

## Catholic Education For All

### **Executive summary of the analysis of the generic responses to the consultation documents on shaping the future of post-primary Catholic education**

1.1. At the beginning of March 2010, the Northern Ireland Commission for Catholic Education (NICCE) published an overview of the challenges facing Catholic education. Following the publication of this overview, a series of documents examining in detail the provision of post-primary Catholic education across Northern Ireland was issued for consultation. The views of all those with an interest in the long-term provision of education in each project area were sought. While individuals and bodies normally submitted views relating to a particular project area, some bodies with a province wide brief and some individuals submitted responses that related to post-primary provision across Northern Ireland.

1.2. Responses, which related to the future structure of post-primary education across Northern Ireland and the post-primary review of Catholic education, were received from the Governing Bodies Association, the Catholic Principals Association, the Catholic Heads Association, the North Eastern Education and Library Board, the South Eastern Education and Library Board, the Northern Ireland Council for Integrated Education, Comhairle na Gaelscolaíochta, the Irish National Teachers Organisation, the National Association of Schoolmasters Union of Women Teachers, the Association of Teachers and Lecturers, the Rural Development Council, the Parenting Forum of Northern Ireland, the Sharing Education Learning Forum and four individuals.

1.3. The views expressed by the respondents related to issues such as NICCE's core principles, the challenges facing education, planning post-primary education, parental choice, academic selection, infrastructure, range and consistency of the proposals and the consultation process. While there was consistency of views on certain issues, on other issues there was not universal agreement. Some bodies may have expressed very strong support for an issue, while other bodies indicated strong objection to the course of action proposed. The views expressed on various issues included the following:

#### **Vision**

- A vision must be agreed and accepted as viable by those most affected. In a place as small as Northern Ireland one policy for the education of post-primary children in post-primary schools should pertain.

- The principles to actively promote justice, reconciliation, mutual understanding, solidarity and inclusive communities and to be part of a genuinely pluralist provision were strongly supported.
- There was support for the aspiration for a schools' estate that is fit for purpose, viable, sustainable and capable of facilitating the education to which every child is entitled.
- The important part played by the Catholic education system in providing education for Catholic children was recognized, as was the strength of Catholic schools and the quality of education that the Catholic schools provide.
- The extent to which the options ensure that the fundamental values of Catholic social teaching will be realised for all children in the future must be given critical and reflective consideration.
- The common good is at risk of being betrayed if, for example, a child is unable to access a place because of an ongoing adherence to unjust academic criteria. There is ambiguity in respect of cherishing children equally if co-educational provision exists on the sites of formerly non-selective schools while maintaining single-sex provision on the former selective school sites and if the poorest and most disadvantaged young people have to access second class facilities because of a new build programme which has favoured the selective sector.
- Social justice and equality of opportunity will be compromised by a Catholic school continuing to turn its attention exclusively or predominantly to those from the wealthier social classes, by proposals which advantage the already advantaged rather than the already disadvantaged, by children being unable to access the best facilities and resources in their area, by failing to change significantly the favoured status of those schools that have operated and continue to operate a selective system and by proposed changes in gender make-up that apply primarily or exclusively to the non-selective school.
- The fundamental principle that Catholic schools act in solidarity is at risk of being damaged by a Catholic school acting in isolation from other parts of the Catholic community of schools, by options that reflect the line of least resistance or minimum change and by options that do not create social capital grounded in the gift of service to others based on mutual interdependence.
- Excellence for all young people will only be realised by all children in an area transferring to modern post-primary schools which are well resourced, by allowing staff to provide the highest quality of learning and teaching to all children in their care and by teachers and support staff in all schools being equally valued.

## **Challenges**

- There is a need to reshape the existing post-primary provision in all sectors to take account of the requirements of the entitlement framework and to address the demographic downturn in some areas.
- The challenges facing all education sectors within Northern Ireland are similar. These challenges include an updated curriculum and assessment framework, the introduction of area-based planning of education, surplus places within schools, the implementation of the entitlement framework by 2013, the debate around academic selection, the special educational needs review, a decreasing education budget, a review of the local management of schools, the sustainable schools policy and the role of education in a shared future.
- No child should lose out simply because of geography or demographics.

## **Consultation**

- The consultation process could have been open to abuse, as there was no way of ensuring that a person responded only once.
- The consultation documents contain general ideas and aspirations without evidence of need or programmes of actions.
- The closed nature of the consultation in presenting only those options based on arrangements without academic selection was unhelpful and ignored the reality that many schools within the Catholic sector wish to preserve the choice of academic schools for communities and parents in their locality.
- The consultation exercise has been presented with a focus on all-ability schools without having indicated the potential for a place for academic schools.
- A replacement network of all-ability schools is being presented that will reduce educational excellence and, based on examples from other jurisdictions, will provide a lower standard of educational achievement.
- No consideration appears to have been given to such issues as shared campuses and co-managed schools in areas too small to sustain two separate schools.
- The concept of learning communities appears to have been given lip service, particularly in areas where Catholic education is the dominant provision.
- There is reference to promoting effective collaborative links with other education providers and to the existing area learning communities, but this commitment does not seem to be reflected in the proposals that have been put forward.

- A document based on an internal restructuring of the existing Catholic education system inhibits debate as to how a Catholic ethos might be preserved while a shared approach to education is being promoted.
- There are no specific proposals as to how reconciliation and mutual understanding in Northern Ireland might be promoted without supporting regular contact with students from other traditions and backgrounds.
- Irish versions of the consultation documents were not made available and appropriate consultation arrangements were not made available through the medium of Irish.

### **Area Learning Communities**

- The NICCE commitment to support collaborative arrangements between post-primary schools to develop as area learning communities is welcomed.
- Strong collaborative relationships have already been laid within the area learning communities.
- There should be effective collaboration with other schools and educational providers through area learning communities to ensure choice and access to a wide range of general and applied courses.
- There is a substantial body of evidence available to support the case for the educational, economic and societal benefits of collaboration between schools from different sectors.

### **Academic Selection**

- Northern Ireland should move away from academic selection by schools at age 11 to a process of transfer which gives every child and every school the opportunity to achieve their full potential.
- The end of academic selection at age 11 has not achieved cross-community support and academic selection as a legal criterion for admissions will not be discarded readily.
- The right and duty of parents in the education of their children is fundamental since it is based on natural law and therefore the choice of a Catholic selective school is neither immoral nor unjust, but a wholly proper expression of this parental obligation by parents who prefer to opt for this educative model.
- While welcoming the support provided by the post-primary Catholic school in nurturing faith, parents will not deprive their children of an academic education for the sake of experiencing a Catholic environment.
- In the absence of wider political consensus emerging on academic selection, any attempt to unilaterally change by the Catholic sector would have a dramatic effect

in terms of Catholic parents and pupils opting for education outside the sector. The effect could be perceived as a displacement of non-Catholic pupils by Catholic pupils in non-denominational schools.

- The effect would be to force Catholic parents to choose between a school providing an education within their faith tradition and a school with academic excellence at the heart of its ethos.
- The proposals will result in neighbourhood all-ability schools, which in a short period of time will be socially selective, as parents will find their options limited to neighbourhood schools.
- The experience in England and Wales in removing academic selection has proven to introduce selection by social and financial means.
- There would be no sense of social justice in replacing a child's ability with that of their family address or means as the determinant factor in accessing education.

### **Infrastructure Issues**

- NICCE should look to build on the strengths of the current system, lobby ceaselessly for an agreed political solution, deal with underachievement at its source, acknowledge the role and responsibilities of boards of governors and act on the wishes of parents.
- In the absence of the Education and Skills Authority, a management body should be created to oversee and manage the development proposals in each area and structures should be created that are in the interests of the education service and not individual institutions.
- Any major change to the system of schools must be able to demonstrate that it can deliver the same or better upward social mobility than the present system.
- There may be a need for training in differentiated teaching and learning to accommodate a wider range of ability within post-primary schools.
- One of the greatest strengths of Catholic schools in Northern Ireland is the unique character and contribution of the religious orders to education.
- The strength and success of Catholic grammar schools has been their independence and their ability to compete successfully on the same basis with all schools of similar type.
- It is unclear as to how parental choice will be affected by proposed changes to the infrastructure.
- The strength and sustainability of Catholic schools in the future will depend on the ability of schools to attract and retain parental loyalty and there is strong evidence that parents want the style of education currently offered by grammar

schools and that they will prioritise this above religious considerations when choosing a school.

### **Proposals**

- Future generations of people, their standard of education, the faith formation of Catholic children and the economic well-being and social fabric of Northern Ireland will be shaped by the proposals being put forward.
- The proposals must balance the unpredictability of parental choice, the movement of population in response to volatile economic conditions and, if non-denominational, selective grammar schools remain in Northern Ireland, the increasing number of Catholic parents who will choose that option in preference to all-ability Catholic schools.
- The most immediate impact of the NICCE proposals has been to destabilise many post-primary secondary schools. The proposals have had an adverse impact on those schools identified for amalgamation or closure.
- There is considerable variation between the descriptors used, with the consultation documents for some project areas *mentioning “a gradual move from selection”* while other consultation documents explicitly state a *“non-selective approach”*.
- There is significant inconsistency in project areas on the issues of single-sex and co-educational solutions. Greater cognisance must be given to parents’ wishes by continuing to have single-sex schools in particular project areas. There is richness in offering choice and diversity.
- A lack of recognition that schools for academically gifted children are acceptable and an absence of proposals to establish specialist provision for the Catholic education of children with severe to moderate learning difficulties raise concern that the proposals are really proposals for “Catholic Education for All”.
- Alternative proposals need to be fully considered including the development of structures that meet the needs of all young people in very large institutions, the provision of single sex education, 11-14 and 14-19 provision and specialist schools and arrangements that would lead to a reduction in travel for young people and a more flexible curriculum to meet the needs of all young people.
- The proposals are a unique opportunity to develop teaching staff and to increase career opportunities across a number of institutions.
- Collectively, the proposals could produce a separate, self-contained Catholic school system to the detriment of a shared future. Some proposals may contribute to the division of the population along sectoral lines.

- It is difficult to perceive how a Catholic system based on all-ability schools is going to provide children with the necessary life skills in an increasingly competitive world. Some parents are of the opinion that it is not possible to offer quality education in an all-ability setting.
- The proposals must be considered as an opportunity to enhance the existing opportunities. The options contain no crosscutting proposals to address the parity of esteem gap between secondary schools and grammar schools and a lack of coherence in the options reflects an undue influence of Catholic grammar schools in a perpetuation of the existing status quo.
- One large school in a given small town or village will provide a much better educational, curricular and pastoral choice than asking parents and pupils to choose between two or more competing schools.
- The creation of large “super-schools” has serious consequences for rural communities. Parents have concerns around pastoral care, loss of personal identity, impersonal relationships, accountability/monitoring and quality of education within large schools.
- School rationalisation could result in a significant loss of ethos and tradition without any due regard for the foundations and principles upon which many schools were initiated, developed and thrived.

### **Entitlement Framework**

- The future shape of the entitlement framework in areas may concentrate on a smaller number of sixth-form school providers and local further education colleges and account having been taken of this possibility is not apparent in the proposals.
- There is a danger that the development of large schools of 1000 plus students, which would be able to provide the entitlement framework without the need for collaboration, would undermine and hinder the positive and non-threatening development in sharing education.

### **Planning Issues**

- The move towards fewer, larger and more educationally sustainable schools, with different solutions in different localities and towns, is welcomed.
- A strong case could be made for more secondary schools of the kind that have benefited from capital funding.
- Many communities can benefit from their children being educated in smaller post-primary schools.

- NICCE's core principles, together with the Department of Education's criteria for sustainability, and the challenges for education could be better met for children of all communities if educational planning was premised on sectors collaboratively meeting educational needs within geographical areas.
- The need exists for a more crosscutting post-primary review process involving all sectors.
- Schools are being re-configured to satisfy the Department of Education's policy makers rather than the needs of Catholic communities.
- A reorganisation of post-primary education should be based on the important role education can play in building a shared peaceful future, the entitlement of all children to have a first-class education through non-selective and all-ability provision, the planned needs of local area communities, the need for a cost effective and efficient educational system and the importance of parental choice.
- The Post-Primary Review of Catholic Education (PPRCE), coinciding as it does with the review of public administration, is in danger of confusing a number of strategic objectives.
- This is not the time to move to an all-ability system of post-primary education and such a move has the potential to deeply fracture the Catholic family of schools.
- There is a lack of detail regarding costings, a lack of evidence underpinning projected enrolments and no reference to the provision of special education.
- No real explanation has been given for increasing the Bain report's 500 pupil post-primary school to the 800 pupil ideal school size. The benefits of the 800 to 900 pupil school are unconvincing.
- There should be consultation with the Northern Ireland Teaching Council (NITC) over all issues.

### **Role of Governors in Planning**

- The post-primary review has ignored the devolved nature of governor control at school level in Northern Ireland.
- Responsibility for strategic planning, admissions policy and running of voluntary schools rests with each board of governors and any proposals, which impinge on their jurisdiction, require their consent and approval.
- Changes to management type or governance of Catholic grammar schools should be taken only in the context of each individual school by the Board of Governors and not on an overall system wide basis.

### **Area-based Planning**

- PPRCE and area-based planning appear to be running in parallel but separately and the duplication of effort in this regard is unnecessary, wasteful and conflicting. Effective area planning is cross-sectoral and involves all education sectors.
- The preferred option for addressing the future shape of post-primary education would be through the vehicle of area-based planning where all educational partners, while respecting the ethos and statutory authority of respective organisations, can plan provision collectively to meet the needs of an area.
- While NICCE deserves much credit in developing a project built around concept of reducing the number of Catholic post-primary schools and at the same time creating a modern Catholic schools' estate for the next two generations, its proposals sit uneasily with the area and central planning boards.
- A shared future, area planning approach towards a modern high quality education system and estate should include all settings and should incorporate strong reciprocal links to the community.
- A shared area-planning approach would have the potential to reduce spare capacity, eliminate duplication and maximise the use of resources for raising standards and for enhancing the learning environment for all children.
- If a model of area-based planning were adopted, there would be a more coherent, creative and cost effective approach to the development of the post-primary education sector.

### **Sectoral Planning**

- A purely sectoral planning approach would result in the loss of "a once in a generation" opportunity to develop an education system which best meets the needs of a rapidly changing and diverse society.
- The potential impact on the pupils of schools, which are not contained within the review, has not been explored.
- The potential exists in certain scenarios for there to be increased pressure on controlled school provision and this could result in an ad hoc planning approach which would damage the collaborative working between schools which is crucial to ensuring the delivery of good quality education.
- Proposals should be compatible with the joint 14-19 policy to be issued by the Department of Education (DE) and the Department of Employment and Learning (DEL).

- The proposals address the needs of one tradition, do not look to creative mechanisms for sharing and, through taking a separated 'faith based approach', risk perpetuating the existing divided system of education.
- Where sectoral interests are put first, be that for reasons of faith or of class, then the education of all children suffers.
- In taking a denominational approach to future planning, the plans perpetuate a segregated status quo, limit debate and have the potential to limit future sharing.

### **Cross-sectoral Planning**

- In the search for school improvement, the Finnish model should be considered. Finnish 15 year-olds were ranked first among 15 year-olds in 56 countries in an OECD 2006 survey and Finland had one of the smallest discrepancies between the best and worst performers.
- In the current economic climate it is appropriate, when planning for education provision, to consider cross-sectoral options that increase the efficient delivery of education.
- In order to achieve its aim of new arrangements that actively promote justice, reconciliation, mutual understanding, solidarity and inclusive communities that would be part of genuinely pluralist provision, NICCE must consider the greater needs of the pluralist society in which it operates.
- The review of post-primary education should be widened to allow greater opportunities for cross-sectoral options to be fully explored, thereby enabling the identification of optimal solutions that do not dilute the ethos or identity but which would help enrich diversity and social cohesion and would contribute to integrative and sustainable communities.

### **Promoting Reconciliation**

- The opportunity is being missed to examine how reconciliation can be promoted through the school system without depriving parents of the choice of schools with a Catholic ethos.
- The attendance of many children from Catholic families at integrated schools attests to the widespread support for the concept of integrated education.
- Schools have a moral and social duty to actively promote mutual respect and understanding and this cannot happen credibly in an education system that is divided by religion and cultural background.
- An approach based on preserving the Catholic ethos while promoting sharing through a variety of means could result in imaginative local solutions that would support communities and the peace building process.

- By looking at a range of approaches involving sharing, either through confederation, shared campuses or the further development of area learning communities, local solutions could be found for post-primary educational provision which would have the double advantage of promoting social cohesion and being cost effective.
- The proposed educational village at Lisanelly (Omagh) illustrates the potential for sharing in a cost-effective way when fresh and open thinking is applied.

### **Denominational Education**

- While “Catholic Education for All” is a bold attempt to shape the future of post-primary Catholic education and the strategic order of the proposals are impressive, a deeper consideration of the needs of other sectors and an active engagement with the Deloitte “cost of segregation” analysis are essential to making progress overall.
- Rationalisation of schools along sectoral lines could lead to a more segregated population and community polarisation. The segregated nature of the educational system is not acknowledged or discussed and the role of education in building a shared future is not addressed.
- No evidence has been produced to support the underlying assumption that Catholic parents will choose or would prefer a separated Catholic education for their children when repeated public surveys, and the very existence of integrated schools, strongly indicate that this is not so.

### **Financial Consideration**

- Plans involving rationalisation, amalgamation and the reorganisation of the Catholic sector’s school estate will have to be paid for from the public purse and, in the present economic climate, run the risk of diverting much needed funds from front-line services.
- At a time when education capital investment is under unprecedented pressure, it would be unwise to ignore the cost implications and the public spending outlook in Northern Ireland over the next decade.
- The anticipated cuts to the capital and recurrent budgets of the Department of Education will completely transform the policy template against which the viability of the NICCE proposals must be judged.
- Within the context of a difficult forthcoming spending round, the way forward is to maximise collaboration between all educational sectors and, where possible, to pool resources, share costs and develop shared facilities. The cost of duplication

of types of school will be increasingly difficult to justify in times of economic cut back.

### **Irish-medium Education**

- The future development of Irish-medium post-primary education provision is one of vital importance for children in the Irish-medium sector. Irish-medium education at pre-school, primary and post-primary levels should be available, as a right, to all parents who wish it for their child.
- Irish-medium post-primary provision is an important means of ensuring that the desire for parents to have their children become competent users of Irish is met. Experience and research have shown that the linguistic outcomes of immersion education are less favourable where children do not have access to immersion provision at post-primary school level.
- Children need access to the learning opportunities provided by Irish-medium post-primary education and to an Irish-medium educational entitlement to enable them to become active participants in the Irish-speaking communities.
- Given that there are several Irish-medium schools within the Catholic-managed sector, disappointment was expressed that Irish versions of the consultation documents had not been made available and as such it was considered that that appropriate consultation arrangements had not been made available through the medium of Irish.

### **Rural Issues**

- Education is a key service for rural communities. Further research focusing upon particular rural issues needs to be carried out and rural schools should be given special consideration.
- Parents living in rural areas with traditional small schools have concerns about travelling distance, logistics and the length of time their children would be away from home.
- A school is at the heart of the community and offers more than just education to children. The wider community and parish would suffer by its absence.
- Parents living in areas, both inner city and rural, that have a history of conflict have genuine concerns about their children's safety if their local school is closed.