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Authors	Hyland, Áine
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Educating Ireland's Children Together - the Dream and the Realities

(Paper read by Áine Hyland, Chairperson, *Educate Together*, in the presence of the Minister for Education, Niamh Bhreathnach, at a seminar on the Green Paper in Kilkenny, 4th March 1993)

Educate Together is the co-ordinating committee for multi-denominational national schools in Ireland. We believe that the ***option*** of multi-denominational education should be available for all who seek it. We define multi-denominational schools as schools where all children have equal right of access and children of all religious, cultural and social backgrounds are equally respected. There are at present, ten national schools in the *Educate Together* sector catering for over 2,000 pupils and employing 70 teachers. Several other groups throughout the country wish to open such schools.

We welcome the opportunity to contribute publicly to the debate on the Green Paper and I would like to thank the Minister for inviting me to speak here today. *Educate Together* is impressed by many aspects of the philosophy underlying the Green Paper and by the educational aims set out in Chapter 1. We support the thrust towards improving educational provision for young people from disadvantaged backgrounds and for children with special educational needs; to enhancing the role of Boards of Management and strengthening links between school, family and community; to promoting gender equity in education (and in this regard I would like to make the point that 6 of our ten Boards of Management are chaired by women; over 2/3rds of board members are women and 8 of the ten principals are women). We welcome the aims of promoting self-esteem combined with respect for the rights and beliefs of others; of creating tolerant and caring members of society and of fostering independence of mind and creativity.

This is a crucial point in the history of Irish education. The government is committed to publishing a White Paper before the end of the year and to following it with an Education Bill. It is an opportunity to reassess where education is at in this country and to put in place structures for educational development for the next generation at least. Since *Educate Together* is concerned only with schools at primary level, I will confine my remarks today to the primary education system.

Although there has been significant political, cultural, social and economic change in Ireland since the national school system was set up in 1831, there has been surprisingly little change in the structure of that system over a period of 160 years. It was initially set up with the object of "uniting in one system children of different creeds" but by the middle of the nineteenth century it had become in practice a denominational system with separate schools for Catholic and Protestant children. In this respect, the Irish system of national education was and continues to be fundamentally different to systems of education in most of the western world where "parallel" systems evolved - i.e. where denominational schools exist side by side with public, democratically controlled schools.

The national school system in Ireland today has over 3,000 Catholic schools (including about 70 Gaelscoileanna which are under Catholic patronage), about 220 Protestant schools; 10 multi-denominational schools; one Jewish school and one Moslem school. The Census volume providing a breakdown of the 1991 population by religion is not yet available but it is reasonable to estimate that there are over 30,000 children aged between 4 and 12 in this country who are neither Catholics nor Protestants. In general, the State makes

no provision for these children within the national school system. Neither does it make provision for the many Catholic and Protestant families who do not want their children to attend a specifically denominational school but want to have their children educated together with children of other religious and ethical backgrounds. These are the families whose case *Educate Together* is putting forward today - we are not in any way questioning the rights of those parents who want denominational education for their children to have access to such education.

In their response to the Green Paper, the CPSMA, the Church of Ireland Board of Education and the INTO have recognised the need for diversity in the provision of primary education. The CPSMA suggests that "the right of different schools to exist and to be funded should be included in the Education Act". The submission from the C. of I. Board states: "As an outcome to this current debate, we wish for there to be a genuinely pluralist system of education in which there is a recognition of and tolerance for diversity."

In the Seanad debate on the Green Paper last October, Senator John A. Murphy supported in principle the ideal of having "a denominational system on the one hand and what might be called a secular or a multi-denominational system on the other hand". He concluded however, "that the country cannot afford that". *Educate Together* does not accept this assertion. The current cost to the government of national school education (i.e. teachers' salaries and capitation grant) will be the same whether the children attend denominational or multi-denominational schools. The issue which needs to be resolved now is the issue of accommodation.

In its response to the Green Paper, *Educate Together* has drawn attention to the fact that the difficulty of getting access to suitable accommodation has been the single greatest deterrent for parents who want to send their children to multi-denominational schools in this country. All other member states of the European Community provide publicly owned buildings for basic education. Ireland is unique in requiring citizens to provide privately owned accommodation for this purpose. Only three of the *Educate Together* schools are in permanent purpose-built accommodation and only one of these has sufficient accommodation to meet demand. In addition to the existing schools, there at least five groups around the country who have failed to start a school because of the difficulty of getting access to accommodation.

Since 1980 the child population has been falling in this country. The number of babies born each year has fallen from a high of 75,000 in 1980 to around 50,000 in 1990. As a result, the national school population is falling significantly in some areas and classrooms and even whole school buildings are becoming ***empty.*** However these buildings are not available for *Educate Together* schools because they are owned by the Churches, though initially financed mainly from public funds. In areas like Kilkenny where the population is vibrant, this does not create a problem and we appreciate the fact that the Junior Minister for Education, Deputy Liam Aylward has accepted the need for a new school building on a greenfield site for the Kilkenny School Project. However, because there are empty school buildings in other areas of the country, the Department is reluctant to provide grant aid for new buildings for multi-denominational schools. *Educate Together* agrees that in the present demographic situation it makes good sense to facilitate the use of existing school buildings and in our earlier response to the Green Paper we proposed that the Department should take a flexible approach to the provision of capital grants for national schools. We suggest for example that the Department provide capital grants for the purchase of existing buildings - especially empty school buildings and should develop a policy which would encourage denominational authorities to sell empty school buildings either to the Department or to parent groups who need accommodation for a multi-denominational school - rather than selling them on the commercial market. Empty or part-empty buildings owned by VECs could also be made available on suitable terms for a multi-denominational school rather than be allocated to non-school use or sold on the commercial market.

Local Education Committees

The commitment in the Programme for Partnership Government to the setting up of intermediate management structures or local education committees opens up a whole new situation which I don't have time to address here in detail. Might I suggest however that the approach taken in Northern Ireland within the past few weeks of issuing a Consultative Document in which different models for restructuring the local administrative system are suggested - might be useful here in the south. The Northern Minister for Education has invited views on rationalising the 5 Education and Library Boards which now employ 1,500 full-time administrative staff at a cost of £32 million (for a total pupil population of 370,000 pupils).

In the context of our own debate here, I would like to focus on one area where the proposed LECs might provide an opportunity for a new and flexible approach to school accommodation which could ultimately overcome not only the accommodation difficulties of *Educate Together* schools, but also other forms of community and adult education. I suggest that local education committees should be given power in the new Education Act to be the legal owners of school property. Incentives might be provided to existing school authorities who have empty or part-empty school buildings to transfer these to the L.E.Cs. Capital grants for national schools from now on (this year there is a capital allocation of £19 million for national school buildings in the Budget) might be allocated on a different legal basis than heretofore.

In the *Educate Together* sector for example, we do not want to become school property owners - yet the current legal basis on which capital grants are given to national schools require us (like all other national school authorities) to name trustees who effectively become the legal owners of the school property. Why should the LECs not become the legal owners of new national school buildings for which government grants are given and lease these to various school authorities - whether denominational or multi-denominational? The rent over a period of years could be the equivalent of the site costs plus local contribution which in the past was paid by the locality - thereby ensuring that the new system would be no more expensive for the State. A school building (or part thereof) leased from the LEC would revert to the LEC when there was no longer demand for that school and the building could be reallocated to another local school group where demand was growing. This could be another type of national school (either denominational or multi-denominational) or it could be a post-primary school, or an adult or community education centre or a pre-school group. Basically what I am suggesting is that from now on there should be a distinction between the ownership of school property and the right to run a school and that the legal conditions under which grant aid is given to national school authorities should be reviewed and revised.

As regards other functions of Local Education Committees, we agree with much of what has been proposed by the CMRS and the INTO in their submissions. The LECs should have power to co-ordinate the various educational facilities in an area, including support services for children with special needs. They might also co-ordinate a teacher supply panel as well as supporting in-service education.

We suggest that the composition of the LECs should be sufficiently flexible to enable groups other than existing education interest groups to be represented. The LECs should be statutorily required to seek the views of parents as to the type of education they would like to have available for their children and they should be obliged to take account of minority views and interests. We would also suggest that provision should be made for local groups to appeal to the Minister where they feel that the LEC is not sufficiently responsive to their requests.

Provisional Recognition and Ineligibility for Capital Grants:

The second major issue which militates against the growth of the *Educate Together* sector is the fact that multi-

denominational schools are initially only given provisional recognition by the Department of Education and are ineligible for capital grants in the early years. This has been the case since 1986 and has meant that seven *Educate Together* schools got no capital grants for refurbishing or furnishing temporary accommodation when the schools were at their most rapid and expensive stage of growth. This has not been the case for denominational schools which are eligible for capital grants from day one.

The new practice of provisional recognition was introduced in 1986 in spite of a commitment in the 1984-7 Programme for Action in Education that "support will be given to (multi-denominational schools) on the same terms as those which would be available for the establishment of schools under denominational patronage". The new practice was introduced without the backing of rules, regulations or circulars. The then Minister for Education, Patrick Cooney, in a debate in the Seanad in October 1986, tried to justify the new practice by arguing that "it would defy reason if we were to grant aid to the full and maximum extent what is essentially an experimental project, or indeed any school that was a new concept in an area no matter how desirable..." *Educate Together* rejects this anti-innovative approach and ask if this philosophy were applied generally would we have Community and Comprehensive Schools, RTCs, or the new Universities of Limerick and Dublin? There is overwhelming evidence that the *Educate Together* schools have been a success and they should no longer be seen as "experiments". We welcome the commitment in the Green Paper that "the Department will facilitate and support the establishment of (multi-denominational) schools on the same terms as those available for the establishment of denominational schools". We ask the Minister to remove the discriminatory practice of provisional recognition for *Educate Together* schools and to provide capital grants for them from the start. Instead of setting up obstacles to the development of multi-denominational schools we would like to see included in the forthcoming legislation a clause similar to that in the 1989 NI Education Order which places a statutory obligation on the D.E.N.I. to encourage and support integrated (or multi-denominational) education.

There are other issues in the Green Paper which we have addressed in our submission. As regards Boards of Management, we favour a system of equality between all the partners - teachers, parents and patron - in the management of the school.

As regards the training of teachers, we feel the Minister should hesitate before abolishing the concurrent model of teacher training which has produced high quality primary teachers over the years. We would however ask her to ensure that no young person is precluded from becoming a primary teacher on the basis of his/her religious belief or background. There should be at least one College of Education in the country which accepts and treats people equally irrespective of their religious background, if any.

Like all other parent, teacher and management groups at primary level, we would like to remind the Minister that the capitation grant for national schools is totally inadequate. We welcome the increase of £5 per pupil announced in the Budget last week and we look forward to an increase annually in the capitation grant during the life of the present government until the level recommended by the P.E.R.B in 1990 is reached.

In conclusion we would like to welcome again the publication of the Green Paper and to congratulate its authors on producing a document which is historic and thought-provoking. We look forward to the publication of the White Paper - in which we hope our views will be reflected - and we ask the Minister to include *Educate Together* in the consultative process which will take place between now and the presentation of an Education Bill to the Houses of the Oireachtas.

(A copy of the full response of *Educate Together* to the Green Paper - Education for a Changing World - is available on request from Áine Hyland, Chairperson, *Educate Together*, 37 Mapas Rd., Dalkey, Co. Dublin at a cost of £2 incl. p.& p.)