

Response from Labour Members in Northern Ireland

Labour Members in Northern Ireland (LMNI) welcome the opportunity to respond to the consultation on The Draft Education (Northern Ireland Order) 2006

Curriculum.

Labour Members in Northern Ireland welcome the determination to ensure a wide and pupil-centred curriculum for our schools. The curriculum provides the opportunity to measure pupil and institutional performance against agreed baselines, and, with the introduction of pupil profiling, the development of clear educational objectives for each child. We also welcome the concept of the minimum content of each area of learning enabling schools to make more curricular decisions.

LMNI would propose, however, that schools should be able to offer languages other than EC languages at Key Stage 3. This would enable pupils, for example from the growing Chinese community, to study their own language. We would hope that the Department will support schools, where necessary, to offer a wider range of languages not only for the benefit of pupils at school but also in recognition of a wider economic and community interest.

The Government should consider repealing Article 21 of the Education and Libraries (NI) Order 1986 and including a new article to establish a fair system of review of the Religious Education programme of study which would take account of the growing numbers of children with other faiths and none. Such a system should be rigorously inclusive of all religious and humanist thought. The current system ensures a wholly Christian controlling interest in establishing the Religious programme of study that is anachronistic and inappropriate.

Assessment

LMNI welcome the development of annual assessment for all pupils, based on skills, key stage and the curriculum and believe that it is an essential measure in the development of an achieving education system.

LMNI welcome the inclusion of a pupil profile and welcome the assurance that it will not be made available to schools prior to decisions being made on school admissions.

LMNI hope that the ability of schools to offer alternative examinations such as the International Baccalaureate will not be curtailed.

Collaboration.

LMNI note, with some disappointment, that there is no clear determination that Grammar schools will be compelled to become involved in the development of collaborative partnerships between schools.

We recommend that there be included within the legislation articles compelling the involvement of all schools in the development of such partnerships.

It is also disappointing that collaboration across the educational sectors is not a clear requirement of the new system. We understand that such a requirement was deliberately left out of the proposals at the behest of one of the school sectors. This is at best unfortunate and at worst a denial of choice and a declaration for separation over sharing. Collaboration across educational sectors is an opportunity to have a significant impact on the broad social goals outlined in the Government's "Shared Future policy and should be compulsory.

Recommendation : LMNI would urge the government to include a positive responsibility for schools to collaborate across the educational sectors.

LMNI would hope that the school building programme will take account of the new curricular and collaborative initiatives by, for example considering the provision of Sixth-Form or Tertiary Colleges which have a proven ability to provide a wider post-16 curriculum and which will enable collaboration to be provided on a stronger, more inclusive and more economical basis.

School Admissions Policy.

Article 28 : The Party would suggest that the Boards of Governors of all schools, when drawing up or amending criteria under this Article should consider representations made to it by the Board in whose area the school is situated. Boards have a general responsibility for the provision of education in their Area. To ensure that all pupils in its area have a reasonable opportunity to gain admission to a school of their parents' preference, a general duty of oversight of admissions criteria for all schools is essential.

LMNI suggest that Article 28 (3) be amended to say that schools will not be allowed to amend their criteria without the approval of the Board for the area. It is important that schools are not allowed to suggest inappropriate admissions criteria that may skew their intake towards one social group or another.

LMNI would suggest that, given the nature of the proposed admissions criteria, schools be given the opportunity to use random methods of selection not only as the method for determining the last few places in a school but also as the main method of selection and hence the methods by which this could be accomplished could be set out in regulations.

Recognition of Teaching Certification.

LMNI would welcome the moving of recognition of teachers' qualifications from the Department to the General Teaching Council.

LMNI would also suggest that the opportunity be taken to give the Council powers, as similarly suggested for England and Wales, to remove from the register teachers on the Sex Offenders register.

Removal of requirement for an Annual Parents Meeting.

LMNI would strenuously contest the removal of such a mechanism for reporting to parents, indeed we would prefer to see the extension of such a provision to encourage more parental involvement in schools.

Current arrangements with their low level of parental turnout reflect the inadequacy of the effort put into parental involvement by a majority of schools. Parents must be encouraged to be at the heart of education, rather than considered an obstacle to children's learning.

Prepared for Labour Members in Northern Ireland

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