

PPWP 1034

1ST DAY BRIEFS June 1993

## CATHOLIC SCHOOL ISSUES

### BACKGROUND

1. The relationship between the Government and the Roman Catholic Church Authorities in relation to education has always been marked by caution on the part of the Church, brought about by a determination to protect the ethos of its schools and a suspicion of any perceived encroachment on their rights. Rapprochement between church and state over the provision and support of schools has consequently been a lengthy process.

2. Catholic voluntary schools cater for approximately 50% of the school population, and fall into 2 categories, ie Catholic voluntary grammar schools and Catholic voluntary maintained primary and secondary schools. At present Catholic voluntary grammar schools, like other, non-denominational voluntary grammar schools, receive 100% recurrent grant, and 85% grant towards approved capital projects from the Department of Education. Catholic voluntary maintained schools, like controlled (ie state) schools, receive 100% grant towards their recurrent expenditure from the 5 area education and library boards. At present they also receive 85% grant from the Department of Education towards the cost of approved capital projects. The rate of capital grant payable to all forms of voluntary schools relates to the school management structure whereby the school trustees retain the right to majority representation on school Boards of Governors.

### CHURCH/STATE DISCUSSIONS ON CATHOLIC EDUCATION

3. Government has been engaged over the last 2 years in discussion with the Roman Catholic Authorities about the funding and management of the Catholic voluntary sector of education in Northern Ireland. The Church's main concerns have been:-

- the level of recurrent funding of the voluntary sector in comparison with the controlled (non-denominational but mostly Protestant) sector;
- the effect of the statutory requirement on voluntary school authorities to provide 15% of the cost of capital building works;

- the conditions for the retrieval or "clawback" by Government of capital grant-aid when voluntary schools close or are replaced;
- the availability of grammar school places for Catholic children transferring to secondary education;
- the role and responsibilities of Council and Catholic Maintained Schools (CCMS).

#### SACHR REPORT

4. These concerns predate, but were given new impetus by, the publication in May 1991 of a study of the funding of the education system in NI by the Standing Advisory Commission on Human Rights (SACHR). This study published data which showed that per capita of pupil, certain elements of recurrent expenditure were greater on pupils in controlled than in Catholic voluntary maintained schools. It also suggested that the 15% contribution to capital costs could have a detrimental effect on the provision of specialist accommodation for scientific and technical subjects in voluntary schools. The publication of the Report led to considerable and acrimonious comment, much of it based on a misinterpretation or over-simplification of the data.

#### PROGRESS MADE

5. As a result of these discussions, significant progress has been made and there is now a much greater level of understanding and, indeed, trust between Church and State. Particular areas of progress include:

- a. An agreement that in future voluntary schools can opt for 100% capital grant. To do so, however, they will have to adjust their management arrangements to ensure that no one interest has an overall majority on the Board of Governors of schools. At present Catholic Church Trustees have 6 out of 10 places on maintained school Boards of Governors - in future they will have 4 out of 9. It will be a matter for individual schools to decide whether or not to opt into the new arrangements;

b. It is now accepted that the recurrent funding issue has been resolved with the introduction of the new LMS funding arrangements. These ensure that all schools are funded on the basis of common formulae. Those formulae are devised following consultation with schools and, in addition, the Council for Catholic Maintained Schools (CCMS) is fully involved in process.

c. following discussion with the Catholic Church Authorities, agreement has been reached on the provision of some 1,400 additional Catholic grammar school places in Belfast, Londonderry and other locations.

6. Consideration is continuing on the complex issue of "clawback", the retrieval of government grant, in circumstances where, for example, a voluntary school which had been in receipt of capital grants is closed and its property sold.

7. Discussions have also taken place earlier this year on the future role and staffing of CCMS. While some immediate financial uplift has been given to help with staffing pressures, DENI has stressed that the future role of CCMS has to be considered in the context of an overall review of educational administration and the change in structures that will be likely to emerge from this.