

BALLYMENA ACADEMY BOARD OF GOVERNORS

Independent Strategic Review: Professor G. Bain.

This Voluntary Grammar School remains committed to the educational good of all young people, regardless of academic ability. This commitment is not in any way compromised by support of academic selection or by the shared conviction, as and when academic selection ceases, that parents, acting in the light of well-informed and objective advice from primary and post-primary schools, should ordinarily be enabled to pick the school best able to meet the strengths, needs and aspirations of their children.

The academic nature of the curricula in which this Voluntary Grammar School specialises and succeeds, and on which the emphasis will remain within the Entitlement Framework, means that for many children another type of school will be more appropriate. This independent review is seen as an opportunity to develop high-quality, sustainable and cost-effective schools which complement each other; strengthen each other by the range and variety of their ethos, identity and provision; give parents real choice and enhance the life prospects of the young people who attend them.

The Board of Governors of this Voluntary Grammar Schools makes no apology for requesting that their voice should be heard by Professor Bain. They believe that they are entitled to a reassurance that their concerns and perspectives will be given due consideration as the recommendations are reached.

This school, like other Voluntary Grammar Schools, has undergone change and development in the past. The willingness and ability to alter over time means that it is now well-positioned to meet the challenges of the future. The quality of governance and management shown has been acknowledged and underpins the school's cost-effectiveness, its track record in terms of pupil outcomes, and its ability to provide quality education for pupils across the 11-18 age range.

1. This review is to be welcomed as:-

✓ **Independent**

We have confidence that Professor Bain will not compromise his recommendations

The review should:

- *be free of sectoral bias*
- *respect schooling traditions and divergences*
- *further the Shared Future agenda, to which many VGS already make a significant contribution*

✓ **Strategic**

Evidence of an intention to engage in a process of detailed long-term planning

The review should:

- *reach evidence based conclusions*
- *make recommendations likely to develop/support sustainable schools*
- *be sufficiently flexible to reflect complexity and promote parental choice*

✓ **Reviewing**

A detailed, careful and overdue examination of the school's estate

The review should:

- *address all recognised schooling provision 4-19[including FE Colleges]*
- *prioritise efficiency and value for money*
- *avoid using 'rationalising' as a synonym -or euphemism- for school closure*

✓ **Systemic**

A realistic mechanism for improving structures and accommodation within which educational provision for all Northern Ireland's schoolage population is made

The review should:

- *be holistic in its scope and intent*
- *allow coherent and speedy investment to upgrade the school's estate*
- *have properly costed and time bound recommendations*

2. To that end, we emphasise:

✓ **Efficiency**

- *developing schools of demonstrable capacity to sustain quality through a time of transition*

✓ **Value for Money**

- *stewardship of scarce resources prioritised; school size must be a factor in that process*

✓ **Coherence**

- *important to plan correctly for prudent and timely expenditure on capital development*

✓ **Sustainability**

- *generate criteria identifying schools likely to flourish and grow in the first half of the 21st century*

3. The outcome will be generational and fundamental change. This school, like other Voluntary Grammar Schools, urges Professor Bain to:

✓ **Contextualise**

Avoid reducing the discussion of schools simply to comparison of economic units.

Factors which must be considered, alongside VFM, are for example:

- *pupil numbers [actual and projected]*
- *ethos*
- *identity [e.g. single- sex, co-educational, boarding]*
- *place in community*
- *current location of school*
- *balance rural requirements*
- *extent and condition of premises, plant and buildings*
- *sustainability [working definition & appropriate criteria have to be established]*

It is essential that the review should consider defined areas/localities/communities, not attempt to arrive at a single province-wide solution

The aim, clearly and openly stated, must be to improve education for all young people by:

- *developing sustainable, popular and successful schools*
- *contributing to community infrastructure*
- *offering real choice to parents and young people*
- *optimising arrangements for post-16 provision, including FE*
- *upholding complementarity amongst schools and opposing uniformity*
- *supporting equality of access by making collaboration useful and more straightforward*

✓ **Rationalise**

Review must be about more than raw numbers of pupils. VGS emphasise the need for:

- *a clear and defensible rationale underpinning all recommendations*
- *a sensitive awareness of community needs*
- *a capacity for growth; closures are inevitable but schools should be allowed to develop*
- *an expeditious and consultative approach to closure/amalgamation of schools*
- *complementarity: a range of school types/schools with differing ethos should emerge*

✓ **Prioritise and Cost**

Review must show VFM [scarce resources used to secure best learning outcomes] but educational imperatives cannot be ignored as a way of saving money. VGS emphasise:

- *quality of learning*
- *curriculum delivery*
- *shared future*
- *community needs*

Summary

In making its case for due regard to be given to the place of this and other Voluntary Grammar Schools in the post-Bain educational landscape the Board of Governors of Ballymena Academy emphasises:

- **Popularity, effectiveness and sustainability**
- **Ownership of premises and grounds**
- **Successful history as owner-occupiers and quality of maintenance**
- **Cost per pupil efficiencies**
- **Experience, expertise and effectiveness of organisational structures**
- **Willingness and capacity to continue this level of operation**
- **Quality of learning outcomes**
- **Curricular and extra-curricular range**
- **Significance of academic qualifications in a knowledge based economy**
- **Place and value of the VGS in any new, fit-for-purpose education system**

At the same time, The G.B.A. can properly warn against:

- **Overly simplistic, province-wide judgements and recommendations**
- **Unnecessarily brutal approach e.g. to amalgamations/closures**
- **Failure to respect tradition or historical factors**
- **Precipitate action based on uncosted plans or poorly-considered strategies**
- **Inadequate analysis of community needs**
- **The unacceptability of uniform, all-ability schools of unwieldy size**
- **Costly collaborative exercises not factored into school financial plans**
- **Inadequate attention to transition planning and questions of manageability**
- **Under-funding, insufficient training and unrealistic timescales**