

Board of Education Report

Proposer: Bishop Ken Good

In classrooms all over Northern Ireland, today and every day, vitally important work is being done by staff and pupils. And as this work goes on, principals in their offices and teachers in the classroom and corridors are doing their best to make pupils believe that everything is carrying on as normal. But, just below the surface, serious dangers lurk, which threaten to undermine and even destabilise the whole school system.

We have frequently heard the word ‘crisis’ used to describe the state of education here. I fear, though, it’s gone way beyond ‘crisis’. The needle on the dial has shifted into the red zone. The alarm bells are ringing. The klaxons are sounding. But little is happening to prevent the fabric of our education system from unravelling.

I cannot overstate the magnitude of the problem. We need intervention – urgent intervention – by those with power in our society. On Tuesday, the leaders of the main Christian churches called for courageous leadership from the Stormont parties and for a resumption of normal political life.

I echo that call. We are in danger of failing this generation of young people. We will be failing future generations. When it comes to something as important as our education system, failure is not an option.

As I see it, the system is under pressure on three fronts:

- there is a vision deficit
- there’s a financial deficit, and
- there is a morale deficit.

I would like to address each of these ‘big picture’ issues in turn.

1. A DEFICIT OF VISION

The Department for Education has initiated what it calls a transformation agenda. This is a worthwhile idea – full of potential. It’s a concept that needs to receive the focus and priority it deserves because there are many reasons why transformation is needed.

But the reality is that without a Minister with responsibility for Education in place to take decisions and to implement them, without an Education Committee to oversee and scrutinise and advocate, and without a real budget to make it all happen, this agenda is running into the sand because of a lack of courageous and strategically-implemented vision.

Why is visionary transformation needed? There are several reasons:

- The current patchwork of provision in education ranges from outstanding in some places to inadequate in others. Transformation is needed.
- A significant attainment gap exists in the development of the skill levels of children and young people for the challenges and opportunities they face in life and work in a technological age and a global environment. Transformation is needed.
- There are many surplus desks in some communities while others need additional school places to meet present and future needs. Transformation is needed.
- More early interventions are required to address the growing and increasingly complex needs of children and young people. Transformation is needed.
- An increasing number of pre-school children are presenting with delayed language development, intimate care requirements and behavioural challenges. Transformation is needed.
- Among older age groups, more children and young people are experiencing mental health issues, alongside social and behavioural difficulties. Transformation is needed.
- More support is needed for children and young people who have additional or special needs. Transformation is needed.

Board of Education Report

Proposer: Bishop Ken Good

These and other challenges are why a fundamental transformation of educational provision is urgently required in NI to ensure that our young people are equipped – all of them – to be the best that they can be.

Transformation is the Department's agenda, and it is an agenda with a lot of potential for good. Policy decisions on all of these issues, and others, are urgently needed.

However, as I say, that lack of political leadership in Stormont is the dead hand. It means there's no-one in charge who can take decisions about this transformation vision. There's no-one there verbalising and refining it, driving it forward and seeing that it's implemented. There is a debilitating deficit of vision.

2. A DEFICIT OF FUNDING

The Education system in Northern Ireland is in financial crisis, too. Schools are facing teacher redundancies, a reduction in the number of subjects that can be taught, deterioration of buildings, increased class sizes and in some schools in March of this year they struggled to pay teachers' salaries.

Permit me to throw some numbers at you.

Since 2010/11, the spending power of education budgets has fallen by £233 million.

Last year, the budget for educational transformation was less than 4% of that allocated for the transformation of the health service agenda.

Schools and services have faced unprecedented pressures as a result of having to absorb increased costs driven by inflation, higher National Insurance contributions, changes to superannuation and a growing demand for services. Consequently, there has been an unparalleled increase in school deficits, increases in class sizes and in the number of composite classes, and constriction in curriculum options for some of the most disadvantaged children.

None of this comes as a surprise. This isn't top secret. Everyone knows this. Everyone acknowledges this. But the squeeze is getting more and more serious and the consequences are becoming more and more hazardous.

3. A DEFICIT OF MORALE

All of this brings us to our third, lurking danger. The double-whammy of a lack of vision and a lack of funding leads inevitably to a problem with sinking morale – in staff rooms especially, in principals' offices and at boards of governors' meetings.

There is a real danger that our education system could soon no longer be 'fit for purpose'. Pupils' opportunities are reducing and staff are under more and more stress. Fewer teachers want to take on stressful senior leadership positions in schools. The long-term picture is not healthy and we need to see action now to build a better future for our children and young people. They only have one childhood in which to get a proper grounding in education for life.

It isn't all doom and gloom, though. In the limited time allowed to me, I'd like to mention some positives as well, particularly where the churches are involved.

I want to highlight, briefly, four grounds for encouragement:

1. SCHOOL GOVERNANCE

The recent reconstitution of School Boards of Governors provides us with the opportunity to acknowledge the significant contribution of all those who willingly volunteer for this crucial role in their local schools and to thank them. The Transferor Churches still hold more than fifteen hundred places as governors in schools that were historically transferred from church ownership to government control in the 1920s and

Board of Education Report

Proposer: Bishop Ken Good

'30s. Maintaining links with schools is vital for the mission of the church and if we neglect our schools then we neglect children and young people in our community. Our governors are of the highest quality. Not only are they integral to good governance in our schools, they also have a role in encouraging and supporting the religious ethos of schools as well as the teaching of RE. This is a good news story.

2. SHARED EDUCATION

Shared Education and Youth Provision are areas of opportunity and of positive progress. Sharing and the development of a model of jointly-managed church schools offers opportunities to work with local communities not only to improve educational provision but also to help heal societal divisions. Established examples of sharing are beginning to deliver such benefits. Important work is ongoing between the TRC and the Roman Catholic Trustees to draw up an ethos document for Jointly Managed Church Schools. Shared education is a good news story.

Youth work provision, likewise, continues to provide very positive development opportunities for young people outside of the classroom. The Education Authority is responsible for statutory provision but the voluntary sector – including churches and uniformed organisations – still provide the greatest number of places. Youth work is a good news story, as is the dedication of paid and volunteer youth workers.

3. SUPPORT COUNCIL

The Controlled School Support Council (CSSC) has made great strides in its relatively short existence. It has won the confidence of schools and principals and is proving very worthwhile. It has also clearly defined the ethos of the Controlled Sector as one based on 'non-denominational Christian values and principles'. This statement has given controlled schools the confidence to state that they are Christian establishments and can live out those values in their community. Our Secretary, Dr Peter Hamill, is on the Board of CSSC and he represents the Church of Ireland at all levels in education. I pay tribute to Peter and acknowledge his work on our behalf in Education in Northern Ireland. The CSSC is yet another good news story.

So, too, is the Church of Ireland's (and the other Churches') active and effective representation on the Board of the Education Authority - which is the statutory body responsible for the educational provision for all children and young people in Northern Ireland, including the Controlled Sector. I want to pay tribute to Rev Amanda Adams, the Church of Ireland nominee to EA and acknowledge her enormous contribution not only to EA but at many other important levels in education also. Engaged Christian involvement at this high, influential level is a good news story.

4. CHILDREN'S MINISTRY

The Board of Education welcomes co-operation between the Sunday School Society and the Children's Ministry Network and their potential merger. As a Board, we are pleased to continue to support the work of Diocesan Children's Ministry advisers and the Children's Ministry Network and are excited about what is being achieved. This is another good news story.

Archbishop, with this mixed picture of worrying 'big picture' deficits on the one hand and of some more encouraging developments on the other, for my final time before I retire, I wish to propose the adoption of the Report of the Board of Education (NI).