



**Sinn Fein Response to the New Post-Primary Arrangements
And
Proposal for a draft Education Order**

Sinn Fein Response to the draft Education Order December 2005

Sinn Fein welcomes the continuing debate on education in the Six Counties and will pursue the outcomes on an All Ireland basis. We also draw attention to the fact that such crucial decisions are not being made by a locally elected, accountable Minister and Assembly.

We will begin by examining the launch statement made by commenting upon the Education Minister Angela Smith's statement on launching the Draft Order and the New Post Primary Arrangements.

Page 1 is a restatement of the British Government's emphasis on market values in education.

The "global market" and "value for money" concepts are listed ahead of what Sinn Fein has and will continue to prioritise: "But our key focus must be on the pupils." Ending this particular paragraph the Minister comes closer to the Republican vision of education, i.e: "...meet individual pupils' needs..." whilst changing economic and social conditions.

There is also an attempt to address the core change in education:

What to do with the legacy of selection now it is ended and how to end competition between schools and to create right relationships between them and other agencies at local level, to best serve all our children.

The proposal to introduce Learning for Life and Work to all Key Stage 4 pupils, with Cross Curriculum Skills throughout each child's school experience, must be formatively as well as summatively evaluated. Any negative and wasteful aspect can thus be swiftly addressed and not left to erode a pupil's enthusiasm for the course or a teacher's zest for facilitating it. Initial teacher training has to address the new areas, as do colleagues on Continuing Professional Development. Both groups of teachers are expected to revamp and improve Careers Guidance along with colleagues in other agencies. Again this begs the question of how much of the £24.7 million will be ring fenced for the various strands of change?

Sinn Fein welcomes the diversity of pathways that will potentially open up for all pupils in the partnerships or campuses which the new arrangements will give rise to. We sound one note of caution though, which is that no single school; within an arrangement can be left to facilitate the range of special needs of the pupils within the partnership or campus. ALL of the partners must share the load managerially and in terms of personnel allocation. Sinn Fein favours these new relationships but there are issues around the overall management of positive behaviour wherever pupils are being taught a course. As we have consistently pointed out such considerations also make demands on school budgets. We agree that links between schools and F.E. are not new; however the same could be said of reports from both that pupil attendance throughout the day can be an issue as are the nature of outcomes for certain children who have attended F.E. on day release.

The new partnerships will have to be monitored continuously and self-evaluated by the constituent partners. This must not be an add-on task for already busy members of Senior Management Teams. Sinn Fein would contend that an objective “Director of Improvement” might be a route to follow in this regard.

Transfer between KS2 and KS3 “...will be based on parents’ choice.” Sinn Fein also calls for an element of pupil choice. The nature of this can be debated quickly and have considerable input from children and young people. The good offices of the Children’s Commissioner could be used for this purpose.

In our National Literacy Recovery Proposals, we highlighted the successes of implementing “synthetic phonics” programmes by certain primary schools. We encourage further discussion and action across schools responsible for Foundation, KS1 and KS2, as to how such reading development strategies will be incorporated.

The use of the Pupil Profile tool as a basis for school transfer is still an issue for debate. As it stands there remains a question over its objectivity.

Assessment tasks for each key stage and the cross-curricular skills may present some uniformity of approach. Your reference is to gauging “...high and low levels of performance...”

Sinn Fein is also concerned with UNDER ACHIEVEMENT and the number of socio-economic co-occurring issues that contribute to it. Regrettably the same co-occurring issues often prevent some parents who would avail most from positive communications with schools, actually doing so.

Page 7 of the Minister’s statement makes reference to the oversubscribed popular schools. We now have the irony of a number of them receiving large sums of extra cash from the “Specialist Schools” budget to become even more popular. How do we strike a balance between encouraging schools to improve themselves even further and resourcing new and non-competitive school partnerships? This is another debate we must have in the immediate future. Such a debate can address the admissions criteria to second level schools in an open and fair way. Sinn Fein contends that this will be an opportunity to end the bussing of academic and vocationally gifted children out of their base communities to the detriment of the local schools.

A striking omission in the draft order is nay reference to the decades long success of community based alternative education projects. This is the time to incorporate such demonstrative expertise into local partnerships. We will return to this observation later. Suffice to say at this stage that they must be recognised as core and creative provision and resourced accordingly.

Turning to the detail of the Draft Order itself, Sinn Fein would argue that further analysis is required in relation to particular sections:

Part 1, Paragraph 6 on financial effects flags up the £24.7m set aside for the initial two years. “Any additional costs arising from other provisions will be met from within existing budgets.”

IN AN ERA WHEN £250M. CAN BE FOUND TO “REWARD” A SMALL, UNREPRESENTATIVE GROUP FROM THE GENERATIONS INVOLVED IN THE CONFLICT OF THE PAST – WHY CAN’T A SIMILAR SUM BE FOUND TO INVEST IN THE FULLY REPRESENTATIVE GENERATIONS OF THE FUTURE?

Part1 Paragraph 10 recognises that a rural proofing exercise is required. Sinn Fein welcomes this and will monitor the details because we flagged up the need for the Department to accept the “reality of rurality”.

Part 2, Paragraph 33, Article 18 employs the new vocabulary noted by Sinn Fein: “applied and general courses” to be taught in second level schools. Perhaps the Department and CCEA are making an effort to give equal validity to what were formally described as vocational and academic strands of the curriculum? Sinn Fein welcomes any such recognition but contends that a lot more practical actions are required by society in general as well as the agencies to value “applied” courses. We have pointed out before and do so again. Award Evenings could be occasions to celebrate qualifications in “applied” courses as much as we have historically done for “general” courses. Employers need to back the new “applied” courses by mentioning them positively in the media for example and stating that they contain the skills element required for a range of careers.

Articles 34, 35 and 36 state the intended new powers for the General Teachers Council. Sinn Fein will want to see the details of these as they affect every teacher in the Six Counties. The governing body of the GTC must be balanced and accountable and consequently Sinn Fein will monitor the outcome of the on-going election to the said body.

Article 38 makes reference to the remuneration of governors of F.E. institutions. Governors of schools are voluntary and any proposal to treat their F.E. counterparts differently in such respects could potentially erode the tradition of altruistic service. Expenses and subsistence are a separate issue but the “remuneration” concept is one that Sinn Fein would caution against for the reasons stated.

Article 40 will be a welcome change for Senior Management Teams and Governors of schools because the said annual parent’s meetings were historically under attended by parents and much of what was reported to them is replicated in the details of Principals’ speeches on Award Evenings.

The Minister and the Department will not be surprised by Sinn Fein’s opposition to the contents of Article 41 because of our public stance on fees for any F.E. or H.E. courses. We remain opposed to the introduction of such fees because education is a fundamental human right and a benefit to wider society.

A Number of other queries on behalf of those who provide Sinn Fein with a sizable mandate now follow:

1. Does the inclusion of a new Foundation Stage result from a positive and on-going evaluation of the “Enrichment Curriculum” pilot?
2. Will Key Stage 4 end whenever a pupil reaches the very last day of his/her sixteenth birthday? If so this could present difficulties for schools expecting pupils to attend until the last day of the final term of Year 12, in order to avail of as much examination preparation as possible.
3. Now that the emphasis is on “Cross Curriculum Skills”: is there no longer a statutory obligation to include the Cross Curriculum Themes?
4. In recent years Europe has recognised Irish as an Official Language. Why then is the latter not considered an option in the proposals for Key Stage 4 language studies for English Medium Schools? Sinn Fein does not accept this exclusion of the Irish Language at this Key Stage and considers your current proposal as racist and in breach of equality and human rights legislation.
5. Article 21 states that Boards of Governors may enter arrangements with amongst others: (c) any other person or body approved by the Department and appearing to the Board of Governors to be qualified and equipped to provide that education. Does this defining statement include the laudable community based Alternative Education Provision Sinn Fein refers to in this submission?
6. Article 30 on Suspension and Expulsion of pupils raises a number of concerns that inclusion of A.E.P. as a core creative partner in a number of the newly envisaged partnerships in second level education, could address to a large degree.
7. The five stages of the Code of Practice in Behaviour Management are slow to progress as matters stand. The new proposals in this regard could slow the process to the perception of no action. Reference is continually made to the board being responsible for suspension and expulsion,. This ignores the realities of the R.P.A. The children and young people involved are entitled to facilitation and recognition and resourcing of A.E.P. is worthy of detailed consideration in this regard.

Furthermore, it seems remiss to summatively evaluate the scheme for suspension and expulsion by a five-year period. Pupils so facilitated require daily formative evaluation and consequently any strategy employed to meet their needs, should be similarly analysed.

The immediacy of circumstances leading to some suspensions do not appear to be recognised. At this point it would appear that Articles 30, 32, 32 and 33 are in stark contrast to the British Prime Minister’s determination to empower S.M.T.s in England and Wales to deal promptly with behaviour meriting such action in their schools. Peer mediation as practiced in some schools currently is recommended for all Key Stages.