

Education (Northern Ireland) Order

Comment by NATFHE – the university and college lecturers union.

1. NATFHE welcomes the opportunity to comment on the proposals in the draft order. We welcome the thrust of the reforms set out in Minister Angela Smith's statement of December 2005. We welcome the decision to end academic selection at age 11. We believe that measures to develop closer working relationships between schools and the further education sector will enhance learning opportunities for young people and better enable them to make career choices.
2. We support the concept behind the curriculum Entitlement Framework but have concerns that arrangements between schools and other providers such as FE colleges must be on a basis of partnership with the primary objective that of best meeting the needs of individual pupils. NATFHE does not support a "free market" approach whereby funding is available to schools who may choose to purchase provision for reasons based upon cost at the expense of quality considerations. There is a need for structured arrangements involving educational partners to develop provision on a planned basis underpinned by co-operation, accessibility and quality standards. It is essential that government provides inter-departmental leadership to give effect to such arrangements within the framework of the Education Order.
3. We note the Department is to prepare and issue a scheme relating to the suspension and expulsion of pupils from schools. We believe the Department must incorporate into that scheme, arrangements to take account of situations where pupils whose conduct gives cause for concern are being taught in the premises of partner organisations. There is a need also for consistent arrangements in that regard to apply across the further education sector to students registered with a college and who come within the statutory definition of a "young person".
4. We welcome the enhanced role afforded to the General Teaching Council for Northern Ireland in respect of approving the qualifications for recognition of teachers. We are concerned that this provision appears to relate only to teachers in the schools sector – teachers in the further education sector are excluded. It is surely an inconsistency at the heart of educational policy that the same group of pupils may be taught by teachers from both sectors yet no mechanism is in place to bridge those sectors so as to ensure common standards of conduct and practice amongst teachers. There is an opportunity to address this in the Order by bringing further education teachers fully within the ambit of the General Teaching Council.
5. We note the powers being afforded to the Department of Employment and Learning in respect of changing the constitution of a Governing Body of a further education institution. We presume that Department is taking advantage of this legislative vehicle in order to assume this power. We note also the introduction of provisions to enable payments in the form of remuneration to be made to governors of FE colleges. Such a measure will significantly alter the character of Governing Bodies and has implications for their accountability, status and independence and will damage community service ethos of that role. We are disappointed that such a measure should be "slipped through" in this Order and in the absence of a widespread community consultation and debate based upon an informed argument as to the merits of such a development. To bring forward such a measure at a time when government is committed to reducing the number and role of non-governmental organisations is somewhat surprising. We suggest this measure be dropped from the Order.