

## **BELFAST BOARD CONFERENCE**

1. Thank you for the opportunity to contribute to this debate on one of the key issues we face in education today. You are discussing a particular issue – the development of education in underachieving areas of urban Belfast, - specifically Protestant urban Belfast – but many of the key principles which need to be identified carry through to other significant areas of our educational life in the Province. I've been asked to talk about governance – although I would prefer to use the term leadership. In particular what do the Churches have to offer to educational leadership in Protestant, underachieving, urban Belfast?

I'm very conscious that I am the last speaker after a long day of speeches, and I don't even have photographs! Let my try to paint a picture.

It's of a group of Protestant church leaders in education going up to Stormont for the first time some years ago, to meet the new Minister for Education – Martin Maguiness. How would we get on? Would he be accommodating or dismissive of the Church's role? He greeted us with a question which has stayed with me and underlies much of this discussion. If I may paraphrase he said: "In 'our' communities – republican/nationalist communities – education is valued and seen as an achievement, in the equivalent Protestant areas nobody is interested. What can we do about it?" That's the question, but I'm not sure any of us have fully come up with answers.

It was posed in a different way by Marion Matchett in her recent report as Chief Inspector:-

“Once again, I have to report that the service still does not do well enough for those young people who find learning more difficult or who see little value in education. Standards remain too variable among and within schools and other institutions. Regardless of the abilities of the young people attending, clearly some organisations and teachers are much more successful than others in helping the learners to make good progress”.

2. If I can stay with the Chief Inspectors Report for a moment, one of the “Key Recurring Themes” identified in a previous Report of 2004 was

“Improving Leadership and Management.” The current report looks at progress:-

“Effective leadership and management are key to improving quality and standards. The process of change must not distract leaders from their core business of improving learning and teaching. Good leaders know how well their organisations are performing and what more they need to do to improve; they ensure that the quality of teaching is high and that every learner achieves his/her best. Improving leadership and management, therefore, remains at the heart of strategies for improving all organisations.”

There is much good leadership in our schools and many of you provide it in Belfast. There is good leadership being given by principals and by teachers, but as a society we need also to recognise the voluntary nature of school governance. For the vast majority of school governors – transferors and others – education is not their primary job. We depend on the goodwill and commitment of volunteers. Is that sensible? Some might argue for the professionalising of educational management and leadership but I believe that would be profoundly the wrong way to go, so long as we understand that the purpose of volunteer governors is to link the school firmly and imaginatively with the community. It is not – and this is where we have sometimes got it wrong recently – to provide a cheap accountancy service or some expert advice on H.R. The volunteers who provide governance in schools should be there primarily because they understand the community in which the school is set and can articulate the hopes and concerns of the parents and the learning community. If governors have other attributes to bring that is helpful, but first and foremost their role is to provide the link to the community.

Now, it seems to me that principle may come under threat as RPA is introduced and more is demanded of local Boards of Governors. We should not professionalise local Boards at the expense of real community involvement and the temptation to do so will be particularly acute in the very areas we are discussing today. The local leadership of local people is paramount, whatever other skills they may bring they must bring an understanding of that community’s hopes and aspirations. We mustn’t lose that gift which only local people can bring to the mix of educational leadership.

3. So what has all this to do with the Churches? It would be easy in talking about governance for the Churches to fall back on the historic position and say whatever has been must be. Clearly the transferring Churches do have historic rights. In the case of the 3 large Protestant churches during the 30's, 40's and 50's schools were transferred to state-control, but still church-related. The Christian ethos of these schools was to be maintained and this was enshrined by Act of Parliament. To ensure the practical outworking of these arrangements the Transferring Churches were given rights of representation on what are now Boards of Governors. It is a partnership arrangement – transferors, principals, parents, teachers, Boards and the Department working together in local leadership. One the whole it has worked well.

In the new arrangements following RPA however, the transferring Churches are in danger of losing their right to representation except on those schools which can be traced as having been directly transferred – not on relatively new-build schools, even though we have been represented on them for years. In the public perception this will be seen as a huge inequality for Protestants, given that the Catholic Church will still have foundation governor status on all maintained schools, including new schools. Amazingly, it is being done in the name of equality! Sometimes, it seems to me, that equality lawyers are like people who look at a swimming pool and see a level surface, without questioning the depth below. It is both unrealistic and ultimately dangerous, especially if you fall in.

These changes under the guise of RPA, however, are but symptoms of an even more worrying trend. Twenty-one years ago, the Education and Libraries (NI) Order 1986 stated – “it shall be the duty of each board so far as its powers extend, to contribute towards the spiritual, moral, mental and physical development of the community by securing that efficient education throughout those stage is available to meet the needs of its area.” In recent documents the “spiritual” dimension is missing. But it is not missing from the child and so we are not allowing the full potential of a young person to develop if we do not recognise the need for spiritual growth and nurture – however that may be defined.

Looking back to when communities were much more stable in Ireland than they are today, there were at least three key figures in most communities – the teacher, the doctor, the clergyman. In modern day terms – education, health, spiritual nurture – it is when all three are working together that the

young person is developing fully. That's why I welcome another comment in the Chief Inspector's Report:-

“A major concern relates to the need for more joined-up thinking and action on the part of all those with responsibilities for education, training, youth work and key related services, including health and social services. In the current climate of rapid and sweeping change, co-ordinated policy, planning and delivery are vital.”

4. Can the Churches help in the delivery of that co-ordinated policy? I believe they can, indeed I believe they must, not because of historical precedent but because of present day reality. I would suggest, briefly, six qualities the Churches can bring to the mix of governance in our schools to strengthen leadership, especially – but not exclusively – in the Protestant urban communities which are your chief concern.

- (1) Experience. I don't need to expand on that. The Churches have long experience in the governance of schools.
- (2) Independence. Transferor governors are appointed as individuals who are not answerable in any real sense to anyone, not even to their appointing Church. Their one responsibility is to ensure that Christian values and responsibilities are recognised for the good of the whole community.
- (3) Community Involvement. Churches are part of the community, admittedly not always as centrally positioned as they should be, but they are part of the social fabric of each of the communities in which both they and the schools are placed to serve.
- (4) Christian Values. Values which place the needs of each individual child at the centre of all decisions which are being made, so that there will be no one way fits all, but each individual will be valued and nurtured.
- (5) Shared values for a shared future. If this important overarching Government policy is to be achieved there will have to be co-operation across the educational sectors. This will only be possible if the so-called “Protestant” sector has a clearly definable Christian faith-base.

- (6) Church are in communities for the long haul. Community building is central to what we do, however difficult and challenging that may be. We are all having to learn lessons at how to do better, but the Churches won't be walking away.

I believe that we are entering a very exciting phase of community building in Belfast and elsewhere. It will be a co-operative exercise, with no one discipline having the freedom to operate on its own. Education will be one of the keys to building community. The Churches, I hope, will be able and allowed to provide some of the intrinsic values and to offer a degree of social cohesion, which will be necessary if true communities are to grow and if our young people are to learn.