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CONSULTATION ON THE EDUCATION (NORTHERN IRELAND) BILL

Response by Democratic Unionist Party

The Democratic Unionist Party remains opposed to the reckless and undemocratic destruction of the current post primary education system in Northern Ireland, which provides children a variety of schools to choose from and places them in a school on the basis of their aptitude and educational ability. Government plans would institute a one-size-fits-all comprehensive school system which has so spectacularly failed children in other parts of the United Kingdom, and which is now being replaced in England and Wales with specialist schools, each with their own emphasis.

We believe that this Order of Council is utterly inappropriate and that an issue as important as this should be left to locally elected politicians. If Government decide to press ahead with this legislation, despite the huge groundswell of opposition to it in Northern Ireland, the changes will be irrevocable.

This latest round of “consultation” on the proposals for new admissions arrangements for post primary schools is only necessary because successive Education Ministers have studiously and gratuitously ignored the views expressed by the citizens of Northern Ireland. The public have consistently demonstrated their support for a system of post primary education which offers a variety of provision and selects pupils for appropriate schools on the basis of their educational needs and academic ability.

Pupils from Northern Ireland at GCSE and A-Level consistently outperform their GB counterparts, and schools from Northern Ireland rank among the best in the UK. However, despite excellent exam results in the province there are undoubtedly areas for improvement. We have highlighted this issue and the need to enhance the qualifications of those not so academically gifted, particularly children in areas of social deprivation. It is important to have more young people from working class areas reaching grammar school and university. It is through a process of academic selection acting as a leveller, however, that gives these young people the best and most fair opportunity of succeeding. The post primary education system in Northern Ireland must be reformed and improved upon, not destroyed and abandoned.

Costello and Burns both set out plans for post-primary arrangements in Northern Ireland based on the false premise that comprehensive education would bring about social equality. Neither report used the term ‘*comprehensive*’ but instead sought to disguise it with terms like “*collegiate*” and “*collaborative arrangements*”.

Since both reports demanded the end of academic selection, requiring every school to have an all-ability intake, there can be no doubt that comprehensive education is the end goal, despite Costello's claim that "*grammar schools will remain*".

The old argument for comprehensive education was that it would create a more equal society, where class difference would gradually disappear as children from all classes mixed together in their local school. The reality of course was very different. The catchment areas for the comprehensive schools were usually determined by geographic proximity to the school. This favoured the middle classes who could afford to live in the better residential areas or who had the freedom to move house to get into the catchment area of a '*good*' school. Inevitably, the former grammar schools were oversubscribed.

The current selection system in Northern Ireland at least allows children from all classes to secure a grammar school place if they are academically suited for that type of schooling. We know reform is needed, but it should build on the strengths of the system, not replace it with a failed alternative.

ENTITLEMENT CRITERIA

Of the four criterion categories outlined in the proposals, three are based on locality, confirming the view of this Party and tens of thousands of those opposed to this scheme that the outcome of these proposals will be all-ability neighbourhood comprehensive schools.

The document states that the menu from which a school can choose its criteria "*will put the interests of the child at the centre of decision making*". How does a crude geographically based factor dressed up in the language of "*community based criteria*" or "*tie breaker*" possibly take into consideration what is in a child's educational interests? None of these options even mention the educational needs of the child.

We believe that schools should be permitted to set their own criteria which would at least permit them to maintain their ethos.

The menu will drive parents to choose their nearest school on the basis that if they choose one further away they may not meet the geographical based criteria, and then may find that the school closest to them is filled up, leaving them at the mercy of a system that could then impose an even worse option.

One thing is clear. If these proposals go ahead the problem of oversubscribed schools will become worse, not better, and the criteria outlined will take on even greater significance. These proposals will create more dissatisfaction about the move to post primary education than the 11+ examination ever did. They will also hurt academically able children from working class backgrounds.

SUBJECTS

We see no reason for schools to be forced to offer a minimum of 24 courses at GCSE, or 27 at A Level, and there is no logic offered by the Department. Since no single

institution could currently offer this variety, schools, colleges and Further Education Institutes would be forced into collaboration.

This will undoubtedly force smaller schools, especially in rural areas, to close. Rural children will be furthest from the catchment areas of perceived 'good' schools and will end up in large comprehensives that will develop in towns. Grammar schools will disappear and the professional classes will choose not to reside in rural areas, seeking instead to live close to perceived 'good' schools, as evidenced on the mainland.

This will be a particular problem not only in rural areas, but also in areas around Belfast. An example is the constituency of Strangford, where there are a high proportion of children who travel to schools in Belfast because of the shortage of schools in their area. Under the proposed changes these children will lose out on going to the school of their choice as admittance will be based on geographical proximity to a school and they will be deemed as living too far away.

These 'collaboratives' are not practical. The introduction of collaborative arrangements will cause many problems in itself. Pupils having to move between schools and the time taken to do this are inconvenient and will result in either longer school days or reduced teaching time. How are children to be safely transported from one campus to another? What about supervision? What extra costs will be incurred? The Government have stridently avoided mentioning the financial implications of split site schooling, teacher retraining and travel expenses.

We also have a concern that as these new courses and subjects must be available, that some other subjects such as the languages may no longer be offered. If this was the case language teachers may be made redundant or be forced to teach subjects that they are not familiar with. After-school activities including sports will also be affected. This is the case in other European countries such as France, and increasingly becoming a problem in Great Britain.

Teachers will no longer be teaching what they consider their own pupils, and therefore a level of accountability will be lost. Boards of Governors will not have as much, if any, influence left.

We whole-heartedly support the development of properly accredited vocational courses. It is important that society, and especially the world of work, recognise vocational qualifications as valid and valuable. We must break into the cycle of society believing that only academic qualifications have any status.

Academically focused schools do not exist under Government's proposed admissions criteria. It is ironic that specialist schools can exist to provide courses in sports science, drama and the performing arts, technology and computing but not in 'academic' subjects.

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 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 them.

DISCIPLINE

Disciplinary matters should be a matter for individual schools. We do not support allowing other education bodies to decide on the expulsion or suspension of unruly pupils. This takes away from the authority and autonomy of individual schools and would not be helpful.

COMPARISONS WITH GB

Government reasons for these radical changes are based on false data and spin. The Minister speaks of the long tail of underachievement among disadvantaged children, but totally ignores the fact that her Department's own statistics indicate that they outperform their GB counterparts. The figures used by the Minister are blatantly misleading and without credibility.

For example, the claims of the Minister that our pupils trail behind GB on the average points statistic is grossly misleading. While employers, universities, pupils and parents regard GCSE grades A*-C as pass grades, the point system outlined in the Costello Report awards points to grades lower than C. This meant a pupil with 5 C grades at GCSE would have a lower point score than someone who had obtained 5 D grades and 2 E grades.

Moreover, it has been publicly acknowledged by failing comprehensives in England that they have abandoned GCSEs in favour of BTEC qualifications in order to achieve better results, a practice not widespread in Northern Ireland.

Recently the results have been published for PISA 2003- an international assessment of 15 year olds students. They 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. In reading, mathematics and science only two OECD countries did significantly better than Northern Ireland.

CONCLUSION

We believe that these proposals are among the most important and far reaching changes to education in Northern Ireland's history. If the Government press ahead with these changes, against the clear wishes of parents, teachers and politicians, they will destroy a world class education system. The Government know that the reckless abolition of academic selection was a cowardly act by a rogue Minister, and would never have been accepted by the Education Committee or Assembly as a whole.

Education is the foundation of a child's life, and each and every child should be accorded the opportunity to receive an education that is suited to their own academic

needs and requirements. Lumping all children together in a mixed-ability class will not and cannot achieve this.

We believe that these changes will be damaging to education in Northern Ireland. Before any proposals are put into legislation there needs to be far greater consensus than currently exists. Rather than endless rounds of public consultation, which is continually ignored anyhow, there should be meaningful involvement of all stakeholders to determine an agreed way forward for the transfer process and post primary education structures.