

Secondary Education Committee – Report 2004

**SECONDARY EDUCATION COMMITTEE**

**REPORT 2004**

**MEMBERSHIP**

***Church of Ireland***

The Rt. Rev. WP Colton, Bishop of Cork, Cloyne and Ross (Chairman)  
The Rev Canon RJEFB Black  
Mrs JM Bruton  
Mrs L Clarke  
Mr G Jephson  
Rev Canon J Merrick  
Mrs P O'Malley  
Ms EE Oldham

***The Presbyterian Church***

Mr B Duffy (Vice-Chairman)  
Rev CM Hunter

***The Methodist Church***

Rev V Wyse Jackson  
Dr JW Harris

***The Religious Society of Friends***

Mr R Johnson  
Professor B Murdoch

**SECONDARY EDUCATION COMMITTEE**

The Secondary Education Committee (SEC) is a body comprising representatives from the Church of Ireland, the Methodist Church in Ireland, the Presbyterian Church in Ireland and the Religious Society of Friends.

The Committee derives its authority from a resolution passed by the sponsoring churches in 1965.

The functions of the SEC are twofold. Firstly, to distribute a Block Grant provided by the Department of Education and Science (DE&S) to families, where at least one parent is a member of a reformed church and who need assistance to send their children to Protestant secondary schools. Secondly it also seeks to represent the interest of the member churches in the post-primary education system.

The committee operates as a limited company thus allowing both the corporate body and the liability of individual members to be appropriately insured.

### **ADMINISTRATOR**

Mr David Wynne was appointed as administrator to the scheme following the retirement of Mr R Kilroy. Mr Wynne had already provided support for the IT aspect of the work of the SEC office. He also has had a background in a number of relevant areas including financial administration and the provision of benevolent services.

### **BLOCK GRANT SCHEME**

Enrolments in the twenty-one fee charging schools totalled 9,172 (9,169 in previous year). This figure does not include the five comprehensive schools. As yet the total figure has not reflected the national trend of reduction in enrolments in the post-primary sector.

In the school year 2002-03 the audited account showed the totals received from the DE&S was €4,917,619 (€4,693,574) the grant in aided fees totalled €4,573,929 (€4,272,465) and capitation adjustment grant €343,434 (€339,254). The cost of administering the SEC scheme was €149,554 (€117,517). Apart from salary costs key elements in the increased expenditure were professional fees and computer system upgrading.

The block grant has shown no increase since 2002 and this is resulted in the grant levels set in 2003-2004 being also applied for the year 2004-2005.

The number of pupils assisted with grants was as follows:

Day grants 1,373 (previous year 1,365) boarding grants 1,068 previous year (1,098) total 2,441 (previous year 2,463).

Grants are allocated for the current school year 2003-2004 and the coming year 2004-2005 on a scale from: boarding €1,140 - €4,050, day €480 - €1620.

The Administrator attended several open days at the request of schools and parents have appreciated the opportunity to clarify particular issues relating to grant assessment. The Administrator calls to schools each year and this is a useful interaction with the principals or bursars who may be aware of family difficulties where the SEC grant may be a support.

Parents who contact the SEC office will be assured of a helpful response from Mr Wynne or his assistant Mrs McCauley. There are procedures in place where a family suffers a sudden and significant change in circumstances due to unemployment, long-term illness or bereavement. A leaflet outlining the scheme is available and has been circulated to clergy and primary schools.

### **THE ROLE OF THE SCHEME**

Concerns had arisen following reported comments by the Minister of Education & Science, Mr Noel Dempsey TD concerning fee charging schools. This raised anxieties about the continuance of the block grant scheme and about the allocation of capital grants

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for school buildings. The Minister was subsequently provided with documentation to indicate that the block grant existed to counter disadvantage and that the schools as a group had significant numbers of children from families experiencing very real and measurable financial difficulties. The Committee was also appreciative of the role of Archbishop of Dublin, Most Rev JRW Neill, in raising these anxieties with the Minister. Mr Dempsey later indicated by letter that he had had no intention of altering the block grant scheme. Several schools have subsequently been included in the published building programme for 2004 in relation to proposed extensions or classroom development. As yet none has permission to go to tender but it is understood that schools listed should see the projects complete within the five year capital funding ‘envelope’ which has been provided by the Department of Finance.

It is regretted that the Comprehensive Schools, built very economically in the early seventies have not as yet progressed to tender stage. The age and condition of these buildings has given rise to continued health and safety issues and concerns about security.

### **EDUCATION ISSUES**

The Committee maintains a watching brief on educational issues but many concerns will be raised by the Joint Managerial Body, the Association of Community and Comprehensive Schools and the National Association of Principals and Deputy Principals (NAPD). These bodies include representation from the Protestant schools. Indeed it is appropriate to congratulate Mr DR West, Principal of Newpark, who is the current chair of NAPD.

The implementation of the Religious Education syllabus for Leaving Certificate (established) has been rightly welcomed and it is hoped that those who have already taken the subject at Junior Certificate level will consider it as an option for Senior Cycle.

In recent reports the possibility of a pilot scheme for the provision of funded chaplaincy has been outlined. There is currently no progress in this matter.

The national agreement on pay and conditions *Sustaining Progress* to which employers, trade unions and government are parties included a commitment to standardise the school year. The implementation of this has been difficult as primary and second-level sectors have different minimum lengths of school year and different traditions in regard to religious holidays. Boarding Schools which cater for children who naturally travel long distances to homes within Ireland, or to homes where families are serving overseas, have found grave difficulty with the standardised year. The late conclusion of talks on the issue and the utilisation of short weeks which greatly increase costs together with overseas parents reluctance to have children travel at peak times have all been raised in the context of the discussions. It is understood that the Irish School Heads Association has raised particular concerns with the Minister of Education and Science about these matters. The Education Act, 1998 does give the Minister the legal right, following consultation, to prescribe the organisation of the school year (section 25 (c)).

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The Committee has also discussed issues regarding the introduction of Social, Personal and Health Education at Senior Cycle and the Education for Persons with Disabilities Bill.