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CHURCH OF IRELAND BISHOPS SPEAK OUT ON PROPOSED EDUCATION CUTS IN REPUBLIC OF IRELAND

Nine Church of Ireland bishops who act as patrons of Church of Ireland Schools in the Republic of Ireland are today voicing their strong concerns about the prospect of cuts, which could have a particularly dramatic negative impact on small Church of Ireland schools across the country, particularly those in rural areas which cannot be amalgamated. The bishops state ten points of principle in the context of current debate. In their statement, the bishops say: ‘The cuts have ... a disproportionate impact on the schools of which we are patrons ... given the repeated commitment of successive governments to pluralism in the area of education ... We believe that faith-based schools have a right to expect genuine governmental support.’ They go on to conclude: ‘While we wish to be regarded as realistic and creative in our contribution to present discussions, we would also emphasise that no single issue has in recent years caused such a degree of anxiety amongst our communities as this one. It is no exaggeration to say that this is a test case of the nation’s commitment to its citizens who are members of a religious minority and who for generations have sought to support and enrich the life of the state in an atmosphere of pluralism and tolerance.’

While the patrons recognise that in the current situation many of the challenges facing schools must be addressed on a case by case basis, they nevertheless felt a desire to articulate certain common principles while awaiting the appearance of the Value for Money Review of small schools, which they expect will play an important role in the debate.

Full text of the Episcopal patrons’ statement of principles:

1. We recognise the financial realities facing the state at this time and accept that our schools cannot simply be exempt from the impact of this situation. We also accept that it is incumbent upon us to come up with ideas for the future that are practical and achievable.
2. We contend that the cuts have, even if this is unintended, a disproportionate impact on the schools of which we are patrons. Given that this is so, and given the repeated commitment of successive governments to pluralism in the area of education, we would argue that such a commitment means that the approach to

educational rationalisation across the state does not necessarily have to be uniform.

3. We are committed to the concept of faith-based schools, and we are aware not least thanks to recent professional surveying that in our communities there is a significant demand for them. We believe that such schools have a right to expect genuine governmental support. In our view education in a faith-based school is undertaken in an environment of Christian faith, but that does not mean the school is narrowly confessional.
4. Of the 174 schools of which we are patrons, 130 have 86 or less pupils and will be directly and in the short term affected by cuts in mainstream class teachers. **This is a dramatic statistic.** Many of these are in rural areas serving rural families and cannot readily be amalgamated with other Church of Ireland schools for reasons of geography. The loss of these schools, accompanied by detrimental changes to the transport scheme, would have a major and destructive impact upon the coherence and wellbeing of the parochial communities which support them
5. There is a prospect of 38 of the schools becoming one teacher. Such an arrangement is tantamount to a decision to close them, not least given the curricular and child protection requirements of the present day. It is likely that many parents would – quite reasonably – not wish to have their children in a one teacher school.
6. In addition, the threatened removal through the Department's redeployment policy of the right of patrons to determine who teaches in their schools could result, for example, in having one teacher schools where the single staff member could not be assumed to be sympathetic to the characteristic spirit of the school.
7. We accept that some rationalisation may be possible, but it is easier in urban areas. There also may be possibilities in the area of the sharing of facilities between neighbouring schools, and this could involve a measure of creative collaboration not least with other patrons who share a commitment to faith-based education.
8. While some of our people have felt it their clear duty to join in local movements aimed at the preservation of small rural schools which are perceived as being at the heart of their communities, we also recognise that when we associate ourselves with a general campaign of this sort we may be in danger of failing to communicate clearly our particular concern. Especially in rural areas, we lack the option of considering sensible amalgamations simply because of the dispersed nature of our people.
9. We recognise that many stakeholders are involved in current campaigns and discussions regarding this important matter. However we would wish to affirm that all decisions made should at the end of the day be **in the best interests of the**

child in terms of a holistic and satisfactory educational experience including in the area of faith formation.

10. While we wish to be regarded as realistic and creative in our contribution to present discussions, we would also emphasise that no single issue has in recent years caused such a degree of anxiety amongst our communities as this one. It is no exaggeration to say that this is a test case of the nation's commitment to its citizens who are members of a religious minority and who for generations have sought to support and enrich the life of the state in an atmosphere of pluralism and tolerance.

NOTE:

The above statement of principles followed a meeting of the Patrons of Church of Ireland Schools in the Republic of Ireland which was held in Dublin on Wednesday 14 March 2012. Nine episcopal patrons were present: the Archbishop of Armagh; the Archbishop of Dublin; the Bishop of Meath & Kildare; the Bishop of Kilmore; the Bishop of Derry & Raphoe; the Bishop of Cashel & Ossory; the Bishop of Limerick & Killaloe; the Bishop of Tuam and the Bishop of Clogher; the Bishop of Cork was not present as he is currently on study leave.

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