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ELEMENTARY SCHOOL PROVISION IN NORTHERN IRELAND: CONSOLIDATION, CONSTRUCTION, AND CENTRALIZATION IN COUNTY DOWN, 1925-33

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The problem of school provision was a principal concern of the newly-constituted local education authorities in Northern Ireland after partition. The County Down Regional Education Committee as a single-county authority aimed to ameliorate the situation it inherited from the Commissioners for National Education by introducing schemes to amalgamate schools, improve existing premises, and construct new buildings. Efforts made by the authority during the early years of its existence are examined and assessed in light of the contemporary legislation. Difficulties – which were inevitable – included the multiplicity of small schools, parental opposition, the transfer of schools, the formation of school committees, and finance.

In 1922, when the new Ministry of Education assumed responsibility in Northern Ireland, educational needs had far surpassed the capacity of the voluntary system, which could no longer provide adequate school buildings by erecting new premises or even by improving and extending existing properties. Under the Commissioners for National Education, grants to the extent of two-thirds of the total expenditure were available to voluntary managers for building new schools; however, the increase in building costs after World War One had made it almost impossible in many cases for voluntary organizations to raise sufficient funds to pay their portion of the expense. When buildings were erected, they were planned with the greatest degree of economy, and many lacked adequate cloakroom accommodation, heating arrangements, and playground facilities. Many existing buildings required interior improvements, including ventilation, toilet accommodation, and adequate lighting in addition to extensive structural alterations.

One of the most serious weaknesses of the National System was the multiplicity of small elementary schools. As well as the division of pupils between Protestant and Roman Catholic schools, many Protestant congregations had built schools beside their churches. Indeed, it was not uncommon to find as many as four or five small schools connected to Protestant

churches in towns with a population of less than 5,000; for example, Comber with a population of 2,684 had four Protestant schools within a very short distance of one another.¹

In this paper, the response to deficiencies in the system inherited by the new Ministry of Education is described. This included according responsibility for elementary education to local committees. In County Down, the Regional Education Authority took up the challenge and set out to address accommodation needs by amalgamation, refurbishment, and the provision of new buildings. Case studies from rural areas and a town illustrate its effects. Finally, difficulties encountered in the implementation of policy are described.

ADDRESSING DEFICIENCIES IN THE EDUCATION SYSTEM

Deficiencies in provision in the education system were recognized early by the new Ministry of Education, but an assessment of the situation was required before a policy for improvement and consolidation could be formulated. The Lynn Committee's Interim Report recommended that the local committees, not yet formed, should be responsible for the provision of elementary education in their respective areas. It also advocated that the Ministry should adopt a policy of amalgamation and have the power to reduce the number of small schools which were never 'justifiable on educational or economic grounds' (Departmental Committee on the Educational Services in Northern Ireland, 1921). According to Lynn, there were now signs of unity among the Protestant denominations, particularly on the subject of religious instruction. However, the Committee, while deploring the system by which children of all denominations had not been educated in the same schools, believed that any attempts to amalgamate Protestant and Roman Catholic schools would meet with little success.

The recommendations of the Lynn Committee were accepted and incorporated into the 1923 Education Act, in which Section 8(2) made provision for an education authority to 'discontinue any school provided by, or transferred to them'. Section 9 proposed that the Ministry have power to withdraw grants from provided or transferred schools which were unnecessary and, as was pointed out by the parliamentary secretary during the first reading of the Bill, the Ministry could enforce amalgamation even 'if the schools do not agree to have amalgamation' (Northern Ireland, 1923). In addition, Part II of the Act required

¹Compiled from data contained in *School Accommodation in County Down*: Report presented to the Director of Education, County Down, to the Down County Regional Education Committee at their meeting held on Friday 27th July, 1928.

each education authority to prepare a scheme for the adequate provision of all forms of education in its area, and to submit it to the Ministry for approval. The authorities were accordingly advised to 'have regard to any existing supply of efficient and suitable schools or colleges within their education area' (Education Act, 1923, Part II, Section 6[2]), and were at a later date reminded of the necessity for a reduction in the number of separate schools in operation 'by the judicious amalgamation of several small schools and by the substitution for them of large schools on convenient central sites' (Northern Ireland. Ministry of Education, 1925-26).

In August 1925, the Ministry of Education issued a circular to the secretaries of the regional education committees, advising them on the suggested procedure for the amalgamation of public elementary schools in their areas. The circular recommended that, on the retirement of a teacher or in other circumstances which would afford opportunities for amalgamation or rearrangement of schools, the regional committee would be expected to offer its views on the situation. Detailed information relating to each case and based on reports from the Ministry's inspectors, would be supplied to the regional committees in relevant circumstances. The Ministry also suggested that the information which its inspectors had compiled in a survey towards the end of 1924 could be forwarded to the local authorities (Northern Ireland. Ministry of Education, 1925a). The survey revealed cases of serious overcrowding and very defective accommodation and equipment. Information relating to County Down on overcrowded or unsuitable school buildings, together with proposals for amalgamations and improvements, was forwarded to the County Down regional education committee in November 1925 (Ministry of Education. Northern Ireland, 1925c).

An analysis of the Ministry's recommendations shows that the buildings and organization of the public elementary school system inherited from the Commissioners for National Education needed immediate attention; 223 schools out of a total of 383 in County Down were listed as requiring structural alterations or organizational changes. Two main thrusts can be observed in the proposals: the amalgamation of boys' and girls' or senior and infants' schools in close proximity, some operating in the same building; and the emphasis on providing central schools.

The Interim Report of the Lynn Committee had dealt with the general question of amalgamation, on the basis that there were too many small elementary schools in Northern Ireland. The Final Lynn Report considered a different aspect of amalgamation, namely the co-ordination of separate schools conducted in the same building. From the Inspectors' reports, it is clear that there

were numerous organizationally distinct schools, each with its own principal, divided merely by a partition. In the case of separate infants' and senior schools, this could be accounted for by the fact that kindergarten qualifications were required to be appointed to all infants' schools. There was, however, no provision for any additional salary to be paid to an assistant teacher responsible for the infant department of a combined school; hence, in the interest of efficiency, separate infants' schools with separate principals were recognized.

One suggestion to overcome this difficulty was proffered by Lynn. When the post of vice-principal was introduced a few years earlier, provision was made for an entire school from infants through to 14-year-olds to be organized under one principal. The vice-principal's post could be held by the headmistress of the infants' school. Lynn also suggested that 'a vice-principal in charge of infants who had previously been headmistress of an infants' school should be allowed to proceed to a maximum salary of £400 per annum' (Departmental Committee on the Educational Services in Northern Ireland, 1923, Part II [3], par. 71). This was £30 more than the maximum of a female vice-principal. The adoption of Lynn's proposals would also address the friction which arose between principals on the transfer of pupils from the infants' to the senior school since the loss of grants would no longer be an issue.

In the case of separate boys' and girls' schools in the same building, Lynn recommended a stringent policy of amalgamation. Certain exceptions were, however, to be considered. For example, if separate schools in existence were large enough to have a teacher for each standard, amalgamation would not be necessary. If managers objected to amalgamation on moral grounds, this should be discussed sympathetically, although 'the loss of efficiency in teaching is so great in small schools that separate schools should not be permitted where average attendance is insufficient to warrant the recognition of two fully qualified teachers in each' (Departmental Committee on the Educational Services in Northern Ireland, 1923, Part II, par 76).

The annual reports of the Ministry of Education provide evidence of the attempts to implement Lynn's recommendations. In 1924-25, as a result of its policy of amalgamating schools and departments of schools where vacancies arose in principalships, the number of operational elementary schools was reduced by 13. In County Down, the number of schools had been reduced from 386 in 1923 to 383 in 1924 (Northern Ireland. Ministry of Education, 1924-25, Part II, Section 3).

SCHOOL PROVISION IN COUNTY DOWN

The requirements of Sections 5 and 6 of the 1923 Education Act pertaining to the surveying of existing educational facilities and the submission of plans for future development were dealt with comprehensively by the County Down Regional Education Authority. While the Ministry of Education commended regional education committees in general for their improvements in school accommodation in their respective areas and looked forward to the publication of proposed development schemes (Northern Ireland. Ministry of Education, 1926-27, HC 313, p.60), the County Down Committee was the only local authority to present its findings and proposals in any detailed form. The Ministry acknowledged this in its annual report 1928-29:

A valuable survey of the school provision of all kinds in its area has been made by the County Down authority... It is greatly to be desired that similar surveys should be made in other areas. (Northern Ireland. Ministry of Education, 1928-29, HC 180, p.10)

Throughout this report, which took a considerable time to compile, and was presented to the Down County Regional Education Committee by the Director of Education on 27 July 1928, two main themes emerge once more: the multiplicity of small schools and the resultant necessity for centralization. The data in Table 1 indicate that almost three-quarters (275 out of 370) schools were one- or two-teacher; 65 schools (17.6%) had three teachers, and 30 schools (8.1%) had a staff of more than three teachers. Under the Ministry's staffing regulations it was not possible for a school to have one teacher instructing a single standard unless the school contained two infants' classes, seven standards, and had an average attendance of 365 pupils.

Existing school accommodation was not fully utilized. In the rural schools, 225 (60.8%) had enrolments that were more than 10% below capacity. In 109 of these schools, between a quarter and one half of the places available for pupils were unoccupied and 48 were less than half full (*School Accommodation in County Down*, 1928). However, the situation was complicated by the fact that in many instances accommodation was far from satisfactory. There were 141 schools (38.1%) in which rooms were occupied by more than one teacher. This included 86 two-teacher schools accommodated in one room and five three-teacher schools operating in one room. Since there were very few amalgamations each year, there was still evidence of separate schools in the same building. Indeed out of 257 schools in the category described in the report as 'Transferred, Provided and Protestant Public Elementary Schools,' 245 were

housed in separate buildings. In the Roman Catholic sector, 113 schools were accommodated in 88 buildings.

Reduction in the number of schools in the county during the period 1923 to 1931 was modest: from 386 to 359.

Table 1

Average Attendance of Pupils and Nominal Numbers of Teachers in Public Elementary Schools in County Down on 31 December 1927

Average attendance	Number of schools	Teachers
Less than 35	22	1 (Principal)
35 to 49	110	2 (Principal and Junior Assistant Mistress)
50 to 94	143	2 (Principal and Assistant)
95 to 139	65	3 (Principal and 2 Assistants)
140 to 184	14	4 (Principal and 3 Assistants)
185 to 239	8	5 (Principal and 4 Assistants)
240 to 319	0	6 (Principal and 5 Assistants)
320 and over	8	7 (Principal and 6+Assistants)
	370	

Source: *School Accommodation in County Down* (1928)

ADDRESSING ACCOMMODATION NEEDS

It was evident from the results of the *School Accommodation in County Down* (1928) report that the problems confronting the County Down committee could not all be solved in the immediate future. As a result, certain priorities had to be determined. The improvement of buildings and conditions in towns, followed by a similar policy in rural areas was advised. Several reasons for this may be suggested. Firstly, if alterations and improvements were effected in urban schools there would be a greater possibility of children travelling to these schools, where the standard of achievement was deemed higher. Secondly, the policy of the authority appeared to favour the elementary school with four or more teachers and this would be more practicable in urban areas. Thirdly, it would be more expedient to erect larger buildings in more populous areas where the population remained more stable, than in rural areas, where the number of pupils enrolled could decrease and large buildings remain in operation with accommodation far beyond their requirements. Rural amalgamations were in general not popular with parents whose opposition was based 'on the ground of

health, on the ground of the danger to pedestrians on the roads in modern times and on grounds far less reasonable and sensible even than these' (Northern Ireland. Ministry of Education, 1929-30, HC 211, Part 1, p.11). Finally, co-operation between elementary, secondary, and technical schools would be easier in the towns.

Centres of population of over 800 inhabitants were recommended as priority areas for a new building programme, and practically all should be provided with central schools. Recommendations included all types of school, but work was limited to the primary sector. The estimated cost of elementary school provision, including alterations to premises in such centres, was £220,300 (*School Accommodation in County Down*, 1928). Table 2 outlines the committee's proposals and estimated expenditure.

Table 2
Proposals and Estimated Cost of Public Elementary School Provision in County Down in Centres of Population over 800

Centre of population	Estimated cost of school provision
Bangor	46,000
Banbridge	19,000
Donaghadee	10,000
Downpatrick	9,000
Dromore	12,500
Holywood	16,000
Newcastle	3,000
Newry	7,000 (alterations)
Newtownards	35,000 (including £15,000 (alterations))
Ballynahinch	10,000
Cregagh	7,500
Killyleagh	6,250
Kilkeel	6,250
Comber	18,750
Portaferry	3,750
Castlewellan	2,500
Gilford	7,500
Total	220,300

Few towns had sufficient and acceptable public elementary accommodation with the exception of Warrenpoint, which required no new school building but merely some minor alterations to the Dromore Road School. In Rathfriland, the premises of the Newry Street Schools were also considered adequate.

Newcastle, which in 1928 had two Protestant schools (Donard View and St John's under Presbyterian and Church of Ireland management respectively), was not regarded as a priority area. While one public elementary school would be sufficient 'on account of local topography and other reasons', Newcastle did not require immediate action. Other towns, for example Newry and Newtownards, required alterations to existing buildings, but centralization was proposed for most towns.² In the smaller towns, this could be achieved with a certain facility depending, of course, as in all cases, on premises being transferred to the education authority and on the assent of the management. However, the Director suggested that in some towns, such as Banbridge, Holywood, and Comber, more than one new public elementary school might be required and the committee showed some uncertainty at this early stage with regard to planning in these areas. The main decision, which had to take account of local conditions, was whether to provide one large or two small schools. In Banbridge, issues arose concerning the transfer of schools, conditions of transfer, and the availability of building space. The Director of Education recommended the provision of a school for 400 and one for 300 pupils rather than two schools of equal size. The smaller building could be treated as a senior school. Similar proposals were suggested for Holywood, where accommodation for approximately 600 pupils was required. A school for 400 pupils and a smaller building to be organized as a central school with 200 pupils were recommended. In Comber, schools for 400 and 350 pupils were desirable, but if two sites were not available, one school for 750 pupils should be provided.

Section 81(1) of the 1923 Education Act empowered education authorities to 'acquire purchase or take on lease any land or any right over land'. The Ministry of Education also issued 'Building Regulations' for large schools and the Director of Education brought these to the attention of the committee. In choosing sites, the committee should take great care to ensure that new schools would be built in areas near open spaces or public parks to afford opportunities for games. The surroundings should also be aesthetically pleasing with the preservation of trees and the provision of school gardens. In large towns, special attention should be paid to school entrances and exits where these adjoined public roads, and it was recommended that playgrounds, which had often been neglected under the National system, should now be an integral part of the site.

In August 1931, the committee decided that, despite the difficult financial situation, the building programme should continue, but the number of years to

² A new central school was later proposed for Newtownards and opened in 1931.

complete it should be increased. Speaking at the opening ceremony of Ballywalter's new school in October 1931, Mr William Gowan, a member of the regional committee, stated that since about half the estimated £300,000 had been expended, the remainder of the original scheme would be spread out so that 'the incidence of rating would be reduced' and, as a consequence, the building programme would not 'under the existing arrangements be completed till about the year 1940' (*County Down Spectator*, 24 October 1931).

The Windsor Hill Public Elementary School, Newry was re-opened in November 1928, having been re-designed and rebuilt. Some features of the new building included glass-covered corridors, a spacious assembly hall which could be divided into a domestic economy room and an extra classroom, modern ventilation and lighting, and boys', girls', and infants' cloakrooms. Alterations to Newry Model Public Elementary School were completed in September 1929. Proposed public elementary schools at Portaferry, Castlewellan, and Gilford were in course of construction by mid-1933. Table 3 documents the regional education authority's achievements in the construction and alteration of public elementary schools during the first five years of their building programme. It is evident that the larger towns received priority. Though it would appear that little action was taken in many less-populated urban areas, attempts were made to acquire sites in the majority of these districts. This exercise often required consultation between the architect, the management committee, land owners and the Ministry of Education, leading to inevitable delays. Ministry approval of plans frequently took a considerable time, since before approval, the plans had to be examined on educational grounds. These would be submitted to the Ministry of Finance whose architects reported on them from a technical point of view.

Suggestions for school provision at Cregagh, a suburb of Belfast, but with a population of 1,593 within the boundaries of County Down, were also considered. Since at the time, there were no schools in the area, children attended schools in the County Borough of Belfast. In 1928, the Director of Education estimated that a public elementary school to accommodate 300 pupils would be required unless an arrangement could be made with the Belfast Education Authority for the education of children resident in Cregagh.

Several considerations including social and economic issues affecting the residents were taken into account by the committee. The Cregagh district would perhaps, at some future date, be absorbed into the Belfast area. Furthermore, the interests of the residents lay mainly in Belfast since many of them were city ratepayers. Although the schools in the vicinity were overcrowded, it was felt that to alleviate the cost of constructing a new building, which was estimated at approximately £12,000, the Belfast authority would most likely be satisfied with

a per capita payment of 25 or 30 shillings per annum for those County Down children who, because of distance, attended schools in Belfast. Under Section 25 of the 1930 Education Act which provided for contribution orders in respect of elementary education, the Belfast Education Authority was entitled to such an order for County Down children receiving elementary education in city schools. The County Down Committee was able to curtail expenditure in this area by an arrangement with the Belfast authority which admitted these children to its schools at a cost of £350 per annum.

Table 3
Public Elementary School Building and Alterations Effected in Urban Areas of County Down, 1928-33

Town	Public Elementary School
Bangor	1 (Voluntary) completed August 1930 1 (Provided) completed August 1931
Banbridge	1 completed August 1932
Newry	Alterations to 2 schools: November 1928; September 1929
Newtownards	1 (Provided) completed April 1932
Warrenpoint	Dromore Road School being enlarged
Portaferry	Under construction
Castlewellan	Under construction
Gilford	Combined premises with Technical School under construction

While the programme in some urban areas was in many cases deferred until later in the 1930s, considerable alterations and construction of new premises were effected in smaller centres of population and in rural areas. New schools at Ballywalter and Crossgar were opened in 1931 and at Dundonald in 1932. Alterations and enlargement of premises at Saintfield were completed in 1932, while a new school at Waringstown and alterations to Portavogie No. 2 School were due for completion in 1933. Six new rural schools were constructed from 1930 to 1932 in Ballydrain, Ballymacashon, Backnamullagh, Carr, Croreagh, and Rockvale. The new premises designed and equipped by the regional education committee demonstrated a very high standard of planning. Even schools in rural areas, which were not initially included in the building programme, incorporated many of the Director's suggestions with regard to

position and facilities suitable for a more advanced curriculum. At Ballywalter, for example:

The building and grounds take in three acres and are encircled by a high and imposing-looking railing. A beautiful view is obtained from the sight of rolling countryside and spacious sea...The children will indeed have the proper environment which goes towards mental and bodily perfection...

The school has five classrooms...The large classroom has been specially fitted for manual instruction and domestic economy. (*County Down Spectator*, 24 October 1931)

ATTEMPTS AT AMALGAMATION: SOME RURAL EXAMPLES

In County Down, initial attempts to amalgamate public elementary schools were limited to rural areas and stemmed from the Ministry of Education's concern for efficiency and, in particular, economy. The first case of proposed amalgamation was considered by the newly-formed County Down Regional Education Authority less than three months after its inception. It concerned the schools of Kinghill and Cabra in the south of the county. The committee considered the accommodation available, the state of the premises, the number and efficiency of staff, average attendance of pupils, and the future organization of the new school (Northern Ireland, Ministry of Education, 1925a). Kinghill and Cabra Schools had featured in the 1923 inspectors' survey where it was stated that Kinghill was 'in urgent need of thorough overhauling and repairs if it is to be continued', but that 'if put in proper repair could accommodate all' (Northern Ireland, Ministry of Education, 1925b). This school had a staff of a male principal and a female assistant, both of whom were rated 'efficient' in the school's most recent general report. It had, in accordance with the Ministry's requirements of 10 square feet per pupil, accommodation for 111 pupils. The average daily attendance for the year ended 31 December 1924 was 49 and for the quarter ended 31 March 1925, 45. Cabra school had one male teacher who was rated 'not efficient' and an average attendance of 27 for the year 1924. It was suggested that amalgamation could improve the education of all the children in the locality, especially those who attended Cabra school, and at the same time would be advantageous from an economic point of view.

On amalgamation, there would be ample accommodation in Kinghill and, reflecting the views of contemporary society, all the infant pupils would have the advantage of being taught by a woman. The principal of Cabra school would no longer have to deal with such a wide range of pupils from infants to senior classes

and would be granted the status of 'privileged' assistant in the amalgamated school. However, even the joint average attendances at the two schools would warrant, under the Ministry's sanctioned staffing rules, only a principal and one assistant teacher. On the retirement of one of the staff, the staffing of the school would be reconsidered to bring it within the minimum for the number of children attending, and thus reduce expenditure. Of the several considerations involved in amalgamation, the possibility of economies was always foremost, as exemplified by the fact that after studying a report by the Ministry's inspector, it was decided to continue the schools as separate institutions since, if Cabra school were closed, a van service would be needed, giving rise to expenditure that would not be warranted in the circumstances.

A second case, which involved Crommelin Memorial School, Carrowdore, and Woburn School Millisle on the Ards Peninsula, proceeded on the initiative of the school managers. The inspectors' survey of 1924 had linked these schools with two others in the vicinity (Grangee and Ballybole) and had stated that even if the former two schools were amalgamated, there would still be too many schools in the area. On the retirement of the principal of the Crommelin Memorial School, steps were taken towards amalgamation. Various factors were considered, but again the financial aspect featured prominently. Finance for the Woburn School had been provided by the former owner and patron Mr Dunbar Buller, but the present owner, Mr R. Pack-Beresford was not prepared to continue to pay for its maintenance. There were 37 children from 13 families on the roll, all of whom lived within two miles by road of other schools. The children from six of the families could conveniently attend the Millisle school, and the remaining two the Dunover school near Ballywalter. Each of these schools had ample accommodation. The Woburn school building was considered to be in good repair with a playground and ample toilet facilities, but there was only one room for two teachers and since more efficient teaching and a reduction in the financial budget could be effected if this school were closed, the proposals were adopted and implemented from 1 October 1925.

The Ministry of Education and the County Down Committee did not always agree in cases of proposed amalgamation. For example, the Ministry suggested the closure of Ardglass No 2 Public Elementary School due to low attendance. The rules stated that to receive aid, a school must have an annual average daily attendance of at least 20 pupils between the ages of three and 15 years (Rule 184). However, the average attendance at this school for the year ended 31 December 1925 was only 9.8, and had since declined. The teacher received a salary of £235 per annum and an annual capitation grant of 4s 6d for each pupil in average attendance. The cost to the state of keeping this small school open was

considered too high and the Ministry wished to terminate aid. The local authority, through its committee on School Attendance and School Committees, considered the matter and suggested several reasons why the school should remain open. These were based chiefly on future planning and consequent demographic trends, although the possibility of economy was also discussed. The committee's principal reasons were:

1. Since June last, the school has been under a new Manager whose best interests will be devoted towards increasing school attendance.
2. In addition to the pupils at present upon the school rolls, there are 9 or 10 Protestant families, new residents in Ardglass and district, whose children, over the age of 3 years, will soon be in attendance at the school.
3. Ardglass is being rapidly developed and new residents are being attracted. Public money is to be spent on the harbour, the provision of a new water supply and sanitation, all of which will conduce to the development of the town.
4. Ardglass No. 1 School is crowded.
5. The cost of conveying pupils to another school, either at Killough or Ballee would be considerable.
6. There is no Protestant school other than Ardglass No. 2 between Killough and Strangford, a distance of about 10 miles.
7. The present teacher is nearing retiring age, and a new teacher will probably attract additional pupils. (Committee on School Attendance and School Committees, 1926)

These reasons give some indication of the difficulties involved in consolidation, and reflect local opinion, since the local education committees were influential in such matters. If the annual statistics are examined, it is noted that the reduction in the number of schools in the county during the period 1923-31 was only 27.

BANGOR: AN URBAN CASE STUDY

The town of Bangor serves as a noteworthy example of the progress made by the County Down Regional Education Authority in the field of school accommodation. In this town, not only did the policy of amalgamation and centralization become a reality, but the committee also pioneered grants for the construction of the first Roman Catholic public elementary school in Northern Ireland. However, the committee itself did not initially suggest improved accommodation. Indeed the idea of a central public elementary school for Bangor had first been mentioned by Mr Robert Fegan at a public meeting after the war. He envisaged a building which would cost £25,000, and the

introduction of the 1923 Education Act with the possibility of new schools being provided by the government, encouraged local councillors to campaign for its practical implementation (*County Down Spectator*, 29 August 1931).

The subject of school accommodation in Bangor had been discussed before the formulation of the Director of Education's Report (1928). In June 1926, the Bangor Local Education Sub-Committee reported to the regional education committee on the state of education in the town.³ In its assessment, the sub-committee considered management of schools, accommodation, attendance, equipment and staffing.

At that time there were four public elementary schools in Bangor, three of which were under Protestant and one under Roman Catholic management. There were six public elementary schools in these four buildings which were situated within, or in close proximity to the town centre. Most of these schools had been built in the latter half of the 19th century. Ward School, under the management of Reverend Canon A.W. Barton, was conducted in a renovated market house originally built in 1780 and enlarged in 1895. Main Street Boys' and Girls' Schools, under the management of Reverend W.J. Currie, were conducted in two rooms of a building erected in 1894 by the First Bangor Presbyterian Church. Several adjoining buildings were later acquired to extend the premises. St Comgall's Boys' and Girls' Schools, under the management of Reverend P. Scally PP, were conducted in a disused Roman Catholic Church, built in 1850. Two rooms were formed by the construction of a wooden partition across the centre of the main building, while a small room, originally a cloakroom was used as a classroom in the Girls' School. Trinity Mixed School was perhaps the best school building in the town, having been rebuilt in 1896. The school was managed by Reverend R.J. Morrell and was reported by the sub-committee as having been 'arranged on modern lines and in splendid condition both inside and out.' An initial examination of the individual accommodation reports revealed that with the exception of St Comgall's Boys' and Girls' the schools had sufficient accommodation. However, on further scrutiny, it is evident that owing to the dimensions of various classrooms the Main Street Schools and Ward School were overcrowded. This was perhaps due to the fact that, with the exception of Trinity Mixed School, the buildings were not constructed expressly

³ Local Education Sub-Committees were established for the oversight of school attendance and local management of schools within the County Down education area. These committees were formed by the education authority under Section 31 and Schedule 4, Part 1, Section 12 of the Education Act (Northern Ireland) 1923, on 3 July 1925.

for educational purposes and consequently the dimensions of the classrooms were unsuitable. Sanitary facilities and playground areas were totally inadequate in most schools.

In determining the extent of school accommodation in Bangor at that time, consideration needed to be given to the rapid development of the town. Since the beginning of the twentieth century the population had grown from 6,236 in 1901, to 8,051 in 1911 and to 13,311 in 1926. These figures show an increase of 65.3% in the 15 years from 1911 to 1926, the greatest population increase of any urban or rural district in the area (Northern Ireland, 1926). The sub-committee took this into account when it reported on the need for immediate action with regard to the acquisition of sites for alternative accommodation. It was suggested that Trinity School could cope adequately with the numbers of children in that area of the town and the St Comgall's Schools could be rebuilt to provide sufficient accommodation for at least 120 boys and 120 girls. Schools with accommodation for 1,200 boys and girls would be needed near the town centre and another school for 400 pupils could be built in the Ballyholme area. The sub-committee's report on a central site was accepted by the regional committee and land was secured near the town's main thoroughfare. The architect was instructed to prepare plans for the new provided public elementary school:

1. a minimum accommodation for 1,200 pupils with the possibility of extension to accommodate 1,500 pupils;
2. two schools - a boys' school to accommodate 400-450 pupils and a girls' school to accommodate 750-800 pupils, approximately 300 of which would be infants;
3. the accommodation of the schools in a two-storey building;
4. an entrance hall and library, science room and drawing room common to both schools;
5. the following rooms for the boys' school - handicraft room; medical inspection rooms, teachers' room, assembly hall, principal's room, ten classrooms; girls' school - domestic economy room, medical inspection rooms, teachers' room, assembly hall, principal's room, 16 classrooms. (County Down Regional Education Committee. Committee on Finance, Law and Transfer of Schools, 1927)

Residents of the Ballyholme district of the town welcomed the proposed plans, but objected to the distance their children would have to travel to the new school. They presented a petition to the local education sub-committee, but despite the opposition, plans for the construction of the new Bangor schools progressed. Sir Thomas Wilson, mayor of the borough and chairman of the local education sub-committee, cut the first sod on 12 September 1929. The work of

the Bangor Local Education Sub-Committee was commended by Bonaparte Wyse, Permanent Secretary to the Ministry of Education, who was present at this ceremony. He admired the skill and intelligence with which the regional committee was handling 'the general question of the supply of suitable schools of all grades throughout the county' and felt that the task which had begun in Bangor would be continued 'in an equally competent manner' to provide for the needs of all classes of the community in the committee's area (*County Down Spectator*, 14 September 1929).

On 25 August 1931, Lady Londonderry performed the opening ceremony of the new Central Public Elementary Schools. The school was constructed in four wings and organized in three sections (mixed senior, junior boys, and junior girls), each with its own principal. Its opening marked an important milestone in the work of the new education authority, which had provided one of the largest and most modern schools in Ireland.

Bangor was also the location of the first grant-aided voluntary school in County Down. In 1926, the local education sub-committee had recommended that the premises of St Comgall's Schools should be rebuilt and this proposal had prompted the members of the regional committee to consider the constitution of the management committee which would control a new Roman Catholic school in the town. The Committee on Finance, Law and Transfer of Schools discussed this matter in relation to Section 16 of the 1923 Education Act. This section provided for an education authority 'to contribute towards the provision of equipment of a new voluntary school or towards the alteration, enlargement or reconstruction of an existing voluntary school.' The finance committee members felt that since the regional committee was responsible for the distribution of public funds, it would not be reasonable for a grant to be made, if the regional committee had not proper representation on the school committee. The finance sub-committee therefore recommended that where a grant was made towards capital expenditure on a voluntary school, the school committee appointed in pursuance of Section 16 of the 1923 Act to manage the school should be constituted to enable the regional committee to secure majority representation.

The recommendations of the finance sub-committee were, however, not accepted by the Regional Education Committee whose members felt that their acceptance would give rise to serious controversy. The matter was deferred several times to the finance sub-committee for further discussion and its special report was presented on 25 March 1927. The sub-committee considered the possible difficulties which might arise through the appointment of a committee differing in constitution from the provisions of Section 15 of the 1923 Act, and

recommended that in each case where a grant was made towards capital expenditure on a voluntary school, the school committee appointed under the provisions of Section 16 of the same Act, should consist of 'not more than four representatives of the managers or trustees of the school'. Each grant should be given under conditions approved by the Ministry of Education

for securing the continuance of the school and the repayment in whole or in part of any such contribution in the event of the school being sold or discontinued or used wholly or partially for any other purposes than a public elementary school. (County Down Regional Education Committee. Committee on Finance, Law and Transfer of Schools, 1927)

The sub-committee also recommended that the plans and specifications of proposed voluntary schools requiring grant-aid should be approved by the regional committee and that the work should be carried out under the supervision of an education authority officer. The amount of the grant would be based on the lowest tender and any expenses in excess of that amount would be borne by the trustees who would also secure a lease of the premises for school purposes for a period of not less than 900 years.

A 'Four and Two' Committee was subsequently formed for St Comgall's Schools. This consisted of the Very Reverend Canon Croll, Vicar Capitular of Down and Connor (Chairman), Sir Thomas Wilson (Vice-Chairman), Reverend P. Scally PP (Secretary), Reverend J. O'Brien, PP, Holywood, Mr Fred Brice, and Mr W. O'Hara, Bangor. The Regional Education Authority recommended that a grant equal to two-thirds of the total capital outlay be given to the new managers. This amounted to £4,000 which was borrowed from the Ministry of Finance at 5.75% interest to be repaid in half-yearly instalments over a period of 35 years.

Almost three years had passed since the suggestion of new Roman Catholic public elementary schools for Bangor before the foundation stone was laid on 22 August 1929. An analysis of the speeches delivered at the ceremony reveal some interesting attitudes of members of the Roman Catholic Church towards the new education system. Reverend P. Scally PP stated that though he did not quite agree with all the policies of the Northern Ireland government, he did admit that in educational matters the government's progressiveness had to be admired. Father Scally, referring to the efforts of the government in its endeavours to raise the standard of knowledge in public elementary schools, suggested that the success or failure of any effort depended largely on the zeal and ability of those entrusted with the implementation of policy. Tribute was also paid to the Ministry of Education whose work, Father Scally remarked, was effected with 'the highest grade of efficiency' and whose officials 'from the highest to the

lowest were courteous, obliging and eager to be helpful' (*County Down Spectator*, 24 August 1929).

The new St Comgall's schools were completed in August 1930, a year before the spacious Central schools, and comprised four classrooms each to accommodate 48 pupils with one classroom for the combined use of both boys' and girls' schools in handwork and domestic economy. Separate boys' and girls' cloakrooms, separate teachers' toilets, and a central heating system were features of the new building.

DIFFICULTIES IN POLICY IMPLEMENTATION

In March 1928, the County Down Committee of the Irish National Teachers' Organisation submitted the following resolution to the education authority:

That we respectfully call the attention of the County Down Education Authority to the urgent need for a general improvement of school buildings and equipment especially in the rural districts throughout the whole county. (County Down Regional Education Committee, 1929, LA3/7/AB/5)

This resolution referred primarily to voluntary schools which, in the opinion of Reverend F. J. O'Hare, a member of the Regional Committee, were suffering under serious disadvantages due to the provisions of the 1923 Act (County Down Regional Education Committee, 1929). In a motion before the committee, Reverend O'Hare and Reverend J. Fitzpatrick intimated that the majority of voluntary school managers disagreed with the provisions of the Education Act and that the Committee should advise the Ministry of Education to introduce changes to the Act and place voluntary schools 'in a position at least as satisfactory as they enjoyed under British administration'. The motion received little support and was rejected. The committee, in effect, adopted an intransigent position on this issue and resolved:

that no action be taken in connection with the resolution passed by the County Down Committee of the Irish National Teachers' Organisation as the Regional Education Committee are satisfied that there is general improvement in school buildings in rural districts when the schools are transferred to the education authority. (County Down Regional Education Committee, 1929a, LA3/7/AB/5).

Colonel Sharman-Crawford speaking in the Northern Ireland Senate in November 1929 suggested how fairly the voluntary schools were treated under the 'Four and Two' committee system and cited the case of St Comgall's school in Bangor which had received two-thirds grant for the building of new premises (Northern Ireland, 1929).

The problem of transfer remained the major obstacle in securing improved school accommodation, even though greater progress was made in County Down than in many other regional education areas. By 1929, 81 schools had been transferred, 22 were in the process of transfer, and 12 were placed under 'Four and Two' committees. Like the County Down Committee, the Ministry believed that the transfer of schools would alleviate this problem.

It would seem to be reasonable to require schools of this kind to be put into a satisfactory condition if they are to remain in operation and to receive the Ministry's grants; and the problem which they must present to their managers, who are almost without exception persons of culture and humane disposition must be harassing to a degree. It is difficult to understand why the problem persists since its solution is not impossible. (Northern Ireland, Ministry of Education, 1929-30)

In addition to the problem of voluntary schools, the question of the position of teachers in amalgamated schools required clarification both in cases of decreasing enrolments and of the centralization policy in urban areas. A Privileged Assistant was often employed in amalgamated schools where the retirement of a member of staff was imminent. However, the position of teachers in new schools caused considerable concern, particularly where existing schools were closed without having been transferred to the education authority.

When a school was transferred, Clause 14(4)(a) of the 1923 Act provided that the existing staff of teachers...shall be taken over and shall from the date of transfer be placed as regards appointment, dismissal and remuneration on terms not less favourable than those applicable to them before transfer.

However, in a proposed amalgamation in Comber, teachers would lose the benefit of this protective clause, since the managers of existing schools would not enter into transfer agreements with the local authority but simply close their schools on the completion of a central building. The Ministry advised the regional committee that

When a new public elementary school is built to replace one or more existing schools in a town or district, the Minister of Education is prepared to recognise the existing staffs of teachers as teachers of the new school even though the staff thus formed in the new school might be in excess of the number of teachers warranted by the attendance. In such a case the existing principals, save the one who might be appointed as principal of the new school can be recognised as privileged assistants and will continue to receive the same salaries (with right to increments) as they receive in their present position. (Northern Ireland. Ministry of Education, 1928)

In accordance with such advice, the regional committee adopted the following resolution on 27 July 1928:

That in the case of amalgamation of public elementary schools carried out by the Education Authority, the teachers in the schools amalgamated be guaranteed employment by the education authority. (County Down Regional Education Committee, 1929)

The Ministry suggested the formulation of an equitable scheme for the distribution of capitation grants: existing principals would retain their rights to additional increments as at the date of amalgamation; and fees for extra subjects would be paid to teachers who gave instruction in accordance with arrangements approved by the manager. The question of seniority of assistants in amalgamated schools was determined by the dates of appointment to their previous schools.

The resolution adopted by the committee in July 1928 demanded some reconsideration in light of the 1930 Education Act, which withdrew from the education authority the sole right of dealing with the appointment of teachers in provided and transferred schools. Thus it appeared ultra vires for the committee to guarantee employment to any public elementary school teacher except in certain special circumstances. The chairman of the committee, James Blane JP, concluded from interviews with committee members and representatives from the Ministry of Education that both were anxious to find employment for teachers who faced redundancy due to amalgamation or to the building of new schools. It was recommended by the chairman that the 1928 resolution be rescinded and the following substituted:

That in the case of amalgamation of Public Elementary Schools carried out by the Education Authority, the teachers in the schools amalgamated be, as far as possible, continued in the employment of the Education Authority in the amalgamated school upon terms not less favourable than those applicable to them before amalgamation, and that, where employment in the amalgamated school is not possible, the Committee shall endeavour to find suitable employment in another Public Elementary School. (*Dromore Weekly Times*, 28 February 1931)

A further problem of centralization was the formation and composition of school committees. The assumption of managers in such amalgamations was that each of the former schools would be assured representation on the new committee, but Section 3 of the 1923 Education Act made provision for the appointment of school committees in transferred schools only. This caused a problem where a school was provided by the local authority to replace several existing schools. The County Down Regional Education Committee had, however, formulated a *Scheme Regulating the Constitution, Powers, Duties and*

Procedure for School Committees for the Local Management of Provided and Transferred Schools. According to this document a school committee should consist of

- (i) in the case of a transferred school, not less than two or more than four representatives of the trustees or persons by whom the schools were transferred, or in the case of a provided school, not less than two or more than four persons representing the Regional Education Committee;
- (ii) not less than two or more than four representatives of parents of children attending the school or schools managed by the school committee;
- (iii) a teacher chosen by the teaching staff of the school or schools controlled by the school committee from the members of such staff; and
- (iv) not less than one person or more than three persons interested in education and residing in the immediate neighbourhood who are acquainted with its needs and who are prepared to share the duties of organising child welfare work in the district. (County Down Regional Education Committee, 1933, p.10)

It is evident from these conditions that no provision was accorded for the representation of the former managers of superseded schools on the school committee of a provided school. Nevertheless, this obstacle was not insurmountable, since the scheme was broad enough to afford the Regional Education Committee certain freedom to appoint their representatives to the school committee. Furthermore, the representatives did not have to have been members of the regional committee. An example of how this could be achieved may be concluded from the proposals of the Comber managers. The managers of the Church of Ireland and Presbyterian schools would represent the regional education committee; there would also be two representatives of parents selected at a special meeting; a teacher chosen by the teaching staff of the new school; and two other managers who would also fulfil condition (iv), being persons living in the district and interested in education (County Down Regional Education Committee, 1929b).

In spite of many difficulties, the County Down committee had completed an extensive building programme in the borough of Bangor by 1931, demonstrating the progress which could be made by a local authority within the new education system in Northern Ireland. However while the committee had built nine new schools and carried out improvements on 106 transferred schools by 31 December 1931 and building work continued in subsequent years, a considerable deficiency is obvious when the Ministry of Education's recommendations for the improvement of educational facilities in the county (1925) are compared with an assessment of the committee's work during the years 1925-33.

Two major difficulties prevented the implementation of most of these recommendations: lack of finance in days of imminent depression, and the small numbers of schools transferred to the committee during its early years. Nevertheless, commendable efforts, far surpassing all other regional authorities in school provision had been made in a short period, which laid the foundation for the major developments which would occur after the passing of the Education Act (Northern Ireland) 1947.

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