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Specialist Schools Concept in the Northern Ireland Context



SPECIALIST SCHOOLS CONCEPT IN THE NORTHERN IRELAND CONTEXT

Wider Educational Context

1. The Department of Education is currently implementing the “Entitled to Succeed” (e2s) Programme, which will provide new post-primary arrangements for Northern Ireland. The objective is to develop an education system that puts the child at the centre, provides high quality education, equality of access and opportunities for all young people to prepare them for life and work in the 21st Century. It also aims to provide parents with a wider range of schools from which to choose a school best suited to their child’s educational needs.
2. The introduction of the new curriculum and the new post-primary arrangements provides increased flexibility and greater scope for schools to determine their own distinctive approach to the curriculum, taking account of the Entitlement Framework. It also provides an opportunity to explore the concept of Specialist Schools tailored for the particular needs of the Northern Ireland education system. There is clear evidence of the success of Specialist Schools in England. This, linked to the greater flexibility offered by the revised curriculum, provides an opportunity to consider whether a Northern Ireland specialist schools model would contribute to providing greater choice for parents and pupils and raising standards through whole school development.

Specialist Schools Concept for Northern Ireland

3. The Specialist Schools conference held on 16 November 2004 was arranged to initiate and inform discussions as to the suitability of a specialist schools model in Northern Ireland. It was well attended by all types of schools, managing authorities and other education interests and successfully raised awareness of the specialist schools model.

Feedback has been very positive and the Department has received several expressions of interest from a range of schools. The Strategic Advisory Group also advised that in developing the Specialist Schools concept, the Department should take account of the particular needs of the Northern Ireland education sector and explore these within a pilot arrangement.

4. The Government has considered this advice along with the feedback from the conference and announced, on 5 March 2005, that the Department of Education would be initiating a pilot scheme to test the suitability of the specialist schools model for Northern Ireland and to seek ways to tailor it to local circumstances.
5. It is proposed that the first specialist designations will be announced in March 2006 and will operate as Specialist Schools from September 2006.

Objectives of the Northern Ireland Specialist School Model

6. It is primarily the process of self-evaluation and application of aspects of an existing curricular strength, as a whole school development process, that leads to the benefits of specialism, rather than simply designation as specialist. Specialist schools will identify and build on their particular curricular strengths and, by sharing good practice, secure whole school development and contribute to the development of good leadership in schools. Requiring schools to take forward a community dimension, ie with other schools, FE Colleges, businesses and the wider community, will help them move from the current environment characterised by competition to one of co-operation and collaboration. This will be increasingly important as schools prepare to deliver access to the Entitlement Framework for all pupils.

7. The core objectives of the Specialist School Concept in Northern Ireland are:-

- ◆ To provide opportunities for pupils to benefit from wider learning experiences and to ensure maximum impact of the available expertise and resources, by promoting co-operation and collaboration among schools and between schools and FE Colleges.
- ◆ To provide parents with greater choice among a range of schools, which have differing areas of focus.
- ◆ To raise standards and realise performance improvement for all young people.

8. It is important that the specialist school objectives are addressed in the context of the principles for the new post-primary arrangements as described in the Costello Report. See annex A. The core objectives above are complementary to the key aims of the “e2s” Programme and will contribute significantly to improving choice for pupils and parents and raising standards for all young people.

Choice of Specialism

9. It is important that the range of specialisms, including vocational areas, will enable schools to be innovative to develop strengths that are relevant to Northern Ireland needs as well as the needs of the pupils in the area served by the school. In June 2004, the Department published for comments a list of possible 18 specialisms and this list was circulated again at the specialist schools conference. For the pilot, schools will be required to choose a specialism from a modified list of specialisms (Annex B). This list is not conclusive and we would expect to modify it as the initiative progresses, and it could be added to as schools develop their approaches under the new more flexible curriculum.

Funding

10. In Northern Ireland Specialist Schools will receive additional recurrent resources of £100 per pupil for each of the 4 years as a designated specialist school and a one-off capital grant of £100,000. These figures will be reviewed following the pilot.

Private Sector Sponsorship

11. The benefits of schools' links to local business were stressed at the November conference. Schools in Northern Ireland will be required to raise unconditional private sponsorship of £25,000. This will demonstrate the schools' commitment to the specialist schools concept and to developing and sustaining links with the business sector.

Application Process

12. The application process will be rigorous and schools will be expected to demonstrate that they have stable or rising standards of attainment within the Specialist area. Applications must include:
 - ◆ A four-year School Development Plan (SDP).
 - ◆ A four-year Community Development Plan (CDP) that involves developing partnerships with at least 5 partner schools. This should be a mix of primary and post-primary schools, including at least one post-primary school.
 - ◆ Evidence of, or evidence of how a school intends to raise, at least £25,000 of unconditional private sector sponsorship.
 - ◆ A bid for a one-off capital grant of £100,000 and an outline of how this would be used.

Assessing the Applications

13. The process for assessing applications will be developed following an evaluation of the pilot (see below).

Re-designation

14. Designation as a Specialist School will be for a 4 year period and will be subject to review in the 4th year, which could lead to specialist status being withdrawn if schools fail to meet the majority of their targets or fail to produce a plan to sustain ongoing improvement.

Pilot Arrangements

Objectives

15. A Northern Ireland pilot will enable the Department to identify a model that best meets the needs of pupils, the education sector and the wider economy. The primary objectives of the pilot will be to consider:-
 - ◆ The role of Specialist Schools in helping to increase and improve choice for pupils and parents and drive up educational standards in Northern Ireland;
 - ◆ the application process;
 - ◆ the range of specialisms; and
 - ◆ the impact on schools with a range of different characteristics.
16. The Department is seeking to include within the pilot schools that represent a range of management types; a geographical spread, involving rural and urban schools; schools of different sizes; and a number of different specialist curricular areas.

Application Process

17. The pilot will be limited to approximately 10 post-primary schools and the application process will involve 2 stages. At each stage of the process, the applications will be considered by a panel, established by the Department, and comprising of former post-primary school principals and former member/s of ETI. The Department will consider the panel's advice and determine the schools to be included in the pilot. Specialist status will not be regarded as a significant change in the character or size of a school and a statutory development proposal will not be required.
18. The objectives of the pilot in the first year are challenging and, in order to test the Specialist Schools concept for the majority of schools and to avoid the skewing of the pilot, the Department will limit applications. The invitation to apply for inclusion in the Specialist Schools Pilot will therefore be extended to all post-primary schools, currently with pupils in each year group in Key Stage 3 and Key Stage 4, except those schools currently in the School Support Programme; and/or designated as Group One schools. However schools excluded from the first year of the pilot will be considered for inclusion in subsequent years. (see paragraph 26).

Criteria for Assessing Schools

19. Applications from schools wishing to participate in the Specialist Schools Pilot will be assessed against the criteria outlined below ie they will be expected to:
 - ◆ Demonstrate that the specialism proposed is an area of clear curricular strength, which has stable or rising levels of attainment.
 - ◆ Demonstrate how the strengths in the proposed specialist area have the potential to promote quality teaching and learning and whole school development.
 - ◆ Demonstrate how they will use the specialism to develop existing links with the other schools, FE Colleges and the wider community, including business and industry.

- ◆ Demonstrate their capacity to take on the challenge of specialist status
- ◆ Be able to meet the challenging timescales for completion of the application forms as detailed in Annex C.
- ◆ Have viable and sustainable enrolments.
- ◆ Be in a robust financial position – Approval for Specialist School status will be dependent upon the production of a copy of a Financial Plan considered and approved by the Board of Governors and endorsed by the appropriate Funding Authority.

Stage 1

20. The aim of this stage of the process is to identify all schools interested in participating in the pilot and sifting the applications to identify 10 schools to proceed to the second stage. All schools, which consider they can meet the criteria above and wishing to apply for one of the 10 places, will complete a short self-nomination form. The information in the form will be used to ascertain the school's potential suitability for inclusion in the Specialist Schools Pilot. It is likely that there will be competition for the limited number of places, particularly since the Department will be seeking to have as broad a range of school types and specialisms as can be achieved within the limited scale of the pilot.

Stage 2

21. The 10 short-listed schools will then be invited to proceed to Stage 2 and will be asked to complete a more detailed application form as outlined in paragraph 12.
22. The application form and guidance are in the course of preparation. The application form is expected to follow broadly similar lines to that used in England and interested schools can see a copy of this on the DfES website. www.standards.dfes.gov.uk/specialistschools/guidance/application_form

Timetable for Year 1 of the Pilot

23. The application time scales are outlined in Annex C. Schools must be completely satisfied that they have the capacity to meet the timescales specified for both stages of the process. The Department will not grant a time extension to any school for completion of the forms at either stage.

Support for Specialist Schools

24. The Department is currently considering how best, advisory support for the 10 pilot schools, can be provided to help ensure the success of the pilot. Details will be notified in due course.

Evaluation of Pilot

25. It will take some years to assess the full impact of a specialist approach on providing greater choice and raising standards but, in the short to medium term, surveys of schools to gauge pupil, teacher and parent reaction, together with ETI evidence, could inform the roll-out of the programme. Given the key role that a school's own evaluation has to play in the whole school improvement process, this should also contribute to the evaluation of the pilot and, as with other self-evaluation processes, it would be quality assured by ETI. All schools in the pilot will be required to participate in the evaluation process.

Future Pilot Arrangements

26. Following an initial evaluation of the application process, the Department will issue guidance on the arrangements for the subsequent year of the pilot, to all post-primary schools. While the pilot excludes Special Schools, schools in the School Support Programme, Group One Schools, 11-14 and 14-18 schools in the first year, they will be considered for inclusion in the pilot in subsequent years.

Costello Principles for Post-Primary Education

The following 7 guiding principles were identified, each with a key word to encapsulate its theme, on which a system of post-primary education should be based. The first four principles are pupil-centred; the others relate to the education service.

EQUALITY	Each young person should be highly and equally valued.
QUALITY	Each young person should enjoy education of the highest quality in all aspects of teaching, learning and wider educational provision.
RELEVANCE	Each young person should be equipped with the values and skills needed to lead a fulfilling life and contribute positively to a changing society and economy.
ACCESS	Each young person should have effective access, with appropriate support, to education, which allows him or her to fulfil their potential, and which fosters lifelong learning.
CHOICE	The education service should be flexible and provide a range of choices with information and advice so that all young people and their parents may make informed decisions relating to their educational development.
RESPECT	The education service should promote tolerance and reconciliation through an understanding of, and respect for, diversity.
PARTNERSHIP	The education service should foster effective partnerships among pupils, parents, teachers, education bodies and the wider community based on trust, openness, transparency and mutual support.

Specialisms for Northern Ireland Schools

- ◆ Arts (performing, visual or media, drama)
- ◆ Art and Design
- ◆ Business and Enterprise
- ◆ Engineering
- ◆ Health and Social Care
- ◆ Humanities
- ◆ Information and Communication Technology (ICT)
- ◆ Languages
- ◆ Leisure and Tourism
- ◆ Mathematics
- ◆ Mathematics and Computing
- ◆ Music
- ◆ Science
- ◆ Sport
- ◆ Technology

NB: The specialism “Rural and Environmental Studies” is currently under consideration and may be added to the list above.

Annex C

Timescale for Application Process for Specialist School Pilot

Timescale	Action
5 September 2005	◆ Issue invitation to all post primary schools to self nominate for consideration for inclusion in the pilot.
Noon 30 September 2005	◆ Receipt of completed self-nomination forms by the Department.
28 October 2005	◆ Department invites 10 schools to proceed to full application stage.
Noon 10 February 2006	◆ 10 Schools will submit full application forms.
10 March 2006	◆ Department announces approval of Specialist Schools status for successful schools.
1 April 2006	◆ Pilot begins – schools plan for 1 September 2006 when they will operate as a Specialist School.

