

GENERAL SYNOD 2014

BOARD OF EDUCATION N.I.

Proposed by Canon Bryan Kerr – Diocese of Clogher

EMBARGOED UNTIL DELIVERY

CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY

In proposing the adoption of the Board of Education Report, I would wish to draw Synod's attention to a few matters within it:

1. ESA “The Education Bill to enable the establishment of the Education and Skills Authority (ESA) has not yet been passed by the Northern Ireland Assembly.” (p.286). “the political impasse is placing a great strain on the existing Education and Library Boards (ELBs)” (p.287).

The path to Review of Public Administration in Education has been long and tortuous; and the ESA project now seems to be stalled. There is also no doubt that the strain upon Boards due to staffing restrictions is having a serious impact upon support services to schools. This impasse cannot go on indefinitely.

The Minister has stated in recent weeks, that due to the lack of political consensus on ESA, his focus has changed to finding a solution by rationalising the number of Education and Library Boards. It is clear that Boards are going to have to be adjusted anyway before 2015 when the area boundaries will no longer match council areas of Northern Ireland with the formation of the ‘super-councils’. It is our understanding that to make any change to Board areas will require political agreement and legislation.

The transferor churches are fully supportive of change to educational administration in Northern Ireland - it is necessary to achieve better use of scarce resources and harmonisation of policies across NI. However it must be done in a way which delivers parity of treatment for all sectors of schools. It is our view that to move forward with the present ESA legislation or a slimmed down Board structure will not address an inequality affecting the controlled sector of schools which will remain without a coherent support body.

2. Controlled Sector Support Body More will be said about this during our debate on the motion following this report; however at this stage we simply wish to encourage the minister and all political parties to seek an agreed way forward for educational administration which enables all types of schools to feel equally valued and supported.

There has been much made recently in some press reports about underachievement in Protestant working class areas. Underachievement is a complex matter, and is not solely a problem for Controlled schools. It has a community dimension, and is associated with low levels of parental and pupil aspiration. A Controlled Sector Support Body well tuned-in to the problem could help schools develop and share strategies to promote a culture of learning and enable children and young people to achieve their full potential.

3. Shared Education: In recent years the Church of Ireland, Presbyterian and Methodist churches have affirmed their strong support for shared education in Northern Ireland. In practice, this can only be achieved by finding the most appropriate local approach to sharing— there is no one fixed model and arrangements for schools sharing will vary across Northern Ireland.

I would want to mention a recent development, of which I am aware locally, that is, the moves towards a shared primary school campus in Brookeborough, Co. Fermanagh. The two primary schools (St Mary's Catholic Primary School and Brookeborough Controlled Primary School) have enjoyed a close relationship for some forty years, and with the support of the Western Education and Library Board and the Council for Catholic Maintained Schools have submitted a proposal to the Department of Education to relocate both schools to a shared campus. A recent survey indicated that some 93% of respondents locally were in favour of such a move, which safeguards educational provision in the heart of the village, allows children to learn and grow together, whilst respecting ethos, identity and culture.

Shared education is surely a good model contributing to a better society in Northern Ireland as it moves forward from its difficult past. Sharing enables children who will eventually live and work in society to spend some of their childhood learning alongside children from other traditions. Shared education seems to offer one way to help these things happen, not by dismissing differences but by helping schools to become interdependent and making the boundaries between them porous.

4. Thanks It would also be appropriate to express a word of thanks to all Church members who are involved in the work of education, not only teachers and members of staff, but also those who give of their time and expertise to serve as Governors in local schools.

A word of thanks also to Renee English and Margaret Yarr, Child Protection Officers, for their guidance and assistance to parishes in implementing Safeguarding Trust and to Claire Geoghegan for her work in administering the AccessNI checks.

Safeguarding Trust now has a dedicated website – full information is in the latest edition of Newsbrief available at the Board of Education stall. On the website you will find updates, information, contact details and links to Access NI forms. The site is still under

development however it is hoped that it will become an important support and information point for clergy and parish panels.

On page 285 of the Report you will see that some of the Board's aims are:

- [To] Liaise with other churches within the Transferor Representatives' Council (TRC) to promote the interests and safeguard the rights of transferors in the future;
- [To] Make submissions to relevant government consultations in particular regarding legislative changes to establish the new Education and Skills Authority (ESA) and the proposed Controlled Sector Body;

The Board would like to place on record its appreciation of the excellent co-operation with representatives of the other two transferor churches; together they have been a strong team presenting the views and defending the rights of transferors. In particular we would like to thank Revd Trevor Gribben Secretary to the Presbyterian Church in Ireland Board of Education and Rev Donald Ker, acting secretary to the Methodist Church in Ireland Board of Education, for their support over the past year.

We also owe a great debt of gratitude to the Secretary to the Board of Education (NI), Rev. Dr Ian Ellis for his knowledge, patience and quiet persistence, and we want to congratulate him on the recent award of a Doctorate in Education from Queen's University, Belfast.

I propose the adoption of the Report of the Board of Education.