



Sinn Féin

Response to  
DE Consultation  
on  
'Education in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century'  
(the Burns Report)

# The 11 Plus, the Burns Report and Post-Primary Education

## The Sinn Féin response

June 2002

### Introduction:

1. Sinn Féin welcomes this second opportunity to comment on our post-primary education system. We congratulate the Independent Review Body for their wide consultation and their detailed report. 'Education for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century' (the Burns Report) has rightly focused the debate on the impact of academic selection on the educational experience and attainment of our children. Sinn Féin endorses fully the report's recommendation that academic selection of pupils into post-primary schools should end.

### The core educational values:

2. Sinn Féin believes that our education system should:

- Provide all children with **equal** opportunities to develop at their own pace and avail of the greatest possible **breadth** of curriculum choices
- Promote quality teaching and learning in **all** schools - in particular pupils of differing age, academic ability and social background will benefit from **sharing** the same learning environment, as will their teachers
- Recognise the full **diversity** of children's needs and talents - every child has special needs, and every school must endeavour to provide that space where a child's differing and **changing** needs can be met
- Be **inclusive** of all partners in the education system – parents, teachers and students, other interested parties, local communities and society as a whole.

3. Consistent with these, Sinn Féin calls on the education system to promote Learning Neighbourhoods, that is, local partnerships between local education providers and the community they serve. These partnerships should aim to include pupils, parents, adult learners, schools and other education providers in one area and make learning the keystone in developing communities and addressing disadvantage at the earliest possible stage. We develop the idea of Learning Neighbourhoods in more details in paragraph 43 page 9.

## The Burns proposals – Summary of Sinn Féin’s response:

### **Proposal**

"the abolition of the Eleven-Plus Transfer Tests and the end of academic selection as pupils move from primary to post-primary school,..."

"... and its replacement by a procedure which gives priority to parental choice"

"the development of a Pupil Profile to provide information to parents, pupils and teachers on a wide range of attributes and achievement of children as they progress through their education..."

"the creation of local collaborative networks of schools in a system of Collegiates."

### **Response**

**Sinn Féin agrees that the Transfer Test should be abolished, and that it should not be replaced by an alternative method of academic selection, in other words, that academic selection should end.**

**Sinn Féin contends that children and their parents must be able to exercise their choice regarding the religious, cultural or linguistic characteristics of a school.**

**Once academic selection ends, given a common curriculum and a substantial increase in the level of funding targeted at social need, no criterion other than catchment area should be used. Open enrolment must end.**

**Sinn Féin supports the use of Profiles as a means of summative and formative evaluation of pupils’ progress, and rejects their use as a means of selection or election in the context of unequal schools.**

**Sinn Féin rejects the Collegiates as proposed. The selective, elitist ‘ethos’ of the grammar school system must not be preserved. Sinn Féin supports the concept of neighbourhood comprehensive schools in partnership with the community they serve. We call for the setting up of Learning Neighbourhoods, as learning partnerships based in a particular area and including all education providers from early years to post primary, the local FHE providers, parents, community groups, and with the participation of relevant bodies (e.g. health and social services, Libraries...).**

This position is consistent with Sinn Féin's initial submission to the Post-Primary Review Body. We will develop some arguments for our response in the next section.

## **Comprehensive schools in partnership with the community**

### **Sinn Féin's preferred model:**

4. At post primary level, Sinn Féin favours comprehensive schools in partnership with their feeder primary schools and the nearest FHE and Third Level facilities, with strong links to the parents and the community they serve. We believe that at its best, the comprehensive school is the most able to deliver a broad and balanced education for a wide range of talents and all levels of abilities.
5. There are a number of schools in the North which operate on this model, and in many cases the quality of education they provide has led to a decrease in the take-up of the Transfer Test in local primaries, and a simple transfer of children from their primary school to the nearby all-ability post primary school.

### **Critique of the Burns Report's rejection of the comprehensive model**

6. The Burns report objects to comprehensive schools on a number of ground which Sinn Féin believes are ill-founded. Comprehensives might lead to "a high level of social differentiation", it contends. There is abundant evidence that this is the case for the current selective system. In a non-selective system of equally endowed schools, where families send their children to the local post-primary school, social differentiation may occur occasionally in some urban areas, and must be compensated appropriately through TSN measures. In the vast majority of areas, schools are likely to have a mix of socio-economic backgrounds. This mix can be further enhanced by a careful choice of catchment areas for each post-primary school, taking account also of the various management types (controlled, maintained, integrated, Irish-medium) which parents will want to choose from. In any case, research has shown that a mix of abilities has more impact on educational outcomes than a mix of socio-economic backgrounds.
7. The Burns Report also warns of the dangers of comprehensive schools trying to maximise academic results at the expense of a broader curriculum in order to compete for pupils. This will always be the case in an Open Enrolment situation where schools depend on holding on to and gaining pupils (at the expense of other schools) in order to maintain or increase their budget allocation. Sinn Féin is fundamentally opposed to the Open enrolment system. This attempts to transform education into a quasi-market where schools compete for pupils in the same way as business competes for customers. Wherever this has been tried, it has never led to an all-round raising of educational achievements but on the contrary to the emergence of a two-tier school system and a widening of the gap between low and high achievers.
8. The Burns Report notes that a comprehensive system would require school amalgamations. This is a red herring: demographic trends will lead to school amalgamations. Demographic trends will also lead to a 'comprehensivisation' of many grammar schools increasingly obliged take on pupils with grades C and D in their Transfer Tests, and even pupils with no Transfer Tests, in order to retain their numbers and their funding allocation.
9. Burns also contends that such a system would not value children equally and develop them to the full. Burns offers no evidence for this. There is of course much evidence to the contrary, from the several excellent post-primary schools in the North that operate on comprehensive lines, to the non-selective and successful school systems in the Twenty-Six Counties and Scotland, to the extremely successful and non-selective systems in Sweden and Finland, to name but a few. There are of course many very good comprehensive schools in England, the achievements of which have been drowned by the Conservative-inspired 'bog standard' slogan.

10. Finally Burns makes a number of points regarding the fate of “higher ability pupils” in comprehensive systems. Again these are purely speculative, and recent research points to the contrary. Some examples of such research are listed in paragraph 22 pages 5-6.

### **A Curriculum for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century? – comments about the ‘Guiding Principles’:**

11. There is a high degree of agreement between the Guiding Principles listed in the Burns report (pages 73-77) and those values listed in section 2 above. Sinn Féin believes the public education system has a democratic and humanistic mission which must be reflected in equal valuing, inclusion, strategies to compensate for disadvantage, and the promotion of a culture of learning.
12. However we note the implicit tension between some principles expressed in the report, such as:
  - on one hand, allowing young people to “develop their talents to the full”, and developing “all aspects of the individual”,
  - and on the other, asking that “education should have regard for the changing needs of society and the economy”, and should equip young people with “the values and skills needed for working and living in the 21<sup>st</sup> century”.
13. The former suggests a broad and varied curriculum, the latter a more utilitarian one. The latter also implies that we can predict with any degree of certainty the type of curriculum, skills and values which will be needed when a typical 11 year old of today enters the workforce, at least 5 years, possibly 10 years or more down the line.
14. Finally the principle that there should be “equal regard for vocational and academic educational opportunities” implies some elective or selective system at age 14 between “particular educational or career pathways”. However the report fails to consult about this model. This is possibly due to the fact that the review of the curriculum by CCEA is still ongoing. Sinn Féin deplores the lack of explicit cross-referencing between the two reviews. We believe that the consultation is lacking because of this, and the outcome may be less coherent.
15. Sinn Féin has welcomed many of the CCEA proposals and expressed some concerns. We believe that some of the proposals stem from a failure of the selective system in fostering high expectations from certain groups of young people, particularly among the more disadvantaged. We contend that this points to insufficient investment in early interventions and insufficient resources targeted at social needs, more so than some inadequacy of the curriculum to the “changing needs of society and the economy”.
16. In order to facilitate pupils in availing from a broad and balanced curriculum up to Key Stage 4, Sinn Féin supports the view expressed by many educationalists that the Key Stage 4 curriculum should be modular, and allow for progression within subjects and combination of modules across areas of study. Progression through the curriculum could continue in this way at post-16 and through later stages, and enable learners to combine basic modules in a particular subject, used as ‘tasters’, with more advanced modules in other subjects which they wish, or need, to study to greater depth. We will expand on these points in our response to CCEA’s curriculum proposals later this year.

## **Arguments for change:**

The arguments below have been grouped to respond to the proposals in the Burns report. However they are all linked and must be seen as a whole.

### **End academic selection.**

17. The research team led by Tony Gallagher and Alan Smyth have shown that the Transfer Test is flawed. In addition, they have shown the Test's negative impact on the Primary curriculum, particularly in P6 and P7. Pupils and parents have commented on the stress caused by the Transfer Test, and the loss of self-esteem in many of the children who fail to gain places in grammar schools – sometimes lasting into adulthood. One of the consequences of this early blow to pupils' self-belief is a long tail of educational underachievement: the self-fulfilling prophecy of the Transfer Test.
18. Academic selection at 11 creates a two-tier education system at post-primary level. It channels children into schools with unequal social status, and discriminates against disadvantaged children. The socio-economic breakdown of school populations differs greatly between the grammar and non-grammar sectors. Only 15% of all disadvantaged children are accepted into to grammar schools. Academic selection is a disguised form of selection by socio-economic status.
19. Most secondary schools work extremely hard to redress this situation, and this shows in the greater motivation of their pupils in comparison to grammar school pupils (NFER Curriculum Cohort Study). However a significant minority of children fall through the net. 19% of pupils leave school with little or no formal qualification. 24% of adults in the North are functionally illiterate. The North of Ireland has one of the widest gaps in the world between high and low achievers (OECD PISA 2000 Survey).
20. In addition the current system of academic selection may breach Human Rights on several counts:
  - by denying primary pupils full access to the curriculum while they are being prepared for the Transfer Test;
  - by subjecting them to a high stake exam at the average age of ten and a half;
  - because the Transfer Test has been shown to discriminate against children from disadvantaged socio-economic groups;
  - by creating a system where children from disadvantaged groups are concentrated in the same schools, thus compounding the impact of disadvantage on the educational experience of these children;
  - by excluding many pupils from experiencing a variety of educational options (academic, technical, vocational).

Recent research has shown the achievements of non-selective educational systems.

21. The Smyth/Gallagher research notes that in Scotland – a comprehensive system - the forty one to sixty percent category of pupils achieving five plus GCSE grades A\* to C is nearly three times larger than in England – a mostly comprehensive system -, and eleven times greater than in the North! At the lower attainment end of the spectrum, Scotland does also better, with only 3% of schools in the 0 to 20% category, to 11% in England and 17% in the North.
22. Furthermore:
  - research by Prof. David Jesson (York University) shows that comprehensives usually do better than, occasionally the same as, grammars and secondary moderns in progressing children from Key Stage 3 to Key Stage 4 – for all abilities as defined by Key Stage 3 results;
  - research by Cardiff Business School suggests that comprehensive pupils with the same A level grades (and other similar factors such as age, gender, etc.) as private school pupils are likely to be more academically successful once they go to university and by the end of their course are 20 per cent more likely to get a first class degree);

- research by the Institute of Education (England) shows that comprehensives equal grammar school for progress from Key Stage 4 to post 16 for all abilities measured by GCSE point score (although both are eclipsed by Sixth Form colleges which are compatible with comprehensive systems but tend not to be established in areas where selective schools exist).

23. Internationally, the PISA 2000 Survey conducted by the OECD, 'Knowledge and Skills for Life', has shown that most systems that perform better are non-selective. Systems where delayed academic selection or election is in place tend to show lower levels of attainment, and a wider gap between low- and high-achievers.

### **Admission criteria and parental choice.**

24. All post primary schools have delivered a common curriculum since 1989. Increasingly grammar schools are being forced to offer subjects which some years ago they would have labelled as 'vocational', while non-grammar schools now offer a range of academic and other subjects depending on the size of the school and the overall socio-economic characteristics of the school population.
25. There are several examples of secondary schools which through good leadership and high staff morale have built a local reputation which in turn has attracted local pupils regardless of their Transfer Test results. These schools operate as quasi-comprehensive schools. They take many of their pupils through to GCE A Levels or AVCEs, and few leave with little or no formal qualifications. In areas<sup>1</sup> fortunate to have such schools, primary schools simply transfer children to the local secondary school and fewer children than usual take the Transfer Test. These areas show how simple and effective the transition from primary to post-primary school can be: children simply move from their primary school to the local post-primary school, along with their classmates.
26. In the context of a non-selective school system, parental choice needs only be exercised regarding the religious ethos (Catholic maintained, controlled, integrated) or cultural/language characteristics of a school (Irish medium, English medium), with the possibility of single-sex/co-ed still available in some areas. These choices stem from the history of the education system in this part of Ireland.
27. Aside from the religious / cultural choice made by families, proximity should be the main criterion (as for primary schools). The suggestion in the Burns report that parents of an 11 year old might exercise their choice between one and another school in a Collegiate, suggests unequal status and unequal provision, as well as continued competition between schools trying to attract pupils. Sinn Féin strongly objects to such a system.
28. Some have warned that the Burns recommendations, or indeed a comprehensive system, would lead to so-called 'selection by postcode'. It is true that middle-class parents have the means to move near to a 'desirable' primary or grammar school in order to maximise their child's chances in the game of 'getting into a good school'. This practice is happening already, encouraged by open enrolment. Similarly wealthy parents can afford to send their children to fee-paying private schools. This is why partisans of academic selection feel safe in warning that both will happen in the future.
29. The contrast in the socio-economic breakdown of the school populations of most grammar schools and most secondary schools, as indicated by the Free School Meal Entitlement percentage, already indicate a degree of class segregation; middle-class parents are already getting elitist education for their children at taxpayers' expense. The best way to compensate for this is to build an education system where quality education is available to all children in their neighbourhood. This will require a substantial investment in less-endowed schools in disadvantaged areas in order to make them as desirable as former grammar schools.

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<sup>1</sup> Maghera, Cookstown, Keady, Armagh, etc.

30. The 'selection by post code' model is criticised because it favours wealthier parents who can afford a change of address, or more articulate parents who can manipulate the system. It also supposes a strong socio-economic differentiation of neighbourhoods, with particular neighbourhoods suffering from much higher deprivation than others. This is the case for some larger urban areas such West Belfast, or Derry Cityside. If a system of all-ability neighbourhood schools is used there will undoubtedly be a few schools which have a much more disadvantaged population than others.
31. In other areas neighbourhoods are more likely to be more socio-economically diverse. The sole use of the proximity criterion should ensure that all schools have a wide range of abilities and most school populations have a range of socio-economic backgrounds. The social mix in each school will depend on the neighbourhood it serves. Compensatory measures can be put in place, such as educational and cross-departmental initiatives and a substantial increase in TSN funding for those schools with a high percentage of disadvantaged pupils.
32. Sinn Féin advocates a system of catchment areas to be used at post-primary level, similar to the parish system in use for maintained primary schools. Such a system can be made to fit the requirements of relative proximity within a particular management type, and should be reviewed from time to time to take account of demographic changes and the variation in social mix of particular areas caused by housing redevelopment and other factors.

### **Pupil Profiles.**

33. Pupil Profiles are good educational practice if they are used by pupils and their teachers as a tool for summative and formative assessment. However the Burns report suggests that these Profiles should also be used by teachers in discussing with parents, and the child, "the educational provisions within Collegiates which would match well with the parents' aspirations and the child preferred learning and career pathways."
34. This parent-teacher dialogue – the child seems to be there as an afterthought since his or her choice of school does not figure on the list of admission criteria – this dialogue does not occur on a level playing field. Should disagreement arise, socio-economic and cultural differences between the teacher and the parents may tip the scale towards the side seen as more articulate or more 'influential'. Parents from disadvantaged socio-economic groups would be particularly vulnerable in this process. Their own educational and employment experience, their hopes and ambitions, or lack of them, may hinder a child's chances if the game that is being played is still about 'getting into a good school'. Those are the parents "who do not have the social, economic and cultural resources to take advantage of [parental choice] as a mechanism for the take up of educational resources."<sup>2</sup>
35. In the context of Collegiates where each school "would continue to be entitled to develop its own ethos and individual identity", former grammar schools might attempt to build on their reputation as centres of 'academic excellence', and quickly become over-subscribed. Primary teachers, realising this, might operate some form of selection based on the academic results gathered in the Pupil Profile, with the apparent aim, as they would see it, to save parents and children from being disappointed if they do not get their first choice and are moved to the back of the queue as a result. Open enrolment will continue to ensure that those high status schools fill up quickly, thus reproducing the current two-tier system within each Collegiate.
36. This elective system is in fact selection by the back door, and could in fact be even less reliable than the former Transfer Test, since it is based on a dialogue between teacher and parent based on a Profile which contains qualitative information and subjective assessment statements. The

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<sup>2</sup> Conway, S., 1997, 'The Reproduction of Exclusion and Disadvantage: Symbolic Violence and Social Class Inequalities'



use of standardised assessment at Key Stage 2 will probably lead to a new form of Transfer Test, internally marked, externally moderated, scheduled later into P7, with more subjects, but still leading to some form of academic selection.

37. Finally, the upgrading of the old Record of Achievement into a high-stake document used to inform the process of ‘matching the pupil to the school’ will place a stressful burden on Primary teachers well beyond that of an evidence collating task.
38. It does not have to be this way. Educational provision and the status of the various schools must be equalised across the post-primary sector. We discuss this in the next section.

## Collegiates

39. Partnership between schools is a positive idea which the Burns report does not explore fully, particularly in relation to the range of existing partnerships:
  - Sixth Form consortia (e.g. Derry) and informal agreements for post-16 delivery
  - local grammar-secondary amalgamations (e.g. Strabane)
  - successful partnerships between a post-primary school and its feeder primaries which no longer enter pupils for the Transfer Test (e.g. the Irish medium sector, various schools in Keady, Armagh, Maghera, Cookstown, etc.).
40. The rationale offered for Collegiates includes:
  - the maintenance of the “ethos and individual identity” of schools – as a reference to the religious or cultural particularities of our school system, this is merely a recognition of the current political reality; as a nod in the direction of grammar schools, it suggests that the Burns recommendations will not significantly alter the selective system, merely redesign it to comply with equality and human rights legislation;
  - the difficulty many post-primary schools will experience in trying to deliver the entire breadth of curriculum after Key Stage 3 – a curriculum which is not deliverable locally may be a badly designed curriculum, which offers too many specialisations too early in a young person’s schooling.
41. The survival of open enrolment together with existing differences of status between post primary schools will ensure that some schools remain the poor relations in Burns’ Collegiates. As competition between schools remain, fuelled by open enrolment, the additional level of bureaucracy without corresponding powers will waste resources and energy if schools are reluctant to put the Collegiate’s interest ahead of their own.
42. Falling rolls make partnerships between some local post-primary schools inevitable, whether through mutual agreement to share Sixth Form provision, amalgamations, mergers, etc. In order to provide quality education for all pupils, there must be equality of provision across all areas. This will require an audit of existing educational provision leading to optimal deployment of existing resources for young people and the community they come from, together with a substantial increase in TSN funding of schools, and other appropriate interventions.
43. In the interest of providing a seamless educational experience for children, increasing the flexibility of the transfer procedure and building local models of lifelong learning, it makes sense to include local Primary Schools in the partnership, as well as other education providers in the community. This is why Sinn Féin calls for the establishment of local partnerships or **Learning Neighbourhoods**, including local schools from Early Years to Sixth Form, the nearest third level institutions, youth service, training centres, community education projects, libraries:
  - where **lifelong learning** is available to all and where a range of educational services are provided to meet individual, community and economic needs

- with strong formal and informal **links** to the area they serve (children and young people, parents and adults, local community organisations and initiatives, local workplaces)
  - which facilitates **access** to education for everyone and works to remove barriers to education for the most disadvantaged and groups with specific needs
  - with an ethos of **inter-culturalism** and which serves an increasingly diverse population
  - and which promotes a culture of **inclusion, co-operation and creativity** both within the community of learners and teachers, and with outside agencies (health, culture, industry, etc.)
44. Together with a concerted effort in early interventions and the mainstream funding of initiatives, we believe this structure has the potential to transform our education system, raise educational attainment and begin to redress disadvantage. The 'learning neighbourhood' concept is already in the process of being developed in a number of areas

### **Some Change Issues**

45. Finally Sinn Féin recommends that each Board area and school management type should appoint a change management coordinating team with the specific brief to oversee and facilitate system changes, e.g.:
- to review existing school plant in the light of changing demographics.
  - to support those schools already considering local partnerships and advise schools on possible consortia / amalgamations
  - to consult with Teachers' Unions, parents and local communities regarding all proposed restructuration.
  - to produce guidelines for effective mergers (e.g. change to a new school name and uniform, use the old 'non-grammar' school premises for the Sixth Form, identify and build on strengths of the former schools and their respective staff, address weaknesses as areas for learning and development, etc.)
  - to update Initial Teacher Training, Continuous Professional Development of Teachers and the training of Headteachers in order to enable teachers to work with wider ranges of abilities and managers to support their staff through change
  - to review the conditions of early retirement for those teachers who prefer not to teach in the new dispensation.