

Independent Review of Education

Initial Engagement Paper: Catholic Schools' Trustee Service

The Catholic Trustees, comprising Diocesan Education Trusts, Religious Congregations and Lay Trustee bodies, are ultimately responsible for the defining mission, ethos, and ownership of their respective schools. Each Trust body is represented on the Northern Ireland Commission for Catholic Education (NICCE).

Catholic Trustees are the legal owners of their schools and exercise responsibility in accordance with the terms or articles of the relevant Trust and in the interest of that Trust. Trustees have responsibility for decisions relating to all aspects of school property and buildings. They also have responsibility for oversight of the strategic direction, organisational nature, and ethos of their respective schools.

The Catholic Schools' Trustee Service (CSTS) was formed in 2017, part funded by the Department of Education and by the various Trustee bodies, as the sectoral body for the Catholic managed sector.

As an agency of NICCE, CSTS advises and supports Trustees in their responsibility for the strategic direction, organisational nature, and shared Catholic values of the Catholic sector and in relation to the specific character of their individual schools. It also advises and supports Trustees in respect of area planning for the Catholic Managed sector. Finally, CSTS assists Trustees in working with Catholic schools to develop more cohesive engagement within the sector in response to Departmental policy in areas such as shared education, area-based planning and developing new models of post-primary transfer.

CSTS submits this initial engagement paper in response to the following key talking points provided by the Panel:

- Delivery of the Review
- The purpose of education and vision for the future
- Strengths and weaknesses of the current system
- Key issues to be considered within each strand
 - Education Journey
 - Support to Schools and Settings
 - System design, delivery and administration

Delivery of the Review

Although the Review has been initiated out of the New Decade New Approach manifesto, CSTS urges the Review panel to avoid being directed, constrained, or influenced by the Executive's commitment to a single education system. It appears that there is some confusion among the political parties as to what that concept means and while it may be a possible outcome it should not be an underpinning aim of the Independent Review. Indeed, we contend that our current system constitutes a single education system.

We would suggest that the evidence being gathered for consideration by the panel must be obtained from all possible sources and assessed on the basis of accuracy and reliability. We believe that the panel should concentrate more on quality provision than on the promotion of any specific model of educational provision. The Review Panel must therefore consider all research sources, including international evidence and best practice as well as any commissioned by the panel.

It is essential that the Panel focuses on educational delivery and standards and identifies the factors which can contribute to ensuring that quality provision is available to all children and young people and this output focus should be central to the review. Only when it has identified where quality provision for all children exists, should the panel then consider the administrative support arrangements which can, and do, best deliver the best outcomes.

The Panel will wish to engage with Managing Authorities, Sectoral Bodies, Government Departments, community organisations, governors, principals, staff, parents, and young people, industry and employers and give due weight to the views of all such groupings. It is also important that the voice of all stakeholders is included, not just those with the loudest voices or those who are most articulate. To that end there will be a need for opportunities for 'blue sky thinking' but also surveys etc designed to be easily understood and responded to by specific groups including an opportunity to submit options for consideration and comment.

The Panel needs to grapple with the issue of Finance. Although it is a major concern, CSTS believes that the outcome of the Review cannot be driven by current issues of the affordability of the current system in any recommendations for change. It is however anticipated that consideration of effective and efficient and equitable use of resources should form part of the Review

The Purpose of Education and Vision for the Future

Education Journey

In its 2006 report “Schools for the Future: Funding, Strategy, Sharing”, the Independent Strategic Review of Education (Bain Review) identified two aims for education:

- *the quality of individual opportunities and experiences, in terms of curriculum, learning and teaching standards in relation to attainment, personal growth and social development*
- *social, community and economic wellbeing.*

The report stated that

We wish to highlight the strong support for an education in the service of both the individual and society, an education concerned with all aspects of human living, contribute to personal fulfilment, civic well-being, and economic prosperity.

CSTS would suggest that much of what was concluded in the above report remains relevant, especially its focus on the quality of opportunities for young people

CSTS suggests that there is a need to create an education system which focuses much more closely on the holistic needs of our Children & Young people rather than on institutions.

There is also a need to review the current curriculum and qualifications to ensure that the curriculum provided meets the needs of our Children & Young People and the needs of society and our economy.

Our Children & Young People are entering a very different world than that for which our curriculum was designed. They face new challenges which aren't being addressed e.g. Growing mental health issues.

The Chief Inspector's Report, 2016/18 identified concerns which highlight the need for a fundamental review of curriculum and assessment in our schools. The report stated that:

Too many underachieve, struggle to learn in underperforming schools and organisations, and find educational routes needlessly blocked by decisions about curriculum and assessment by schools and governors who priorities the interest of their school or organisation over the needs of learners.

The assessment and examination culture at post 14 can have negative consequences including undue stress on pupils, a narrowing of curriculum and restricted pathways.

In general, at KS4 there is either a lack of appropriate pathways that meet with the needs of all the pupils and provide progression routes or there is insufficient knowledge about them.

As suggested in the report there is a need for a system which can identify clear and seamless pathways through from 3 – 19yrs which are designed around the needs of Children & Young People, and which requires greater collaboration between schools and with FE Colleges. The system should also provide for smooth transitions between phases and providers without any structural barriers. It will be that the panel collate international practice around the impact of seamless transitions and pathways on outcomes for all.

The review should also identify more appropriate measures of success for schools beyond GCSE/ A Level results and University place acceptances with a particular emphasis on the identification of value-added measures.

In any review of curriculum and assessment it is essential that we engage with employers to ensure that schools prepare young people for the 21st Century economy which is continually changing and evolving.

The Review should also focus on how we can develop the use of technology in how curricular provision is designed and delivered in how teaching methodology can be enhanced and how individual skills in this area can be developed and enhanced. This should build on the experience of schools and Children & Young People during the pandemic. Consideration should also be given as to how technology can best enhance opportunities for specific groups of children and young people e.g. SEN pupils. The review should also consider the possibility that increase performance from students during the pandemic may, in part, be due to some students performance improving as a result of the style of learning that technology provided

Support to Schools and Settings

Currently schools have a range of supports centrally provided; HR, Transport, Facilities, Maintenance etc. The Review should examine which services schools can best access centrally and make these available to all schools and also determine which would be more efficiently and effectively delivered at school level.

CSTS believe that schools require support to develop collaborative relationships with each other; within and across sectors/ phases to ensure that curricular pathways can be most effective. This will require some consideration of how LMS funding operates as schools currently can feel pressured into retaining pupils on the basis of a rationale which may be budgetary rather than educational.

Changes in policy have led to significant cuts to school curriculum/ management support. While some strong leaders/ managers have been able to make provision 'in house' schools with the greatest needs are least likely to be able to turn things around without external expertise. The EA are currently examining new models of CPD and support to schools and this issue needs to be developed further. The lack of this type of support has resulted in a deficit in professional development opportunities for staff as well as an increase in feelings of isolation for many school leaders. Schools require access to appropriate supports which they can call on as and when required. Alongside this there is a need for all schools to engage with services which can provide both support and a challenge function which can affect improvement.

System Design, delivery, and administration

In NI we have a broad range of school types which have grown out of parental demand/ choice. These provide Children & Young People and their families with a range of options and introduces an element of competition into the system which can be positive.

The 2006 Bain Review recognised the value of such variety:

Within a framework of shared core values and principles, we acknowledge perspectives that make for the distinctiveness in the educational experience provided by schools, manifest in their ethos, but with scope for each school to develop and maintain its own particular character.

Where such variety exists, there is a need to ensure that it is supported. There are many services which can be provided centrally and are most efficiently delivered in that manner e.g., transport. There are other services which require sectoral supports to ensure that the ethos and distinctiveness of the school can best be supported. It will be important that the Review can identify how these are best delivered, and by whom.

The Review Terms of Reference refers to a Single Education system. We would contend that what we currently have is a single system – operating to the same DE policies/ curricular requirements etc. but also allowing for a pluralism of provision both at school and administrative level which is a positive attribute of our system.

We believe that Catholic education has demonstrated both within NI and on an International level that it can deliver effectively for Children & Young People and for communities and makes a positive contribution to wider society. In part this is linked to the sector's interconnectedness to its community through parish/ faith/culture etc. This community connectedness is also identified as a key component in some very successful schools in other sectors.

Strengths and weaknesses of the current education system

Educational Journey: strengths

The majority of pupils have access to a good quality of education. We also have a committed teaching and support staff workforce who strive to meet the needs of the pupils.

There is clear evidence of year on year increases in performance at GCSE and A-Level for pupils including good progress in English & Maths standards. For example, 72.8 % of pupils attained GCSE A*-C including Eng. & Maths in 2018/19 compared to only 57.3% in 2008/09. Similarly, in 2008/09 63.9% achieved 3 A-level or equivalent A -C and by 2018/19 this had risen to 71.8%.

An increasingly inclusive and diverse education system is emerging. For example, pupils with SEN, who's parent wish for it, have found a place within mainstream provision and the multi-cultural nature of our society and our schools is evidenced by the welcome received by 'newcomer' Children & Young People into our schools.

There are many excellent examples of collaboration and sharing within and beyond sectors through Area Learning Communities and Shared Education projects etc.

Many schools are developing very positive collaborative arrangements with other schools/sectors/phases through building local relationships and often through Area Learning Communities and Shared Education programmes which enhance provision to Children & Young People.

The resilience and adaptability of our school communities during covid, especially during the lock down periods has opened schools up a whole new world of technology and to new ways of making provision for children and young people and for new curricular opportunities.

CSTS would contend that the positive contribution made to the education system by Catholic schools is a strength of the current education system.

Educational Journey: weaknesses

The Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) provides data to suggest that we have a good, but not world class, education system. For example in 2018 PISA showed the following findings amongst 15-year-olds:

English

No significant change in mean performance since 2015 – higher levels did improve but less so at lower levels.

Highest Levels 5/6 OECD Average 8% NI 9% Ireland 12% England 12% Scotland 11%

Lowest level 1 OECD Average 22% NI 19% Ireland 12% England 17% Scotland 11%

Maths

Mean score around OECD Average - remained stable since 2006

Highest Levels 5/6 OECD Average 11% NI 8% Ireland 8% England 13%

Lowest Level 1 OECD Average 24% NI 20% Ireland 16% England 18%

Science

Performance continues to fall since 2006

Highest Level 5/6 OECD Average 7% NI 5% Ireland 6% England 11%

Lowest Level 1 OECD Average 22% NI 20% Ireland 17% England 17%

It is concerning that we have a very significant tail of underachievement. For example, 12.8% of pupils did not achieve 5 GCSE A*-C and 7.5% were deemed ineligible to be included in the exam summary in 2018/19.

Many of our Children & Young People do not have access to the necessary curricular pathways which allow them to move smoothly through the system to their desired outcomes. Schools are sometime focused more on retaining pupils than directing them to more suitable pathways.

Schools sometimes limit collaborations and interactions with each other and with FE to meet pupil needs both within their school and with other schools

Our curriculum and assessment model has narrowed opportunities for pupils with a lack of equal value for academic and vocational routes.

The existence of academic selection creates impacts significantly on primary curricular provision at KS2. This also impacts on the goal of a smooth pathway for

students through 3 -19yrs. Additionally the system has differential impacts on students from varying social backgrounds.

Support to schools: strengths

There are some clear benefits to school through the supports that they are provided such as increased financial control/ flexibility (albeit, inhibited by the significant cuts to budgets in recent years).

CCMS provides an important role in supporting and challenging schools and working with school leaders and governors within the Catholic Maintained sector.

The nature of governance appointments provides the local linkage between the school and its community and governors exercise an important role in providing a support and challenge function to the school.

Support to schools: weaknesses

Over recent years schools have found that many supports which previously existed have been removed e.g., curriculum/management support (due to central budget cuts).

Schools now have a 'looser' relationship with supports / support officers than previously existed and this impacts on the capacity of support to assist the schools to introduce positive change.

System design ,delivery, and administration: strengths

The availability of a range of school sectors to provide for parental preferences – all working towards delivering common goals – is acknowledged by many as a strength of the present system.

Area Planning has begun to see greater co-operation between sectors where all sectors engage in the process to ensure that we work towards providing for Area solutions rather than considering single school solutions.

The EA, and CCMS for Catholic maintained schools, has identified significant differences in provisions across NI and is working to ensure equity of provision for all C&YP

The presence of sectoral bodies/ sectoral supports to address the needs of specific sectors and to work with the sector to ensure that it develops its' distinctiveness.

System design, delivery, and administration: weaknesses

Area Planning is developing a network of sustainable schools' but progress has been slow, in part due to a lack of capital development work for schools and the speed within which Capital projects can move from initiation to completion.

While the EA is working to address equity of provision its size means that progress on these issues has been slow and it is less receptive/responsive to local issues and has a less personal connection to individual schools.

The inequitable access to technology for our C&YP which was a key discovery of school operation during covid and the ongoing implications this has for access to technology.