

Spiritans Education Trust

Minutes of the 193rd Board of Directors Meeting, 30th November 2020

This meeting was held via teleconference

Directors Attending

Mr. Gary Abrahamian
Mr. Rory Guinan
Mr. Pat Kitterick, Chair
Ms. Caroline Lundy

Ms. Emer O'Connor
Dr. Tom Whelan CSSp
Mr. Ronan White
Sr. Eithne Woulfe

Apologies Mr. Brendan Dillon

In Attendance

Mr. Ronan Barry, Faith & Mission Officer
Mr. Tom Jackson, Company Secretary, Finance Officer
Ms. Sheila Lanney, Administration Officer (Recording Secretary)
Mr. Tom Sheridan, Executive Officer

1. Prayer

2. Preliminaries

- (a) Apologies received – Brendan Dillon.
- (b) Conflicts of Interest to be declared – none.

3. Minutes of Previous Meeting

- (a) 192nd Ordinary Meeting of 02 November 2020.
Item 6(i) was clarified to read: *'In relation to the Junior schools, the need to progress the range of current issues was emphasised and in that context the Chair advised the BOD of his letter to the Provincial Leader/Chair of Members citing outstanding matters of concern, including the Junior Schools'*. The minutes, duly amended, were agreed for signing when the BOD next meets in person.
- (b) Matter arising (not included in this Agenda) – none.

4. Reports

(a) Finance

Directors and Officers Insurance: The significant increase in premium (€2,300) was noted.

St. Michael's College:

- The BOM has sought approval for a bridging bank loan (€5m repayable over 5/6 years) to facilitate progress with the Development Plan (for which BoD approval in principle has been granted previously). It was noted that this would be a matter for the Congregation (which had granted negative pledges previously). The Executive would communicate its position to the school, reiterating its general approval for the Development Plan and would continue with its own due diligence of the project as it progressed.

- The Board acknowledged BOM concern – replicated in other schools - at a direct approach to the school from the Congregation for financial support of Spirasi. It was noted that, while the value and centrality of such projects to Spiritan mission at home and abroad was fully appreciated, this was not a matter for SET approval per se but was a Congregational matter. However, the BoD noted that it raised important questions relating to our schools' charitable status generally and associated regulatory/legal issues and schools' existing financial commitments to the Congregation. The BoD requested that the Finance Manager prepare a briefing note on the matter in advance of any advice to schools.

Rockwell College:

- It was noted that the school's financial/budgetary position and proposal re girls' boarding were the subject of ongoing discussion with the BOM (see also Executive Report below).

(b) Ethos

Pursuant to BoD approval of 2 November 2020, Mr Shay Claffey was co-opted to the committee. The need for gender balance was highlighted for attention. The BoD was briefed on following (see Appendix 1):

- Research proposal:
 - The BoD fully approved the sub-committee's strategy for consultant-led research on a pathway to support the integration of expressed Spiritan values in the operation of our schools.
- Development of the ethos lens:
 - The proposed strategy was approved. The sub-committee would engage with Chair to advance the process and BoD training would be considered.

(c) Education

The Education Sub-committee noted as follows:

- *Child Protection:* To enhance schools' policy and practice in this area, information from the DES Inspectorate on its evaluation of this aspect of their obligations & compliance should be communicated to our schools. The option of commissioning an independent evaluation was mooted.
- *Annual School Reports:* A review of the template by Spring 2021 is deemed necessary to facilitate further the gathering of important school data.
- *Covid:* It would be important for SET in the current pandemic environment to communicate our support for their trojan efforts to Principals and Deputy Principals and to thank them for their exceptional work over the year.

5. Executive Report – specific matters for updating & discussion

The Executive Report was noted. Discussion took place on the following matters:

(a) Templeogue College development and related matters

TS reported on the current position (See Appendix 1), emphasising in particular the clear commitment of the Congregation to the further development of the Spiritan education mission into the specific area of SEN provision through the use of current resources, the potential to close the gap between aspiration and reality in relation to the seven core values of Spiritan ethos which give expression to the characteristic spirit and mission of Spiritan schools and, finally, the enthusiasm of the DES to engage with SET.

The Board expressed its own positive response to, and approval of SET involvement in the project, while also raising many practical issues that may arise as the project develops and progresses e.g. types of provision, patronage/trusteeship of any new school(s), the attitude of schools impacted, the need for appropriate oversight of the project.

It was agreed that the Chair and Executive would pursue the matter with PLT. Given potential sensitivities involved, the need for BoD confidentiality was stressed.

(b) Rockwell College update re governance and finance

The Board noted the Executive's report (see Appendix 3) on continuing engagement with the school authorities on governance and financial issues and possible outcomes. It was noted that

- auditors RBK had raised significant issues, and that a meeting with the BoM's finance committee was imminent
- in spite of BOM concerns, Rockwell's website was advertising onsite boarding and that the CBOM had asked for its removal
- the Executive had well-founded confidence in the capacity of the newly appointed CBOM to manage these matters effectively.

6. Any Other Business as may properly arise: None

7. Next Meeting

The next BOD meeting is scheduled for Monday 21st December 2020 by Zoom.

Chairperson: _____ Date: _____

Secretary: _____ Date: _____

Appendix 1

Report of Ethos Sub-Committee to the Board of Directors

30 November 2020

SET research proposal

The proposal as it was presented to the BoD included the following: *to explore research (possible doctoral research) on seeking a pathway to support the integration of expressed values in the schools' operation. This research might offer SET an opportunity to develop conversations and create a process with 'stakeholders' (Schools, BoM, Senior School management teams, Congregation etc..) on strategic directions that the BOD sees as priorities within the school network.*

A wide-ranging discussion on this proposal took place. It was suggested that a doctoral research may not give us the best possible methodology for the development of this research. In the discussion it was suggested to seek a consultant to carry out this important research. An example of a similar piece of work that was carried out by the Spiritan province was the 'Mission Audit' in 2014. This was carried out by Peter McEvoy, a managerial consultant, on behalf of the PLT.

Conclusions

- It was agreed that this process had two stages.
- The first phase is a facilitated phase. The aim of this phase is to identify and consult with all stakeholders regarding their understanding of values in relation to the lived experience of the educational mission and present a report on this facilitation.
- Phase two maybe a research/action paper that would look at closing the gap between the aspired values and the lived realities within the educational mission.
- It was agreed to update the board of directors at the next meeting and seek further approval to continue on this path.

Ethos Question/lens

A comprehensive discussion took place around the function of an ethos question within the BoD meetings. The discussion included engagement around the 'Visitation report' (2016). In this report several questions were asked about the role of the province and its responsibility for the education mission in our schools. One of the clear questions that the Visitation report asked was, how were the schools being at the service of a wider population of people including those who are most in need? The intention behind asking this question is to further the Spiritan mission in our schools.

Conclusions

- At particular times of the year, it is important to ask and ethical questions in relation to the meeting's agenda. E.g. strategic meetings, capital projects, financial decisions, annual budgets etc....
- In preparation for these 'strategic' meetings, a member of the ethos subcommittee would discuss with the Chair of the BoD, how best to include the 'ethos question' within the decision-making process.
- This process would ensure that we prepare flexible questioning rather than 'one size fits all' question.
- The hope is that this process regarding 'ethos question' would be seamless and not ad hoc.
- It was also proposed to the PLT about furthering the training for members of the board of directors on the area of Spiritan ethos.

Appendix 2

Templeogue College development project

1. In terms of educational infrastructure, Templeogue College is undoubtedly the “poor relation” of schools under the sole trusteeship of SET. There is now an urgent need to refurbish or replace the present structure, costing c. E10-15m. It sits on a c. 16-acre site (>4 times requirements).
2. The BoM’s challenge is to identify an alternative source of income to finance the infrastructural needs in whole or in part e.g., dispose of some schedule 1 property for housing? PPU? Parent body?
3. It is highly unlikely that DES would subsidise the proposed school renovation. However, DES has challenges sourcing sites in South Dublin for Primary & Special Schools and ASD units.
4. Following several initial SET conversations with DES/Building Unit, both parties have proposed further engagement for mutual benefit and to further explore what options might emerge. Most recently (23 Nov.), the parties recognised the potential to solve both the needs of DES in terms of Special Ed. Facilities and the needs of Templeogue College in terms of the school building.
5. Prior to the 23 Nov. meeting, the attitude of the Members/PLT to such an initiative was sought. Understandably, no commitments could be given but there was agreement that exploratory talks to consider possibilities would be helpful. It was agreed that there might even be potential to utilise other sites to support special education. Subsequently, the Members have reached out strongly to SET more formally to explore the development of a substantive proposal (see next).
6. The PLT/Members recognise & understand the above context and are equally aware of the charism-focused challenge of the 2018 General Council visitation report around the potential use of substantial Provincial resources for the benefit of ‘a larger number...particularly of a poorer population’ as possible expression of Spiritan Mission in Ireland. Their vision is wide-ranging and expands even beyond the Templeogue solution. The challenge to SET will be to act as animateur for their thinking.
7. Perhaps the most important outcome of such a proposed joint venture is the opportunity that SET’s involvement in Special Education gives us to actively engage with the educational needs of the most vulnerable young people in our society, to make real key aspects of Spiritan education mission in Ireland and, in addition, create a meaningful access programme in our own schools.

Next steps:

- The DES has requested that we submit a report by Friday the 4th of December which would point to those areas where we see potential for a joint initiative. They then wish to schedule a formal meeting for before Christmas.
- For this initiative to move from informal consideration to formal engagement with stakeholders it may be worthwhile to establish a joint working-committee with representatives of the BoD and the Spiritan Congregation.
- The stakeholders/interests in this project – Congregation/PLT, SET/Members, BoM/Campus Development Sub-Committee, P&FO, DES - must be kept informed in timely and appropriate manner.

Appendix 3

Rockwell College

1. For some time, there have been significant concerns expressed about Rockwell College's financial sustainability and general school management.
2. It was in the above context that when the BoM was due for renewal in 2018 the decision was made to find a Chair, experienced in school leadership who would ensure the highest standards of management in the school. The incoming Chair was appraised of the concerns but brought a professional, objective perspective to the task.
3. The new Chair addressed many areas of poor practice in relation to Child Safeguarding, student discipline, teacher contracts, posts of responsibility and misrepresentations to the DES. She also stated that she found the Principal to be untrustworthy at times.
4. Because of the above concerns a disciplinary action was taken against the Principal and the BoM found no cause for dismissal but recommended training/mentoring. The Chair resigned.

Where are we today?

1. Following the resignation of the Chair and another board member, new board appointments were made. A third board member has since resigned.
2. We have not as yet approved Rockwell strategic plans and have asked the BoM to reconsider on-site girls boarding this year. The current Chair is strongly in agreement with our position.
3. At a recent meeting of the BoM attended by the E.O. the decision was taken to proceed with the proposed boarding facility. However, the Chair has ensured that no letter confirming that decision has yet issued to SET. It may be that after the forthcoming meeting between RBK and the BoM at which serious concerns will be expressed about the financial viability of this project, the Board may change its position.

Possible Outcomes.

1. The BoM agrees to postpone the boarding facility which will significantly reduce the financial exposure of the school. The board is in its final year and SET will ensure that the new board has individual members who will support the Chair in the reforming work started by the previous Chair.
2. The BoM does not agree to postpone the boarding facility. SET then DIRECTS the board to postpone the boarding facility. This will likely lead to further resignations from the board which allows us to appoint members who will support the reforming work that must continue. The boarding initiative is the Principal's project, and its postponement may prompt the principal to consider her position.
3. The option of disbanding the board is a very serious one to even consider. The reputational damage to the school would be enormous and the employment of a unitary manager is only a temporary solution. There may be a better prospect of ensuring good school leadership in Rockwell by maintaining a strong, informed board who will hold the Principal to close account. There may also be potential to engage the recently appointed Deputy Principal in a more pivotal role in the management of the school.