



Department of Education – New Post-Primary Arrangements and Proposals

DISABILITY ACTION'S RESPONSE

March 2006

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INTRODUCTION

- 1 Disability Action is a pioneering Northern Ireland charity, working with and for people with disabilities. We work with our members to provide information, training, transport, awareness programmes and representation for people regardless of their disability; whether that is a physical, mental health, sensory, hidden or learning disability.
- 2 More than one in five (300,000) people in Northern Ireland has a disability and the incidence is higher here than in the rest of the United Kingdom. Over one quarter of all families here are affected.
- 3 As a campaigning body, we work to bring about positive change to the social, economic and cultural life of people with disabilities and consequently our entire community.
- 4 Our range of services is provided from a network of 5 local offices, with 85 staff and 250 volunteers.
- 5 Disability Action welcomes the opportunity to respond to this consultation.

SPECIFIC COMMENTARY

- 6 Disability Action commends the many positive elements of these proposals. Such reform if properly implemented will create greater opportunity for children and young people with its focus on equality.
- 7 Guidance on the new transfer arrangements enables parents to take the pupil profile to post primary meetings, this may lead to misuse and the Department must ensure that this new system is not open to abuse.
- 8 Proposals for curriculum change acknowledge that a range of learning, not just academic excellence is important and valuable
- 9 Education should be as comprehensive as possible to maximise the potential for Northern Ireland's children to grow as healthy, contributing citizens. Significant effort is required to challenge and

change the lack of accredited achievement experienced by children and young people from marginalised and vulnerable groups and areas of economic deprivation.

- 10 Disability Action is concerned that although £24.7 million has been allocated to underpin these new arrangements up to 2008, but that any extra costs must be met from existing budgets. Funding crises in Education and Library Boards have been the focus of recent Department of Education activity rather than any other strategic or equality issues. Further focus on budget management will detract from the key positive proposals contained in this consultation.
- 11 Disability Action supports the new admission arrangements and commends the Minister's focus on equality of opportunity as an instrument of change.
- 12 Disability Action commends the revised structure for the curriculum and assessment arrangements, however we would advise the Department to be more specific in describing what the new system will look like, demonstrating clearly the benefits to all pupils including those at both ends of the spectrum of academic achievement.
- 13 In relation to procurement and investment, we would make the following points:
 - Falling school rolls could provide opportunities to maximise learning in a smaller more supportive environment with smaller class sizes
 - Budget pressures will remain and this situation should have been dealt with in this consultation
 - many proposed school closures are located in areas of high deprivation consequently challenging the Ministerial commitment to equality
 - an EQIA must be undertaken on current and future PFI proposals
- 14 Disability Action would ask if the EQIA on the Religious Education syllabus due out for consultation soon will have implications for this draft Order.
- 15 Disability Action supports the proposals on suspension and expulsion. We advise that the Department develops new and

innovative programmes to both retain children in schools and to support excluded/expelled pupils.

- 16 We wonder why this debate on reform and renewal fails to place any focus on the roles and responsibilities of classroom assistants and on the benefits of modernising their role. We advise that this should be done particularly in light of continuing budgetary constraints.
- 17 In addition, we believe that any savings identified by the RPA team should be applied to education reform.

CONCLUSION

- 18 Disability Action welcomes these proposals for reform **but despairs that once again the issue of special schools for children with disabilities and those with special educational needs have received neither consideration nor comment. In our view this is symptomatic of the lack of regard for their needs and rights by a Department responsible for provision of education for all children and young people.**
- 19 **These young people and special schools were ignored in the Burns and Costello reports we should not be surprised that they and their needs and potential contributions continue to be ignored.**