

SECONDARY EDUCATION COMMITTEE REPORT

JOAN BRUTON (MEATH AND KILDARE) - PROPOSER

EMBARGOED UNTIL DELIVERY

Your Grace,

There are 21 voluntary secondary schools under Protestant management and each is an independent entity reflecting its own history and tradition. Not the least of the factors which help towards that individual identity is the inspired leadership of the principals who give so much to the life of their own institutions. The end of this school year will see a considerable change among those who are principals with well-deserved retirements and consequent appointments. A member of the Secondary Education Committee and of this Synod retires from his role as Principal of Kilkenny College this year.

Canon Jack Black was the first chaplain to Newpark Comprehensive and subsequently became Principal of Dundalk Grammar before moving to Kilkenny College. There, he built on the work of the late Sam McClure, whose regretted death occurred last year, in creating the largest boarding school in the country and with the support of the State built fine teaching facilities for the students. No doubt Jack's valued expertise will continue to be available to Church and community and we wish him a happy and well-deserved retirement. He will be missed from the Secondary Education Committee and we thank him for his valuable contribution.

It would be easy to think that Kilkenny College is exclusive and only for the well heeled and that is how our schools have been portrayed in recent years. This is a very false perception. Kilkenny College and, indeed the other schools in the S.E.C. sector, welcome all and have the supports in place for those who are economically disadvantaged and those who have special education needs while simultaneously providing a wide and challenging curriculum.

However, I would be false to a school in which I must declare an interest, Wilson's Hospital, if I did not also point to its welcome to both the disadvantaged and to those who are able to flourish in the supportive atmosphere of a friendly community with a fine range of curricular and extra curricular

activities with chapel life at the heart of the Community. No doubt other members of Synod will rise to sing the praises of their establishments but this is not a PR exercise but rather the preface to express the disappointment and dismay of Wilson's and other schools who have been refused Summer Works Grants. The reason given was that they were 'Fee paying'. The schools have appealed the decision and, I understand that, at least one is being reviewed. It is to be hoped that others will be similarly reviewed and that the original decision will be reversed.

It is true that families pay fees, but those who cannot afford to pay are not excluded. This is possible because the Secondary Education Committee operates a grant system which gives an equality of opportunity to all the children of the community. We are able to do so because the Department provides the funds given to schools in the free scheme as a block and allows the Committee using transparent procedures the opportunity to distribute it according to need.

We welcome the Minister for Education and Science's recent statement clarifying the issue. In her statement, the Minister affirmed that the Block Grant has its origins in the desire of the State to enable students of the Protestant persuasion to attend schools which reflect their denominational ethos. We are happy to note that the Minister has confirmed that minority religion schools receive 100% capital funding for building projects.

In addition, we are delighted to acknowledge the Minister's recently announced decision to allow three of the voluntary and two of the Comprehensives go to architectural planning. We must hope that there will be no delay in moving on to the point where permission to build will be given so that the deteriorating conditions referred to in the report are a note in history rather than a disappointing reality of everyday school life. It is, however, a pity that there are other schools in the S.E.C. sector who must wait for their building projects – and wait is the operative word as the Department cannot give any indication of when they can look forward to adequate school accommodation.

Educational developments are also noted in the Report but there is no reference this year to the proposed Leaving Certificate revision as the final NCCA report and the Minister's response is awaited. Awaited too is the report of the working party on behaviour in schools and sadly the background to this is to be found in the changed mores of Society.

May I end in paying tribute to the members of the Committee not least to the previous speaker, the Bishop of Cork, who as our chairman keeps us focussed on the issues under discussion and brooks no time delay or dilly dallying. I can assure you that it is a pleasure to attend S.E.C. meetings.

I should also note our appreciation to the administrator David Wynne who has briefed schools and encouraged bursars and principals to make sure all who are in need know about the scheme. This year, David organised a conference for bursars with a consequent valuable exchange of information.

And, lastly but not leastly, on behalf of all involved in the S.E.C. sector, I want to thank Canon McCullagh who appears to have an inexhaustible knowledge of the workings of the Department of Education and Science. John is always available to answer queries and does in a quiet and efficient manner.

I have pleasure in proposing that the Synod considers and then adopts the Report of the Secondary Education Committee.