

**Briefing Note to the NKETS School Community regarding proposed school expansion
Monday 5th December 2011**

The Department of Education has recently written to the Executive Committee of NKETS in our capacity as School Patron, requesting that we expand our school to cater for an upsurge in demand in the Celbridge area. This briefing note sets out the rationale and key elements of the proposal, the key issues that have been identified by the Executive and the Board of Management, and the interim response that the Executive has given to the Department.

Rationale

The request comes in the context of unprecedented population growth in Ireland over the past 5 years, particularly in 2007 and 2008. As the children born in those years commence primary school in September 2012 and 2013, there will be a significant surge in demand for enrolment in junior infant classes. The Department estimates that at a national level, enrolments at primary level are expected to grow by 30,000 pupils between now and 2014, and by a total of 45,000 pupils between now and 2018. This translates into a need for over 20 new schools at primary level and a further 20 at second level between now and 2017. In addition to building new schools, the Department needs to increase capacity by undertaking major extensions or new buildings in 180 existing primary and second-level schools in developing areas.

The Department has analysed where this growth in demand will be concentrated. North Kildare is one of the areas with the greatest population growth over the past five years, and the Department has identified Celbridge as one of the most critical areas in the country in terms of growing demand for primary school places. Despite having already extended the capacity of a number of primary schools in Celbridge over recent years, there will be another major spike in demand in September 2012, when enrolment numbers will increase by an additional 159 students. A further increase is expected for September 2013, when the total increase in junior infant enrolments will amount to 251, with a projected total increase of up to 467 pupils at primary level by 2017. This equates to a requirement for 9 additional primary classrooms for September 2012, and up to 17 additional primary classrooms by 2017. The Department's figures are based on a new projection methodology using Child Benefit data, and are proving to have a high degree of reliability.

The Department has assessed the primary schools in Celbridge to identify how it can accommodate this increased demand in September 2012. NKETS clearly stands out as an obvious candidate for expansion. It is a single-stream co-educational school with a multi-denominational ethos, it has a site of sufficient size to allow for expansion, it has a building that was designed with future expansion in mind, and it is one of the few schools in Celbridge that has not had an expansion in recent years.

Key Elements of the Proposal

The central element of the Department's proposal is that NKETS expands up to 16 mainstream classes – thereby moving from a single-stream to a double-stream school. It is envisaged that the expansion would commence in September 2012 when the school would receive an intake of a second junior infants class. School enrolment numbers would then increase gradually year on year by one additional class each year.

The proposed extension would be built in a rapid timeframe, to be ready for September 2012. It would entail a building extension that would be complementary to the existing building, and would also include ancillary accommodation. Full details will be clarified in coming days following further engagement with the Department.

Current Position of the Executive

Since receiving the request, the Executive has been involved in intensive discussions with the Department, with our new Board of Management, and with Educate Together, to develop our position. There is a strong consensus within the Executive on a number of key points:

- The Department's request is based on credible facts – we are convinced by their assessment that there is going to be a spike in demand for primary school places in Celbridge starting in September 2012.
- An expansion of NKETS is fully in line with the ethos and purpose of the school, and in line with the Educate Together Charter. It would expand the availability of an Educate Together model of primary education to the local community, and would increase the diversity of the school population
- An expansion of NKETS would present exciting opportunities to further develop our school. It would also entail challenges that would need to be carefully managed. Any expansion should cater for the needs of the existing school community as well as responding to the needs of the local community in Celbridge
- While an expansion to two streams would be a significant increase to the school population, this increase would happen over a number of years, and even when completed NKETS would remain one of the smallest primary schools in Celbridge. The Executive is confident that the management, staff and parents of the school are capable of maintaining the existing atmosphere and intimacy within an expanded school.

In the tight timeline set down by the Department, we have indicated that the School Patron is positively disposed towards the proposal, but that we need to ensure that any expansion of the school is at a pace, scale and design that meets the needs of the current school community while also responding to the growing demand in the local community. We have advised the Department that we are not in a position to decide on the matter until we have consulted with the wider school community and until we have received clarification and assurances on a number of important issues. These issues include assurances about and engagement with the school on the nature of the proposed extension in terms of building quality and integration with the existing school building, the provision of ancillary accommodation and facilities, and the mitigation of additional financial burden on the school community.

A School Development Committee has been established to liaise with the Department. The Committee has representatives of the Executive and the Board of Management, and will be supported by Educate Together. If the project proceeds, the Executive would be pleased to hear from anyone with relevant skills or expertise who wishes to support the work of this group. The Executive is committed to making a decision on this proposal at an early stage, and has established a mechanism for members of the school community to make submissions on the proposal, with a closing deadline of Friday December 9th at 2.30 pm (see accompanying letter for details).