

## INTRODUCTION

As outlined in “Building Peace Shaping the Future” by the Catholic Bishops of Northern Ireland, Catholic education has an important role to play in breaking down barriers of ignorance, misunderstanding and suspicion. It is our view that Catholic schools have long been involved in work in this area and will continue to do so in the future. In order that this work and the work of others can be advanced we agree that there is a need to develop a long term strategic policy with a clear vision of the future. We are acutely aware of the key role education can play in ensuring that this vision can become a reality.

## POLICY AIMS

We see the future as one in which there is equality, respect for diversity and recognition of our social interdependence. This vision is in line with that proposed in the strategy. The second Vatican Council (1962-1965) in its decree on Christian Education embraces the notion of education being about the;

“...promotion of the common good”.

This ideal is at the centre of the Catholic ethos within our schools. We are mindful of the need to see this ‘lived out’ in our schools and in society. Our schools are all embracing and operate admissions policies which are open and inclusive to all regardless of religious belief. We are also aware of the high levels of division which occur in some areas of Northern Ireland and of the tensions which exist in these areas. It is important that the policy, as it is implemented, allows for progress to be made at

varying speeds to ensure that developments, as they occur retain community support and confidence.

We are also mindful that if education is to play its full part in this move towards equality then education itself, must also fully embrace equality for all. Where academic achievement is valued above other aspects of education we have a system where perceived failure and low self esteem are, for many, the experience of the system. This ‘failure’ then becomes part of the communities lack of self worth. It is our aim that this unequal approach to education can be removed and that our children can be educated, in the future, as equals.

#### FUNDAMENTAL PRINCIPLES

The document sets out clear principles which, if adhered to, have the potential to deliver the vision. It is clear, as suggested, that the strategy will require a long term, cross-Governmental co-ordinated action. The strategy will also need to ensure that this cross-Governmental working can become a sustainable reality as too often in the past this aspiration has not been realised.

One of the target groups is ‘children and young people’ and our schools are uniquely placed to address the issues raised, with this group, and are committed to playing their part in realising the Shared Future. In Building Peace Shaping the Future the Catholic Bishops have affirmed the role Catholic schools can play,

“Schools in the Catholic managed education sector have been and continue to be fully committed to building a new society”.

Some steps have been made towards achieving this goal through the changes which are ongoing in the Northern Ireland Curriculum. In addition to giving a new role to Citizenship education the prescriptive element of the curriculum has been reduced to give schools the flexibility to engage in programs which will promote a pluralist society.

In order that the full potential of schools in meeting this challenge can be realised it is also important to note that we must ensure that schools are adequately resourced to meet the additional challenges they will undertake. This being the case we are confident that they will meet the challenge positively.

#### IMPLICATIONS FOR ACTION

It is clear that in order that we can sustain progress action should, as suggested, operate at three levels local, regional and within Government and include short, medium and long term plans. All of these plans, in keeping with sound practice within education, should include success criteria/expected outcomes and be time bound so that monitoring and evaluation of progress can be ongoing.

The Equality Commission are already working towards the establishment of good relations in Northern Ireland. It therefore appears appropriate that they play an important role in this strategy and enhance their work spearheading the promotion of equality and pluralism.

The role of Government will be central to the success of the initiative. If Government by their example can show a willingness to share, that will act as a positive first step and example to the whole community.

Much of the strategy will need to be delivered at local level and in some areas excellent work is already occurring. This work needs to be expanded upon and

celebrated as a guide for other areas. In areas where this work is at an early stage much work will need to be done to prepare communities for change. In order that the community can be empowered to make the transition it will be important that local people are involved at all stages and appropriate resourcing and training will be necessary to ensure that initiatives are seen as coming from, rather than imposed upon, communities.

Government has made a commitment to integrated education and this is supported by the Department of Education. However, the Department also have a duty to support parental choice. Within our schools parents have made a Catholic education their choice and this must be equally valued. We are confident that the Catholic school embody a spirit of outreach and reconciliation that enables them to fulfil the responsibility of ensuring that young people are offered an education that promotes inclusivity, tolerance, openness and reconciliation and this should be recognised within the strategy.

There are many areas within Northern Ireland where significant inequality in employment and housing still exist alongside high incidences of child poverty. It is only when such inequality is addressed that we can begin to establish a truly pluralist society.

## MONITORING AND EVALUATION

As mentioned previously monitoring and evaluation must be part of any process which is undertaken. While those charged with the delivery of the initiative will have a role in monitoring and evaluating consideration should be given to identifying an external body who could carry out this role in a more objective way.

## EQUALITY IMPACT

The aims of the strategy are such that, by concentrating on the creation of a pluralist society, this should not impact negatively on any groups. It should in fact reduce any negative factors which currently exist on specific groups within our society.

## CONCLUSION

In ‘The Belfast Agreement of April 10<sup>th</sup> 1998’ the Northern Ireland Office stated that;

“...an essential aspect of the reconciliation process is the promotion of a culture of tolerance at every level of society.”

The Council for Catholic Maintained Schools has striven to support and guide its schools to ensure that such a culture is integral to our education processes. We feel that we are well placed to guide our young people into a society-wide culture that reflects their school-based experiences, and would reiterate the view expressed in ‘Building Peace Shaping The Future’:

“we see our schools as being ideally placed to assist our society to move beyond its deeply ingrained divisions into a new coherence and openness to the world at large.”