

## **Board of Education Report**

**Proposer: The Revd Canon Jennifer McWhirter**

**Embargo Until Delivery • Check Against Delivery**

This report can be found on page 259 and following in the Book of Reports.

One of the five marks of Mission of the Anglican Communion is ‘to teach’ and the involvement of the church in education springs from the very core of the church as a community. Where there is a strong connection between the school and the parish, the latter can benefit greatly, and having a primary school in a parish can be hugely enriching for parish life, which I have personally experienced in my previous parish. The involvement, therefore, of the church in education is inherent to the personality and character of the Church as a community.

With that in mind, I wish to draw your attention to a couple of issues highlighted in the report from the perspective of the Republic of Ireland.

The first is the cost of living crisis, which is mentioned under section 4b on page 262. We have all heard about, and been affected by, the cost of living crisis, no matter which side of the border you live. Escalating rates of inflation, increases in the cost of food and fuel, for both our cars and our homes, mean that since the end of 2021, the cost-of-living crisis has dominated the lives of people in Ireland. Fuel prices, food and groceries, heating, accommodation, and leisure have all increased significantly. As these costs increase so families find their disposable income at an all-time low.

The use of food banks has risen exponentially during the last year. A Barnardo’s survey conducted in November 2022 showed that 10% of parents in Ireland had used food banks, compared to just 4% in a similar survey conducted in January 2022, and anecdotally this number has increased in the months between then and now. This same cost of living crisis has impacted heavily on schools. Increases in the cost of heating and lighting of schools, together with increased insurance bills and the untimely delay in payments of minor works and capitation grants by the Department of Education, which has seen funds due at the end of February only being paid to schools in recent days, has meant that some National Schools have only a few hundred euro in their bank accounts at present or have gone into deficit in order to pay staff such as caretakers and secretaries. Secondary schools under Protestant ethos have found themselves excluded from direct funding under the free scheme since 2009 as they are fee-charging schools. This places them in a particularly difficult situation as they have a fixed income and have no recourse to the usual sources of state funding.

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The Board understands that the Department is continuing to take a ‘case by case’ approach to the availability of additional ‘cost of living’ funding to such schools. While there has been an increase in the recent budget, this has yet to trickle down into school bank accounts. I am sure that some of you who are on Select Vestries across the country have had similar discussions in the last few months about the increased cost of heating and lighting churches and church halls and can therefore understand the increased pressures on schools at this time. One way this is manifesting itself is the huge difficulty in getting teachers and support staff to take positions, most especially in Dublin, but also in other cities. Anecdotally one Dublin principal related that whereas in previous years they might have expected 200-300 applications per job now they might only receive 5 or 6 per job and some smaller schools are having to advertise jobs several times in order to receive any applications at all. While this has been problematic for a few years the cost of living crisis has brought it into fine focus for those trying to employ teaching and support staff in city schools.

The second issue is the humanitarian crisis in Ukraine, which is under section 5 on page 263. The arrival of refugees from Ukraine into Ireland has resulted in over 13,000 Ukrainian children being enrolled in schools at both primary and secondary level since the war began. Although a request was submitted to the Department of Education they advised that specific figures for the number of Ukrainian children currently enrolled in Church of Ireland National Schools, or secondary schools under Protestant ethos, or indeed any specific breakdown of these figures, was not generally available.

These children have been welcomed into our schools, which have been very generous and supportive, but unlike the Syrian refugee crisis of 20 or so years ago, no additional funding has been forthcoming from the Department of Education to help with their integration and learning. This means that any expense incurred in the integration of these children into our schools has been done entirely with the use of private resources, costs falling to private individuals or being absorbed directly by the schools themselves. Extending from, but not limited to, the provision of work books, free hot lunches, bus tickets and technology to support the children. Our schools, being smaller than other national schools as they can be, are displaying a welcoming, approachable and openness in welcoming such children, and it is my belief that our schools can often have a greater sense of community and family as we welcome children from Ukraine.

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In gathering comments and feedback from national schools in Dublin, Wexford, Cork and Mayo the same issues came up regarding the settling of Ukrainian children into our schools.

The first is communication. The children who have started attending primary schools mostly have no English, and for a lot of them their parents speak no English either. Trying to teach children in a language that they have a limited understanding of is difficult to say the least, even with the use of translation apps on phones and tablets. One principal related difficulties with the translation apps for a child in Junior Infants who couldn't type in what he wanted to say in his own language. A speech app proved to be just as problematic as his pronunciation of the words in his own language was child-like, as you'd expect of a child of his age, and the speech app couldn't recognise what he was saying. There seems to be different levels of efficiency in getting additional language hours paid for by the Department in order to help the Ukrainian children with their English, and even when hours are given by the Department there aren't always teachers available to fulfil these hours, although one school related that the Department have allowed them to bank these hours for future use.

The second issue is working with trauma. The children coming to school from Ukraine, and their parents, have had their lives turned upside down and suffer from trauma. While schools can offer support as best they can, some children act out due to their trauma which can cause disruption in the classroom. Thirdly the transient nature of those refugees. All the schools I spoke with related the frustration and upset caused when children are integrated into their schools and they are then, along with their families, are moved somewhere else. While not in the control of the Department of Education it can be re-traumatising for a child to settle in school and then be uprooted once again away from the friends and community into which they have become connected and settled. This upset extends to the whole school, and sometimes parish, community when families have been welcomed and supported and a huge amount of work has gone into their being settled in school.

Finally across the board there has been the desire of principals to provide in their schools a safe and happy environment for the Ukrainian children in their care, with one principal going so far as to say that this has been the primary goal, and the learning that the children experience is secondary. Church of Ireland communities across the country have rallied around the Ukrainian children enrolled in their schools with one school providing pencil cases for the children, and

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seeing a huge response when an appeal went out for spare lunch boxes and school bags so the children didn't have to bring their lunch to school in the paper bag provided by the hotel in which they were staying with their room number as the only identifying mark. The huge response by our school communities in welcoming Ukrainian children and their families is not to be underestimated, but neither is the benefit each of those principals reported to their school communities. I would like to point out that these are snapshots from these places and it remains to be seen whether this is the experience of Church of Ireland national schools across the country.

In conclusion tribute must be paid to the teachers, auxiliary staff and Boards of Management who work so hard to ensure the children in our schools receive the best education available to them. The current Boards of Management in all our national schools conclude their term of office in November this year and thanks is due to them all for the, often unsung, work and commitment, in terms of time and expertise, they give to their schools. Our school communities are better for it. Having said all that, it gives me great pleasure to propose the report of the General Synod Board of Education.