

CHAPTER 2: THE CASE FOR CHANGE

Context

- 2.1 The education service has a vital role to play in equipping the young people of Northern Ireland with the knowledge, skills and values to be the citizens, parents, employees, entrepreneurs, or civic leaders of tomorrow. The task has never been more challenging.
- 2.2 We live in a society still emerging from conflict, where the hurt of recent history is still acutely felt. At an individual level, the life-chances of many young people are constrained by social disadvantage, which often results in educational underachievement, thus perpetuating the cycle. The challenge for our education service in this changing world is to ensure that each young person, irrespective of social background or circumstance, is given the opportunity to fulfil his or her potential and make a positive contribution to life and work in a modern pluralistic society.
- 2.3 Our economy has changed dramatically in recent years, with the decline in the traditional industries and a shift towards service-based and knowledge-based economic activity. This presents a clear challenge to educators, to ensure that young people emerging from our schools have the skills and personal attributes necessary for the modern work environment. Swift advances in technology are accelerating these changes and our young people will need to be adaptable and have the necessary ICT/ILT competence. This will impact too on the way education itself is delivered, in making use of facilities such as e-learning, and will present challenges for our teachers, who will need the support of the education service behind them to help make these changes.
- 2.4 Our education service enjoys a good reputation in many quarters, but a closer examination identified a number of challenges which it faces today and in the years ahead. The Group considered a range of statistical and other information relating to the impact of factors such as demography, curriculum, the performance of our current system relative to other countries, and the effect of existing policies and practices on our system.

Demography

- 2.5 By 2010, the number of pupils in post-primary schools is projected to fall by some 8% or 12,600 pupils, and population projections predict that by 2040, our age 11-18 population will have reduced by a quarter (Appendix 2). The demographic downturn is having an impact on the existing post-primary school estate, where there is already substantial over-capacity. In 2002, 32 post-primary schools had less than 300 pupils. Popular schools continuing to fill to capacity at a time of falling numbers will result in an increased number of small schools.
- 2.6 Grammar schools are highly regarded by parents in many areas, and can be expected to continue to fill to capacity. This, together with a declining school population, has two knock-on effects:
- The ability range of pupils admitted to grammar schools will widen. An increasing number of pupils with Transfer Grades C and D are being admitted to grammar schools (Appendix 2). Under the current transfer and open enrolment arrangements, this trend is likely to continue and will result in further widening of the ability profile of pupils admitted to these schools. This will raise questions about the appropriateness of the curriculum offered and the teaching approaches needed for a much broader ability range of pupils in these schools.
 - A smaller proportion of pupils will transfer into non-grammar schools. This decline in non-grammar school enrolments, coupled with the growth in the Integrated and Irish-medium sectors, will increase the number of schools with low enrolments, and raise questions about their future viability. It will also lead to a greater concentration of socially and educationally disadvantaged pupils in non-grammar schools.

Educational Provision and Performance

Choice and Flexibility

- 2.7 In the majority of cases, the current system is inflexible and provides negligible opportunity for pupils to change school before the end of Key Stage 4. It cannot respond to pupils' changing needs and circumstances, and many pupils are disadvantaged by having their options closed down at

a very early stage in their post-primary education. This has a negative impact on the life chances of many children and ultimately on the wider society and economy.

2.8 At present, the educational provision and choice available to pupils depends on where a pupil lives, and the type and size of school attended. Small post-primary schools, even with additional funding to address the diseconomies of their size, cannot provide their pupils with access to the same breadth of curriculum choice or enrichment opportunities as their peers in larger schools:

- the number of GCSE subjects on offer at post-primary schools ranges from 6 to 33 subjects, with 127 schools (55%) offering less than 20 subjects; and
- 21 schools (9%) offer less than 15 subjects.

2.9 These concerns apply equally to the provision for pupils above compulsory school age:

- the number of GCE subjects available to post-16 pupils in schools ranges from 1 to 27 subjects;
- almost a quarter of the schools providing GCEs, offer less than 10 subjects; and
- of the 177 schools that have 6th form provision, 69 have less than 80 post-16 pupils.

Such schools can provide only a very limited range of subject choices, denying their post-16 pupils many of the opportunities available to pupils in schools with larger sixth forms (Appendix 2).

The Curriculum

2.10 All pupils in post-primary schools, irrespective of the type of school they attend, currently follow a common curriculum which offers an essentially academic diet, albeit at different paces from school to school. Many pupils, including those in grammar schools, do not see the relevance of much of what they are learning and do not find the curriculum as stimulating, enjoyable or as flexible as it might be (ref: NI Cohort Study). Employers responding to the consultation on the Burns proposals reported that

children leaving school are not equipped with the skills necessary for work in the 21st Century. In the 2002 Skills Monitoring Survey, employers reported a gap between the skills of their current workforce and those needed to meet their business objectives. Particular skills lacking included computer literacy/knowledge of IT, practical skills, customer handling skills, interpersonal skills and general communication skills.

- 2.11 CCEA is addressing many of these issues in the context of its proposals for a revised statutory curriculum for Key Stages 3 and 4. However, the additional flexibility offered by these proposals will be of little benefit to pupils if it merely allows for more options within an essentially 'academic' menu. As indicated earlier, in many schools the range of courses at Key Stage 4 and post-16 is very limited, with the result that pupils' choices are constrained by what is available rather than enabling them to pursue courses that are relevant to their needs, aptitudes, interests and aspirations.
- 2.12 There are also issues regarding the credibility and assessment of vocational qualifications. Many universities and employers do not give vocational qualifications the same status as their academic equivalents, and there is often poor public perception about the level and value of some vocational qualifications.

Performance

- 2.13 Northern Ireland has a reputation for producing more pupils with qualifications at the top end of the achievement scale than in England. Compared to England, Northern Ireland has a higher proportion of pupils achieving 'A' levels, and at GCSE level we have more pupils achieving 5 or more good grades (A*-C). However, we also have too many young people leaving school with few or no qualifications. At GCSE, the average performance of pupils (in the form of a GCSE point score - see Appendix 2) is lower in Northern Ireland than in England. In overall terms, therefore, our young people are not doing as well as in England. Whilst the high achievement of our top performers is praiseworthy, we must address the issue of too many of our young people leaving school with low, few or no qualifications, which has direct implications for their future employment prospects and for their life-chances generally.

2.14 There is a strong social differential in educational achievement in Northern Ireland. Pupils from socially disadvantaged backgrounds do significantly less well than other pupils:

- they constitute only 7% of enrolments in grammar schools;
- the most disadvantaged pupils are only one third as likely to achieve a grade A in the Transfer Test; and
- they are only around half as likely to achieve 5 or more high grade GCSEs (A*-C) as the least disadvantaged pupils.

The various initiatives introduced to tackle disadvantage and underachievement, while improving performance in schools with high levels of disadvantage, have not yet had a measurable impact on closing this gap in performance.

2.15 It is important to look beyond comparisons with England to assess how well Northern Ireland's education system is serving its young people. The PISA (Programme for International Student Assessment) 2000 Research (ref: OECD Report), which assessed the ability of 15 year olds in the participating countries to apply their knowledge and skills in reading, mathematical and scientific literacy to real life problems, showed that:

- Northern Ireland's average performance was on a par with that of England;
- the performance of the UK as a whole was behind a number of other developed countries; and
- the gap between the highest and lowest scores in Northern Ireland was amongst the widest of the participating countries.

These findings reinforce the point that whilst our current system serves many young people very well, we must address the issue of those who do less well. Some broad conclusions drawn from the PISA results by OECD are outlined in Appendix 2.

2.16 The GCSE point scores show that many pupils at our grammar schools reach high levels of achievement but so do a significant number of pupils in our non-grammar schools. There is a considerable overlap between the two sectors, with some excellent performance in both grammar and

non-grammar schools, but also some poor performance in both sectors (Appendix 2).

Policies and Practices

Transfer Arrangements

2.17 Widespread concerns about the effects of the current arrangements for the transfer of pupils from primary to post-primary education were clearly evident in the responses to the consultation on the Burns proposals. The majority of respondents supported the abolition of the current Transfer Tests. Perceived shortcomings of the present arrangements included:

- the current Transfer Tests are seen as placing undue pressure on young children;
- preparation for the Transfer Tests in many primary schools has the potential to skew the primary curriculum;
- private coaching for the tests gives an unfair advantage to those pupils whose parents are prepared, and able, to pay for it; and
- many pupils who do not gain a grammar school place experience a sense of failure and lose confidence and belief in their ability.

2.18 Teachers in non-grammar schools spend a great deal of time seeking to address these feelings of failure but where they remain unresolved, pupils can become disengaged and disaffected with the education system (ref: Gallagher and Smith). In addition, the Transfer Tests, although providing a general indication of pupils' ability, have been shown to have the potential to misclassify pupils by up to three grades above or below their given grade (ref: Gardner).

2.19 Northern Ireland is one of only a few countries in Europe today that continues to have a selective system, where children are selected on the basis of ability at age 11 into particular types of schools.

Open Enrolment

2.20 The current system of open enrolment has created competition between schools. While this was intended to drive up standards, the desire of

parents to gain places in what are perceived as “better” schools has created:

- a hierarchy of schools within each sector;
- a number of schools characterised by falling enrolments, low staff morale and low achievement; and
- a climate in which schools work in isolation from each other, thereby inhibiting cooperation which, if developed, could bring benefits to pupils, teachers and the wider community.

The declining post-primary population and the current open enrolment policy are expected to lead to an increase in the number of schools whose viability is in question.

Strategic Management of School Estate

- 2.21 There is a lack of cohesive planning and management of the education estate, in part due to the diverse ownership responsibilities. The development planning process lacks a strategic approach, and developments in post-primary education are not planned in a holistic way that will make best use of resources and provide an efficient and effective service to local areas.

Summary

- The status quo is not an option. Demographic trends alone mean that change is unavoidable.
- Current provision is inequitable: access and choice depends on where a pupil lives and the size and type of school attended.
- Employers report that young people are leaving school without the skills necessary for work in the 21st Century.
- Our high achieving pupils perform well and it is important that this is sustained and further improved. However, our system is failing too many other pupils.
- Failure to address the issues facing our education system will have a significant impact on our ability to compete in what is becoming an increasingly global and technologically-driven world market.