

Response To The Report Of The Post-Primary Review Body: "Education For The 21st Century"



INTRODUCTION

1. The SDLP is pleased to have this opportunity to comment on the Review Body's Report and to offer Mr Burns and his colleagues our congratulations on the production of a major piece of work which has made a substantial contribution to the debate on our education system.
2. As set out in our submission to the Review team, the party views the education system as a cornerstone of society. It is a fundamental human right as well as a key driver of the economy and a central requirement for personal development. An effective and well-resourced education system must be an essential component of any strategy to create genuine equality of opportunity.
3. As set out in some detail below, the party welcomes many aspects of the report and is pleased to note that significant elements of the report reflect points made in the SDLP submission to the body in February 2001. The overall tone of the report is very much to be welcomed:
 - the principles and objectives it identifies;
 - its assessment that the current system is "inflexible, fragmented, wasteful of resources and makes it difficult to ensure equality of opportunity";
and, in particular;
 - the recommendation to end academic selection.
4. The party does, however, have reservations about certain proposals, particularly in relation to the more practical aspects of realising the vision set out.
5. This response will consider primarily the three main recommendations of the Report, beginning with the recommendation to end academic selection, whilst retaining distinct pathways from age eleven. It will then address the proposal to create a pupil profile and finally address the issue of Collegiates.

6. For ease of reference, it is worth re-stating that the SDLP argued in its submission to the Review, in February 2001, that the following principles should guide the foundation of the new education system:

- excellence in the standard of education available to all;
- equality of opportunity;
- parity of esteem for all educational pathways;
- structures to encourage the development of the full potential of all students;
- parental and student choice - the involvement of individuals in decisions that affect them;
- flexibility: students should not have their life-choices restricted before it is necessary to do so; secondly, flexibility is required to cater for different rates of development;
- social inclusion: access to all levels of education should be open to all irrespective of social background;
- equity of funding for all schools, taking account of the imperative of targeting social need.

It is in the light of these core principles that the SDLP has considered the recommendations for change.

THE END OF THE TRANSFER EXAMINATION & RETENTION OF SEGREGATION AT ELEVEN

Abolition of academic selection

7. The SDLP warmly welcomes the recommendation to abolish academic selection. This would be a very positive step in equality terms through the elimination of a test which has the effect of disadvantaging children from less affluent backgrounds.

Of course, there will be tremendous benefits also in human terms in the reduction of damage to self-esteem and in educational terms, as the primary curriculum regains the balance currently lost in years 6 and 7.

Retention of distinct pathways from age eleven

8. The recommendations of the report point towards retention of distinct types of schools, some tending towards more 'academic' work and others tending towards more 'vocational' study. The SDLP has consistently opposed the idea of categorising children in this way at age eleven, even if it isn't intended to be fixed or final. We have not seen adequate evidence of any benefit in making significant choices or beginning to restrict or direct children's education at age eleven. Obviously the recommendations in relation to the Curriculum, both in this Report and in the Curriculum Review, will affect the significance of segregation at Key Stage 3. Nevertheless, we remain of the view that children should transfer automatically to an all-ability post-primary school at age eleven.

Equality of Opportunity, Parity of Esteem & Social Inclusion.

9. Clearly, the proposals to move towards *choosing* a pathway at 11 and to broaden choice post-14, should contribute to improving equality of opportunity and parity of esteem for all types of learning. If educational pathway is based on choice, and if a quality educational route is available to all, then this can help overcome the feelings of failure endured by so many young people today. However, we believe it will be difficult to achieve these goals fully while retaining distinct pathways from age eleven. Flexibility in pathways and the facility to study subjects from a variety of subject-groups, would be central in reinforcing parity of esteem. This would further be consistent with the move away from classifying learning in rigidly 'academic' or 'vocational' terms.
10. The SDLP would still prefer to see all post-primary schools change the description of their school from grammar/secondary/high school to "College", even if different Colleges offer different sets of curricular options as proposed. This term is currently used by some schools within each sector.
11. Other influential factors are, of course, beyond the control of the education system, such as, for example, the overall disparity in incomes in the working world.
12. The SDLP strenuously opposes selection by social background, which is, in our view, a proven result of the existing transfer examination. Thus, the transfer tests have contributed to a situation where many school populations battle with artificially high levels of social, economic and educational disadvantage, with inevitable consequential problems for the ethos and achievements of the school.

In our view, it is in the interests of society as a whole, that school populations should contain a balanced social mix.

13. We remain concerned about the adequacy of attempts to tackle social need in education. The findings of the Adult Literacy Survey, showed that one in four of our adult population perform at the lowest levels of literacy; this appalling statistic must have serious implications for our education system. Significant resources must be effectively targeted to give greater support to those at risk of leaving school with few or no qualifications. Clearly this requires small class sizes, individual attention and greater resources for schools providing for such students.
14. Children in need of particular support must be identified at an early age and well in advance of key decisions their lives, to avoid outcomes pre-determined by social circumstances and to guarantee real choice through equality of opportunity. We have concerns that despite all good intentions, the Burns proposals would result in children dividing into groups that coincide with social and economic background rather than individual preference and potential. The evidence in relation to European education systems appears to support this, where academic school populations are predominantly made up of children from better-off backgrounds. We understand that the Report places significant reliance on the Collegiate structure as a means of avoiding this, since pathways should remain open and flexible, but we remain unsure that this can be delivered, particularly given the legacy of our selective system.

Selection Criteria

15. As set out above, the SDLP welcomes the end of academic selection. While we would prefer to see an all-ability education system, we have examined the proposed selection criteria in the Report and would make the following comments. We welcome, in principle, the proposal to set common entrance criteria for all schools rather than allowing local variation, on the basis that this would provide a more equitable basis on which to proceed.
16. We welcome the recommendation to introduce informed choice as the primary selection criterion. Clearly, however, many schools will, particularly in the initial stages, remain over-subscribed.

17. The second criterion is also to be welcomed in facilitating families in keeping their children at one school. (However, the oldest sibling rule should, of course, permit access for the eldest child of a particular sex, where an older sibling of a different sex was attending a single-sex school.)
18. We have serious reservations about the “special circumstances” criterion and would wish to see further proposals on the detail of any definitions, before endorsing it as a criterion. Plainly, this would be wide open to abuse if not explicitly defined.
19. The proximity criterion, would, on the one hand, be consistent with our desire to see children transfer automatically to their local all-ability school. However, under the Burns proposals to retain distinct pathways, we see merit in the notion of a lottery to allocate places in over-subscribed schools. This would address concerns about “selection by postcode” such that communities living furthest from existing Grammar Schools would be disadvantaged.

CURRICULAR ISSUES

Effect on the primary school curriculum

20. As set out in the SDLP submission to the Burns Review, the end of selection will, of course, bring significant educational benefits in terms of teaching years 6 and 7. At present, teachers feel compelled to “teach to the test”, skewing time towards the subjects and skills examined, and yet have tremendous anxiety about neglecting the other important aspects of the curriculum, so essential to balanced development.
21. The importance of education at primary level is gaining increasing recognition and the end of selection can allow this to be reflected in a more suitable approach to curriculum planning, and the maintenance of an atmosphere in the classroom that is more conducive to developing a love of learning.

Key Stage 3 (Age 11-14) Curriculum Proposals

22. Clearly, the curriculum at Key Stage 3 must be examined in more detail as the Curriculum Review proceeds. However, the SDLP welcomes proposals to retain a core curriculum for 11-14 year olds, with added flexibility. This constitutes a

welcome acknowledgement of shared needs of all children at such an early stage in their development and is consistent with the SDLP belief that age 11 is much too early to begin to skew a child's education towards particular career paths.

23. For example, the SDLP would support the notion of a 'statement of entitlement' (put forward by CCEA in April 2002) to ensure provision of a wide range of options for all children, at all schools. We believe that from age 14 onwards, children should be *entitled* to choose from a range of 'academic' and 'vocational' subjects, even if they fail to secure a place at their school of choice at age 11. This increase in subject options, combined with greater inter-school co-operation, should help to address the concerns of parents who feel strongly that their child is suited to a particular type of education. Further, it is consistent with the principles outlined earlier, in terms of maintaining options and choices for as long as possible, and should mitigate some of the negative consequences the SDLP would see, in retaining distinct educational pathways from age 11.

THE PUPIL PROFILE

24. The SDLP welcomes in principle, the creation of a pupil profile. Clearly, if we are to increase parity of esteem for all types of learning, a pupil profile could play an important part. As an ongoing record of the full range of a student's achievements, it should encourage pupils and parents to take pride in the progress made across many areas of learning and development.
25. The profile would, moreover, assist decision-making throughout a child's educational career and would be entirely in keeping with the growing appreciation of the different types of skills and intelligences to be valued and encouraged amongst our children as they prepare for adult life and the working world.
26. We further welcome the fact that the profile will not be forwarded to post-primary schools until after pupils have commenced at their new schools. This is eminently sensible, given that the child's academic achievements are irrelevant to the school in terms of entrance criteria.

27. However, the Burns Review contains fairly scant information about the pupil profile in terms of content and preparation, particularly in terms of the relationship between the new profile and existing or proposed assessments. Questions remain in terms of the linkage with existing report mechanisms and methods of generating and maintaining public confidence in the profiles. Consistency and objectivity will obviously be critical factors.
28. We have particular concerns about the administrative burden on teachers and would stress that teachers must have appropriate training, resources and support throughout and beyond the period of change envisaged. The process must also be managed effectively to ensure that timetables allocate teachers the hours required to perform their role satisfactorily.
29. Concerns have been raised that attempts might be made to reintroduce the issue of academic achievement under the proposed selection criterion of "special circumstances". The SDLP would oppose this and will work to ensure that strict guidelines prohibit such a move.
30. In our view, the profile should not be presented as something that *defines* the child, but rather a living document that *describes* his or her development and achievements to date. We would not, therefore, wish to see the pupil profile allocated an overall grade as this would run counter to the spirit of the initiative, in terms of encouraging the broad consideration of a student's abilities and accomplishments. The absence of an overall grade may reduce the potential for pressure to be applied to teachers and principals to award higher grades to justify the 'choice' of academic route.
31. If the vision set out in Burns is to be achieved, it will be vital also, that at the point of transfer, parents and children can be reassured of the variety of options that will remain open: opportunities to choose a combination of courses or change pathways entirely.

COLLEGIATES

32. The SDLP supports, *in principle*, the notion of collaborative networks of schools working together to extend choice and equality of opportunity;

- the SDLP proposed in its submission that groups of schools should work together to agree provision in a given area;
- we acknowledge that no school can provide students with all of the choices necessary in the modern world;
- we support the notion of co-operation rather than competition to ensure efficient use of resources and provide the maximum range of options;
- we further welcome the idea of encouraging students to identify with the group of schools in their area, rather than just their particular school.
- In order to facilitate this, we would recommend that each co-operative network operate under a single Management Board.

33. However, we have serious concerns about the practical issues involved in establishing the Collegiates: the costs and administrative arrangements for setting up Collegiates are unclear and would be difficult to agree. It is, for example, unclear which school would 'own' the child for the purposes of the per capita funding allocation. We have concerns about the size of the proposed Collegiates, particularly in rural areas, and we are not persuaded of the need for a new tier of bureaucracy of the type suggested.

34. Greater co-operation could of course enhance flexibility in student learning and career pathways, which would be particularly welcome. This should allow students to combine elements from 'academic' and 'vocational' courses and to move more freely between pathways so that career options are kept open as long as possible and personal development encouraged.

35. While we acknowledge the effort to address in these recommendations, the needs of smaller schools, further consideration is required in terms of transport and time-tabling issues. Virtual learning and peripatetic teaching could of course help to address such difficulties, but significant resources and training would be required for the former.

36. We endorse the view that Further and Higher Education Colleges must be involved in a more collaborative approach to post-primary education. Further Education Colleges in particular, cater for 20% of the 16-19 year old population. As a society, we cannot afford the inefficient use of resources resulting from

current competition and overlap. Moreover, increased co-operation can contribute to enhancing parity of esteem between all learning pathways.

37. Special schools should also be included in co-operative networks, in line with social inclusion, choice and development towards teaching children together as far as possible, and also, in terms of efficient use of resources.
38. We welcome proposals to increase contact between schools and local employers; this will complement measures to improve Careers Guidance for students as well providing an important connection between educators and those relying on the skills taught, to make their businesses successful. Schools are of course a community resource and increased community involvement can deliver benefits to both schools and the community they serve.
39. **Consistency of provision and standards:** we have argued that schools should work together to agree provision in a given area, but are cautious about how this might operate in practice; we would not wish to see vastly different arrangements developing across the North. However, it is extremely important that arrangements have the support of the community.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

40. The SDLP is continuing its campaign for a well-resourced education system that enables each child to develop his or her full potential, consistent with the child's human right to high quality education and the principle of parity of esteem for all learning pathways.
41. **End of academic selection welcome**
- Having campaigned since the 1970s, for the end of academic selection, we are pleased to endorse this recommendation and trust that, in tandem with other strategies, it will help to create greater equality of opportunity.
42. **SDLP remains committed to all-ability education rather than dual pathways**
- The SDLP has campaigned for all-ability education, rather than the retention of distinct pathways from age 11. We have not been persuaded of any benefit in segregating children at such an early stage and would therefore wish to see all

children transferring at age 11, to a local all-ability college in the sector of choice.

43. Concerns re: Equality of Opportunity, Parity of Esteem & Social Inclusion - Mitigating Factors

Nevertheless, we have closely examined the proposal to retain two pathways in post-primary education. We are not convinced that such a system can deliver equality of opportunity, parity of esteem and social inclusion. We would strenuously oppose the creation of a system that would entrench the current tendency for children's educational pathways to coincide closely with their social background, such that the populations of the more academic schools tend to be predominantly from more affluent families.

a) However, we warmly *welcome the recommendation to prioritise Choice* as the primary entrance criterion. Clearly this could go some way to addressing the concerns above, if supported by *effective strategies to target social need*, through well-resourced early years and primary education.

b) Moreover, we believe that from age 14 *onwards every child should be entitled to choose from a range of academic and vocational subjects, whichever school they attend.*

c) Parity of esteem can be further enhanced *through all post-primary schools being designated "Colleges"*, a term currently used by schools within each sector.

44. Examination of lottery system proposed, for allocation of tie-break places instead of "proximity criterion"

If the Burns proposals are accepted, then for over-subscribed schools we believe that a lottery system should be examined as a potential mechanism for resolving a 'tie-break'. This would be fairer for rural communities and others living some distance from an existing Grammar School.

45. Concerns about Pupil Profile, although endorsed in principle

We endorse the suggestion to develop a pupil profile, as a broad record of development and achievement that will be of use to students and parents

throughout a child's education. However, there is little detail in the Report in terms of content and procedure for development. We would not wish to see the profile made available to post-primary schools until after allocation of places. We have further **concerns about the administrative burden that could be imposed on teachers** in this respect.

46. **Opposition to Collegiate Structures**

The *SDLP called for enhanced co-operation between schools*, in the interests of extending choice and making best use of resources. We acknowledge that no single school can offer the range of options required in the modern world and we wish to see students afforded the opportunity to move between academic and vocational pathways.

However, we do not support the Collegiate structure as proposed. We believe it would be costly, unwieldy and difficult to agree.

Rather, we suggest that this proposal be modified such that *local networks* would be established and would operate under a single management board. These should be constructed in a way that *accommodates the particular ethos of existing schools* and respects the role and responsibilities of Trustees.

We would wish to see *Further Education Colleges* and *Special Schools* participate in arrangements for enhanced co-operation and endorse suggestions to bring *employers* into closer contact with schools. Schools are a local resource and should be closely linked to the communities they serve.

47. The SDLP believes the *status quo is not an option*; our education system must be radically overhauled to deliver a modern system that can enable all children to develop their full potential. Despite our reservations, we believe this Report has taken us a significant step towards the achievement of that goal.

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