



Northern Ireland Council for Voluntary Action

Response to the Department of Education's New Post- Primary Arrangements and Proposal for a draft Education (Northern Ireland) Order

**7 March 2006
CONS 585**

New Post-Primary Arrangements and Proposal for a draft Education (Northern Ireland) Order

1. Introduction

1.1 The Northern Ireland Council for Voluntary Action (NICVA) welcomes the opportunity to respond to the Department of Education's proposals. Our comments are informed by NICVA's role as the representative body for the voluntary and community sector and by a vision of society where all citizens are treated fairly, where sectarianism and discrimination are not tolerated and where respect for human rights and equality is regarded as the norm.

2. Positive aspects of the reforms

2.1 NICVA supports the broad thrust of the Education (Northern Ireland) Order 2006 which sets out the shape of the new education system. We believe that the draft legislation gives Northern Ireland the opportunity to develop a better education system for all.

2.2 We welcome the end of selection at 11 on both educational and social justice grounds. NICVA agrees with the case for reform outlined in the ministerial statement including the need to prepare young people for a fast-changing world and to offer more choice and flexibility to meet students' needs. In our previous submission on the new admission arrangements for post primary schools, we called for the addition of a principle about ensuring equality of opportunity for every child and therefore are pleased that the statement urges reform to provide equality of opportunity for all young people regardless of where they live, the school they attend or their social background.

3. Case for reform

3.1 This case for change is underscored by the fact that 'academic' selection is fast becoming a myth with most grammar schools taking pupils at all ability levels to counter declining pupil numbers. At Campbell College 37.4 per cent of new pupils had a grade A and in St Joseph's Convent Grammar it was 38.4 per cent; Cambridge House took in only 25.7 per cent of its pupils with the top grade and in Hunterhouse it was a mere 10.1 per cent. They are fast becoming comprehensive schools for middle-class children except that they do not offer a full range of vocational subjects.

3.2 Statistics for free school meals provide conclusive evidence that the present system discriminates against disadvantaged children – the latest figures for 2005/2006 show that secondary schools had four times more disadvantaged pupils (30 per cent of all their students) than grammar schools (7 per cent). Furthermore, the present system based on selection at 11 perpetuates disadvantage and discourages mobility with 63.2 per cent of secondary pupils leaving without good examination passes, compared to 6.4 per cent of grammar school leavers. Appendix 1 sets out the case for abolishing selection and deals with some of the myths that surround the issue.

3.3 Inequality between the secondary and grammar sectors exists in every part of Northern Ireland and in both the Catholic and Protestant school systems. In the Protestant sector the inequality is particularly serious; more than six times more children are entitled to free school meals in secondary than in grammar schools. Figure 1 summarises the data at Northern Ireland level. Information for every constituency in Northern Ireland is given in Tables 1 and 2.

Figure 1: Summary of proportion of disadvantaged students by sector, all Northern Ireland.

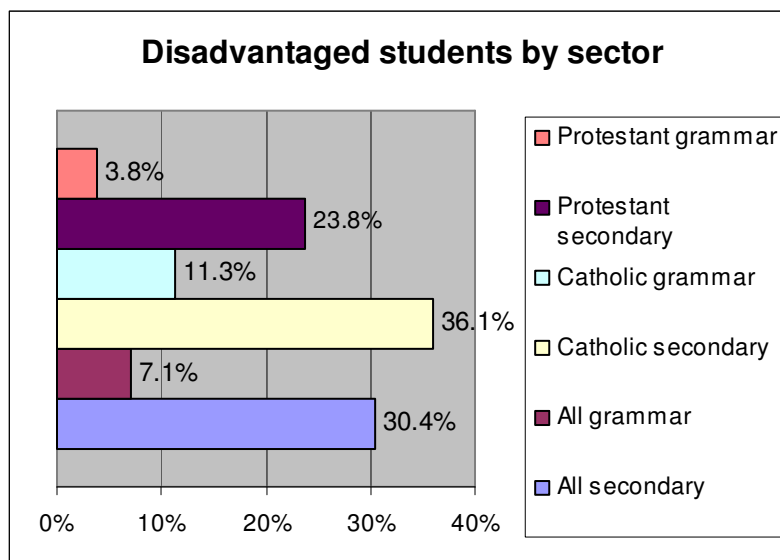


TABLE 1: Pupils from disadvantaged homes in secondary and grammar schools in each constituency, 2004-05

Constituency	All religions		
	sec	gram	ratio
Belfast East	32.3	2.0	16
Belfast North	48.5	8.4	6
Belfast South	36.2	3.5	10
Belfast West	47.7	20.6	2
East Antrim	23.5	4.0	6
East Londonderry	27.8	5.5	5
Fermanagh & S Tyrone	27.5	8.7	3
Foyle	50.9	13.6	4
Lagan Valley	32.3	1.9	17
Mid Ulster	26.7	11.4	2
Newry and Armagh	26.1	9.3	3
North Antrim	26.0	4.1	6
North Down	17.9	2.2	8
South Antrim	21.6	3.9	5.5
South Down	22.9	5.1	4.5

Strangford	19.2	2.6	7
Upper Bann	22.5	5.4	4
West Tyrone	36.0	15.5	2
All Northern Ireland	30.4	7.1	4

TABLE 2: Pupils from disadvantaged homes in Catholic and Protestant secondary and grammar schools in each constituency, 2004-05

Constituency	Catholic			Protestant		
	sec	gram	ratio	sec	gram	ratio
Belfast East	NA	1.8	NA	32.3	2.1	16
Belfast North	50.8	9.9	5	45.6	5.4	8.5
Belfast South	51.6	4.4	12	20.7	3.1	7
Belfast West	45.6	20.6	2	64.9	NA	NA
East Antrim	26.1	5.1	5	22.9	3.7	6
East Londonderry	28.5	5.7	5	27.0	5.4	5
Fermanagh & South Tyrone	32.3	13.2	2	17.9	4.1	4
Foyle	54.0	16.6	3	32.4	4.5	7
Lagan Valley	39.1	NA	NA	30.9	1.9	16.5
Mid Ulster	28.1	14.4	2	23.8	5.4	4
Newry and Armagh	34.2	10.6	3	14.8	2.9	5
North Antrim	29.0	5.0	6	24.0	3.8	6
North Down	15.0	NA	NA	19.4	2.2	9
South Antrim	28.9	NA	NA	17.2	3.9	4
South Down	28.6	7.7	4	9.6	2.5	4
Strangford	18.0	NA	NA	19.5	2.6	7.5
Upper Bann	30.4	12.2	2.5	14.6	3.2	5
West Tyrone	40.6	18.6	2	25.3	10.9	2
All Northern Ireland	36.1	11.3	3.2	23.8	3.8	6.3

Notes

1. Disadvantaged is defined as being eligible for free school meals.
2. Integrated schools are neither Catholic nor Protestant and many are all-ability so they are excluded from this analysis. In the 19 second-level integrated schools, 22.6% of pupils were disadvantaged.
3. Raw data from DE from the annual school census in 2005-05.

4. **Oversubscribed schools**

4.1 In order to make equality a reality, we called in the previous submission for more research into the criteria for over subscribed schools. We stated: “NICVA supports the use of feeder schools only if a socially-balanced intake can be achieved by prioritising pupils from a mix of prosperous and disadvantaged areas. If feeder schools drew their intake from areas which included social housing, for example, then the opportunity is reduced to buy property near a desirable school, thus pushing up house prices and achieving a kind of social selection by proxy. We suggest that more research is needed to provide guidance about achieving a social mix for every post-primary school as this document simply does not present any evidence about what would be possible in different areas across Northern Ireland and what the implications would be.”

4.2 We argued that more intervention may be necessary to counter the link between geographical and educational segregation or selection by postcode: “Some suggest that a robust TSN approach should direct greatly increased funding to schools and teachers’ salaries in deprived areas. Others argue that there is merit in attaching additional resources to deprived children in order to make them more ‘attractive’ to more popular schools. This is currently done in Northern Ireland for nursery places. London schools are experimenting with a clearing system traditionally used in matching choices and available places in higher education. There are also strong arguments that a ‘blind’ or random selection mechanism for allocating oversubscribed places should replace all the proposed criteria. We believe that all of these options should be investigated, taking into account that in rural areas there will be issues of distance from schools.” We therefore welcome the minister’s commitment to further consultation in 2007 on draft regulations on community and geographical criteria in order to avoid postcode selection and rural disadvantage.

5. **New curriculum and cooperation**

5.1 We also welcome the statement’s reference to other reforms including the phased introduction of the new curriculum, the ‘entitlement framework’ and cooperation between schools, further education and other training providers to deliver the framework. However we have one caveat - the guide for parents on the new transfer process contains a proposal that parents can take the pupil profile to inform discussions at post primary school meetings. NICVA would reiterate our concern that this should not be allowed to lead to selection by the back door.

6. **Changing world**

6.1 We often hear about economic growth, low unemployment and increased opportunities in Northern Ireland, but this conceals uneven development with growing inequality between the skilled qualified workforce which can adapt to the forces of globalisation and unskilled people who are in danger of becoming doubly disadvantaged by sectarian and social segregation. Other

factors including the Review of Public Administration and the reducing UK subsidy will further alter the economic context and change the sort of trained and qualified people we need. At present NI has a high proportion of people aged 16-65 with severe literacy and numeracy problems – 24 per cent of adults are on the lowest level of prose literacy and more than half (54 per cent) are defined as functionally illiterate. Furthermore 24 per cent of the working age population have no qualifications, far worse than the 15 per cent in England and Scotland and 17 per cent in Wales.

- 6.2 Northern Ireland cannot retain an ossified and socially stratified school system suited for the 1950s. We need one that will promote the skills of all citizens and put Northern Ireland on top of the league in skills, one that will encourage entrepreneurship, competencies in the growing IT and services sectors and end false dichotomies between the academic and vocational. The draft Order goes in the right direction though we acknowledge that many other actions are needed to break down inequality and create a fair society and a learning society. That is why NICVA has campaigned for a strong anti-poverty strategy encompassing income, employment, health, housing, community development, education and neighbourhood renewal to tackle the increasing gap between the rich and poor.

7. Concerns and recommendations

7.1 **Not enough sharing**

Angela Smith, Education Minister, states that schools will need time to put the entitlement framework in place to provide access to a wide range of courses from Key Stage 4. Apart from enabling schools, FE and other training organisations to work together, which is already happening in many areas, there is no encouragement of cross-community collaboration, despite the political priority given to *A Shared Future*. This is very disappointing as education is a key area in the delivery of *A Shared Future*. NICVA would urge the pending review of the education estate to make this a top priority.

- 7.2 We also urge that training organisations in the voluntary and community sector should be considered for participation in collaborative arrangements. For example, organisations that work with Traveller children and young people often perform excellent work and it is important that their expertise and experience are recognised. NICVA's policy manifesto states: "Over 55 per cent of Travellers are children; the challenge of that minority's social inclusion is primarily a children's issue."

- 7.3 Special schools have not been mentioned – surely they should have the opportunity to participate in collaborative arrangements?

8. **Follow the money?**

- 8.1 The explanatory memorandum explains that there will be £24.7m to support the introduction of key elements of the new arrangements between 2005 and 2008, but that any additional costs will be met from within existing budgets. There is already a crisis in education with more cuts expected in teacher

numbers and existing services. The department has prioritised balanced budgets, rather than other obligations like Section 75, which does not bode well for implementation of the reforms. The education budget should be increased in light of this deepening financial crisis and the importance of getting the education reforms right. We would urge the need for joined-up working because there has been no financial allocation for funding the nutritional guidelines for the schools meal service, which have major implications for the reduction of health inequalities and long-term savings in the health budget.

9. **Investment and procurement proposals**

- 9.1 NICVA welcomes the increased investment in school buildings and facilities and understands that falling numbers provide a rationale for closing schools that can no longer provide the required range of education. However, we would argue that these pressures are exacerbated by an education system that is divided by ability, religion and gender and that decisions on closures should be postponed until the review of the education estate is complete.
- 9.2 Moreover we would argue that the statistics on declining numbers and the proposal to close schools have not factored in the growing number of immigrant children and young people. We would urge more research into the projected number of additional students and that the review should consider their educational needs. (It is estimated that the Republic of Ireland will gain over 11,000 immigrants each month which means that 20 per cent of the population will be non-national by 2020).
- 9.3 Falling rolls represent an opportunity to provide smaller classes targeted at the most disadvantaged areas. It has been pointed out that it would be unacceptable for surgeons to perform expensive surgery on private patients that was denied to NHS patients and yet this is what happens in education. Therefore underachieving students should enjoy premium funding which would mean small class sizes, incentives for the best teachers to stay in these schools and a focus on making every school a good school.
- 9.4 Moreover many of the projected closures are due to occur in areas of greatest need which will be compounded by the proposed new procurement arrangements. These include the privatisation of front-line staff, including cleaners, caretakers and grounds maintenance staff, which will increase inequalities in disadvantaged areas, just when the draft Order is promoting equality of opportunity.
- 9.5 For these reasons we urge the department to consider the unintended consequences of the current investment strategy. New build controlled, maintained and voluntary schools are going ahead at a time of closures, cutbacks and job losses, with no regard to promoting integrated education in line with *A Shared Future* and the other imperatives mentioned above. The announcement of a moratorium on integrated schools is a scandal in light of the waiting lists and apparent priority given to parental choice in the draft Order. This development highlights the lack of planning and the urgent need

for strategic thinking, surely work for the Strategic Investment Board and the department, together with education partners and the voluntary and community sector.

10. **Need for vision**

10.1 At present we fear that the case for reform will go by default because the department has not explained the benefits of reform for everyone and has not painted a picture of the new system. The detractors have focused on one issue, academic selection, and sown seeds of confusion and uncertainty about the reforms. Therefore it is vital that the department articulates and communicates its vision and key messages – NICVA would suggest the theme ‘*A better education for all children*’ where all students and parents can choose between a range of good post-primary schools, some with an academic bias, some with a vocational emphasis, some with a mix of the two and some with specialist status. It will be a system where cooperation will replace competition between schools and other training providers to give students a much wider range of options, where students will not have to make choices until the age of 14 and 16, where they will have a choice of 24 subjects at 14 and 27 at 16 and where learning will be tailored to the individual.

10.2 With increased investment, collaboration and the new curriculum, a new education landscape will emerge with emphasis on equality and quality. The replacement of the transfer test with the pupil profile will stop the abuse of ten year old children and distortion of the primary school curriculum.

10.3 Collaboration is already working in Limavady, Newry and Ballycastle with students, teachers and parents united in their positive evaluation of cooperation and the increased range of options. The vocational enhancement programme entails collaboration with further education and already caters for over 8,000 students. The new curriculum will give teachers more professional freedom to teach more creatively and meet the needs of students more effectively. The options, including a greater emphasis on ICT, literacy and numeracy, personal development, citizenship, employability and careers’ advice will prepare young people for life and for a rapidly changing world. The vision is an education system fit for purpose – at present the system fails to prepare children adequately for life and work. A recent report from employers’ organisations criticised the skills of school leavers and graduates for their lack of employability and cited the need for much better communication skills, which are subjugated by the present system’s emphasis on academic content and compliance.

11. **Need for joined-up government**

11.1 This is a cliché now but still holds true. If the department wants to deliver these reforms it must work closely with DEL to influence universities, including the need to recognise vocational subjects. Also, the announcement about the details of the children and young people’s fund is due in the near future, yet there is no indication how the education reforms will link with the fund’s proposals.

12. **Need for children and young people's voices**

- 12.1 The introduction of the pupil profile and emphasis on choice, flexibility and tailored learning provide an opportunity for students to take part in assessment of their own learning from an early age, which will encourage motivation, and should be reflected in the design of the profiles. NICVA believes that young people have not been adequately consulted on the proposals contained in the draft Order.

13. **Communication**

- 13.1 NICVA would urge the department to develop a communication strategy, not as an add-on, but as an integral part of implementation to inform the public, thereby influencing political representatives. Communication could also be targeted at politicians - for example, data about inequalities based on free school meals statistics in unionist constituencies could inform the thinking of unionist politicians who are traditionally hostile to the reforms. We would urge the department to allay the fears of the grammar school lobby by arguing that the reforms will benefit the most academic students and will not challenge the future of grammar schools which will play an important part with partners in broadening choice for all children in both vocational and academic subjects. They will be able to offer two-thirds of their options in the academic field and their students can benefit from additional vocational options offered by the school or by partners.
- 13.2 Appropriate communication should also be directed to parents, schools, unions, business and other social partners like the churches to keep them informed and 'sell' the benefits of the changes. Since these changes are all about children and young people, advice should be sought from the children and youth sectors for the design of age-appropriate material.

14. **Equality**

- 14.1 We were disappointed that no equality impact assessment was undertaken on the new admission arrangements. The rationale that the proposals are too high level is inadequate because an assessment of likely differential impacts and potential adverse impacts would have highlighted some of the concerns above. Another benefit of assessment would be to highlight the need for a gender analysis of the curriculum which would lead to discussion about, inter alia, the merits of introducing age appropriate relationship and sex education in personal development programmes to provide female students with the self-esteem and confidence to negotiate relationships. Also, discussion about the race ground would point to the need for admission arrangements to take account of increased inward migration, including the need to provide information to parents in different languages. Moreover consultation on assessment would have encouraged more engagement with people directly affected and would have assisted the communication of the benefits of reform.

Appendix 1

Let's move forward... to a better education for all children

Introduction

The world is moving forward and so should education. We have the opportunity in Northern Ireland to create an education system that will meet the needs of all children and young people and create a solid foundation for a learning society. We do not have that at present. Northern Ireland's system has important strengths, supported by the parents' belief that their children's education is important. But it also has weaknesses, chiefly the large number of people dismissed as failures at an early age.

One result of selection at 11 is that education is highly disputed territory; it does not need to be like that. We can build on the strengths of the system, including primary schools that give high quality education to most children. That means more investment in pre-school education and children's services, not just in education but in related areas like health. It means improvements in primary education in disadvantaged areas where levels of achievement for very many children are too low.

Creating an education system for all children also requires the ending of academic selection at the age of 10 or 11. We can improve choice and flexibility for all pupils, building on the strengths of both grammar and secondary schools and the small number of comprehensive schools through partnership. We should not shut off possibilities for young children; rather we should ensure that they continue to learn and develop and gradually take decisions, along with their parents, on the sort of education and training they would like and be suited to.

This paper sets out seven reasons why selection at 11 should be ended and suggests we move forward to make a better education system a reality.

1. Cannot and should not select at 11

It is not possible to select children at the age of 11. They simply do not fall into two neat groups of academic and non-academic children. Children are different and unique; all have a mix of aptitudes, abilities and intelligences. Some develop later than others – too many children have failed the 11-plus and gone on to high academic achievement. The 11-plus is discredited but so is academic selection itself. It is doomed to fail. It has always failed – when we had IQ tests, verbal reasoning tests, tests of English, maths and science and every other form of selection.

2. Selection at 11 is unfair.

Even if we could divide children at that age into those who pass and those who fail, it is wrong to do so. A system that brands most of these young children as failures is morally unacceptable.

Moreover there is double unfairness because selection discriminates against working class children. Consistently research studies (eg those by John Wilson in the former NI Council for Educational Research) have shown that middle class children are far more likely to pass the tests than working class children. Among those on borderline grades, middle class children are more likely to get grammar school places than working class children with the same grades.

Nothing has changed. A study published in 2000 showed that 84.4% of the children of professional families went to grammar school; if the father was a clerical worker, 79.1% of their children went to grammar schools. By contrast, only 23.5% of factory workers' children went to grammar schools and a mere 13.2% of children whose father was unemployed. (*The pattern of performance at GCSE*, Peter Daly and Ian Shuttleworth, QUB, in *The Effects of the Selective System of Secondary Education in Northern Ireland*, DE, 2000.)

We see the same inequality in the proportion of pupils from poor backgrounds in the two sectors, as defined by entitlement to free school meals. The latest figures for 2005/2006 show that secondary schools had four times more of these disadvantaged pupils (28% of all their students) than grammar schools (7%). In the Protestant sector the inequality is even greater, approximately seven times more children are entitled to free school meals in secondary than in grammar schools.

A small number of working class children do get to grammar school but we make it very difficult for them. Thousands of able working class children are being written off at the age of 11 because of selection, regardless of what sort of tests we use. We need to move forward to create a system that is fair to all children.

Daly and Shuttleworth comment on this issue as follows: "Selection might provide a way for some children from disadvantaged backgrounds to access grammar school education. However the aggregate patterns suggest selection can act in many individual cases to reinforce social segregation in the education system because of the relatively low proportion of disadvantaged pupils in the grammar school system."

Success and failure in education at an early age are self-fulfilling. Most people who do well at 11 proceed to good GCSE and A level grades and enter higher education. Most people who fail the 11 plus get mediocre GCSEs and no A levels. For example, 80.3% of grammar students leave with two or more A levels and another 13.4% have five or more good GCSE passes (grades A*-C). By contrast 18.3% of secondary leavers have two or more A levels and 18.5% have five good GCSEs.

In summary, 63.2% of secondary pupils leave without good examination passes but this is true of only 6.4% of grammar leavers. So the education system based on selection at 11 perpetuates disadvantage and discourages mobility.

It has been argued that Northern Ireland has more working class children going into higher education than other parts of the United Kingdom. Yes, there are a number of factors at work here. Firstly we cannot consider just the number of people from NI entering NI institutions. In recent years between 26% and 40% of students have gone to study elsewhere in the UK and we know they are more likely to be middle class. In 2003-04, for example, 52% of NI domiciled students accepted in Britain were from

the highest social economic classification but this was true of only 38% of NI people entering NI institutions.

In addition, the advancement of working class children to higher education is largely among Catholics. This is indicated by the fact that 46% of students admitted to St Mary's are working class, but this has been the position for many years. For example, among higher education entrants in 1991, 43% of Catholics but only 27% of Protestants were from manual backgrounds, as Table 1 below shows.

	Protestant	Catholic	All (incl 137 others)
Non manual	73.4%	56.8%	65.3%
Manual	26.6%	43.2%	34.7%
Number	2251	2282	4670

Source: Cormack et al, *Higher Education Participation of Northern Irish Students in Higher Education Quarterly*, volume 48, no 3, 1994

The most important point about access to higher education, however, is that far too few people from the lowest social classes achieve it. If we fast forward to 1997, only 10.6% of the higher education entrants from Northern Ireland were from the two lowest social classes (semi-skilled and unskilled). Among UK entrants generally, 10.9% were from these two lowest social classes, so there is no evidence of the NI system being more successful in getting people from disadvantaged groups into higher education.

However, more NI people from Social Class III (both manual and non-manual) entered higher education than people from the UK as a whole; correspondingly fewer people from the highest social groups came from NI. (Figures extracted from Thanki et al, *UK/Ireland student flows: an analysis of the 1997 student application and entry data*, Centre for Research on Higher Education, April 2000.)

If we fast forward again to the latest statistics for higher education entrants, we see the same pattern, though the classification of social class is different. As Table 2 shows, UK entrants generally are more likely to be from the two highest social classes than those from NI and this picture is reversed in the middle groups. Again the important feature is that there is little difference in the shares coming from the two lowest groups (semi-routine and routine occupations) – 20.3% of entrants from NI and 19.8% from the entire UK cohort.

Table 2: acceptances to higher education, 2005

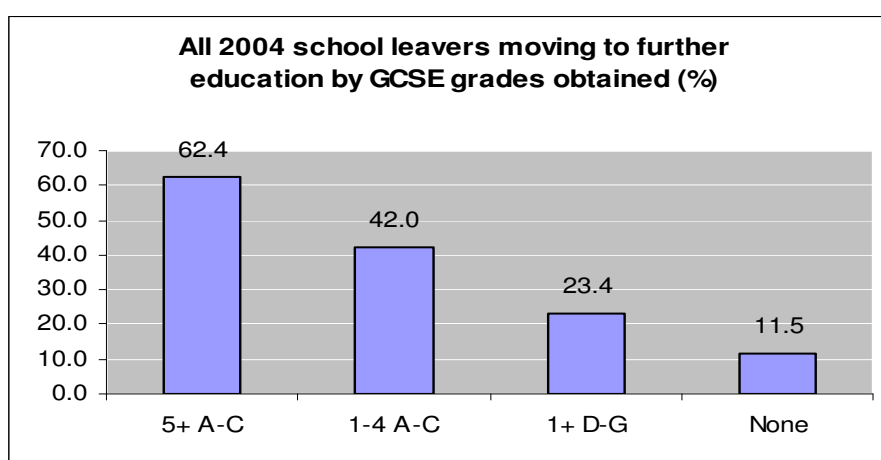
	from NI	from UK	% NI	% UK
Social groups 1 and 2	4,838	146,777	42.6	52.8
Social groups 3-5	4,204	76,344	37.1	27.5
Social groups 6 and 7	2,303	54,928	20.3	19.8
All social groups	11,345	278,049	100	100

Source: UCAS annual statistics, excluding 'not known'; see www.ucas.ac.uk.

3. Let's move forward and keep options open

The good news is that a minority of pupils who fail at 11 persevere and succeed against the odds in secondary schools or further education. We must create opportunities for all children to succeed instead of putting barriers in their way. Northern Ireland is facing a new economy needing new and greater skills by far more people. It cannot compete in a global economy by creating low-skill jobs, only by moving dramatically up the value chain.

There can be little doubt that the stigma of the 11-plus is a factor in the anti-education culture in NI. Failure breeds failure; too many people believe that education is not for them. For example, there is a clear correlation between achievement at GCSE (which is largely determined by fate at 11) and staying on in education, as the school leaver statistics for 2003-04 clearly show (Table 10, DE, Sep 2005).



Instead of hard and fast decisions at the early age of 11, we should have flexibility and greater choice of courses so that young people can have a range of academic and vocational courses and the option of moving from school to school. Choices can become firmer at the ages of 14 and 16 whilst still retaining flexibility. Choice and flexibility should be actively promoted by the Department of Education through support and funding incentives.

4. Is Northern Ireland's education system the envy of the world?

Hardly. Nearly all grammar schools are good at their task of getting most of what are deemed the 'brightest' children into higher education by ensuring they get good GCSEs and A levels. Top children will probably do well in any system and certainly the one proposed for Northern Ireland in the draft Education Order 2006 offers them the choice and challenge needed to make the most of their abilities.

It should be remembered that grammar schools are not the only element in our education system. They build on the solid foundation provided by seven years of primary education – which has always been all-ability. There is no reason to think that all ability schools would be any less successful at the age of 12 or 13 or older.

In addition, secondary schools and further education play an important role in motivating children who have been rejected by selection. Many of them do the job very well. Indeed, 40% of the people from NI who go into higher education do so through the route of secondary schools or further education (Ann Mallon: *Are students who study in GB different from those that study in NI*, in Labour Market Bulletin 19, Dec 2005, DEL)

However, this minority succeeds against the odds and most people who fail the 11-plus go on to achieve little from five years of secondary education. As mentioned above, nearly two-thirds of secondary school leavers (63.2%) do not have 'acceptable' qualifications ie two or more A levels or five good GCSE passes.

Looking at all leavers (from secondary and grammar schools), 41.2% do not have acceptable qualifications. That is 10,575 young people in 2004 alone. Nobody could envy a system that fails such a large number of children. Moreover if we examine just those pupils who left with only GCSEs ie they did not achieve A levels, the number of leavers is 14,315; of these, 70.5% did not achieve five or more good grades.

5. Government diktat and contrary to human rights.

The draft Order is neither government diktat nor in breach of human rights. It was government that introduced the 11-plus and kept it going for decades despite clear evidence that it discriminates against disadvantaged children. It makes no sense to claim that sensible change in the interests of the majority of NI children amounts to dictatorship. The Order in Council procedure is far from ideal but it is the system we have in the absence of political agreement to restore devolved government. Well organised lobby groups should not be able to prevent change just because they think the changes will not serve their interests.

It is far more convincing to claim that we are denying the human rights of children who fail the 11-plus. The announcement of a legal challenge is probably a publicity stunt that will never reach court. If it does, we believe any legal challenge to the draft Order on human rights grounds will fail. International human rights conventions offer protection for fundamental religious and political convictions but do not extend to a parent's right to insist on a particular type of school eg single-sex or selective school.

Government should be involved in education in partnership with parents, children and other stakeholders. We expect government to provide the money for education and by abolishing selection we expect it to create a better education system that can challenge all children, offer them greater opportunities and develop their talents and skills to meet the needs of the 21st century. We don't want to go back to a 'free trade' system where charitable institutions provided education.

6. The myth of destroying successful grammar schools.

Nothing in the draft Order challenges the future of grammar schools. Not one grammar school will shut down if the proposals go ahead. They will play an important part with secondary schools and further education colleges in broadening choice for

all children in both vocational and academic subjects. Grammar schools can provide particular expertise in academic subjects and will be able to offer two-thirds of their options in the academic field; their students can benefit from additional vocational options offered by the school or by a partner school.

Government is not dictating how these partnerships will work. Local schools and colleges, including grammar schools, can develop systems that best serve the needs of their students.

It is a mistake to talk about ‘grammar schools’ as though they are identical. In reality there are very large differences between them, both in their intakes and in their achievements at the ages of 16 and 18.

At one time the grammar sector used to take about a quarter of the supposedly ‘top’ pupils but last year there were 13 grammar schools which drew less than half of their intake from this group. At Campbell College, 37.4% of new pupils had a grade A and in St Joseph’s Convent Grammar it was 38.4%; Cambridge House took in only 25.7% of its pupils with the top grade and in Hunterhouse it was a mere 10.1%¹. So many grammar schools are almost comprehensives in the sense that they take pupils at all ability levels, as measured by the 11-plus tests. Certainly they are effectively all-ability but they do not seem to object to this or find it is a problem. Nor should it be a problem if some of the lower grade pupils admitted are from working class homes.

7. The world is changing, so should education

We mentioned earlier the global economy. Other important things are changing. The Review of Public Administration and the reducing UK subsidy to Northern Ireland will also alter the economic context in which we work and change the sort of trained and qualified people we need.

At present NI has a very high proportion of people aged 16-65 with severe literacy and numeracy problems – 24% of adults are on the lowest level of prose literacy and more than half (54%) are defined as functionally illiterate. This is closely related to life chances. For example, people out of work were almost twice as likely as employed people to be on the lowest literacy level; conversely people in work were three times more likely to be on one of the two highest literacy levels than people out of work. Similarly, people on the lowest incomes were five times more likely to have low literacy levels than those with the highest incomes. (Sweeney et al, *Adult Literacy in Northern Ireland*, NISRA, 1998).

Low levels of skills are also found among Northern Ireland adults. If our selective education has been the envy of the world since it was introduced in 1948, we would not expect 24% of the working age population to have no qualifications, far worse than the 15% in England and Scotland and 17% in Wales (Labour Force Survey 2003).

¹ These figures are, if anything, overestimates. The DE statistics use an asterisk for small numbers which does not affect the numbers with grade A but does reduce the numbers with lower grades; the stats do not have overall admissions figures.

We cannot retain an ossified, socially stratified school system suited for the 1950s. Or one in which very many people are turned off from lifelong learning. We need one that will promote the skills of all citizens and put NI on top of the league in skills, one that will encourage entrepreneurship and end false distinctions between academic and vocational study.

The draft Order goes in the right direction though many other actions are needed to break down social class discrimination and create a fair society and a learning society. It would be wrong for those who support the proposed changes to imagine that inequality will disappear. That is why NICVA has consistently supported concerted action by government to create and implement an anti-poverty strategy encompassing income, employment, health, housing, education, community development and all the complex social factors that perpetuate inequality in education and other aspects of society.

Support the changes – let's move forward to better education for all children.