

The Presbyterian Church in Ireland

Submission of the Board of Education of the Presbyterian Church in Ireland with regard to the Consultative Document "Reorganisation of Secondary Education in Northern Ireland".

The Presbyterian Church, throughout its history, has been deeply committed to and involved in education. The aim has not been simply the instruction of young people in things religious, but that they might be assisted and encouraged to develop their full potential as persons in a Christian environment.

Presbyterian people, who represent a considerable proportion of the population of the province, are convinced that the Church's role in education is as vital today as ever it has been. In an age of conflicting values and declining moral standards, parents want their young people to grow up in an environment of Christian nurture and moral principle.

The Church's relationship to education has been marked by participation based on mutual trust and good faith. The Churches refused to hand over their schools under the terms of the 1923 Act because a secular system was envisaged. Under the 1930 Act the Protestant Churches agreed to transfer schools on the conditions that Religious Instruction would be given, and that those bodies who transferred schools would be given 50% representation on management committees. The harmony that developed, in consequence, led to the principle being retained in the 1947 Act, in the Amending Act of 1968, and again in the Order of 1972.

Where the Churches have participated under Transferor Rights, they have sought to bring a sense of continuity, a dedication to the needs of young people, and a pastoral link between the school and the home. The attendance of transferor representatives at management committee meetings has been well above average, reflecting their support for both the teaching profession and the children.

It has always been the concern of the Presbyterian Church that every child should receive the best education possible, suited to his age, aptitude and abilities. In the light of this concern the Church welcomes every change in the educational structure that would lead to improvement, and in particular at this time commends the efforts that are being made to end the system by which 75% of our children may be stigmatised as failures at the age of 11. However, the Board does not consider that the proposals forwarded in the Document make for educational advance.

The restrictions placed upon those who drew up the Report were so stringent as to render their task well nigh impossible. To limit reorganisation to the use of existing buildings can at best produce only a very poor compromise.

The exclusion of the question of integrated education means that the system advanced can not be truly comprehensive. To segregate children on a religious basis appears to be as wrong as segregation on the basis of class or colour. On two separate occasions the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church has passed unanimously resolutions in favour of integrated education. It is felt that integrated education, together with integrated housing integrated work force and integrated leisure will lead to better trust and understanding in our community.

The Board is most concerned at the use of the terms "Catholic" and "Non-Catholic" in the Report, (111, 2, 17). This goes further than simply recognising the regrettable division which exists, it proposes to entrench it more permanently in law. There is a serious danger of deepening the existing division in the community by grouping schools in denominational categories, and so delaying and discouraging present hopes of integrated education.

The Document states that changes in management are not necessary for the success of the scheme (111, 11, 32). The Board of Education pleads that this policy be adhered to. In fact, it has been very difficult for the Churches to discuss freely the comprehensive system because of the drastic changes in school management explicit or implicit in the Report. The Board maintains that if the proposals are carried through, they will lead to a strengthening of the Roman Catholic sector, and a weakening of the involvement of the Protestant Churches to the extent that the state sector will be virtually secularised.

There is no clear definition of the role of the Transferor in the system. Paragraphs 111, 11, 20 and 111, 11, 35a leave a vagueness and uncertainty. The choice of Transferors' Representatives is taken from the Transferors and given to the Area Boards who do not need to consult the Transferors. This is an elimination of Transferor Rights, and would be seen by many as a breach of faith by the Government. On the other hand the trustees of voluntary schools will be given the right of veto over membership of management committees and consultation is necessary (111, 11, 12: and 111, 11, 35c). The Board affirms that Transferors' Representatives ought to be appointed only after consultation with and nomination by the Transferring Interests, and that there must be no reduction in the proportion of Transferors' Representatives without a corresponding reduction in such Representatives in the voluntary and maintained sector of education.

The decision to exclude Colleges of Further Education from the proposed scheme is seriously questioned, especially since these have catered for young people with particular technical or vocational bents. The Board would further point out that this is an area of education where integration has been accepted without question by all sides.

The Board is persuaded that as a general principle all secondary schools should have parity of staff and equipment; although it might well be that areas of social deprivation deserve positive discrimination.

An essential in comprehensive education is that all schools be given parity of treatment so that they will enjoy equal esteem in the minds of parents, and in the community as a whole. This would certainly not happen if two tier schooling were introduced, with 11 to 16, and 11 to 18 schools existing in close proximity. The difference in status would undoubtedly affect both pupils and staff adversely in the 11 to 16 schools.

The Board also considers that a two form entry school is too small to be effective as a comprehensive.

Recognising the uncertainty which the Report is causing in the minds of some teachers, the Board is concerned lest the rights and status of any teachers should be adversely affected by any proposed change.

The Board stresses that education exists primarily for the benefit of children and urges that changes be made not for the sake of change, but only where improvement can be clearly seen as a consequence. It is acknowledged that no system can continue indefinitely, but the Board is far from persuaded that the proposals as they appear in the Consultative Document make for thorough and proper educational advance.

Presbyterian Church in Ireland

The Board of Education of the Presbyterian Church in Ireland would, in presenting this submission, express the sincere hope that the harmony and good relationships which have developed over the years between Church and State in the field of education will be continued and strengthened.

The Presbyterian Church, throughout its history, has been deeply committed to and involved in education. The aim has not been simply the inauguration of state pupils in church buildings, but that they might be educated and encouraged to develop their full potential as persons in a Christian environment.

Presbyterian people, who represent a considerable proportion of the population of the province, are convinced that the Church's role in education is as vital today as ever in the past. In an age of conflicting values and declining moral standards, parents want their young people to grow up in an environment of Christian values and moral principles.

The Church's relationship in education has been marked by participation since its arrival in the country. The Church's refusal to hand over their schools under the terms of the 1870 Act because a secular system was introduced. Under the 1902 Act the Protestant Churches agreed to transfer schools on the conditions that religious instruction would be given, and that those bodies who transferred schools would be given 10% representation on management committees. The language that developed, in consequence, had specific religious aims retained in the 1927 Act, in the Amendment Act of 1948, and again in the Order of 1971.

With the Church's long commitment to education, it is the duty of the Board to ensure that the Church's contribution to the education of the province is maintained and developed. The Board will therefore support management committees wherever they have the necessary religious aims, and will also support, wherever possible, the teaching profession and the children.

It has always been the concern of the Presbyterian Church that every child should receive the best education possible, suited to his age, abilities and abilities. In the light of this concern the Church will necessarily change its educational aims where that would lead to improvement, and in particular at this time support the efforts that are being made to end the system by which 7% of our children are segregated as feebleminded at the age of 11. However, the Board does not consider that the proposals forwarded in the document are for educational aims.

**CHURCH HOUSE,
BELFAST, BT1 6DW**

April, 1977

The Board is most concerned at the use of the terms "Catholic" and "Protestant" in the Report (III, 2, 17). This goes further than simply recognising the regrettable division which exists, it proposes to increase it even more by law. It is a serious danger of deepening the existing division in the community by suggesting religious and denominational categories, and by suggesting a "Catholic" and "Protestant" representation of pupils.