

PART II

PARTNERSHIP AND PROGRESS: EDUCATION FOR THE 21st CENTURY

In this part of the Report we set out our detailed conclusions and recommendations for the future organisation of post-primary education in Northern Ireland. Our proposal is founded on three innovations -

- the development of a Pupil Profile which will provide information to parents, pupils and teachers on a wide range of attributes and achievements of children and young people as they progress through their schooling (Chapter 8);
- the abolition of the Eleven-Plus Transfer Tests and the ending of academic selection as pupils move from primary to post-primary education, and its replacement by a procedure which gives priority to parental preference (Chapter 9);
- the creation of local collaborative networks of schools in a Collegial system (Chapter 10).

In our view, these three innovations are, of necessity, integral to our Vision for a new and enhanced post-primary education system in Northern Ireland. The full implementation of our proposals would take some time, but, assuming no delays in reaching a political decision, the move to a new future could begin very soon.

In arriving at these recommendations we have maintained a key focus on the opportunities and benefits for pupils, parents, teachers, schools and the wider community. In addition, we have considered the opportunities created by our proposal for enhanced links between schools, further and higher education, vocational training and employers (Chapter 11).

In the first part of the Report, our analysis of the existing post-primary education system confirms that while the present arrangements deliver high standards of achievement for many, there are also significant weaknesses which must be addressed if we are to give all our young people the equal opportunity to realise their potential. Further, we came to the conclusion that it was necessary to develop a system that addressed the particular needs and circumstances of Northern Ireland in the 21st Century. It was for us, thus, insufficient merely to mimic arrangements in some other places, however suitable they may have appeared for those places in the past. Our proposal will involve significant change at all levels of the education system, not least in developing new networks of co-operation and collaboration. It also presents a significant challenge to Government and our political leaders in the way our young people are valued and the education system is resourced. For all of us, the spirit as much as the letter of any legislative and administrative changes will be key to realising the improvements in post-primary education we believe to be necessary and within reach.

The phenomenon of change is not new to our schools. Over the past decade the pace of change has been remarkable, with changes to school management, curriculum and assessment, qualifications and the funding of schools. The way in which the implementation of these changes has been managed is testimony to the commitment and professionalism of our teachers and others working in and with schools.

In fact, while our proposal offers innovative and new directions for education in Northern Ireland, one of the reasons we are confident that it can work is because of the strong foundation provided by our teachers. We consider ourselves fortunate that our schools contain teachers with such diverse and valuable skills and expertise. Our teachers in primary schools have been unstinting in their efforts to provide their pupils with a wide and rich curriculum in spite of the restrictions and pressure consequent on the Transfer Tests. Our teachers in secondary schools have demonstrated a deep commitment to the needs and interests of their pupils, manage to meet the very wide range of needs among their pupils and, at the same time, achieve very good results against the odds. Our teachers in grammar schools also demonstrate a high level of commitment to their pupils and achieve virtually unrivalled academic results from them.

We believe that one of the difficulties of the current post-primary system is that the diverse expertise and experience of our schools and teachers have been disconnected. In fact, we became firmly convinced that the particular form of competitive relationship that currently exists between schools served to constrain the synergies that could be gained if the expertise of our teachers could be harnessed in the common interest of all pupils. At the same time, we recognised their distinctive contributions and sought to find a way in which their particular strengths could continue to provide a basis for meeting the needs and interests of individual pupils. Hence our proposal for collaborative communities of schools working in a Collegial relationship.

By harnessing the energy, good-will and commitment of all our teachers, and the hitherto unimagined possibilities for resource development in areas such as ICT, we believe our Report provides the strongest basis for meeting our common interest in providing all our young people with the high quality education they require to meet the challenges of the 21st Century, while allowing the individual in each of them to shine.

Our proposals will have far-reaching consequences for the organisation and structure of the post-primary education system. The proposals will require careful planning, co-ordination and phasing to ensure that the possibilities envisaged for our young people are realised. In Chapter 12 we outline the operational issues and resources we feel will be necessary to make the Collegial system work, while in Chapter 13 we outline the key stages along the road to implementation.

In Part I of this Report we examined the journey taken by our education system up to the end of the 20th Century, a journey in which practically all members of the Review Body were themselves participants. In Part II of the Report we offer our agreed Vision of the future and the steps by which we believe it can be achieved.