

School Governance

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Irish National Teachers' Organization	Cumann Múinteoirí Éireann
35 Parnell Square	35 Cearnóg Pharnell
Dublin 1	Baile Atha Cliath 1
Telephone: 01 804 7700	Guthán: 01 804 7700
Fax: 01 872 2462	Fax: 01 872 2462
Email: info@into.ie	Ríomhphost: info@into.ie
Web: http://www.into.ie	Gréasán: http://www.into.ie
General Secretary: John Carr	Árd Rúnaí: John Carr



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School Governance

Background Paper

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND TO PATRONAGE SYSTEM IN PRIMARY SCHOOLS

When the National School system was established in 1831, it was envisaged that all children would attend their local national school. However, as the system evolved, the churches insisted on separate schools for Protestant and Catholic children, hence, the denominational nature of the primary education system today.

Historically, the church authorities (mainly Catholic and Church of Ireland) acted as patrons or sponsors of primary schools by initiating the process of establishing a new school when one was needed to serve a specific geographic area. These schools are privately-owned, publicly-funded institutions, the denominational character and ethos of which is respected by the State.

There are also nine Model Schools which are State owned and under the patronage of the Minister. These were established in the middle of the 19th century and were originally conducted on a mixed or multi-denominational basis. No model schools have been established in modern times.

In more recent times, other patron bodies such as Educate Together in respect of the multi-denominational sector and An Foras Pátrúnachta in respect of the Gaelscoileanna have been recognised as the patron bodies for new schools. The 1937 Irish Constitution allows for denominational education. The Education Act 1998 allows for the recognition of new patrons.

ROLE OF PATRONS

All primary schools have a patron. The patron has ultimate responsibility for the school ethos, the appointment of the board of management, financial and legal matters and the supervision of staff appointments in accordance with Department regulations. Patrons generally discharge their responsibilities in close consultation with boards of management and other interested parties involved in the schools. The current composition of patrons and patron bodies of the 3,279 primary schools is outlined on next page^{*} (DES 2006). The patron directly nominates two members of the board of management.

Patronage of Primary Schools (2006)*

Catholic (a)	Church of Ireland (b)	Presbyterian	Methodist	Multi-D (c)	Inter-D (d)	Muslim	Jewish	J. Witness	Total
3039	183	14	1	34	5	2	1	1	3279

- (a) includes most Gaelscoileanna, a number of special schools and five Model schools where the Minister is Patron.
- (b) includes four Model schools where the Minister is Patron.
- (c) includes John Scottus NS, Killashee NS, and three Gaelscoileanna. Balance are multi-denominational schools under Educate Together itself plus some limited companies which are recognised as patrons in their own right (eg, Limerick School Project and Dalkey School Project) and which are members of Educate Together.
- (d) includes four Gaelscoileanna and a Gaelscoil established in 2005 under joint patronage of local Catholic and Church of Ireland Bishops.

In addition to the above, there are approximately 20 special schools with various different patrons, eg, Enable Ireland and the Health Services Executive.

CHANGING SOCIETY

The growth of the multi-denominational sector and the establishment of denominational schools, other than Christian, reflect societal changes in modern Ireland, where a growing number of parents seek an alternative to traditional denominational education. As modern Irish society develops, due to both changes in religious practice and the increasing immigrant community, many of whom are non-catholic, it is evident that the current patronage system, originally established in the 19th century, no longer meets the needs of today.

Many Catholic schools in urban areas cater for a significant number of non-Catholic children. Many Church of Ireland schools cater for non-Protestant children. Denominational schools are entitled to give preference to pupils of their own faith when allocating places though this practice is rarely used except in situations where there is a problem of an acute shortage of school places, as happened in Balbriggan Autumn 2007. In areas of huge population growth, denominational education does not meet the needs of all parents.

NEW DEVELOPMENTS

It has been proposed that a new primary school, which will operate under the patronage of the VEC, will be established in Diswellstown in County Dublin in September 2008.¹ There are 33 VECs established in accordance with the provisions of the Vocation Education Act 1930 and provide a range of cross community education, training and support services, eg, vocational schools, community colleges, Youthreach centres and adult education. VEC schools are state schools. To date, the VECs have had no involvement in primary education. VEC schools are non-denominational and teachers are employed by the VEC rather than by individual boards of management. VEC committees are comprised of local (county/borough) representatives, community representatives, parent representatives and teacher representatives and meet monthly. Personnel matters are the responsibility of the CEO.

Archbishop Martin, of the Catholic Diocese in Dublin, publicly stated recently, that he would welcome a pluralism of patronage, which would continue to offer a choice of schools to parents. He indicated a willingness on behalf of the Church to hand over some schools to a different patron, in return for the right to retain Catholic denominational primary schools. A pluralism of patronage would mean the continuance of the current patronage system, with the possibility of the introduction of new patrons of primary schools such as the VECs. Large geographical regions could provide a choice of schools under different patronage – denominational (Catholic, Protestant, other), multi-denominational, or state or non-denominational. Offering such choice in rural areas would be problematic.

The question of the teaching of religion is linked to patronage. Denominational schools teach religion according to a particular faith. Multi-denominational schools (Educate Together) teach about faith and religion and include an ethics programme. Non-denominational schools generally do not teach religion (though there is provision for some VEC schools to offer religion).

The idea of a community school, which would be attended by all pupils in an area, has also been posited. Community schools operate at second level and are open to all pupils in their catchment area regardless of religious denomination. They are defined as multi-denominational. Religion is taught though pupils can opt out. They are governed by deeds of trust, and the boards of management reflect the make-up of the local community. Both Church (Catholic or Protestant or both) and State interests (through the VEC) are represented on the management boards of the schools, in addition to parents and teachers. The two options within the concept of a community school at primary level, are multi-faith community schools, where all pupils could avail of a faith based religious programme according to their parents' wishes, with or

1. Two primary community schools opened in September 2008 under the patronage of the VEC in Co Dublin.

without the addition of a core religious education programme, or a non-denominational community school where a non-faith based religious education programme or no religious education programme would be taught. It would be necessary to draw up deeds of trust suitable for community primary schools, reflecting the diversity of communities of today.

The Future of School Governance

John Carr, General Secretary,

INTRODUCTION

President, guests, members of the Education Committee and delegates, it is a pleasure to be asked to deliver this paper on school governance structures which I trust will not only be challenging and thought provoking but will prompt you to discussion of issues and, most importantly, solutions.

Today, Irish primary education stands at a crossroads with a proud tradition behind but an uncertain future ahead. Our primary schools are required to meet from within limited financial resources and creaking infrastructures, ever-expanding demands from a rapidly changed and continually changing society. This situation poses key questions to which answers must be provided. Among these are: “Can our current education structures meet the needs of 21st century Ireland?” and if not, “What policy changes are required to enable the school system to reflect the Ireland of today and to play an effective part in the shaping our shared future?”

I want to begin by stating clearly that I am not seeking change for the sake of change. No-one actively seeks the continual change that other countries have to endure. But where change has been necessary primary teachers have always led calls for improvement, dragged resources from a penny pinching exchequer and enthusiastically embraced new developments. For example, in order to meet the needs of 21st century Ireland internal changes such as a revised curriculum have been adopted and successfully implemented. Teachers occupy far more diverse roles than ever before, many having up-skilled and re-trained in their own time and at their own expense. And today, pupils of all abilities sit side by side in the modern classroom which prepares them for their place in an ever more inclusive world.

Nevertheless, however worthy these initiatives are in their own right the primary school system of 2007 would be fairly recognisable to parents who enrolled their children in schools in 1857, 1907 or 1957. Our system would be recognisable because governance structures that underpinned primary education for much of the 175 years have remained largely unchanged. But those structures which arguably served their purpose in 19th and 20th century Ireland are under strain at present and unlikely to serve future needs and developments.

A priority, therefore, for policy makers in Irish education is to look closely at current governance structures and ask if a system that evolved over a century and a half ago can meet the needs of Ireland today. There are compelling and rational economic, social

and educational arguments why such a review should take place without delay. The pace of change in Ireland provides the main reason for what has happened here almost overnight, which took decades to evolve elsewhere, thus giving others a longer time-frame in which to plan for change. We have neither the luxury of time nor the option of leaving it to individual schools to find local solutions to what is a national priority.

Modern Irish society is increasingly multi-cultural, multi-racial, multi-faith and multi-lingual. According to Census 2006, 10% of the 15-19 year old age group is non-Irish but the equivalent figure 0-4 year olds is 16%. Figures from the 2006 census relating to religion reveal that between 1991 and 2006 the number of people who stated they had no religion or “other religion” more than trebled, while those describing themselves as Catholic Irish fell from 87 to 80 percent. An insight into how accelerated this change is in Dublin was provided by Archbishop Diarmuid Martin when he recently stated that he had 90% of all Dublin schools under his control to cater for about 50% of the population who actively wanted a Catholic education.

And so it is clear, the almost exclusively white, single faith, English speaking Ireland of forty years ago has ceased to exist. The post-colonial, introspective, relatively poor Irish people of even a generation ago have been replaced by a confident, affluent and demanding population who increasingly define themselves according to European and world viewpoints rather than insular, narrow and even sectarian perspectives. And where better is this change to be seen today than in most primary schools that just a few years ago prepared children for the emigrant ships. There, in our primary schools, the children of new Ireland sit beside the children of immigrants – the new Irish.

So the governance structures of our schools must be modernised and changed not only to reflect the new Ireland but to help shape future Irish society. In order to consider potential change the evolution of current structures must be examined.

EVOLUTION OF TODAY’S SYSTEM

The root of Irish primary education can be found in the *Stanley Letter of 1831* (Coolahan, 1981 p12). This established a system of national schools which was never intended to be largely denominational, the underlying thinking being the provision of integrated schooling and the development of community cohesion. It was a system designed to banish “even the suspicion of proselytism” from schools, “wherein all denominations would be educated together in secular subjects and separate arrangements would be made for doctrinal instruction according to different denominational tenets”.

Despite this “brave but unsuccessful excursion into promoting community harmony and local cohesion” conflict soon ensued between churches and between the churches and the state regarding the control of schooling. The result of this was the development of a de facto denominational system although the state for some years

clung to the concept of a de jure multi-denominational or mixed system.

Post independence, the Constitution of the Irish Free State stated that “all citizens of the Irish Free State have the right to free elementary education”, making no change in existing governance arrangements. Subsequently, the 1937 Constitution specifically adopted the prevailing Catholic social teaching on the right of parents to choose the type of education for their children, which in turn, would be determined by the Catholic Church and by extension, other churches. The role of the state was formally relegated to a supportive or subsidiary role in education provision, “providing for free primary education” as opposed to “providing primary education”.

Ironically, Articles 42 and 44, which effectively copper-fastened church control of primary education, subsequently facilitated the emergence of change. A fledgling multi-denominational sector based largely on demands for more democratic managerial structures emerged with the establishment of the project schools, notably in Dalkey and Bray. This eventually led to the establishment of Educate Together, the first attempt to provide for diversity in Irish education although it is very clear that the state at the time did little to promote such schools.

Additional diversity was provided through support for the Gaelscoil movement facilitated by favourable transport arrangements and pupil teacher ratios. There are currently 168 Gaelscoileanna in Ireland, some of which are under denominational patronage and others are under the patronage of An Forús Patrúnachta, a private company, acting as a patron and establishing under its control denominational, inter-denominational and multi-denominational schools.

Although these developments have provided a limited amount of diversity, there is now a question mark over the state’s willingness or ability to support large scale provision for diversity, particularly in the context of a growing school population. More importantly, questions are also being raised about the suitability of the current system to meet changed circumstances, for despite recent change, it remains largely parochially organised, denominationally segregated and clerically managed.

There are, as I said, good reasons why school governance structures should be critically examined at this time.

ECONOMIC CHALLENGES

Firstly, it must be asked if the state, which since the Education Act of 1998 is responsible for building all new schools, can continue to make provision for every group of parents (with or without denominational or language group support) who wish to establish their own schools? Is it possible, never mind desirable, to have in every city, town and village different types of schools that reflect the individual wishes of each and every subset of parents living in a particular area? Already it is clear that attempts

thus far to provide for a limited amount of faith and linguistic diversity are directly responsible for many children being educated in substandard school conditions. It is also evident that perseverance with current policy will see further leapfrogging by some schools over others in the scramble to attract capital funding.

As Ireland becomes increasingly diverse, can or should our school system be expanded to such an extent as to reflect all forms of diversity, now or in the future? If the answer to that question is yes – then the only thing that is certain is that current and projected budgetary provision for school buildings is not just inadequate but woefully inadequate. The Education Act of 1998 provides little clear direction in this matter charging the Minister “to promote the right of parents to send their children to a school of the parents' choice having regard to the rights of patrons and the effective and efficient use of resources.” Is this piece of legislation, like so many others, to be interpreted by the judiciary on foot of citizens making applications to the courts to have their rights upheld? Failure by the state to legislate for special education provision led to court determinations, which although laudable, were not always made with knowledge and understanding of the education system. Is it not time for the politicians and policy makers to face up to very obvious responsibilities. If not, then at the very least, the implications of continuing with current policy should also be explained clearly to the tax payer and their consent obtained for political inactivity.

POLICY CONSIDERATIONS

Secondly, in Ireland to date, despite the fact that not all schools are under denominational governance or control, the *Primary School Curriculum* specifically states that the development of curriculum for religious education remains the responsibility of the different “church authorities”. Given this situation, what control, if any, can the State exert on curricular provision in relation to religious education? What would or indeed could happen if a group of parents wished, under an umbrella of religious education, to promote values which are contrary to the interests of the State? What action could the State take if it was clear that religious teaching in some schools ran counter to, for example, equality legislation? Are there any limits, checks or balances on what is to be taught? We all value religious freedom but should this freedom be so absolute as to prevent the State intervening if children were to be indoctrinated, radicalised or imbued with values contrary to the common good within the school system at the expense of the Exchequer?

SCHOOL BASED CONUNDRUMS

Thirdly, at school level, current regulations provide that no child shall receive or be present at any religious instruction at which “his” (sic) parents or guardian disapprove and religious instruction periods are to be fixed to facilitate withdrawal of children. At the same time the rules prescribe that a religious spirit should inform and vivify the whole work of the school. In most parts of Ireland choice of school does not exist, and all children are therefore obliged to be present during religious instruction because arrangements for withdrawal cannot be made. Even where arrangements can be made to withdraw children, the period for religious teaching can scarcely be fixed if a religious spirit is to inform the whole work of the school. Is this fair to anyone in the school? The parent who does not share the ethos of the school can still have fears about proselytisation. The teacher in the classroom is always open to the charge, while in many cases parents who actively support the school ethos and seek a particular denominational education for their children can see that education diluted.

But equally, what we can find in schools are local arrangements to accommodate diversity so much so that many denominational schools are now de facto multi-denominational while being de jure denominational, almost the complete reverse of 170 years ago. But as I have said, this is often unfair to children and parents and increasingly unfair to teachers, many of whom now find themselves providing religious instruction to a minority of their class pupils while being expected to provide alternative accommodation for the majority.

SCHOOL ENROLMENT POLICIES AND PRACTICES

The recent school places controversy in North Dublin led to the public spotlight being placed on school enrolment policies, particularly in Catholic schools. What received less coverage was the lengths to which many teachers, particularly principals, have gone to provide a school place for every child, to be inclusive and to work to the limits of existing regulations. And I want to pay a particular tribute to those principals who, day after day, had to meet parents face to face in their respective schools and attempt to explain the policy and provision failures of others.

But ironically this failure in provision by the State and the debate that followed posed questions which must be answered. For instance, what right does the State have to act if, having handed over control of a school to a patron body, that patron body subsequently excludes children on the basis of religion? What action can the State take against a patron body that either directly or indirectly engages in enrolment practices which effectively mean that significant numbers of children with special needs, newcomer children and children of Travellers are not enrolled in their schools? What

power does the State have to act where patrons decide to limit the intake of their schools despite increases in the school-going population at local level, simply to preserve their existing ethos or to maintain their existing size?

Thus far there has been much heat and very little light. We have heard a well argued opinion from the Equality Authority on the issue of enrolment and an equally cogent legal argument provided to the Catholic bishops. Preliminary advice obtained by the INTO seems to support the latter. But once again I want to argue that these should be policy issues, not legal arguments.

A PLURALITY OF PROVIDERS

It has been suggested by Archbishop Martin that future school governance would best be served by a plurality of providers. This suggestion needs to be considered carefully, not simply in economic terms, but also in operational terms. Because thus far, in spite of issues that I have raised a few moments ago, the Catholic school in many parts of the country has been and is the local national school, taking and welcoming, all comers. Does this proposal envisage a policy of retrenchment by the Catholic Church which would see enrolment in a smaller number of schools restricted to those who attend services or make financial contributions? Could the Catholic child of, for instance, a newly arrived worker from Poland be granted a place ahead of a child living beside the school? Could that child be forced to pass not only the school beside his or her house but several others before a school place is made available?

If such a scenario were to come to pass key issues need to be examined such as where and by whom will decisions relating to transfer of patronage be made? Will there be local consultation and decision making or will decisions be taken over the heads of local communities? To whom will patronage be transferred? What rights will teachers have in schools to be transferred and schools to be retained?

Therefore, while a plurality of providers might at first appear attractive it will undoubtedly mean increased expenditure, fragmentation of provision and could lead to the development of a two tiered system. It could be, albeit unwittingly, the catalyst for an even more segregated system. It could be the end of a commitment to public education by the majority church and the start of a substantial private sector at primary level? Given the substantial role that the Catholic Church plays in the education sector these are issues which must be urgently clarified.

I believe strongly that everything possible should be done to avoid the development, by accident or design, of a two tier system. For all its faults, one of the great strengths of the system this far has been the local primary school in which all children are enrolled.

A natural consequence of segregation is that different groups segregated by language or faith, gain little or no understanding or experience of each other. Is such a

scenario desirable? Segregated provision will have implications for societal cohesion and overall well-being and the state has responsibilities for the present and future cohesion of society which it cannot ignore any longer.

A THIRD WAY?

In relation to enrolment, I want to say that I respect the right of a parent to choose religious education for their child. But should this right be extended to the provision of a denominational school? So if segregation on religious grounds is to be rejected and the parent's right to choose a religious education for their child is to be respected, is it possible to envision a model of schooling that could accommodate both? I believe that the concept of a community national school should be explored fully, openly and transparently by all of the partners in education. Within such a concept, many options are possible including the provision of separate religious education or none for all groups. Alternatively, a common religious programme for all children with some separate instruction, perhaps for one or two classes per week could be arranged. A further arrangement could be a common programme during school hours with separate instruction after formal school hours.

Such arrangements exist at second level. Why can these not be replicated at primary? What is so special about religious education in primary schools that segregated schools are required when at post-primary, segregated classes will suffice? A similar argument can be made about segregation on the basis of language. At second level, different language streams operate successfully in the same school building and could not similar arrangements work at primary and if not, will someone tell me why?

Was Stanley's original plan of a non-denominational secular education for all children in the same school with separate religious education for all who opt for it so bad? It was certainly before its time, but has its time now come? All over the world there are now movements in educational provision. In Glasgow, that most divided of cities, there are shared campuses in operation. In the North, Sir George Bain's report on school provision proposes shared facilities. Can we not even debate the issues in public?

The Minister has indicated her intention to develop a community national school in North Dublin under the auspices of Co Dublin VEC. To date there has not been an open transparent debate on this proposal. Different groups have been invited to make observations to the Department but there has been no interaction between all the partners in education. Despite the announcement in February of this year (2007) there has been no public discussion of key issues such as school ethos, the teaching of religion or management structures which are matters of public interest. Neither, may I add, has there been meaningful engagement on teacher employment issues. But then given that nine months from opening day, the location of the school has not been

announced that is hardly surprising. Sadly, it appears that the DES has learned little from what happened this summer. I know that many teachers are fearful of change – I say the only choice we have is to face the issues and shape the structure or keep our heads down and live with the consequences.

Today, I therefore reiterate my call for a forum on the future of school governance in Ireland and I welcome the support given for this idea by the Fine Gael Spokesperson on Education and Science, Brian Hayes.

MANAGEMENT POLICY

It is also time to look at what I called at the outset “the creaking infrastructure” of school management. All over the country boards of management are under pressure on every front from attracting volunteers to accessing accurate and reliable information, so necessary in an ever more complex world. Is it not time that professional HR, legal and industrial relations advice, guidance and training was supplied to every board from a central source or from properly resourced regional structures.

I also believe that it is time to examine the effectiveness of a highly centralised Department trying to grapple with new and challenging situations in every part of the country. Much of what affects education is decided at local level. Is it not time to revisit the concept of local or regional structures? If this is to be done account must be taken of existing structures such as Regional offices and the VEC structures. I do not advocate the establishment of a health style bureaucracy but education cannot progress without adequate support for management. It might seem somewhat incongruous for a union leader to make such advocacy but in its absence, it is our members, particularly principals, who are making good the shortfall.

A fully functional effective management support system, organised on a national or regional basis, could be financed for a fraction of the cost of recent pay awards to politicians. We could of course continue with present practice – ignore the whole issue, let it evolve in response to local circumstances, make it up as we go along, wait for public reactions to crisis and decide what to do at the time, depending on what way the wind is blowing. Such inaction would be sheer folly for which future generations will pay a high price indeed.

CONCLUSIONS

What must not be allowed continue to happen is teachers in schools all over the country being left to pick up the pieces for public policy failures. There will be costs associated with any of the proposals that I have put forward and there will as always, be

resistance from some quarters to that. For proof of that all one has to do is look what has happened recently in the area of public service pay. Any salary negotiations affecting the public sector in Ireland attract commentary and the impending release of the Report of the Benchmarking Body is no exception. Demands for additional reform and productivity, usually dressed up in the language of modernisation are not new, especially from representatives of the private sector. But much recent commentary has gone far beyond that and the usual rhetoric. Instead, private sector representative organisations such as ISME have venomously attacked the public sector as over-paid, over-manned, under-worked and under-performing.

In their world, everything that is good stems from the private sector while the public sector is characterised as little more than an asset drain. But if current trends are to continue then the public sector will be expected to pick up the tab for the unrestrained capitalism and private sector greed of the last five years, exacerbated by government neglect and indolence during that time. For during recent years the Irish economy has been buoyed by the efforts of migrant and immigrant workers particularly in the building sector. The Irish private sector has shamelessly used these workers, not to drive down costs but to increase already inflated profits. The so called captains of industry are quite content to hire these workers on short-term contracts, at lower rates of pay, to finance their lavish lifestyles and expand their assets and then turn their back on any necessary societal investment. For them Ireland is just an economy, not a society.

Many of these workers, unable to afford a home of their own, are in rented accommodation and so at the mercy of another breed of Irish entrepreneur – the landlords and landladies prepared to supply the housing, usually concentrated in particular areas. Because of the availability of rented houses many of these workers are neighbours of economic and political refugees who have come to Ireland in the hope of a better life. But the sons and daughters of the bosses and the landlords do not sit side by side in school with the children of their tenants and immigrant workers. Rather they are part of a white flight, eagerly seeking out any segregated school setting where they can enrol their children where the State will pick up the tab. Is the state going to further facilitate this through inactivity and neglect?

The result of unrestrained capitalism and unbridled pursuit of profit by the private sector at the expense of any consideration of public good is that Ireland is becoming even more socially divided than heretofore. As our housing stock becomes more and more divided so too are the schools that serve those communities. But the private sector bosses who have reaped the rewards of years of unrestrained exploitation of workers and their families will not now accept that they have obligations towards finding a solution through paying for improved infrastructure and paying a fair wage to the teachers who work in schools. Those who have reaped the economic rewards must contribute to the development of our society.

Education, properly structured and resourced can make a significant contribution to the future development of our economy and our society. It is time to agree a credible and workable plan for future governance structures that will facilitate these goals.

This will require action from the State. Ireland's Ministers for Education fall into two distinct groups. There were those like Mulcahy who told the Dáil he was a kind of dungarees man who would "take the knock out of pipes" and Moylan who asserted he would not make "any drastic changes to either departmental policy or administration". On the other hand there were Donagh O'Malley who needs no citation and Colley who saw the absolute need for the Minister to plan and co-ordinate educational provision.

It remains to be seen into which camp this Minister will write herself.

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Report of Discussion Groups

INTRODUCTION

Following the General Secretary's presentation on School Governance, delegates had an opportunity to discuss the various issues raised. Responses from the various discussion groups, which were facilitated by members of the Education Committee, were collated, and are reported below.

No real consensus as to a way forward was apparent as a result of the discussions on school governance. However, there was a useful airing of the issues which are arising in Irish schools and a general acknowledgement of a pressing need for a response to a radically altered demographic profile.

SCHOOL SYSTEM

Delegates felt very strongly that quality and equality, which have been the hallmarks of our primary education system for many generations, should be maintained.

There was general agreement that the local school should reflect the society of the particular area in which it is set. It was also acknowledged, however, that this is too small a country to support a large degree of fragmentation, especially in small rural areas. There was a fear that such fragmentation might result in polarisation within local communities.

The consensus was for a completely new system modelled on the original concept of the national school, which would provide education for all children in their own locality regardless of race, faith, language or ethnic origin.

PATRONAGE

It was generally agreed that much more discussion and information was necessary before any informed debate could take place around the issue of patronage.

Although the possible advantages of the VEC model regarding funding and administration were acknowledged, delegates did not believe that adapting the present VEC model was the solution to the problem. Many were apprehensive about the possibility of political input in such a system.

ETHOS

Delegates generally believed that the moral base provided by the present, largely Catholic/Christian system, should be acknowledged and retained insofar as possible. However, it was strongly felt that faith formation and sacramental preparation should be matters for the churches concerned and that these bodies should be much more proactive in this regard.

EMPLOYMENT

The implications of a possible fixed-budget model and its effect on teacher employment were discussed. There was concern that, with budgetary constraints, younger, less-experienced staff might be perceived as more cost-effective in terms of salary payment.

Questions were also raised about the implications for teacher employment in the context of a plethora of faith-based schools. It was feared that undue emphasis would be placed on candidates' religious beliefs and practices – or lack thereof.

Some concerns were also expressed regarding redeployment and panel rights in any new system.

CONCLUSION

However, it is important and significant to report that, rather than dealing with the impact of any radical change on their own conditions of employment, delegates generally concentrated on the consequences for their pupils and for society as a whole.

In conclusion, it was agreed that delegates should echo John Carr's call for a forum on school governance. A proper debate, involving all interested parties is needed, to ensure equality in the system.

It is vitally important that the INTO be the strongest possible voice on this issue.

Plenary Discussion

A plenary session took place during the consultative conference following the discussion groups. Below is an edited version of the discussion. Questions and comments are outlined in blue. Responses from the panel to the questions and comments then follow. The panel members were John Carr, General Secretary, Sheila Nunan, General Treasurer, Peter Mullan, Press Officer, Brendan Harron, Senior Official. Mary Cawley, Cathaoirleach of the Education Committee chaired the session.

John, I would like to ask you if you think that sufficient consideration is being given by the relevant officials to the experience of other European countries, those who have had more disparate communities than we have had and obviously had a great deal of experience. Do you think that is being taken into consideration and is there any provision for using that in planning for the future?

Albert Doherty, Carndonagh/Moville

How far down the road do you believe are community primary schools and has the Minister shared information with the union?

Maurice Laide, Tralee

John, I want to congratulate you on your excellent presentation. You raised some very good questions. Did you ask the Minister these questions and did she reply. If not, are you going to?

John Boyle, CEC

Rather than asking the panel a question I was hoping that the panel might be prepared to ask the delegates who are present in the hall how many of them are in favour of the retention of the current structures, particularly around governance and the type of patronage that we have and especially around denominational education at a time when Ireland is changing so fast.

John Conroy, Dublin City North

Just to add to what John has said, I think one of the weaknesses down the years in our country is the lack of forward planning. We are terrible for just waiting for something to happen and then reacting. I think we have a huge challenge here. The challenge is

to get what is happening right and I hope that this will, maybe once and for all, reshape the way our government starts to look and plan for our future.

Mary Cawley, Chairperson

Can I go back to John Boyle's question about how many people in the room would favour the retention of current structures? Could we just have a show of hands for the number of people who would favour the retention of current structures please? Those against? It is about 50/50 with a lot of people undecided.

Sorry chairperson, a lot of the people beside me are asking for clarification. What is the alternative? I suppose what I was thinking of in terms of as alternative is the model that John espoused earlier on of a community primary school along the lines of the community post-primary schools that we have at the moment.

Mary Cawley

I will pass some of the questions over to John.

John Carr

Sheila Nunan and Peter Mullan, who worked with me on this on the speech, are with me. Brendan Harron is here too in case there are any questions in relation to Northern Ireland. So I will ask Sheila to take some of the questions.

Sheila Nunan

Regarding the question on the experience in other countries, we are not aware if the Department has looked very comprehensively at practice in European countries. I think, as John has said himself, our major concern here is that they are inviting individual partners like INTO and the management bodies separately and individually to talk. The other question, specifically how far down the road we are – we are very far down the road. It is the Department's intention from next September to open its first Community Primary School and it is anticipated that they would be following with some further schools in the years after that. That is a very narrow window. Leaving aside the broader issues in terms of the faith issues, it is a very narrow window for direct negotiations on the managerial structure, the protection we need for our members and the representations on the Board. But that is the timescale that is currently operating, so we will see a new school in September 08.

John Carr

In relation to Maurice's question, "did I ask the Minister?" – no, I did not. I have discussed this in general terms with the Minister. I think everybody is at sea in relation to the best avenue to pursue at this particular time. Should it be the community school

model, with children separating for religious education? The concern that I have – say in a developing area is that in new areas a school would be given to one patron body, another to a different group, with the State being responsible for the rest. The danger then is that the Community National schools will become the place where others won't want to go. And the new-comer children will be obliged to enrol in those schools, and our Traveller children will end up in those schools, because the other denominational schools will be full up, thereby creating the two tiered system. The Minister is concerned about the possible segregation of pupils, but I know that other deputies, for instance Brian Lenehan, have a very strong view because they come from constituencies where there are a lot of new-come people. They have very strong views in relation to the community school model. The Minister is playing a 'wait and see' game. Everybody is talking vertically, no one is talking laterally, and it is only if we sit down and try to interrogate each others' value stances and the difficulties that may arise, will we develop an appropriate model for this century. If we get it wrong at this juncture, we will have created insurmountable difficulties for the future. So it is important that we get it right. All I want to do today is to open up a debate and reiterate our call for a forum. The establishment of such a forum would at least enable everybody to outline their views.

As I said earlier, Bishop Martin has very valid points. There are at least nine new schools being set up in North County Dublin. There is a concern that we will be making decisions on the basis of ad hoc arrangements and expediency. The State should be asking the question: 'where are we going, with not alone schooling, but with social cohesion in this country and how best can we achieve that through our schooling system'. God knows we have enough segregation involving post-primary schools in certain fee paying schools. Let's not do the same at primary level.

Regarding the question about the lack of forward planning, that is part of the problem. Who would have said, even five years ago, that we would have the issues that we have today. The Minister's announcement last February of the Community National School followed a statement from the INTO to a journalist demanding a new model of schooling. But we have been saying this for a long time. We have been arguing that the way forward is to provide religious education in schools and let denominations be responsible for their own faith formation. That would enable every child to be educated in the same school. There is a view, for some a valid view, that perhaps there shouldn't be any religion taught in schools at all. There is, however, another view which I have supported in my speech, that every child should have access to religious education in primary school. It is a matter of respecting and attempting to accommodate the rights of all people. I have put forward the view that the Community National School, where every child could go, irrespective of creed, race, colour or whatever, is