

**RESPONSE TO THE  
INDEPENDENT STRATEGIC REVIEW  
OF EDUCATION**

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GENERAL TEACHING COUNCIL FOR NORTHERN IRELAND

JULY 2006

## 1.0 Introduction

- 1.1 The Council welcomes the notion of a strategic review as it considers that such an approach resonates with the undertakings outlined in its Charter for Education (see Appendix 1) which seeks, amongst other things, a commitment to a model of policy development rooted in consultation, appropriate research and data collation.
- 1.2 The Council notes with interest the observations at paragraph 10 of the consultation document relating to the ‘fundamental purposes and principles’ underpinning education in Northern Ireland and considers it appropriate that any review of this nature should consider such issues as a prelude to deliberations. The Council would suggest that its recently published Charter for Education offers an appropriately detailed philosophical rationale for education. And, as importantly, is a document that has been widely endorsed by political parties, and the education establishment. The Council believes that, given the consensus around the Charter document, it offers an appropriate benchmark against which the recommendations emerging from this review should be considered.

## 2.0 Terms of Reference

- 2.1 The Council notes the terms of reference set out by the Secretary of State and has itself identified these core issues as being of strategic importance. The Council further recognises that uncertainties in regard to issues such as the structural and logistical implications of the ‘entitlement curriculum’, allied to a failure to address pro-actively the implications of demographic trends, have created an environment which has not been conducive to rational analysis or considered or indeed reflective public debate.
- 2.2 The Council has three further points to make in regard to the terms of reference, one on the issue of funding, the second pertaining to the quality of teaching and leadership i.e. professional development and third relating to the issue of the facilitation of ‘integrated education’.
- 2.3 **Funding:** With regard to funding the Council notes the comments in paragraph 3 of the consultation paper which indicate that, although the issue of funding falls within the remit of the review, the consultation paper itself is restricted to funding relating to the schools’ estate. The Council considers that, whilst the issue of the funding of the schools’ estate is indeed important, consideration must also be given to matters such as the funding of teachers’ salaries and the resource implications of the management and structural issues arising from the consortia arrangements, which will emerge from the entitlement approach to the 14-19 curriculum. Of equal importance is the issue of ‘special needs’ funding and SENDO. The impact of these issues on the finances of the South Eastern Education and Library Board in particular is well documented. The debilitating

impact of increasing demands on schools, arising from SENDO, at a time of declining resources should not be underestimated.

- 2.4 **Professional Development:** Equally important, in light of the observations at bullet points two and four of paragraph 14, is the need for any strategic or systemic review to consider what structures and culture are required to ensure the necessary quality of teaching leadership and management to deliver the world class education we all aspire to. Quite simply it is essential that we consider the professional development needs of teachers and what structures will best deliver on this issue. It is also important to consider how best to disburse the resources for such activities. The Council in a recent report to the Department of Education, undertaken as part of the strategic review of teacher education, proposed a model of professional development that would help create and sustain the culture of ‘democratic professionalism’ necessary to ensure that change is readily embraced and implemented. The model which is predicated upon a ‘mixed economy’ model of professional development has implications not just for structures and support services but also for resources. It is for these reasons that GTCNI believes that this issue should be reflected in the deliberations arising from this consultation process.
- 2.5 **Integrated / Integrating Education:** Turning to the issue of the facilitation of ‘integrated education’ as set out in paragraph 2 of the consultation paper; the Council fully endorses the sentiments enshrined within the TACOTIE report and, indeed, in its Charter for Education identifies learning to ‘live together’ as one of the ‘four pillars’ of learning<sup>1</sup>. The Charter further emphasises the fact that education is central to the development of social capital which is identified as a vital contribution to personal development, and ‘communal well being and social cohesion’.
- 2.6 In light of this common purpose, so to speak, the Council is concerned that the question posed at paragraph 2 could be perceived to carry within it an implied criticism of the sterling work undertaken by all schools in regard to the promotion of social cohesion and reconciliation. In essence, it must be the goal of all educators to provide an education that is ‘integrative’ in nature and the integrated schooling movement has and will continue to play a significant role in the promotion of such a culture. However, the Council rejects any suggestion that the problems associated with division in Northern Ireland can be resolved solely by education and considers that any attempt to burden the system with primary responsibility for this issue is another example of inappropriate ‘role inflation’ for schools.

### **3.0 Principles, Values and Goals**

- 3.1 The nine points made at paragraph 16 are interesting in that six of the nine relate in various ways to resources. That said, the points, if read in conjunction with the aspirations in paragraph 10, are appropriate. However, the Council considers that the outworkings of these values, principles and goals will not be without significant difficulties.

### **4.0 Inherent Tensions**

- 4.1 Whilst as noted above, the principles, values and goals, as set out in paragraphs 10 & 16 are laudable, there exists in the notions of affordability and the minimisation of waste, in respect of capital and recurrent expenditure, an inherent tension with the concept of parental choice and the concept of open enrolment. In short, the diversity of provision resulting from current arrangements sits ill at ease with the notion of simple cost effectiveness. This allied to the historic patterns of provision and 'political' resistance to rationalisation creates a somewhat difficult environment for administrators charged with the management of the school estate. In a community characterised by a significant rural dimension we need to be mindful that the social and fiscal implications of the closure of rural schools are often difficult to quantify. There is a school of thought that would suggest that in some instances projected savings are not realised.
- 4.2 The resolution of this tension is unlikely to be an easy task in an environment characterised by uncertainties regarding the arrangements in respect of such emotive issues as selection and the resulting post-primary arrangements, the implications for classroom management strategies and staffing of the new curriculum arrangements, to be introduced under the auspices of the 2006 Education Order. The situation is further exacerbated by the on-going failure to secure a devolved administration and what is perceived by many to be a paucity of funding and the undertaking, in DENI Circular 1990/20, that all schools irrespective of pupil numbers must be adequately funded under the LMS arrangements.

### **5.0 Further Reflections**

- 5.1 Before turning to the specific questions posed in the accompanying letter to the Consultation Paper, there is merit in reflecting further on the social and political context of the review. Whilst the consultation paper, quite properly, reflects on the nature of the curriculum change to be introduced and the existence of several reports on tolerance and shared future, and also on the negative impact of 'inefficiencies in certain aspects of the education system', it is largely silent on the socio-political realities of life in Northern Ireland. It is equally silent on the potentially negative effects

of existing funding mechanisms for schools and the market forces philosophy underpinning the LMS culture.

- 5.2 The Council would suggest that in regard to resources, the review should consider the implications in global costs of LMS. It is noteworthy that when Local Funding was first introduced at the start of the 1990s DENI had to inject almost £3m to ensure that the system was not faced with an unacceptable level of redundancies. One wonders what that sum would be at today's costings. The Council is conscious that teaching costs are not devolved in Scotland with no apparent detrimental effect. At a time when the new curriculum requirements, post Key Stage 3, require co-operative working it would appear logical to reflect on how we will successfully encourage co-operative working in an environment characterised by competition and market force funding. This issue will be considered later in this paper.
- 5.3 Turning to the issue of socio-political realities. The education system, in Northern Ireland, in regard to its current administration, reflects aspects of the traditional 'fault lines' in Northern Ireland. This is not to suggest, as some erroneously do, that education or schools can be held responsible for such a situation, rather it is an acknowledgement that Northern Ireland remains a community where the 'politics of identity' loom large. It is not the role of a professional body like GTCNI to offer a detailed analysis of this situation, or to suggest an alternative view of the world, rather the Council seeks to inject an element of reality into the debate.
- 5.4 One of the more obvious realities is that whilst the RPA offers an opportunity to rationalise administration and aspects of employment it is, for the time being, unlikely that the school system will become a unitary system. Indeed, the existence of diversity in provision in Northern Ireland mirrors the emerging scenario in England and Wales where Academies and faith based schools are an increasing feature of the educational landscape.
- 5.5 In seeking efficiency, cost effectiveness and economies of scale it will be necessary, at this juncture, to work within the existing constituent elements and subsequently to actively promote co-operative working. The General Teaching Council has made a significant contribution to facilitating co-operative working and joint understanding, in regard to education, through the development of its Charter for Education and its Code of Values and Professional Practice. With these complementary documents society can now share in a common understanding of the purposes of education. Such an understanding is the foundation upon which co-operative working can emerge.
- 5.6 The realisation of the aspirations implicit within the consultation paper will require a sea-change in society's understanding of how education should be delivered. The Council considers that the RPA through the single Education and Skills Authority offers a potential vehicle for

planning, however, this would require that all of the existing vested interests can be assured that their voices are appropriately represented within arrangements pertaining to any new authority.

- 5.7 The Council is convinced that the process of ‘enculturation’ in respect of change requires, in addition to a common understanding of the purposes of education, a clear understanding on the part of all concerned of the practical realities and implications of factors such as demography, diversity of choice and the retention of a network of small schools. Ignorance in relation to the above, allied to uncertainties in regard to selection etc, create an environment of uncertainty which inevitably leads to reluctance to consider change. It is imperative that, as far as possible, these issues are addressed. The derivation of objective data offers an opportunity for the promotion of rational discussion and the ‘de-politicisation’ of the debate.

## 6.0 **Actions Required**

- 6.1 This section offers not just a GTCNI perspective on how best to address the issue of uncertainty but also seeks to address the 6 issues posed on Page 2 of the letter of 14 June 2006 and also the issue of the empowerment and development of the profession.
- 6.2 If we are to bring a greater degree of understanding to the debate on how best to facilitate education in Northern Ireland the Council considers that there is a need as a matter of urgency to:
- a. provide an authoritative analysis of the profile of provision in Northern Ireland with a meaningful comparison with a comparable area in the UK i.e. reflecting the geography and population;
  - b. provide a detailed costing of schools reflecting different pupil numbers;
  - c. establish objective ‘viability criteria’ for primary and post-primary schools, i.e. what size of unit provides the critical mass of curricular opportunity and professional expertise, to ensure that the educational experience enjoyed by pupils is appropriate and fulfilling? Such criteria will have to take account of the staffing issues associated with curricular change, for example, the introduction of the enriched curriculum for early years and the impact that this might have in a schooling system characterised by composite classes in Key Stage 1;
  - d. provide a costing of current over provision i.e. cost of existing as opposed to a ‘notionally rationalised’ system;

- e. conduct a detailed mapping exercise of demographic trends, including the implications of population mobility in an expanded EU, to better inform decision making; and
- f. draw up a comparative analysis of arrangements in respect of school management and the planning of provision in the other ‘jurisdictions’ within the British Isles. Such analysis to take account of:
  - (i) the derivation of data re potential pupil numbers i.e. long-term enrolment;
  - (ii) mechanisms to discern parental wishes re preferred ethos; and
  - (iii) mechanisms to assure parents, whose aspirations regarding ethos cannot be met via separate schooling, so that their children’s school experience will give due cognisance to their views in respect of this issue.
- g. conduct a detailed ‘impact assessment’ of the investment that has already been made in ‘connectivity’ through the C2K initiative. Can ICT technologies and infrastructures help facilitate consortia-based or integrating approaches to schooling?

## **7.0 Response to Specific Issues Raised**

- 7.1 Turning to the specifics of the matters raised on Page 2 of Professor Bain’s letter. The Council has numbered these ‘1’ to ‘6’ to facilitate ease of reference.
- (1) In keeping with the notion of local responsiveness it would seem logical to map Northern Ireland into a series of education community areas. Note these might be linked to the issues around question (5). In short a mapping exercise undertaken in relation to post-primary education communities could be extended to link the potential primary feeder units. Such an approach would ensure that a more holistic view of needs would be considered at all phases of education. Note: such an exercise should throw into relief post-primary schools who are unlikely to be viable providers or contributors to the 14-19 entitlement curriculum.
  - (2) The issue of collaboration is rendered more complicated by the existence of a funding regime predicated upon market forces. The resulting culture acts as a divisive rather than a unifying force and sits ill at ease with such notions as education communities or a joint campus approach. The Council would welcome a review of school funding mechanisms in light of this reality.

However, should such a move prove to be unattainable then thought should be given to funding post primary consortia, in particular, in a new way. One possibility is to have a dual funding stream with LMS funding augmented from an additional 'consortia funding stream' designed to bring stability to those schools suffering a fluctuation in LMS funding. Such a mechanism will be essential if we are to ensure that a pupil's entitlement is not subject to the vagaries of LMS funding. In essence, we need to ensure the continuing viability of the diverse 'units' within a consortium. It is noteworthy that the Education and Training Inspectorate have identified as priorities for both DE & DEL the need to 'address the tensions in post 16 provision between the free market strategy of open enrolment promoting competition and the advantages of organisations working in partnership.' The Council would suggest that given the new curriculum the issue will impact from 14 to 19.

Remaining with the issue of sharing of facilities, it is fairly obvious that not all of the existing post primary schools will be viable in the future. Consideration should be given, where it is appropriate, to re-launching such schools as community education campuses, with primary schools in substandard accommodation relocating to such buildings where they are deemed suitable.

- (3) This question is somewhat vague and in many respects the answer would be context driven; that said, GTCNI considers the following factors to be essential:
1. future viability in terms of pupil numbers;
  2. the projected size and potential for joint community sponsorship or models of joint management;
  3. existing and future transport links, urban planning details and rural sustainability; and
  4. the potential for extended school operations or the development of broadly based learning communities.
- (4) The Council has no historical data on which to answer this matter/question but would suggest that a cost effective surplus is unlikely to be above 10%. It is anticipated that an accurate demographic mapping would facilitate a differentiated approach to this issue. In short, it may be that in areas of known growth a 'new build' may have a larger initial surplus capacity included as a 'future proofing' exercise. However, as noted above the issue will always be complicated by the operation of the Open Enrolment Policy.
- (5) GTCNI has already noted its belief that an initial mapping exercise is required as to possible consortia and linkages to Further

Education. It is recognised that Further Education will play a significant role in 14-19 arrangements. What has not been addressed is how best this sector can be brought into play.

What is not acceptable, in the interests of equity, is the ad hoc development of a series of loosely coupled arrangements between individual schools and Further Education Institutions. The Council believes that the Department of Education or the new Education Authority must be proactively involved in the development of structured and sustainable arrangements. Equally, it has to be recognised that this may require a degree of what might be deemed 'preliminary rationalisation' within the post primary sector. The notion of 'Costello Consortia' is not universally accepted and it is important to note that recent evidence, emerging from one district inspection, revealed deep concerns in the post primary sector regarding how collaborative working could be facilitated.

- (6) The Council has already indicated its belief that the first step in co-operative working is the development of a shared understanding as to the purposes of education. The Council's Charter for Education offers such an understanding and GTCNI would suggest that if all who signalled their support commit, as individuals and organisations, to the aspirations enshrined within the Charter, then the development of partnerships and a commitment to education as a vehicle for social cohesion and integration will be made much easier.

## **8.0 Conclusion**

- 8.1 In responding to this review the Council is confident that the education service, as a whole, does indeed share a common understanding of the purpose and significance of education and is committed to providing a world class education for our young people. Equally, the Council recognises that a time of financial constraint and demographic downturn we must ensure that resources are marshalled effectively and that our planning processes are structured and coherent. What must not be forgotten is the reality that change is implemented by people and care must be taken to inform, empower and co-join the profession in the processes of renewal. The Council considers that at a time of unparalleled change consideration must be given to the reallocation of the savings accrued from structural change to the school sector, to further enhance teaching and learning.