



**UNIVERSITY OF DUBLIN
SCHOOL OF EDUCATION
TRINITY COLLEGE DUBLIN**

**FEASIBILITY STUDY FOR THE OPENING
OF A SECOND-LEVEL SCHOOL
BY EDUCATE TOGETHER**

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

PROJECT TEAM:

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‘It is evident...that there is a certain kind of education that children must be given not because it is useful or necessary but because it is noble and suitable for a free person ...’.

Aristotle, 384-322.

‘The solution of adult problems tomorrow depends in large measure upon the way our children grow up today’.

Margaret Mead, 1901-1978.

INTRODUCTION

In September 2006 we delivered to Educate Together [ET] an Initial Feasibility Study [IFS]¹ concerned with exploring the possibility that the ET organisation might develop a novel type of second-level school, a type of school better suited to the needs and circumstances of twenty-first century Ireland than its current secondaries, which largely evolved in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The proposed new school[s] would be multid denominational, coeducational, child-centred and democratically run. In having these features and embodying and expressing the values that lie behind them, the proposed new school[s] would go beyond the voluntary or religious sector, which is denominationally based by definition, but would also surpass anything on offer from the Vocational Education Committees [VECs], where single-sex schooling is still permitted and democratic management is far from assured either within schools or in the relationships between schools and their patrons. And the proposed new school[s] would even be more democratically responsive to parents’, and *pupils’* needs than the various comprehensive and community schools, which operate independently of the VECs but which are not necessarily any more learner-centred in their teaching than all the other second-level schools in Ireland.²

¹ A Seery, A Loxley and D Limond, *Initial Feasibility Study for the Opening of a Second-Level School by Educate Together* (unpublished, 2006).

² Educate Together’s charter uses the term child-centred. While it is not for us to make policy for ET, we find learner-centred a preferable term when dealing with those in their teen years. We have used the terms national school and primary as synonymous and have treated second-level and post-primary likewise. And, as in the IFS, we have not hyphenated coeducational or multid denominational.

The IFS indicated a number of areas for further research. In subsequent discussion with Paul Rowe, CEO Educate Together and members of the Board of Educate Together it was decided to proceed with a three-strand research project. The three strands identify three tasks

Seek detailed legal advice on the official procedures and criteria for opening a new second-level school in Ireland

Ascertain all the requirements for establishing schools of the various sorts by consulting widely with serving and former second-level principals and others with relevant knowledge.

Engage in an empirical study of parental attitudes to second-level Educate Together education in light of Educate Together experience and expectations

The project was designed to address these tasks in the following ways:

- Engage legal counsel to give opinion on the chances of Educate Together requiring the Department of Education and Science to recognize it as a second-level school sponsor with regard to the Education Act 1998, equality and EU legislation.
- Convene an invitational one-day workshop for principals of different school types to discuss the requirements of establishing, running and maintaining a school
- Carry out an empirical study of family/carer decision making concerning choice of second-level school and their attitudes and opinions on the prospect of second-level Educate Together education.

The research was carried out between April and September 2007 with additional parental interviews being carried out in October 2007. A final draft of the report was submitted to a Board meeting of Educate Together in November 2007. Two of the research team also made a presentation of the principal findings at an Educate Together Second-level Members' meeting on January 26th 2008.

RESULTS AND FINDINGS

STRAND ONE: LEGAL OPINION

Regrettably, we are not yet in receipt of a written opinion on the question that was posed to counsel. The text of the question was formulated by Mr. Thomas H. Bacon, BL, formerly of O'Connor Solicitors of 8 Clare St. Dublin 2. Opinion was sought from one senior counsel who, after a number of months declared that he was not in a position to consider the brief. The brief was then passed to junior counsel and while we have a number of informal opinions on the question, we await a written response to date.

STRAND TWO: PRINCIPAL'S WORKSHOP

In late April 2007 a one-day consultative meeting was held with four experienced school principals from each of the main second-level school types in a hotel in Dublin. The principals came from both Dublin and rural schools. We employed both the focus group method and interviews and encouraged the selected experts to speak freely about their experiences and to share their insights, but also their apprehensions, with us. The participants in the group gave generously of their time but did so on an understanding of strict anonymity. The data reported on below has been supplemented by additional interviews with two of the principals. This was because during the analysis of the experts' group data, some gaps emerged around the themes of 'operational, curricula and staffing' which we felt needed exploration in further depth and detail. The outcomes are reported below and under the following three sub-headings: 'School type, governance, leadership and ethos'; 'Plant, physicality, environment' and 'Operational, curricular and staffing issues'.

School type, governance, leadership, ethos

- Understand background of community
- Size: 750-800 for subjects, max 600 for student-centred education
- Need for good knowledge of new legislation, EPSEN etc
- Possible partnership with VEC should be at trustee level only not at operational level
- Principal, staff must share vision, philosophy and dynamism

- The model of the community school or comprehensive school was held up to be one that could fit the demand of a certain independence in recruitment and innovation while retaining a recognised position in the Irish post-primary schooling landscape.

Plant, Physicality, Environment

- Control of well designed physical environment by parents *and* pupils
- The desirability of pupils' *congregation spaces*.
- The *durability* of the building and its fixtures.
- The need for *laboratories/workshops and art rooms*.
- The need for a *library* (with integrated ICT facilities).
- The importance of good *sanitation*.
- The need to provide *workspace and facilities for teachers to encourage presence outside time in classroom*.

Operational, curricular and staffing issues

- Multiple skills in staff, good continuous professional development (CPD), importance of non-teaching staff.
- Senior management teams: attention to composition, role and communication, their importance as “engine” of school, renewable posts.
- Agreed timetabling, longer instructional periods, building time for things other than subject instruction.
- Students in growing democratic participation, importance of student council.

STRAND 3: THE PARENT SURVEY AND PARENT INTERVIEWS

The data in this strand was collected from five sites which were decided upon by the Educate Together board. The data construction was undertaken using two methods:

1. Parent/carer questionnaire;
2. Telephone interviews.

The design of the questionnaire was undertaken over a three month period and went through a number of modifications before it was finally administered starting in May 2007

and ending in November 2007. The content of the questionnaire (a copy of which can be found in appendix II of the full report) drew on two main sources: the extensive literature around school choice and the data which formed part of the initial Educate Together feasibility study. It was decided that in order to try to maximise return rates the questionnaire needed to be relatively short and so a limit of 8 pages was agreed upon.³ The final questionnaire contains 120 separate items and distributed over three sections:

1. About you and your family – to collect basic contextual information;
2. Choosing a Post-primary school – this was made up of three main questions, each of which contained a number of items with the largest being question 13;
3. Educate Together and Schooling – a series of 28 statements which explored participants experience and perceptions of their ET primary school.

The majority of the questions and subsequent statements were designed to use a Likert type item response set. These essentially function as ordinal scales which allow participants to exercise a degree of discrimination when asked to respond to any given item. Although they provide for a greater level of detail over dichotomous (e.g. yes/no) type of questions, it should be noted that the scales (i.e. the calibrations between each 'number') do not constitute an equal interval similar to that of a temperature gauge or metre rule. Despite this lack of precision, Likert scales can nonetheless operate as fairly robust indicators of attitudes. The questionnaire went through two piloting processes with parents/carers who have children attending an Educate Together primary school (but not the ones chosen for this study) as well as members of the Educate Together board. A number of useful suggestions were made and, where deemed appropriate, incorporated into the final draft.

The distribution of the questionnaires was somewhat unorthodox for the researchers, but nonetheless seemed to work well in practice. As the researchers did not have access to names and addresses of parents/carers in which to construct a sampling frame, an alternative approach was taken which involved utilising the 'target' schools assistance. A letter outlining the nature of the project was sent to the schools and the type of assistance we required from them in order to carry it out. This was followed up by a 'phone call to set up a delivery date for the questionnaires. In short, we asked the schools to assist with the distribution of the questionnaires in two ways and they could opt for one of them: 1) label and post them out or, 2) have them delivered by the children to their respective families.

³ Although there is a mixed set of views over what constitutes a relationship between questionnaire length and return rates, the experience of one of the research team suggested this as a possible optimum.

Four out of the five schools opted to post out the questionnaires using An Post. The completed questionnaires were then posted back to TCD by the participants. One consequence of the unusual mode of distribution is that the research team could not be sure that all targeted families received the questionnaire. This results in the difficulty of not being able to report accurately on the response rate. However, based on calculations made on the number of children in the schools and the data returned on family size we have calculated a return rate of 46% for the survey (410 families). Whilst this may initially seem low, it is nonetheless within acceptable tolerances. The data from the questionnaires were subsequently entered into the SPSS software for checking and analysis.

The second mode of data construction was in the form of a series of telephone interviews. Those participants who had completed and returned a questionnaire were asked if they would like to take part in a telephone interview. Those who wished to were asked to provide us with their names and a contact number. The response to this was quite high (n=70) and so a random sample of n=35 potential interviewees was selected. All of the interviews were conducted via a standard schedule, which was a modified version of the tool used in the initial feasibility study in 2006.

Key findings from the empirical study

Choosing a post-primary school

Strongest factors influencing parental/carer choice of second level school:

On the school in general

- Good special educational needs (SEN) provision,
- Good physical plant,
- Not single sex,
- Sensitive to primary-post-primary change.

On the Ethos of the school

- Effective dealing with bullying and racism,
- Necessity for good discipline code and high expectations,
- School should listen to parents,
- School should have a distinctive philosophy in teaching and learning.

On teachers

- Should be experienced and well-qualified,
- Should treat pupils with respect,
- Should offer good feedback to parents/carers,
- Should make parents welcome in school

The results are commented upon in greater detail in the report itself. It is sufficient in this summary to point out that while the appearance of the above factors are not surprising, there is a noteworthy absence of some factors (examination results, sporting success...) that might have been expected to rank highly.

Educate Together and Schooling

The statements concerning Educate Together and its philosophy and practice of schooling which elicited the strongest sentiment of agreement are given below. The percentages report the combined responses of participants in the categories “agree” and “strongly agree”.

– Would send child/ren to an Educate Together 2 nd level school	90%
– Mixed schools are better for development	85%
– Children having same social background is important	15%
– Educate Together is chosen for convergence with own values	94%
– Educate Together balances academic and social development	91%
– The Educate Together philosophy works in practice	92%
– Educate Together school is of good quality	92%
– Educate Together education treats children with respect	92%
– Educate Together staff are approachable	92%
– Our child/ren are happy at school	97%

These findings give a very positive view of both the theory and practice of Educate Together schooling. They can provide an important endorsement and impetus to the plans by Educate Together to venture into second-level education in Ireland.

The full report is recommended for your reading and consideration.

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