



**CHURCH OF IRELAND
THE BOARD OF EDUCATION**

Church of Ireland House, Church Avenue, Rathmines, Dublin 6

**Presentation to Joint Committee on Education and Social Protection,
3rd July 2013.**

1. On behalf of Church of Ireland and Protestant Primary Schools may I thank you Chairman and members of the Committee, for the opportunity to make this short presentation to you this afternoon.
2. I am joined here this afternoon by two of the ten patrons of Church of Ireland primary schools, the Rt Rev Patrick Rooke, Bishop of Tuam, Killala and Achonry; and The Rt Rev Dr Paul Colton, Bishop of Cork, Cloyne and Ross.
3. The last time I appeared here before you, I outlined in some detail, the costs involved in running a primary school. I note also your own recent report on those costs. So instead running through those costs and figures again, I would like to focus on some key issues of concern for the Protestant religious minority on this issue.
4. Our focus is the provision of suitable primary education for the children of parents of minority Christian religious traditions. In that regard we view our schools as part of the existing provision for pluralism and diversity in the Irish education system; a network which is embedded in towns and villages across the country. No doubt every deputy here will be aware, of the value local Church of Ireland communities in your constituencies place on having their own primary schools.
5. We are fully aware that there is a cost for all of us, as taxpayers, to provide primary level education for all our children (and the department of Education and Skills officials will no doubt have exact figures on those costs). Yet there is also an obligation on all of us, to ensure that the best possible education is available to every child in this State. The impressive range of planned school

buildings listed in the Department of Education and Skills' five year plan, with a budget of €1.5 Billion, is indeed a display of the necessity for continuing to provide such a quality level of educational infrastructure.

6. We are also conscious that as we meet here today, a value for money review of small schools is nearing publication. The terms of reference of that VFM states that 50 pupils or less is taken as the benchmark for a small primary school. The last such review was conducted as recently as 2006, and continued a policy of supporting schools where numbers were small. Obviously, this policy has now been reversed and small schools are struggling to cope with the shock of having their minor works grant ceased and their capitation core funding reduced, along with the thresholds for the allocation of teachers being significantly increased and the VFM sword of Damocles hanging over their heads.
7. To retain your second teacher in September 2014, you will need 20 pupils, an increase of 8 pupils or a 66.6% increase since 2011; a 14% increase is needed to retain your third teacher and 7% to retain your fourth teacher. This clearly points to a policy of targeting the level of provisions to smaller schools. The Minister has said that nobody could support a pupil teacher ratio of 12:1 and that at 19:1, one teacher schools are better off in their allocation than schools with two teachers or more, and has argued that the current 28:1 ptr is better than levels that pertained in the 1990's.
8. The reality of life in a one and/or two teacher school is that the whole school – junior infants to sixth class – is in that one class or two classes. One and two teacher classrooms are multi-age, multi-grade, multi-ability with mainstreamed special needs students. Modern curricular demands and the Ministers strategies on literacy and numeracy, along with the increased amount of administrative work, all adds up to creating a very different school to that which existed twenty years ago. This is an extremely busy educational space and needs more resources, not less.

9. In terms of Church of Ireland schools we are of the view that any policy which seeks to close or “wind down” a school below 56 pupils (or two teacher) will have a disproportionate affect on the Protestant minority. Why do we say that? Based on the returns of 2011/12, 97 of our schools have less than 56 pupils. That accounts for nearly 50% of all Protestant primary schools. To reiterate, a policy of closing schools under 56 pupils will close half the Protestant primary schools in Ireland. That is what we are facing and that is why the Protestant community is anxious.

10. We would submit that the aim of the Minister and his Department must be to support a diversity of patronage types through the maintaining of current provision, where reasonable. The fact remains that primary schools exist to serve small children who cannot be expected to travel on buses or across large amounts of countryside in the depths of winter. Such a policy would not value and respect children.

11. However, we also recognise that there are situations where it is reasonable and sensible to close or amalgamate schools, especially where those schools are in close proximity and where there is available capital to provide the same quality (or indeed better quality) accommodation than the school to be closed. In that regard, we wish to highlight to the committee that the Protestant minority have been down this road before. Since the 1960’s, we have closed or amalgamated nearly 200 primary schools (and reduced our secondary schools down from 46 to 27), indeed a further two have closed in recent years. So it cannot be said that Protestant communities are not realistic in this regard. The geographical spacing of our current network of primary schools did not happen by accident, but was part of a planning process in dioceses around the country from the late 1960’s onwards. Our difficulty is that where a Protestant school closes, it is unlikely to ever be re-opened. We must be mindful of the next generation of members of our Church and their right to be educated in a school of their own faith. It is part of our duty of stewardship and is part of our cultural tradition.

12. May I conclude therefore, by thanking you for the opportunity to highlight this issue this afternoon. I hope I have conveyed some sense of the level of anxiety that exists among the Protestant community towards the VFM review of small primary schools, which has been in gestation now since 2011. I suggest that this issue goes to the heart of questions such as: who are we as a society? What do we value and how do we support that which is culturally distinctive?

The Bishops of Cork has, in recent days, further consulted with his schools on the issue of the costs of running smaller primary schools and the committee may be interested to hear that information first hand from a school Patron.

Thank you.

Appendix 1