

Transferor Representatives' Council (TRC)



Response to the Independent Strategic Review of Education

July 2006

Dear Sir George,

The TRC welcomes this opportunity to offer its perspectives on the strategic planning and organisation of the schools' estate. As requested we offer the following as a focused response to the paragraphs in your paper.

1. The Council agrees that this is a suitable time to look at new models of schooling in view of the falling school rolls and new proposals for the curriculum. There is a particularly urgent concern for the future of many secondary schools in the light of the widening intake of some Grammar schools.
2. The Council has long held the view that the task of 'integrating education' is an essential component of developing social cohesion in NI. This work cannot be achieved by Integrated Schools alone but will require encouraging the main sectors, where there is community support, to find new ways of collaborating and / or sharing educational provision.
3. The TRC is willing to engage in dialogue as a key stakeholder of the Controlled sector.
4. The effective use of public funds should be an important driver; however the phrase 'fit for purpose schools' estate' will need some exploring. We would reject a utilitarian view of education in favour of a holistic vision which encompasses a spiritual purpose.
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6. We agree that long term planning must take the listed factors into consideration. We would comment under 'the needs and aspirations of the various sectors' that selfish sectoral interest must be obviated by meaningful cross-sector dialogue. We also support the wider community use of schools and are aware of the concept of 'learning hubs' in some Boards. The key question is how this kind of dialogue is to be facilitated? The TRC is willing to engage in such a dialogue and to offer assistance in promoting collaboration.
7. We agree that the outcomes of rationalisation could take many forms, including collaboration among schools and between schools and colleges. However we ask who would be the lead agency in initiating such collaboration arrangements? Who would hold up exemplars of collaboration to other schools who had not given this any consideration?
8. We agree with the objective of the 'right mix of schools of the right size in the right locations'. However it is not clear who makes the decisions about the right size, mix and locations. Also our experience of school developments leaves us with serious concerns for future decision making. DE failed to provide advance notice of declining school population and so school rationalisation planning has descended to crisis management on an ad hoc basis. It is essential that demographic trends are constantly monitored and become a key component of future policy making. We also have concerns regarding the adequacy of facilities provided in new school builds through PPP schemes. Many principals are reporting that proposed new buildings, designed using current guidance, often end up providing less accommodation leaving a question about how it is decided what is 'fit for purpose' schools provision?
9. We agree that planning should be on a system-wide basis, however this seems idealistic. It is difficult to square this with the objective of 'a specific sector dimension' without obvious competing strategies. We would ask who would be representing the interests of the controlled schools in such planning activities? We would also have concerns that for example the legislation facilitating Integrated schools development will continue to be detrimental to the development of the controlled sector. We would welcome a more 'interactive and collaborative approach to planning'. We await more detailed proposals to indicate how this might become a reality.

10. The aims of an education system outlined are highly laudable. As people with a faith perspective we would like to see a reference to education also contributing to the spiritual development of the community (see statutory duties of public education in part III (5) of Education and Libraries (NI) Order 1986).
11. We strongly support the contribution of education to community well-being and welcome the reference to the TACOTIE report. We see a future role for DE to reactivate a group of this nature to take forward some of the new thinking in the Shared Future framework.
12. Whilst the state must be neutral in its approach to the aspirations of the two main communities in NI, the state must also be a facilitator of the promotion of a culture of tolerance. This is particularly important as we become a more multi-cultural society.
13. Funding is of course linked to effectiveness and efficiency; however sensitivity must also be engaged to preserve vulnerable communities. Long term investment may be required in isolated areas and areas of social deprivation, with viability decisions not made solely on the basis of numbers and costs.
14. These factors seem suitable indicators of high quality learning standards.
15. We strongly agree that financial stability will do much to restore confidence and empower school to focus on key purposes. At present staff and parents of too many schools have a constant fear of the axe falling on their schools.
16. These aspirations and values are commendable. We would add 'diversity of ethos' in bullet point 3. There are tensions within the current schools' funding system which is driven by pupil numbers. Parental choice and open enrolment force schools to compete for pupils; this will always be a disincentive to collaborative arrangements.
- 17-19 It is very difficult to see how this vision can be actualised. With so many drastic change forces applied to the educational system in NI at present, with the added pressure of time, we fear that a sustainable, efficiently functioning system could be endangered. Great change not only affects structures, it can cause untold stress and diminish morale of professional and ancillary staff. Much care will be needed to support staff through this exacting transition phase. It is essential that clear leadership and direction is given to inspire confidence that the pain and frustrations which must be passed through will achieve a more enhanced educational provision for children in the future.

Members of the TRC Executive would be glad to meet you at a mutually convenient date to discuss further their perspectives on this important strategy. We enclose for your information a recent TRC leaflet '*Moving Forward Together*' which outlines some of our recent thinking on our vision for controlled schools in NI. We wish you well in the continuance of your review.

Yours sincerely,

Revd IW Ellis

Secretary to TRC