

UTU RESPONSE TO THE BURNS REPORT

29th May 2002

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 The Ulster Teachers' Union is the only teachers' union that serves exclusively teachers who teach in nursery, primary, secondary and grammar schools within Northern Ireland. It is representative of teachers at all grades in the profession, including principal teachers. It is able, therefore, to reflect solely the interests of Northern Ireland's teachers. It currently has a membership of approximately 6,000 teachers.

1.2 The Ulster Teachers' Union welcomes the opportunity that the Minister has provided for a review of the post-primary education system. The Ulster Teachers' Union has campaigned vigorously for many years to end academic selection at

11 + and would reiterate its continued opposition to a system that has for too long denied equality of opportunity to all of the children in Northern Ireland. The UTU is optimistic that now that the iniquities of the existing structures have been so publicly highlighted the Minister will take prompt action to ensure that future generations of children will not suffer under an unfair system.

1.3 The Ulster Teachers' Union would congratulate the Burns Review Body, and its Advisors, on the professionalism with which they approached the task. The Ulster Teachers' Union, while disagreeing with some of the detail of the proposals, would have no difficulty in concurring wholeheartedly with the vision, the underlying objectives and the guiding principles for the future of post-primary education drawn up by the Burns Review Body. It would wish to especially highlight its agreement with the principles which relate to parity of esteem and equality of opportunity for all students and to the recognition by the Review Body of the key role for teachers in the delivery of a high quality education system.

1.4 In drawing up a response the Ulster Teachers' Union has focussed on four key areas of the document and will deal with each separately.

2. ACADEMIC SELECTION

2.1 The Ulster Teachers' Union is on record as having condemned for many years the travesty of academic selection at 11 +. It has been debated at successive UTU Conferences and our commitment to an end to selection has on each occasion been reconfirmed. The Ulster Teachers' Union would wish to once again place on record its total opposition to academic selection at age 11 and reiterate its concerns regarding the severe distortion that the current process of transfer imposes upon the primary school curriculum. ,

2.2 Teachers in the secondary sector are also affected by the aftermath of the current transfer procedure. They are faced with the task of rebuilding the self-esteem of the large number of pupils who see themselves as failures because they have not achieved the required grade. Despite the fact that the majority of their peer group are similarly

decreed to be unsuitable for an academic education this does not take away the sense of loss of worth.

2.3 In the introduction the Ulster Teachers' Union highlighted its commitment to equality of opportunity .It is committed to ensuring that whatever measures are necessary are put in place to redress social imbalance. The current grammar school system has perpetuated the social and class divisions within our society and this cannot be sustained into the 21st century.

2.4 Some children receive coaching to assist their performance in the transfer tests. It is clearly unfair that these children have an advantage over others. The advantaged children are very likely to come from higher socio-economic backgrounds thus perpetuating the current social imbalance within post-primary schools. Teachers have reported that coaching may give a false boost to some children who then find difficulty in coping when they get to grammar school

2.5 In addition, the Ulster Teachers' Union has grave doubts about the reliability of the current transfer tool. There is absolutely no evidence to show that it is an accurate predictor of whether or not a child will benefit from an academic education, nor is there any proof of the standardisation of the test.

2.6 The Ulster Teachers' Union believes that there should be a seamless transition from primary to secondary schools. The current system places undue pressure on teachers in both the primary and secondary sectors in accommodating the transfer process. The time and energy teachers put into making the current system operate could be used more productively for the good of all our young people.

2.7 In some geographic areas there is currently inequality of opportunity in obtaining a grammar school place based on gender. In some areas that have single-sex grammar provision the entry grade may be different for each, dependent upon capacity .This situation cannot clearly be sustained. There is also inequity of access to a grammar school education generally, since in some areas pupils with all grades have access to a grammar school education yet in other areas only pupils with an A grade will obtain a place.

2.8 The Ulster Teachers' Union believes that by ending academic selection the primary school would be able to offer a more balanced curriculum. Teachers would be able to teach in the broadest sense of the word rather than merely train children to perform. There would not be the pressure to push some children beyond their capabilities and education could once again become enjoyable for those in their latter years at primary school. It would also ensure that those children who felt that transfer test work was not relevant to them would not lose interest in education.

2.9 The Ulster Teachers' Union believes that if academic selection is to end then there will undoubtedly be a period of "settling in" in terms of the new arrangements. It would acknowledge that during this period some children who might be best suited to an academic education might not obtain a place in what would have previously been a grammar school. Secondary schools have for many years delivered the common curriculum and have achieved excellent results with many of their pupils in external examinations that are the same as those entered by grammar school pupils. The Post-

Primary Review Body has recommended that there should be easy transfer between schools within the collegiates. Given these facts the Ulster Teachers' Union believes that there should be no serious disadvantage to any pupil by the ending of academic selection at the earliest opportunity.

2.10 Within the current post-primary education system there are grammar schools which will accept pupils with a D grade in transfer. This has led to the employment of teachers to address special educational needs within some grammar schools. On the other hand there are some schools which are designated as secondary schools which are chosen by pupils with an A grade at transfer. In these circumstances the school provides suitably challenging work for those pupils to ensure they reach their full potential. The Ulster Teachers' Union is satisfied that there is enough expertise within the teaching force in both secondary and grammar schools to ensure the initial problems in ending academic selection are minimised.

2.11 The abolition of academic selection would result in many positive spin-offs for not only the pupils but the teachers and school administration. At present teachers in some instances are placed under an intolerable pressure to ensure that coaching of children for the transfer test takes place within schools, despite many teachers grave reservations about the long-term value of such coaching. An end to academic selection would remove this pressure.

2.12 Ending academic selection would also allow schools to redirect valuable resources from the purchase of transfer related materials to the provision of materials which are of greater relevance to the broader curriculum.

2.12 Teachers are aware that the transfer test only deals with a very small part of what must be valued and developed in the child. The Ulster Teachers' Union welcomes the Burns Report reference to the more recent research on multiple intelligences and would concur that a much broader concept of learning must be allowed to develop. The general public must also be appraised of the value of adopting such an approach and the need to attach value to achievements other than those that are purely academic.

2.13 The Ulster Teachers' Union would wish to place on record that it has concerns in relation to the human rights of all those involved in the education process. Those concerns centre on the fact that the present system can be seen to be cruelty to pupils, cruelty to parents and cruelty to teachers. Teachers are dedicated and have a genuine concern to provide the best possible education for each and every child in their care. Teachers believe that it is every child's right to have the fullest and broadest

education throughout their time at school, whether they happen to be academically gifted or not. Each child has the right to expect that they will receive an education that is appropriate to them and that allows them to retain their self-esteem and dignity.

The current system promotes discrimination on grounds of academic ability against one of the most vulnerable sections of our community, our children. In this country the community has striven hard to end discrimination of all forms and the government

has produced copious amounts of legislation to ensure that discrimination is outlawed. The Ulster Teachers' Union would urge those in power to produce the appropriate legislation at the earliest opportunity in order to end the discrimination represented by the current system of transfer to post-primary schools based on academic selection.

2.14 The Ulster Teachers' Union urges government to take an early decision in relation to the abolition of academic selection. This will end the worry of current primary age pupils, and indeed their parents, for whom the future is at present uncertain. Teachers are also unsure what the future holds and need to have an early indication so that they can prepare the way for whatever changes are put in place.

2.15 The Ulster Teachers' Union would ask that in addition to early clarification of the way ahead the government put in place, at the earliest opportunity, appropriate training for teachers to brief them on the future changes. In light of the current serious teacher workload situation this training must be adequately resourced and held within normal working time.

3. PUPIL PROFILES

3.1 The Ulster Teachers' Union would have no difficulty with the concept of the pupil profile suggested within the Burns Report.

3.2 The Union would, however, wish to re-emphasise its concerns in relation to teacher workload and would seek assurances that whatever pupil profiling system is adopted should be comprehensive and not over-bureaucratic.

3.3 While the use of standardised tests would in the view of UTU be acceptable in building up a pupil profile such tests should in no way form an alternative means of academic selection. Bearing in mind the workload issue, the Ulster Teachers' Union would suggest that if such tests were to become part of the pupil profile then these tests should be externally marked.

3.4 Most primary schools currently have embryonic pupil profile systems that could be modified to provide what the Post-Primary Review Body is suggesting. CCEA currently provide materials that might be of use in developing a standard format e.g. year 7 pro-forma.

3.5 Secondary schools also have systems currently in place that could form the basis of the continuation of the pupil profile i.e. Records of Achievement. The Ulster Teachers' Union would wish to emphasise the need to ensure that the information gathered at primary level is then transferred to the post-primary institution chosen by the pupil.

3.6 The Ulster Teachers' Union states emphatically that the teaching profession would not tolerate any suggestion that the pupil profile be used for any form of selection. Teachers will be happy to use it to inform and advise parents of the most appropriate choice of educational path for their child.

3.7 In developing a pupil profile some thought must be given to ensuring that the document produced will be of real value to pupils, parents and teachers alike. It must also be succinct and manageable.

3.8 The Ulster Teachers' Union believes that pupil profiles should be used in a positive way to highlight areas for development. It should not be used to disadvantage any pupil.

3.9 Many schools have limited storage facilities and this must be borne in mind in relation to pupil profiles.

3.10 The Ulster Teachers' Union believes that there is a need to replace the current fragmented system of recording children's progress by a cohesive continuous system. Pupil profiles could provide the vehicle but care must be taken to ensure the greatest possible degree of uniformity of approach so that such profiles are comparable.

3.11 The Ulster Teachers' Union would once again state the need for adequate training and other resources in order to ensure that the pupil profile system is a success. The workload implications for teachers must also be catered for by allowing teachers additional non-contact time in order to both train in the development of such profiles and to produce them when the system is in place.

3.12 The use of pupil profiles is seen by the Union as having the potential to motivate good behaviour and encourage children to achieve their potential in terms of performance throughout their school career.

3.13 The UTU believes that pupil profiles will also be perceived by teachers as a beneficial tool in providing a holistic picture of a child's progress throughout their school years.

3.14 The Ulster Teachers' Union would urge government to fully consult with the teaching profession in the development of the pupil profile. It should make sure that wherever possible existing recording systems should be used as a basis rather than creating a totally new format. The development of the pupil profile should be commenced without delay since it will be a useful tool regardless of what eventual post-primary reorganisation takes place.

3.15 Teachers will assist in every way possible to ensure that the pupil profile is a success as long as they are assured that it will not be used for any form of selection. They must also be given reassurance in relation to the provision of adequate

resources. The introduction of pupil profiles must not add to the already high workload that teachers carry .

4. TRANSFER TO POST-PRIMARY

4.1 The Ulster Teachers' Union would welcome a revision of the current post-primary school system but has concerns whether the proposals for a collegiate system contained in the Burns Report are the most appropriate. The UTU has concerns, for example, that the Burns Report did not give consideration to the Special Schools. It

also believes that the FE sector should have been included in the post-primary structures since many of the programmes provided in secondary and grammar schools mirror provision in the FE sector. rural areas might go further into decline if people felt that they needed to move closer to centres of greater educational choice.

4.2 The Ulster Teachers' Union would suggest that the Collegiate structure proposed should be modified to allow for selection of future career path to be deferred until the age of 14. It is felt that while 11 is the appropriate age for a move to another school that is too early an age for major career decisions to be made. The UTU feels that it might be more appropriate for all children to transfer to their local secondary (non-grammar) school which would provide the Key Stage 3 curriculum (currently a common curriculum for both secondary and grammar in any case).

At the end of Key Stage 3 a joint decision could be taken by the pupil and his/her parents regarding the academic or vocational route they wish to follow and the most appropriate school to cater for their needs. Grammar schools and some of the existing secondary schools might then choose to specialise in the manner outlined in the Burns Report.

4.3 There should also be the flexibility within the collegiates to allow for some schools to provide education at Key Stage 3 and 4 and even beyond, depending on the needs of a particular geographical area. This type of approach might minimise the problems in the rural areas which some perceive would arise if the present proposals were implemented in their entirety.

4.4 The Ulster Teachers' Union believes that this type of system works well in the Craigavon area and does not concur with the Post-Primary Review Body's dismissal of this model as a feasible alternative. The UTU feels that a model similar to the "Dickson Plan" in Craigavon could be implemented with a minimum of difficulty since the existing secondary schools would simply replace the 14+ pupils with an increased 11 + intake.

4.5 The Ulster Teachers' Union considered the admissions criteria suggested by the Post-Primary Review Body. It believes that if the decision to follow either an academic or vocational route were to be deferred to 14 that the principles of parental choice, but with a greater element of pupil preference, could still be incorporated. The UTU would emphasise its opposition to academic selection at age 14 for the reasons given earlier.

4.6 The Ulster Teachers' Union concurs with the suggestions in relation to siblings

and in particular the suggestion that the eldest of each sex be considered separately in relation to their applications for single-sex schools.

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4.7 The Ulster Teachers' Union disagrees with the criterion in relation to children of staff.

4.8 The Ulster Teachers' Union has severe concerns in relation to criterion (iii) and feels that there would need to be a very clear definition of special circumstances that would be taken into account, otherwise this may lead to litigation.

4.9 Proximity to the school is already used in primary schools admission criteria and in some grammar school criteria. The Ulster Teachers' Union would prefer some method of random selection in order to avoid claims of "education by postcode" in order to protect the population in rural areas. There are concerns that already denuded

4.10 The Ulster Teachers' Union would suggest that it would be wrong for transport implications to have undue limiting influence on the real choices parents have in terms of a suitable school for their child.

4.11 The Ulster Teachers' Union believes that it is absolutely vital that pupils, parents and teachers be kept fully informed during the transition period of how the system will impact on pupils. Resources must be devoted to educating all involved in the implications of any change to existing structures so that parents can make an informed choice that will be in their child's best interests.

4.12 The Ulster Teachers' Union believes that additional resources may need to be targeted at rural areas in this programme of education to ensure that these areas do not become de-populated.

4.13 There must be protections put in place in the post-primary sector during the transition period to ensure stability in schools. Existing teaching posts should be retained until the system has settled and a realistic view of future pupil numbers is established.

4.14 It is essential that sufficient additional resources are set aside to maintain the structures and ensure that the stress on teachers and pupils is minimised in the changeover period.

5. COLLEGIATES

5.1 The Ulster Teachers' Union believes that the success of the collegiate system depends entirely on a fundamental change to existing funding structures. Whilst individual schools within the collegiates are competing for funding based on pupil numbers they cannot be collaborative.

5.2 The Ulster Teachers' Union disagrees with the current proposals in relation to the size and geographical spread of the collegiates and would suggest that this be re-examined.

5.3 If the Burns Review Body's suggestions are to work then schools within the collegiates should be supportive of each other and should make it easy for transfers of pupils from one school to another to take place.

5.4 The Ulster Teachers' Union believes that it is essential that the curriculum review process be re-examined to ensure that it is not a stumbling block to progress in the development of specialisms in individual schools.

5.5 The Ulster Teachers' Union would also have concerns that some schools might find it very difficult to change their identity but believes that all schools must adopt a flexible attitude in entering the collegiate structure if such a structure is to be successful.

5.6 The Ulster Teachers' Union believes that considerable additional resources will be required in order to put in place the administrative structures necessary to run the collegiate system. There are obvious workload implications for Principals, Vice-Principals and Senior Management Teams and there are the practical implications of putting in place a new tier of bureaucracy. Relationships between the collegiates and the existing employing authorities must be explored and clarified. The UTU would have concerns that precious resources are not wasted due to duplication of functions.

5.7 The Ulster Teachers' Union would be of the opinion that the collegiate structure might be more easily administered if the option of using the existing secondary schools as the Key Stage 3 providers was to be adopted. The UTU feels that this would considerably reduce the potential for conflict in provision of the general curriculum up to age 14 and encourage co-operation between the remaining schools that could then concentrate on developing specialisms appropriate to the situation.

5.8 In the setting up of the collegiate system the importance of providing appropriate levels of finance, training and teacher support cannot be overemphasised. In addition the government will have to commit sufficient resources to a programme of educating the pupils, parents, the general public and the business sector in relation to the new structures.

5.9 The Ulster Teachers' Union concurs with the Post-Primary Review Body's suggestions in relation to transfer of pupils within the collegiate system but would want some clarification as to the extent of the school's right to exclude pupils in relation to disciplinary matters.

5.10 The Ulster Teachers' Union believes that the proposed new curriculum would sit well with a collegiate system that allowed for deferred choice of career path at 14.

5.11 It also believes that changes must be made to the Key Stage 4 curriculum in order to accommodate the kind of diversity envisaged in the provision of a range of different types of specialist schools catering for a range of career paths.

5.12 The Ulster Teachers' Union believes that in setting up the collegiates there should be an assurance for existing pupils that they may complete their education in their existing institution unless it is their preference to move to another school within the collegiate system.

6.CONCLUSION

6.1 The Ulster Teachers' Union wishes to conclude by stating that it hopes that government will reach a speedy conclusion in relation to the issue of post-primary review of the education system, in the best interests of our pupils and our teachers.

6.2 The Ulster Teachers' Union also hopes that those involved in making the important decisions necessary to conclude this exercise will avoid taking party political stands and will instead take into account only the educational issues of importance. It would be a tragedy if this opportunity to make a real difference to the lives of future generations of our children were to be lost through needless political posturing. While the UTU is aware that an election is on the horizon it would implore

those in the Assembly who genuinely care about our education system to take principled stand and end the iniquitous system of academic selection forthwith.

6.3 The Ulster Teachers' Union would call on all those involved in setting up the new system for the 21st century to liaise closely with the representatives of teachers to establish what measures need to be put in place in order to ensure a smooth transition from old to new. Teachers will need to feel protected in terms of job security, career prospects and conditions of service. They will also need to be consulted about the changes required to make the system workable.

6.4 The Ulster Teachers' Union would remind government of one of its recent conference slogans -EDUCATION? ASK A TEACHER.