

Dublin, 23 June 2011**FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE****Diversity in Schools is about More than Religious and Cultural Dimensions*****- Irish Vocational Education Association meet with Advisory Group to Forum on Patronage and Pluralism in the Primary Sector***

The Irish Vocational Education Association (IVEA) met with the Advisory Group to the Forum on Patronage and Pluralism in the Primary Sector earlier today to present their submission.

First established in 2009, there are now five Community National School (CNS) managed by VECs. These schools operate through an ethos of inclusiveness and respect for all beliefs, both religious and non-religious. Their establishment follows a recognition that there is a need for an additional choice that can accommodate the diverse preferences of parents for varying forms of religious education and faith formation during the school day, offering ‘multi belief’ schools.

The IVEA’s submission to the Forum is based on the Community National School model and the recommendations about how primary education should be reformed in order to cater for diversity are based on the way this model has developed.

Michael Moriarty, General Secretary of the IVEA said, “There is agreement on the nature of the problem; we now need to work together to find the ‘best-fit’ solution. VECs, with some 40 years experience of working in the management of community schools and designated community colleges are ideally placed to contribute towards a solution and are anxious to do so.”

He continued, “While acknowledging that the inclusion of religious education in the school curriculum poses challenges, we note that these challenges are already being met in Community National Schools. IVEA believes that the intention of those who established our national school system should now be realised. The time has come to change the way primary education is managed in order to cherish all our children equally and to enhance community and national cohesion, and we believe IVEA has a vital role to play in this, and is well placed to provide the expertise required.”

IVEA noted during its submission that catering to diversity in our schools is about more than the religious and cultural dimension; real inclusion must cater to all forms of diversity – socio-economic, learning, aptitudinal, amenability, among others.

“The debate on school patronage has focussed exclusively on religious education and religious instruction and the extent to which, if any, these should be included in the school day. IVEA contends that the issues of quality of service provision, good

governance and accountability also need to be taken account of at this juncture,” commented Moriarty.

IVEA proposals suggest that in order to avoid community division, the State should seek, through structured, transparent discussions with existing denominational patrons, to have the patronage of some 33% of schools transferred to the State over a period of four years. The stakeholders in all local schools should be consulted on the understanding that the ultimate decision would be taken by the DES and that its decision would not be based on a plebiscite result.

“Providing a different school, with a different patron, to meet particular needs has cost implications for the State; the most cost effective solution is for the State, through agents such as VECs, to assume a patronage role, thus guaranteeing the educational rights of all children under the one roof,” Moriarty elaborated.

“A proliferation of patronage types means that different ‘belief groups’ grow apart from their earliest years; this can breed intra communal misunderstandings and divisions. Communities should not be divided in establishing the demand for diversity. Instead, every effort should be made to educate children together, irrespective of ethnic, religious, cultural and language or learning differences.”

Since the enactment of the Comptroller and Auditor General (Amendment) Act 1993, all VECs have been subject to stringent statutory requirements of governance and accountability and the Vocational Education (Amendment) Act 2001 further strengthened the governance, control and accountability of VECs. These developments are significant in the context of the proposal to vest patronage of the new community national schools with VECs.

In reforming national school patronage, IVEA submits that the present system which enables almost 100% of state funded primary education provision to be vested in a combination of religious bodies and/or private limited companies is inappropriate to satisfy the requirement of accountability which overarches the Education Act 1998. This is a matter that the Forum needs to address by way of firm and practical recommendations.

Moriarty summarised, “Each community should have access to a school that meets the relevant criteria, irrespective of its location. State patronage of primary schools is the key to success here. Some 40 years ago, State intervention through the establishment of community/comprehensive schools, and VEC community colleges made appropriate education available to swathes of Irish society that had been effectively excluded from such education. Similar State intervention is required today. All families should have access to primary education as of right; and all students should have their belief system respected and supported by the schools they attend.”

**ENDS**

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The Irish Vocational Education Association (IVEA) is the representative body for the 33 Vocational Educational Committees (VECs) in Ireland, and works to protect, promote and enhance the interests of vocational education and training within the wider education sector and the country at large.

VECs deliver a wide range of educational services, from managing community national schools, second-level schools and colleges, Post Leaving Certificate colleges (PLCs) and education centres to providing training programmes for Travellers, adult literacy courses, prisoner education services, Youthreach programmes, Vocational Training Opportunities Schemes, and community education programmes.

VEC PLCs have developed a range of programmes and courses in response to the needs of industry and commerce which are certified by FETAC at levels 3 to 6, and by the professional bodies which set standards for entry into the professions.

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