

IRISH CONGRESS OF TRADE UNIONS
NORTHERN IRELAND COMMITTEE

INDEPENDENT STRATEGIC REVIEW OF EDUCATION

1. Introduction

- The Irish Congress of Trade Unions welcomes the opportunity to respond to the above consultation. Congress is the central trade union body in Northern Ireland and as such represents over 220,000 workers and over 30 trade unions. All of our affiliates have an interest in the future of education provision. We are aware that a number of our affiliated unions have responded separately to the invitation to comment. In these circumstances, this Submission will attempt to reinforce the main elements of trade union policy in the area. Congress affiliates represent all categories of staff working in our education system.
2. Congress welcomes the approach to dialogue and engagement referred to in paragraph 3. We would be of the view that any overarching examination of education must take account of funding. The examination of the schools' estate is an ongoing part of the Review of Public Administration. We are aware of the pressures being placed on school authorities to share school facilities as a contribution to effective forms of collaboration. In broad terms, Congress favours such an approach but we also believe that the emphasis must remain on education and not cost reduction.
3. We note the comments in paragraph 5 regarding a 10 year modernisation programme of the schools' estate. Congress accepts the need to build new schools designed to meet the needs of a changing and evolving society. We do not accept the view that education facilities are best provided by the private sector. Trade unions remain opposed to the use of PPP/PFI in the provision of building and planning of the schools' estate.
4. It would however be wrong to move ahead on the schools' estate matter in advance of the outcome of RPA considerations. The new Education and Skills Authority will have a major role to play in this area of provision. There will also be major implications for future staffing structures and compliment.

Paragraph 7 again refers to opportunities for collaboration at the post 14 curriculum level. Mention is made of co-operation between schools and further education colleges.

However, we believe that the proposals emanating from the Consultation on *“Training for Success: Professional and Technical Training”* are a major factor in making such collaboration a success. Simply, there are a range of professional issues regarding teachers and lecturers that will need to be resolved to meet educational needs and work towards a skilled workforce.

5. Paragraph 8 details the objective of the estate planning process. We share the value espoused in the need for a *“stimulating, safe and healthy learning environment”*.

Paragraph 9 goes on to suggest that the current model is not working and states that the objective detailed in Paragraph 8

“..... is not being achieved, nor is it possible to be realised in a cost effective manner under current planning arrangements”.

Trade Unions, and the staff they represent, would welcome the opportunity to be involved in a *“new strategic approach to planning on a system wide basis*”.

We would welcome also the opportunity to discuss in some detail the four features *“that appear most pertinent”*.

The use of the word *“ethos”* has many meanings in the context of Northern Ireland and has been the subject of detailed discussion at the Stakeholders Group established by DE to look at RPA issues.

We agree that there is a clear need for high quality statistical data if we are to achieve the necessary outcomes. Much more work needs to be done and information on the process must be open and shared. Congress is part of a high level process at Government level to establish the needs of all service delivery requirements under RPA. This process is intended to look at staff numbers and locations, services provided in various geographical areas as well as the resources needed to provide better public services. Education is a key element of all of this. Section 75 considerations are also crucial in the overall equality dimension.

6. Congress welcomes the recognition of the need for a collaborative approach to planning and a dialogue around this. Trade unions would expect to be part of this process given the comments by the Secretary of State on 22 November 2005 when he announced the outcome of the RPA.

7. Congress is pleased to endorse the general tone expressed in Paragraph 10. We would however wish to see more emphasis on equality as it has a deeper resonance than the term “*equity*”.
8. Congress supports the policy of “*A Shared Future*” and made a significant submission to the original consultation. We are disappointed with the resulting triennial action plan and its lack of coherence and targets. A Shared Future can only be enabled if adequate resources are made available. In common with the majority of interested parties we await an announcement on how “*A Shared Future*” will be resourced.
9. We agree that “*An effective system of education requires adequate funding*”. Congress also wishes to ensure that pupils receive the best education and support services. Trade unions also support the need for effective service provision and are of the view that the Local Management of Schools model is divisive and corrosive to the aspiration of collaboration and equality. This system needs to be modified so that it can take account of broader community needs rather than a selective group.
10. Congress endorses the content of Paragraph 14 and welcomes the recognition that support staff are a key element to a progressive system of education.
11. No one will wish to disagree with values detailed in Paragraph 16. The achievement of such values must and has to be an inclusive process. More emphasis has to be placed on equality. Schools can and should be a focus for local communities, parents and staff should be able to identify with a facility that is safe and welcoming. Not only do we need this type of environment but in planning any change full account must be taken of financial impact on local communities in terms of jobs.
12. Again, Congress welcomes the values and challenges detailed in Paragraphs 17-19. We would be concerned that in devising structures to meet these values and challenges, unions and communities might fall to the margins. This would be a mistake. Congress and the communities it works with have a vital role in meeting the objectives of Paragraph 19.

In conclusion, we would welcome partnership in the outworkings of the Review and remain available for further discussion.