



CHURCH OF IRELAND

THE GENERAL SYNOD BOARD OF EDUCATION (Republic of Ireland)

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Submission to the Minister for Education and Skills on behalf of the General Synod Board of Education (RI) in relation to Budget 2014 as it relates to the Education Sector.

Executive Summary

The Church of Ireland Board of Education (RI) recognises and accepts that the public finances of the Irish State continue to be in chronic deficit. It understands that certain reductions to the provision of services to the public must be examined by Government in the on-going endeavour to balance the nation's finances with a view to the government regaining its sovereignty in respect of fiscal matters. In doing so, a challenge is presented and difficult choices have to be made. The Board recognises and understands this reality.

However, the Board strongly believes that **it is essential to the future wellbeing of the children in Irish classrooms along with the future of our country that frontline services in education be protected.** The Board is of the view that a decision to reduce frontline services (such as raising the PTR, increasing allocation thresholds further or reducing capitation funding to schools) is a simplistic and unfair means of achieving savings.

We are of the view that **funding for education should be prioritised at a Governmental level.**

We are of the view that the allocation of €8 Billion to the Department of Education and Skills is the absolute minimum required.

Surely this level of funding can be ring-fenced to properly resource the delivery of education to the young people of Ireland?

What better signal to send out to the world – particularly at this point in time in our nation's history – that whatever else, **Education is a priority for Ireland.**

We are also of the view that unequal resourcing reductions to primary education by the government are in conflict with **the State's Constitutional requirement to prioritise primary level education,** in the first instance.

This document elaborates on the points highlighted above.

1. Background

The Church of Ireland ranks second in the State in terms of the provision of primary schools with 174 schools under its Patronage. There are over 500 teachers teaching over 13,500 pupils in Church of Ireland Primary schools. These schools are managed and served by voluntary boards of management, with each board comprising eight members, giving a total of nearly 1,400 people voluntarily serving the provision of primary schools in the Anglican tradition across the Irish State. There are a further 24 primary schools under the Patronage of the Presbyterian Church, one under the Society of Friends and one under Patronage of the Methodist Church. We believe that the presence of all of these schools facilitates parental choice in Irish education and supports religious diversity within Irish society.

2. Education as a Right

Every child has the right to the best possible primary education. The State has a duty to provide for that education irrespective of financial concerns. Since 2010 the capitation grant to primary schools per pupil has been reduced from €200 to €176. Schools have been forced to increase their income by way fundraising and through voluntary contributions to deal with the resulting shortfall. The consistent draining of core funding to schools is resulting in parents having to substitute the running costs of schools and raises a significant question over whether the state is meeting its obligation to provide free primary level education. The Board is of the view that any decision by the Minister to further reduce capitation levels to schools would be a move into unconstitutional territory.

The obligation for the core funding of schools at primary level cannot be placed on parents.

3. Capital Funding

The Board joins its colleagues across the education system in calling for the restoration of the minor works grant. This funding was especially important to significant numbers of Church of Ireland and Protestant schools who, for historical reasons, occupy buildings which are older or constitute protected structures. The ceasing of the minor works grant has pushed such schools into very

difficult situations in terms of physical infrastructure. With the focus of DES capital expenditure being on “new builds”, the options for Boards of Management in this situation are limited.

Children and teachers in older school building are equally entitled to high standard classroom conditions as children and teachers in newer schools.

The Board believes that the withdrawal of the minor works grant creates a two-tiered approach to the provision of physical infrastructure at primary level, which is inequitable and not focused on the child.

In short: Making Do Won't Do!

4. Budgetary Targets

The Board understands that while the exact budgetary reductions sought from the education sector has not yet been determined, the figure mooted is in the region of €40 - €100 million.

It is further understood that a one point increase in the pupil to teacher ratio (ptr) at primary level will yield a “saving” of €20 million and, similarly, a further 1% reduction in capitation will yield a “saving” of €20million.

The Minister has argued that he is charged with “making the hard decisions”. The Board believes that to increase the ptr and/or decrease capitation levels is the easy option rather than the hard choice. Such an action is myopic and focused on the balance sheet rather than the child in the classroom and the furthering of teaching and learning.

The Board calls on the Minister to reject the calls from the Troika for further budgetary cuts in education or failing that, to look to other areas rather than front line services to make the required savings. In its submission the All-Party Oireachtas Committee on Education and Social Protection in June the Board outlined that:

The reality of life in a one and/or two teacher school is that the whole school – junior infants to sixth class – is in that one class or two classes. One and two teacher classrooms are multi-age, multi-grade, multi-ability with mainstreamed special needs students. Modern curricular demands and the Ministers strategies on literacy and numeracy, along with the increased amount of administrative work, all adds up to creating a very different school to that which existed twenty years ago. This is an extremely busy educational space and needs more resources, not less.

It is the belief of the Board that any view of modern education which thinks it acceptable for pupils to be in a classroom of upwards of thirty children is far removed from the needs of children as learners.

5. Educational Policy on Teaching and Learning

This Board has complemented the Minister and the Inspectorate on the introduction of the Literacy and Numeracy strategy. High standards in literacy and numeracy are vitally important not just to achieve higher rankings for Ireland education but also to the learning outcomes of the individual child and to aid the economic recovery of the country

A policy of raising the pupil teacher ration contradicts the learning centred approach of the literacy and numeracy strategy.

At a time of national economic collapse, it seems incongruous to contemplate a policy of further dilution of teaching levels and frontline services.

The Board would like to see evidence of a long term strategy in relation to Primary Education and asks that consideration be given to the effects that further reductions to school teaching and infrastructural supports will have on learning outcomes for pupils and also the economic recovery of our nation.

6. Costs to schools

In October 2012 and again in June 2013, representatives of the Board highlighted to the Oireachtas All-Party Committee on Education and Social Protection the numerous indirect costs on schools. One of the proposals submitted by the Board was for schools to be exempt from VAT for certain goods and services in entirety. It seems illogical that schools receive funding from the State, but are obliged to return a significant part of this funding to the State through VAT on such items as oil, gas and electricity. At a time when many schools are finding it difficult to keep their heads above water, the Board requests that the DES and Revenue conduct an analysis of the loss to the State that a reduction in VAT (by even a number of percentage) would cost the State. In the view of the Board, this would be negligible to the State but hugely significant to the finances of schools. It would also send a signal that the Minister and Government recognise schools as community resources rather than treating them as private businesses.

7. The Role of Primary Schools with less than 2 Teachers

This Board is greatly concerned and anxious as to what Budget 2014 might contain in relation to “smaller” schools. Church of Ireland primary schools outside the Dublin area in particular, cater for a spatially dispersed community. Given that primary schools exist to serve children, it is essential that children living in rural areas have schools in proximity to their homes. A policy which overly focuses on the centralisation of primary schools would not recognise the reality of life outside urban areas.

This Board is greatly concerned that the provisions of Budget 2014 (and/or the forthcoming VFM Review of Small Schools) will threaten the futures of Church of Ireland Primary Schools across the country.

Any policy which seeks to close or “wind down” a school below 56 pupils (or two teachers) will have a disproportionate effect on the Protestant minority. Based on the returns of 2011/12, 97 of our schools have less than 56 pupils. That accounts for nearly 50% of all Protestant primary schools. To reiterate, a policy of closing schools under 56 pupils will close half the Protestant primary schools in Ireland.

The Board wishes to highlight the difficult situation that many of our schools are in following changes to teacher allocation thresholds in Budget 2011, especially in counties Cork and Donegal.

In making this submission, this Board is putting the Minister for Education and Skills on notice of the disproportionate effect that both further reductions in teacher allocations and/or a narrow-focused policy on “small schools” will have on Church of Ireland and Protestant Primary Schools.

8. Second level.

As the Minister will be aware, much of the representation regarding second level education for pupils from Church of Ireland and Reformed faith traditions is undertaken by the Council of School Governors, the broader Committee on Management for Protestant schools or, in relation to grant funding, the Protestant Secondary Education Committee.

This Board supports calls for the pupil teacher ratio for fee-charging secondary schools not to be increased in Budget 2014.

It is a matter of historical record (and was custom and practice for 40 years) that second level schools with Protestant affiliation were treated as part of the free scheme. This understanding was undone from 2008 onwards when ancillary grants were withdrawn and a higher pupil to teacher ratio was allocated, making a distinction between how secondary schools are allocated teachers. This was the first time in the history of the State that such a policy has been pursued and it is to the detriment of the young people in Protestant secondary schools. This Board is of the view that

Section 12 of the Education Act 1998 gives no such power to the Minister. While we are given to understand that successive Attorney General's have advised successive Ministers for Education and Skills that Article 44.2.4 of Bunreacht na hÉireann allows the State to make such a distinction, these advices have never been made available despite numerous requests to the Department of Education and Skills, along with assurances from the Minister that he would take action to allow the advices be made available.

As has been widely reported in the media, a significant number of such schools have engaged directly in discussions with the Department of Education and Skills regarding their futures. Those schools are entering those discussions in good faith and, with good will, are coming to the Minister and his Department to seek certainty on how the schools might best serve the Protestant minority into the future.

Maintaining the confidence of parents in the school and certainty regarding the schools future is essential to Protestant schools and their mission of serving young people from minority Reformed Protestant religious traditions.

Schools currently are dealing with the implications of a second rise in the pupil teacher ratio while concurrently be engaging in discussions regarding their futures and new configurations.

We are of the view that placing schools in this scenario is unfair and a distraction from their core work of teaching and learning.

The Board takes the view that alleviation of the differentiated the pupil teacher ratio level in Budget 2014 would clearly demonstrate that the Minister and his Department are working with the schools regarding their futures.

The Minister will recall the assurances he gave at the meeting between representatives of this Board, led by the Archbishop of Dublin and Glendalough, with Minister for Education and Skills, Ruairí Quinn and An Taoiseach Enda Kenny, in relation to the future of the "block grant" to Protestant parents. The Board was relieved to be assured that this vitally important grant is recognised as such by the present Government and that its future is secure.

9. Conclusion

The Board is mandated by the schools which it represents to voice its opposition to further reductions to the provision of education resources.

The Board is aware that discussions are on-going regarding the global amount to be removed from State funding. It is our position that funding for Education should not be reduced in Budget 2014. As recently as 2012 and 2013, funding for Education was reduced by €200 million.

Indications are that up to €100 million is being contemplated for Budget 2014.

This level of funding reduction is simply too much for the education system to cope with.

The long term future recovery of nation will be undermined but more importantly, the child in the classroom will not get the level and quality of education he/she deserves.

This damage cannot be undone for generations.

Ends.

- Submitted on behalf of the General Synod Board of Education of the Church of Ireland (RI). 24th Sept 2013

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