



Post Primary Education

Foreward

Catalyst's self-appointed task for more than a decade now has been to encourage the Church to be the Church, to examine ourselves to see how our Christian witness measures up to the gospel parameters. We feel that there are areas of life where the great biblical themes of justice and fairplay should be reiterated and realized; justice and fairplay especially for those who do not themselves have a strong voice, for those on the margins or at the bottom of society.

One such arena is that of public education. Both in NI and throughout the UK there is much debate about the benefits and failures of the present situation and of the reforms which have been implemented over the past half century. There are many criticisms of the outcome of present-day education policy and a good deal of uncertainty about how we can improve it, including a fear that the latter state might be worse than the former. Pressure groups and special-interest groups abound, and often more heat than light is generated.

It is our plea that there should be an honest and open examination of the issues, and who is better placed to contribute to this than the Christian churches? They pioneered education, motivated by the wonderful idea that all are children of God the Father who has endowed everyone, but everyone, with skills, talents, intellectual and other abilities.

Respectfully we offer the following as points worthy of consideration especially by religiously motivated people:

- 1 The status quo post the 1944/48 Education Acts meant in NI students emerging from Grammar Schools with very good Senior Certificate (GCE) grades and A levels, (better than in GB). But many left school with no paper qualifications at all (c 21% in 1960, higher than GB's 11%)
- 2 Widespread dissatisfaction with the "eleven plus" meant pressure for change in GB. So great was the unhappiness that even the radical Minister of Education Mrs Thatcher did not suggest keeping it in its existing form. Nor have any of her successors. It is interesting that there was no generally expressed similar revulsion at the exam here; many complained at the anxieties of it but did not see it as a moral issue. The present writer can remember only one Unionist MP who expressed any understanding of the thinking that led many in GB to support comprehensive schools. One might have expected many of the UUP

constituency, and even more of the DUP, to be unhappy at the status quo, but their public representatives remained silent. Is this because nearly all decision makers here (particularly the senior civil servants) are the products of grammar schools? We note that “public” or grammar school background did not inhibit politicians in GB from considering the merits of change. Catalyst believes that education policy involves questions of basic and simple morality. This is why there should be specific Christian input into the continuing debate..

- 3 The lack of respect for education in some Protestant areas is conspicuous. For decades the numbers of children in these areas who “passed” the eleven plus were small. Even stranger is that a significant percentage of those recommended for grammar schooling did not take up the offer. This contrasts with what obtained in socially similar Catholic areas. What does this tell us about the ethos of these areas, an ethos created in some measure by strongly held religious attitudes? It is also a fact which the political representatives of working class Protestants might well ponder.
- 4 We plead for awareness on all sides of the present debate that a moral education policy is one that does the best for all our children, not just the most intellectually able ones. We note that we in the UK seem to find this a more difficult issue to grapple with than our contemporaries in Europe, the USA and elsewhere. We suggest as a helpful starting point an acknowledgement on the part of those critical of academic selection/ grammar schools etc that not all those who support these do so for unworthy reasons; supporters of selection believe that an academic path is good for many and for society, and that it should be accesssable to people of any social background who would profit from it. Likewise there should be an acknowledgement on the part of those who support selection that not all those who question it are academic vandals; there are very good reasons why many in GB feel that, however well- intentioned the tripartite system of 1944, in practice it is unfair and not conducive to the development of vast numbers of children. Morality dictates that the interests of the majority be considered as well as those of any minority.
- 5 The original justification of selection by exam at age 11 is now abandoned. No longer is it argued that it is possible accurately to measure pure “intelligence” and thereby confidently predict aptitude for an academic education. This change may be progressive but unfortunately the newer types of 11+ exams are even more unfairly skewed against children from not-very-literate homes.

Catalyst is pleased to be able to provide in this publication some guidance for those who wish to think about these important matters. Each of our four essayists has a track record of thinking seriously about the provision of education for our children and young people. We are grateful to them for giving us their time and their expertise.

Charles Kenny, *Chairman, Catalyst June 2006*

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A BETTER WAY?

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EVOLUTION OR REVOLUTION?

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SELECTION OR ELECTION?

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EDUCATIONAL CHANGE - A CATHOLIC PERSPECTIVE.

Bishop Donal McKeown, a native of Randalstown (Co. Antrim) is a Modern Languages graduate from Queen's University, Belfast. He spent five years studying theology in Rome and was ordained priest for the Diocese of Down and Connor in 1977. He worked for 23 years as a full time teacher, the last six as President of St Malachy's College, Belfast. In 2000 he obtained an MBA in Educational Management and the following year he was appointed as Auxiliary Bishop in Down and Connor. He was a member of the 'Costello' Working Party (Post-primary Review) and is a current member of the Department of Education Strategic Advisory Group.

A BETTER WAY?

Few people in Northern Ireland like the present transfer procedure - and with very good reason. A system which in such an arbitrary manner divides young children into winners and losers, those who can and those who cannot, is a morally offensive system. There is much that can be said to discredit it.

The transfer procedure has a deleterious effect on the curriculum in primary schools. In Years 5, 6 and 7 the curriculum is skewed, with undue emphasis being placed on English, mathematics and science. Although it is very important that children are well taught in these subjects, other areas of the curriculum tend to be neglected or, at best, to receive insufficient attention. Children are given little opportunity to investigate the world in which they live, to learn of the formative influences on their heritage, to develop their imagination or to experience exposure to the arts.

The current transfer procedure has a damaging effect on those who are perceived to have failed because they did not attain grades which enabled them to attend a grammar school. It is unjust that a child who has worked very hard and who may well be above average, even on an academic measure, is deemed, by him/herself and his/her peers to have failed. What does such a perceived failure do for his/her self-esteem? Some people still carry the scars of that perceived failure after more than 50 years.

Even if it were acceptable to consign more than half our children to perceived failure at the very early age of 11+, the instrument for making such fine distinctions should be as foolproof as possible. This is simply not the case: the transfer procedure test is a very blunt instrument for making such distinctions. A great many children's scores are bunched around the various cut-off points on the scale. Very few marks may mean the difference between a Grade A or a Grade D, and a single mark will differentiate between a Grade B2 and a Grade C1. A child's future educational pathway may be based on the failure to answer a particular question. And the nature of the questions, with the need to facilitate the markers by requiring answers which are right or wrong, means that there is considerable opportunity for final grades to be determined by the guessing of answers.

A one-off test at 11+ also ignores the different rates of development of children. There will be wide variation in the maturity of children at the end of Key Stage 2; the test takes no account of those whose academic development occurs later. The current transfer test is heavily weighted towards knowledge and memory and is not a very good predictor of future academic success: with ongoing maturation and development a child with a lower grade in the transfer test often significantly outperforms at a later stage a child who had achieved a higher grade. The test takes insufficient account of qualities such as persistence and capacity for hard work, qualities which stand children in good stead both at GCSE and A Level.

The outcomes of the transfer test affect children in different ways, dependent on their postcode. In some areas children will not be accepted by grammar schools unless they have achieved a Grade A whereas in other areas a child with a Grade D may receive a place in a grammar school.

The transfer procedure test is unreliable; if children were to be retested after three months there would almost certainly be considerable variations in the scores.

Some children at the age of 11 are too immature to recognise the significance of the transfer test and may consequently fail to take it sufficiently seriously.

In effect, for many children between the 20th and 50th percentile of the academic ability range the transfer procedure is little more than a lottery.

The obvious flaws in the current transfer test beg a number of questions. Is it morally right to determine a child's future educational pathway by an inflexible selective system:

where there is such a fine line, a line which may be imprecise and inconsistent, between perceived success and failure?

where the system hinders the provision of a broad and balanced curriculum?

where the selection instrument takes account of only a limited number of predictors of future academic achievement?

where decisions are made before a child is mature enough to understand the consequences?

where the outcomes vary from one part of the province to another?

which ignores the fact that many pupils' abilities and aptitudes are not well developed at 11+?

where the incidence of coaching puts socially disadvantaged children at an even greater disadvantage?

If the present system of selection is so easily discredited is there any other selection system which might credibly replace it? I think not; for more than fifty years different models of selection have been tried and all have been found wanting, else clearly they would have been retained. Almost all of the criticisms of the current selection procedure apply to alternative forms of selection at this early age. It seems clear that selection at 11+, whatever form it takes, cannot be defended as equitable or just.

What then are the alternatives?

Comprehensive education is one option. Comprehensive education in England has received a great deal of criticism, some of it unjust. Where there is a doctrinaire adherence to mixed ability teaching the outcomes have frequently been less than satisfactory but there are many fine comprehensive schools which organise their teaching programmes in ways which benefit all their pupils, whatever their abilities. They serve all their pupils well and their academic results speak for themselves. We also have comprehensive schools in Northern Ireland which are highly regarded in their own communities. There seems no good reason why these should not be allowed to continue in their present form.

Comprehensive education, generally, might be an option in Northern Ireland if we were starting with a clean sheet - but we are not. There already exists a system of grammar and secondary schools, some of each kind very good and some not so good. Many of the grammar schools have justifiably high reputations and are very well equipped to provide academic education of high quality. If a system of comprehensive education were to be introduced here there could be no equality among the schools; the current prestigious grammar schools would always be considered more desirable than the other secondary schools. So we are not starting with a tabula rasa and transition to a comprehensive system of education would be untidy, protracted and likely to be inequitable and unsatisfactory.

There is another, and I believe better, alternative. The system of parental election proposed by government, largely removes the pain and injustice of selection and, properly administered, has the potential to steer children into appropriate educational pathways. Much depends on the effectiveness of the proposed Pupil Profile and the professionalism of teachers. With the help of an effective Pupil Profile, primary school principals should be in a position to offer parents helpful guidance about the most appropriate educational pathway for their child as he/she enters Key Stage 3.

It is up to parents to decide whether or not they show their child's Pupil Profile to the post-primary school: if they do, then principals of these schools should be able to provide helpful advice to parents about the probable suitability for their child of the programmes their schools offer. At present many parents recognise that their children are not equipped for an academic education and decide that their children will not sit the transfer procedure test. Many other parents are likely to take account of the Pupil Profile and recognise that an educational pathway with an emphasis on practical and technical skills is the more appropriate route for their children. It would be a great encouragement and would help parents make difficult choices if government did everything in its power to raise the esteem and publicise the achievements of many non-grammar secondary schools.

Of course parental election means that the parents, having listened to the advice given, are free to ignore it. Consequently there is likely in some places to be an over-subscription of grammar schools, particularly those which are regarded as prestigious or in urban areas where demand for places exceeds their availability. There will need to be criteria to determine which children will be accepted and which will not. These criteria need to be both effective and fair. The Minister for Education, Ms Angela Smith, stated in December 2005 that one of the guiding principles will be 'to ensure that the combined effect of the criteria does not result in postcode selection or social exclusion and that it does not disadvantage pupils living in particular areas e.g. rural areas or pupils attending feeder primary schools that are not given an appropriate degree of priority for admission'. Whatever criteria are put in place, they are unlikely to resolve all the difficulties and the fairest tie-breaker is likely to be random selection.

Allowing parents to elect for their children to attend a particular school and suggesting the use of random selection as a tie-breaker means that not all children will attend the school that might best suit their needs. It is imperative, therefore, that all children entering Key Stage 3, in whatever type of school they find themselves, are offered a common curriculum. The curriculum must be designed to allow them experience a wide range of learning experiences. If children are to discover and develop their strengths and aptitudes and identify and address their weaknesses they need to be exposed to the full spectrum of educational experiences. They will, of course, make progress through the various elements of the curriculum at different rates, commensurate with their ability. The aim must be to help each child achieve as fully as possible his/her potential.

So far I am supporting in principle the present government proposals but I would go further than those proposals. Our grammar schools, particularly from Key Stage 4, are in the best position to offer pupils an academic pathway, just as non-grammar schools are best equipped to offer education with a more technical or practical emphasis. I believe that grammar schools should retain that academic emphasis and that from 14+ they should concentrate on offering an academic pathway. Non-grammar schools should offer children from Key Stage 4 onwards a curriculum which best meets the requirements of those whose gifts lie in other directions.

Although I have differentiated between two main educational pathways, one with an academic and one with a more practical emphasis, I wish to stress the word 'emphasis'. An educational programme which was either entirely academic or entirely practical would be unworthy of our children. Education is much more than a utilitarian or mechanistic preparation for employment. Schools tend to be judged on what can be measured and government has a fascination with scores and league tables. There is a real danger that some of the most important, though less tangible, outcomes will be overlooked. Any educational pathway must be set within the context of a rounded education. Schools must address all the needs of the pupils: personal, social, emotional, spiritual and physical. The best of them will provide opportunities for their pupils to experience activities which will enrich their lives, experiences such as exposure to the arts, cooperating through teamwork and the celebration of difference and diversity.

Children are much more able at 14+ to make decisions about their educational future. They will have experienced throughout Key Stage 3 a range of learning experiences in the common curriculum. They will have experienced the demands of academic education and will know their ability to cope, and their desire to continue, with it. They will have been exposed to work of a more technical or creative kind and will know how they respond to those experiences. Through effective careers education pupils will be in a much stronger position to make informed decisions about their aspirations at Key Stage 4 and beyond. They will also have a much more realistic appreciation of their own strengths and weaknesses and a much better understanding of the commitment that is needed in the educational pathways that are available. At 14+ they should be given the opportunity to elect for the educational pathway that is best suited to their needs and aspirations.

If the present grammar schools were to offer an educational pathway with an academic emphasis from Key Stage 4 and beyond it is probable that in some of them demand for places at 14+ would exceed supply. If that were the case then it would be appropriate to have an approved entrance examination to determine the suitability of those who elected to continue their education in, or to transfer to, grammar schools. The examination would need to be a proper examination, centrally administered, covering the full range of appropriate academic subjects and marked by specialists, unlike the current 11+ transfer test which is merely a device for rank-ordering children. If parents were aware, when their children at 11+ elected for their educational pathways, that there would be an examination at 14+ which might result in their children having to move to another school, it might encourage them to choose the pathways that best suited their children.

This suggested system has some disadvantages: it means that the selection of some pupils for over-subscribed schools may be dependent on chance; it requires a new academic examination at 14+; it may be thought to discriminate in favour of academic education; it means that some children will have to change schools at 14+.

But I believe that the advantages of the system outweigh the disadvantages: it would mean the end of an imprecise and offensive selection system; it preserves the strengths of both grammar and non-grammar schools, allowing them to make optimum use of equipment and staff resources; as all schools are likely to have some children across the full range of academic ability, particularly during Key Stage 3, it promotes the provision of a common curriculum from 11+ to 14+. Most importantly of all it delays important decision-making until 14+ when each child will be in a much better position to make a significant contribution to the process of determining his or her own future.

Surely this is 'A Better Way'?

George Orr

EVOLUTION OR REVOLUTION?

It is true to say that, in the current debate on post-primary educational reform, the strongly held views of each side have their roots in what each sees as being in the best interests of the children of Northern Ireland. I too am motivated, like many others, by the desire for what is best for our young people and for our Province, and by the principles, so far as I am able to keep them, of what is true, just, upright and of good report. I, like so many, also believe strongly in the democratic principle.

The responses to the Household Survey, which were published in 2002, showed clear majority support for the following : the ending of the current transfer test, the rejection of collegiates, transfer to secondary education at 11, the development of a pupil profile and the retention of academic selection (the last point has been consistently supported through three official consultations and three surveys by the media). In my view, these should be accepted in full, according to the public will, and not “cherry-picked” to suit a particular ideological point of view.

My concerns about the present proposals for post-primary education cover four main areas - education, society, spin, and, last but not least, the democratic principle.

In educational terms, our system, year in year out, produces high academic results, gained not just because of grammar schools but rather because of our mix of very good schools of different types which stretch high achievers, which “temper the wind” and encourage those who need support and which provide escalators for those who develop at later stages. Our system is not perfect and adjustments need to be made, but, by and large, it works well. Despite denials by our Ministers, the proposals of the Costello Committee will, in time, lead to a comprehensive system of education with all the associated problems we have seen in Britain, where, ironically, the system is in retreat- lack of choice, the growth of private schools, underachievement and a drop in standards and in numbers studying the hard sciences, mathematics, economics and languages.

There are problems associated with our present system of transfer - the stress involved, the influence of coaching for those who can afford it, the narrow grade bands which can lead to inconsistent results; it is highly likely, however, that there will be greater problems caused by the proposed pupil profile which uses language

capable of many interpretations, contains no robust standardised assessment, uses vague terminology, is open to exploitation by those who have the economic capital to do so and, most importantly, does not meet international standards of reliability and of validity. The proposed move from objective testing to profile will reduce rather than enhance social mobility and will limit parental choice. Parental choice, in any event, will be negated when a school is oversubscribed and admissions criteria are brought into play.

In educational terms, equally worrying is the curriculum proposed which is based on skills rather than knowledge. The teacher will facilitate rather than teach the subject matter; rather than transmitting knowledge, the teacher will guide the development of enquiry skills. Coupled with this, there appears to be the belief that grades, marks and other assessment mechanisms are seen as undesirable because they lead the child to conceive of education as a competition; in addition the merging of traditional subjects into themes and core skills is seen as more important than the integrity of subject mastery. Research evidence from the USA and elsewhere, suggests that a curriculum which focuses on developing skills through inter-subject, project-based learning led by the child is likely to affect those from poor backgrounds by impeding the acquisition of basic skills in literacy and numeracy. The 'cultural capital' of the middle classes, coupled with more disposable income, will ensure that their children have a greater advantage in educational terms.

My second concern about the new proposals is their possible effect on society. For a number of years many schools have been attracting pupils from wide geographical, social and religious spectra and, in the midst of narrow-mindedness in our province, these melting-points of backgrounds and attitudes are to be welcomed and encouraged. However, the most likely main admissions criteria in the event of subscription will be distance from school; this will lead to a 'ghettoisation' process as circles are drawn around schools and prejudices are reinforced. In addition social mobility in Northern Ireland will decline, as it has done in Britain since the introduction of comprehensives. The pupil entitlement of 24 GCSEs and 27 Advanced Levels (for which there is no educational basis) will have an adverse effect on our rural community. (In addition enforced transporting of pupils between schools raises issues of health and safety, of responsibility and of costs which may be high and, ironically, may come in the wake of financial cuts to the Education and Library Boards, who cannot meet current responsibilities).

My third concern is public statements and associated “spin”. We are told that change will happen in 2008, yet it is already happening, even before the proposals become law. We are told that grammar schools will continue to exist, but how can that be, when they will have an all-ability intake? We are told that grammar schools are already comprehensive because they admit children with C and D grades, but 90% of Grammar School pupils have A and B grades, representing the top 35% of those that sat the test; this is not a comprehensive intake.

The claim is often made that pupils in Northern Ireland are not doing as well as elsewhere and that the system here disadvantages those from working class or less well-off homes. Yet our pupils outperform at GCSE and at Advanced Level their counterparts in Britain and also perform well in international comparisons. Our system of secondary and grammar schools results in 41% of the student population coming from a working class or economically disadvantaged background.

We are encouraged to accept change regardless of whether or not it is good; indeed the implication often made is that those who do not bow to Government dictates are backward looking or reactionary. Good schools must always adapt and keep pace with the demands of a changing world. Evolution not revolution has been our way.

Finally, there is the democratic principle. On the eve of Direct Rule, Mr McGuinness declared that the 11 plus would finish in 2005 and offered no alternative proposal. This policy decision had never even been considered by Ministers in the Executive nor have any of our locally elected representatives ever had an opportunity to debate the issue; indeed if the Assembly had been in place, there would not have been cross-party support necessary to implement the proposal. We now await the presentation of an Order in Council to parliament; once passed (and it will be passed because of the Labour majority) it will not be able to be changed by a restored Assembly because any such proposal would not receive cross-party support. The democratic deficit is evident again in the ability in England and Wales to retain grammar schools where local support wishes it; this is not to be offered to the people of Northern Ireland. The irony is that the same Government is encouraging schools to encourage participation in the democratic process, through ‘citizenship’ classes, but denies the very same principle to the people of Northern Ireland.

Education here, which was the shining light in the darkest days of the troubles, is in a state of flux: falling rolls, often exaggerated, should have been addressed much earlier; there is serious under-funding for many schools; the Minister with responsibility for Education when questioned by the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee seemed to have no idea of the costs involved in Costello nor was able to give any assurance of whether or not the proposed admissions by profile would work. Our children deserve better than to be subjected to the introduction of three untested variables at once - a radical change in admissions policy, a progressive curriculum and the Review of Public Administration; a successful business would not willingly take this risk but Ministers seem to be prepared to take it for our children.

It is imperative that the Order in Council is deferred at least until it becomes clear whether our own elected representatives could have the opportunity to debate the issue in a revived Assembly. As the Government proposes to enshrine in legislation November 24 this year as the deadline for restoration of devolution, surely a delay of a few months could be accommodated without difficulty. Indeed not to do so would be seen by many as bringing into question the Government's good faith.

Concerned Parents for Education and the Association for Quality Education have positive proposals, in print, to support primary schools in disadvantaged areas, to reform the transfer process, ending the 11+ and to build on the strengths of our present post-primary system.

There needs to be a more holistic appraisal of Northern Ireland's real educational needs. Sir George Bain has been tasked with such a remit and it is vital that he enters into meaningful consultations with educationalists who have experience in the classroom, with representatives of the business and academic communities, and with members of parliament and local community representatives.

The outcome of consultations with such a broad cross-section of opinion, rather than the narrow focus of previous deliberations commissioned by the Government among those with a similar ideologically based agenda for change, would provide a much more secure and enlightened way forward for education instead of the chaos which will inevitably result from implementation of the present proposals.

Billy Young

SELECTION OR ELECTION?

I am sure that I am not alone in noticing the increasing use of the concept of “choice” in arguments in public discourse over recent years.

We see the term used regularly in debates around health (take drug availability), housing (in for example public housing), politics (such as the debate around who we are able to vote for), social services (concerning the availability and type of benefits or pensions) and education (increasingly around parental choice in the current debate on selection). It seems to have become a common lobbying device, used mostly to challenge what is held up as perceived inflexible public policy.

In N Ireland terms, if the argument in support of “choice”- in whatever sphere - supports moving towards a shared future based upon the common good, then it is laudable.

If, however, our understanding of “choice” becomes a synonym for the notion of personal preference, it runs the risk of becoming self-serving and divisive, as it detaches itself from any concept of personal responsibility and bears the seeds of division and personal interest. Such arguments often suggest vehemently that unless and until the choice we demand is the one we are offered we will not consider any accommodation or compromise. In short, preference becomes prejudice and any notion of an agreed common goal is dismissed as unacceptable.

I would suggest that the argument in favour of selection at 11+ falls into that latter category of choice which has more to do with protecting self-interest than promoting the common good and that following this path deprives us of the support of any Christian understanding of social justice.

I would like to argue that the case for selection is far from proven and I will offer a number of propositions which I hope will support this premise. I will begin by presenting facts before moving on to some ethical considerations.

a) Britain is moving away from selection.

When the concept of universal, free post primary education took root within the UK, most areas adopted a selective model at post primary level as an adjunct to that system. It is also a fact, however, that even if such a system was “fit for purpose” in earlier times - something not yet conclusively proven through

research - since the 1960s Britain has moved away from grammar schools. There remains the incongruity of the Conservative Party policy which does not include the re-introduction of selection in GB, but that does support selection in N Ireland.

b) The current system of selection is fundamentally flawed.

The existing 11+ or transfer process is about the 10th or 11th type of test we have used here in N Ireland since 1947, and all of them have been abandoned because they failed to do what their advocates claimed they would do - deliver equality of access to second level and eventually tertiary level education. In recent times the Burns report in 2000-2001 based on substantive research which was carried out during the period 1998-2000, recommended the abolition of the transfer test based on the research evidence. The subsequent consultation which took place in advance of the Costello report, confirmed the view that there was no public confidence in the existing transfer process which was seen as fundamentally flawed. This reflected the research which identified the fact that whether a pupil gets a top grade or the bottom grade can depend on the answers to a mere handful of questions.

c) The household response which is oft quoted in support of selection is not as clear as recent media releases have indicated.

It remains a fact that during the consultation process, over 60% of respondents indicated a preference to retain selection but the overall return rate reflected only 16% of the adult population, hardly a robust result. This was a survey, not a referendum. What is also less well advertised is that a majority of those same parents wanted selection to be deferred to 14 and that in contradiction to the earlier statistic, 57% agreed that the transfer tests should be abolished and schools should use the same admissions criteria! In addition schools voted overwhelmingly to end selection (62%) a figure which included 90% of all primaries and even 9% of grammar respondents! The abolition of selection was supported by all 5 Education Boards, CCMS, the Catholic Bishops, N.I.C.I.E., CnaG, all Teacher Unions as well as NICTU and NIPSA, the Transferers' Representative Council, all HE and FE colleges which responded, the SDLP, Sinn Fein, Alliance, PUP, Workers Party, Women's Coalition, the vast majority of Voluntary and Community groups and alliances including Barnardo's and NICVA, the NI Human Rights Commission, Children's Law Centre, the CBI (with a caveat of appropriateness) CCEA, and the Council for the Administration of Justice..

d) The N Ireland system of Education is not the envy of the world.

PISA (Program for International Student Assessment) evidence indicates that N Ireland has one of the most unequal education systems in the western world as although 31% of schools have 80% plus 5 A-C grades, 54% of schools have 40% or under . In fact in England the average GCSE points score is 40% and in NI it is 38%! The standard claim is that NI has the highest academic results of anywhere in the UK, thanks to the 11+ is also false as on most measures Scotland gets higher results. The selective system has repercussions later in life as well in that while 80% of grammar students might leave with two or more A levels and 93% have five or more good GCSE passes (grades A*-C), by contrast at the other end of the system, just over 18% of secondary leavers have two or more A levels with the same percentage achieving five good GCSEs. Looking at all school leavers (from secondary and grammar schools), 41.2% do not have acceptable qualifications. That was 10,575 young people in 2004 alone.

e) The transfer test allows working class pupils to access grammar schools.

A study published in 2000 showed that almost 85% of the children of professional families went to grammar school, while by contrast, less than 24% of factory workers' children went to grammar schools and a mere 13% of children whose father was unemployed. (*The pattern of performance at GCSE*, Peter Daly and Ian Shuttleworth, QUB, in *The Effects of the Selective System of Secondary Education in Northern Ireland*, DE, 2000.) In addition less than 7% of those attending grammar schools are in receipt of free school meals (NI non-grammar average 28%). The inequality is greater in Controlled schools with approximately seven times more children entitled to free school meals in secondary than in grammar schools, something confirmed by the fact that in the past year only 2% of pupils in the Shankill area attained grammar school places.

f) More children from working class background achieve University places in N Ireland than elsewhere in the UK.

A standard claim is that NI has the highest participation of working-class students at university compared to anywhere else in the UK. Although the basic claim is true, the reality is that this occurs despite grammar schools, not because of them, as over 40% of NI entrants to higher education come from non grammar schools or FE Colleges (Ann Mallon: *Are students who study in GB different from those that study in NI?* in Labour Market Bulletin 19, Dec 2005, DEL). In 2005, while 19.8% of the higher education entrants from Northern Ireland were from the two lowest groups (semi-routine and routine occupations),

20.3% of all UK entrants generally came from these two lowest social classes, so there is no evidence of the NI system being more successful in getting people from disadvantaged groups into higher education. It also remains a fact that N Ireland has the lowest proportion of graduates amongst the adult population in the UK.

g) N Ireland education system provides a well rounded education fit for life.

N. Ireland has a very high proportion of people aged 16-65 with severe literacy and numeracy problems with approximately one in four adults on the lowest level of prose literacy and more than half defined as functionally illiterate.

This is intrinsically linked to life chances as we know that people out of work in N Ireland were almost twice as likely as employed people to be on the lowest literacy level; and conversely those in work were three times more likely to be on one of the two highest literacy levels than people out of work. Low levels of skills are also found among Northern Ireland adults. If our selective education has been the envy of the world since it was introduced in 1948, we would not expect 24% of the working age population to have no qualifications, far worse than the 15% in England and Scotland and 17% in Wales (Labour Force Survey 2003).

h) Grammar schools remain as consistent centres for children of academic ability.

Even if we were to accept for the purposes of comparison that the transfer test results are a standard measure of obtaining an objective grading, in September 2005, only 2 Grammar schools in N Ireland were able to claim an intake comprising only grade A pupils. Over 70% of grammar schools had an intake which went as far as Grade “D”. How then is there one type of school which can be described as “grammar” in such a variegated system? Is a grammar school in oversubscribed Belfast the same type of school as its under-subscribed rural equivalent?

In terms of social justice, the facts just stated cannot be used to support the claims that the current system operates either for the common good or indeed in the best interests of all children. There are serious ethical problems with a system which creates “winners” and “losers” at age 10, and adduces the argument that “Life is competitive, selection happens and children need to get used to it”, not only to support the competition for the “best schools” but also to finance the cottage industry which is tutoring.

It seems to me that any future educational solution needs to begin from the premise of the rights of the child. This would move us towards embracing the principle of *election* rather than *selection* as our operating norm, that is that parents and pupils elect schools rather than schools selecting - or in fact de-selecting - the pupils. This would put the child back at the centre of the debate and would offer a process which constructs a more flexible system based around the best needs of the child, rather than the current situation in which we place children into an inflexible system as a result of a high stakes test.

By offering a flexible entitlement framework combining a variety of subjects, which are both academic and applied in nature, and through allowing choices to be made not only at 11, but also now at 14, 16 and eventually 18 years of age, delivered through a collaborative model, the proposals before us begin to erode the false dichotomy between designating children either as “academic” or “non academic” at 10 years of age. Such a way of measuring intelligence has no currency in modern academic discourse.

This collaborative model ties in with the Shared Future aspirations of more integration in education as well as delivering value for money through better management of the schools’ estate. The curriculum, by being more flexible and more applied, provides young people with more choice and will increase the knowledge, skills and abilities of those young people, thereby delivering a more appropriate set of competences for work and life in a plural society.

By refusing to select pupils on the grounds of social or indeed religious background, our educational system will provide young people with safe places in which they might begin to understand and celebrate difference through engaging in positive shared experiences.

It is possible to argue that the education system in Northern Ireland has served many young people well in the past, but we need to accept that it was designed for a very different era and no longer meets today’s needs and circumstances.

It remains a fact that we have the highest working-age economic inactivity rate in the UK and that we need to encourage greater entrepreneurship and business/ industrial links if we are to move away from an over dependence on “the professions” and the public sector.

It is clear that the current highly selective education system with its academic focus is not fit for purpose for a 21st century N Ireland in which we need a mix of well-educated people who are also highly skilled people, if our economy is going to compete on the world stage. We cannot continue to be consumers of a system which elevates academic achievement, but must become creators of a system which supports the development of well-rounded young people who will take their place in the shared future towards which we are headed. In short, like the Magi in TS Eliot’s epic poem, we must become “no longer at ease with this dispensation” for the sake of our young people.

Michael Wardlow

EDUCATIONAL CHANGE - A CATHOLIC PERSPECTIVE

A Time of Change

Our education structures are facing the biggest upheaval in 60 years. Naturally any period of change causes fears and anxiety. People and organisations can feel threatened by change that will demand new relationships and will take many people beyond their individual and institutional comfort zones. That applies especially in education because no-one wants their children to be the guinea-pigs in an experiment. However, while the prospect of major structural reform creates insecurity for some, it is greeted with excitement by others. Those who have been unhappy under previous arrangements see the prospect of much longed for change, even of vindication. Many of those involved in education fear that a victory/defeat paradigm will skew the debate about new developments.

Furthermore, many of our schools cherish their very long traditions. In addition some schools have, over the last decades, had to cope with very difficult circumstances. People in both groups fear being sacrificed in the interest of some great master plan. Still others fear that the 'big picture' will disregard the rôle of schools in local - especially rural - communities.

Will sectional interest take priority over educational reasons? Is it always impossible to have a win/win situation? Are we working with a vision for the future or only with a strategy for victory?

This presents a particular challenge for Catholic Trustees here. They are the legal owners of the largest single block of schools in NI. Six dioceses and fourteen religious congregations have ultimate ownership of some 45% of the schools in Northern Ireland. For them, the prospect of radical structural change - as well as the reconciliation imperative and the major demographic downturn - provides a huge undertaking. Five hundred and fifty schools plus a University College will not be enabled to cope with the demands of a new educational culture without appreciable change management. So what is the basis on which the Catholic Trustees are facing this challenge that has come from outside?

A Catholic Vision for Education ?

Many query whether it is meaningful to talk of Catholic education, particularly in a modern secular society. How can you talk of 'Catholic' maths or French? Surely the State should be concerned only with a content-driven education system

that provides the core skills and competences that all can be expected to aim for? Faith should be left to the faith communities and to families. Furthermore is separate education for Catholics not just a huge factor in perpetuating our divided society? Isn't the faith emphasis in Catholic schools merely a cover for preserving an unwelcome cultural separateness? These are serious questions that have to be faced.

Where do we look for some guidance in this area? While most people don't take seriously the idea that the Catholic Church works on the basis of a centralist command-driven economy, there is nevertheless a rich vein of theological reflection on education that has come from the centre.¹ That vision provides many of the core principles on the basis of which we seek to inform discussion and to find ways forward that are based on clear, socially responsible assumptions and which will guide our decisions in this country. I will look briefly at some of the key criteria of what we understand by Catholic education and for assessing the current developments here.

Catholic schools are found in a huge number of countries, with the whole gamut of structures and relationships with civic society. They seek to offer a Catholic education, not just a good secular education for ethnic Catholics. First, it should be noted that these schools are not just set up to indoctrinate young church members with Catholic theology.

“The integral formation of the human person, which is the purpose of education, includes the development of the human faculties of the students, together with the preparation for professional life, formation of ethical and social awareness, becoming aware of the transcendental and religious education. Every educator in the school ought to be striving to develop persons who are responsible and inner-directed, capable of choosing freely in conformity with their conscience, thus preparing young people to open themselves up to life as it is, and to create in themselves a definite attitude to life as it should be”²

¹ *Gravissimum Educationis* (1965) (GE)
The Catholic School (1977) (CS)
Lay Catholics in Schools – Witnesses to faith (1982) (LC)
The Religious Dimension of Education in a Catholic School (1988) (RD)
The Catholic School on the Threshold of the Third Millennium (1997) (TM)
Consecrated Persons and their Mission in Schools (2002) (CP)
The abbreviations in brackets eg CP, TM etc, will be used in quotations.

² LC para 17

This is an agenda focussed on liberation and opening the mind, the full development of people, not the development of a narrow set of horizons.

Furthermore, there is a broad content to Catholic education. The Catholic school does not just teach discrete subjects or skills but “*is a centre in which a specific concept of the world, of people and of history is developed and conveyed*”³. This specific concept, *Weltanschauung*, this worldview, is biblically-based and might be summarised as having distinctive emphases.⁴

- a. These might include a ‘positive’ anthropology which begins with the creation of man and woman in God’s image and likeness (Genesis 1:26), rather than seeing sin and the Fall (Gen 3) as the starting point.
- b. Salvation in Jesus comes from the faithful God who so loved the world (Jn 3:16). Jesus came to heal all the dimensions of our human nature - our relationship with God, with other people and with ourselves. Thus a commitment to working for justice and the coming of God’s Kingdom derives from this optimistic view of God’s grace working in the lives of individuals, and of the incarnate reality of the Kingdom. (cf Luke 4: 16-22)
- c. This assumption of a transcendent and immanent God implies a belief that, while God is revealed uniquely in His word, a sort of sacramentality in the created universe also allows some knowledge of God to be acquired through beauty, human relationships and reflection on human experience. (cf Rom 1:19-29) This then provides the context for a rich sacramental theology. God engages with the whole of the person - body, head, imagination, heart etc.
- d. Furthermore Catholic theology, while not playing down the need for individual rebirth, has tended to emphasise the faith community as a key locus for this ongoing conversion and growth. (cf 1 Cor 12:4-30)
- e. In this context, we seek some role for the vertical community in history, the role of tradition in the developing faithfulness to God’s message.
- f. And our worldview would be inclined to value rationality and learning, the search for the truth, even if we will not find the Truth until beyond the grave.

³ CS, para 8

⁴ For this analysis I am grateful to Tom Groome. Cf. Thomas Groome, *What Makes a School Catholic?* in *The Contemporary Catholic School. Context, Identity and Diversity*, ed McLaughlin T., O’Keefe J and O’Keefe B, London, Falmer Press, 1996

Within a Community

This strong emphasis on the communal dimension of human life and of salvation is fundamental to what Catholic schools are trying to achieve here and elsewhere. Some will assume that the huge contribution of schools to building and maintaining community cohesion is just part of the sectarian agenda in Northern Ireland, working only to keep the community divided. But that misses a core point in what our schools are consciously seeking to contribute to the whole of society. Furthermore, it seems to be faithful to the Pauline teaching about the Church as the Body of Christ, where each cell has its own place under Christ the Head.

We thus have a clear belief that schools are not just places where individuals are prepared or trained for life elsewhere or to enhance the economic achievements of our society. Of course, these are part of the intended output of all schools. Schools are also concerned with building community and building on community. It is about building up individuals as members of society, imbued with a sense of Christian solidarity and compassion. Thus, we believe that the experience of the school community and of the wider community is both a *context* for healthy learning and *part of* the content of a good education.

a. The context

Much research in educational effectiveness shows that education is not just a solitary but a social experience. So much of our learning happens outside the school! It was Osbert Sitwell who, when asked for Who's Who where he was educated, replied "During the holidays from Eton". Furthermore, in our Western liberal society where there is a decreasing range of topics about which we share agreed language, those who already have - or can develop - shared language codes learn more quickly because of common cultural and linguistic assumptions. A healthy connection between the school community and the backgrounds of its pupils provides a key resource for learning - the imparting of useful information and the process of healthy formation.

Thus the Catholic school - and indeed any school that wants to be more than just a job-skills factory - cannot be separated from those factors outside school, which contribute to a rounded faith development of young people. The Vatican documentation is clear that only a community (which includes "students, parents, teachers, non-teaching personnel and the school management")

*“can create an environment for living, in which the values are mediated by authentic interpersonal relations between the various members of which it is composed. Its highest aim is the complete and comprehensive education of the person.”*⁵

After all, the young people of today are not just the adults of tomorrow, but people who must learn today many of the things they will need tomorrow. Schools, the document continues, are

*considered as microcosms in which oases are created where the bases are laid for living responsibly in the macrocosm of society.*⁶

Unless our schools and their associated communities can bear witness to human solidarity, to the reconciliation won in Jesus, we may clearly see the lean, efficient, effective secularist educational trees - but we miss the beauty of the forest.

However, that community-based formation should not be seen as a stricture placed on young minds but an assistance for them to experience transformation in their lives. It is concerned with helping them to develop emotional and spiritual intelligence so that they can develop meaning and the ability to cope with the pains of being human. Healthy education means sharing a language about liberation and creativity, not oppression and conformity.

Here the challenge is to help people to build self-confidence and bonding capital and at the same time developing their bridging capital. Building healthy communities is not necessarily a negative contribution to building a cohesive society and a shared future. The cherishing of one's own identity can lead to a deep appreciation of diversity. Lack of a positive identity can often lead to a lack of confidence and an inability to dialogue. And the Churches have a key role in building that healthy sense of identity.⁷

⁵ CP para 41

⁶ CP para 43

⁷ Derek Bacon has done some useful work on the contribution of Churches to building social capital in Northern Ireland. Cf. Bacon, D., *Communities, Churches and Social Capital in Northern Ireland*, Coleraine, Centre for Voluntary Action Studies, University of Ulster, 2003 ISBN 1 85923 1764

b. The content

I believe that the communal dimension that is part of so many Christian organisations is not just an optional extra but a core part of the New Testament message. The experience of community - and especially of one that is Gospel-based - is not just useful in communicating Gospel values.

The experience of community, of belonging and solidarity, makes up core parts of the New Testament message. The word 'church' occurs only twice in all the Gospels. But on many occasions Jesus says to the disciples "You are...", using an image rather than an abstract definition of what members of the church are called to be. The authors of the NT letters similarly use a whole range of images to describe the mystery of the church - many of these images are clearly about us as together rather than as isolated individuals.⁸ Images include

- Sheep of Christ (Jn 10)
- Branches of the vine (Jn 15)
- Christ's body (1 Cor 12:27)
- Ambassadors for Christ (2 Cor 5:20)
- The household of God (Eph 2:19)
- Living stones (1 Pet 2:5)

Again, belonging and interconnectedness appear to be at the core of the NT vision for God's people.

Of course the NT also includes another balancing emphasis, which touches on this. While all are members of the Body of Christ, there is a great variety of gifts. (Cf Eph 4:7, 1 Cor 12:4-31) When writing to the church in Corinth, Paul has to take a very strong line against those who think that their particular gifts must take priority over those of others. The challenge for the Church is not to search for conformity, but to develop the potential of the God-given diversity of gifts and graces that we have. The search for a unity in diversity is the real struggle that we have to face in building community and communities. How can we enhance the status and dignity of the individual through the structures of belonging that we put in place in the service of the Kingdom? That is the challenge that we try to embody in our

⁸ For an interesting look at these images cf. Hans-Ruedi Weber, *Experiments with Bible Study*, (Geneva, World Council of Churches, 1983) pp225-232

educational provision. How do we provide equality of dignity and of belonging while responding to the huge range of needs that different people have? That is a real practical problem rather than just a theological conundrum. And it will affect just what model of Church we communicate through the experience of community that we offer in schools and parishes.

The Post-Primary Review

The education system in NI has developed many strengths over the years. We have top class results at A-level and a very high percentage of pupils who go on to third level education. We are blessed with a system where we still get large numbers of talented young people who want to be teachers. All in all, we have a system whose strengths we would not want to lose.

However, to those who lionise our education system, I would say a couple of things:

1. We do very well for a goodly percentage of pupils who achieve well. It is vital that this continues. That is the only way that we will stretch and develop our talented young people. Only by having economic strengths can we invent strategies that will offer hope to the millions who live in poverty and squalor around the world. But we have an increasing number of young people who leave school with very few or no qualifications. A semi-skilled work force may have served us well in the past. Unskilled and unqualified people, with no stake in future of the society, will damage their own self-respect and the cohesiveness of NI. A new coherent system needs to start off with the assumption that it will develop *all* young people and not just some.
2. Despite the excellent achievement of many schools in both the Grammar and non-Grammar sectors, our current system of academic selection has increasingly become a process that mirrors social achievement. While the Grammar schools initially allowed large numbers of children from underprivileged backgrounds to access second level education, official figures about Free School Meal Entitlement show that the selective system now tends to advantage the already advantaged.⁹ I believe that a Christian community must actively work to advantage the disadvantaged, not to dig deeper trenches in our society. Academic selection has tended, by and large to advantage the already advantaged!

⁹ Figures for School Year 2005/6. DE Statistical Press Release 28 Feb 2006. Available on the DE website. www.deni.gov.uk

3. Academic selection ensured that up to 40% of pupils were able to select either the Grammar school of their choice, or at least an acceptable alternative. They have options, and if they cannot find a place at a Grammar school within three miles of their home, they will get a travel pass to go to any Grammar school anywhere that accepts them. The other 60% have very few choices, either as regards the schools they might wish to attend, or as regards a range of options that particular schools might offer. For a large part of the population of 11 year olds, there is no choice and many will end up in schools that will almost certainly look after them very well, but where they have a very limited range of subjects to choose from. The Catholic Trustees are working, not to limit the choices of those who already have them, but to ensure that real choice is made available to those who currently have little or none.

4. We are rightly concerned with the legacy of sectarian division, the result of those who have exploited our political schizophrenia for their own ends. But our society is increasingly deeply divided on more than just ‘sectarian’ lines. The Post-primary review process has shown up cases, in allegedly bitterly divided areas, where local Controlled and Catholic-managed schools are working together to provide better choices for all their pupils - but where there is no conversation going on between the selective and the non-selective schools in the area. It would be a shame if we were to focus only on ‘denominational’ sectarianism and neglect the reality of ‘social’ sectarianism. We will not have a shared future if we replace our so-called ‘peace walls’ with glass walls and ceilings that are ultimately equally divisive and financially unsustainable.

So what are the principles that the Trustees of Catholic schools see as fundamental principles for evaluating the proposed changes?

1. Education, not just training!

Teachers don’t teach subjects. They teach people. If, in practice, education is reduced to preparing individuals to compete in the job market, it will leave them ill-prepared for the major tasks of life - relationships, parenthood, community-building, self-expression, leisure and many others. We are committed to ensuring that all schools offer a rounded education to fit young people for the most important job that they will ever do - that of being human beings in society, and for most of them that will include being parents, spouses and neighbours. If the community and the schools do not offer young people good role models and vision, we can not blame them if they get their values from other sources such as Arthur

Guinness, Stella Artois, Albert Square or pie-eyed Pete at the corner! We are committed to offering an education for life and not just training for a job. And we want to aim at excellence in all these areas.

2. A Shared Future

All educational providers here have committed themselves to ensuring that reconciliation and the ability to live together are key outcomes of the educational experience in all schools. Catholic managed schools want to be welcoming to pupils of all faith backgrounds and none. Indeed here we have an increasing number of examples - as in almost every other country - where the Catholic school is popular because of its explicit faith basis and not despite its denominational label.

It is worth noting that the word ‘integrated’, when applied to education here, has become less of an adjective than a brand name. We have many schools with increasingly mixed enrolments that do not bear the title ‘integrated’. And we have many schools where cross-community enrolment is not currently possible. In the context of a shared future it would be most unjust to huge number of schools if only the 5% ‘Integrated’ were portrayed as virtuous and the others lampooned as morally inferior.

3. Excellence - Living life to the full

We see each person as a spiritual being, made in God’s image and likeness, a temple of God’s spirit, redeemed in Christ by the God who so loves the world. We are called to develop all our talents to the full, in the interests of ourselves and of others. What Pope Benedict calls ‘the love story between God and humanity’¹⁰ can generate huge reserves of hope and love. Education is not just about the acquisition of value-free ‘facts’ or skills that will help individuals succeed in a rat-race. That would betray our deepest humanity. We are committed to supporting teachers so they continue to provide an educational experience that develops everyone’s emotional and spiritual intelligence. Helping them believe in a God who believes in all of them is a key part of this.

¹⁰ Benedict XVI, *Deus caritas est*, Vatican December 2005. para 17.

4. Communities of learning

An emphasis on individualism can undervalue the key role that a school's community plays in communicating values, a sense of belonging and ways of coping with exhilarating or stressful situations. Schools are at their best when they are communities of learning and part of a wider community. We want to retain the sense of a learning community, where people can feel at home, and where there is joy in acquiring new knowledge and deepening wisdom. That is the ideal platform for seamless life-long learning. We thus seek to have schools and structures that promote solidarity and compassion rather than just competition. People are precious for what we are, not for what we have achieved.

5. Contributing to healthy communities

A teacher can teach a child to read. Only a healthy community can educate. No matter how hard our schools may try, it is only through having healthy communities that people will feel supported. Unless educational structures promote a sense of belonging and identity, they are a very short-sighted use of public money. There is little value in teaching Citizenship or sexual responsibility in the classroom if it is not exemplified in the school and visible in the communities where people live. We will thus work to ensure that our secular and faith communities are promoted; and that every support is given to neighbouring Controlled schools, especially when they and their local community may feel threatened. A healthy pluralist society is enriched by diversity, not threatened! Local minority communities need to feel supported, not abandoned. Thriving communities are the best context to enable individuals to thrive.

6. Focussed on relationships

We are faced with the choice - will our education promote the individualism that is damaging our ability to make and sustain relationships? Or will we actively promote a sense of communal responsibility of others, especially for those who have little social or educational capital? From a Catholic perspective - I am sure that this view is shared by people in all the faith communities here - education was never just for individual advancement but rather a vehicle for promoting the welfare and liberation of individuals within families and communities. An excessively individualist focus seems to me to be driven more by the philosophy of the market than by the vision of the Gospel.

Let's be real!

This may all seem wishy-washy pious thinking. But I have attended two recent events that encouraged me regarding the wisdom of my thoughts.

First, I attended a seminar some months ago at Stormont where the basic thesis was simple - that the principal source of happiness and well-being for people comes, not from their income but from their relationships, both individual and social. If communities are falling apart, then there is huge pressure on Health and Social Services, the Police and Probation Service, schools and prisons etc. Therefore, in order to save money for the spiralling public purse, all developments - industrial, commercial, recreational and residential - should be relationship-proofed! Short-term profit has the capacity to land us all in long-term debt. ¹¹

Secondly, at a recent conference organised by the Department of Education and the Regional Training Unit, ¹² a keynote address from Professor David Hopkins surprised many when he said that education must have a moral purpose and promote social justice! Coming from his experience in the reality of education in major urban areas he was convinced of the huge role that education could play in creating social cohesion and building community. Many people are recognising that education is not just about training competitive little clones, which will faithfully develop the economy. I believe that education is about educating people as social beings, as members of communities. It starts with the conviction that belonging provides a context for identity, personal growth, mutual support and self-respect. Recently, I heard statistics about life expectancy in one part of Glasgow. The average man there can expect to live to 54, a shorter life expectancy than that of a man in Iraq and the Gaza Strip! That is an extreme example of what urban life can be like for worrying numbers of communities that are increasingly falling off the edge of nice, successful society. But those who work in urban areas are pointing out where we might well be drifting if social fragmentation continues.

The Post-Primary Review has offered us a chance to look again at education's contribution to the creation of a new society here. The welfare of a very successful minority of individuals can never be the only priority for the billions that we invest in our schools and colleges here.

¹¹ This is underlined by recent BBC findings. http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/programmes/happiness_formula/

¹² Papers are available on the RTU website <http://www.rtu.org/framework.cfm>

Conclusion

The aim of the Catholic Trustees is to work so that, in changing times, we are part of a vibrant high-achieving education sector that retains the confidence of parents, and that contributes to a healthy reconciled society here for all.

As a Trustee of Catholic schools here, I have no desire to swallow Government policy, hook, line and sinker. I would oppose any move that might threaten high standards or damage opportunity for young people, especially those who live in challenging circumstances. We will certainly work with all our colleagues across the board to contribute to a society that understands values and not just prices.

We are seeking to focus on the overall provision and outcomes - rather than just on the individual providers. After all, publicly-funded schools are there to serve the common good and not just a narrow constituency. The system should not be tailored just so that it can serve the comfort-zone of any school, but rather so as to promote the needs of the wider community. It is not unreasonable to expect individual schools to be allowed to make their own unique contribution, but they must do so in a socially responsible and cohesive context. Institutional independence can be a strength, but it should never become a god or an end in itself!

The Catholic-managed schools are explicitly committed to developing such a network of schools which will work together, and with other providers, in the interests of the whole of our society. Public education is here to serve the cause of all, not just the interests of some. And all education needs to build communities - for without these, many people will be crushed. A narrow focus on individualist success and institutional independence is a poor recipe for a shared future here.

These are exciting and contentious times in education. We do not want to lose much of the good that we have achieved nor should we be trapped or flattered by our past successes. We have a system where many have benefited. But almost 50 years after the introduction of Grammar schools, we do need to review our structures. These have to suit a radically different age. We are committed to creating a system of schools in which everyone will flourish when they can grow and learn in healthy communities, inside and outside the school. If some are losing out, we will all pay for it. If all are supported, we will all benefit. That is the content and the context of what we dream of for our education system here.

Bishop Donal McKeown

