

## STATEMENT BY THE CATHOLIC BISHOPS OF NORTHERN IRELAND ON PROPOSED CHANGES IN EDUCATION

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- *The Northern Bishops*  
- *June 2008*

### KEY POINTS

Following the most recent meeting of the Irish Bishops’ Conference in Maynooth, the Catholic Bishops of Northern Ireland issued the following statement in response to the debate about academic selection, the changes proposed for education under the review of public administration and the intention of some primary schools to use independent academic assessment tools to replace the 11+ test. In their ‘end of school year’ statement, the Bishops highlighted the following points:

✚ “While some have sought to claim the support of the Catholic Bishops for their approach to the current debate, we have scrupulously avoided endorsing the perspective of any political party or any specific structures to replace the 11+.”

✚ “It is vital that all those with the best interests of children at heart reach agreement on outstanding issues as quickly as possible. Uncertainty and instability affects children and undermines the work of teachers and schools.”

✚ “An education system which produces excellent academic results for some pupils up to A-level but has nearly half our 16 year olds leaving school with less than 5 GCSE A\*-C grades cannot be considered either equitable or a success in Christian terms.”

✚ “The term ‘Catholic’ means universal. Thus, a school calling itself ‘Catholic’ cannot act in isolation from other Catholic schools or from the educational community as a whole.”

✚ “It is specifically the Trustees who have ultimate responsibility for making and agreeing specific proposals for Catholic education with the statutory authorities.”

✚ “Traditional distinctions between grammar and other types of schools are becoming increasingly meaningless. The 11+ selection system does however unfairly advantage grammar schools in terms of enrolment and sustainability.”

✚ “We wish to state our clear opposition to the introduction of independent academic assessment tools by schools as a temporary or future means of pupil selection.”

## **STATEMENT IN FULL**

As Trustees of the family of just over 500 Catholic schools in Northern Ireland we are acutely aware that all schools here are facing a period of major change and uncertainty. We share the disappointment of many parents, teachers and others that, as another school year ends key aspects of the proposed changes remain unclear. It is vital that all those with the best interests of children at heart reach agreement on outstanding issues as quickly as possible. Uncertainty and instability affects children and undermines the work of teachers and schools. We had shared the hope with others that devolution would bring the opportunity to build on the excellent reputation of schools here and enhance the opportunities provided for every child. We believe this is still possible with a determination to resolve outstanding issues in an atmosphere of respectful engagement and a shared concern for the best interests of children.

We come to this debate from the perspective of a long established, evolving and distinctive philosophy of Catholic education based on the Gospel of Jesus Christ and the inherent dignity of every child, made in God's image and likeness. Catholic schools exist across the world and are valued by parents from a wide range of religious and other backgrounds. They provide a holistic and values-based approach to education which is open to all and promotes tolerance and respect for diversity as a basic aim. Parents have a right to choose a Catholic education as part of their fundamental human right to freedom of conscience and religion. We do not ask for any privileges, only for the right to make our uniquely successful contribution to our public education system.

### **Academic Selection**

In this context, as the legal Trustees of Catholic schools in Northern Ireland, we do not approach the current debate about the future of education here from the point of view of any particular political philosophy or administrative policy. While some have sought to claim the support of the Catholic Bishops for their approach to the current debate, we have scrupulously avoided endorsing the perspective of any political party or specific structures to replace the 11+. We have indicated broad principles and with others have awaited specific proposals from the Department of Education about the way ahead. What we have made clear is that we believe the following values and principles should guide the proposals made:

Respect for the high level of commitment, professionalism and excellence which already exists throughout the school system in Northern Ireland, and the need to build on those foundations; The necessity of appreciable change. An education system which produces excellent academic results for some pupils up to A-level but has nearly half our 16 year olds leaving school with less than 5 GCSE A\*-C grades cannot be considered either equitable or a success in Christian terms; Commitment to the inherent dignity and equality of every child. Education is not primarily about the excellent academic performance of some but about helping all young people develop as rounded human beings. We will not judge changes on the basis of theoretical convictions, but only on the basis of what actually delivers opportunities and excellence for all young people and their communities. Special attention must be given to the needs of those who suffer disadvantage.

Some five years ago we said that we should move to election of schools by parents and away from selection of pupils by schools. While we pay tribute to the excellent reputation and tradition that many schools have developed over the years, at the same time we should not lose sight of the fact that publicly funded schools together exist to serve the whole of society and its communities, not just their own interests. Schools are to be evaluated as good schools when they provide a range of opportunities for all children and are responsive to the particular gifts of every child.

*Thus we believe that:*

All schools if sufficiently resourced can provide pathways to a wide range of skills and qualifications for children, including academic skills. The development of a broad based common curriculum means that traditional distinctions between academic grammar schools and technical, vocational secondary schools are becoming less relevant; Traditional distinctions between grammar and other types of schools are becoming increasingly meaningless where grammar schools are taking children with a widening range of results. The 11+ selection system does however unfairly advantage grammar schools in terms of enrolment and sustainability; While all schools should provide pathways to a wide range of skills and qualifications for children, some level of specialisation within a particular school may be appropriate. This may include the possibility of specialisation in what might be regarded as ‘academic’, or ‘vocational’ skills. Similarly, within a broad range of pathways within a particular school, some children may benefit from a pathway which emphasises traditional academic skills over other options.

Parents have a right and responsibility to choose schools which can best respond to the particular needs and gifts of their child. Assumptions by parents that a grammar school is always the best school may not be well founded; Any proposed change should respect the right of parents, teachers, principals, Trustees, Board of Governors and others with responsibility for education provision to know in a clear and timely manner what is being proposed, the rationale behind it and the process for implementing such change; Change should be implemented in a way which is sensitive to the practical needs of teachers and schools. This may require reasonable time for transition to new processes and structures. Parents need to see workable solutions before they will have confidence in them; All proposed change should respect the right of parents to choose an education for their children which is consistent with their philosophical and religious convictions; All proposed change should encourage and support opportunities to develop partnership between schools and increased understanding between pupils from all social, religious, ethnic, cultural and political backgrounds, with due regard for the distinctive ethos of each school. As Catholic trustees we actively encourage all our schools to continue to do everything they can to promote healing and reconciliation.

### **Review of Public Administration**

We welcome in principle the Government’s decision to streamline public services. However, the focus needs to be, not merely on structures, but on what helps to deliver quality outcomes for individuals, their communities and society. Thus, while we regret the end of the statutory role that CCMS has had to co-ordinate and develop maintained schools, we are encouraged by the Department of Education’s commitment to provide sectoral support across the system. Specifically we welcome

the DE agreement to facilitate the establishment of a Trustee Support Body (TSB) which will support, promote and co-ordinate the entire family of over 500 Catholic schools in Northern Ireland.

We continue to engage with the Department to ensure that the rights of parents who choose Catholic schools are adequately recognised and supported and that the rights of Trustees are sufficiently represented and ensured in any future process of management and planning. We are glad to be able to offer that level of co-ordination and vision which have enabled Catholic schools to lead the field in so many areas of education in Northern Ireland.

It is a fundamental principle of Catholic education that Catholic schools exist as a family of schools acting in solidarity with each other and in the interests of the common good. We believe the new Trustee Support Body will help to develop and strengthen this principle in reality and will enable the family of Catholic schools to co-operate more effectively with all other sectors and educational bodies.

We reiterate the conviction that the network of Catholic schools is not just a loose alliance of independent schools. The term ‘catholic’ means universal. Thus, a school calling itself ‘Catholic’ cannot act in isolation from other Catholic schools or from the educational community as a whole. The impact of any proposed developments on neighbouring schools cannot be peripheral but are part of the responsibility and concern of every Catholic school.

As Trustees we deeply appreciate the role of parents, teachers, principals and Board of Governors in developing the family of excellent Catholic schools. We recognise that it will not always be easy to find agreed ways forward that will provide equality of opportunity for all our young people, whatever their talents and needs. However, in the last analysis, it is specifically the Trustees who have ultimate responsibility for making and agreeing specific proposals for Catholic education with the statutory authorities. We are committed to acting only in ways that serve the common good.

As we face the uncertainties of the future with others in the education community in Northern Ireland, we believe it is only by planning together and with Gospel values to the fore front of our minds that we will continue to provide an effective and sustainable provision of explicitly faith-based schools into the future.

### **Independent Assessment Tests**

While we sympathise with the fears and uncertainty being generated by a lack of clarity about future procedures for school selection, we wish to state our clear opposition to the introduction of independent academic assessment tools by schools as a temporary or future means of pupil selection. We would ask Catholic primary schools to use only those methods of testing that come from statutory bodies.

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