

**The transfer of pupils from
primary to post-primary
schools: the implications of
Church policy for
Catholic education in Newry
and the surrounding area**

Introduction

I visit the post-primary schools of the diocese each spring. Over the past ten years I have developed a great respect for the quality of teaching, learning and pastoral care in these schools, as well as for the work that is done to develop the faith of pupils. As chair of CCMS I have also been involved in the debate on the Review of Public Administration, particularly the setting up of the Education and Skills Authority (ESA) and on the transfer of pupils from primary to post-primary school. The Northern Ireland Commission on Catholic Education (NICCE)¹ published its policy on transfer from primary to post-primary school on 30th March 2009.²

The first point in the NICCE policy is that ‘the current system of academic selection at age eleven is no longer an appropriate way for children to transfer to Post-Primary school’:

Therefore it is our view as Trustees that all schools in the Catholic sector should move to an alternative form of transfer as soon as possible and by no later than 2012, in time for the full implementation of the Entitlement Framework in 2013 (n. 1).

The decision to move away from academic selection as the basis for transfer of pupils from primary to post-primary schools constitutes a major challenge to all involved in Catholic education.³ As Bishop of Dromore I

¹ The Northern Ireland Commission for Catholic Education (NICCE) was set up in 2005 to co-ordinate the work of all Catholic School Trustees in NI. The membership is: Bishop Donal McKeown (Chair), Bishop Patrick Walsh, Bishop Seamus Hegarty, Bishop John McAreavey, Sr Eithne Woulfe (Sisters of St Louis), Sr Nellie McLoughlin (Sisters of Mercy) and Prof. Muredach Dynan (The Edmund Rice Schools Trust).

² For the full text, cf. Appendix I.

³ In retrospect, it is a matter of regret that the process of moving to new arrangements that would be necessary following the end of academic selection did not begin following the decision of the Minister of Education in 2002 to set a date for the end of the 11+ test. In defence of Catholic Trustees, it should be said that they hoped – and it was not an unreasonable hope – that the Northern Ireland Executive would agree

offer this paper as a contribution to the search for a way forward in the Newry area. In the first part of this paper I set out the vision and values that should underpin our plans for Catholic education; part II deals with the way forward.

Christian values and vision

The social Gospel

The Second Vatican Council stated that ‘everyone should look upon his neighbour (without any exception) as another self, bearing in mind his life and the means necessary for living it in a dignified way lest he follow the example of the rich man who ignored Lazarus, the poor man’.⁴ In a paper on the Church’s policy on education, Archbishop Michael Miller, secretary of the Congregation for Catholic Education, wrote:

This desire to serve those in need has very often driven the founding of Church schools. It is of the utmost importance to recall that ‘a distinguishing feature of Catholic education is that it is open to all, especially to the poor and the weakest in society. Catholic schools, known in many areas for their academic excellence, should therefore heed ‘the Gospel imperative of serving all students and not only those who are the brightest and most promising. Indeed, in accord with the spirit of the Gospel and its option for the poor, they will turn their attention particularly to those most in need.’⁵

It is essential therefore that those who seek to provide Catholic education do so in a way that is consistent with Church principles of social justice, which will be shown in the way staff and pupils are treated and in the priorities given to resources. The principles of social teaching may be clear; however in reality we communicate value and respect for people by the time, energy and resources we commit to them. At the presentation of

policies and procedures for the transition to, and operation of, new procedures. Since this has not happened and appears unlikely to happen, Trustees should, in my opinion, focus on putting arrangements in place that will make academic selection unnecessary, something that has already happened successfully in several areas.

⁴ *Gaudium et spes*, n. 27.

⁵ *Challenges facing Catholic schools: a view from Rome* [not published].

the NICCE policy, Cardinal Brady spoke of 'every school having a particular concern for those who are most disadvantaged in their area'.

The social Gospel in an Irish context

A document entitled *In the wake of the Celtic Tiger: poverty in contemporary Ireland* issued by the Commission for Justice and Social Affairs [of the Irish Bishops' Conference] in January 2009 considers 'the faces of poverty in Ireland'. Focusing on child poverty, the Commission argues that hidden costs arising from education - such as uniforms, books and extra-curricular activities - can constitute a significant burden for low-income families. It also considers the significance of education as a key to participation in society and the importance of early intervention addressing educational disadvantage to prevent problems such as unemployment, poverty and involvement in crime in later life. It seems to me that in the Northern Ireland education context, the poor includes the following:

- Pupils who are less gifted
- Pupils whose gifts are less respected in our society
- Pupils from low-income families
- Pupils with special learning difficulties
- Pupils with language difficulties
- Pupils with behavioural difficulties
- Pupils whose parents are less aware of the value of education
- Pupils from rural areas who live far from the urban centres where schools are situated.

Post-primary Catholic schools in Newry

The configuration of post-primary Catholic schools in Newry is the product of history. The Abbey CBS, Our Lady's, and the Sacred Heart Grammar schools have roots in religious congregations that came to Newry in the 19th century; St Colman's College was the diocesan seminary and it too traces its history to the 19th century. These schools provided secondary education at a time when only a minority of children stayed in school beyond the age of 14. They were classical schools which became Grammar schools in the mid nineteen forties, offering places to those who passed the 11+ and to pupils whose families could afford to pay fees for them. St Joseph's Boys High School was founded in 1958 and St Mary's

Girls High School in 1961; the foundation of these schools reflected developments that emerged as a result of the 1947 Education Act and the raising of the school leaving age. They catered for pupils who did not gain access to Grammar Schools. The table below shows the link between access to schools and social deprivation as measured by the number of pupils entitled to receive free schools meals. The statistics, which do not result from decisions made by particular schools, show one of the effects, of the present transfer system on the intake of pupils into post-primary education.

Post Primary Review:

Number of Pupils Receiving Free School Meals in Project Area

	Number of Pupils 2008/09	Number of Pupils Entitled to Receive Free School Meals	Percentage of Pupils Entitled to Receive Free School Meals
School Grouping By Project			
Greater Newry City and District			
St Joseph's Boys High School	434	172	39.6%
St Colman's College	886	46	5.2%
St Mary's Girls' High School	563	189	33.6%
Abbey CBS	873	79	9.0%
Our Lady's Grammar School	847	69	8.1%
Sacred Heart Grammar School	838	61	7.3%
St Mark's High School, Warrenpoint	839	196	23.4%
St Patrick's College, Banbridge	442	108	24.4%

Transfer at 11

In common with other parts of Northern Ireland, the management of access to Grammar schools is by far the most vexed question facing schools in the Newry area. Until now this process has been managed on the basis of the 11+ test. While the test was designed for the purpose of transferring primary school children to the post-primary sector, it had other unintended side effects; for example, one effect was that more attention was often given in primary schools to pupils who were likely to succeed in this test.

Post-primary review

In 2007 a survey was launched into the provision of Catholic post-primary education in Northern Ireland under the heading of the Post-Primary Review. Funded by the Department of Education, it divided Northern Ireland into regions, one of which is 'Greater Newry City and District'. The Newry region includes the following schools: St Joseph's Boys High School, St Colman's College, St Mary's Girls' High School, Abbey CBS, Our Lady's Grammar School, Sacred Heart Grammar School, St Mark's High School (Warrenpoint) and St Patrick's College (Banbridge). Two further schools have applied to join the Newry project: St Columban's High School (Kilkeel) and St Louis Grammar School Kilkeel). Although St Paul's High School, Bessbrook, is geographically close to Newry, it is part of the Armagh Project, which includes schools in Armagh city and county. Clearly the Newry Post-Primary Project will have to take account of the provision made by St Paul's High School.

The Greater Newry City and District Post-Primary Review group provides the forum within which discussions can take place into the future provision of post-primary Catholic education.⁶ The principles that guide the work of the Post-Primary regional groups are contained in an Appendix at the end of this paper.

⁶ For a full statement of the principles that underpin the Post-Primary Review, cf. Appendix 2 below.

Guiding principles for a way forward in the Newry area

1. NICCE, in its March 30 2009 statement, asked that 'Catholic Schools should operate in a spirit of interdependence and solidarity', adding

When making key decisions all schools should take into account the effect that those decisions will have on other schools in the same area. New structural arrangements at local level being worked out in the context of the *Post Primary Review* should seek to put in place the best possible arrangements for all young people. These will be developed for each area over the next few years and may lead to a variety of arrangements consistent with local circumstances. This would not be a one- size-fits-all approach (n. 2).

2. The commitment of all schools to 'interdependence and solidarity' will be necessary to enable each one of them to offer the widest range of subjects:

All children should have access to a high quality Catholic education from 11-19, regardless of the school to which they transfer at age eleven. Some schools currently provide only for pupils at age 11-16. Some are unable to provide the range of subjects that will be necessary under the *Entitlement Framework*. Future arrangements should provide access for all young people to an 11-19 education through reorganisation, federation or collaboration between schools, and between schools and Further Education Colleges, to address local needs and to achieve the best outcomes for children (n. 3)

3. NICCE asks all Catholic post-primary schools to 'give full consideration' to the guidelines on admissions criteria issued by the Minister for Education on 2nd February 2009⁷ and urges schools to implement them

⁷ Recommended first criterion: Applicants who are entitled to Free School Meals (FSME): priority to be given so that the proportion of such children admitted is not less than the proportion of first preference FSME applications received within the total number of first preference applications received. Other criteria: sibling; eldest child; feeder/named primary school; parish (with nearest suitable school); catchment area

'as fully as possible' when the final version of these guidelines is issued by the Department of Education following consultation (n. 4). There is some confusion about how the criteria should be applied and further guidance will be necessary to clarify the situation.

4. NICCE accepts that Catholic post-primary schools, which are over-subscribed, will need to continue to admit pupils on the basis of an academic test 'in the short term', that is no later than 2012 (cf. n. 1).

5. The Newry Grammar schools have been successful in imparting a strong academic education and a living witness to the Catholic faith. In particular, the religious brothers, sisters and priests who worked in these schools added the personal witness of their own vocations. Moreover the fact that they retained very little of their salary enabled them to subsidize the education of many children who otherwise would not have been able to access a full Grammar school education. Those values continue to flourish in these schools. For the future however Grammar schools will have to reflect on how to retain the best of their faith-ethos and their academic education while working to meet the needs of a wider range of pupils.

6. Secondary schools have built up a valuable set of skills in teaching and motivating the pupils they have taught over the years. It would be helpful to study what they have achieved and to put together models of best practice as an example to Grammar schools who will need to benefit from this expertise as they adapt to cater for the needs of students with an increasingly diverse range of gifts and abilities.

7. Cooperative working relationships among the Catholic post-primary schools are developing, as are the relationships between the schools and Newry FE College; there is scope for these working relationships to be developed further.

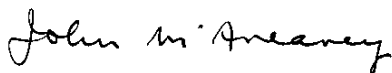
8. Discussions in Newry should take account of potential developments in other areas. For example, if the post-primary developments under

(with nearest suitable school); nearest suitable school; random selection (tie-breaker).

discussion for the Lurgan area gain acceptance there, it is likely that fewer pupils from Lurgan will travel to Newry. The trustee representatives of the diocese of Dromore and the Sisters of Mercy who are sponsoring the developments being proposed in Lurgan will wish to support their implementation. Should the developments in Lurgan come to pass, it may be appropriate for schools in the Newry area to define their catchment areas.

Conclusion

The ending of academic selection at 11 creates new challenges and opens the door to new possibilities for post-primary Catholic education in Newry and the surrounding area. The wish of the Northern Ireland Commission for Catholic Education that 'all schools in the Catholic sector should move to an alternative form of transfer as soon as possible and by no later than 2012' creates a definite time-frame. The discussions already begun within the Post-Primary Review must continue with greater urgency. I believe that we need to move in the direction intimated in this paper, not for pragmatic political reasons but to be faithful to our own values and principles and for the sake of all our children and young people. My main concern as Bishop is to make the best possible facilities available to parents who wish their children to have access to Catholic education; no parents should have to settle for less than the best for their children. The NICCE policy stated that following the end of academic selection new arrangements 'will be developed for each area over the next few years and may lead to a variety of arrangements consistent with local circumstances'. The shape these arrangements will take in Newry and the surrounding area is open to discussion. What is clear is that putting the arrangements in place will require vision, cooperation, imagination and flexibility. I believe that Trustees, Boards of Governors, principals, teachers and parents working together, will be able to put in place arrangements that will serve all those who wish to access Catholic education.



+John McAreavey
8th April 2009

Appendix I

- The Commission restates its position, accepted by the Working Group, that the current system of academic selection at age eleven is no longer an appropriate way for children to transfer to Post-Primary school. Therefore it is our view as Trustees that all schools in the Catholic sector should move to an alternative form of transfer as soon as possible and by no later than 2012, in time for the full implementation of the Entitlement Framework in 2013.
- Catholic Schools should operate in a spirit of interdependence and solidarity. When making key decisions all schools should take into account the effect that those decisions will have on other schools in the same area. New structural arrangements at local level being worked out in the context of the *Post Primary Review* should seek to put in place the best possible arrangements for all young people. These will be developed for each area over the next few years and may lead to a variety of arrangements consistent with local circumstances. This would not be a one-size-fits-all approach.
- All children should have access to a high quality Catholic education from 11-19, regardless of the school to which they transfer at age eleven. Some schools currently provide only for pupils at age 11-16. Some are unable to provide the range of subjects that will be necessary under the *Entitlement Framework*. Future arrangements should provide access for all young people to an 11-19 education through reorganisation, federation or collaboration between schools, and between schools and Further Education Colleges, to address local needs and to achieve the best outcomes for children.
- All Catholic Post-Primary schools should give full consideration to the guidelines on admissions criteria issued by the Minister for Education on 2nd Feb 2009. When the final version of these guidelines is issued by the Department of Education following consultation, all Catholic Post-Primary schools are urged to implement them as fully as possible.

- In the absence of a regulated system of Post-Primary Transfer, the Commission accepts the view of the Working Group that an academic test may be appropriate in the short-term, particularly for those Post-Primary schools, which are oversubscribed. Those Catholic schools which opt to make use of such testing should ensure these tests:
 - Do not discriminate against any groups of children;
 - Will avoid children having to sit a multiplicity of tests;
 - Will be used for only a very limited period of time;
 - Will not involve any distortion of the statutory KS1&2 curriculum and;
 - Will focus on English and Mathematics in the context of the KS2 curriculum.

- The Commission is committed to ongoing dialogue with the other educational sectors and with all who are concerned with the future education of young people in Northern Ireland. It does so in the hope that the Catholic sector can contribute to a growing consensus on the way forward for all young people.

- With others the Commission recommends that the Minister consider the establishment of a time bound Working Party of educationalists and other relevant experts to find an agreed solution on the post-primary transfer for all schools in Northern Ireland, taking particular account of the emerging needs of the economy and our society.

The Commission will publish a more detailed commentary on this policy and its practical implications for all concerned in the near future.

Appendix 2

Northern Ireland Commission for Catholic Education: Post-primary Review: Core Principles

“The Catholic school finds its true justification in the mission of the Church; it is based on an educational philosophy in which faith, culture and life are brought into harmony.”⁸

The Northern Ireland Commission for Catholic Education (the Commission) is engaged in a review of Catholic post-primary education, which will produce new arrangements for the delivery of Catholic education. The Commission has consulted within the education sector on a set of core principles to guide the review. The revised principles are now published by the Commission and will be used within the post-primary review process.

Vision for Catholic Education

The review of post-primary education is guided by the vision for Catholic education, outlined below. This vision was most recently published, for a local audience, by the Consultative Group for Catholic Education.⁹

“Catholic education takes place in communities inspired by the Spirit of Christ. Christ’s commandment to love God and neighbour inspires a caring ethos, which is expressed in relationships within and beyond Catholic schools.

Catholic education is person-centred. It promotes the dignity, self-esteem and full development of each person who is made in God’s image and uniquely loved by God.

Catholic education is inclusive. It is respectful of, and engages with people

⁸ Religious Dimension of Education in a Catholic School 1988, Par. 34

⁹ Catholic Education - The Vision Statement, Consultative Group for Catholic Education, 2006, <http://catholiceducation-ni.com/content/view/20/36>.

of all beliefs; it encourages the religious development of all in their own faith.

Catholic education is rooted in the Gospel values of respect for life, love, solidarity, truth and justice: it aims to harmonise faith and culture, build a better society and pursue the Common Good.

Together, Catholic schools provide high quality, rounded education for all young people, so that they develop their full uniqueness and potential.

In Catholic schools the person and message of Christ find expression in:

- *Communities of faith, service, prayer and worship;*
- *The development of each person's full potential in a climate of joy, freedom, respect, challenge, co-operation and celebration;*
- *The enrichment of pupil life - intellectual, physical, spiritual, moral, social and emotional;*
- *The promotion of a spirit of charity, social justice, global awareness and concern for others leading to practical outreach and partnerships;*
- *A culture of tolerance where people of diverse identities are recognised, welcomed, respected and cherished;*
- *Listening, mutual understanding, trust, reconciliation, healing and peace; and*
- *The preparation of pupils to lead fulfilling and purposeful lives which will contribute to the Common Good."*

Core principles for Post-primary Review Projects

All new arrangements shall be congruent with the distinct character of Catholic education and shall seek to promote a shared and inclusive society. The arrangements will provide a system of post-primary Catholic education in Northern Ireland, which respects and adheres to the following principles.

1. The new arrangements will optimise high quality education provision and excellence in outcomes for all pupils.
2. The new arrangements will actively promote justice, reconciliation, mutual understanding, solidarity, inclusive communities and be part of genuinely pluralist provision.
3. The new arrangements will contribute to the provision of education choices for parents and pupils.
4. The new arrangements will be the result of transparent consultative processes.

These core principles are supported by a number of criteria which will assist in the planning process for the development of new arrangements.

1. The new arrangements will optimise high quality education provision, and excellence of outcomes for all pupils.

- Students will receive a high quality education whose excellence enjoys the confidence and support of all parents and students.
- Students will have access to a curriculum, the delivery of which, maximises the potential of each to achieve to the best of his/her ability.
- The school system will ensure a continuum of quality provision which takes account of the respective geographical location of the schools.
- The school system will facilitate an effective education continuum from primary to post-primary.

2. The new arrangements will actively promote justice, reconciliation, mutual understanding, solidarity, inclusive communities and the development of a pluralist society.

- Each school will contribute to the promotion of a culture of mutual respect, understanding and tolerance, within and between communities – ethnic, religious, academic, educational, economic, and social. This culture shall be for the benefit of students, the wider community in particular the parish/ parishes.
- Schools will build networks with other education partners, as appropriate, to promote collaboration and co-operation necessary to the delivery of new proposals and to promote a shared future.
- Parity of esteem for all education routes shall inform all activities. Each school will be as inclusive as possible so as to meet the educational, intellectual, personal, spiritual and cultural needs of all its students, Catholic and non-Catholic.
- Schools will be facilitated to work together in the interests of raising standards and promoting the professional development of staff. Such collaborative relationships between schools will be based on trust, openness, transparency and mutual support.
- Networking with the wider business community and employers shall be promoted.
- The re-organisation of post-primary schools in any area will reflect and seek to preserve the distinctive ethos of the schools contained within it, in the interests of diversity and mutual understanding.
- Schools and their extended communities will be encouraged to reflect optimistically on change and to approach the change process positively in light of the core principles.

- The capacity for providing community-based life long learning shall be integral to any school re-organisation decisions.

3. The new arrangements will contribute to the provision of education choices for parents and pupils.

- Students will have access to a school estate that has been configured to enhance flexibility of provision.
- Students will have access to a curriculum which is relevant, and flexible, and which meets their changing needs and aspirations.
- The school system will enhance access for each student, to further and higher education provision and employment opportunities.

4. The new arrangements will be the result of transparent consultative processes.

- Mutual respect and support, informed by good communication channels and agreed protocols, shall influence the outworking of all projects.
- Changes affecting students at critical points in their education will be well planned and carefully negotiated to minimise any potential effects on their development and progress.
- Staff will be supported and facilitated, personally and professionally, in responding well to the demands of change.