

To Headteachers of Schools and Colleges

18 August 2009

Dear Colleagues

I am pleased to write to you for the first time in my new role as Chairman of the Bishops' Conference Department of Catholic Education and Formation. Please do share this letter with your governors and staff.

The beginning of the academic year is a good time to thank all who are involved in Catholic Education in England and Wales, whether school staff, governors, diocesan officers or others, for their commitment and achievement. The Catholic community is rightly proud of its schools and colleges for their high standards, good results and the part which they play in the wider community.

Catholic Education today is challenged by the rapid social, economic and cultural changes within our society. But it would be wrong for us to think that this is an entirely new situation. In the nineteenth century when Cardinal Manning and the Bishops brought the Catholic Schools into the state system it was also a period of innovation and change in society. Two principles were established then, and they have been defended in one form or another since that time. These are that parents should have the right to send their child to a school of their choice in accordance with their conscience, and that a child attending a maintained Catholic school should be receiving free education, as do children at other types of maintained schools. Much that has followed over the last century and a half has been based on the Catholic community working towards a full expression of these two principles.

Our Catholic parents have appreciated that to ignore or marginalise the moral and religious dimensions of the individual would hinder their children's full education. That is why over the generations parish communities have supported and continue to contribute to the capital expense of Catholic Education at a very real financial cost. Whilst the Catholic community recognises the role of the State in helping the Church fulfil its commitment and obligations to young people, Catholics in England and Wales believe that the effort over the years to provide Catholic Education has been worth the sacrifice. Our schools put into practice what it means to be Catholic: a community centred on the person of Christ, forming its members in Christ and looking outwards to serve and enrich the wider community.

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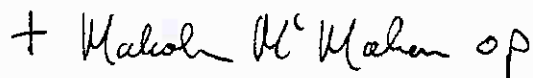
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The result of this experience is that the Catholic Church has many insights to offer the world of education. In a recent letter from the Vatican's Congregation for Education (attached) the point was well made that the religious dimension of the school contributes to the overall formation of the person and makes it possible for them to transform knowledge into wisdom of life. The individual is enabled to *'discover goodness and to grow in responsibility, to seek comparisons and to refine his or her critical sense, to draw from the gifts of the past to understand the present better and to be able to plan wisely for the future'*. These ideals are offered to all who are educated in Catholic schools and colleges. It is clear that such an education based on these principles offers a clear vision for the education of children and young people, and for their lives as future citizens.

Pope Benedict XVI reminds us that we are sustained in our work as educators by *'the certainty that the noble goals of education, founded on the unity of truth and in service of the person and the community become an especially powerful instrument of hope'*. Our modern society continually searches for meaning but in our schools and colleges we create islands of hope that give purpose and a future to our children and young people as well as to the wider community of which we are a part.

May these values sustain you in your continued work for Catholic Education in the year ahead. Thank you for all that you do.

With every good wish and blessing

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Malcolm McMahon" with a small flourish at the end.

Bishop Malcolm McMahon
Chair of the Bishops' Department of Catholic Education and Formation

Attachment: Letter from Congregation for Catholic Education (May 2009)