

10 September 2001

## EDUCATION MINISTER RESPONDS TO ASSEMBLY DEBATE ON HOLY CROSS

Speaking at today's Assembly Motion on Holy Cross Primary School, Education Minister, Martin McGuinness MP MLA, said that this was a debate which he hoped and prayed would never be required: **"Even at the height of the Troubles, schools remained havens of peace where children were protected from outside events. It is deeply regrettable that this privilege has not been afforded to the young children of Holy Cross and Wheatfield Primary Schools, or indeed to the children from Cliftonville Primary School who were attacked while travelling home from school last Thursday."**

He continued: **"Let us be absolutely clear and unequivocal: protests affecting school-children are completely unacceptable and must stop. Every child has the right to travel to school unhindered and without fear; and to be educated in an environment where they feel safe and ready to learn. I also believe that it is the responsibility of everyone in society, but particularly of elected representatives, to guard and maintain that right."**

Mr McGuinness also paid tribute to the teaching staff affected: **"It is a tribute to the professionalism of the teachers at Holy Cross and Wheatfield that normal lessons have continued and the children have been able to progress their learning despite the strains of the last week."**

During the debate, Mr McGuinness welcomed calls for a resolution from all the political parties and also from the Education Committee: **"This is a task for local politicians and community leaders, not children and school teachers and Boards of Governors who must be relieved immediately of the terrible pressures they are having to face on a daily basis."**

In conclusion, the Minister said: **“While the situation has improved a little in recent days, I appeal to everyone in this Assembly, and to community leaders and people of influence outside this House, to do everything in their power to resolve this dispute immediately and restore to the children of Holy Cross and Wheatfield the safe, secure and “normal” education environment to which they are entitled.”**

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### **NOTES TO EDITORS**

The Assembly Motion – “That this Assembly supports the right to education of school children attending Holy Cross Primary School in North Belfast” – was tabled by Mr Gerry Kelly MLA.

**DRAFT****SPEECH ON ASSEMBLY MOTION FROM GERRY KELLY MLA:****“THAT THIS ASSEMBLY SUPPORTS THE RIGHT TO EDUCATION  
OF SCHOOL CHILDREN ATTENDING HOLY CROSS PRIMARY  
SCHOOL IN NORTH BELFAST”**

Thank you Mr Speaker.

This has been a crucial and overdue debate and I am grateful to Gerry Kelly for bringing forward the motion on this very important issue. However, as Minister of Education - and as a parent - I have to say that this is a debate which I hoped and prayed we would never need to have. As other members have said, throughout the sad history of the troubles - even when the conflict was at its height - schools remained havens of peace where children were protected from events outside. Children could come to school without interference in the knowledge that, regardless of what was happening elsewhere, they would be taught in a safe and secure environment. It is deeply regrettable that this privilege has not been afforded to the young children of Holy Cross Primary School or, indeed, Wheatfield Primary School who have also been affected by the events of the past miserable and distressing week.

Who could ever forget the appalling scenes transmitted around the world last week of terrified children aged 4, 5 and 6 screaming in fear and clinging to their parents, with tears streaming down their cheeks, as fully grown adults screamed sectarian abuse and spat and threw missiles at them?

Who could ever forget the terror on their little faces - and those of their parents - when a blast bomb exploded beside them?

Who could ever forget that these were just little children starting back to school at the beginning of a new school year?

In an incident not connected with schools Thomas McDonald, a schoolboy, was killed and I wish to extend my sincerest condolences to his sorrowing family. On Thursday there was an attack on pupils travelling home from Cliftonville Primary School.

Let us be absolutely clear and unequivocal: protests affecting school-children - whether they consist of bombs, throwing missiles, sectarian chanting, blowing whistles, sounding klaxon horns or turning backs - are completely unacceptable and must stop.

I believe that I speak for the vast majority of people when I say that every child has the right to travel to school unhindered and without fear; and to be educated in an environment where they feel safe, secure and ready and able to learn. I also believe that it is the responsibility of everyone in society, but particularly of elected representatives, to guard and maintain that right.

Unfortunately there has been a marked failure by some in this Assembly to shoulder this responsibility. Although this issue first emerged in June, it was not adequately addressed over the summer and, when it erupted again last Monday on the first day of the new term, it fell to the teachers, school governors and school authorities to pick up the pieces. They responded magnificently in the most difficult and uncertain circumstances and deserve the utmost credit. The children are always the teachers' priority and staff in both of the schools affected by this situation have ensured each day that the children are reassured, settled down and

quickly introduced to the comforting routine of the school day. Given the circumstances it is humbling – and a tribute to the skill and professionalism of the Principals and teachers in Holy Cross and Wheatfield – that normal lessons have continued and the children have been able to progress their learning despite the stresses and strains of the last week.

A vital role has also been played by the statutory education authorities – the Council for Catholic Maintained Schools, the Belfast Education and Library Board and officials from my own Department - in working in a closely co-ordinated manner to provide advice, guidance and support to the schools caught up in the middle of this community conflict. These agencies and the two schools have come together as a group to identify and put in place practical measures to assist the teachers and children in dealing with the immediate and longer term impacts of this stressful situation.

Schools of all types, right across the North, have also been in contact with Holy Cross to express their horror at what the children and staff are having to endure and to offer their support. As Education Minister I have been extremely heartened, and proud, to see the wider education community once again pulling together in the face of adversity to assert and maintain the basic right of children to education. This has been one of the positive things to come out of this dreadful situation.

I would also like to take this opportunity to applaud all those who raised their voices against this protest and called for it to end. From the outset, courageous leadership was shown by church-leaders, including those from the Protestant community who spoke out in such a forthright manner against the attacks on Holy Cross children.

I said in a Press Conference in Ardoyne last Tuesday that this was a community issue which could not be left to the school authorities and the parents to sort out

but that there was a responsibility on politicians and community leaders, particularly those representing the local area, to act to get discussions going and reach an accommodation. Since then there have been calls for a resolution from all the political parties and I particularly welcome the statement from the Education Committee affirming the right of the children to travel to and from school free from interference, abuse or obstruction.

Clearly there are wider issues of concern to both communities in Ardoyne which have not been addressed and have spawned the highly charged context to the current dispute. These must be tackled as part of a long term solution and this can only be achieved through the immediate commencement of dialogue between the two communities. This is a task for local politicians and community leaders – not children, school teachers and Boards of Governors who must be relieved immediately of the terrible pressures they are having to face on a daily basis. The protest is wrong, untenable and must stop immediately.

While the situation has improved a little in recent days - and I am encouraged by the progress that has been made - much still remains to be done. I would therefore appeal to everyone in this Assembly, and to community leaders and people of influence outside this House, to do everything in their power to resolve this dispute immediately and restore to the children of Holy Cross and Wheatfield the safe, secure and “normal” education environment to which they are entitled.

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