

Catholic Education For All

Executive summary of analysis of responses to the consultation document on shaping the future of post-primary Catholic education in the Clogher and Kilmore area

1. Introduction

1.1. This review focused on post-primary provision within the Clogher and Kilmore area. The schools included in the review were Mount Lourdes Grammar School (Enniskillen), St. Aidan's High School (Derrylin), St. Comhghall's High School (Lisnaskea), St. Eugene's College (Rosslea), St. Fanchea's College (Enniskillen), St. Joseph's College (Enniskillen), St. Mary's College (Irvinestown), St. Mary's High School (Brollagh) and St. Michael's College (Enniskillen).

1.2. A consultation document was issued and views were sought on the challenges for education highlighted in the document, on the vision for education as stated in the document and on proposals that there should be a maximum of three 11-19 schools located in Enniskillen together with one new 11-19 school in rural south east Fermanagh.

2. Level of Responses

2.1. Responses using the response form provided with the consultation document were received from 410 individuals, comprising 98 pupils, 211 parents, 46 members of staff, 12 governors and 43 other respondents. In addition a petition signed by 1312 individuals was received expressing support for the qualitative statement, prepared by St. Mary's College and St. John's Business and Enterprise College, for an 11-19 rural academy serving north Fermanagh and west Tyrone.

2.2. Responses, which related specifically to the future structure of post-primary education in the project area, were received from the Board of Governors of St. Michael's College, the Board of Governors of St. Comhghall's College, the Board of Governors and staff of St. Eugene's College, the Board of Governors of St. Fanchea's College, the Board of Governors of Mount Lourdes Grammar School, the senior management team of Mount Lourdes Grammar School, the Board of Governors of St. Aidan's High School, the Board of Governors of St. Joseph's College, the Parent Teacher Association of St. Joseph's College, the teachers of St. Joseph's College, St. Mary's College and St. John's College, the Clogher Diocesan Education Committee, Comhairle na Gaelscolaíochta, the Catholic primary school

principals of Clogher and Kilmore, St. Joseph's Primary School, the Board of Governors of Tattygar Primary School, Holy Trinity Primary School and Nursery, the Fermanagh Trust and the Irvinestown Community Association.

2.3. 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.

3. Views of Respondents

3.1. Individual and Local Groups

While there was general agreement with the challenges for education cited and the vision for education set out in the consultation document, some constructive observations were provided and some issues of concern were highlighted.

Challenges for Education: How can we work together to ensure that all children receive quality education in vibrant and sustainable Catholic schools, that schools provide opportunities which meet the needs of all pupils and the demands of the new curriculum, that more students stay on at school beyond age 16, that our schools assist the development of a successful local economy, that we address the problem of surplus places, that we make best use of the schools' infrastructure, that all schools will be sustainable into the future and that we respond to the challenges that financial constraints are having on many of our schools at the present time?

Comments provided on the above challenges by both the individual respondents and the group respondents included:

- The challenges specified are more pressing in County Fermanagh, given its rural population and a higher proportion of schools with small enrolments and the implementation of the entitlement framework is challenging for all schools irrespective of size of school.
- The most urgent challenges relate to the demographic decline, curricular change and the entitlement framework, sustainability of schools, academic selection and

providing a quality education which best addresses the needs of young people in the current and future economic and social milieu.

- It is patently unfair and discriminatory that the sustainable schools policy, as currently constituted, places rural communities at a disadvantage given that few areas would be densely enough populated to support an 11-16 or an 11-19 post-primary school with a minimum of 500 pupils or 600 pupils respectively.
- The current uncertainty and the delay in the provision of clarity on the future of individual schools is undermining morale in schools faced with the likelihood of closure and is making it increasingly challenging for school management teams to plan strategically. In the current climate where individual schools are unsure of their long/short term sustainability, schools are increasingly adopting a protectionist 'closed door' approach, rather than adopting a collegial approach to planning and curriculum delivery.
- The review of public administration and the establishment of the Education and Skills Authority will have potential impact.
- To ensure that all children are afforded equality of access to quality education, the reorganisation plan must be put into effect as soon as possible. The new arrangements must ensure that there will be effective provision of education for all pupils, including the current pupils and that ethos and pastoral care arrangements will be protected.
- Ending academic selection removes parental and pupil choice. A coherent plan for the transition of pupils from primary school to post-primary school needs to be devised and agreed. The preservation of academic excellence, the possibility of leakage to other sectors and the maintenance a strong pastoral environment within a new arrangement will present challenges.
- Quality education is better provided for in local schools. Under an equitable and just education system no child should lose out simply because of geography or demographics.
- It is essential that educational provision in the distinct geographical and ecclesiastical area of St. Aidan's High School is appropriately planned and managed.
- A new 11-19 school in Irvinestown would address the post-16 drop out rate as many students who did not continue their education after leaving St. Mary's College have indicated that they would love to have stayed on.

- St. Comhghall's High School has a post-16 enrolment that, adjusted for common admission criteria, would meet the sustainable schools policy recommendations and would excel as a new school.

Vision for Education: Our vision seeks to ensure that the education in each of our schools will continue to be rooted in the Gospel values of Respect for Life, Love, Solidarity, Truth and Justice. It aims to harmonise faith and culture, build a better society and pursue the common good. Through this vision, our 11-19 schools will work together to develop a strong shared sense of Catholic identity, ethos and vision, to provide an agreed pastoral ethos, to enhance the quality of learning and teaching for all students, to provide access to a wide range of vocational and academic qualifications that will take account of the strengths, interests and abilities of all students, to develop and provide a curriculum which will attract and retain pupils beyond 16, to support all young people who have special educational needs, to strengthen and develop the existing links with our local primary schools, to strengthen and develop the existing collaborative arrangements in the Fermanagh Learning Community with other post-primary schools, the special schools and the further education providers and to tackle disadvantage and underachievement and support each other in responding to the needs of those pupils who are disaffected, dropping out or being excluded from our schools.

Comments provided on the above vision by both the individual respondents and the group respondents included:

- The vision has much to commend it in terms of Catholic values and its focus on the needs of young people but it is only aspirational and may not be transferable into reality.
- The vision must cater for all those with special educational needs, including the academically gifted. Substantial intervention programmes should be in place to tackle disadvantage, underachievement and disaffection among most vulnerable pupils. Vulnerable pupils need a local school.
- This vision makes no reference to strengthening and developing existing links with local parishes, does not clarify whether the proposed 11-19 schools will be single-sex or co-educational, is biased towards Enniskillen and discriminates against rural children.
- The vision should be expressed also in terms of equality of opportunity and access for all our young people and should dispel the view that selection is the only option for a quality education. While the vision implies that all proposed 11-19 schools will be equal in status, parental and public perception is likely to impose its own rank order.
- Catholic-based education should be preserved and all students should have an array of choices appropriate to their needs and gifts that allows for the highest

level of achievement in all pathways and gives the students the best possible preparation for life and work.

- The size of schools needs to be controlled so that pastoral approaches that meet the needs of individual pupils can be maintained. A large school loses the ethos, identity and tradition of smaller school.
- Rural schools should be retained where possible. Rural communities derive much more than an educational resource from their schools as the schools are intrinsic to the actual communities they serve. St Mary's College shares many links with local primary schools, which would not be the case with schools in Enniskillen.
- The current uncertainty is negatively impacting on staff morale in all schools and is impeding the strategic development of education that all school leaders are committed to delivering. In addition there is uncertainty about the meaning in real terms of phrases such as, '*a formal collaborative and mutually supportive partnership*'.
- All schools must be able to deliver the appropriate curriculum to meet the future needs of our young people. A co-educational environment is the appropriate environment in which to educate all young people. The co-educational model allows young people to grow up and to be educated together as equals and in the long-term will assist them in the development of healthy relationships.
- The new arrangement should offer real choice for parents. There would be concerns about the transitional phase, about the impact on the curriculum, the staff, student welfare and the infrastructure and about the availability of finance.
- Academic selection must be retained i.e. different schools for students with different abilities. The Catholic sector, becoming non-selective on a unilateral basis, could have potentially serious implications for schools in the dioceses.
- An end to academic selection is an essential positive step towards the realisation of a truly Catholic vision of education.
- The proposals must protect the voluntary status and extend it to all schools within the new dispensation.

Proposals

We propose that there should be a maximum of three 11-19 schools located in Enniskillen together with one new 11-19 school in rural South East Fermanagh. This would be subject to each school meeting fully the requirements of the entitlement framework.

We propose that all of these schools will be part of a formal collaborative and mutually supportive partnership of 11-19 schools which between

them shall provide an education for all 2,900 pupils. The collaborative partner schools will:

- **each provide a curriculum which meets the needs of all pupils and the demands of the statutory curriculum**
- **each be viable and sustainable [i.e. with a minimum number of 500 pupils at 11-16 and 100 at post-16]**
- **develop and operate agreed common admissions policies.**
- **work together to identify priorities and respond to areas of mutual benefit e.g. Chaplaincy, resource management etc;**
- **maximise the use of the available resources for the benefit of all pupils;**
- **seek to secure, with other agencies, an Education Access Service to support us in responding to the needs of those pupils who are disaffected, dropping out or being excluded;**
- **strengthen and develop the collaborative arrangements that already exist within the area learning community.**

Comments provided on the above proposals by both the individual respondents and the group respondents included:

- Significant changes should not be proposed at this time as the proposals are not achievable due to financial constraints being imposed by the government.
- A major increase home to school travel distances would deny rural children the opportunities available to urban children for social bonding and would negatively impact on commercial and possible future economic development. Children will miss out on extra-curricular activities as they would be home later. It is imperative that parents would be provided with at least one viable 'rural' alternative.
- The proposals are more concerned with money than the welfare of children. Parents and children should have a choice of where a child goes to school. We would not like to have to go to a school in Enniskillen or to have to send our child to a school in Enniskillen.
- No consideration has been given to children who are vulnerable or have special educational needs and who will struggle with this change. Vulnerable children do not need the stress of the enforced journey and longer day in travelling to Enniskillen.
- Small schools are superior to large schools and local schools are better in the case of a child falling sick or forgetting something at home. Closing St. Mary's College (Irvinestown) would devastate the local community, which is already run down by the closure of factories, and would affect local groups who use the facilities.
- Lisnakea has a population and infrastructure already in place to support a new 11-19 school. If all post-primary schools in the Catholic sector have joint admission criteria, there would be a sufficient number of children in south

Fermanagh to match and exceed the sustainable schools policy's minimum enrolment numbers of 500 pupils at 11-16 and 100 pupils at post-16.

- If there is no rural post-primary school in the south east Fermanagh area, all post-primary school age children in the rural communities would be served by urban schools in Enniskillen and the identity and ethos of the area would be diluted or lost. A school in the area, working in collaboration with its neighbours, should enable each young person to access, with appropriate support, courses which would help them to fulfil their potential and to develop the skills relevant to the changing society and economy.
- There is a lack of clarity surrounding future plans for pupils living in the north Fermanagh/ west Tyrone area. A new, non-selective, 11-19 rural academy should be set up to provide post-primary provision for all children of the area.
- The closure of St. Mary's High School and the transportation of pupils to a school in Enniskillen would result in the closure of a social and adult learning centre for the whole area. The removal of a sporting and recreational centre would create difficulties for rural children in adapting to an urban setting.
- There would be concerns about the sustainability of the number of schools proposed and the implementation of the proposal on the county's transport infrastructure. A maximum of three schools in Enniskillen seems to be appropriate.
- A fully co-educational model may be more easily achievable by evolution over a fixed period of time and by being based on the present school estates and the resources likely to be available.
- A co-education system would lead to competition as individual schools promote their school rather than working within a mutually supportive partnership.
- We remain unconvinced that this is a child-centred approach or that the needs of the children have been considered with this en-mass movement. Children could be forced into Enniskillen and their learning accommodated for three to four years in temporary accommodation.
- In the context of the current economic climate and the restrictions on public sector spending, it is all the more apt to consider cross-sectoral options in the planning for education provision.
- One challenge not being addressed is the long-standing psyche regarding the perceived superiority of grammar school education.

General Comments

Other comments made by both the individual respondents and the group respondents included:

- Catholic leaders must continue to develop a strong sense of Catholic identity, ethos and vision, to create a fair deal for all children in a network of high quality all-ability schools and to secure a wider range of vocational and academic qualifications for all pupils.
- The challenges and vision can only be met by any new arrangement of schools deepening and enhancing existing collaborative arrangements.
- Action must be taken before a number of secondary schools become ineffective and parents opt out of the Catholic sector by sending their children to a school that can offer a wide range of subjects.
- With longer travelling times, pupils will have less leisure time, less study time and will spend a lot of time sitting on a bus. Children will be unable to participate in after-school activities including homework clubs, GCSE specific revision classes, sports teams, choirs, orchestras, or school musicals/plays.
- Vulnerable children who are shy or have special needs would experience difficulties attending a school in Enniskillen, both with the larger school and the travelling involved. It would be difficult for parents to come to the school if there was an emergency, particularly for those parents who do not drive.
- Current proposals have not been able to identify suitable arrangements in the north Fermanagh area and there is a need to explore with the local communities in south and east Fermanagh how best to secure education provision for that area which is viable and sustainable.
- Traffic going in and out of Enniskillen is already terrible, is causing pollution and will become worse when the new hospital opens. Enniskillen has a bad reputation for anti-social and bullying behaviour in school and at bus stops. There may not be sufficient room in the Enniskillen schools, and pupils and students will be taught in mobiles.
- Any arrangement which restricts access of pupils from parishes to St. Michael's College is incompatible, not only with the purpose of the school's foundation, but also with the levies and fundraising over recent years.
- There needs to be an acceptance that ending academic selection at 11 is a positive step and in the interests of all our children. It is crucial that all methods of academic selection are completely abolished and that the given timescale is strictly adhered to.

- The removal of academic selection is a denial of the right of parents to choose a Catholic grammar school for their children and it could lead to more Catholic parents choosing a non-Catholic grammar school. The 'one size fits all' all-ability school solution will not raise standards but will serve only to drive down standards and, in so doing, further fracture the Catholic education sector.
- The importance of a school to a rural community should be acknowledged in all future educational considerations and a plan for reorganisation should be put into effect. A school is an important part of a community. A local school allows children to form relationships within their community and provides facilities for clubs and associations.
- If educational provision was removed from Irvinestown and Dromore, parental choice would be removed because those parents who seek the care and the individual attention that a small school can provide would no longer be afforded this option. It would be a devastating blow to the community and commercial future of the area, would be difficult to maintain local identity, build community spirit and ensure the propagation of the faith among the younger generation. There would be less control over the behaviour of the children in the evenings around the town, a weakening of the parent-school bond and a loss of facilities for the clubs, associations, church groups, and youth clubs etc, who currently use the school facilities.
- Appropriate consideration should be made regarding the particular requirements of Irish-medium pupils in English-medium post-primary schools.
- Traditional secondary schools had been hit hardest by demographic change as the traditional grammar schools maintained their pupil numbers.
- If there are two co-educational schools in a town, one may be perceived as a better school due to the postal addresses of pupils attending the school and the preconceived views of parents and it might be very difficult to agree common admissions' criteria without enhancing these perceptions.
- The Catholic education sector and the controlled education sector have conducted separate, parallel reviews of post-primary education in Fermanagh and there has been no opportunity or mechanism to explore cross-sectoral options.
- The process should move forward to ensure an effective provision for all pupils, including the current pupil population. Parental opinion in relation to single sex and co-education provision should be consulted upon. Decisions regarding final proposals should be reached and consulted upon as soon as possible.

3.2. Regional Groups

A summary of the views expressed by the regional groups is provided in a separate document titled 'Executive summary of the analysis of the generic responses to the consultation documents on shaping the future of post-primary Catholic education'.