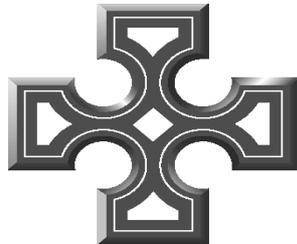


**THE CHURCH OF IRELAND GENERAL SYNOD
BOARD OF EDUCATION (RI)**



From: The General Synod Board of Education of the Church
of Ireland (Republic of Ireland).

Submission on:

Advancing School Autonomy in the Irish School System:

Consultation Paper published by the Department of Education and
Skills

29th January 2016

Introduction

The General Synod Board of Education for the Republic of Ireland, of the Church of Ireland considered the recently published Advancing School Autonomy in the Irish School System and makes the following observations as part of the invited consultation process in relation to the contents of that document:

The Board notes that an in-depth research document was published to support the consultation paper which outlines the available literature on the area of school autonomy and notes that various research literature has been referenced which supports the concept of increased school autonomy. The Board also notes that the view has been advanced in the consultation paper that “while the philosophical and ideological arguments for increasing school autonomy have some persuasive power, the evidence-based experiences are less persuasive and mean that changes to school autonomy must be carefully planned and delivered”. The Board would share the note of caution articulated by the DES in the consultation paper and agrees that experiences of seeking to advance school autonomy in both Northern Ireland and elsewhere in the United Kingdom are evidence that it is sensible to treat the concept of increasing school autonomy with appropriate caution.

Preliminary Remarks

The Board notes that a number of key areas are outlined in relation to school autonomy: staffing, budget, curriculum, governance and ethos. It is stated that advancing school autonomy on these key areas was part of the Programme for Government 2011 to 2016. The Board are unclear as to how the policies pursued in education could be said to have been orientated to harmonise with the stated aim of advancing school autonomy. For example, in the area of staffing, the passing of the Education (Amendment) Act, 2012 and the introduction of compulsory redeployment of teaching staff has resulted in less autonomy for Boards of Management in regards to the recruitment of staff. In terms of budgeting and financing, the amount of capitation funding was reduced significantly over the term of the last government and indeed the pupil teacher ratio at second level for Protestant fee-charging schools remains at a differentiated rate. In terms of curriculum, there are currently consultations in progress in relation to the proposed Education about Religious Beliefs and Ethics which is a movement by the State into the realm of teaching religious education in schools – a subject that heretofore has been a matter for the patron of the school. In terms of governance, the issuing of circular letters to schools on diverse issues concerning the management and governance of the school while there is a conflicting focus on the Rules for National Schools (in parallel) could hardly be said to represent a coherent policy of advancing and promoting autonomy within schools. In terms of ethos, this is a matter for the patron and the school yet in the same period of the last Programme for Government there was a Forum on Patronage and Pluralism. This sparked a widespread national debate on “divesting” from one patron body to another in the pursuit of introducing diversity to the types of schools available. The Board notes the comments made on page 20 of the consultation paper on this topic but takes issue with the opinion offered in that section, which is that “the paper encourages school authorities to use their autonomy to address these issues in ways that reflect the different context of each particular school”. The Board is unclear regarding to whom or to what the reference to “school authorities” refers (is it the Board of Management or the Patron?) and takes issue with the use of the word “autonomy” in this context. The Board wishes to advise the DES that, in its view and specifically with regard to Church of Ireland

schools, neither the Board of Management or the Patron has the authority initiate conversations among school communities regarding the patronage of the school as the Board of Management are accountable to the Patron for the upholding of the religious ethos of the school and the Patron is responsible to the Church community, under God, for the religious ethos as an inherent part of his or her office as bishop of the Church. The Board wishes to state that Church of Ireland schools are a valuable and essential part of the provision on the part to the Protestant minority in a modern pluralist Ireland. The Church of Ireland Patrons have no desire to have their schools “reshaped” or “reconfigured”. The Board, the Patrons and the Church community are strongly of the view that the schools currently serve to facilitate diversity in communities across the country and are valued by their parent bodies in that regard. The Board is disappointed not to see recognition by the State in this consultation paper of the important role undertaken by minority religious schools in Irish society and that the future “reshaping” or “reconfiguring” mentioned is essentially a matter for other patronage bodies to consider in their own particular context. While it is undoubtedly not the intention, the Board reads the section on school and “divestment” as suppression of freedom of association and operation under the specious nomenclature of autonomy. In that regard, the Board is puzzled by the opinion offered on page 20 of the consultation document “that there is no “one size fits all” approach to ensuring that all schools are inclusive and welcoming”. The Board wishes to state on behalf of all the Boards of Management, staff, parents and the Patrons of Church of Ireland schools that all our schools are inclusive and welcoming and this approach is based on an ethos of openness and acceptance of the school as being a community in its own right and belonging to the whole community.

In relation to the specific points raised at the beginning of the consultation paper on page 3, the Board makes the following observations:

Staffing

Schools are unable to have full autonomy over “their own staffing needs” as schools are subject to redeployment, in the first instance and secondly, the allocation of staff is based on pupil’s numbers. The Board further notes the challenging situation that pertains regarding the combining of resource hours for resource teachers.

Staff Allocation

The Board is unclear as what further autonomy is envisaged in regards to the allocation of teachers within the school by the principal as the principal currently has full autonomy in this regard under the Education Act 1998.

Role of parents and patronage

The patronage of schools being determined by a certain cohort of parents at a specific period in time could well be regarded as a destabilising force in the overall education system and the opposite to the role and purpose of the concept of patronage – which is to be a focus of surety and stability for the school in the community. If patronage can be destabilised intermittently then it is difficult to see how that patronage can have a meaningful expression within the school in the longer term. The Board would need to receive further clarification on how this suggestion might work in practice and the legal basis for the suggestion.

In this connection, the Board notes that there is reference to the “amendment of section 28 of the Education Act 1998 to provide a statutory basis for the developing a Parent and Student Charter”. The Board wishes to highlight that there has been no consultation with regard to this matter since it was first indicated in the public domain by the previous Minister for Education and Skills in 2012. The Education Act 1998 speaks about a “spirit of partnership”. The Board is concerned that such a major change to the equilibrium between the parent body and all other members of the school community is being introduced without any consultation with either the representatives of Boards of Management or the Patron bodies of Church of Ireland schools. As such, four years after the “parent’s charter” was first mentioned in the public domain, the Board remains unaware of its contents and what its role and purpose will be.

Devolved capital budget

In relation to the proposal to pilot an annual capital budget to schools, the Board suggests that the experience in Northern Ireland schools should be examined in this regard.

Use of school infrastructure by local community

In relation to the use of school infrastructure by the local communities: it is the understanding of the Board that this is already common practice in towns and villages around the country and the Board could cite a wide range of examples in this regard. The Board notes that this obligation already exists under the Education Act 1998. However the Board is very alarmed at the use of the word “control” in this context. The ownership of school premises does not, generally speaking, rest with the State but rather the individual school trustees or patron body. This is a matter of property law and the Board is unclear as to what is being proposed regarding this issue in the consultation document and would welcome clarification on this as a matter of priority.

Curriculum

In relation to the reference to the curriculum and its improvement of literacy and numeracy levels among students, it is the understanding of the Board, from attending briefing meetings with the Inspectorate, that the Literacy and Numeracy Strategy continues apace and that a document in relation to same which extend the strategy to 2020 was published only recently. The Board would be grateful for clarification on this issue if its understanding is incorrect.

Accountability

In relation to funding and budgeting, the Board notes the comment made on page 13 that “schools have a high degree of autonomy in managing these according to the needs of the school and the local circumstance”. The Board is unclear therefore why this matter is being raised in connection with advancing school autonomy. The Board notes however that there are numerous references in the consultation paper regarding the perceived need for increased levels of accountability and oversight regarding finances (and indeed there is reference on page 8 to increased need for professional services). The Board wishes to advise that all schools are obliged to produce annual accounts which, in accordance with the Governance Manual (at primary level) and the requirements of good governance generally, must either be audited or certified. These accounts, in turn, are subject to review by the patron body who, in the experience of the Board, would have them reviewed by an external accountancy body. The Board is therefore of the view that Boards of

Management are, generally, currently operating proper accounting procedures. Where it is found that this is not the case, then both management bodies and school patrons are duty bound to act against the Board in this regard. The DES has a role in this regard also. The Board is therefore unclear as to what is being suggested in the consultation document in the context of the suggestion that “there are real risks of mismanagement” and that there is “a further requirement for the development of mechanisms to ensure that schools account for such resources”. The Board is of the view that if it is intended by the DES that Education and Training Boards are to be given a role, on a statutory basis, in the management of funds in schools, then in the interests of honesty and transparency, this ought to have been stated in the consultation paper. The Board is unclear as to how such a development would advance the autonomy of school Boards of Management as Boards manage and are accountable for the management of their own funds currently. The Board is further unclear as to whether the suggestions contained in the consultation document regarding the management of funds relates to both primary and secondary level and, further to voluntary secondary schools. The Board cannot understand how the ETB’s could be given a role in managing the finances of a voluntary secondary school. Clarification on what exactly is being considered by the DES in this regard would be welcomed by the Board as a matter of priority.

In relation to other areas of accountability raised in the consultation paper (specifically page 25):

The proposal that the Boards of Management be required to report publically on a number of issues annually implies that Boards of Management do not do so already. It also seems to imply that schools are not subject to WSE inspections. The Board is very conscious of the extremely heavy workload that is placed upon principals in schools. Given that the majority of Church of Ireland primary schools are four teachers or less, the Board is acutely conscious of the administrative burden placed on teaching principals. The Board is of the strong view that this administrative burden should be reduced rather than increased and, notwithstanding the reservations expressed, would be interested in exploring how further financial support to primary schools might be achieved. The Board is of the view that increasing reporting beyond what is already required would be overly onerous is not realistic at the present time.

Conclusion

The Board welcomes the opportunity that the publication of the consultation document, albeit at the end of this current Programme for Government, has given to reflect further on the governance and functioning of our schools. A number of areas mentioned which may well provide scope for further more detailed consideration and in this regard, the Board is open to discussing the issues raised above further with the DES.

The Board suggests however that given the complexities of the issues involved and the fact that there are significant sectorial differences between primary and second level (and indeed within that latter sector); that two further consultation documents be drafted which separate out the issues raised as they pertain to the two sectors. This would allow for further clarity with regard to what exactly is being proposed.

Submitted to the Department of Education and Skills by the General Synod Board of Education (RI) of the Church of Ireland.

29th January 2016.

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