

The Board of Education of the Church of Ireland College of Education has very much welcomed the opportunity to participate in the Forum. We regard it as a privilege to be engaged in the dialogue around these issues over these intensive three days here in the Clock Tower. We are very aware of the significance of this event and also the complexity of the issues under consideration. The written submissions and oral contributions of all the participants, as well as the written submissions by other organisations and individuals has highlighted the broad range of opinion on the issues under consideration and has made it very clear that the task for those working on this issue is a deeply complex one.

There are a number of key points that we would like to reiterate briefly. Firstly, the primary schools under Church of Ireland and other Protestant patronage are already a part of the existing diversity in the primary education system. Our schools have always catered for our own small community and for all those belonging to the wide range of Protestant groups. Furthermore we have historically, and continue currently, to welcome those of all faiths and none. The survey data that I reported on Wednesday clearly highlights this reality, it also indicated to us that the current model of patronage of our schools is highly regarded by the parent body, regardless of faith affiliation.

The Religious Education curriculum in operation in our schools is a broad one that focuses, in an age-appropriate manner, on an exploration of moral and spiritual issues through a broad, reformed Christian lens. As noted in our submission and in our presentation on Wednesday afternoon, specific faith formation activities are left to the parish or to the faith community group. This has always been essential in our schools given the broad range of Protestant groups who attend our schools. We also noted in our presentation on

Wednesday afternoon that our schools have a long history of catering for sacramental preparation, generally outside of school hours, for Roman Catholic children in attendance. As noted in our presentation on Wednesday, the provision of an integrated curriculum is an essential part of the work of our schools and reflects educational best practice for children of primary school age.

As noted in our submission and presentation our schools have a particular significance for our small, culturally distinctive community, especially in rural areas where that community may be quite widely scattered. We noted that there are many positives about the integrated schools model developed in Northern Ireland but that there is relative parity in numbers in the North between the two main Christian traditions on the island. This is not the case in the Republic where our community makes up a much smaller proportion of the population as a whole. Our schools play a particularly important role in ensuring that our children have an opportunity to learn about their culturally distinctive identity. Recognition of diversity is the mark of a mature democracy and we hope that the State will continue to recognise the cultural distinctiveness of our community and its significant contribution to this society.

We noted that we have already demonstrated a willingness to engage in shared patronage of schools and we also noted that we have been involved in divesting a small number of our schools where the local community no longer believed that they were viable under Church of Ireland or Protestant patronage. We are very keen to stress that such divesting took place arising out of specific local needs, contexts and desires and that such local initiative is the most appropriate democratic manner in which change of this nature should occur.

I want to conclude by thanking the members of the Forum for their attention and engagement throughout this process and wish them luck with the work that lies ahead. We look forward to the further dialogue about the outcomes that the report of the advisory group will undoubtedly generate and we look forward to re-engaging in this historic national conversation.