

Revised 8/10/86

DRAFT

REF: 699/86

PROPOSAL THAT HAZELWOOD PRIMARY SCHOOL BELFAST SHOULD BE RECOGNISED AS A
GRANT-AIDED INTEGRATED PRIMARY SCHOOL

PROPOSAL

1. On 11 April 1986 the Belfast Education and Library Board, at the request of the Board of Governors of Hazelwood Primary School, published a development proposal which provides that the school should be recognised as a grant-aided, co-educational voluntary primary school catering for an anticipated enrolment of about 250 primary and 25 nursery children, the distinctive feature of the school to remain its inter-denominational integrated character. During the statutory 2-month objection period which expired on 10 June 1986 six formal objections were received together with 5 letters supporting the proposal. The Belfast Education and Library Board expressed strong reservations about the proposal when submitting it to the Department for consideration.

BACKGROUND

2. Hazelwood Primary School was founded as an independent school in 1985 by a group of Protestant and Catholic parents in North Belfast with the active support of the Belfast Charitable Trust for Integrated Education (BELTIE). The main aims of the parent body were to establish an integrated primary school with a nursery unit which would give equal status to the 2 major cultures in Northern Ireland. The balance between Protestant and Catholic children would be ideally 50%-50%, but would in any event be kept within a 60%-40% ratio. The teachers and the Board of Governors would reflect a similar balance. The

school opened in September 1985, initially in premises in York Lane, Central Belfast, but in November 1985 it moved to new premises in North Belfast previously occupied by Throne Controlled Integrated Primary School which had closed on 31 August 1985. The Throne Primary School premises were acquired from the Belfast Education and Library Board by BELTIE at a cost of £100,000.

ENROLMENTS

3. Hazelwood School draws its pupils from a wide catchment area encompassing North Belfast and Newtownabbey and the majority of the children, some living as close as half a mile away, are transported to and from the school in 2 minibuses. In the first year of its existence enrolments have increased from 99 in September 1985 to 118 in June 1986 (93 primary plus 25 nursery pupils). The school anticipates that at least 157 children will be enrolled by September 1986 the distribution of the enrolment being as follows:-

Nursery	P1	P2	P3	P4	P5	P6	P7	Total
25	39	16	20	13	19	16	9	157

According to the Principal a further 11 children have applied for admission to the school in September 1986 but their applications have not yet been accepted because this would upset the 60-40 ratio between Protestant and Catholic pupils. Beyond the 1986/87 school year the potential enrolment of Hazelwood is rather more uncertain. The Principal claims to have 25 definite applications for admission to P1 in September 1987 including 22 children who are expected to transfer from the nursery unit and some other parents have made "enquiries". The school could therefore have an enrolment of 148 pupils in primary classes by September 1987 but potential intakes beyond then are as

yet unknown. If, as the school authorities anticipate, the nursery class can continue to attract about 20-25 children per year, which may perhaps not be an unreasonable assumption given the general shortage of nursery provision in the area, and most of these children subsequently transfer to P1, enrolments could slowly increase to around 160 by 1990. Nevertheless it is extremely difficult to make any confident predictions about future enrolment trends, certainly beyond September 1987, when the school has only been operating for one year. If we decide that the nursery class should not be recognised (see paragraph 6.e) there will be even more doubt about the school's long-term viability.

There must also be some doubt about the real level of integration which the school is likely to achieve when the religious affiliations are not known of 66 pupils out of 169 enrolled or on the waiting list. Of the remaining 103 some 60% are Roman Catholic.

ACCOMMODATION

4. Hazelwood School occupies the former Throne Primary School premises which were built in the early 1950s. The building, with 11 classrooms, is certainly capable of accommodating the proposed 250 primary and 25 nursery pupils. A piece of ground to the rear of the school has also been purchased and this could, if necessary, allow for future expansion as well as providing much needed additional outdoor play space.

However, the premises are of "ORLIT" flat roof construction and other school buildings of this type have given rise to some structural and maintenance problems. A survey of the building was undertaken in May 1985 by independent consultants. Their report indicates that while the structural condition of the building is generally good some modifications and repairs to the roof structure will eventually be necessary. From information obtained from

various sources, including the Belfast Board, about the age/condition of the heating and electrical systems etc it is apparent that a considerable amount of money would have to be spent on the building in the not too distant future in order to bring it up to a reasonable standard. Indeed an Investment Appraisal (Appendix F) reveals that something in the order of £240,000 would have to be spent on the building, mainly in the next few years, on maintenance, repairs, adaptations etc. Some of the work may have health and safety implications.

STANDARD OF EDUCATION

5. A general inspection of the school was undertaken in February 1986 and a copy of the Report is attached (Appendix E). The staff are well qualified and the standard of teaching is never less than satisfactory but the resources required for a full range of learning experiences for the pupils have not been provided. Nevertheless in most classes a fair balance has been achieved across several areas of experience. The report concludes that while inadequacies in resources have as yet limited the development of an appropriate curriculum for each pupil the energetic leadership of the Principal and the high degree of co-operation he receives from his staff have nevertheless done much to overcome the difficulties encountered in creating a new school. Attention has however been drawn to the inadequacies of the nursery provision both in terms of accommodation and equipment and to the fact that these deficiencies are prohibiting the establishment of satisfactory nursery education.

OBJECTIONS

6. Formal objections to the proposal were submitted by 6 controlled primary schools in the North Belfast/Newtownabbey area. These schools and 4 others

(who did not subsequently submit formal objections), had already made their opposition known to the Belfast Education and Library Board, which before publishing the proposal was required to consult any schools which would, in its opinion, be affected by the proposal. The Down and Connor Maintained Schools Committee was also consulted by the Belfast Board and expressed opposition to the proposal. The main points made by the objectors and our comments on them are as follows:

Objection

a. - Hazelwood is not unique in claiming to have a distinctive integrated character - existing primary schools in the North Belfast/Newtownabbey area are open to all religious denominations and some have already achieved an element of integration.

Comment

- Every grant-aided school in Northern Ireland is required by law to be open to pupils of all denominations. In practice however most Protestants attend controlled schools and most Catholics attend voluntary schools. While it is true that a small number of controlled, and a smaller number of voluntary schools, can claim to have some degree of integration the number of Catholic or Protestant pupils respectively in attendance tends to be relatively small. Hazelwood School with its declared intention of integrating the 2 main religious and cultural traditions in Northern Ireland and maintaining a 50-50 or at least 60-40 enrolment ratio between Protestant and Catholic children can therefore justifiably claim to have a distinctive integrated character.

Objection

b. - As a result of declining enrolments and the general surplus of accommodation in Belfast the Belfast Education and Library Board over recent years has carried out a rationalisation programme to take surplus school places out of the system. The creation of a new primary school in an area where there are still more than sufficient primary school places and in premises closed as recently as August 1985 runs contrary to this policy. This needless duplication of school provision will impose a further drain on the already stretched financial resources of the Belfast Board to the detriment of existing schools.

Comment

- Despite the Belfast Board's recent rationalisation initiative there are still more than sufficient primary school places in North Belfast/ Newtownabbey and there is therefore no need for another grant-aided primary school in the area. However, the case for Hazelwood is that it is different from other primary schools in that its declared intention is to integrate the Protestant and Catholic traditions and those who support it would contend that it meets a particular local need not provided elsewhere. If Hazelwood was to be given grant-aided status then the Belfast Board would become responsible for school meals, equipment and recurrent costs (heating, lighting, cleaning, maintenance etc). The Board, in submitting this development proposal to the Department has forcibly made the point (see Appendix B) that, again this year, it has had to make very significant cuts to keep its spending within the limits imposed by the Department and since no provision has been made in its budget for funding Hazelwood it will therefore expect the Department to provide it with any additional funds necessary.

Objection

c. - The current enrolment at Hazelwood, which only opened in September 1985, is well below the minimum level recommended for a viable urban primary school. Its viability has therefore yet to be established and the fact that the Throne Controlled Integrated Primary School (whose premises Hazelwood now occupies) failed to attract sufficient support to become viable would indicate that caution should be exercised.

Comment

- In March 1981 the Department published "Schools and Demographic Trends - A Backcloth to Planning" in which minimum enrolment criteria were specified for different types of schools. For primary schools in urban areas the goal was to maintain an enrolment sufficient to justify one teacher for each age group, ie a minimum of about 200 pupils. This is the yardstick by which all proposals to establish new grant-aided primary schools in urban areas are now judged. In practice this means that an independent school like Hazelwood needs to prove that it can attract an enrolment of at least 200 to make it potentially viable. The Department would not necessarily insist that the school should actually have achieved a total enrolment of about 200 before granting it maintained status but enrolment patterns and projections must clearly indicate that it is capable of doing so.

- An attempt to convert Throne Primary School to a controlled integrated primary school failed due to lack of support (only 64 pupils, 5-6 of whom were Roman Catholic, were enrolled when it closed in August 1985). This was perhaps not surprising since the Roman Catholic Church refused to take up the places on the school management committee which were available to it.

On the other hand, in its first year of operation, Hazelwood has managed to attract 93 primary plus 25 nursery pupils and the anticipated enrolment in September 1986 is 132 primary plus 25 nursery pupils. However, while this is encouraging, it is difficult, as stated in paragraph 3 to make any confident predictions about future enrolments at the school.

Objection

d. - The creation of additional school places in North Belfast/Newtownabbey during a period of declining enrolments will affect the viability of some existing primary schools who have already lost pupils to Hazelwood and may lose even more if the school is granted maintained status and increases its enrolment.

Comment

- Hazelwood draws its pupils from a very wide catchment area in North Belfast/Newtownabbey where there are some 28 existing primary schools (19 controlled and 9 voluntary). Only 10 of these schools have expressed concern to the Department and/or Belfast Board about the possible loss of pupils to Hazelwood. The Down and Connor Maintained Schools Committee also made the same point in its letter to the Belfast Board. In general however school enrolment levels in the voluntary sector, certainly in North Belfast, are stronger than in the controlled sector and Hazelwood is therefore unlikely to have a significant effect on voluntary primary school enrolments. The potential effect on controlled primary schools is more difficult to gauge since only 2 of the 9 schools who expressed concern about the loss of pupils to Hazelwood have quantified their loss, ie Ballygolan (11 pupils) and Cavehill (5 pupils). These figures presumably do not take account of pupils who might have transferred from Throne

Primary School when it closed but instead enrolled in Hazelwood. However, only 5 controlled primary schools in the North Belfast/Newtownabbey area are numerically weak with enrolments below the minimum of 200 recommended for a viable urban primary school. Only 3 of these schools (Ballygolan 170 pupils, Whitehouse 189 pupils and Currie 133 pupils), have expressed fears about the loss of pupils to Hazelwood. Of these Ballygolan, which is by far the nearest to Hazelwood (approximately half a mile away), is likely to be the worst affected - if Ballygolan were to lose say another 11 pupils with a subsequent reduction in teaching staff then some children would have to be taught in multiple age groups. Although few existing schools appear to be under serious threat from Hazelwood the possibility must not be overlooked that the loss of even a few pupils by a school could lead to a teacher redundancy and even to an erosion in the curriculum if for example the redundant teacher was the only member of staff with special expertise in a particular subject eg music.

Objection

e. - There is in general a shortage of nursery provision in North Belfast/Newtownabbey. However, because of the limited financial resources available for school building a number of proposals to provide additional nursery facilities, including nursery classes at existing primary schools, cannot be implemented. It would be grossly unfair therefore, if Hazelwood were to be allowed to "jump the queue" and establish grant-aided nursery provision in advance of others.

Comment

- A large number of proposals for additional nursery provision including some in the North Belfast/Newtownabbey area, which were approved in

principle some time ago, still remain "on the shelf". This is because the financial resources available for school building have been very limited and priority has had to be given to the provision of urgently needed facilities for children of compulsory school age. Accordingly if the nursery class attached to Hazelwood were to be given grant-aided status almost immediately there would be justified criticism from all sectors of the community and demands for the provision of additional funds for nursery projects approved well in advance of that at Hazelwood. Moreover the nursery class at Hazelwood is accommodated in premises which fall well short of prescribed nursery standards. While it is difficult to quantify the exact cost of the adaptations etc which would be necessary in order to bring the nursery accommodation up to standard the cost is likely to be in the region of £15,000. To allow the nursery class to operate in substandard accommodation would also attract criticism because the Department's insistence on high standards for nursery provision has often been challenged - unsuccessfully - in the past. It is therefore considered that, even if it is decided to give Hazelwood Primary School grant-aided status recognition of the nursery class should be withheld; this can be achieved by the Department's making a modification in the development proposal under Article 14(7) after consultation with the Board of Governors of the school.

A THIRD SCHOOL SYSTEM

7. This application for grant-aided status from Hazelwood Primary School, and that from Forge Primary School, to be followed no doubt in due course by many others (if BELTIE and ACT are to achieve their aims), raise an important policy issue which must be faced now, viz can Northern Ireland afford to finance a third school system supported by public funds alongside the existing two systems.

There are two parallel school systems because the Roman Catholic Church has always insisted that Catholic children must attend schools under the control of the Church, whether local parish priests or religious orders. The two systems have grown side by side over many years with no significant competition between them for pupils. Planning of the development of schools has been able to proceed having regard to existing provision and with the understanding that the Catholic Church authorities would take responsibility for additional provision required for Catholic pupils and the local education authorities would take responsibility for all other pupils. Reliable techniques for estimating the numbers of places needed as a result of new housing development have been developed and used successfully. The introduction of a third system which, to achieve viability for its own schools, will have to take pupils away from existing schools is difficult to justify.

There can be little doubt that the existence of even two systems results in wasteful use of resources and inhibits the development of educationally viable schools. In many places where the child population is insufficient to support more than one school the amalgamation of the existing small controlled and voluntary primary and secondary schools would create units which would be much more viable both economically and educationally. The existing teaching force could be distributed much more effectively and many children would have improved educational opportunities.

The introduction of a third system of schools which will take pupils away from the existing systems can only make matters worse. It will mean that scarce funds for capital expenditure will have to be allocated to the purchase by new integrated schools of sites and temporary classrooms or of redundant school premises, instead of being employed to improve and replace existing school

stock. It will mean that the teaching force will have to spread over more schools with a consequent reduction in the numbers of discretionary posts available to meet particular problems in schools. It will mean that the recurrent resources available to Boards will have to be spread around a greater number of schools, although not a greater number of pupils, and will result in more accommodation becoming surplus in existing schools.

We believe that this issue needs to be carefully examined on the basis that, if integrated education is to develop at a time when the schools sector as a whole must contract rather than expand, it can only do so at the price of some very obvious diseconomies. This examination will be put in hand immediately.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

8. In spite of the problem explained in paragraph 7 we believe that, in light of the Government's stated policy of support for integrated education where there is a local wish for it, this school's application for grant-aided status must be approved. If the examination of the issue which is to be undertaken should lead to a change of policy in regard to support for integrated schools that change will have to be publicly announced so that any persons considering establishing integrated schools in the future will be aware of the position. We therefore recommend that the school should be recognised as a grant-aided voluntary primary school. The nursery unit should not however be recognised and the proposal should be modified accordingly after consultation with the Board of Governors. The latter decision would be consistent with the decision which has just been taken in the case of Naiscoil Bhreandain.

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October 1986

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