

INDEPENDENT STRATEGIC REVIEW OF EDUCATION

Response of the North Eastern Education and Library Board

1 INTRODUCTION

- 1.1 The North Eastern Education and Library Board welcomes the opportunity to comment on the paper prepared for consultation by the Independent Strategic Review of Education. As one of the key stakeholders in Education (employing approximately 11,000 staff, with a budget of £300 million, supporting 74,000 pupils and over 400,000 people in its area) we welcome the independent nature of the review.
- 1.2 Article 6 of the 1986 Education and Libraries Order requires that “each board shall secure that there are available in its area sufficient schools for providing primary and secondary education sufficient in number, character and equipment to afford for all pupils opportunity for education ... as may be desirable in view of their different ages, abilities and aptitudes ...”. Further legislation supplements this overarching statutory requirement on Boards by giving delegated responsibility to governors, developing funding mechanisms, and ensuring the provision of schools can be achieved by a variety of education partners.
- 1.3 We note the terms of reference of the review –

“To examine the funding of the education system, in particular the strategic planning and organisation of the schools’ estate, taking account of curriculum changes, including the wider provision for 14-19 year olds, and also demographic trends”.

In our response we attempt to identify the issues implicit within the terms of reference, and make some outline suggestions as to how these issues might be addressed.

2 ISSUE: PLANNING SCHOOL PROVISION

- 2.1 The North-Eastern Education and Library Board has promoted a philosophy which places the learner at the centre of education. This principle has been to the forefront when the Board has had to make difficult decisions in respect of educational provision in an area. The Board has also striven to support the concept of collegiality in terms of service delivery, consultation with professional bodies and the ongoing professional development of Principals. This has been increasingly difficult to achieve as schools have been required to work in an increasingly competitive environment, driven by an LMS system which has inherent flaws. The Board has appreciated the benefits that accrue from working directly with interest groups that are reflective of the whole sector, eg the North Eastern Post Primary Principals Association which is representative of all schools - controlled, maintained, integrated and voluntary grammar. The Board works with these groups to develop agreed approaches to issues of educational concern. The new education authority may find this approach worthy of consideration in developing an inclusive model of consultation and collaboration with its educational partners.

- 2.2 In recent years the Board's thinking has been influenced by the work of one of the world's leading educationalists, Michael Fullen, and we are now in the process of establishing learning communities at post-primary level, representative of all sectors. This is an exciting development and regardless of the final decision on the future of post-primary education in Northern Ireland, it is a model which has much to commend it, as a basis for the future structure of the education system in Northern Ireland. The seven underpinning principles on which the Costello Report is based, have attracted almost universal support across the educational community- equality, quality, relevance, access, choice, respect and partnership. Within the North Eastern Education and Library Board's area there are presently eleven such learning communities in existence, all at various stages of evolution, but the seeds have been sown in moving schools from a model of competition and isolation to one of collaboration, centred on the needs of the learner within the learning community. For example in one town, all four post-primary schools, representative of different sectors, are working collectively to offer an extended range of choices at 16+ to pupils in the area. Provision is being planned jointly, marketed collectively and will use the expertise of staff in the four institutions. Similar models are evolving throughout the Board's area. They are dependent on visionary leadership and the commitment of schools at local level but they also require the active support of the Employing Authority.
- 2.3 Such developments are the result of the statutory requirements which will be placed on post primary schools to deliver the Entitlement Framework to guarantee for all pupils a minimum number and range of courses as well as the professional commitment of educators to provide the maximum choice for students and to enhance their life chances. We believe further success of this approach is the cross community nature of the provision which results and it is therefore essential that planning takes place across sectors and within the policy framework of 'a shared future'. While support for inclusive models appears to exist at individual school level, it would appear that much remains to be done in securing the support of the Catholic authorities in committing to such a way of working. The recent launch of the Extended Schools agenda appears to be another major strategy which commends a collaborative approach at local level and the establishment of "a community of learners", involving potentially, nursery, primary and post primary schools in an area, working together.
- 2.4 At present there is a fragmented approach to planning overall school provision in an area. Integrated provision is driven by parents, Catholic provision is driven by the Trustees and CCMS, Controlled provision is planned by the Board, new Integrated provision by parents supported by NICIE and Irish Medium provision by CnaG. The outcome of this is that four different types of schools can be maintained and created in areas of really small population eg Ballycastle. This approach also leads to schools being established and maintained on the basis of different policy foundations.
- 2.5 Because of this planning approach there is a tension between the principles of choice and diversity and what is sustainable on the ground in terms of pupil numbers and affordability. There is of necessity a trade off between the principles of choice and diversity, and what provision is viable and sustainable.
- 2.6 Our view is that one body should carry responsibility for the strategic planning of school provision. Post 2008 this should be the Education and Skills Authority (ESA). We recognise however that at local level there will be a need to create partnerships with education stakeholders particularly the new Councils. Community planning and the role of the 'super' Councils has yet to be decided, however we believe that it should involve research into the wishes of local communities through community audits. This would inform the planning process for school provision. It is important, however it operates post 2008, that it does not confuse accountability mechanisms or fragment planning along geographic lines.

- 2.7 We believe as long as a sectoral approach is adapted to the planning of school provision there will be inequalities, inefficiencies and different approaches to policy.
- 2.8 The potential exists to determine what constitutes a geographical area and to involve all of the stakeholders in bringing forward a Composite Development Proposal to meet the educational needs of that area. The present system of Development Proposals is archaic and seriously hinders the development of a strategic approach to educational planning in an area. Lessons could be learned from the reunification of Germany, where society suffered from a frightening drop in the birth rate. The German authorities took a strategic approach to educational provision and addressed the issue at a jurisdictional level.
- 2.9 The Board considers the principles applying to mainstream schooling should also apply to schooling for children with special educational needs. There is particular concern for a growing number of young people who do not seem ‘to fit’ into traditional school settings. There is a need to ensure that provision is strategically planned for them across Board boundaries.
- 2.10 It would be helpful if steps were taken at the centre to engage political representatives at all levels on the issue of school re-organisation. Insufficient publicity is given to the many positive educational (and other) benefits of re-organisation. A similar “good news” story needs to be repeatedly relayed to the public at large as well as school communities.

3 ISSUE: MANAGEMENT OF ESTATE

- 3.1 The present environment in which the education service operates is particularly volatile. Predictions on demographic trends show that there will be a significant decrease in pupil enrolments across schools in Northern Ireland. However, there is a geographical division to this, with decline taking place at different rates in different places. This is why we believe that the school estate needs to be managed on an area basis, supported by robust management information.
- 3.2 We are concerned at the length of time it takes to re-engineer the school estate. Closures and rationalisations take at least a year and in many cases much longer. Further concerns exist about the management action which is available to the managing authority in order to achieve speedy resolution of issues. Due cognisance also needs to be taken of other potential delaying factors, for example, in relation to land acquisition and the planning approval process, especially with regard to Roads Service requirements.
- 3.3 We therefore believe the Department should examine the procedures involved in rationalisation with a view to ensuring they are streamlined. We also believe that new, innovative courses of action should be available to managing authorities to change the nature of school provision quickly to meet the needs of communities and to enhance school performances eg changing the management type of the school.
- 3.4 We await the publication of the Department’s sustainable schools policy. We hope that it not only deals with educational and financial issues important as these are, but we also hope it takes on board the concept of sustainable communities – sustainable in both community and environmental terms. This concept could have an important impact on school planning for the future.

3.5 A major problem for the management of estate is the outdated nature of the Department's building handbook. Each board has to build its schools according to the building handbook. However there are a number of problems with the building handbook –

- room design and layout often lags behind that necessary for modern education using technology and delivering the revised curriculum;
- in primary schools each class base caters for 30 pupils, but the LMS formula can buy teachers on a PTR of approximately 21/22. Therefore new schools are often opened with temporary classrooms;
- while newly built schools currently incorporate many design features consistent with up-to-date guidance on energy efficient measures, other innovative approaches to conservation are omitted from schemes as a result of financial constraints.

Some of the apparent spare capacity in the school system could be addressed by examining the potential to reassess the enrolment and admissions numbers to schools. The opportunity also exists to examine how spare capacity in schools might be used to support the raising of educational standards by utilising such spare places to develop the concept of the whole service school

3.6 In the rationalisation programme within the NEELB we are seeking to remove surplus places. At present within the controlled post primary sector we have 11% surplus places, and in the controlled primary sector, 22% surplus places. We believe that between 10-12% surplus places are necessary to take account of demographic shifts, parental choice and enrolment fluctuations. This figure is supported by the Audit Commission.

4 ISSUE: INTEGRATING EDUCATION

4.1 The Board for many years has had a policy in support of integrating education: bringing young people together for joint activities through to supporting the establishment of controlled integrated schools. However with the publication of the Government's policy on a 'shared future' and the general political environment, we believe there is a new opportunity to re-examine the models which might be used to promote integration in the education service. In this context there is a need for a revised definition of integrated education.

4.2 The present situation leads us to the following conclusions –

- The statutory framework for integrated education is inflexible. It is based on parental wishes and therefore hinders strategic planning. The statutory framework promotes a variation of one model and so inhibits innovation in governance and the possibility of different forms of shared schooling. It also inhibits the ability of managing authorities to create imaginative solutions to local issues.
- The Catholic Church does not support integrated education. No Catholic Maintained School has ever transformed.
- In planning terms managing authorities very largely are reactive to requests for integrated education, and this means there is very little strategic planning of provision.

- 4.3 We believe there are a number of issues which if addressed would assist in educating our young people together, fulfil the policy objectives of a shared future and play a part in school improvement:
- (i) The legislative base on which integrated education is promoted needs to be reviewed to create enabling powers which encourage creativity and innovation in developing integrated education.
 - (ii) There are many models of shared schooling, such as the shared campus, joint management, faith schools, integrated schools, a new 'state' school etc., but these will only work with the support of the churches.
 - (iii) Integrated education like other education sectors must be planned. We should therefore develop the concept of community audits.

5 ISSUE: FUNDING OF SCHOOLS

- 5.1 For two years all schools in Northern Ireland have been funded on the basis of the Common Funding Formula. We believe this approach to resourcing schools is fundamentally flawed.
- (i) We do not believe any formula can be devised which appropriately funds a school the size of St Mary's Primary School, Rathlin, (4 pupils) and Methodist College, Belfast (c. 2000 pupils).
 - (ii) Schools are largely resourced on pupil numbers, yet staffing costs are the largest budgetary item. So in many schools staffing accounts for over 90% of the budget. For teachers the more experienced the teacher the more expensive he/she becomes.
 - (iii) The concept behind Local Management of Schools is to delegate funds to schools to allow choices to be made by local management and therefore ensure that finance is allocated to the greatest effect. The concept, however, is undermined by staffing costs and particularly teaching costs which mean schools have little management discretion other than pay staff.
- 5.2 We support the concept of Local Management, however we believe teaching costs should be removed and teachers reallocated on a PTR basis. This would ensure schools still maintain choice over resource allocation decisions, it would ensure equity, and it would create greater stability in the most important resources schools receive.

6 CONCLUSION

- 6.1 As a Board we want to create and maintain a world class education service for all our young people. We welcome the Review as part of the process in helping us deliver that aspiration.