

Independent Schools Council Response to the Proposal for a draft Education (Northern Ireland) Order

Dear Sir/Madam,

The Independent Schools Council (ISC) represents 500,000 children in 1,276 independent schools including 20% of Northern Ireland's grammar schools. ISC exists to promote choice, diversity and excellence in education; the development of talent at all levels of ability; and the widening of opportunity for children from all backgrounds to achieve their potential.

The strength of Northern Ireland's present educational system demonstrably increases this opportunity as the children and young people of Northern Ireland currently enjoy a far higher level of social mobility than their English counterparts. At present 41.3% of students accepted into higher education in Northern Ireland are drawn from the four lowest socio-economic groups, compared to only 28.4% for the United Kingdom as a whole.^[1] If these proposals are implemented, selection by ability will be replaced by selection on the basis of class and economic power as occurs in the rest of the United Kingdom.

A recent report by the Sutton Trust revealed that 131 of the top 200 comprehensive schools (66%) had fewer than 5% of pupils eligible for free school meals against a national average of 14.3%. This stems from the fact that socially advantaged parents are likely to live in areas served by the highest status schools and are better placed to take advantage of any flexibility in their admissions arrangements.

This is further confirmed by a Report entitled *Changes in Intergenerational Mobility*, published in 2002. This Report considers the extent of intergenerational mobility in economic status across two British birth cohorts, the first born in March 1958 and the second cohort born in April 1970. It concludes that children born to less well off parents in 1970 were much more likely to grow up to be less well off adults than their counterparts born in 1958. The Sunday Times Social Affairs Editor, Nichols Heller, commenting on the Report notes that "*The sudden collapse in social mobility coincides with the wholesale destruction of the grammar schools.*"^[2] If these proposals are implemented in Northern Ireland, this collapse will be echoed there.

In every test of public opinion in Northern Ireland, the Government's proposals have been rejected, most recently in the consultation on admission arrangements for post-primary schools in 2005, when over 90% of respondents opposed the Government's proposals to outlaw academic selection. Moreover, they have been rejected by a clear majority of parents, teachers and locally elected representatives.

ISC therefore supports the campaign by the Association for Quality Education (AQE), which it believes to reflect more accurately the will of the people of Northern Ireland and wishes to once again draw attention to the criticisms of the proposals contained in their Black paper '*The Education (Northern Ireland) Order 2006: An Analysis of the Government's Proposals for Post-Primary Education*'. Specifically that:

- the proposals would result in the imposition of a one-size-fits all comprehensive system;
- examination results would deteriorate;
- the proposed pupil profile is flawed;
- the proposed curriculum is unworkable;
- social integration, as well as social mobility and participation in higher education, would be adversely affected;
- the strengths of the current system would be lost;
- the proposals lack any estimate of cost.

ISC fully recognises that some changes are needed with regard to the transfer arrangements and the curriculum and that something needs to be done about the young people who leave school without formal qualifications. However, these proposals will not effect positive change and will irrevocably destroy the strongest educational system in the United Kingdom.

ISC would instead strongly endorse the alternative proposals of the Association for Quality Education (AQE) that any new system of education for Northern Ireland must:

- recognize that underachievement and inequality do not begin at age 11;
- preserve opportunities for academically gifted pupils to develop their talents to the full;
- allow schools to develop or retain specialisms which could offer pupils genuine alternative in terms of academic and vocational pathways;
- develop, in specialist schools of perceived status, technical and vocational qualifications that carry real weight and would have increased economic relevance for both pupils and prospective employers;
- end the 11 plus as soon as new admissions procedures have been developed and piloted;
- develop a Pupil Profile that would contain information on pupils attainment that would meet international standards of reliability and validity;
- allow parents to make an informed choice, taking into account the advice of both primary and post-primary schools, who would have an absolute right to see the profile in advance of any decision regarding admission. In the event of oversubscription, schools should be permitted to offer places to those pupils most likely to benefit from their provision, based on the information contained in the profile;
- develop a coherent strategy to address the specific problems arising from a revised assessment of the scale of demographic change.

Any introduction of legislation intended to implement proposals, which are demonstrably not fit for purpose, should be deferred so that a more holistic appraisal can be undertaken of Northern Ireland's real educational needs.

Yours sincerely,
Jonathan Shephard
General Secretary
Independent Schools Council