

Secondary Heads Association

Response to the Post Primary Review

Guiding Principles

SHANI agrees with the Guiding principles as set out in the report. It points out that:-

- The principles are already embedded in the current system;
- They underpin any effective system of education;
- There is no evidence that they would be bettered delivered under the proposed new system.

The Association's detailed views are set out in Appendix 1.

Abolition of Transfer Tests

SHANI believes that the current transfer test should be abolished, but not until it can be replaced by a suitable form of academic selection which has been carefully designed, properly trialled and successfully piloted.

Abolition of Academic Selection

SHANI does not believe that academic selection should be abolished. It is essential that pupils with academic ability are not penalised in any future arrangements. Research evidence clearly illustrates that an all ability system results in an overall lowering of academic standards to the detriment of all pupils and especially of the more able.

The Association's detailed views are set out in Appendix 2.

Age of Transfer

There are many well documented advantages to transfer at 11+ and any change would require a major reorganisation of existing infrastructure for which funding is not available.

Admissions Criteria

The criteria suggested by Burns, which take no account of academic selection, will lead to the introduction of a comprehensive system with selection by either postcode or lottery, and loss of parental choice.

Refer to the paper presented by Laura Lundy set out in Appendix 3.

Pupil Profiles

SHANI believes that the Pupils Profiles should be developed, if they can be used by the receiving school to ensure that pupils are placed according to ability and aptitude. Such a profile should be built up over several years and based on standardised materials to ensure that the information provided is objective, consistent and uniform.

Creation of Collegiates.

SHANI is firmly opposed to the statutory creation of a collegiate structure. Its detailed views are set out in Appendix 4.

Implications for Higher Education and the Economy.

- The implications of the report for Higher Education and the Economy are not clear at this stage, but it is the considered opinion of this professional body that current standards will **not** be maintained if the report is implemented.

Practical Implications

- The current infra structure
- Funding
- Parental reaction when raised expectations are not met
- Implications for rural communities
- Unrealistic time scales.

Proposed modifications

- The development of a pupil profile, gathered over P5-P7, and containing objective information on each pupil's abilities and achievements.
- The use of this pupil profile by the receiving school to ensure that pupils are placed according to ability and aptitude.
- The need to have in place a post primary curriculum which offers real choice and flexibility for all our pupils before any change in structures.
- Real choice for parents and pupils by creating a system of vocational / technical and academic pathways, which will enjoy parity of esteem.
- An appropriate time scale to plan and implement change,

Appendix 1

A response to the proposed model for ‘an education system which has as its focus the needs of young people’ [p75 5.7]

The Report cites 12 guiding Principles which should influence and be at the heart of policy and practice at all levels of the system. This response focuses on the Principles. It questions some of the Report’s assumptions and rejects the contention that the proposals do not represent a charter for comprehensive schools.

There are valid criticisms of the current transfer system; many who are unhappy with the Report are already promoting change, in the interests of all our young people; being in disagreement with the Report does not translate as support of the status quo, nor does it mean being opposed to the aspirational content and tone of the Report.

The 12 Principles are considered in the context of the kind of system and schools which will follow the abolition of academic selection and the imposition of a further layer of bureaucracy, in the shape of collegiates, nominally ‘co-operative networks’ of schools still in competition for pupils.

The most important point to be made is that the abolition of academic selection, *inter alia*, creates comprehensive schools. This may be disputed by the Report writers, but they have not refuted it, nor can any amount of sophistry about hypothetical collegiates, as part of an untested system, remove the conviction that the proposals will produce schools that are comprehensive in all but name. There is a serious lack of detail in the Report about the outworking of the proposals and a major underestimation of the funding levels they would require. There can be no disguising the fact that, should the Report be implemented, its proposals will inevitably turn our schools into comprehensives.

What has to be questioned is: will all-ability intake schools create the system which will achieve the Report’s vision and objectives and match the 12 guiding Principles?

1 Each young person should be valued equally

The experience of comprehensive schools in England and Wales shows that they do not confer equal value on children, nor have they created a climate in which young people are clearly valued as individuals. The experience has been to the contrary: using comprehensive schools as an instrument to achieve a notion of social justice has seriously disadvantaged the very children who were supposed to benefit. Furthermore, the growth of independent schools has deepened the inequality. Why then risk a comprehensive system because of the political prejudices of a vocal and influential minority or because of an understandable dislike of current transfer arrangements? Dismemberment, rather than sensible adaptation of the current system, with its many strengths, is unwise, especially since all-ability schools elsewhere on these islands have not matched this principle nor have they matched the achievements of our current system.

2 *All young people should be enabled to develop their talents to the full and to realise their creative potential, including accepting responsibility for their own lives and making a positive contribution to society*

The present system, which we accept is not perfect, provides the very opportunities which Burns demands, ie, a broad and balanced curriculum and opportunities to develop and enhance individual abilities and creative skills. The introduction of 'one size fits all' schools will disable schools' abilities to tailor education to meet the needs of individuals. What is required is greater diversity, not less, fewer restrictions and diminished bureaucracy, whereas the sum total of the Report is more of all of the above.

3 *Young people should be encouraged to develop a love of learning*

The Report falls into an old trap: overestimating the potency of schools to bring about highly desirable social changes. The fact is, schools, particularly post primary schools, cannot compensate for the shortcomings of other social institutions, including the family and politics or even religion. If these powerful institutions have been unable to effect the changes, why should it be assumed that schools will be able to do so? And, if the changes do not occur, is it the schools' fault? This is not to deny the beneficial role which good schools have on the young people who attend them, but rather to accept that schools are not particularly effective agencies for social change nor indeed for maintaining the status quo.

4 *The education system should provide for the development of all aspects of the individual, including the intellectual, spiritual, moral, cultural, social, physical, emotional and creative*

The Report highlights the importance of extra curricular activities, ie, provision beyond the formal curriculum, as a way of fostering this principle. It is interesting to identify the current centres for excellence in extra curricular provision. With a few notable exceptions amongst the non-selective schools, it is the grammar sector which has established this as a strength across the spectrum of activities. This is despite less favourable funding arrangements, especially for the controlled grammars. Abolition of selection would, on past experience, have a seriously negative impact on extra curricular provision.

5 *The promotion and demonstration of a culture of tolerance, reconciliation and respect for diversity of culture should be a seminal purpose of education.*

This almost goes without saying in the context of the performance of the schools of this province. It is difficult to see what impact the Report will have. The argument that 'an inclusive education system' will make it more likely is speculative to say the least, and, once again seriously overestimates the role of education as an agent of social change. A limited choice of schools is offered, viz: denominational, integrated etc, the right of parents to opt for a controlled school, or a co-educational or single sex school is denied. So much for respecting diversity!

6 *Education should have regard to the changing needs of society and the economy*

It is recognised that Northern Ireland needs a better qualified work force, yet Northern Ireland already has a higher proportion going on to Higher Education than elsewhere in the UK. For a number of years the general level of qualifications has been rising amongst young people. Our schools out-perform Great Britain's schools and the quality of our schools and work force already attract industry to this region. It is hard to see how a comprehensive system can contribute to achieving this principle, especially when the Great Britain experience is considered. The promotion of a range of school types and parity of esteem, as well as the empowerment of schools to tailor their provision to the needs of their young people, would seem infinitely more beneficial.

7 *There should be recognition of and support for the key role of teachers in the delivery of a high quality education system*

This principle applies to any system. However, changes of the nature and the scale which the Report proposes will have a seriously negative effect on all post primary schools, not just on grammar schools, and will probably lead to the closure of a number of schools. The diversion of the time and energy of Principals, away from the schools they have been appointed to lead, to service the bureaucracy of the Collegiates, is difficult to reconcile with supporting teachers.

8 *Each young person should be equipped with the values and skills needed for working and living in the 21st century*

The argument here is undeniable, although there will certainly be some discussion about the 'values and skills'. 'Love of learning' is one such value, and it is rightly promoted as such by the Report, however, the overwhelming experience of Great Britain comprehensives is that the schools of a non-selective system are a most unlikely foundation on which to build.

9 *There should be parity of esteem for vocational and academic educational opportunities*

It is essential for the economic and political well being of Northern Ireland that the truth of this statement should be translated into day to day reality, but the key to that does not lie in schools. The task is to educate the public, especially employers, and to dispel old myths about vocational education. Steps already taken, such as a common grading system for academic and vocational qualifications and the stance of HEIs are very important, but the mass media and advertising will change attitudes more quickly.

- 10** *Lifelong opportunities and choices for learning should be available to all*
- 11** *There should be equality of opportunity, access and excellence for all*
- 12** *The curriculum and assessment arrangements should take account of research on learning abilities*

These three principles are accepted. But it has to be stated that the inference of the Report is that these principles are:

- (a) absent from the present system
- (b) promoted by the proposals

The fact is, the current system has many strengths, not all of which are acknowledged by the Report and not all of which are actually recognised by our schools, especially those which are currently non-selective. It is a gross over-simplification to call the present system 'exclusive', given its better performance than the rest of Great Britain; it is equally unwise to suppose that a comprehensive system will necessarily create the conditions in which any or all of these principles will be more readily achieved than is currently the case.

Appendix 2 **Selection**

Some form of selection will be inevitable. Selection is part of many aspects of life and the important thing is that any selection processes must be 'fair' and 'fit for purpose'. A selection process based on 'post-code', as proposed by the Report will not deliver the promised utopia.

Although the admissions arrangements are only one aspect of the report, they are the most important. The final system of education will be determined primarily by the admissions arrangements and these need careful examination. It should be noted that currently self-selection takes place whereby pupils with a lower or no grade generally do not apply to oversubscribed Grammar schools. Therefore schools that are currently oversubscribed are likely to be even more so with the removal of academic selection.

Selection Criteria

1. Parental Preference

- Used in the past and failed – only worked if you were successful in obtaining a place at your first preference school.
- Banned by the courts because
 - a) reality failed expectation; if you didn't get your first choice you were very unlikely to get your second or third and the pupil was invariably placed in a school that others didn't want to go to.
 - b) based on parents guessing; parents did not put down the school they wanted but the one they thought their child would be most likely to obtain a place in.
- Banned from all post primary since 1997, not just a Grammar school criterion.

Parental preference as a criterion can only work where all schools are held in equal esteem by parents. The Report while analysing the Scottish System comments '15. The present system has evolved over a period of some thirty years and there remains a legacy of different school types. The more "popular" schools tend to be those which were formerly selective senior high schools while the former junior high schools are under-subscribed.'

Burns Appendix H4

There is no evidence to suggest any other than this would happen in NI if the Report's proposals were implemented.

2. Siblings or eldest eligible

Seems fair as it is not disadvantaging the eldest although in reality nearly all applicants, except in the first few years, will meet this criterion and therefore it will be superfluous.

3 Children of staff

Negligible effect on admissions.

4 Compelling Individual Circumstances

By definition everyone has 'individual circumstances' and the decision as to whether they are 'compelling' will be decided after appeals, tribunals and then judicial reviews.

5 Proximity to school

- Currently used by many for last few places
- Since Burn's criteria do not discriminate this will be decided for the majority, if not all, of pupils applying to oversubscribed schools.

The outcomes of the application of the proposed criteria will be

- effectively the introduction of Comprehensive Education as pupils will be most likely to gain a place in their nearest post-primary school. The Report rejects comprehensive education.
- discrimination against those applicants at distance from perceived good schools e.g. country areas or commuter areas
- population shift as is clearly documented in England and has started already
- discrimination against those who cannot afford to move into catchment area

The Burns report contradicts itself in proposing proximity to school as a criterion and then stating that:

'when geography is used as the final criterion for admission purposes, comprehensive school systems can display a relatively high level of social differentiation, particularly in cities. In practice this can mean that socially advantaged parents are likely to live in areas served by the highest status schools and are better placed to take advantage of any flexibility in their admissions arrangements.'

Burns report §7.20

Selection should match a pupils' talents with a given school. Therefore we recommend:

- Dispense with Transfer tests
- Use a portfolio of information based on existing good practice in PS beginning with end of KS1 tests (P4)
- Include skills, aptitudes and abilities
- All post primaries use the profiles
- Pupils receive an education best suited to their needs
- Abolishes labelling of pupils as D
- Maintains the ethos of all our schools

Appendix 3

**Laura Lundy - Senior Law Lecturer, Queens University Belfast
Speaker at NIHR Seminar 9 April 2002.**

Human rights and the existing system of selection

There is no doubt that the system we have raises a series of human rights concerns. These have already been identified in professor Dickson's introduction and I will not repeat them, except to say I agree with these points. In the review body's report there was a focus on the guiding principles, which they say informed their thinking. These include references to equality of opportunity, the development of the whole child, reconciliation and respect for diversity. The guiding principles could have been lifted directly from international human rights covenants. It is unfortunate, however, that nothing more specific on human rights than that was stated. However it is important to have these principles. It is interesting that, even the report's fiercest critics have made it clear that they agree with the guiding principles. Part of the problem of some human rights statements is that they can be seen as a bit woolly as guiding principles. However where they really come into their own is as standards by which to measure concrete proposals.

Translating principle into practice - ensuring equality of access

I wish to focus on the human rights and equality implications of the proposals for new admissions arrangements. Although the admissions arrangements are only a small part of the report, it has been one of the most controversial aspects of the proposals. I think rightly so, since how children gain entry to schools is crucial to the success of any system. From a human rights perspective the fundamental aspect is to ensure equality of opportunity through admissions arrangements. I will discuss the proposed admissions criteria in turn.

- **Parental preference**

On the face of it, this is about delivering parental choice. If that was the case, then it would be in line with international human rights standards, which repeatedly talk about parents having a right to have their children educated in accordance with their wishes.

There is a problem, however, with this criterion, as it actually works against parents. It was prohibited in the past as a criterion, for this very reason. It forces parents into a game of poker where they must get their first choice right. If they don't, they fall to the bottom of every other school's list. This means that a sensible/informed parent will go for the safe bet. In this case, and I'll come back to this, it probably means applying to the school closest to the family home. That is simply not a way of delivering on parental choice.

- **Siblings/eldest child**

My own view is that this type of criterion is largely justifiable, if it is confined to siblings attending the school. The only concern is perhaps in the interim period where the children it would keep out are those who have an elder brother or sister who didn't attend the school. In many cases this will be because that sibling didn't do well enough in the transfer test. It would take a generation for this problem to work itself out, but it might be a price worth paying.

- **Children of staff**

This criterion has been subject to some criticism as it is seen as nepotistic. However as long as it includes all staff, not just teachers, there are no equality implications. As it affects so few children and those working in schools have so few perks, it is probably justifiable.

- **Compelling individual circumstances**

It is important to have the discretion to use this criterion as it allows individual exceptions to be made. However at the minute many secondary schools will not use criteria such as these, as it requires them to give priority to children who are usually suffering some sort of disadvantage. On the other hand, grammar schools are required by law to consider special circumstances. There is a view that this is a loophole that can be manipulated by educated or affluent parents. If it is to be included, it should be very well regulated and decisions made by a central body rather than putting schools themselves in the unenviable position of having to decide these claims.

- **Proximity to school**

The way this is worded in the Review's report is confusing. It states proximity to a pupil's home as a factor, but also says that the nearest suitable school is what matters. These are simply not the same things. The first would be about straight proximity, measured in a radius. The second would take account of the geographical realities and would be much fairer. For instance, it would work in a more equitable manner for those from rural communities. The problem with the second formulation is that it wouldn't be enough in itself. There could be a situation where a school has 100 places and 200 children apply, all of whom can argue that it is the nearest suitable school. It needs a distinguisher to make it work. The implication in the report is that it would be proximity to a child's home.

Overall the criteria do point to oversubscribed schools having to prioritise children who live closest to school. Critics are saying that it would be selection by postcode. Obviously this is not the case in all schools/all areas, but it would probably be a factor in enough schools to make it unacceptable. The essential problem is that the model proposed leaves the distribution of children between schools to market forces and that is a recipe for a different form of social segregation and inequality. It does not have the attraction of an objective test of academic ability.

Suggestions

I thought I would throw out a few ideas on admissions criteria. My own view is that these options and others need to be explored in a systematic way by the Department, those with the expertise to judge their overall implication. I would suggest the following:

i) Catchment areas – These should be managed, planned and be defined in such way as to ensure social mix. It could mean keeping “the nearest suitable school” criterion, followed by a lottery. This would be better than what is being proposed at present.

ii) The existing system could be turned on its head and priority given to the socially disadvantaged in admissions procedures. It would be a form of what already happens in our nursery schools. If a school was oversubscribed the first children in would be those whose parents are on designated benefits. It would not apply to a huge number of children, but it would be a way of counteracting disadvantage.

iii) Another idea was suggested in the *Independent* newspaper last week. Professor Brighthouse published a report on ensuring equality without academic selection. He suggested that children from disadvantaged backgrounds need to be made more attractive to schools. He proposed that there should be a voucher system, in which children from socially disadvantaged backgrounds would be given vouchers worth considerably more than other children.

These are only some ideas and I am not in a position to judge if they would work or not. They are all based on the assumption that there will be no selection on ability. I do want to make the point that selection on ability and conformity with human rights are not necessarily mutually incompatible. For instance, Lagan College has a system whereby the school selects a third of their intake as a way of ensuring a genuine all-ability schools.

Academic selection is not completely against international human rights standards but it is much harder to meet those standards, with an academic selection system and certainly it cannot be done within our system as it stands.

Appendix 4

The Collegiate Structure

The creation of a local collaborative network of schools in a system of collegiates can certainly be described as the most extraordinarily sweeping proposal of the Burns Proposals.

The structure of each collegiate is unwieldy and the functions go well beyond what is possible given the suggestion of one full time co-ordinator and supporting administrative staff.

The Board of Principals is charged with both the operation of the collegiate on a day to day basis and oversight of the implementation of collegiate plans.

The Collegiate Liaison Council is intended to act as a sounding board of advice and expertise on the nature and range of curricular pathways in schools. It is recommended that it should have statutory recognition. In practice this would mean that the Liaison Council would have statutory authority to overrule the Board of Principals on curricular matters. This is entirely unacceptable.

The Standing Conference is charged with the key task of preparing and adopting the annual strategic plan based on collegiate objectives and targets. Representatives from the Governors of each school in the collegiate are to be included. This is the only reference to the role of Governors in the new structures. **School Trustees are not mentioned at all.** This would suggest that Governors' role is becoming peripheral and Trustees have none at all. Again, this is entirely unacceptable.

The functions of the collegiate are manifold. The suggestion in the report that there would need to be some transfer of responsibilities from Education and Library Boards in terms of curricular development and staff development begs the question as to the future of the Boards. It also begs the question as to how each Principal is meant to lead and manage his/her own school while simultaneously managing the day to day operation of the collegiate.

The benefits and opportunities of the collegiate structure cited in the report are certainly not arguments in favour of a collegiate.

The unworkable dimensions of such structure can be summarised thus:

- a wholesale reorganisation of secondary education which has not been tested, piloted, costed or thought given to the practicalities of managing the structure;
- the geography of each collegiate is unwieldy; it will not be possible for schools to retain their distinctive ethos and identity;
- complex additional layers of unnecessary bureaucracy at a time when we are trying to reduce the bureaucratic burden on schools;
- ambiguity of roles vis a vis, Board of Principals, Liaison Council, Board of Governors;

- responsibilities of Principals will lead to a significant change in Terms and Conditions of Service and the crucial issue of who is responsible for leading and managing individual schools;
- mobility - freedom of pupils and teachers to travel between schools within the collegiate would have practical implications for time, cost, travel, standardised timetabling, change in Terms and Conditions of teachers;
- there are particular issues for rural schools as the traditional pattern of transfer is affected. Catchments are not aligned with collegiates. The rich mix of pupils from a wide variety of areas will be destroyed with certain primary school children having no option because of transport;
- the structure actively encourages a system of operating by postcode which disadvantages the rural pupil as well as the socially/economically disadvantaged;
- the suggestion that schools will move from LMS to a 'culture of co-operation, interdependence and mutual respect' is not rooted in the reality of human nature.

The Burns' proposals place much of the hopes for success of 'the vision' on the establishment of collegiates. It is clear that in practical terms such a structure is unworkable. While the concepts of co-operation and collaboration are commonly agreed the imposition of a statutory structure is not.

For change to be successful it should:

- be evolutionary;
- not increase bureaucracy;
- have practical details worked out in advance of implementation;
- be piloted and costed including consideration of long term funding of the scheme;
- have a sensible time scale;
- not proceed in haste.

The future of Northern Ireland is dependent on the education of our young people. A successful system should not be dismantled until it can be replaced with one which is clearly going to be more effective.