



NEW ADMISSIONS ARRANGEMENTS FOR POST-PRIMARY SCHOOLS

Comments from the Institute of Directors

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Introduction

1. This paper provides a response from the Institute of Directors in Northern Ireland (IoD) to the Department of Education's document (New Admissions Arrangements for Post-Primary Schools ('the Document')), which was published in January 2005 and on which views are sought by 30 June.
2. The Institute is a non-party political organisation representing the views of around 53,000 business leaders in the UK and more than 900 in Northern Ireland.
3. The views expressed in this submission reflect the outcome of a survey of members at the beginning of this consultation process and subsequent discussion by the Education & Skills Committee, a presentation by Steve Costello, meetings with representatives of a number of educational groupings, and contributions from a wide range of members to the draft of this paper.

The IoD's position so far

4. The key points of the IoD's position with regard to post-primary education, as indicated by past submissions to date, can be summarised as follows:
 - Support for the abolition of the 11 plus.
 - Agreement that the replacement system should be based on parental preference and pupil aptitudes.
 - Need to provide sufficient places in schools to which parents want to send their children otherwise such a system will not work.
 - Agreement that parental choice should be assisted by the preparation of 'pupil profiles'.
 - Concern that the changes should not result in the diminution or loss of the high standards of our best schools. The approach should be 'keep the best and improve the rest'.
 - Access for all pupils to schools that enable them to best develop their potential and which provide them with access to satisfying career prospects.
 - The necessary development of a strong system of vocational as well as academic education.
 - Broadening of provision in all post-primary schools by the addition of more vocational subjects or more academic subjects (as appropriate) to augment the status quo.

- An effective say in the placement process by receiving schools otherwise the ethos of the best schools (whether grammar schools or otherwise) cannot be maintained.
 - The right of post-primary schools to see pupil profiles before placements are finalised.
5. It might be said that in some respects what is now proposed by the document is similar to what the Institute has proposed. In others, however, it is not at all consistent with what the IoD has proposed. Some serious concerns of IoD members are indicated below.

Selection Criteria

6. Selection in one form or another will always be necessary so long as there are insufficient places in schools to which parents want to send their children. No criteria are absolutely satisfactory. All disadvantage some children who, mostly through no fault of their own, do not happen to conform to them, in favour of others.
7. The only satisfactory answer to that reality is to develop a situation in which there are sufficient places in schools of acceptable quality to meet children's needs and aspirations so that all may have the best possible opportunity to develop their talents and generally to pursue their developing ambitions. One serious concern is that the document makes no serious effort to address that issue. The point below expands on this concern.

Key Educational Developments Prior to 2010 (Chapter 1 of the document)

The Institute wishes to make the following comments

- **Pupil Profiles**

8. The IoD continues to support, in principle, the concept of the 'pupil profile' and also the outline of what that would involve as set out in Appendix 1, so far as it goes.
9. However in such a scenario, teachers will be under pressure to give parents a positive and pleasing picture of their children. The profile should, therefore, contain elements which are purely objective – for example, by reference to set tests taken during the period from which the profiles are drawn. There are new and very effective means of computer-aided formative assessment such as the Alta Systems process developed in Northern Ireland, which could also be used to increase the objectivity of the profile.
10. Consequently, the Institute does not agree that schools should be unable to refer to these profiles when deciding which children to admit when over-subscribed. Ideally, profiles should be reviewed by the post-primary school and parents during the discussion associated with the application for the allocation of a post-primary school place. Moreover the issue of over-subscription requires more attention than the document gives it (see below).
11. It will be necessary for the post-primary schools to set out their educational objectives and provide a clear articulation of the type of pupil they believe will thrive in their particular educational environment.

- **The New Curriculum**

12. Broadly speaking the Institute is encouraged by what it has heard of the new curriculum so far.

- **The Entitlement Framework**

13. The IoD supports, in principle, the thrust of paragraphs 1.7 to 1.9, partly because we welcome the intention to inject a strong vocational element into the system.
14. However, it must be recognised that obliging schools to provide a third of courses that are academic and a third that are vocational will inevitably affect their ethos even though they may decide themselves how to use the remaining third of what they offer. That, in itself, is not something to which we would necessarily take exception.
15. It is vital, however, if the proposal is to be followed through, that schools are given the resources necessary to make a genuine success of their selected strategy. It would be disastrous if, due to financial deficiencies and the compulsion to meet the entitlements, provision in schools was so diluted that they became merely third rate. That possibility presents a real threat to standards in our best schools – whether ‘academic’ or ‘vocational’ and a potentially serious impediment to the less popular schools raising their performance, their appeal and consequently, their financial viability.
16. Therefore, in the document, the requirement to provide the “market” or demand entitlement should be tied to the provision of the necessary resources.

- **Specialist Schools**

17. The Institute would welcome more information about what this proposal entails.

- **Over-subscribed Schools and Demographic Trends**

18. The Institute is disturbed by the apparent apathy, which characterises this part of the document.
19. The document records evidence, reinforced by Appendix 2, of serious over-subscription. It comments, somewhat lamely, that ‘there will always be popular schools and a number will be over-subscribed’. However, it offers little to remedy the problem beyond awaiting whatever amelioration of it may result from demographic trends, even though it is patently clear from the figures given that serious problems will remain in some areas after those trends have come into play, which in any case will take up to ten years.
20. The IoD cannot support a policy, which apparently accepts the disadvantaging of a significant proportion of Northern Ireland children through failure to meet their educational preference and capability.
21. Over-subscription means that children are unable to achieve an education of their or their parents' choice even if they are well capable of benefiting from such an educational choice, indeed they may be disadvantaged if placed in a school with pupils of a different educational capability and calibre. If it is allowed to remain remotely close to present levels, parental preference for many will become meaningless since their preference will carry no effective weight. Many of the wrongs of the present system will remain. The new system of selection may shift disadvantage from one section of the population to another. Conceivably it may thus become more socially egalitarian, which we would certainly welcome. However, it will also inherently be as unjust as the present arrangements and it will damage the prospect that

we cherish, of an education system which underpins developing prosperity for all in Northern Ireland in the 21st Century.

22. Every child in Northern Ireland regardless of background is entitled to access to an education that will best enable him/her to develop potential, to achieve fulfilment in life and to contribute to economic and civic well-being. That requires that all our schools must be fit for the purpose, which in turn requires a deliberate and determined strategy led by the Department to take whatever action is necessary to bring the levels of our poorest performing, and therefore least popular, schools to the level of the best thus making them more attractive to parents and thereby making preference and outcome less critical than they now are.
23. Following such a policy in the IoD's view provides the best prospect of reducing the need for a system of selection (through whatever means) whose primary purpose is to ration out places in the best schools and which has little to do with enabling youngsters to obtain an education best fitted to their needs and aspirations. The Institute urges the Department to act accordingly and to play a proactive role in dealing with the matter by a vigorous programme of action. Whilst financial implications and difficulties are involved, the issue must, at the very least, be placed high on the Department's agenda and in its declared intentions.
24. In addition, the Institute proposes that the Department should set a target for the proportion of parents whose preferences have been met – say 95%. It should maintain the necessary data and should publish it.

Policies and Objectives (Chapter 2)

- *'The Department is seeking your views on whether the principles and objectives outlined provide a sound basis on which to develop new admission arrangements.'*
25. Broadly speaking, the Institute is content with the principles listed in paragraph 2.2.
 26. Regarding the objectives (paragraph 2.3), the second bullet point should be amended to read:

'maximise opportunities for parents to exercise their preference and the likelihood that their preference will be met'
 27. In the third bullet point, third line, the word 'some' should be deleted. At the end add:

'thereby ensuring that the child at least gains access to a place in a school of comparable quality to that preferred by the parent.'
 28. The IoD would wish the Department to make a commitment along the following lines:

' In support of these principles and objectives, it will be the policy of the Department to ensure that the quality and range of opportunities offered by all schools in all areas is such as to enable parental preferences to be satisfied by meeting them or by at least ensuring access to comparable and hopefully acceptable alternatives'

Choosing a Post-Primary School (Chapter 3)

- *The Department is seeking your views on:*

(a) whether the Pupil Profile should be used in the way described above; and

b) whether there are alternatives or additional ways in which the profile should be used to help parents decide on future post-primary provision for their child.'
(reference paragraphs 3.1 to 3.9 of the document)

29. In general, the IoD supports and welcomes the thrust of this part of the document and would make the following comments

- With respect to paragraph 3.3, parents will not be able to feel confident about their child's needs, etc, being met if there are insufficient places in schools which they prefer or if there is not well established information demonstrating that there are comparable acceptable and accessible alternatives of good quality- notwithstanding the provision of entitlements and the development of specialist schools (as yet only to piloted with no known outcomes so far). Hence inter alia the Institute's insistence that the Department should make it its business to ensure that what is available in all relevant schools is of comparable quality and provides good prospects of the achievement of an acceptable career path.
- It is misleading to suggest that the extension of the range of opportunities and the development of specialist schools will of themselves satisfy the needs of parental preference. Much else needs to be done within the main body of existing schools, including attending to the quality of teachers, improving the quality of leadership and enhancing the level of investment in equipment, buildings and facilities, etc.
- The Institute welcomes the content of paragraph 3.5.2, third bullet point, whereby discussion may take place with post-primary schools about the content of the pupil profile. However, we would wish the provision go further to give post-primary schools the right to see the profiles of each applicant to their schools and to be entitled to advise the parents about the suitability of the school for the child in question. They could thus make clear to every parent what they are taking on for their children, leaving it to parents to make their choice based on what they have been told.
- *The Department is seeking your views on the information/advice, which should be available from the primary school to help parents make informed decisions.*

27. The IoD supports the content of paragraph 3.10. As made clear above, however, there are concerns that the pupil profile and what primary principals say be heavily rooted in objectivity. The Institute considers that the setting of tests and the use of computer-aided formative assessment during the primary school process would be helpful to that end.

- *The Department is seeking your views on:*

(a) the range of information outlined above to help parents make informed decisions,

(b) the role of the post-primary school in advising parents; and

(c) whether any other information/support should be provided to assist the decision-making process

28. Broadly speaking, the IoD considers that what is proposed is sufficient. However, we would emphasise the importance that should be attached to the role of the post-primary school in the provision of advice based on the pupil profile. The Institute would also emphasise that

sight of the profile should be an entitlement of those schools and not solely dependent on the discretion of parents.

- *The Department is seeking your views on the information/advice, which should be available from DE/Education and Library Boards to help parents choose the most suitable post-primary school.*
29. The Institute has little to add to what is proposed. In general, an open approach should be applied and DE/Boards should be willing to respond helpfully to any reasonable request for information that they receive. It is believed that the role, indeed existence, of ELBs is under consideration in the context of the Review of Public Administration.
- *The Department is seeking your views on what information/advice should be available to assist with choices of educational pathway, during post-primary education.*
30. Although there is often much reference to pathways, frequently the routes towards particular career objectives have not been clearly determined and made known to potential participants.
31. Pathways need to be clearly mapped out for every potential career objective, showing for example the qualifications required, where and how they can be obtained, alternative routes and the qualities required for successful progression. Such maps should be standard parts of the equipment available to every primary and post-primary school and, of course, to all careers staff.
32. The IoD would be particularly concerned that such maps should give adequate attention to careers in wealth-creating business.
33. Post-primary schools should establish what they can offer to facilitate progress through the various pathways and they should make that known to parents considering their preferences.
- *The Department is seeking your views on the broad timetable for the new admissions process (page 21)*
34. The Institute has nothing to add.

Pupils With Compelling Individual Circumstance or a Statement of Special Educational Need (Chapter 4)

35. The IoD does not have sufficient specialist expertise or experience to justify a response to this part of the document.

Admission Criteria for Over-subscribed Schools (Chapter 5)

- *The Department is seeking your views on:*
 - (a) *the possible options for the menu [ie the list from which post-primary schools would be allowed to select selection criteria].*
 - (b) *any criteria that you believe should be included in the menu, bearing in mind the principles and objectives outlined in Chapter 2.*

36. The Institute has expressed some views on the question of over-subscription and what should be done about it above (eg paragraphs 18 to 24).
37. Although the Institute accepts, for reasons of practicality and realism, that selection and thus criteria for operating it are likely to be necessary to some degree for the foreseeable future we consider that the need for it on anything like the scale which applies at present denotes an inadequate system of education which is failing significant numbers of children and which therefore requires radical improvement. As has already been made clear the IoD would wish that improvement to be put into place without delay.
38. Hitherto the IoD has supported the abolition of the eleven plus and its replacement by a system based on parental preference supported by pupil profiles, partly because of the deficiencies of the present system and partly because we do have some faith in the likelihood and ability of parents to make wise choices suited to the best interests of their children given honest information and a good range of alternatives of consistently high quality to choose from.
39. This has, however, been done on the assumption that the Department would take active steps to ensure that the range of available choices is indeed of such consistently high and acceptable quality as to be attractive to parents, with each offering good career prospects. There is also the assumption that with steady improvement in the quality of all post-primary schools - particularly the present lower achievers - in the mix of choice within them and in the career prospects that they could open up, parental preference would be satisfied in the vast and steadily increasing number of cases and so-called selection criteria would, therefore, become steadily less relevant.
40. If these assumptions hold good, the Institute would accept the range of criteria listed in the document and would allow post-primary schools to choose which of them to apply, on the understanding that as the quality of education improves all round and parental preference is increasingly satisfied, the need for them would, in effect, be steadily phased out.
41. If on the other hand the assumptions are not valid, as it seems may now be the case, a system based on parental preference would be unworkable. Accordingly the IoD could not support the proposals as a whole and would prefer a system designed to make best use of inadequate educational resources by strictly matching placement with aspiration, aptitude and ability. This does not imply the advocating thereby of the retention of academic selection as such. The main criteria for selection should be designed around meeting the learning needs of the child based on the pupil profile supported by objective assessment.
42. The Institute is opposed in principle to geographic criteria being a dominant part of the selection process, because they deny children access to schools which - although not located as close to where they live as they might like - nonetheless offer them the best opportunity of an education most suited to their needs. It would be quite wrong to put parents in the position that they had to move the family home in order to enable their children to have access to a school of their choice. There is anecdotal evidence that this is already happening in some areas of Northern Ireland well in advance of the introduction of the proposals. In other places, new house building is already making a nonsense of the demographic projected figures, which impacts on the education infrastructure in the area.
43. Nor is the IoD attracted to the so-called family focussed criteria, under which preference would be given to children who have siblings at the school. Such criteria imply, wrongly in our view, that what is best for the eldest child necessarily is also best for his/her younger brothers or sisters.

Admission Appeals (Chapter 6)

- *The Department is seeking your views on whether the process for appealing the decisions of Boards of Governors not to admit a child to the school should be altered in any way.*
44. As stated above, post-primary schools should set out their educational objectives and provide a clear articulation of the type of pupil they believe will thrive in their particular educational environment. Where parents wish to challenge an over-subscribed school's decision, the parents should be able to demonstrate to an independent arbitration service that their child's profile more closely matches the schools requirements than those of other children offered places.

Protection of Standards

45. The changes involved in replacing the existing system of selection are hugely significant. They may present opportunities for improvement. However, they also involve very substantial risks of damage to the quality of the existing system of education and of its outputs.
46. The Institute finds it disturbing that the document contains no acknowledgement of that danger or measures to ensure that the quality and strengths of the existing system of education, are at least maintained. Such measures must be put in place as a matter of urgency, accompanied by an effective process of monitoring.

Summary of our present position on selection criteria

- The Institute still supports in principle the concept of parental preference and that of the pupil profile.
- The IoD does not support the selection criteria outlined in the document except as strictly short term expedients, which may be applied until they become irrelevant with the establishment of sufficient places in schools to which parents want to send their children, so that over-subscription is no longer a concern and parental preferences can be met.
- Given the continuing need for selection, the Institute would prefer a system based on clear criteria designed to match placement to aptitude and educational need - as identified though the pupil profile supported by objective assessments.
- The system should be operated by receiving schools deferring wherever possible to parental preference.
- A vigorous programme should be initiated to secure improvements to the performance of currently under-subscribed schools designed to raise their standards, facilities and achievements to the level of the best performing schools.
- Systems should to be introduced to monitor the quality of output of schools, to ensure at least, that there is no decline in standards and achievements and to ensure that remedial action is taken where necessary.

Conclusion

47. In this submission, the Institute has sought to respond systematically and thoroughly to all the questions that the document raises, where we have a particular interest in them and worthwhile views to offer.
48. The IoD is fully supportive of the reason for change and for many of the aspects as described in the preceding sections.

49. However, we stress the seriousness of the reservations that expressed, with particular reference to over-subscription, the need for post-primary schools to have access to the pupil profile, the required improvements in schools, the ability of the proposals to deliver an effective system of parental preference and the need to ensure a consistently high standard of education and opportunity for all children. The Institute asks the Department to note the importance of its response to these matters in relation to our support for the proposals as a whole.

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