

CONSULTATION ON NEW ADMISSIONS ARRANGEMENTS FOR POST-PRIMARY SCHOOLS

Response by Democratic Unionist Party

Introduction

The Democratic Unionist Party remains opposed to the process of the destruction of the current post primary education system in Northern Ireland, which provides children a variety of schools to choose from and places them in a school on the basis of their educational ability. Government plans would institute a one size fits all comprehensive school system which has failed children in other parts of GB and is now being replaced across the water with specialist schools, each with their own emphasis.

This latest round of “consultation” on the proposals for new admissions arrangements for post primary schools is only necessary because successive Education Ministers have studiously and gratuitously ignored the views expressed by the citizens of Northern Ireland. The public have consistently demonstrated their support for a system of post primary education which offers a variety of provision and selects pupils for appropriate schools on the basis of their educational needs and academic ability.

The people of Northern Ireland are proud of what the education system allows individuals to achieve, and the fact that academic excellence is available to all. The doors of grammar schools are open to everyone in Northern Ireland, not just the rich, and not only those whose parents were educated at grammar schools. The will of the people of Northern Ireland to retain academic selection has been ignored in the construction of the consultation document.

The Sunday Times Parent Power survey late last year placed 25 Northern Ireland schools in the top 200 UK secondary schools. This was a fantastic achievement given our comparatively small population. Such success will not be maintained by destroying academically-orientated schools.

Despite excellent exam results in Northern Ireland there are undoubtedly areas for improvement including enhancing the qualifications of those not so academically gifted.

Children do much less well in areas of social deprivation. It is important to have more young people from working class areas reaching grammar schools and university. It is the principle of academic selection, however, that gives these young people the best opportunity of succeeding.

We wholeheartedly support the development of properly accredited vocational courses. It is essential that society, and especially the world of work, recognise vocational qualifications as valid and valuable. We must break into the cycle of society believing that only academic qualifications have any status.

Academically-orientated schools do not exist under Government's proposed admissions criteria. It is ironic that specialist schools can exist to provide courses in sports science, drama and the performing arts, technology and computing, but not in 'academic' subjects.

In order to ensure a fair system of transfer at age 11, the choice of pathways must be equally valued. Pupils with academic interests and abilities must have the opportunity to pursue them in grammar schools, while those with different talents and interests, who are no less valued, must be able to secure a place in a school that will cater for their needs.

Society must be encouraged to afford all post-primary schools equal status. This cannot be merely bestowed, but must be earned by their performance, and the resourcing and attitude of Government to all schools.

Background

In 1998 when he took up his position as Education Minister, Martin McGuinness immediately declared war on Northern Ireland's selective post primary education system. The first step was the commissioning of the Burns report which rejected any academic element in the post primary transfer arrangements. Despite concerted attempts to sell the Burns proposals, opposition by the public and educationalists remained strong. When the Minister finally launched a household consultation, the result was that out of a massive 240,000 responses, 64% rejected the proposal to end academic selection. Despite this overwhelming rejection of his plans the Minister in his last hours in office unilaterally announced that he was ignoring the views of parents and teachers and proceeded with the abolition of academic selection.

The merit principle which had underpinned our education system since after World War Two was removed in an atrocious act of educational vandalism and a transfer vacuum was created. Despite the fact that majority support did not exist, let alone cross community support for this action, Direct Rule ministers have slavishly carried forward the McGuinness agenda. It is ironic that while the previous Secretary of State claimed the reason why GB legislation on hunting with dogs would not be introduced in the province was that it was too sensitive an issue and would be better left to Northern Ireland representatives and the local electorate, the education of children in the province has not been afforded the same democratic input.

The Costello proposals represent the latest step in that march down the road towards the destruction of our education system and are designed to cement the undemocratic decisions already taken. Along with the Burns proposals, they are driven by political ideology. They are the product of carefully selected appointees who have delivered the outcome expected of them. They will not have the support of the Democratic Unionist Party.

We do not intend to respond to each of the questions posed by the Department. Instead we will comment in turn on each of the chapters of the consultation document.

Chapter 1- Context for new admissions

The ending of academic selection will be no less unacceptable in the context of the new landscape envisaged by the Costello report than it is at present. Indeed it is most unlikely that even half the developments described in this chapter will be in place by the date when the new transfer arrangements are due to be introduced. The claim that “the new admissions arrangements will take place in an educational landscape quite different to what we are used to today”, is a false promise. The fact is that choices will be made with basically the same educational architecture as exists at present.

The content of the pupil profile has not even been agreed. There has been no analysis of the problems associated with the profile, or no indication of the additional workload for primary school teachers. Neither has there been any agreement with teachers that they are prepared to take on this additional responsibility which no doubt will often place them in conflict with parents who dispute a profile’s content. Given the importance of these profiles they cannot simply be introduced with immediate effect. They will require a number of years for testing and refining.

The introduction of the new curriculum will itself be disruptive and take a number of years to bed in. It is still work in progress.

The entitlement framework, even if it were desirable and workable, could not be introduced without massive spending on most existing schools or widespread rationalisation which cannot be performed in the short term.

The assumption that the entitlement framework of the Costello report is a benefit to education is incorrect. Schools should not be compelled to provide such a framework. There is no evidence that 24 subjects at GCSE and 27 subjects at sixth form level is a better idea than any other combination of numbers.

The scope for collaborative arrangements is likely to be limited and to date very few such ventures have proved successful in the areas where they are most likely to be needed.

The document admits that specialist schools could be as far as five years down the track meaning that they would not be in place ahead of the proposed new admissions arrangements.

This programme of change will be imposed on top of initiatives such as the Common Funding Formula and the revised curriculum, as well as changes demanded by the current funding crisis in schools which is leading to widespread redundancies, and within a context of falling school numbers in certain areas.

The educational fairy-land envisaged by this chapter will not be in place by 2009. Therefore the proposed new arrangements will take place in the same educational landscape as presently exists. With the best will in the world, against a background of limited resources and unrealistic timetables, it will be impossible to meet the promises in this chapter. We therefore propose that the government should at least delay the implementation of new admissions criterion until it is clearer that the conditions described here can be met.

Chapter 2- Principles and objectives

The main underpinning principle and objective of any arrangement should be ensuring that each child is placed in a school which offers him or her an education best suited to their needs and abilities and which will enable their skills to be developed to their full potential. This principle cannot be met in the context of the school system which will result from the Costello proposals. First of all each school will be offering the same educational fare. Secondly the only way in which the aptitudes and abilities of a child can be measured is to have admission arrangements which assess those aptitudes and abilities and subsequently place the child at the most suitable school.

The admission arrangements will not be free or fair and will discriminate against young people from poorer communities since post primary selection will now be based on interviews and geography. Both of these will favour youngsters whose parents have the right connections, are able to present themselves and their children best at interviews and who can afford to move to the catchment area of popular schools. These tend to be located within the more expensive housing areas.

The proposals and the campaign to sell these proposals hold out the promise of a greater role for parents and greater parental choice. The fact is that “informed parental choice” should have no relevance in a situation where a school is over-subscribed. When this occurs parental choice is not the factor which should determine whether the child is admitted.

The document is wrong in its assumption that schools normally serve local communities. There are very many schools which for a number of reasons attract pupils from a wide geographical area. It would seem that the locality principle forms the basis for the criteria for oversubscribed schools in Chapter 5 and has the potential to radically alter the intake and nature of a large number of post primary schools.

Chapter 3- Choosing a post primary school

The process itself, with the mountain of documentation from profiles, primary school advice, post primary school information, documentation from the Education and Library Board along with meetings and interviews with both the primary school and each of the schools applied for, will disadvantage parents who are less comfortable with the education system. The whole process could act as a barrier particularly to working class parents and their children.

Additional work will result for the primary school teacher or principal and the principals of post primary schools. Some of the more popular schools currently receive 500-600 applications. Against a background of raised expectations about parental choice being paramount, this will certainly rise. There is no indication how it is intended that schools would handle this extra volume of work, or that parents should deal with the large number of interviews they may have, since many will express a number of preferences.

The pupil profile itself will be a source of contention especially since parents will recognise how much rests upon it, and the assessment is entirely teacher based. This

will place enormous pressure on teachers. There appears to have been no consultation with teachers regarding their willingness or ability to take on this responsibility. What will the profile actually contain? Will it be a set of marks, or include a teacher evaluation or opinion? Without some independent objective assessment, there will always be charges of teacher bias, or schools taking the easy way out and writing glowing assessments for a large number of pupils in order to avoid confrontation with parents. What common benchmark data is proposed to enable a parent to make comparisons with other children if they ever wish to do so?

The document is unclear on the role the post primary school has in the selection process. Does the principal merely listen to the parents? Has he or she any input into whether the pupil is accepted, and on what basis can the school refuse to admit a child, if any?

Some parents may indeed seek professional advice on the best school for their child based on the pupil profile. However they will be treated no more advantageously in the criteria for oversubscribed schools than parents who disregard the pupil profile, seek no advice and simply choose a school because it is popular.

It is a vain and futile hope that any parent will take advice from the ELB's transfer officer who will have no knowledge of the child and will be viewed simply as a vehicle to direct children to the empty schools. This will be the inevitable result of the ill conceived and empty promise to provide parents "a clear role in the process".

The process is ill thought out, will result in a free for all and will do nothing to overcome the disappointments and disadvantages of the present system. Indeed by raising expectations of parental choice, this aspect will become even worse than it is at present.

Unless the receiving school can have sight of the pupil profile and some objective assessment of a child's ability, the principle of placing the interests of the child at the centre of the process will not be achieved. Also without this facility it is impossible from grammar schools to maintain their academic ethos.

Chapter 4- Pupils with compelling circumstances

Such pupils should be treated as supernumerary to admission and enrolment numbers despite the difficulties which this causes for class sizes in some instances. Supporting evidence of a medical or educational nature should be required. We are uneasy about the use of reports which are sometimes commissioned from professionals by parents. These do give an advantage to better off families and objectivity can be questioned.

Chapter 5- Admissions criteria for oversubscribed schools

Of the four criterion categories outlined, three are based on locality confirming the view of this Party and tens of thousands of those opposed to this scheme that the outcome of these proposals will be all ability neighbourhood comprehensive schools.

The document states that the menu from which a school can choose its criteria "will put the interests of the child at the centre of decision making". How does a crude

geographically based factor dressed up in the language of “community based criteria” or “tie breaker” possibly take into consideration what is in a child’s educational interests? None of these options even mention the educational needs of the child.

Schools should be permitted to set their own criteria which would at least permit them to maintain their ethos.

The menu will drive parents to choose their nearest school on the basis that if they choose one further away they may not meet the geographical based criteria and may then find the school closest to them filled up leaving them at the mercy of a system that could then impose an even worse option.

One thing is clear. If these proposals go ahead the problem of oversubscribed schools will become worse not better and the criteria outlined in this chapter will take on even greater significance. These proposals will create more dissatisfaction about the move to post primary education than the 11+ examination ever did. They will also hurt academically able children from working class backgrounds.

Conclusion

These proposals have no community support, they are not thought through, the method of implementation has not been tested, there is no indication of the implications for primary school teachers and no costs have been attached to them.

Given the need for consensus around proposals such as these because of the massive social and educational impact they will have, it would be a democratic, educational and administrative scandal to proceed with them as they stand. There is no compelling reason why the present arrangements, with some minor changes, could not be continued until agreement can be reached on a realistic and sustainable way forward.