

Consultation for the Forum on Patronage and Pluralism in the Primary Sector

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The Forum on Patronage and Pluralism in the Primary Sector

Submission to the Advisory Group

by

The Council for Education of the Irish Episcopal Conference

Introduction

The Forum on Patronage and Pluralism in the Primary Sector established by the Minister for Education and Skills is a most notable and welcome development. The large number of Catholic primary schools in Ireland amidst a changed social and cultural landscape has given rise to questions about parental choice and has highlighted the need for greater diversity in education provision. As we look to a shared future in our democratic society it is important that all citizens are well served by our education system. We are committed to the common good and this includes the requirement to facilitate parental choice with regard to schools where this is practicable. Schools are among the most essential of all social realities so it is important that all stakeholders be involved in planning their future.

The Church has been engaged for a number of years in ongoing reflection on education in Ireland, having published a policy paper on future provision in 2007¹, its vision for Catholic education in 2008², and a report on factors influencing parental school choice, also in 2008³. In 2010 the Department of Education and Skills produced data on areas for possible divesting of some Catholic schools. The Bishops' Education Council responded to this by outlining a three step process that the Catholic Schools Partnership would undertake in the period August 2010-September 2011:

- Further qualitative analysis of parental understandings of patronage;
- The publication of a position paper and the invitation to individuals and organisations to respond;
- Internal consultation within the Church with parents, patrons, teachers, priests, pastoral council members, pupils, interview assessors, trustees and managers.

The results of these processes were analysed at four regional assemblies held in June 2011 with representatives from all dioceses. The Catholic Schools Partnership will now begin to draw the various strands of its consultation process together and then present the findings of its research to the broader public.

In his notable speech at the launch of this forum Professor Coolahan reflected on the consultative tradition that has characterised the evolving Irish education system over recent decades. We look forward to this forum continuing this tradition of using our collective wisdom to chart a way forward. In this regard it is very unhelpful and misleading for some commentators to use the language of war, battles and trenches. This forum and process are not a war but a mature reflection on schooling in our democratic society based on shared citizenship and a respect for plurality. We believe that the forum should proceed on the basis of evidence carefully adduced and analysed. Where such evidence is lacking the forum should commission research to underpin its work. If the results of the forum are to

¹ Irish Catholic Bishops' Conference, *Catholic Primary Schools: A Policy for Provision into the Future*, 2007.

² Irish Catholic Bishops' Conference, *Vision 08 – A Vision for Catholic Education in Ireland*, 2008.

³ Council for Research and Development, Irish Catholic Bishops' Conference, *Factors Determining School Choice*, 2008.

be accepted by the broader community then it must be clear that its conclusions are evidence based and not driven by any particular political or ideological agenda.

As part of our contribution to the forum we would like to reflect on the following issues:

1. Principles that inform our approach
2. Important characteristics of the primary school sector in the Republic of Ireland
3. Parental choice
4. The changing profile of school patronage
5. Catholic schools in twenty-first century Ireland

1. Principles that inform our approach

- 1.1 In January 2011 a National Directory for Catechesis in Ireland (*Share the Good News*) was launched by the Irish Bishops' Conference. This details a ten-year plan for catechesis across the life cycle from childhood through adolescence to later adulthood. Rooted in an understanding of the human person as a child of God, redeemed by Christ and destined to share in God's own life forever, Catholic education is a lifelong process of human growth and development in response to God's call. It begins in the home, continues in the school and matures through involvement with the Christian community in the parish. These three dimensions of home, school and parish must work together if Catholic education is to truly attain its goal of forming mature human persons in the image and likeness of Christ. But schools remain critically important.
- 1.2 Catholic schools form a central part of the life of the Church in any particular society. The Church is involved in education because of Christ's mandate to go and teach and because there are parents who wish to have such an education for their children. A Catholic school works out of a certain vision: every human person is a child of God called to share in God's own life forever; the school should form part of the broader Christian community and its mission to proclaim the gospel in today's culture; the school is an inclusive community serving society in both a critical and supportive manner. Since the Second Vatican Council there has been much reflection on the nature and purpose of Catholic education. This has been given expression in a rich array of official documents which challenge Catholic schools to be truly at the service of Church and society and to promote the common good.
- 1.3 In Ireland the Churches have played a key role in school provision. There are many reasons for this as our complicated history over the past two centuries demonstrates but it is important to state the basic principles underlying a Catholic understanding of education: parents are bound to educate their children; the Church's leadership and civil society should facilitate parents in carrying out this role.
- 1.4 Parental choice is the critical principal in education. It is probably true to say that the best guarantee of Catholic schools into the future would be the provision of greater choice. However, any process of change of patronage must be driven by parents from the ground up. It cannot be led by patrons or trustees of existing schools.

- 1.5 Change in educational policy needs to be thought through carefully as the contribution of good schools to the development of social capital and the common good is inestimable.
- 1.6 There is no such thing as a value neutral education. All schools, whether established by the State or by one or other voluntary group, necessarily and implicitly espouse a vision of the human person and give expression to a particular ethos by their choices, actions and priorities.
- 1.7 Faith schools exist in almost all countries except those where they are outlawed by non-democratic regimes. In many nations they form a central part of the education system while in almost all democratic societies they are funded by the State. Such schools provide a real public service.
- 1.8 Religious affiliation is not the only measure of diversity in Ireland. Arguably, it is the least important such measure. Most religious organisations (educational and otherwise) are extraordinarily inclusive in their approach and very respectful of diversity. Catholic schools are caring and inclusive communities precisely because they are Catholic.
- 1.9 Religious education has nothing in common with indoctrination which amounts to a deliberate harming of students by undermining their natural ability to reason. In contrast, Catholic schools are committed to the deepest respect for both faith and reason and as such they contribute significantly to the formation of rational and mature citizens of our democratic society. One of the most notable characteristics of Catholic education is a respect for faith and reason. This helps to explain why such schools are so popular throughout the world. Faith and reason can live and thrive in the same person; while one cannot be reduced to the other they both can play a dynamic role in forming and educating a mature person.
- 1.10 There is no evidence to link the time devoted to religious education and sacramental preparation in Catholic primary schools with national levels of literacy and numeracy. Ongoing review of the curriculum is necessary and welcome but this must allow for instruction time in subjects relating to or arising from the characteristic spirit of the school. (See Education Act, art. 30)
- 1.11 There is a tendency among some commentators to equate a secularist view with neutrality. They tend to represent religious beliefs as inherently irrational and less worthy than a secularist worldview. Secularism is not the same thing as pluralism; indeed many secularists adopt a position that is anything but pluralist when it comes to the free expression of religious belief in schools.

2. Important characteristics of the primary school sector in the Republic of Ireland

- 2.1 The Department of Education and Skills strictly regulates the curriculum of schools through the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment and the inspectorate's Whole School Evaluation processes. Indeed Section 30 of the Education Act (1998) states that the Minister determines:

- (a) the subjects to be offered in recognised schools,
- (b) the syllabus of each subject,
- (c) the amount of instruction time to be allotted to each subject, and
- (d) the guidance and counselling provision to be offered in schools.

Further, Section 9 of the Act defines in exact detail the functions of a recognised school, Section 13 describes at length the powers of the inspectorate, while Section 15 demands that a board of management of a recognised school carry out its functions in accord with the policies determined by the Minister. Schools must comply not only with extensive legislation and the Rules of National Schools, but also the multitude of Circulars and Guidelines, which issue from the Department of Education and Skills. The exact composition of Boards of Management at primary level is prescribed by the Department of Education and Skills through its *Constitution and Rules of Procedure of Boards of Management*, not by the Patron bodies.

- 2.2 In the Republic of Ireland we speak of denominational, inter-denominational and multi-denominational schools. The meaning of these terms is very unclear. Currently the Department of Education and Skills does not recognise the designation of non-denominational schooling. Consequently, there is a tendency to speak only of denominational and multi-denominational schools and to define the latter as more open and inclusive. Inevitably, this gives rise to negative representations of denominational schools as closed and sectarian. This is completely at odds with the experience in local communities throughout the country.
- 2.3 The term ‘multi-denominational’ is used in numerous, often contradictory, senses. There needs to be clarity with regard to the meaning of this term and the meaning of denominational and non-denominational schooling. We look forward to the forum clarifying the meaning of these terms so that parents and other stakeholders will clearly understand the various options available to them.
- 2.4 Catholic schools have adapted to demographic change with significant net migration into Ireland and have led the way in integrating migrants into local communities. They have been leaders in areas such as special needs, social inclusion and traveller education. One of the great strengths of our primary school system has been that in many parts of the country children from various social strata have attended the same school together. In any reconfiguration there is a danger of much more streamlined social stratification as the evidence demonstrates that, given the choice, many parents will opt for a school which draws most of its pupils from the more upwardly mobile social classes. Thus the strength of our present system where parents in many parts of the country identify the local primary school as their school should not be underestimated.

Some parents opt for more socially exclusive schools. Travelling some distance to a particular school while passing by other schools can be an indication of this. Similarly, language or the payment of fees can raise the bar of likely social participation. While the principle of parental choice must be respected, parents should also reflect on the common good when it comes to issues relating to schooling. Social and physical mobility are in danger of creating a multi-tiered education system.

- 2.5 In Ireland we have a very large number of small schools serving a notably dispersed rural population. The remarkable thing about these schools is that they are managed so well and at such little cost. Not least because of the size of school enrolments, the Irish system has been dependent on local, voluntary effort with regard to management and finance. There are close to 20,000 volunteers acting on boards of management. They receive no pay, no subsistence and no travel expenses. This is a very notable example of local participatory democracy. In Ireland we have thousands of well functioning denominational schools. A primary school system rooted in local communities serving a dispersed population at little cost in terms of patronage and management is a notable reality in terms of social capital.
- 2.6 Catholic schools in Ireland are attended by some students who do not come from Catholic families. In many cases their parents opt for this type of education and welcome the ethos and values which underpin such schools. In some other cases parents may have little or no choice but to send their child to a Catholic school. This raises the question of opting out of some classes. The Education Act states: “The Minister shall not require any student to attend instruction in any subject which is contrary to the conscience of the parent of the student or in the case of a student who has reached the age of 18 years, the student” (Section 30, 2 [e]). It should be noted that this stipulation is directed at the Minister, and applies to all subjects and not just to Religious Education. Catholic schools, for their part, respect and acknowledge the right of parents who require that their children be excluded from Religious Education. Facilitating such opt outs is a resource based issue. Schools are committed to facilitating parents in this regard but they can only do so as resources are made available so that the school complies with its own policies re curriculum, supervision and child safeguarding. The provision of such resources is the responsibility of the Minister. However, even with current resources Catholic schools have developed local arrangements to accommodate the valid wishes of such parents, and steps are currently in hand further to develop the practical arrangements required to be put in place in this regard. Some commentators have raised concerns about the integrated curriculum with regard to this issue. It should be noted that the philosophical basis of such a curricular approach is the pedagogical principle that subject specificities are irrelevant in early childhood learning. Thus children are introduced into an integrated world rather than one arbitrarily divided into discrete academic subjects.

3. Parental choice

- 3.1 Parental understandings of school patronage require careful quantitative and qualitative analysis. Unfortunately, there are very few such studies in Ireland. In 2008 the Irish Catholic Bishops’ Conference published a detailed quantitative survey on factors determining school choice among parents of children in Catholic primary schools. This survey is often misquoted as suggesting that only 50% of parents want schools with religious patrons. In fact, the findings are highly complex demonstrating that while 95% of respondents stated that they are very satisfied or satisfied with their decision to send their child to the school they currently attend, there are a whole range of reasons why they chose to do so. Most important are the quality of education provided and the likelihood of the school meeting their child’s needs and abilities. Religious factors are significant for parents in choosing a school

for their child but not as important as more formal pedagogical issues. Approaches to discipline and fostering the child's imagination are also central factors.

3.2 The findings of such quantitative surveys clearly need deeper analysis at a qualitative level. Over the past few months the Catholic Schools Partnership has undertaken just such qualitative analysis of parental understandings of school patronage. The report is not yet complete but initial findings can be summarised as follows:

- Parents choose a primary school for their child based on geographical proximity and historical knowledge of that school's quality.
- These schools are chosen for the quality of the education but also because they provide the schooling experience that parents wish their child to have.
- Patronage is not a word widely known by parents; ethos or the inclusion of Religious Education is more likely to be the understanding of the Church's involvement in primary education.
- The local experience for their child's primary school education is pre-eminent. Systemic concerns with school governance are not centrally important in the parental relationship to their child's education.
- Most parents make little connection between the daily running of the school and the relationship between Boards of Management, Patrons and the Department of Education and Skills.
- Parental understandings of their child's school are highly localised.

3.3 Interpreting all of this data is difficult but it is clear that school patronage, while it is important, is a secondary factor in the perspective of most parents. The forum will need to take care in its deliberations that it does not overstate the significance of this issue to the neglect of what are more vital issues for the majority of parents. Further studies in these areas would be most welcome and very beneficial for all concerned. Simple quantitative measures of choices between different patrons are unlikely to be of much value given the limited understanding of, and importance attached to, patronage on the part of parents.

4. The changing profile of school patronage

4.1 The demand for greater diversity of school provision has led to the establishment of this forum. It is important that the forum ascertains the level of this demand in different communities across the country. The Catholic Church has no desire to act as Patron of schools where the local community would prefer another Patron. Similarly, it is an unsatisfactory situation where any teacher finds him or herself in a situation of having to teach religion if this poses conscientious difficulties for the person involved. It is then important that the forum succeed in its work and does so in a manner which brings all of the stakeholders in education into a shared future with adequate diversity of provision.

- 4.2 Over recent years new schools in rapidly developing demographic areas have been opened by various patrons – An Foras Pátrúnachta, Educate Together, Vocational Education Committees and the Catholic Church. This broad range of provision is welcome as a response to a more diverse population. In many locations the Catholic Patron has not applied to be considered as the patron as there was no perceived need for a further Catholic school in the area concerned.
- 4.3 With regard to areas of stable population where there are unlikely to be any new schools over coming years some existing schools may no longer be viable as Catholic schools. In such situations the Catholic Patron, in dialogue with the local community, might make any buildings which are surplus to requirement available so that the Department of Education and Skills could plan for greater diversity of school provision in that area. This must be planned locally and based on respect for the rights of parents and all other stakeholders, including local parish communities. If sufficient demand for a school under different patronage can be demonstrated then all of the stakeholders should work in partnership towards this goal. This will most likely occur where a Catholic school closes due to lack of numbers or where two such schools amalgamate. In any case of a change of patronage of a Catholic school, provision will have to be made for the rights of Catholic parents and their children. Furthermore, in all such cases local communities will understandably raise the issue of finance, given the large transfer of resources from parish to school over many decades.
- 4.4 Any change in the patronage of a given school must be negotiated locally. A decision to change patronage will be a voluntary operation involving all stakeholders. Since it is impossible to predict the outcome before the process begins it is very unhelpful to use figures like 50% as it suggests to those involved in Catholic schools that they will be forced into change against their will. This will not be the case. We are not involved in social engineering but in the voluntary transfer of patronage where there is demonstrable demand for such.
- 4.5 In any instance of a proposed change in patronage, parents and other stakeholders must have clarity with regard to what choices are before them. Who are the other possible patrons? What is their vision for schooling? Is the State to act as a patron at primary level? If not, why not? What type of schools might the State provide? Are there patrons who are willing to act as co-patrons in a joint patronage model? We look forward to the forum dealing in detail with all of these issues.
- 4.6 The success or otherwise of any transfer of patronage will depend on the rigour of the implementation process. The forum will need to establish such a process to take account of all of the issues that will arise with regard to buildings, school transport, employment and facilitating parental choice.

5. Catholic Schools in twenty-first century Ireland

- 5.1 As part of its recent work the Catholic Schools Partnership has undertaken research on the future of Catholic schools through various focus groups. The vast majority of those who participated in the focus group discussions believed that the Catholic primary school is still valid and valued today, despite the changed economic, social and cultural context in which it operates. The Catholic school has unique,

identifiable features which link with Irish culture, tradition and heritage. Its ethos and values remain relevant, perhaps now more than ever, given the challenging times we live in. It is accepted that there will be fewer Catholic schools in the future but there is still a strong desire to preserve the Catholic school identity. At the same time participants recognised the need to ‘re-brand’ it in a way that appeals to a modern and sophisticated society. Participants believed that a stronger, more committed Catholic school could emerge as a result of greater diversity of education provision.

- 5.2 The emphasis on existing inclusivity in Catholic schools in this research is notable. Whilst, in common with other patronage models one can point to Catholic schools which are socially exclusive, the vast majority of Catholic schools have adopted an approach that is socially aware and sensitive to the individual pupil’s needs. This commitment to inclusivity is a hallmark of many schools and should not be undermined by any processes proposed by the forum.
- 5.3 In a more secularised environment the Catholic schools of the future must reflect on their identity. Most of them are parish schools and some of them will need support in re-discovering what it is to be part of the local Christian community. As the process of transfer of some schools to other patrons evolves it will be necessary to ensure that the Catholic schools of the future have the right to express their identity in employment and enrolment policies and in their Religious Education programmes. All of this will be strengthened through the implementation of the National Directory for Catechesis in Ireland (*Share the Good News*) which will bring a new energy to the relationship of school and parish.

Conclusion

The Council for Education of the Irish Episcopal Conference is a committed partner in this forum. We look forward to reading and hearing the contributions of other stakeholders and to constructing together a shared future based on democratic, cultural and demographic realities.