

Wednesday 18 December 2019

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Department of Education
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Submitted by email: Eamonn.Broderick@education-ni.gov.uk

Dear Mr Broderick

RE: Knockloughrim and Newry proposed Plymouth Brethren voluntary grammar (Category B) school

We write to register our objection to Development Proposal No 631, the proposal to convert two existing private Plymouth Brethren affiliated schools into a single 11-18, voluntary grammar (Category B) school, within the state system.

By way of introduction, the National Secular Society works for the separation of religion and state and advocates for a secular and inclusive education system in which children of all faith backgrounds and none are educated together.

Our specific concerns about the above proposal, are:

1. Even by combining the two sites (Knockloughrim and Newry are 57 miles drive apart), the proposed school has only 20% of the minimum number of pupils required for sustainable operation, as recommended by the Northern Ireland Audit Office. These schools' attempt to enter the state system fails the most basic test of sustainability. They are simply not financially viable as private institutions and would not be as state schools
2. The proposal is clear that the aim of converting to a voluntary grammar would be to "Preserve and protect our children from anything that would be against the OSG ethos which is based on Christianity and adherence to the teachings of the Holy Bible". This 'principle of separation' is not a legitimate basis on which to commission a new state school. Like other religious minorities in Northern Ireland, Plymouth Brethren parents may not want to send their children to state faith schools where a Catholic or other Protestant ethos may be imposed against their convictions. But the solution is not to fragment the education system with more minority faith schools, but to redouble efforts to build an integrated schools system.
3. The school will hold virtually no attraction to families not of the faith as its "ethos will be faith based in accordance with the Plymouth Brethren religious community". This means that it will continue to be insular and unable to grow to a sustainable level even if the present sites allowed this.

An insular religious community with a history of serious safeguarding failures is not well placed to run a state school. We would urge the Department of Education to invest public money in education that serves the whole community.

I look forward to your response.

Yours sincerely,

Stephen Evans
Chief executive
National Secular Society