



## SUBMISSION TO THE SELECT SUB-COMMITTEE ON EDUCATION AND SKILLS FROM EDUCATE TOGETHER

NOVEMBER 2011

### **Abstract**

Educate Together is a national patron body that operates 60 Primary National Schools and is formally recognised as a Second-level Patron. As both a partner in education and a future potential receiver of services from the proposed Education & Training Boards, Educate Together is making a formal submission to the Select Sub-Committee on Education & Skills on the proposed Education & Training Boards Bill 2011. This submission gives our perspective on the scope of the Bill, the remit of the new boards and the needs of the education sector. We feel that the Bill as drafted is not meeting those needs, and that therefore it merits a fundamental review. This submission is made in two sections with the latter detailing the scope and scale of Educate Together's role as a school patron body.

## **SECTION 1: SUBMISSION ON THE EDUCATION & TRAINING BOARDS BILL**

### **Review of the Education and Training Boards Bill 2011**

This Bill presents the Irish education system with a significant opportunity to align, coordinate and streamline services to state, voluntary and community education providers through the proposed Education and Training Boards. Educate Together supports in principle, the establishment of Education & Training Boards but feels that their establishment as proposed in the current Bill, will not address sectoral needs in an efficient and independent manner. In addition, this Bill will not resolve the current imbalances in service provision in the education system between state and voluntary/community providers. It is our recommendation that the Education and Training Boards Bill 2011 needs to be referred back to the Department of Education and Skills and redrafted from first principles.

#### **Proposed Organisational Structure**

The Bill proposes to establish 16 Education and Training Boards (ETBs) which will directly replace the 16 newly amalgamated VECs. The Bill allows for a dual remit for the ETBs. The first is as patron body to the primary and second-level schools formerly under the patronage of the VECs or the Minister (in the case of the Community National Schools). The second is as provider of centralised support services to all schools and educational institutions within their region, both those under their own patronage and those under alternate patronage. This dual remit is a conflict of interest and gives rise to serious questions as to how services will be delivered on an equitable basis to schools of all patron bodies.

#### **Issue of Patronage**

The conflict of interest between patronage responsibilities and the new services role for the whole sector is a fundamental flaw in the Education and Training Boards Bill. No state provider of services should also be a prime beneficiary of those services. The role of patron has to be separated from the remit of the ETBs for them to have any credibility across the education sector as independent service providers.

In addition, by retaining the patronage mandate, the state is in effect creating 16 mini-patron bodies, each with their own infrastructure and associated costs. We suggest that the state follows the model that is currently used by the voluntary and community education partners and establish a single national representative body for VEC schools at primary and second-level. As such a body, the IVEA, already exists; we suggest its remit be amended to incorporate patronage responsibility on a national basis for all former VEC Community National Schools and Community Colleges. Educational bodies such as Educate Together and An Foras Pátrúnachta have successfully operated centralised support services for their schools for many years. There is no reason why the Vocational Education sector should not be able to operate a similar system.

With the responsibility of patronage removed from their remit, the Education and Training Boards can focus on their critical role as truly independent centralised service providers to every school and their representative patronage bodies on an equal basis.

#### **Streamlining of Education & Training Boards**

We also suggest that the number of proposed Educational and Training Boards is excessive. The divesting of patronage responsibility to the IVEA would allow for far more streamlined and focused service provision that could be achieved through the establishment of super-regional bodies rather than the bi/tri county structures currently proposed. We suggest the sixteen proposed Education and Training Boards could be reduced to eight and still offer a streamlined efficient service to all schools in their regions.

City of Dublin  
Greater Dublin  
North Leinster  
South Leinster

Cork  
Munster  
Connaught  
Ulster

### **Reduction in Cost to the Exchequer**

The streamlining of the ETBs from sixteen to eight would greatly reduce the duplication of infrastructure and significant savings could be made to the exchequer. The recent briefing by the Minister of Education and Skills to the education partners stressed the huge pressure the education budget was under and indicated that significant cost savings would need to be made over the next four budgets. The reduction in the number of ETBs from sixteen to eight would deliver significant savings in the 2012 budget without the reduction in frontline education services that all education partners are in agreement have to be minimised.

Educate Together feels the savings accrued from administrative efficiencies, without loss of quality of service, have to be examined closely as an alternative to a reduction in teacher numbers or an increase in the Pupil Teacher Ratio. Our overcrowded classrooms are moving ever further away from the norms in other developed countries which does not bode well for Ireland's stated intent to reverse the decline as illustrated by our slide down the OECD ranking.

### **Scope and Remit of the ETBs**

The fundamental objective of the Education and Training Boards Bill should be the establishment of efficient, cost effective state support services to schools of all patronage across the sector on an equal and equitable basis. There is a huge opportunity for the state to improve the quality of education offered in our schools and create an environment of co-operation through co-ordinated services to make best use of the limited resources available. The Bill as currently drafted does not stipulate service coordination and the effecting of co-operation between schools as core principles. These are critical omissions that need to be amended in the revision of the Bill.

### **True Coordination of Services**

Educate Together strongly advocates for the operating purpose of the Education & Training Boards to be principally focused on engendering cooperation between schools in accessing services within distinct geographic regions. As the financial resources of the state become ever more straitened, we have to look at creative and innovative ways of maintaining (and improving) standards of education through the effective distribution of state services to all education providers. The establishment of the new Education and Training Boards could be the catalyst to vastly improved education infrastructure in this state operating at optimum efficiency to the maximum benefit of pupils and students.

There are a number of areas where co-ordination of service provision could improve outputs and maximise efficiencies. **Special Needs Provision** could be managed across geographical catchments rather than on a school-by-school basis. This requires careful management and the creation of a great deal of trust between education partners. A regional ETB with a visibly independent remit is best placed to achieve this. In Special Needs Provision schools in an area could share resources with deployment applied at the point of most need - a service manageable far more easily by an ETB than could be effected through a bilateral patron agreement.

Inter school cooperation, co-ordinated by regional ETBs, could have significant benefits in the areas of **enrolment and school choice** – areas identified as priorities by the Forum for Patronage and Pluralism. **Subject Specialisation** across schools in an area could also be achieved through ETB co-ordination. This measure would be extremely valuable as pressure on pupil teacher ratios at second-level is leading to an effective reduction in subject choice for students to the detriment of their education and future career choice options.

### **Opportunity for Social Cohesion**

Educate Together sees great potential for Education and Training Boards to play a critical role in improving levels of inclusion in Irish schools, particularly in achieving proper social and ethnic balance. As a coordinating educational body, an Education and Training Board should have oversight of how schools enrol pupils. There is scope for an ETB to instil a spirit of cooperation within the schools in its region to effect proper inclusion levels in such schools for children of different social and ethnic backgrounds. A truly inclusive society, as Ireland purports to be, should have the mechanisms to avoid the definition of schools (even by self selection) as servicing distinct ethnic or social groupings.

### **Back Office Support Structures**

Educate Together strongly advocates for the provision of centralised support services for all schools, particularly in the areas of Human Resources and Best Management Practice. How these services will be accessed by all education providers and on what basis is not addressed in the current Education and Training Boards Bill.

All schools will benefit greatly from being able to access state support services in these areas on an equal basis. At present these services are only available (from the state) to VEC schools. Other patron bodies have to provide and fund these services independently. This is inequitable and the Education and Training Boards Bill does not sufficiently address how such services will be offered equally to all education providers. The issue of conflict of interest for the ETBs should they retain patronage of schools arises most critically here.

### **Composition of Board**

The Bill stipulates in detail the proposed composition of the Boards of the ETBs and the process for Board appointment. In redrafting the Bill the composition of the Board should also be revisited from first principles.

**Co. Councillor Representation:** As proposed an Education & Training Board will have 10 local authority representatives and potentially 6 educational professionals. Educate Together advocates for greater representation on the Boards for professional education providers from primary, second and third level sectors. The number of councillors should correspondingly be reduced from ten to six. There should be better balance between professional education practitioners and political representatives on the Boards. If the ultimate aim of the Education & Training Boards is to ensure a more efficient and effective education system, the Boards' composition should reflect the required expertise in education and organisational management to best effect this outcome.

The proposed monthly meeting schedule could also be easily replaced with a more efficient bi-monthly schedule that would also serve to reduce costs to the taxpayer.

We also suggest that the proposed nomination system should be completely reviewed to ensure equity of representation across educational patrons. The current proposal ensures the VEC has far greater representation and control of the nomination process than is desirable for an independent state body.

### **Fees**

The Bill allows for fee income for the ETBs. However, it does not specify what services it would charge for or who would be liable to incur such fee charges. The parameters of fee charges should be explored and specified and the exemption of fees to other education providers should also be specified.

In the spirit of fairness and equity on the allocation of state resources between state and voluntary providers, ETB services should not be subject to charges for private providers if state bodies can access them for free.

## **Accountability**

Accountability is primarily dealt with in the Bill in section 8 though there are obligations and sanctions specified under Objectives and Functions that relate to accountability to the Minister. The Bill places its measures of accountability on the Chief Executive. The Bill stipulates that the Board has responsibility to run its affairs efficiently and cost effectively but there are no measures of education performance or outputs mentioned.

We suggest that the Select Sub-Committee requests that a specific set of desired educational outcomes be developed for which the ETBs will be accountable. We would also suggest a commitment be sought from the Minister's office that ETB service plans and annual reports will be freely available online for public inspection. Furthermore, the ETBs' effectiveness in meeting educational targets should also be published.

In the interests of accountability for public expenditure, we recommend that measures of accountability should be expanded outside and beyond the role of Chief Executive. The DES should publish a specific set of educational outcomes that all ETBs are mandated to work towards. Measures and accountability should be specified in relation to their achievement.

## **SECTION 2: BACKGROUND INFORMATION ON EDUCATE TOGETHER**

### **The Growth of the Educate Together Network of Schools**

There are now over **14,000 pupils** attending 60 Educate Together national schools in **19 counties** in Ireland. Even if no new Educate Together primary schools were opened in the next 5 years the number of Educate Together pupils would reach 20,000 as new schools grow to their full capacity. Involved in running these schools are around **17,000 parents** and 1,200 staff members. Most Educate Together schools are in new housing areas and have been established in the last five years. This is now a genuine mainstream movement with the full range of schools types many with DEIS status and assisted learning units.

The Educate Together model is now tried and tested and increasingly popular. While expanding from 18 schools in 2000 to 60 schools in 2011 represents significant growth, this number of schools is still far from meeting the demand for the Educate Together model of education. The organisation is working in many areas where demand has been identified and has lodged 70 applications for new schools with the DES – potentially 12 of which it hopes to open in 2012.

Among the factors driving this demand is the fact that 98% of primary schools are still faith-based, a figure which is increasingly out of step with current demographics. This presents serious human rights issues for families and the State and has been noted by the United Nations and the Council of Europe. We have made submissions to the Forum on Patronage and Pluralism in this regard. Another factor is the success of existing Educate Together schools, and a perception that this particular model offers the best preparation for life, work and play in the diverse globalised society that is 21st century Ireland.

### **The Educate Together Model**

As a Patron of schools, Educate Together is a company limited by guarantee. Its activities are regulated by its Memo and Articles and the Companies Acts, and its decisions are made at General Meetings of its members. This is a modern, transparent and accountable model of patronage. This legal foundation obliges all Educate Together schools to be "multidenominational, co-educational, child-centred and democratically-run"

In practice, the essence of Educate Together schools is summed up in the mottoes "Learn Together to Live Together" and "No Child an Outsider". For those who are not familiar with this specific

model of education, if you were to visit an Educate Together school you would be struck by the quality of relationships between teachers, pupils and parents; typically all members of the school community are on first name terms. It is normal for parents to be present in the school as they are involved in management and, in partnership with teachers, the delivery of the curriculum. Also noticeable is the confident and respectful manner in which pupils interact with each other and with adults; critical awareness is fostered through this approach and from a young age children are taught to take responsibility for their own learning and to critically interact across different viewpoints.

Educate Together schools provide a complete religious education programme as part of a comprehensive ethical education curriculum, the 'Learn Together' programme. This programme has four strands: Moral and Spiritual, Equality and Justice, Belief Systems and Ethics and the Environment. In the Belief Systems strand, the programme explains and explores the major belief systems in the world in an educational manner, teaching children about these faiths and beliefs without endorsing any particular one as religious truth. All members of the school community participate equally in this programme and no teacher is asked to teach as religious truth a viewpoint that they may not themselves hold.

At the same time, families who hold specific religious beliefs and wish to use the school premises for denominational religious instruction or faith formation classes are facilitated, and these classes take place outside the school day, on an "opt-in" basis. This is a significant distinguishing feature between the Educate Together model and the VEC Community National School pilot.

In the Community National School pilot, there is a commitment to providing faith formation classes during the school day; a commitment which Educate Together envisages will be impossible to fulfil without compromising the human rights of some members of the school community, as well as the educational and the social responsibilities of a school obliged to treat all children equally. We also believe that this approach may breach contemporary equality legislation and the Constitution of Ireland.

Carefully developed management practices in Educate Together schools ensure that the school's ethos, values and aims are shared and clearly articulated and the whole school community is engaged in an ongoing process of evaluation and review, in keeping with best educational practice. This participatory, democratic approach takes time and hard work on the part of parents, teachers and principals - and schools are assisted in this by the Patron body by way of training and on-going support. School communities can also affect national policy via the democratic structures of the organisation and its Annual General Meeting. Pupils are also encouraged to take part in the democratic process and most Educate Together national schools have active Students' Councils or Unions.

A final, but fundamental feature of the Educate Together model is that **schools are driven by parents**. Educate Together schools are founded by parents who wish to choose a particular democratic and equality-based model of education for their children. The resulting voluntary initiative and energy brings added value to the schools and enhances the quality of the education provided. It is these same parents who now wish to bring the same added value to second-level education.

## **The Educate Together Model at Second-level**

Extending this model to second level presents a significant opportunity to the State. Calls for a **new approach to second-level education** have come from diverse sources including State bodies, NGOs, trade unions, academics, business leaders and significant employers and investors in Ireland, such as Google and Microsoft. Educate Together believes its unique approach to school patronage and management is ideally suited to developing a new type of school which can make a positive contribution to the development of second-level education in Ireland. This view is shared by many in

the world of education and the project has recruited an Advisory Panel made up of some of the best known educationalists in the country (see appendix).

Educate Together Second-level schools will have the same legal obligation to uphold the Educate Together Charter and will be based on the same values of human rights and equality as their primary counterparts. They will differ from existing models in the same way as Educate Together national schools differ from other types of primary schools. *The Blueprint for Educate Together Second-level Schools*, published in 2009 details the specific characteristics of Educate Together second-level schools. This document underpins our approach at second-level and is totally in keeping with the Junior Cycle reform programme as proposed by the NCCA.

Parents stated clearly in a Feasibility Study conducted by Trinity College Dublin in 2006 that academic excellence is a high priority for them, but that the balance between academic achievement and the fostering of social and personal development that is achieved in their primary schools should be maintained. By integrating 21st century teaching and learning strategies comprehensively and purposefully into the curriculum, and by assessing not only what students learn but how they learn, Educate Together second-level schools will nurture critical thinkers, problem solvers, effective communicators, creators and innovators. We intend to make a qualitative change in the way that curriculum is delivered starting specifically in the junior cycle programme.

Building on the success of the 'Learn Together' programme at primary level, Educate Together second-level schools will provide an ethical curriculum that focuses on the ethical, moral and social development of young people. It will provide the knowledge, skills, values and attitudes that young people need to enable them to make informed moral decisions and prepare them for life in a pluralist society that embraces diversity. This will be a central element of school life and will articulate the ethos of the school. There is no current second-level school in Ireland that offers this approach.

In an Educate Together second-level school the inclusive and democratic principle will extend to the various sets of relationships in the school. Students, parents and teachers will work together as partners in learning and, in the interests of promoting equal relationships, the practice of all members of the school community being called by their first names is likely to be continued to second-level. Students will also be included as associate members of Boards of Management.

## **Response of the Department of Education and Skills**

The Minister for Education & Skills, Ruairi Quinn, formally recognised Educate Together as a Second-level patron in May this year. Educate Together is currently applying to open four second-level schools scheduled to open in the next two/three years. It is also in negotiation with Co Dublin VEC to manage the new Community College opening in Clonburris as a partnership between the two patron bodies. Educate Together made its first application for a second-level school in Lucan in 2002.

## **Educate Together, a partner in Education**

Demand for the Educate Together model of school at both primary and second-level continues to grow. The stated aim of the Department of Education, in its plans to open 20 new primary and 20 new second-level schools over the coming 5 years, is to increase diversity of school type. In addition Ireland, in its deposition to the United Nations as part of its submission to the Universal Periodic Review, has made firm commitments to accelerate the opening of multi-denominational schools at both primary and second-level. As an educational body of over 30 years standing, Educate Together is ready, willing and able to work closely with the Department of Education and Skills to help it meet its diversity of school type obligations and offer real choice to every parent in Ireland.

## **Members of the Advisory Panel to the Educate Together Second-level Project**

- Leanne Caulfield, President, Irish Secondary Students Union
- Denise Charlton, Chief Executive Officer, Immigrant Council of Ireland
- Prof Sheelagh Drudy, Chair of Education, University College Dublin
- Dr Conor Galvin, Lecturer, School of Education and Lifelong Learning, University College Dublin
- Dr Jim Gleeson, Former Senior Lecturer, Dept of Education and Professional Studies, University of Limerick
- Sandra Gowran, Director of Education Policy, GLEN - Gay and Lesbian Equality Network
- Annette Honan, Education Consultant
- Prof Aine Hyland, Former Professor of Education and Vice-President, University College Cork and founder member of the Dalkey School Project
- Prof Kathleen Lynch, Professor of Equality Studies, University College Dublin
- Barry O'Brien, Head of Government Affairs, IBM, IBEC representative
- Anne Molloy, Amnesty International Irish Section
- Dr Carmel Mulcahy, Head of Education Studies, Dublin City University
- Dr John O'Reilly, Lecturer in Education, University of Limerick
- Dr Aidan Seery, Senior Lecturer, School of Education, Trinity College Dublin
- Paul Sheridan, Engineers Ireland
- Dr Emer Smyth, Senior Research Officer, Economic and Social Research Institute
- Brendan Tangney, Co-Director of Centre for IT in Education in Trinity College Dublin
- Rose Tully, National Parents Council, Post-primary
- Dr Fionnuala Waldron, Head of Education, St Patrick's College, Drumcondra
- Derek West, Arts Administrator for Creative Engagement [NAPD] and former Principal of Newpark Comprehensive School

This advisory panel was assembled to provide a sounding board of "critical friends" as Educate Together policy on second-level education develops. The aim of assembling an advisory panel is to ensure that the project proceeds in the most informed manner possible, with reference to all key stakeholders, academics and other interested parties in education, as well as with reference to current Irish and international research.