxiously awaiting the publication of the report of the Steering Committee. The Board is greatly concerned that a sword of Damocles now hangs over many of its schools and the involvement of the Church of Ireland and other Protestant Churches in the provision of education in many parts of the country. It is no exaggeration to state that this would mark a major historical change in the support by the Irish State for involvement of the Church of Ireland and Irish Protestants in Irish education. The Church of Ireland Board of Education takes a serious view in relation to the work of the Steering Committee and would welcome the opportunity to elaborate on this submission in an oral presentation to the Steering Committee.

The Church of Ireland Board of Education is joined in this submission by the Bishops of the Church of Ireland who have written to the Minister for Education and Skills seeking a meeting to discuss this and other matters relating to the involvement of the Church of Ireland in Irish education.

Submission details:

Submitted to SPSVFM@education.gov.ie

On Friday the 18th March 2011

By: Dr. Ken Fennelly, Secretary, Church of Ireland Board of Education.
(Hard copy to follow by post).