



Northern Ireland

Submission on

**INDEPENDENT STRATEGIC REVIEW OF
EDUCATION**

July 2006

1. We were forwarded your pre-consultation document via the Irish Congress of Trade Unions. We welcome the opportunity to participate in subsequent meetings/workshops.
2. We also welcome the holistic approach taken, in which the future estate is discussed in the context of the outcomes of education, and its funding needs.

Context

3. UNISON has a significant membership working as non-teaching staff and contributing to educational outcomes, even though this is often not recognised. A major proportion of the total membership has life chances shaped by our system, and experience as parents.
4. We regularly encounter as a union the issues you address – in a wide variety of contexts. Falling school rolls feed through in an endless series of micro-decisions at school level where hours and / or jobs are lost by cleaners and school meals workers. Neither we nor the employers – usually the Boards – can gain any leverage over this process through long-term planning, particularly where budgets are delegated. Another example of estate-related ongoing change is centralised kitchens and the transportation of meals: remotely produced food not cooked on site does not match the ethos of locally sourced nutritional meals.
5. We deal directly with the consequences of systematic under-funding, eg reductions in classroom assistant hours and jobs. We also work to challenge under-funding on a regional level, facing a system which fails to meet established needs; institutionally fails the test of basic accounting practice, with consequent major under-spends accompanying devastating cuts: and has systematically failed to use statutory equality duty to determine and vary budgets.
6. We are engaged in partnerships for Lifelong Learning with a range of major employers. While the results release latent skills and clearly transform individuals lives and performance, a substantial proportion of energy has to be put in to remedying the historic failure of the current system of education to create even basic competences up to age 19. Selection and its consequences are profoundly linked to this failure.

7. We consistently campaign on the consequences of poverty, deprivation and inequality. The majority of our members are 'working poor' and we seek to support them and their families with real change on the ground. When for example 25% of BELB pupils leave school functionally illiterate; 50% are on the behaviour continuum; and high levels of youth suicide match economic deprivation, then clearly an anti-poverty perspective has to include the current performance and failures of an under-funded education system.
8. Central to our practice as a union is the work of our four self-organised groups: Race, Women, Disability, Lesbian/Gay/Bi-Sexual/Transgendered. They bring us awareness of unheard and new traditions and histories in this society. The Independent Review's focus on the traditional divide and the accommodation of this divide in planning a new model for educational delivery and the estate is in danger of marginalising these other traditions and histories.
9. The work of our members on the ground, in particular those in the community and voluntary sector, demonstrates again and again the need for community facilities to deliver social results – in areas where schools are padlocked from mid-afternoon. Buildings as a community resource must be an essential component of new thinking.

Re-thinking Education

10. Our fundamental critique of the Independent Review's work to date is that it limits its analysis by a focus on equity – which should be replaced by an emphasis on promoting equality on the grounds of objective need.

Equity means an approach to rationalisation which becomes essentially one of managed contraction of resources and facilities through integration and sharing as an efficiency based response to the dynamics of falling rolls.

An equality and anti-poverty analysis could lead to an alternative based on the use of resources released by falling rolls to target increased allocation of resources to areas of poverty and deprivation which feature linked educational under-performance. This goes beyond the simple reduction of all PTR's in each location – which in itself would raise outcomes – to a radical re-direction of resources. It would not contradict the integration and sharing model Government is keen to

promote, but would substantially strengthen social result on the ground, and lend major strength to the currently tokenistic approach Government is taking to anti-poverty work.

Funding: Restoring Public Confidence and Credibility

11. The process of change addressed by the Independent Review can only be delivered in the context of a root and branch restoration of the public finances of Education. The current blame culture in which Boards are penalised while the Department is clearly not in control of its own finances is damaging both service delivery and the capability of the system to move forward.

Modernising the estate to meet the aspirations of the Review will require resource planning and the best use and allocation of monies. It is becoming clear that delegation of school budgets is a barrier to this. It is leading to the misallocation of funding because of retained surpluses with no strategic accountability over their use. It is also compromising workforce planning of teaching and non-teaching staff: Decisions on numbers and skill mix are being taken at the micro rather than macro level. The Independent Review must consider how modification to schemes of delegation could best promote its objectives.

Processes of Decision Making

12. The Review is seeking to engage key bodies and constituencies in a process of radical change. Its focus is on their issues for collaboration and preservation of identity.

Essentially this is high level technocratic change in a room. It does not address how support for change can be mobilised at local level.

Communities, particularly in areas of deprivation, will reasonably see change without participation as loss. Imposed change that rationalises resources without the promise of improvement in educational outcomes will not work. Hence our objective need model of re-allocating resources in Para 10. The Review must also consider the effect of local job loss linked to rationalisation, particularly in areas of poverty and deprivation.

The review needs its own Equality process as part of consultation and moving to recommendations. It clearly does not have one to date, and this should become a fundamental aspect of the Review's work.

Delivering Recommendations:

13. At this stage the Review is using the PWC EIPS report as a crutch for implementation.

This model is fundamentally flawed – to the extent that further consultancy work is now being commissioned pre-decision. We would highlight proposals to;

- involve private sector partners generating conflicts of interest and accountability which will compromise any value-driven change
- out-source maintenance commissioning and infrastructure procurement when Boards have high competencies in these areas
- privatise all caretaking, cleaning, catering, grounds and building DLO staff across all the sectors. This fundamentally damages any prospect of consent to the outcomes you are seeking.

Conclusion:

14. We look forward to further involvement in your Review. We shall be circulating this response widely: you have our consent to any circulation you may wish to undertake in advance of consultation workshops and groups.

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