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(Article submitted to **Irish Education Decision-Maker** by Dr. Aine Hyland, Education Dept., University College, Dublin 4 - September 1992).

Issue No. 3 of Irish Education Decision-Maker was a special issue devoted to the forthcoming Education Act. It contained 24 articles, including an introduction by the then Minister for Education, Mary O'Rourke. Contributors to that issue expressed their hopes and fears of what might be covered by the proposed legislation and by implication in the Green Paper which would precede it. Now that the Green Paper has been issued it is interesting to compare the speculation and expectations with what is being proposed.

Before discussing the Green Paper, I think it is important to recognise its historic significance. Never before in the history of Irish education has such a wide-ranging document been issued. In 1985 Minister Gemma Hussey issued a Green Paper - *Partners in Education; Serving Community Needs* with courageous proposals for a network of Local Education Councils throughout the country which would provide a co-ordinating structure for post-primary schools and also a framework for the development of education related services (such as a psychological service, transport etc.) for all educational levels. Within its limits, that Paper was impressive but unfortunately it was opposed by many diverse educational interests and it did not result in a White Paper, much less in legislation. Some five years earlier, in 1980, the then Minister for Education, John Wilson issued a *White Paper on Educational Development*, which was reasonably comprehensive in its coverage of educational issues but which lacked the long-term vision of the current Green Paper. It was more a government policy statement than a White Paper in its more usual sense as a document which would lay the basis for legislation. The only comprehensive legislation ever proposed for Irish education was the Education Bill of 1919 which was withdrawn from the statute books in 1920 without even getting a second reading. (See Issue No. 3 of Decision-Maker).

It is valuable and indeed essential that from time to time a country should distance itself from day to day educational problems and take a longer term view of its education system and chart the path ahead. A time of recession and of scarce resources is a good time to take stock and to prepare a coherent long-term plan which can be gradually implemented over the years as resources become available. The Green Paper provides the basis for such a long-term plan and its potential should not be underestimated in the understandable concern for immediate solutions to our educational problems.

The Green Paper presages the start of a new era in Irish education. I was present when it was launched by Minister Brennan in Dublin Castle at the end of June and my reaction then was one of excitement that education had finally been accorded the recognition it deserved. The location of the

launch was fitting - the magnificent public rooms of the historic seat of power suited the occasion admirably. My immediate response when I first read it was one of admiration for those who had been involved in its drafting and a conviction that here we have a document that will be read and admired by educational historians for many generations ahead. Like the 1835 Wyse Plan for Education in Ireland, it projects a sense of vision; it is all-embracing in its coverage and it is unapologetic in putting forward proposals for the future of Irish education.

The aims of the Green Paper are impressive. There has been considerable verbal support already for the commitment to establish greater equity in education; to broaden Irish education; to make the best use of education resources; to train and develop teachers so as to equip them for a constantly changing environment; to create a system of effective quality assurance; to ensure greater openness and accountability throughout the system and to maximise parent involvement and choice. The difficulty arises when the how and wherefore of these proposals are spelled out. There is no doubt that it will be difficult to satisfy the conflicting views of interest groups and individuals when the White Paper is being drafted.

Within the confines of this short response, it is only possible to touch on a few of the issues raised in the Green Paper. The **first** of these is the proposal that a **new funding mechanism based on a unit-cost approach** be introduced at all levels. The aim of this new approach as stated in the Green Paper is to "ensure a more equitable basis for funding for schools while providing the maximum flexibility to Boards of Management in the operation of their school budgets". Allied to this each school and institution will be autonomous with a new management structure "which is representative of all concerned interests". The suggestion that equal funding contributes to equity is questionable. Why should a school accept "difficult" and "resource-intensive" pupils if there is no financial incentive to do so? If there is undue emphasis on "quality control" and if the status of schools in a community is measured in terms of examination results, then there will be even less incentive than heretofore for schools to enrol pupils whose exam performance would take away from rather than enhance the school's image. We are familiar with the practice of schools choosing "desirable" pupils but it would be very serious if legislation were to legitimise and encourage this practice while reducing the budgets of other schools which have traditionally catered for the less advantaged.

There are many questions to which one would like to have answers before coming to a conclusion on the merits or otherwise of a unit cost system. What elements would be included in calculating the unit cost? What about capital costs, transport costs, incremental salary costs? The inclusion of capital costs would give an immediate advantage to schools fortunate enough to be housed in adequate, good condition, low maintenance buildings. The inclusion of transport costs would favour schools where few if any of their pupils would require transport to reach the school. The inclusion of incremental salary would militate against schools which have "inherited" a high proportion of long-serving teachers at or near the maximum point of the incremental scale. The

potential of a unit-cost must be recognised but it is essential that if such a system is introduced, it should be devised with sensitivity and care.

The constitution of Boards of Management as proposed in the Green Paper is also problematic. There is a contradiction between the underlying philosophy in regard to greater democracy and increased parental involvement in schools ("the desire to reflect parents' rights and wishes in school management, combined with local community involvement, as part of a genuine partnership with the providers of education") and the proposed composition of the new Boards of Management. The current proposal will result in a situation where the proportion of elected parent representatives on Boards will be even less than it is at present. In the case of larger national schools and all secondary (including vocational) schools only two of the 11 members will be elected parents (at present 2 of the 8 members are elected parents).

Another matter of concern in the Green Paper relates to **the increased power proposed for owners/trustees** who will nominate five of the eleven members of the Board of Management. This proposal gives property owners a pre-eminent role in determining the educational provision of an area. The present Rules for National Schools make a clear distinction between the role of the Patron and that of the Trustees or owners of a school. A national school Patron, who may be an individual person or a suitably constituted group of individuals e.g. a limited company, determines the philosophy and ethos of a school and formally nominates the school's board of management but is not required to own school property. The Green Paper proposes the abolition of the Patron and the transfer of all the powers which were previously vested in the Patron to owners/trustees of school property. It would be a serious blow to democracy if ownership of property were to become a key determinant of suitability to run a school.

The issue of curricular provision and structure at second level is also worthy of comment. The proposal to introduce a new subject at junior cycle - Enterprise and Technology Studies - is an interesting one. Many schools have introduced novel and apparently successful enterprise initiatives within Transition Year and Vocational Preparation and Training Programmes. However, the proposal as it stands raises a number of questions. Will any one teacher in any school be competent to teach this new subject, which seems to contain elements from a number of different subjects (e.g. Business Studies, Art / Craft / Design, Woodwork, Metalwork, Technology etc)? How will it be timetabled? How can a school which does not have any Woodwork or Metalwork teacher or facilities offer this subject? Would it not be better to set out aims and objectives for the development of enterprise and technology skills, which could be realised either within a new subject, or within one or a combination of existing subjects? The Junior Certificate could certify that these skills had been attained, but not necessarily within a new subject.

The emphasis in the Green Paper on a **subject based curriculum model** at junior cycle instead of an areas of experience model, has inevitably led to a situation whereby difficult and undesirable

choices have to be made. Despite a commitment to the European dimension in education, a modern European Language is not included as a compulsory subject at junior cycle level. The arts are also relegated yet again to a peripheral position - a questionable decision for a country which has shown in recent years that some of the most successful enterprises earning foreign currency are based on well commercialised artistic endeavour.

At **senior cycle** level, it is proposed that "a combination of an effective foundation of general education and a strengthened vocational orientation will form the basis for development". The proposal of the Culliton report for a "parallel stream of non-academic, vocationally-oriented education at second level which commands widespread recognition, respect and support" is rejected. The Paper proposes instead to build on and expand the range of vocational options within the existing Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme (LCVP) with the intention of expanding the programme from its present 5% of total to at least 30% from 1994. If this is to be done, I hope that the LCVP, which at present is predominantly taken by boys, will be revised to encourage participation by girls. This is an opportunity for the decision-makers to clarify what precisely is meant by a "vocational" programme. Surely courses geared towards the services sector are at least as "vocationally" oriented as those geared towards construction or manufacturing industries. Most of the new jobs which have been created in recent years have been in the services sector and this should be taken into account in the development of new "vocationally-oriented" courses and programmes.

In general, the Green Paper is less clear on a framework for developments at senior cycle than it is for other areas. It rejects the proposal of the NCCA that students could choose courses from the Leaving Certificate and the Senior Certificate, and favours instead the development of alternative Leaving Certificate courses. The buck has been passed yet again to the NCCA who have been asked to provide "further advice on this issue". Surely after 8 years of discussion papers and consultative documents, it is unrealistic to expect the NCCA to come up with anything new. What is required now is a decision, and hopefully the White Paper will contain such a decision.

The Green Paper contains a short but vital section on **the teaching profession**. It reiterates a point that cannot be stated too often - "Teachers have made an enormous contribution to Irish society and it is important that the career of teaching continues to be an attractive and professionally rewarding one". It also states that "research supports the widely held view that teaching is a complex and demanding job which requires high quality initial training and preparation, supported by in-career development to meet continually changing needs and demands". In the current situation where recruitment to the teaching profession has fallen and will continue to fall because of the demographic situation, in-service education of existing teachers, or **in-career development** as it is referred to in the Green Paper, is vital. The Green Paper indicates that existing agencies - Teachers' Centres, Education Departments of universities, Colleges of Education - will have a role to play in supporting in-career development but that the schools themselves will be the major

determinants of what support should be provided for their teachers. There is evidence from other countries that school-based and school-focussed inservice plays an important role in encouraging and enabling schools to engage in whole-school review and renewal. However, inservice opportunities for professional and personal development outside the school environment should continue to be available to individual teachers and schools would be well advised to allocate some of their in-career training budget for such courses.

The Green Paper recognises the specific need for developing new skills and for upgrading existing skills of teachers involved in new senior cycle courses. In this regard, I cannot understand why the Green Paper supports the recent decision of the Registration Council that to be registered as a Secondary Teacher, **teachers must include one of the existing examination subjects in their final degree examinations.** Ironically, this decision means that graduates in areas which are increasingly offered as alternative senior cycle and PLC courses, e.g. marketing, journalism, catering and tourism, or media studies might not find it possible to register as a secondary teacher, much less a graduate in politics, sociology or philosophy - all of which are senior cycle subjects in other countries or in examinations such as the European or International Baccalaureate. If we want to ensure that our secondary school curriculum becomes stagnant, then a regulation such as has been introduced by the Registration Council is one way to do it. It makes no sense at all in a period of change and development.

Space prevents me from discussing the specific proposals for initial teacher education in chapter 6 of the Green Paper. The current N.U.I. B.Ed. degree course - which includes an academic subject to degree level as well as both the theory and practice of education, provides a sound basis for the proposed consecutive model of initial training. Most student teachers would welcome arrangements which would enable them to take some lectures together with other university students but this does not necessarily mean discarding what is a highly respected professional qualification for primary teachers. We should look carefully at a model of primary teacher training which has served us well for almost 20 years and which is the envy of many of our European partners and build on the strengths of this model.

My final point relates to **the failure of the Green Paper to address the issue of a local or regional administrative structure for education.** The Green Paper proposes to introduce **autonomy for each individual school** but it fails to introduce a local or regional administrative structure. One of the strengths of the vocational system to date has been its ability to provide a wide range of subjects for pupils in small vocational schools. This was facilitated by the use of whole-time peripatetic specialist teachers who taught in a number of different vocational schools in the scheme. How can this and other V.E.C. provided services be maintained under the new proposal?

While it is not easy to devise a structure which would be acceptable to the various interest groups, it has become increasingly clear that any move to devolve power from the Department of Education will require an intermediate structure between the Department and the schools. Such a structure would help to ensure that a coherent and comprehensive education service is available in every area. It would also provide a basis for organising support facilities such as a psychological service, a visiting teacher scheme, specialist peripatetic teachers, remedial and resource teachers, transport services, adult education, etc. Various proposals for regionalisation were made during the past thirty years, most notably by Minister Burke in the mid 1970s and Minister Hussey in the mid 1980s. A less well known proposal was made by an internal Departmental committee set up in 1962 "to consider the present position of post-primary education, particularly in its social aspects, and to make recommendations". This committee which recommended the development of a comprehensive system of education at junior cycle followed by a dual-track system at senior cycle (a three year academic secondary course paralleled by a one year pre-employment course) envisaged that the effective administration of such a system could only be carried out by a regional committee. It proposed the establishment of "local statutory committees for post-primary education nominated principally by the Co. Councils and Urban District councils of the areas concerned just as the vocational committees now are, (and having) in addition nominees of the Bishops whose dioceses form part of these counties, to represent the religious communities providing secondary education and also a nominee to represent the interests of religious minorities." This recommendation, submitted to the then Minister for Education, Dr. P. Hillery, thirty years ago this December, might well be considered at this stage as a good model for a new local/regional structure of educational administration, with the addition of appropriate representatives for primary education.

It is interesting that among the bodies which have recently expressed disappointment that the Green Paper has not addressed the issue of a regional structure is the CMRS who could not understand "how the devolution proposal can be effective or equitable without the establishment of an intermediate tier of co-ordination and management". A number of organisations which in the past objected to proposals for local or regional structures might now be willing ^{to} reconsider their position.

The Irish education system has not been renowned in the past for its openness or transparency nor indeed for its accountability - consequently **the proposal to ensure greater openness and accountability** is particularly welcome. However, even at this early stage of the deliberations, some people might well ask whether the Minister is serious about this proposal. It has recently emerged that certain chosen groups have already met with the Minister and/or departmental representatives for further clarification on aspects of the Green Paper. Many people would like to know on what basis are some groups accorded this privilege and not others? And if clarification is required, why cannot such clarification be issued generally? There are also rumblings and rumours that the Minister may not now proceed with his original proposal to initiate a series of public open

meetings to discuss the Green Paper. This would be a great disappointment to many people. There have been very few occasions when the educational debate has been opened up to every citizen thus providing an opportunity for the ordinary man and woman to make his/her voice heard. To my knowledge such an open debate has only occurred twice before in the history of the State. The first occasion was in the late 1960s when efforts were made to reorganise and rationalise post-primary education and public meetings were held in different centres around the country. The second occasion was in 1984/85 when the Curriculum and Examinations Board held public meetings around the country to discuss the curriculum and assessment proposals contained in the document *Issues and Structures in Education*. On both occasions the debate was exciting and fruitful. It would be a pity if a Green Paper which has specifically supported openness and transparency were to ignore its own proposals and if a White Paper were to be drafted without giving an opportunity to everyone - whether or not involved in a specific educational interest group - to contribute to the "great educational debate".