

# ***Education for Minority Groups in Northern Ireland***

***Presentation to the  
Independent Strategic Review of Education***

***July 2006***

***A Presentation from Focus Learning Trust  
on behalf of the Brethren Community***

## ***EXECUTIVE SUMMARY***

### ***The Current Scene***

1. *Government funding of schools in NI does not provide for the increasing number of minority groups. These include faith groups and philosophical groups – such as Montessori and Steiner – as well as parent groups.*
2. *The current system operates well when funding schools for major denominations that can operate large schools, as the Protestants and Catholics, but does not provide for small community groups.*

3. *Counsel has been given that a funding system which disadvantages one faith group compared to another is indirect discrimination under Human Right legislation.*
4. *Some of these groups have established valuable and successful schools to meet community needs.*
5. *The DE needs to consider a route to support and encourage schools that are established for the benefit of minority groups.*
6. *It is recognised that declining school numbers in NI are an issue and that there is a need for sustainability in schools.*

### **The Brethren and Schooling**

7. *The Brethren are Christians who are guided by the absolute authority of the Holy Bible. They are known as a caring community actively involved with the wider world in business and representation to Governments.*
8. *The Brethren movement commenced in Dublin in about 1828 and now comprises around 45,000 worldwide who are found in 19 countries including 9 Member States of the European Union.*
9. *The influences and peer pressure in secondary schools having become increasingly incompatible with their Christian convictions, Brethren parents took the initiative in the early 1990s to look for alternative education for their children. Thirty seven small parent-led schools were set up throughout the UK, two of which are in Ireland, and many more worldwide.*
10. *These schools are committed to excellence in education and whilst secular in character they fully regard the parent's beliefs and conscience.*
11. *Despite financial constraints, high standards of education are being provided, based on the National Curriculum and public exams are taken.*
12. *In the UK, OFSTED has inspected and reported very favourably on these schools. The Schools in Ireland have also received favourable inspection reports.*
13. *Children from all backgrounds and of all abilities receive the full education programme to the age of 17, even if the parents cannot afford any contribution to costs.*
14. *The schools are noted for their dedication to providing for pupils with special needs and also for the inclusion of additional subjects, such as citizenship and current affairs, to encourage a wider interest and understanding of the world around us.*
15. *These schools are totally dependent on the dedication and financial commitment of community members and other supportive persons.*

### **The Focus Learning Trust Proposals**

16. *We are requesting the Department to formulate a policy that will recognise and financially support educational provision for minority groups, within the following framework:*
17. *Giving opportunity for any genuine and dedicated minority group to set up recognised and funded schools*

18. *Working together on a sustainable, effective curriculum that ensures a quality education for students whilst recognising the faith of the community*
19. *To recognize the reasons why the group has established schools and to ensure that this is not affected by any compulsory inclusion of students*
20. *Not to set a minimum number of students for any school to receive government support; although it recognised that the government would need to set a limit on funding per pupil*
21. *To allow for groups to operate and receive funding through a federated body, such as the Focus Learning Trust, to simplify dealings with DE.*

### **Conclusions**

22. *The Government needs to recognise that the current system discriminates against minority groups obtaining state funding for small schools which is readily available in many other countries (See Appendix 1).*
23. *There has been a long tradition of tolerance and regard for the conscience of minority groups in the UK (See Appendix 2).*
24. *Support for the running costs of small schools will enrich diversity, address the Human Rights issues, and bring in funding for the capital costs of premises that would otherwise fall on the DE.*
25. *In considering funding of minority groups schools it is necessary to recognise the dedication of these groups to support the schools financially and to ultimately underwrite their viability.*

## Section 1

# **The Current Scene**

### **The Current School Funding Arrangements**

26. *Government funding for schools is basically provided through three channels which successfully provide for the large majority of schools. These funding routes are:*
- i. *The Education and Library Boards*
  - ii. *Council for Catholic Maintained Schools (CCMS)*
  - iii. *The small number of Integrated and Irish Medium Schools*

### **Why the Current System does not provide for further diversity**

27. *There is no system in place to enable the government to meet the obligation of providing for minority groups that require their own schools. These groups can set up independent schools in accord with their convictions, but are disadvantaged in that they do not receive funding provided for larger community groups.*
28. *The only possible existing policy that we have been able to find is the 'Host School' route. This was pursued as far as identifying a suitable and agreeable potential 'Host' school. However, in meeting the Department to discuss the proposal, it became clear that this arrangement would not work in meeting the needs of minority groups. It was felt that any 'Host' school would be unlikely to be totally sympathetic with the ethos and also they would have undue control of the finance.*
29. *Thus we have not been able to find any route through which the Department can provide financial support for minority group schools.*
30. *We believe the fundamental flaw in approaching the funding of schools for minority groups has been the disregard of community commitment to these schools.*

### **The obligation to support diversity in schools**

31. *The need to respect the choice of large or small communities is increasingly recognised. Human Rights legislation clearly establishes such choice and that no group should be disadvantaged through their convictions. Thus providing educational diversity and choice is a responsibility upon every democratic government.*

32. *Focus Learning Trust in the UK has taken counsel from a leading QC on the difficulties of minority groups gaining state funding for small schools to provide for their communities. He concludes that any arrangement which disadvantages one faith group, in comparison with other groups, is indirectly discriminatory.*
33. *We fully recognise that no government can compromise their responsibility to ensure every child has a full education. Thus we are fully supportive of educational and financial inspection procedures being included in policy to provide for any funded schools.*

### **Schools established by Minority Faith Groups**

34. *There are a number of schools that have been established by small groups and these are often, as with Focus schools, distinctively parent-led schools that have been established to meet a real need in communities. Even without funding support they have, through dedication, become successful schools.*
35. *These small independent schools have become central institutions in minority communities and invaluable in meeting the need for education that is in accord with their beliefs.*
36. *In other cases minority groups are unable to establish schools in accord with their beliefs due to the lack of funding provision.*

### **Sustainability in schools**

37. *We recognise the declining numbers in schools within Northern Ireland and the difficulties that this already places in the Department. The recent references by Mr Peter Hain and Mrs Angela Smith to the need of sustainability in schools are noted. It is intended that any proposals will not add to these problems.*
38. *It is a significant consideration that many students from minority groups are already not in the existing system as a result of their faith. The proposals for educational funding to provide for such groups are to ensure sustainability and quality within schools that often already exist outside the mainstream schools.*

## **Section 2**

# **The Brethren and Schooling**

### **The Brethren**

39. *The Brethren movement started when a group of believers in the Lord Jesus who were exercised that the Bible was being neglected by*

*Christendom, separated themselves around 1828 from the established churches. They rejected the notion of a clergyman and emphasised the Lord's Supper and practical separation from the course of a godless world.*

40. *We hold to the central doctrines of Christianity: One God, revealed in Christ, loved for His goodness, and made known as Father, Son and Holy Spirit (Matthew 28v19)*
41. *We currently have collective assembly positions in 19 countries across the world.*
42. *Brethren have no other beliefs and practices than those set out in the Holy Bible for all believers, and we seek to practise the truth as found in it.*
43. *The Bible is a moral book. That is, it has to say to good and evil. It does not address itself to merely inquisitive persons, who have no intention of obeying it as God's word. Some persons are incapable of taking in a moral thought. Such have 'no hope and are without God in the world' (Ephesians ch. 2 v 12).*
44. *God is not changing the world, He is changing persons, turning them from darkness to light by the gospel. Christ has met the enormous moral question of good and evil by His death on the cross and the shedding of His blood, and His sacrifice is available to all mankind as an offering to God, offended and insulted by our sins. Not all will be saved, but God will have the majority.*
45. *We are not changing the world either. But having saved us, God does not expect us to sink back into habits of sin, and He provides an answer for us in His way of separation from evil to protect us. Page one of the Bible says 'God divided the light from the darkness' and that idea runs through scripture. Separation is not a haughty superior outlook; It is a way of escape for a Christian concerned to live here for Christ. Our separate walk is the reason for us sometimes being called exclusive.*
46. *God has not given up His rights to humanity. He desires that all should be saved. Government is of God and it is for men. 'He ruleth in the kingdoms of men and giveth It to whomsoever He will' (Daniel ch. 4 v 25). This was to King Nebuchadnezzar, the first of the great emperors, and he was converted by Daniel's testimony. We believe from scripture (Romans 13) that God ordains the powers that be. He raises them up and puts them down and uses them to restrain evil. He uses democracy to restrain evil and keep a way open for His testimony. Satan is opposed to Government and seeks to infiltrate it and introduce legislation to weaken the community's sense of what is due to God.*
47. *Our position is not to participate in the political process by voting, but to testify to the truth according to our consciences and pray for and*

*support good Government. No enlightened Christian would stand by and do nothing, while ignorant persons call good evil and evil good. We have many examples of this in scripture in persons such as Christ Himself, Paul, Joseph, Daniel, etc.*

48. *Questions are sometimes asked as to what Brethren are allowed and not allowed to do. These sort of questions show a lack of understanding of a Christians's walk, which is to follow Christ, not legal proscriptions.*
49. *Brethren use technology where justified, but not to feed on the filth that the media makes its fortunes with. We do not have radio or television in our homes and do not watch movies. Mobile phones are not used in a general way, they are a very inefficient communication tool in business and encourage lack of planning and foresight. They are also now used to provide access by the user to the pornography and immorality so favoured by the entertainment industry to increase their wealth. We particularly recoil from novels and cinemas. Scripture condemns those that 'Love and make a lie' (Rev ch. 22 v 15). Man is fascinated by the lusts of his fellows. Peter speaks about abstaining from 'fleshly lusts which war against the soul' (1 Peter ch 2 v 11), Soul damage is incurable, like cancer. God will have the last say.*
50. *The core of Christian fellowship is the Lord's Supper! It is the ultimate expression of fellowship, and scripture teaches that eating is fellowship. Most thinking people can see that. We would break bread and eat with anybody that establishes their right according to scripture to participate in remembering the Lord Jesus Christ and shows forth His death. Scripture says 'Blessed are they that do His commandment:s that they may have right to the tree of life' (Rev ch 22 v 14),*
51. *Our position is a family one, based on love — there is no hierarchy amongst us. The sanctity of marriage is upheld and over 98% of our marriages are for life. Unemployment is almost unknown amongst us.*
52. *We count on God to justify our position.*
53. *Further information about The Brethren can be found on the only approved website : [www.theexclusivebrethren.com](http://www.theexclusivebrethren.com)*

### **Focus Learning Schools**

54. *Brethren parents took the initiative during the early 1990s to look for alternative methods of education to state schools, as conditions became increasingly irreconcilable with their fundamental Christian convictions. These included influences that undermined moral and family values, a growing disrespect for authority, problems such as violence and addictive drugs, and the growing difficulties with controlling internet access. Provision for Brethren students was also*

*becoming more and more difficult for mainstream schools a decade ago - we feel it would be almost impossible now for secondary schools to accommodate Brethren students consonant with parental convictions*

55. *Initially these parents educated their children at home, as provided for in the 1974 and 1986 Statutory Rules of N.I. In time parents informally worked together to share tutors and resources and these arrangements became the embryos that developed into the present 37 schools in the UK (2 of which are in N.I., with the Newry school enrolling some students from Dublin). Thus these schools have a unique character, in that they have not been established by ecclesiastics, but from the inception have been motivated by parental conviction. Now they are formally registered as independent schools and the majority on governing bodies are parents or grandparents.*
56. *Focus Learning Trust, a registered charity, was established in 2003 to provide co-ordinated expertise and support in view of all Brethren's schools working systematically and to uniformly high standards. Focus also acts as a central body making representation to government on matters such as funding.*
57. *In England Focus Schools have had to be registered as Independent Schools with a Special Religious Character to meet legal requirements. The distinction of these schools from most independent schools is that they exist only because of Christian conscience. Pupils are not selected according to ability or the ability of the parents to pay fees. Only the dedication of parents and other supportive persons has provided the operative impetus for these schools. Constant fundraising, personal commitment and charitable trading are the only sources of income for educating nearly 2,000 pupils.*
58. *Despite the financial constraints, high standards of education are being achieved, based on the National Curriculum plus additional subjects, and public exams are taken. Professional non-brethren teachers are employed at all schools. The curriculum is being constantly developed in order to not only achieve nationally recognised qualifications, but also mature, responsible and broadminded adults who will contribute to society.*
59. *Running costs have been kept down to an average of £5000 per student per annum across the UK, due to a large input of unpaid labour. This is still an enormous financial burden of £10m p.a. for a minority community. Additionally, capital works are needed at many schools to upgrade facilities for students, but such works are seriously constrained by lack of finances. Costs at the two small schools in NI are around £6500 p.a. as well as capital input to provide suitable premises.*
60. *OFSTED inspect Focus schools in England and have reported*

*favourably, with comments including "Focus input is second to none". In N.I. the schools have been inspected by D.E.N.I. and have had complimentary comments.*

- 61. It is a leading objective that all pupils will leave school having achieved their full potential, regardless of ability or parental resources. Pupils receive the full education programmes through to the age of 17, even if their parents cannot afford any contribution to costs. Focus also has specialist SEN assessment and therapy teams, using advanced specialist equipment, with substantial human resources dedicated to these students. The 'Virtual Classroom' concept is being introduced to ensure that pupils obtain the required teacher support and the variety of subjects in smaller schools.*
- 62. MPs and other persons from public positions, such as the police and local authorities, are encouraged to visit our schools to help the 'social cohesion' of students and to increase public awareness of what is being achieved through the dedication of parents, staff and volunteers.*
- 63. Despite parents withdrawing their children out of mainstream schooling solely to protect them from influences that were offensive to their Christian convictions, at no time has any financial support been received from the Government. This has meant a minority group being disadvantaged by fidelity to their convictions. It is only through dedication that these disadvantages have been overcome to the degree they have.*

### Section 3

## **The Focus Learning Trust Proposals**

64. ***We are requesting the Department to formulate a policy that will encourage and provide financial support for minority groups to run their own schools. Such schools will meet a need within the general community and they will provide a vital, albeit small, contribution to local communities.***
65. ***Our desire is to work supportively and positively with the Department to arrive at an agreed policy that provides for small schools and upholds the standards that would be expected from a DE funded establishment.***
66. ***There is a wide range of matters to be considered to ensure equitable, regulated and uniform standards of education for all students funded by the Department:***

### **Opportunity for any dedicated group to establish a school**

67. *Any group of persons that are prepared to take on the responsibility and long term commitment of establishing their own school should have the opportunity to do so with DE support. While the obvious need is for minority faith groups, there would be nothing to preclude parent groups from such an arrangement. The ultimate responsibility of meeting costs above DE funding would need to be underwritten by any group establishing a school.*

### **DE and Independent Schools working together**

68. *A mutually accepted responsibility to work together in making small funded schools a success would be an essential agreement of any such policy. This would particularly involve working on a sustainable, effective curriculum that meets national educational expectations. At the same time it would be necessary to recognise the faith or philosophical convictions of the founding group and accommodate this within an agreed educational framework.*

### **Compulsory inclusion of students**

69. *These schools will in many cases provide for the needs of parents who, for faith or philosophical reasons, do not wish to send their children to mainstream schools. Thus it is most important that the distinctive ethos and character of these schools is not diluted by compulsory inclusion of other students.*

### **No minimum number of students**

70. *Schools below a certain size may not be regarded financially viable but this should not limit dedicated persons establishing a school to meet a need in the community. It is recognised that DE cannot make an open-ended financial commitment to support any school however small.*
71. *What DE can do is make a commitment to provide an agreed amount of financial support per student. Costs above that would be the responsibility of the school and they would need to demonstrate reasonable assurance of any additional funds that are necessary before DE agree to fund the school.*

### **Federated School Groups**

72. *The suggestion that Focus Learning Trust could operate any schools within Northern Ireland under one federated trust has a number of advantages and this provision needs to be included in the funding policy. Schools working together in this way can strengthen each other, share resources and achieve uniformly high standards. Financially there would be better control and a more balanced distribution of finance if more than one small school was working together.*

## APPENDIX 1

# Education for Minority Groups

73. *Many European countries fund schools established by minority groups, as well as other notable examples around the world, such as America, Australia and New Zealand.*
74. ***The European Governments of Austria, Belgium, Eire, Finland, France Germany, Luxembourg, Netherlands, Portugal, Spain and Sweden all financially support small schools established to provide for minority groups.***

### The Netherlands

75. *The Netherlands clearly gives parents the decision over school places, rather than LEAs. This has been enshrined in the Dutch constitution since 1917. Any group of parents can set up a school, subject to simple basic conditions, and the school is funded on a per-pupil system. As a result of this successful and long established system, 70% of children attend funded independent schools and the country offers outstanding educational diversity. High standards are maintained in all schools through a strict National Curriculum and inspection regime.*

### Sweden

76. *Prior to 1991 only 1% of students attended independent schools and therefore there was virtually no educational diversity. In 1991 it made one of the most fundamental education reforms in the world. The virtual state monopoly of education was replaced by a universal voucher scheme. This gave parents unprecedented choice over which school their children attended. Subsequent studies have shown the benefits of this action. Now results have improved in state schools and new independent schools have provided quality education in regions that previously only had failing state schools.*

### Australia

77. *Since 1968 a radical funding system has been used in Australia, by which Catholic and independent schools are partially funded.*
78. *Funding of non-government schools is directly related to the socio-economic status of the pupils; schools receive up to 70% of the government costs per pupil when taking pupils from disadvantaged areas, while this reduces to 13% for pupils from affluent areas.*
79. *This has had a dramatic effect on the numbers attending non-government schools in Australia: now about 32% of students are at*

these schools. 93% of parents support this system as it gives them unprecedented choice for the education of their children.

80. One of the most significant figures is that 20% of children from families who earn less than Aus\$20,900 p.a. (c.£8,350) attend non-government schools.
81. Financially the results are as impressive. The average funding for these schools is 50% of what it would cost to provide for the pupils at state schools. Thus the Government saves AUS\$ 4.2 billion per annum on education costs by the move to non- government schooling.
82. Capital grants are made at up to 25% of the level that would be paid to state schools.
83. The Government now has minimal requirements for capital funding of state schools. Apart from areas being newly developed, the continuing move to independent schools has almost removed the need to build new state schools.
84. Funding to private schools is conditional on following set educational standards:

## APPENDIX 2

### Regard for Minority Groups in the UK

85. Over many years the British Government has respected and provided for the conscience of minority groups. Below are some examples of provision made for conscience during the past century.

#### Examples of toleration and recognition of conscience

86. **Military Service Acts 1916 and 1938 to 1948**

The provision for exemption from carrying arms, due to conscience, has been taken up by many Brethren over the past century. These 'Conscientious Objectors' were active otherwise in military service and in full support of the Government.

87. **Marriage Act 1949 (26)**

This provision allowed Quakers and Jews to solemnise marriages according to their own rites.

88. **Slaughter of Poultry Act 1967 & Slaughterhouses Act 1974, 36(1)**

Allowance was made for the slaughter of poultry and animals according to Jewish and Mohammedan rites.

89. **Trade Union, Labour Relations and Employment Acts 1974-1982:**

Exemption from closed shop obligations. Brethren do not belong to professional or trade associations, nor trade unions.

90. **Motor Cycles (Protective Helmets) Regulations 1980 and Construction (Head Protection) Regulations 1989**

These Regulations gave Sikhs exemption from use of protective helmets on building sites and motorcycles.

91. **Oaths Act 1988**

This Act allows alternative provision to affirm where persons are not prepared to swear on the Bible.

92. **Education Act 1993 (241)**

Allowing children to be exempted from sex education in schools. Many parents regard such sensitive moral matters as a parental responsibility.

93. ***Criminal Justice and Public Order Act 1994 (42)***

*Permitting exemption from Jury service on the grounds of conscience. This legalised provision for conscience that had, in practice, been made for many years.*

***Recent administrative provisions for conscience***

94. *The Inland Revenue has exempted Brethren businesses from the mandatory requirement of electronic PAYE returns and will retain a paper-based system to provide for this.*

95. *The Secretary of State for Transport has made provision for exemption from the compulsory computerisation of MOT Testing Stations (Special Notice 2/2003).*

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