

## **The White Paper - An Overview: Opportunities for Change and Empowerment**

The White Paper on Education promises a range of significant changes in the governance of schools - not the least of them being the increased opportunity for parents to effectively democratise the system. The role and responsibility of teachers comes under scrutiny. Teachers are recognised as carrying the main responsibility for identifying and responding to learning difficulties. This, however, implies that proper resourcing is in place to empower them.

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### **A MOMENTOUS EVENT IN THE LIFE OF THE STATE**

The White Paper on Education, *Charting Our Education Future*. Launched prior to the 1995 Easter Teacher Union Congresses, is such a major event in the educational life of the State, that one's response to it has to contain various elements of what one is: parent, principal, teacher, special educationalist, taxpayer or union member. The White Paper, which is most welcome, is the culmination of several years of dialogue, reports and formal meetings, initiated by a succession of Ministers of Education, joined by the various education partners. It seeks to bring a very complicated system, rife with sectional interests into a modern democratic and pluralistic State.

### **FROM CENTRALISM TO LOCAL EDUCATION BOARDS**

To achieve her main aim the Minister proposes to decentralise power from her Department to ten Local Education Boards. She intends to move framework legislation for the new Boards before the end of 1995, allowing staff to be appointed. These new Boards will have a crucial role in determining whether the



ideas in the White Paper become a reality. As such they will have to have adequate organisational, coordinating and support functions, or otherwise they could become a mere administrative arm of the Department. Each Board will be able to set up specialist groups to advise and assist it in the implementation of policy. This could ensure that a process of consultation with interested parties and those with relevant expertise within the local community, are involved in the work of the Board. This should remove the anomalous and imperialistic practice where each school deals on its own merits or demerits, with the mandarins of Marlborough Street. It should bring schools which have a common interest in each locality together in an organic and realistic way. No school need be an island. The involvement of the Department of Education is to be reduced to core functions, such as policy formation, curriculum determination and the evaluation of the results of education.

### **PARENT POWER AND DEMOCRATISATION OF SCHOOLS**

The timing of the launch of the White Paper was unfortunate in that it highlighted some of the vested interests involved, identifying the teacher unions as being among the potential losers, should the recommendations in the White Paper become a reality. One union leader was quoted as saying at the Easter Congress that aspects of the White Paper which purported to change adversely the terms and conditions of employment of members would be resisted vigorously. The same leader added that the union would not stand by and watch politicians or their bureaucrats destroy the system by undermining the morale or status of teachers. The unions and the Church managerial bodies have had a relatively cosy relationship in recent years. The latter's interest in education has been primarily to ensure that religion was taught and practiced. This left the unions to make the running with their own agendas. Now as the control of primary schools at least, is to be surprisingly democratised, a new and potentially powerful partner in the shape of parents, could cause ripples or even a strong current within that cosy relationship. The dichotomy within teacher unions, between consideration for their members' rights on conditions and pay, and strictly educational practices will be sorely tested.

### **CONCERN ABOUT CONTROL OF SCHOOLS**

I welcome the democratisation of the educational system, though second level schools are still resistant because it is unhealthy for groups to control schools whose main interest is not education per se. This has given cause for concern in many areas, but particularly within Voluntary Bodies as personnel changes and



people who have no understanding, empathy or respect, for education come to control schools. The first principle underpinning the philosophical rationale for the role of the State in education is the promotion of quality, equality, pluralism, partnership and accountability. Any controlling group must hold its breath as measures are put in place, to ensure that such objectives are being attained in areas within its remit.

### **SPECIAL EDUCATIONAL NEEDS... 'AS RESOURCES PERMIT'**

The White Paper briefly addresses the question of students with Special Needs at the various levels. It refers to the SERC Report of 1993, saying it "has made detailed recommendations on meeting the needs of students in each category of disability. A special task force has been set up within the Department to implement the Report's findings "as resources permit". The latter phrase is the crucial one. How much more democratic it would be, if each locality in the country was in a position to determine how such resources would be spent, rather than relying on a centralised bureaucracy in Dublin, Athlone or Tullamore? Each student, at primary or second level, with a special disability will go on a national data base to facilitate the planning of provision for all students with disabilities. Each Education Board will have a statutory responsibility for these students, including coordinating educational provision and support services. Each student will be assigned to the nearest appropriate special school for access to the support services, whether he/she attends that special school or not. The White Paper also envisages the 'statementing' of pupils with significant learning difficulties. The National Council for Curriculum and Assessment will tackle the curriculum requirements for those with special needs. Appropriate in-service development for teachers will be organised.

### **RECOGNISING THE STATUS OF TEACHERS AND TEACHING**

Quite realistically the White Paper states "Classroom teachers carry the main responsibilities for identifying and responding to learning difficulties". It should follow that such people are fully resourced and given the due recognition and status which they deserve. Visiting 'experts' are often accorded recognition that their input into education does not merit. I am always conscious that the most subtle skills in teaching have to be deployed at the most junior level, yet society, and very often those who should know better do not recognise that fact. I find it ironic that the White Paper seeks to establish formal networks of principles to provide mutual support, to promote the transfer of good practice among schools and to identify continuing training needs. When principals have had the temerity



to so organise themselves, they have met with resounding opposition from the teacher unions.

### **CONCERN ABOUT TEACHING SKILLS**

Since the inspecting of teaching practice by the Colleges of Education has been allocated to a very wide base, the sentence on teacher training which reads, "The objective of such evaluation will be to identify at the earliest possible point, students who are unsuited to teaching" is very appropriate. Some corresponding development at second level would not be inappropriate, to say nothing about the lack of teaching skills often apparent at third level. Induction programmes at primary and second level would appear to make good sense. The White Paper does address the need for programmes for the development of teaching skills at third-level and states that this will be a priority".

### **OPPORTUNITY FOR EMPOWERMENT**

The overall thrust of the White Paper in empowering parents to play a realistic partnership role within education is most welcome. The parental representative bodies need to become at least as well organised as their prospective partners, so that their members will have the necessary back up and support in taking their place around the table. The present Minister of Education happily appears willing to ensure that this democratisation of education does not and will not fail. The parents of this State have such a commitment to their children's education that I feel sure they will take their constitutional role as full partners in the educational process.

Anthony Jordan is also a writer of biographies. His most recent book *Churchill - A Founder of Modern Ireland* was published this year.

**White Paper on Education *Charting our Education Future* (1995) is available from Government Publications Sales Office, Molesworth St., Dublin 2. Price IR£5.**