

Children do much less well in areas of social deprivation. It is important to have more young people from working class areas reaching grammar school and university. Only 1.8% of the male student population in Northern Ireland is from a Protestant working class background, but it is a process of academic selection that gives these young people the best opportunity of succeeding.

On the day the Northern Ireland Assembly was suspended, Martin McGuinness moved quickly to abolish the 11+ without providing any alternative system for post primary transfer. Government propose to replace academic selection with a system that would allow the better-off to send their children to modern vibrant schools while the underprivileged are denied the same opportunity.

The Minister should set aside ideological rhetoric and work with politicians and the education sector to deliver a system that commands support right across the community. Costello clearly fails to meet these criteria and should be abandoned.

Despite 35 years of civil unrest, our pupils, in both grammar and secondary schools have consistently out-performed their counterparts in Great Britain at GCSE and A Level. In 2002, 58.7% of Northern Ireland's pupils obtained 5+ A* - C grades at GCSE compared to 52.5% for pupils in England and Wales, while fewer of our pupils left without any qualifications. The pattern is similar at A-level, with Northern Ireland's pupils out-performing their peers in England and Wales by a considerable margin.

The results published recently for PISA 2003- an international assessment of 15 year olds- suggest Northern Ireland has one of the best-performing education systems in the world. The average score across all OECD countries in each subject area was around 500 points. In Northern Ireland, the average scores were 515 in mathematics, 517 in reading and 524 in science.

We whole-heartedly support the development of properly accredited vocational courses. It is important that society, and especially the world of work, recognises vocational qualifications as valid and valuable. We must alter the mindset that only academic qualifications have any real status.

In order to ensure a fair system of Transfer at 11, the choice of pathways must be equally attractive and valued. Pupils with academic interests and abilities must have the opportunity to pursue these at a grammar school, whilst those with different talents and interests, who are no less valued, must be able to secure a place in a school that will cater for these.

Society must be encouraged to afford all post-primary schools equal status. This cannot be just bestowed, but must be earned by their performance, and the resourcing and attitude of Government towards all schools.

The current system of post-primary education in Northern Ireland, for all its faults, still sends a significantly higher number of pupils from working class and disadvantaged backgrounds to higher education. Queen's University Belfast and the University of Ulster have been particularly successful in this regard compared to other UK universities.

The Sunday Times Parent Power survey late last year placed 25 Northern Ireland schools in the top 200 UK secondary schools.

This was a fantastic achievement given our comparatively small population. Such success will not be maintained by destroying academically-oriented schools.

It should be the Northern Ireland Assembly representing the people of Northern Ireland that decides on academic selection, so current Government proposals should be put on hold. We recognise there is still plenty of room for improvement but compromising what is best about our system is no way to proceed.

We want a system that allows all children to reach their full potential.

Rural Schools

Rural schools can represent the heart of small communities and must be retained where possible. Imaginative ideas could include:

- Sharing head teacher around number of local schools to reduce overheads
- Greater use of peripatetic teachers to ensure delivery of curriculum
- Widening usage of school to make it more of a community facility
- Sharing premises with other agencies to deliver range of services

Early Years Provision

- Support pre-school place for every child to allow development of social skills
- Strict literacy and numeracy targets should be set with success of schools in meeting them published
- Too often facilities are poor, young children are taught alongside others much older, and little emphasis on skills development
- Inspections should identify reasons why schools fail to meet targets- corrective action including additional support, teacher training or replacement must follow
- Parents should be encouraged to become involved in any problem-solving measures and assisted to enrol in courses where applicable

Funding of Education and Library Boards

- Highlighted our concerns over proposed education cuts affecting local Education and Library Boards
- Recognise difficulties Boards will experience in living within Budgets in future especially with expanding special needs provision
- Realise control of spending by some of Boards could have been better in recent years
- Will continue fight to maintain frontline services, and vigorously pursuing issues of school meals, crossing patrols, safety on school transport and special education needs



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PROMOTING EDUCATIONAL EXCELLENCE



Education matters have generated much debate in the province over recent years. Our educational achievement has always been one of the province's key selling points. Undoubtedly the issue which has most exercised people in Northern Ireland is the means for deciding which school children will attend after leaving primary school.

Students should be placed in the school that best suits their needs on the basis of ability rather than by postcode or ability to pay. Almost two-thirds of people living in Northern Ireland want academic selection including teachers, parents and a majority of politicians. They value an education system where the doors of grammar schools are open to everyone, not just the rich, or only those whose parents were educated at grammar schools. Overall 64% want academic selection including 62% of teachers.

Despite excellent exam results in the province there are undoubtedly areas for improvement. We need to enhance the qualifications of those not so academically gifted. We must retain what is best about our education system while reforming what is outdated and ineffective.

The system requires reform, not abandoning.

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PROMOTING EDUCATIONAL EXCELLENCE

NEW TRANSFER TEST

- Readily accept expectation among many parents that 11+ should be replaced
- Amended 11 + should be introduced in interim until replacement agreed and necessary associated training completed
- Remove science topics since lack of facilities and shortage of trained teachers place some pupils at disadvantage- science still taught like history, geography and other curriculum subjects but not part of test
- Result should be based on the best scores rather than mean so off-day can be accounted for
- Favour better differentiation of marks within the grade system- spread of scores between current A and D grade very narrow
- Results available to schools and parents- essential to ensure system transparent
- In longer term, transfer procedure could have:
 - (i) small continuous assessment element over years 5-7
 - (ii) series of internally marked standardised tests- to ensure uniformity there would be external marking checks
 - (iii) tests in Maths and English arising from Key Stage 2 curriculum
- These changes would address some of concerns of parents and teachers concerning high pressure nature of test, fairness of marking system and complexity of test content.

VALUE FOR MONEY

Efficiency could be improved by reducing:

- Current number of Education and Library Boards
- Number of education providers. The DUP advocates a single education provider rather than the current seven. Is there really any need for a separate provider of integrated education when many controlled and voluntary grammar schools are more integrated than some of those controlled by NICIE?
- Percentage of schools' budget held by Boards for centrally provided services, many of which could be devolved
- Number of special initiatives which require more administrators at Department or Board level and are usually short-lived leaving schools to find funding to continue initiative- 'threshold payments' to reward good teachers cost nearly £1m to administer
- Dealing with backlog of capital works will require injection of hundreds of millions of pounds of private money through PFI schemes- land exchanges should be considered where appropriate



COMMON FUNDING FORMULA

- Despite Education Minister, Barry Gardiner's protestations, proposed Common Funding Formula is unfair and discriminatory
- CFF first proposed by Martin McGuinness but rejected by Assembly Committee
- DUP welcome any move towards equity of funding between schools so all children have equal opportunities but Department's Equality Impact Assessment indicates Catholic-maintained and integrated schools will gain nearly £1 million to detriment of controlled sector, and every child in integrated school will have extra £26 more spent on them each year
- Priority appears delivery of social rather than educational objective
- Minister should desist from introducing financial system that does not have confidence of schools across Northern Ireland. If however he ploughs ahead, TSN money should not be increased before Department demonstrates it improves school performance. Even in such circumstances, it should be allocated evenly per capita based on eligibility for free meals rather than uptake
- All long-term funding should be curriculum based, and financial benefits given to small Irish medium schools should also be provided to small rural schools

ALL SCHOOLS OF EQUAL STATUS

- Change mindset that schools providing academic education are superior to those with other specialisms- there are good and bad grammar schools just as there are good and bad secondary schools
- Raise standards in all schools and ensure all are equally valued for the different roles they perform- requires change in societal view as well as educational action
- Schools should be afforded equal resources
- Should be sufficient flexibility in curriculum to ensure basic standards of numeracy and literacy while at same time reflecting different interests and abilities of children
- Should be more flexibility for pupils to move from one school to another if discovered original choices have been inappropriate.
- Co-operation between schools can break down perceptions about different status of schools and may also make better use of resources
- Careers education, co-operation with industry and input from private sector can give greater recognition to schools and young people who choose to specialise in practical skills, retail operations, motor vehicle repair and maintenance or construction
- Government target of 50% of young people in Higher Education reinforces perception that only academic education valuable

RAISING SCHOOL PERFORMANCE

- Reinstate performance tables- no objective information for parents to compare one school with another
- Head teachers who demonstrate achievement should be rewarded to encourage them to stay in post; failing head teachers must be replaced
- Regular school inspections with reports compiled in accessible form for parents
- Teachers not consistently performing to required standards should be offered re-training; if this measure proves unsuccessful they should be replaced

LEGACY OF MCGUINNESS

When the UUP agreed to partner Sinn Fein in Government, Martin McGuinness was handed control of children's education and the two-time IRA Chief of Staff had a field day:

- Sought to introduce comprehensive education, and on last day in charge threw whole education system into disarray by announcing end of 11+ examination without providing alternative
- Changed rules to permit Irish language schools to open and be fully funded even if only have 12 pupils enrolled- meanwhile controlled schools with six times as many pupils closed against parents' wishes.
- Set targets to increase number of children in integrated schools by 10% and Irish language schools by 5%
- Consistently funded schools in manner that disadvantaged those that cater for predominantly Protestant children
- School performance tables abolished at behest of teachers unions but against the wishes of schools and parents



UNIVERSITY FEES

- Variable top-up fees may act as deterrent to potential university students from disadvantaged backgrounds - both Queen's University and University of Ulster have worked hard to be open to all
- Their maximum of approximately £3,000 per year at introduction will inevitably rise
- As result of having only two universities, students in Northern Ireland already face higher qualification entry barriers- we do not wish to see further disincentives
- Government should review suggested repayment threshold- graduates paying back loans before attain benefit of university education
- Students could opt for cheaper courses regardless of the value they add to their education simply as a route into university- science, engineering and professions such as law and medicine will be more expensive

EQUALITY OF PROVISION

- Capital spending directed to schools in greatest disrepair, not upon section of population they serve or type of education provided
- Millions of pounds available to schools under Targeting Social Need should not be allocated on basis of free school meals, given reluctance of many parents to claim them
- Additional money allocated to targeting social need must be monitored to ensure used for education assistance rather than improving buildings or buying mini buses etc
- Preference for pre-school places to children from families in receipt of Income Support is unfair especially to those in low paid employment who cannot afford to place children into day care- discourages many lone parents from seeking work and encourages dependency culture

