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copies sent to C.D. St. George, Minister
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'REORGANISATION OF SECONDARY EDUCATION IN NORTHERN IRELAND' JULY 1976

Comments from the BOARD OF EDUCATION of THE METHODIST CHURCH IN IRELAND.

The Board of Education of the Methodist Church in Ireland wishes to take the opportunity given by the Department to respond to the Consultative Document on Reorganisation of Secondary Education.

It is firmly committed to certain beliefs derived from theological, social and educational sources. These propositions comprise -

1. That an acceptable educational reform must improve the existing possibilities for the self fulfilment of all children including both the able and the less able.
2. That variety of opportunity in schools is to be encouraged.
3. That the interest and co-operation of parents are essential elements in the success of schooling and that a sense of responsibility in parents is encouraged where there is a recognition of parental choice when placing children in schools.
4. That wherever possible the principle of parental choice should enable parents to choose between single sex and co-educational schools and among denominational, interdenominational and non-denominational schools.
5. That in the provision of staff, buildings and equipment for post primary schools special consideration should be given for those schools in areas of special difficulty.
6. That there should be an economic use of existing facilities including staff, buildings and equipment.
7. That where changing requirements involve schools in changing their roles it should always be for improvement rather than on economic or innovatory grounds.
8. That education depending much on continuity of experience and development should have an organisation involving the minimum number of breaks.
9. That the continued co-operation of the management of voluntary schools with local authorities and the Department should be encouraged with the consequent avoidance of the development as in England of Independent Schools, admission to which depends on ability to pay.
10. That evolutionary development is most likely to be the best way to meet the changing requirements of society in respect of education.

In general terms the Board is anxious to further a system which extends the present measure of parental choice, avoids notions of failure amongst children while preserving possibilities of success. It upholds parental choice "so far as it is compatible with the provision of efficient instruction and training and the avoidance of unreasonable public expenditure". In the present situation where a large majority of parents have no choice of school, the Board feels that the proper response is to organise so as to increase choice rather than to limit it further.

The Board is keen to support any move which will lead to deeper reconciliation of Ulster people. It is convinced that the schooling of Roman Catholic and Protestant

children together is but one step towards improved relations. On the issue of "integration" the Board sees many difficulties especially amongst the long established separated groupings in the Province. Careful working out of what precisely is meant by the theory and practice of "integration" has obviously to be done. The Churches, through the community, must endeavour to promote relationships which will in turn be reflected and developed in the schools. If in areas of new development the schooling of children together could, from the beginning, be established, the Board would heartily support such moves. It would further deprecate any changes which could reduce the attendance of children at schools belonging to a tradition other than their own. It fears that certain proposals in the Consultative Document could destroy a development that the Board welcomes.

The Board emphasises the worth of each individual child in any structure of education. The important issue is that the education provided should fit the needs of the child. Selection and the resultant school structures have been seen by our Board, as by many others, including the framers of the 1947 Act, as a means to this end. As an instrument of selection the present procedure is now seen to be inadequate in making the confident distinctions originally assumed possible and so new approaches to procedures and structures are accepted as being necessary to ensure for each child an education suited to his own particular aptitudes and abilities. What seems vital to the Board is that as well as providing an opportunity for each child to realise himself to the fullest we must ensure that the structure does not lose excellence as a prime aim. Excellence does not imply uniformity of curriculum but is a measure of the extent to which each individual child is enabled to realise his highest possible fulfilment and achievement.

Evolution towards this ideal has already made progress, and positive new steps are now required to reach new heights in achieving it. We believe that the process of change must be such that all that is valuable in our present schools should be used to attain the ideal of ensuring that each child, whatever his talents and however they are presently developing, should in his own right have the maximum opportunity to grow to his full stature as a confident individual person.

The Board is committed to improving the role which the Church or philanthropic persons or groups have played and can continue to play in the development of schools. The Church has played a most significant part in educating, at various levels, the children of the Province. The Churches in the past as well as in the present have in general given much to education and to some voluntary schools in particular. Accordingly the Board of Education of the Methodist Church cannot conclude these observations without reference to a particular school likely to be affected by any reorganisation of Secondary Education. Methodist College, Belfast, is governed by a body on which the Minister is represented and which reports directly to the Methodist Conference. As the Board of Education of the Methodist Church we wish to draw attention to the concern felt by the Church as a whole for the future welfare of the College and to point out certain features to which the Church attaches importance.

Methodist College was founded by voluntary effort at a time when there was no public provision of secondary education. From the start the intention was not simply to provide for Methodist children but to make a contribution to the educational opportunities open to the children of Belfast and, through the boarding departments, to pupils from further afield. As public money has become available to assist in this task, the Board of the College has never disdained it, but has always sought to make the improvements that such money made possible and to develop its partnership with the Ministry in the interests of the boys and girls it serves. As each successive change in the system the College has found it possible to adapt itself to the new situation and to maintain what is valuable in its traditions under the new conditions. We wish, however, to draw attention to certain factors that have always obtained and which, in our present view, are still essential if the purpose of the founders and the viewpoint of the Methodist Church are to be respected.

The first is that the College should continue to be directed by a Board of Governors responsible to the Methodist Conference, whatever changes may occur in the detailed composition of the Board provided that those appointed by the Conference remain in a two-thirds majority of the Board. Secondly, the admission of pupils to the school should continue to be the function of an officer responsible to the Board of Governors in co-operation with the Department of Education and should not be alienated to any outside body. Thirdly, boarding departments should be maintained on a sufficient scale to be viable, in order that the Board may fulfil its responsibilities for the education of Methodist Ministers' children, and the children of missionaries and others serving overseas, and the many children for whom boarding education meets a particular human or social need. Fourthly, the age range for which the Governors provide, whether in one school or more than one, must be sufficient to provide continuity of boarding education through the whole span over which children of parents working overseas need it, i.e. approximately 8 to 18. Fifthly, religious education according to the Christian Faith shall continue to be given to all pupils, unless their parents withdraw them on grounds of conscience; and sixthly nothing shall preclude the appointment of a Methodist minister as Chaplain to the College.

To sum up, the Board of Education of the Methodist Church is deeply concerned that the principles outlined here should be upheld and that the Methodist College should be preserved as a voluntary school, for it is convinced that such is the will of the Methodist people for whom in matters of education it is commissioned to speak.

MARCH, 1977