

Independent Strategic Review of Education
A Paper Prepared for Consultation
June 2006

A response from the Catholic Bishops of Northern Ireland

1. The Catholic Bishops welcome the setting up of the Strategic Review of Education and wish to enter into constructive dialogue with the Review Team. The Bishops are not just distant observers in the field of education. As Trustees – along with Religious Congregations¹ – of almost half of Northern Ireland’s schools, we are very well aware of both the requirements of the new curriculum and the Entitlement Framework, and the reality of demographic downturn. Furthermore, we wish to repeat our commitment to the creation of a stable and peaceful society here and to maximise the contribution of Catholic schools to that process, alongside and in co-operation with other sectors. All this must happen within the context of giving value for the large amounts of public money spent on education. However, as education cannot be evaluated merely in terms of an economic activity alone, so too any rationalisation of the school estate cannot be based solely on economic considerations.
2. Northern Ireland has a uniquely complex educational structure, which is not simply a mirrored reflection of the historical tensions and identities in the society. Ownership of the school estate has developed in a range of ways at different stages in history and is thus in many hands. Only 43% of all pupils attend schools (‘controlled’) of which the state is the legal owner. The original owners of many of these schools (the Transferrors) still have specific rights. The remainder of schools have legal owners other than the state. The Catholic Bishops - together with the Religious Congregations who have schools here – are the major stakeholder in the entire school sector with 45% of Northern Ireland pupils attending schools, both maintained and voluntary, in Catholic Trusteeship. The remaining 12% are divided between contrasting and indeed often competing interests - Voluntary schools under Other Management, Grant Maintained Integrated, Irish medium, Other Maintained and Non Grant-Aided.²

Many of the current schools were constructed many decades ago, with little contribution from the public purse. In addition, there is a long history of under-funding of the Catholic sector. There needs to be

¹ Various Religious Congregations (Dominican Sisters, Christian Brothers etc) are the Trustees of about 20% of the Catholic post-primary schools (Maintained and Voluntary Grammar) in Northern Ireland and have right to be consulted in any process of change or restructuring. They are also Trustees for a number of primary schools.

² Cf Statistical Press Release, *Enrolments at Schools and in Funded Pre-School Education in Northern Ireland*, Department of Education for NI, 28 February 2006. Cf data in Table 1b.

recognition of the huge financial contribution made by Catholic parents, parishes, dioceses and religious congregations to building NI's education system. Full capital funding is a comparatively recent phenomenon and the Department of Education is at last making inroads into the chronic backlog of major works projects in Catholic schools. Local faith communities, not the state, were often the driving force behind Catholic schools. Any cavalier attitude to schools, which would deny the contribution made by local communities, would be unwelcome and unacceptable.

3. We are fully committed to engaging with the new realities. Along with the other Catholic Trustees – as well as leaders and teachers in Catholic academic institutions - we have repeatedly shown our willingness to contribute to the creation of a 21st century education system that benefits all pupils and leads to a sound basis for the future for which we all have such strong hopes. However, we seek to implement changes in a way that is based on clear principles. In this process, we have already published two important documents, which received wide recognition and were concerned with
 - a. the distinctive philosophy of Catholic education and its contribution to the common good and to a just society;³
 - b. how Catholic schools can continue to make a key contribution to reconciliation in Northern Ireland.⁴

Catholic schools have a specific religious identity from which flows the particular philosophy of education in which faith, culture and life are brought into harmony and is based on:

- a. The dignity of the individual;
- b. The primacy of a rounded human formation where pupils' multiple intelligences can be promoted, including their emotional, moral, ethical and spiritual development;
- c. High expectations for all pupils;
- d. A commitment to social justice and to education as a moral enterprise, rather than to an educational model based on short-term or merely utilitarian principles;
- e. The key role of building educational communities as the locus for learning;
- f. Building identity, confidence, reconciliation and healthy communities in the wider society, and ensuring that schools can promote life-long learning for all;

³ *Proclaiming the Mission. The Distinctive Philosophy and Values of Catholic Education.* The Catholic Bishops of Northern Ireland, Armagh, 2001

⁴ *Building Peace, Shaping the Future.* The Catholic Bishops of Northern Ireland, Armagh, 2001

- g. Maximum collaboration with all educational providers and stakeholders in creating a stable, cohesive and creative society;
- h. A coherent system of provision that ensures access to the highest quality of educational opportunities for all young people.

These are principles, which are widely acknowledged by educationalists around the world to be core features in quality education. Thus Catholic schools do not seek to be kept separate from society but rather to continue to contribute to building a healthy and thriving society where all individuals, families and groups can live and celebrate their unique contribution to a diverse genuinely pluralist society. We would be concerned by any implication that a pluralist society is best served by removing the richness of diversity. Such an approach would be a contradiction of true pluralism. Thus, we welcome the Consultation document's commitment to "*pluralism, diversity and choice*" (para.16).

4. Explicitly faith-based education is not a phenomenon peculiar to NI. It exists in many countries and its development is promoted in England and Wales by the current Labour government at Westminster. Furthermore, the right to have such institutions is enshrined in many international charters. It would be a source of huge concern to very many people if the Strategic Review did not ensure that faith-based education remains a choice available to all parents across Northern Ireland. While some schools may claim to be 'broadly Christian in character', the Catholic managed sector here is currently the only one to provide an explicitly faith based worldview and vision. We recognise that some parents would want the right to choose a secular school, without any religious character. They are entitled to support from the public purse in pursuing this choice. However, it would be unacceptable if – in the long term - only that preference was to be seen as normative and other choices portrayed as somehow pandering to peculiar minority interests.

In our submission to the consultation on the Review of Public Administration (30th September 2005) we wrote: "*The right of faith communities to provide and of parents to have a system of education which reflects their philosophical and religious convictions is firmly established in international instruments of human rights. The European Convention on Human Rights, Protocol 1 (1951) Article 2, for example, states that 'In the exercise of any functions which it assumes in relation to education and teaching, the state shall respect the right of parents to ensure such education and teaching as is in conformity with their own religious and philosophical convictions.'* The United Nations

International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (1966) Article 13 (3) upholds 'the liberty of parents . . . to choose for their children schools . . . which conform to such minimum educational standards as may be laid down or approved by the state and to ensure the religious and moral education of their children in conformity with their own convictions.' This in turn confirms the fundamental principle enunciated in the Universal Declaration on Human Rights (1948), Article 26 (3) that 'Parents shall have a prior right to choose the kind of education that shall be given to their children.'

It is precisely in response to this right of parents to choose an education in conformity with their own convictions and in exercise of the Church's right to pursue its mission in a free and pluralist society that Catholic and other faith-based schools exist. The British and Irish Governments have and continue to recognise this right in providing for and promoting a diverse system of education, which includes faith-based schools managed and maintained by the Churches.

Over the years this desire of Catholic parents for Catholic schools has been proved by the financial sacrifices accepted by parents to provide a network of primary and post-primary schools serving every parish in Northern Ireland. However, this does not exclude and should not be seen to exclude other children – particularly children from other denominations – whose parents accept the Mission Statement and Aims of the school. In principle and in practice, Catholic schools are open to children of all denominations. Indeed, the presence of children from other denominations and other religious backgrounds is seen as an enrichment of the education experience offered by the school and a practical expression of the inherent commitment of a Catholic school to inclusivity.”

It would therefore be a source of huge concern if the Strategic Review did not ensure that all parents across Northern Ireland continue to have the choice of a faith-based education.

We note in par.10 of the Review document that the education system should accommodate "*reasonable parental choice in relation to the values and ethos of schools with due regard to the use of public funds*". There would need to be clarity as to the interpretation of the word 'reasonable'.

5. It would be unfortunate if the Review were to give credence to the trite assumption that a Catholic school was just a school for Catholics, merely a place where Catholic religious teaching was communicated to the pupils, in the Religious Education classes and elsewhere. Catholic education, in fact, is both motivated by a particular philosophy of education, and committed to transmitting a particular *Weltanschauung* where solidarity, justice and human dignity are core elements. Thus a religious perspective on the world is handed on by the experience of solidarity in a learning community. In an increasingly individualist world, it is not without good reason that faith-based schools are in huge demand.

Catholic schools are thus not based on a desire for a sort of separateness but are motivated by a commitment to contribute to the common good, by creating communities of hope. For this reason, there is much resentment at any blithe description of education here as ‘segregated’. Northern Ireland does not have a segregated system, in the sense that anyone is banned from attending a particular type of school because of their religious or ethnic background. We certainly do have a diverse system of education within a pluralist society, based on equality and human rights. That system bears the scars of our turbulent and painful history. But no contribution is made to a genuinely pluralist society by someone who imagines that all those who are out of step with his/her ‘enlightened’ educational and political vision have somehow capriciously chosen to indulge themselves as recidivist segregationists. The *bona fides* of all sectors currently involved in education should be recognised if we are to create a genuinely pluralist system.

6. We welcome the distinction made between ‘integrated education’ and ‘integrating education’ and acknowledge the implied recognition (para 2) that it is not only ‘Integrated’ schools which are actively involved in reaching across traditional divisions. The Department of Education has, until now, sought to fulfil its obligation under the 1989 ERO to ‘facilitate and promote integrated education’ by focusing almost exclusively on the work of the Integrated Education movement. This has led to the bizarre situation where some schools with the ‘Integrated’ label have a less mixed population than their neighbouring non Integrated schools. The transformation process has also led to situations where a failing school claims the title ‘integrated’ as their only hope of survival – but often fail to deliver any appreciable degree of integration, while still retaining the title. We would thus caution against any glib use of ‘integrated education’ and would indeed welcome a definition of how it is to be understood in the current debate. We are certainly clear that,

whatever its merits, the 'Integrated Education' movement does not have any monopoly on reconciliation, tolerance etc. We recognise the Consultation Paper's implied acceptance that acknowledgement should now be given to *all* those schools which have been able to cross perceived cultural, religious and social barriers, taking account of their particular environment. Furthermore, this should not lead to an implied second-class status for those schools, which – because of their catchment area – are not currently in a position to have appreciable 'integration'. Very many of them have done Trojan work in very difficult circumstances and have made their own huge contribution to promoting peace and reconciliation.

We believe that an explicitly faith-based school may well succeed in promoting the integration of society precisely because of its faith convictions and not - as occasionally some would have us believe - despite them.⁵ Such a school may well be capable of making at least as great a contribution to reconciliation and understanding as some of those who carry the label 'integrated' with a capital I.

In fact, in accordance with the philosophy of Catholic Education, all Catholic schools should be making such a contribution as a matter of principle. In that context we recall the statement in the Consultation document on the Review of Public Administration: "*Young people are carrying the legacy of the past learning within a culture where segregation has been the norm for many.*" This statement is very simplistic and offensive to those many teachers and schools which over the years have been a bulwark of tolerance, peace-making and respect for diversity in our society.

7. As Trustees, we have always demonstrated our commitment to the raising of educational standards in Catholic schools, both maintained and voluntary. Having looked at a wide range of data - much of which is published by the Department of Education for Northern Ireland - we are clear that Catholic schools have provided a uniquely successful education in Northern Ireland. This merely replicates the situation in other countries and in Britain. Despite appreciably higher levels of Free

⁵ One example – among many - of such a commitment to peace building was the Churches' Peace Education Programme. This initiative – begun in 1978 by the Irish Council of Churches and the Catholic Church – is just one indicator that faith-based education actively places reconciliation at the core of its work. We include a copy of the recent review of this programme, commissioned jointly from Stranmillis University College and St. Mary's University College. The purpose of the Review was to evaluate the work of the project till now and propose new ways for it to continue with its unique contribution

School Meal Entitlement,⁶ - which one might expect should indicate lower levels of achievement - Catholic schools have produced striking results which actually outperform other sectors at all levels.⁷ We would argue that this is due to the fact that learning is enhanced by community cohesion, shared vision and shared language codes. The challenge for us is to retain our place in the educational spectrum here so that our schools can continue to set the pace and offer this excellence in education to all. It would be economically unjustifiable to endanger this excellence under the pretext of providing value for money.

8. It is true that education absorbs a major part of public sector investment and well educated young people contribute to economic development. However, education is more than just an economic activity. Communities play a major educational role in educating young people. Healthy communities make a huge contribution to education and to social stability. Good schools both benefit from, and contribute to social cohesion through their relationship with healthy communities. Thus any rationalisation cannot be based on economic considerations alone. The Bishops are clear that any rationalisation which neglects the reality of active community building will be based on poor economic calculations. Once social capital has been spent or destroyed, it is very difficult to replenish. Fragmented communities exact a huge price on those who

⁶ Free School Meal Entitlement

Primary:	Irish Medium	35.4%	Post-Primary	Irish Medium	35.5%
	Cath Maintained	24.6%		Cath Maintained	34.4%
	Controlled	15.4%		Cont Integrated	23.4%
	Cont Integrated	18.2%		Controlled	21.0%
	GM Integrated	14.3%		GM Integrated	20.5%
			Cath VG	10.6%	
			Cont Grammar	3.9%	
			Other VG	2.9%	

Figures for School Year 2005/6. Statistical Press Release 28 Feb 2006, Department of Education for NI, Table 3b

⁷ “The proportion of pupils at schools under Catholic management who achieved 2 or more A levels or equivalent was higher than the proportion of pupils at schools under Other Management at 44% and 40.8% respectively. Some 81.7% of pupils at grammar schools under Catholic management achieved 2 or more A levels or equivalent, as did 22.3% of pupils at secondary schools under Catholic management. For schools under Other management the equivalent figures were 79.1% and 14.6%.

A higher proportion of pupils leaving grammar schools under Catholic management attend Institutions of Higher Education (73.6%) than pupils leaving grammar schools under Other management (70.8%) A similar trend emerges for secondary school leavers with 17.1% of pupils from secondary schools under Catholic management continuing to Institutes of Higher Education and 9.7% of pupils from secondary schools under Other management”

Statistical Press Release 21 September 2005. Dept of Education for NI *Qualifications and Destination of NI School Leavers 2003/04*

live there and on the public purse. Schools with clear identity and which serve specific communities have made a huge contribution to holding communities together and enabling young people to develop confidence and hope for the future.

As the Review document in paragraphs 9 and 15 makes clear, a community can not simply be equated with the people who live in a geographical area. There may be different communities in the one area, and these communities – particularly in rural areas – are often well able to celebrate their diversity and still share much in their normal lives. In the planning process for schools the "*understanding of the dynamics of local communities*" which school authorities and sectors have is very important in order that the needs of communities for "*schools that reflect diversity of aspiration and choice and which, taken together, are effective in meeting the needs of all pupils, are educationally and financially viable, and are sustainable in the long term*" are met.

The local school is a very important element in any given community. The loss of such a school can be perceived as a major blow to people living there. This is certainly true of the Catholic parish primary school – and will equally be true for other communities. Each Catholic parish has its own primary school, provided of course that such a school is viable. This primary school, together with the parish church, is the heart of the parish community, especially in a rural area. In many places in NI, collaboration between smallish schools may offer a much better result in terms of community relations than the enforced merging/‘integration’ of two or more schools and the subsequent loss to, and perhaps of, a minority community.⁸

9. It is true that the existence of Catholic schools has played a role in supporting the specific identity of one part of our society in Northern Ireland. This can be caricatured as being either wholly positive or negative. We recognise the value of identity and belonging that comes from cultural, sporting and artistic self-confidence. Any proposed changes should acknowledge the broad contribution of faith communities to social cohesion and to care for the needy.⁹ We also recognise that, in a society with divided political loyalties, belonging can sometimes become merely ‘negative identity’. The challenge for all

⁸ Ballycastle, Co Antrim, offers one such example, where the local Controlled High School can survive and preserve its identity only because of very close collaboration from and with the much larger Maintained College.

⁹ Cf Derek Bacon, *Communities, Churches and Social Capital in Northern Ireland*, Centre for Voluntary Action Studies, University of Ulster, Coleraine, 2003

is to celebrate identity and difference and to see these as potential sources of enrichment. We are clear that, in a context of political uncertainty, anything – sport, culture, religion or history – can be used to further political agendas. However, equally, any attempt to dismiss traditions and differences as merely negative and unaffordable relics of the past will do not justice to the need for our society to develop organically.

Politically this is still a very divided society. It is clear that in the ongoing period of political uncertainty, everything is liable to be used as a political tool. It would be very unfortunate if the role of the ‘community’ in determining future educational provision were to lead to a politicisation of education in some areas. Throughout the last troubled decades schools in every sector have made every effort, often in very difficult circumstances, to remain immune to political involvement. It would be a major loss to both education and reconciliation if that relative independence of schools were to be diminished.

10. While the Bishops recognise that much work needs to be done in the area of reconciliation, it would be unfortunate if the only division to be addressed by the Review were the one based on perceived religious affiliation. Firstly, this society is becoming increasingly multi-cultural. As a society, we need some guidance as how we can include and celebrate the diversity of cultures and faiths which will increasingly characterise our society. Secondly, increasing wealth often leads to even greater gaps between sections in society. The Bishops are clear that the educational structures should not, in practice, facilitate greater social gaps while claiming to counter the potential for sectarianism. The combating of socio-economic disadvantage is a key part of ensuring that everyone can share in current and future economic success.

11. The Bishops have consistently demonstrated a commitment to cost efficiency and will continue to do so. The Catholic Church community – through Trustees, Governors, staff and parishes - provides a high level of voluntary management, energy and support. We have already established a Regional Project Board, supported by five Diocesan Project Boards, to manage rationalisation. The Core Principles for such rationalisation include a commitment to :
 - optimise high quality educational provision and excellence of outcomes for all pupils;

- actively promote reconciliation, mutual understanding, justice, solidarity, inclusive communities; and be part of a genuinely pluralist provision,
- contribute to the provision of real educational choices for all parents and pupils, especially for those who currently have limited options;
- be the result of transparent consultative processes.

We therefore welcome the statement in par.9 of the Review: *"Within the context of guidelines provided by the Department of Education the planning process should have a specific sector dimension with school authorities and sectors continuing to represent the needs, expectations and ethos of their sector and their understanding of the dynamics of local communities throughout the planning process"*. We are therefore already taking very seriously our responsibilities in this regard.

Because of the coherence of the Catholic sector and the single-mindedness of the trustees there has already been significant rationalisation of Catholic schools – both primary and post-primary - across the five dioceses. This rationalisation has been acknowledged by the Department of Education.

The first stage of the Review's proposals should be to give each sector the opportunity to make proposals for such cost-effective rationalisations from within their own sector and in a way which they can determine to be consistent with their particular character and ethos.

As is already the case in border areas in fields such as health, fisheries, waterways etc, rationalisation in the field of education could also avail of opportunities presented by the increasing harmonisation between North and South. We are willing to explore with both Governments the possibility of developing efficiencies and feel this would have the support of many parents.

12. The Bishops are not at all opposed to the principle of exploring opportunities for further sharing of resources but the point at which such sharing is deemed to undermine the particular religious character and ethos of a school is a determination that rightfully belongs to the Trustees on behalf of the Catholic community whom they serve. There are many models elsewhere which can be explored. However, the unique circumstances which exist and persist here mean that no system

can be taken unchanged from another environment or jurisdiction. The community here is well capable of developing its own unique models for the future.

13. While emphasising the principles of Catholic education, in particular the fundamental right of parents to choose a faith-based education, we are willing – indeed anxious – to engage constructively with the Review and with its conclusions in order to develop “*thinking about new ways to work together and of envisaging approaches to schooling which share resources and guard ethos*” so that - as is stated in paragraphs 15 and 16 of the Consultation document - we will have communities “*served by a set of educationally effective and efficiently functioning and sustainable schools*” reflecting “*diversity of aspiration and choice*” and which will optimise “*the use of their facilities for the good of all through agreed models of collaboration and sharing*”.