

**Bishop Donal McKeown
Catholic Bishops of Northern Ireland
Education Spokesman**

Question 1

The Bishops have publicly stated their commitment to the creation of a system that maximises parental election, rather than just selection by the schools. This is a process about empowering all parents and involving them as much as possible in the education of their children.

Question 2

Empirical data is important in enabling parents to understand clearly what a child can and cannot achieve. Professional opinions from teachers are important, but it is vital that teachers' opinions are not the only element. This is to reduce pressure on primary teachers to justify their opinions.

Question 3

Information should enable parents to see what the teachers' impression is - and the consultation should allow parents to make their own perspectives known. Children can be involved in many important jobs outside of school, and can be suffering/ challenged in ways that teachers do not always know.

Question 4

If parents are to be empowered, they need to have access to maximum amounts of information - to help them make appropriate choices. That information should be provided in as many ways as possible - in an awareness that some 20% of our adults are said to be functionally illiterate, and increasing numbers of non-nationals are among us, with English as a second language.

Question 5

Material needs to be available, not just in the form of long pieces of informative prose but in diagrammatic form where possible, so that a maximum number of parents are enabled to understand the process and participate in it.

Question 6

The role of Careers Education and Careers Advice will be vital. The Pupil Profile will need to continue into the Post-Primary stage with changing information and the opportunity to discuss new and emerging options.

Question 7

This process, if it can be completed in March, will enable receiving schools to better prepare for the new arrivals.

Question 8

These should be very limited, though it is difficult to specify for every possible eventuality. The needs should be clearly those of the child, and not just those of the parents.

Question 9

If the categories are limited, it should be possible to ensure that these are supernumerary. However, this should not become a pathway for schools to simply enhance their intake.

Question 10

An outside panel would take the enormous pressure away from Governors - who are acting only in a voluntary and unpaid capacity.

Question 11

Yes

Question 12

It is clear that the current presence of siblings makes it desirable for them to be able to study together. However, in employment, it was judged inappropriate and discriminatory in the past for jobs to be fulfilled just because someone knew and could recommend somebody. Giving preference to siblings of former pupils may well in effect disadvantage/discriminate against others.

Question 13

As Bishops, we recognise the advantages of the social capital that comes from networks of belonging. Parish identity remains an important element in this, particularly in rural areas. This needs to be recognised, as parish communities have invested heavily in schools over the decades.

Question 14

Local identity is important. However, if the purpose of this exercise is to increase real choice, the geographical criterion should not have undue prominence in excluding others. If all schools become merely local schools, then there is no real choice as regards what school would offer an appropriate education for specific pupils.

Question 15

Standard criteria should be used across NI and tie-breakers need to be transparent in their specification and use. Names and surnames of children can vary - as can their given addresses!!

Question 17

A level playing field has to be created for all schools.

Question 18

Any process should protect volunteers who act as Governors not to be exposed to excessive pressure or potential vilification!

Other Issues

The system needs to advantage those who have little real choice at present. This is a cultural change that will need a considerable period of time so that all parents feel enabled and empowered to be active participants in their children's education. This process needs to improve the lot of underachieving children and parents - without jeopardising the availability of the highest of academic standards for the academically gifted.

Adverse Implications

No