

UNISON

Northern Ireland

Submission on

The Education (Northern Ireland) Order 2006

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1.0 INTRODUCTION – THE NEED FOR REFORM

Education is inherently linked to increasing socio-economic position, income and other material resources. Education also prepares children with the practical, social and emotional skills for a healthy life. It prepares children to participate fully as active citizens. It also promotes the health of children by the provision of a safe healthy environment conducive to learning.

However in Northern Ireland the figures are stark. Children from middle class backgrounds have been far more likely to get a top (A) grade in the 11-plus than their working class counterparts. Under-achievement is most profound among those from deprived communities. They are under-represented in Grammar Schools, University and high wage employment. It is this context that UNISON has consistently called for the abolition of the 11+ selection system and endorses the new admissions arrangements for post primary schools.

2.0 KEY COMMENTS

2.1 New admissions arrangements for post primary schools

UNISON endorses the new admissions arrangements for post primary schools and the emphasis in the Ministerial statement to equality of opportunity as a means to redress historic disadvantage. However, it is essential that current proposals that parents can take the pupil profile to inform discussions at post primary school meetings (as contained within the statement's guide for parents on the new transfer process) should not lead to selection by the back door.

UNISON support the focus of the new curriculum on the importance of social, emotional and applied learning as well as academic.

2.2 Lack of vision

It is essential that the case for reform is not undermined by the failure of the Department to clearly outline precisely what the new system will look like. The Department must make it clear that reform will benefit all children. As it stands the current proposals convey a lack of vision.

2.3 Funding Crisis

According to the explanatory memorandum, £24.7m is available 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. However this fails to recognise the current in-built financial crisis in education which will deepen in 2006-08. The £100million for education proposed in the Government's priorities and budget document 2006-2008 is inadequate.

2.4 Investment and procurement proposals

In the context of a projected decline in pupil numbers a programme is proposed to rebuild and improve many schools. Whilst the problem of falling school rolls has been acknowledged the current cost pressures, particularly in Belfast, have not been. These cost pressures continue to mount and are exacerbated by an education system differentiated, in the main, by religion. In addition, many of the predicted closures are due to occur in areas of highest objective need. Strategic funding should be made available as a priority in the current budget

proposals to cope with the cost pressures currently facing the Boards and to fund innovative regeneration initiatives in these areas.

The proposals put forward in the 2006-2008 priorities and budget claim £120 million savings for investment in front-line services. They cite improved procurement arrangements as key methods for securing savings. However, the proposed new procurement arrangements currently advocate the privatisation of all front-line staff who are school cleaners, caretakers and grounds maintenance staff across NI. This is a totally contradictory position, and will serve to widen inequality and poverty in communities which require investment based on objective need. A rapid rethink is urgently needed.

In addition, a major proportion of the budget spend will be on strategic partnership and PFI proposals. It is essential that Equality Impact Assessment is conducted and that comprehensive equality conditions are attached to any spending of public money in this area. The construction programmes should be designed to ensure that apprenticeships are created for those from areas and groups of objective need and that fair wages and union recognition is built in. It is also essential to avoid further socio-economic instability by ensuring that front-line jobs in education support services are removed from the threat of privatisation.

2.5 School Meals

Although the Government has now re-introduced nutritional guidelines for the school meals service, there is no prioritisation of the recommendations arising from the 2004 Five-Board' Best Value Review of the school meals service and no financial allocation for its funding. This is despite the fact that major long-

term savings to the health budget and, more importantly, a reduction in health inequalities for children can be achieved by a fully funded free meals service. Indeed recent figures show that across the NHS in the UK as a whole £6bn per annum is currently spent on treating preventable poor diet related illnesses. A cost-benefit analysis should be carried out in NI. It should be noted that the recently tabled Schools Bill for England gives local education authorities the power to move to fully funded universal free meals building on the successful local initiative in Hull.

2.6 The role of classroom assistants

The proposals do not highlight the need to modernise the role of the classroom assistant in the context of the English model agreement on enhanced classroom assistant and related gains in preparation and planning time for teachers.

2.7 Suspension and expulsion

UNISON endorse the proposals on suspension and expulsion and would refer the Department to the BELB Behaviour Review which recommends increased support for pupils to remain in school.

End

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