



## FINAL SUBMISSION BY EDUCATE TOGETHER

DECEMBER 1 2011

### **Introduction**

This short submission consists of some additional comments on the reflections presented on November 17<sup>th</sup> and does not supplant Educate Together's previous submissions.

### **Survey of parental preference**

Educate Together underlines the importance placed on a mechanism for adducing the levels of parental preference of school type. We believe that the best way to achieve this is for a body independent from the role of patron of schools to seek the order of preference of parents of children at the age of 2 years old.

We believe that such a survey of preference will allow the state to be aware of any accumulating deficit in school provision and if it can show that it is responsibly responding to this, it can honestly claim that it has engaged with the widely understood human rights deficits in this area.

We stress that such a survey must be carried out by a competent professional body, independent of the patronage of schools. This is essential for public support of the process, for transparency and the avoidance of the perception of conflict of interest. Our experience in Gorey in 2010 would indicate a need for this survey to be conducted to recognised professional research standards.

When drawing up the structure to carry out this work, it should be considered that it could also play an important role in the management of school enrolments and the elimination of the ability of

schools to 'cherry pick' the social, ethnic, religious or ability of their intake. Educate Together strongly endorses the concern for social inclusion in enrolments that was expressed by the Chairperson on November 17<sup>th</sup>.

In relation to the group's proposal to survey the views of parents of children already in schools, which we support, we would like to stress that such a survey must be conducted confidentially. We would suggest that to reduce costs this should be done on-line. It is important that, to avoid any suggestion of conflict of interest, returns should not be made through the school authorities.

### **Control of promotion**

Educate Together appreciates the chairperson's comments that the group does not welcome the possibility of plebiscites or other forms of contentious competition as parental preferences are being registered. Educate Together's recent experience would indicate that it would be most preferable if the body outlined above were to provide a single document in which the various school type options were explained and that this could form the permissible information provided for parents. This could be similar in nature to the information provided by the Referendum Commission in relation to proposed constitutional amendments. In our view, it is essential to avoid the expenditure of State funds to promote a State provider unless equal funding is provided to other patron bodies.

### **Scope for cooperation and collaboration**

Educate Together is convinced that there is wide scope for cooperation and collaboration amongst schools in a given area. The independent structure we envisage could empower and enable such collaboration and provide a scaffolding around which schools and school patrons could be brought together to work to address the rights of parents and the best educational interests of children. Such State-led cooperation could lead to many efficiencies in a wide variety of educational functions including subject specialisation, special needs and many areas of peer to peer support. In addition, we would like to emphasise our very positive experience of sharing campuses and maximising the use of facilities that are shared between schools.

### **Special position of Irish medium schools**

Educate Together acknowledges the special legal status that the group recognises for Irish medium schools. However, we believe that a similar status exists for the rights of families to access schools according to their lawful preference and conscience. This is particularly important in the consideration of transport rights. We would also suggest that the experience of start-up Educate Together schools be included in any review of the regulations concerning minimum numbers for new schools.

### **Stand alone schools**

Educate Together feels that there are very few areas in the country in which it will be impossible to provide an equality based alternative to a denominational school. Our calculations are based on access to a school "within 30 minutes travel time from the home". We do not believe that there are many areas of the country where there is not a second school within such a radius.

### **FFOSH**

Educate Together has long experience of grappling with the interface between religious education, faith-formation and the national curriculum. We believe that the place of Faith-Formation in the school context is a central question. Our experience is that it is impossible to provide equality to all children in the school programme, unless the faith formation element of the programme is an opt-in facility that takes place outside the compulsory school day.

We remain very concerned that the current configuration of the Community National Schools still ignores this experience and requires the compulsory registration, labelling and separation of children in schools according to the religious identity of their families. The families that seek out Educate Together schools find such an approach unacceptable and their needs cannot be

addressed by this model. We are additionally concerned that no cost analysis of this model has yet been presented. This model has still not been independently evaluated and the serious legal questions raised by Educate Together remain unanswered for more than a year.

### **Teacher Education**

Educate Together has encountered great difficulty in ensuring that student teachers in the colleges of teacher education are properly prepared to work in the different context of an Educate Together school. If there is to be real diversity of patronage in our school system, this diversity must be reflected in the content of undergraduate courses and students must have an equal ability to achieve certification in the Learn Together ethical education curriculum as they have to achieve certification in denominational programmes. There are also significant issues that arise with the governance of these state-funded colleges.

### **Education about World Religions, Ethics and Morals (ERB)**

Educate Together has developed an established and highly respected ethical education curriculum. In our view, it would be a travesty if, in the course of addressing the issues in the denominational sector, a one-size fits all approach was adopted that would diminish the scope of this programme in Educate Together schools.

In this regard, we would like the group to be aware that Educate Together has been refused represented on NCCA despite being a body that has long experience and specific expertise in ethical curriculum development. Educate Together's Learn Together curriculum is a fully formed curriculum that covers the subject areas that were mentioned in the Chairperson's interim remarks. It is immediately available to other providers on request and negotiation.

### **Urgency**

Educate Together would like to underline our concerns over the urgency to commence a change process. As detailed on November 17<sup>th</sup>, there are thousands of parents currently seeking Educate Together school places in areas in which we are unable to meet this demand. In many of these areas, there appears to be significant vacant educational space in denominational schools. It is essential that a cooperative process is commenced as soon as possible in the 47 areas that have been identified by the Forward Planning Section of the Department of Education and Skills. We are committed to assist the department and the forum in any way we can to bring this about.

### **Conclusion**

Educate Together is mightily impressed with the integrity, depth and quality of the work that the advisory group presented on November 17<sup>th</sup>. We would like to thank the group for this work which we understand was undertaken during the summer and under great pressure. We believe that it probably marks the most important policy development for Irish primary education in the last 25 years and we congratulate you in making such a contribution.