

SCHOOLS FUNDING AND ADMINISTRATION DIVISION

FROM: MARK BROWNE (DR)

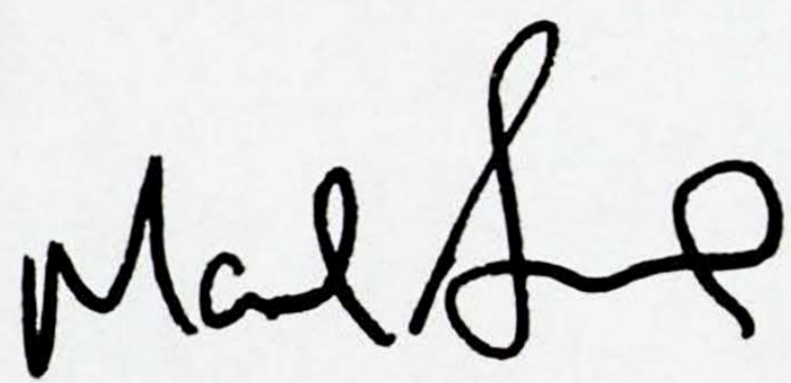
DATE: 7 August 2001

cc Mr whyte

MR PEOVER

NORTH BELFAST: FOLLOW UP TO 26 JULY EXECUTIVE

1. I spoke to Eddie McArdle who has been closely involved in trying to resolve this issue and the attached draft response to Peter May sets out the current position. Eddie was not aware of any Belfast Board involvement to date.
2. The situation continues to look very difficult but is one which can only really be resolved at local level. Nevertheless, it is important that we keep up to speed on developments and I will maintain contact with Eddie McArdle on this.



MARK BROWNE (DR)

☎ 59338

FROM: STEPHEN PEOVER
Acting Permanent Secretary

DATE: 7 August 2001

cc PS/Mr McGuinness
PS/Mr Haughey
PS/Mr Nesbitt
PS/Mr Loughran
Mr McGinn
Mr McCusker
Mrs Bunting
Mr Stewart
OFM/DFM Advisers

PS/MR MALLON
P/S MR EMPEY

FOLLOW UP TO 26 JULY EXECUTIVE: NORTH BELFAST

1. Your note of 6th August asked for a report setting out the steps being taken to ensure safe access to schools in North Belfast when the new term begins.
2. The Department has been concerned throughout this difficult situation to show support for the school and to safeguard the safety and well-being of the children as far as possible. The Permanent Secretary, Nigel Hamilton, visited the school in June and the Department has been in contact with CCMS, which has management responsibility for the Holy Cross School, and the Belfast Board.
3. The Deputy Chief Executive of CCMS, Mr Eddie McArdle, has been closely involved in working with the school, parents, community groups and police to help resolve this issue and has advised as follows:
 - the school access issue has arisen from, and become embroiled with, wider interface issues and community tensions in the area.

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- CCMS and the Board of Governors of the school have sought to keep the two issues separate to avoid education becoming a political football. There is an ongoing risk that other schools could be blocked in retaliation (eg Cliftonville Primary) but CCMS and the BOG have worked to prevent such an escalation.
- CCMS and the BOG have sought to reach into the local communities through church contacts on both sides, building on relationships developed during a similar situation 3 years ago, to ensure that Holy Cross School can stay open.
- The Mediation Network has been drawn in by groups on both sides to help resolve the issue and has arranged meetings with both communities.
- A Parents Group, acting under the auspices of local community groups, has been established to meet with the Mediation Network and Glenbryn residents over the next few days. CCMS and the BOG, concerned that this group would be discussing or negotiating on issues relating to the school, have arranged to have the School Principal and Vice-Chair of the Board of Governors co-opted onto the membership.
- CCMS and the BOG plan to hold a subsequent meeting of Holy Cross parents to explain the outcome of the meetings and discuss how best to take matters forward.
- The local catholic church is launching a pastoral initiative in the parish which will comprise masses and meetings to provide an alternative forum for discussion of these issues.
- If the situation is not resolved by September, access through the back gate of the school can be maintained through St Gabriel's secondary school on the Crumlin Road, as happened for the last week or so of the summer term. While some parents will be content with this in the short-term, there are others who are demanding access via the front gate from the Ardoyne Road and others who fear for the safety of their children

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under either arrangement.

- It hardly needs to be said that, even if access is maintained, it is not acceptable to have young children placed under such daily stress and parents and teachers kept in an ongoing state of anxiety.

4. This issue is one which has arisen, and will ultimately have to be resolved, at local level. The ongoing efforts by CCMS and the BOG to keep the school open and to draw a clear distinction between the question of school access and wider community issues, are to be commended. The situation is extremely difficult and volatile and higher level political interest and activity to help reach a resolution, provided it is pitched at the right level and delivered with sensitivity, would be welcomed by CCMS and the Board of Governors. In considering how the Community Relations Unit might assist, it would be best to contact Eddie McArdle directly (Telephone 028 90393880). Belfast Board officers have visited the school and assisted in strengthening security around the premises but have had more limited involvement with the local communities. The relevant Board contact is the Senior Education Officer, Mr Michael Rea (Telephone 028 90564027).

5. I would be grateful if you would keep me informed of any proposed action by OFM/DFM.

STEPHEN PEOVER

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