

Amen

Submission on the Public Consultation Process - Your Education System

On Tuesday 2nd March I attended a public meeting on the education system in Dundalk, Co. Louth. I would like to begin by complimenting the Minister and all those involved in organising this meeting which was well run in that it allowed ordinary citizens ample opportunity to express their views on the education system. Amen welcomes this national consultation process which recognises that everyone has an interest in a high quality education system and gives all citizens and organisations an opportunity to have an input into the future of education in this country.

The Constitution:

At the outset we would like to say that the paramount consideration in all decisions regarding the education of our children should be article 42 of the Constitution which states:

Article 42.

The State acknowledges that the primary and natural educator of the child is the Family and guarantees to respect the inalienable right and duty of parents to provide according to their means, for the religious, moral, intellectual, physical and social education of their children.

It is Amen's view that there should be a clear distinction between the roles of the parents as educators and the State as educator. The State educational system should focus primarily on the basic skills of literacy, numeracy and communication as well as the ability to apply knowledge in a variety of situations to solve problems. The task of imparting values to children should be primarily the preserve of parents and the State should be careful to ensure that it does not encroach on the 'rights and duties of parents'. However, the State should have a role in teaching civics and promoting good citizenship but doing so in a way which recognises and respects the boundaries between the primary role of parents and the secondary role of the State. Unfortunately there is a growing tendency on the part of the State to impinge on the role of parents in contravention of the spirit of the Constitution. Article 42 clearly states that 'the Family is the primary and natural educator of the child' and this must be respected and supported by the State.

Exploring Masculinities:

A prime example of the State encroaching on the role of parents is the Exploring Masculinities programme which was introduced into some boys' schools but was later withdrawn as a result of challenges from Amen, other men's and parents groups, some sections of the media and other interested parties. This programme was an attempt to inculcate the views and values of a small group of extreme feminists into the minds of

young boys. The use of the word 'Exploring' in the title was grossly misleading. Even a cursory examination of the content shows that it was designed to lead boys to certain conclusions – all of them negative about men and masculinity and all promoting the views of feminists. One of the main reasons why this Programme was so flawed and unbalanced is that those who designed it adopted '**an exclusionary and dismissive attitude**' to anyone who did not agree with their 'understanding of masculinity' or their feminist prejudices. Amen, the largest men's support group in the country, offered to make a contribution based on the experiences of the thousands of men who have contacted us, but Project Co-ordinator, Peadar King, rejected our offer saying that Amen had *nothing to offer*. Obviously we did not conform to his 'gender agenda'. Despite this rejection we provided the Department with relevant material none of which was included in the programme.

Who decides policy?

In a report on the Department of Education some years ago Mr. Sean Cromien said that "*...officials let interest groups.....dictate the policy of our education system*". The manner in which an exclusive group was allowed to devise the Exploring Masculinities Programme to promote their own political/ideological agenda is a prime example of the problem identified by Mr. Cromien. There is a responsibility on the Minister, as the democratic representative of the people, to ensure that neither interest groups nor officials use their influence or position to promote their own political ideologies or agendas through the education system. It is especially important, when dealing with programmes that may impact on political, religious or cultural values, that interest groups should not be allowed to dominate the design of such programmes and that there be input from the widest possible spectrum of opinion. Amen hopes that lessons have been learned from the Exploring Masculinities debacle and that the Minister will take steps to ensure that the days when interest groups dictate education policy are brought to an end. The Minister should closely monitor all such programmes, it should not be left to parents groups and other organisations such as Amen to act as watchdogs.

Fathers:

Many of the men who have contacted Amen tell of the difficulties they experience in getting copies of school reports. Failure to give fathers access to school reports is a denial by the State of the means to fulfil their constitutional obligations to their children as set out in article 42. It also undermines their status and roles as guardians of their children. This issue has been brought to the attention of the Department in the past. However the response of the Department has been to abdicate its responsibilities and leave the matter to be decided by individual School Boards. This is totally unsatisfactory. Not all School Boards would appreciate the constitutional status of guardians and there will be inconsistency in decisions on this matter. The constitutional rights and obligations of all parents must be respected equally by all School Boards. The Minister should, therefore, bring an end to any confusion by issuing a directive to all School Boards and School Principals that they are required to give school reports to both parents. Such a directive would ensure that schools are not used as a mechanism to assist in the alienation of a

parent (most often the father). This would ensure that both mothers and fathers are treated in a fair and equitable manner within the education system. It would also ensure that teachers are not dragged into acrimonious battles between parents. The timing of parent/teacher meetings, which are usually held during the daytime, make it difficult for many fathers, and some mothers, to participate due to work commitments. These meetings should be arranged at times to suit all parents.

Information and Communications Technology:

We note that the discussion document issued by the Department recognises the value and potential of Information and Communications Technology (ICT). While the document recognises that much has been done to bring technology to schools and colleges it also acknowledges that we have only just begun to tap into the potential of ICT as a learning tool. It goes on to state that the next task is to bring ICT much more into the learning process. In July 2000 and again in June 2002 Amen applied to the Department for support for the development and upkeep of our website www.amen.ie which is used extensively as an educational resource by second and third level students and researchers. Regrettably, on both occasions our request was turned down.

Please include our website www.amen.ie in your links.

Paying:

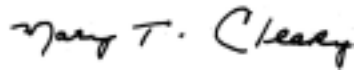
Amen recognises that, as in the case of all State services, there is a finite amount of money available for education. It is the view of Amen that priority in the allocation of funds should be given to the Department's core responsibilities i.e. literacy, numeracy etc. This would include school buildings as well as high quality curriculum. The discussion document poses the question - is there duplication and wasteful expenditure? While we would not be sufficiently familiar with the detail of the Department's spending to identify duplication we are aware of wasteful spending. For example, at present the Gender Equality Unit of the Department, together with the Centre for Gender and Women's Studies in Trinity College, is holding a series of talks entitled 'Boys, Men and Masculinities'. These are all given by feminist academics from abroad. All of them would subscribe to a similar minority feminist world view and, for the most part, would promote the same agenda as the exclusive clique who supported the discredited Exploring Masculinities programme. These speakers were specifically chosen because they agree with feminist academics in TCD and UCD as well as feminist zealots in the Gender Equality Unit. The money spent on these talks is doing absolutely nothing to improve the quality of education but, like the public money spent on Exploring Masculinities, is simply being to enable a small clique of feminists to indulge themselves and propagate their distorted view of boys, men and masculinity. We do not know how much these talks are costing the taxpayer, however the amount of money spent is not the main issue here. The very fact that small unrepresentative groups can access public money for such purposes, at a time when parents are forced to keep their children out of school due to the neglected state of school buildings, is an example of the reality identified in the

discussion document viz. that sectoral interest can very often be more powerful than the public interest.

Indeed we would question the value of and need for a Gender Equality Unit in the Department and the various gender/women's studies departments in the various third level institutions. These bodies appear to promote certain minority viewpoints and vigorously exclude those who have alternative views. In fact, we would say that the Gender Equality Unit could more accurately be titled the Feminist Propaganda Unit. These bodies should be critically examined and consideration given to the possibility that their funding could be more usefully spent on other programmes which would be of more value to our young people and society in general. For instance courses on communication skills, conflict resolution and anti-bullying would contribute more to the development of our children than brainwashing them with feminist propaganda. Such a programme could help them to develop and sustain healthy relationships in various aspects of their lives e.g. family, workplace, school etc.

Again I would like to thank for the opportunity to comment on educational issues we feel strongly about and which reflect the opinions and experiences of many men and women who make contact with us. I trust that this submission will be placed on your website without delay.

Yours sincerely



National Coordinator, Amen
www.amen.ie