

EMBARGOED UNTIL DELIVERY. Speech seconding the report of the Synod Board of Education (Republic) at General Synod. Edgar Swann, Glendalough.

Your Grace, members of Synod.

Anyone who has worked in the R.E. Department of a secondary will be aware of the annual material which arrives, in an attempt to encourage schools to participate in the Synod exam. The format of which has changed radically over the last few years.

The Synod Examination has a very long history and includes such gems as the headmaster of a well known second level school charging the examiner of the committee with setting an unfair paper in New Testament Greek. Today the Synod Exam is very much an opportunity for young people to explore their Christian faith. The Board is anxious that as many schools at second level as possible should enter pupils for this examination which is school based and has encouraging prizes and certificates both for pupils and for the schools themselves. It is part of the Primary Religious Education Programme. With the excellent work of the Primary RE Committee under the Chairmanship of the Bishop of Meath and the excellent work of Mrs Jacqui Wilkinson the third module of Follow Me has now been completed and the next is in hand. This programme reflects the common core curriculum in the North of Ireland and the methodology of philosophy of the primary school curriculum in the Republic of Ireland. Stepping Out is suitable for 1st and 2nd classes or P3 and P4.

Follow Me is not a programme of instruction or formation but rather one that seeks to uphold existing faith commitment while encouraging those of no faith experience to explore and come to an understanding of the Gospel.

Anyone charged with the management of a national school at the present time will not need to be reminded of one of the most difficult situations, which have faced schools for many years.

National Schools have been increasingly aware of a shortage of Qualifying teachers. The Department of Education has acted by recognizing more quickly the qualifications of those who have qualified in the EU and allowing some 5 years for such teachers to get the appropriate Irish qualification. This is only a small part of a much needed solution. Our College of Education which does such excellent work in providing well qualified graduates for our schools is working at full capacity but the supply of teachers is not as yet sufficient to meet the needs of schools. There is also anxiety that teachers are slow to consider posts in more rural parts of the country.

Boards of management in recent times have faced increasing demands on their time and on their acquisition of expertise. The proposal to provide treasurers with a computer package for the maintenance of school accounts is to be welcomed particularly in view of the plethora of small grants which arrive by electronic transfer in school accounts. The grants arrive well ahead of any notification of the purpose for which the grants are to be used. The Report pays tribute to the work of the officials of the Department of Education & Science but inevitably at school level it is difficult to make contact with the Department because of staff shortages and a reticence of civil servants to answer telephones. The promised regional once-stop shop for education may well help to overcome this but like any development in education it will only work if it is a development given fresh and adequate resources.

The Department has been welcoming in a scheme allowing schools to initiate planning towards school extensions, refurbishment or the creation of green-field schools. However the progress from the point of initiating planning to the permission to go to tender can be a very long period and schools find it difficult to know where they stand on any priority list.

Too often there is the sense that building projects get a go ahead because of political expediency. We are all aware, during the lead up to the election, of the charge that projects have deliberately been put on hold for some considerable time in order to be drip fed to communities during electioneering as a deliberate election bribe. This is no way to run a school system.

Funding must be planned on a multi-annual basis and be sufficient to upgrade all schools within the decade.

The granting of special needs posts has to be heartily welcomed, but the provision of accommodation other than corridors and storerooms is also essential. There can be no place in modern Ireland for cramped or sub standard school buildings. Our children are a precious resource and deserve better, and so do our dedicated teaching staff.

The Education (Welfare) Act has brought new responsibilities to schools and the proposal that transfers of pupils would be noted electronically is to be welcomed however again this does not render any benefit to a small school which has not an office or a principal's room or indeed a computer which is designated for office use only. The work of the National Educational Welfare Board will be watched closely to ensure that it does not create a burden for schools but rather that it's role in assisting schools in achieving higher attendance and more positive learning for pupils who are on the periphery of society is to be welcomed.

One of the major tasks which the Board has been asked by the Representative Body and Standing Committee to undertake is Safeguarding Trust training. This has been ongoing and the ready acceptance of the Church's Child Protection Policy in the last year has been welcomed. The Board is anxious to facilitate training wherever such needs arise and several dioceses have appointed their own training groups. The reminder in the Representative Church Body's Report of the need for every premises to have a Health and Safety Policy is a useful reminder that we protect children by providing suitable premises as well as insuring that those who work with them are properly trained. The implementation of Safeguarding Trust involves work and effort on the part of the parishes, but in the present climate it is essential that the Church of Ireland is seen to be setting the highest standards for the welfare of the young people committed to its care.

During the year, and following much public debate on the subject the Board responded to a discussion document in relation to safer school buses. The Board raised issues regarding the age of the buses, the lack of safety belts and harnesses and the need to upgrade the system. The policy of "cascading" used buses into the system is a sign that children are at the bottom of the pile in terms of priorities. Must we wait until there is a serious accident involving children on a school bus to achieve action?

The Board also administers the Scheme D Transport Grant at primary level and there has been an increased number of applications for this scheme. It is important that schools advise parents of the availability of the scheme which provides grants where there are no scheduled school bus services.

The maintenance of schools under Protestant or Church of Ireland management at both primary and secondary levels has always been seen by our minority community in the Republic as essential to the maintenance of our ethos. The work of all the second level schools under Protestant Management is of great significance to the community in the Republic. A number of the schools are small in terms of enrolment but all have the ability to deliver education in an efficient and effective manner and can point to results well above the National average. While big may be beautiful small can be equally significant and valuable.

I am happy to second the adoption of this report.