

YOUR EDUCATION SYSTEM

OBSERVATIONS OF CATHOLIC YOUTH CARE

Background

Catholic Youth Care (CYC), founded in 1944, is a Diocesan Agency (Archdiocese of Dublin) which provides a wide range of youth services which could be summarised as follows:

- Opportunities for young people to deepen their faith:
- Support for volunteers who organise and staff local youth clubs and summer projects:
- Local Youth Services, in association with Vocational Education Committees:
- Special Services to young people in designated disadvantaged areas:
- Co-operative work with schools, School Completion Programmes:
- Youth Information Centres:
- Co-operation with Gardaí in the Youth Crime Diversion Projects:

In all our work we give priority to the poor and we work within the terms of the Youth Work Act.

We have contributed to the formulation of the Youth Work Development Plan 2003 – 2007.

Recommendations

In the development of a plan for education in future years we recommend that

- the value of youth work as defined in the Youth Work Act, 2001 be recognised and resourced
- the Youth Work Development Plan be integrated in the Education Plan
- adequate resources be provided by central government and through the Vocational Education Committees.

SCHOOL

We recommend that schools encourage and facilitate the active participation of parents and pupils in developing school policy, particularly on issues such as discipline, dress code, community service, challenges to anti social behaviour within and without the school premises and school hours. In particular, there is a role for teachers, parents and pupils to develop positive attitudes to moderation in drinking habits and in the avoidance of the misuse of drugs. Adults and young people who work together for the benefit of the wider school community in matters such as care of elderly, care of the needy members, promotion of pride and appreciation of the local history, physical and natural surroundings enhance the life of the community as a whole.

Schools of the future will not be the sole source of information or learning as pupils will have direct access to information from computers, television and newsprint. They will continue to have need for teachers who can interpret and enhance this information, inculcate a desire for life long learning, to lead young people to self discovery, to information research and verification and for exploring issues in a secure environment and under guidance of qualified and motivated personnel.

3.

Schools of the future will have to cater for pupils from a variety of cultural, ethnic and socio-economic backgrounds, inculcate respect for all classes and creeds and recognise the special importance of the culture and creed of their families and facilitate the individual pupils to have teaching which will enhance the value of their particular faith, provide opportunities for deepening their knowledge of and learning the importance of fulfilling their obligations to the requirements and commitments of their faith.

Schools of the future must have an obligation, good will and resources to promote and teach the Irish language, literature, music and history. While Bunreacht na hEireann gives legal protection to many of these issues, it may be necessary to take measures to prepare and oblige school authorities to implement multi-cultural, equality driven and multi faith of pupils and their parents.

Schools of the future should give parents a real say in drafting school policies, sufficient information on their children's gifts, school work and characteristics to help them to make informed decisions on further education and careers. In the case of pupils with special needs the schools and medical personnel should work together to devise the most suitable education for these pupils within mainstream schools or in specialist schools.

LEARNERS

The pupils, from the first day of school, must learn the value of learning through play, through enquiry and later through active participation in class work, complemented by homework with parental involvement, individual research and interaction with other pupils.

Pupils should follow as wide a curriculum as possible until the age of sixteen or so, at which stage they could narrow the range of subjects to allow for a degree of specialisation. It is unwise to be prescriptive about the choice of subjects but it is suggested that subjects be grouped under headings such as languages, mathematics, arts (music, drama, visual), manual, physical (including health education), information technology and that students be required to study at least one component from each grouping. Schools would need to have the resources and facilities to offer a wide choice to students.

DISRUPTIVE PUPILS

School discipline policies, drawn up through consultation with teachers, parents and pupils, should clarify the procedure which will apply to regularly disruptive pupils. Disruptive pupils should be treated firmly and fairly within this policy.

There is a responsibility on school authorities to consult with the pupil and parents as to the cause of this disruptive or challenging behaviour, which may have its origins in situations at home, bullying within or without the school, or a sense of unfair treatment by school personnel or other factors which influence the behaviour of adolescents, such as boredom, mood swings or poor self-image which sometimes leads to attention seeking.

It is important to bear in mind that the primary purpose of a school is to educate in the widest sense. The teachers' task is 'to teach' and the support of specialist staff must free the teacher to do their job without trying to be at the same time social worker, family mediator, substance misuse counsellor or nurse to young children.

EXAMINATIONS/QUALIFICATIONS

A simple, non competitive external examination at the end of the primary school 6th class could be a useful indicator of how national standards and expectations are being achieved and could be used to ensure that pupils have the numeracy, literacy and other skills to proceed to second level education.

However, it could put a false and unnecessary pressure on pupils, cause friction and resistance amongst teachers, create unhealthy competition amongst schools through ill informed judgements which would not take into account the inequality of talent, support and resources available to individual pupils and schools and could further marginalise pupils with special needs, especially those in mainstream schools.

5.

The ideal format of examination for age 15 or so should be a combination of portfolio and written examination with recognition and weighting for personal attributes, achievements in contributing to the welfare of the community, sport, arts and social skills.

The Leaving Certificate should have some weighing for continuous assessment and qualities and effort as for the examination at age 15. Academic standards have to be sufficiently high to measure a student's capacity for third level studies.

Third level examinations must always be kept under review to ensure that there is a balance between theoretic knowledge and its practical implications. The changing of knowledge and the new facilities which become available through technology, distance learning, the needs of mature students, the needs for regular upskilling of those in most professions call for the constant review of examinations and examination methodology. There are many pressures on examination content and format to ensure the on-going international recognition and validation of examinations, to meet the requirements of professional bodies and changing circumstances in the academic world. There must be a mechanism whereby the institutions of higher education and/or the validating bodies can take initiatives and respond quickly to introduce change.

QUALITY

Quality and the pursuit of excellence should be the cornerstone on which our education services are founded. The provision of information in relation to individual school performance has to be broad based, on agreed criteria and cover all aspects of the influences on good performance, such as location and suitability of the building, environmental factors, support services and adequacy of resources. Presentation format of such information should be standardised so as to avoid a situation whereby a glossy brochure could be interpreted as an indication of better performance rather than a more simple and modest presentation from a school which had a greater struggle to achieve the potential of all its pupils.

The ratings of individual schools will be measured by communities on the basis of the vision and leadership of the Board of Management and the Principal, by the recognised commitment of staff who are accessible to parents and by the pride which pupils take in a schools where each person is valued, where pupils have a say in the formation of school policy and where parents appreciate that pupils enjoy attending school in an atmosphere of fair but firm discipline. A school which gives holistic care is likely to be viewed locally as a good school, regardless of its standing in the so called "league tables".

INFORMATION AND COMMUNICATION TECHNOLOGY

Computers and other forms of technology are valuable teaching aids and are likely to improve and become cheaper and more acceptable. In another generation or so the mystique of technology will have disappeared. It is important to appreciate that computers are a tool, an aid and a time saver but cannot substitute for the inter-action between the wise teacher and the young, bright and enquiring minds of pupils.

Access to modern technology should be used in a creative way to equalise and level the "playing field" for the less well off and provide them with the opportunities and skills to compete with those who have such facilities at home.

FURTHER EDUCATION

The first priority in the provision of further education should be the provision of second chance education for those who left school early and for those who were unable to afford formal education beyond the Leaving Certificate Examination. Second chance education has to provide for access courses, child care facilities, cover a wide range of courses and be student centred.

7.

The curriculum for these courses should be devised in consultation with educational institutions, business and industrial interests and have an input from students. HETAC and FETAC should be entrusted with the design of these programmes and funding provided through the Vocational Education Committees or Institutes of Technology.

The incentives should include financial assistance for tuition, books/materials, travel expenses and child care. Employers could contribute by allowing time off for tuition and examination and by way of once off payments when courses are completed and qualifications obtained.

HIGHER EDUCATION

The myth that higher education is for the rich and for high achievers should be dispelled by changing the attitudes of the Institutions of Higher Education and second level schools.

It should be accepted that not all students are mature enough or financially able to proceed straight from secondary school to higher education and there should be positive encouragement of mature students.

Students from disadvantaged areas require constant support and encouragement in the universities and colleges. These students will always need special and individual attention, particularly at times of stress such as pre and post examination.

The staff, equipment and resources of the college must be adequate for the staff to be at the cutting edge of developments in their field of study. The fostering of close ties between business and industrial leaders and students and staff in research will be mutually beneficial and promote the recognition of staff, colleges and students as potential world leaders

THE COST

Education is of its nature labour intensive and expensive. Formal education now spans about fifteen years of a young person's life.

The priority for funding must be primary education and the education for pupils with special needs either within the primary school or in special schools.

Within all forms of education there must be positive discrimination in favour of the poor. Information technology, such as computer and audio video equipment have replaced pen and ink, chalk and talk, and though more expensive and with a short shelf life, cannot be ignored but add to the normal running expenses of the individual schools. Fifty years ago the Religious Orders invested heavily in the provision of low cost primary and secondary education. Class sizes were large, fewer personnel were required and the salary scales were proportionally lower. This is now history and from now on teachers will demand salaries related to the industrial/business rates. There is a logjam in the number of schools awaiting renewal or refurbishment. Health and safety considerations make it imperative that this backlog is cleared without undue delay.

If the desirable improvements in the education system and its flexibility improve the State will have to bear the full cost up to the end of the compulsory age. Third level colleges should be able to get additional funding from International Foundations and through research contracts.

It may be necessary to raise taxes, perhaps with a specific commitment to devote the additional revenue to education.

THE CHALLENGE

There is an enormous challenge on policy makers, staff and all involved in the provision of education to work together, to be open and flexible in response to changes in the best interests of pupils.

Máire Ní Chionnaith
Head of Youth Work Services
Catholic Youth Care
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