



NICCY Youth Panel

Presentation to the Independent Review of Education Panel

**Adam Hamilton
Aideen McHugh
Alex Dean
Denis Navickas
Eoin McGlinchey
Eoin Millar
Olivia Bryson**

28th June 2022

Contents:	Page No.
1. Introduction Our Journey Evidence Gathering	2
2. Mental Health Mental Health Recommendations	3
3. Post Primary Transfer Post Primary Transfer Recommendations	5
4. Curriculum Content Curriculum Content Recommendations	8
5. Single Education System Single Education System Recommendations	10
6. Overarching Recommendations	12
7. Conclusion	13
Appendix 1: Summary of Recommendations	14

1.0 Introduction

We are members of the NI Commissioner for Children and Young People's Youth Panel, known as the NYP for short. The Youth Panel role is to support the Commissioner and her staff in their day-to-day work.

The Youth Panel is made up of young people who share their experiences and thoughts with the Commissioner and her staff and help NICCY make decisions about issues that affect children and young people.

When we heard about the Independent Review of Education, we felt strongly that we would like to participate, to have our voices heard. We spend so much of our day, our week and our year within the school environment, it felt natural to share our thoughts, opinions and ideas with the Review Panel. We note the three core strands that the Review is considering and believe that our presentation today will touch on element of each.

Also, as NICCY is all about children rights, and we are part of the Commissioner's support mechanism, we have explored the issues we identified with reference to child rights and the UNCRC.

Our journey

The number of different issues or areas associated with the school environment and education is enormous. In identifying the themes we wanted to examine, we were aware of our own limitations to the time available to explore, engage and review those issues.

The Education subgroup of the Youth Panel identified a list of themes from which we theme selected the 4 most popular. These were:

- Mental Health in schools
- Curriculum Content (mostly focusing on RSE)
- Transfer Test
- A Single Education System

In choosing these 4 areas, we know we have omitted many other really important issues such as special education needs, school transport, bullying, school uniforms, etc..., but we are also aware that the Review Panel, have been, and will be, engaging with many different stakeholders and source much valuable information.

Evidence gathering

Having identified our 4 key areas to explore, we then identified important stakeholders that we wanted to talk to, and crucial questions we wanted to ask. These meeting provided valuable information and signposts to additional reports and publications

- Mental Health in schools
 - Mental Health Champion for Northern Ireland.
 - Pure Mental NI

- Crisis Café
- EA's Critical Incident/ Emotional Health & Wellbeing Team
- Curriculum Content
 - CCEA
 - Gillen Implementation Team
 - Sex Education Forum
- Transfer Test
 - Principal, Loughview Integrated Primary School
 - National Education Union
 - QUB
 - Principal, Lagan College
- A single Education System
 - Integrated Education Fund
 - National Education Union
 - NICIE
 - Council for Catholic Maintained Schools
 - Controlled Schools' Support Council

2.0 Mental Health

Article 24 of the UNCRC says that all children and young people have a right to the best possible health and access to services that promote and maintain good health. This applies to both physical and mental health.

From the 2020 [Youth wellbeing prevalence survey](#)¹, we found out:

- Rates of anxiety and depression in Northern Ireland are about 25% higher than the rest of the UK and Ireland.
- 1 in 8 young people have anxiety or depression.
- One in six 11-15 year old girls, rising to almost one in four 16-19 year old girls were more likely to engage in self-injury or have suicidal thoughts or attempts.
- When the 20% most deprived areas were compared to the 20% least deprived areas, there were higher overall rates of emotional and behavioural problems.

Our conversations highlighted that there are some examples of very good teachers and good practice, but it lacks consistency. Teacher training needs to include additional training on mental health issues and how to deal with them – termed 'mental health first aid' in one of our discussions.

Training in itself is not enough, there's a need to build the structure around them that supports them in that, because the most terrifying thing, we think, for any adult is to be left with a situation that is scary for them also – we have to support teachers to support the young person. EA and the Department of Education, they need to be supporting schools with the funding and with the support to provide resources and training that is actually

¹ [Youth Wellbeing Prevalence Survey](#)

going to make a big impact. Parents also need to be educated on how to recognise, talk about and support children who are under pressure or have mental health issues.

We had very good conversations about the Children & Young People's Emotional Health and Wellbeing in Education Framework, especially with the Mental Health Champion.

We believe the school curriculum needs to be reviewed to ensure the Framework is mandatory and quality assured. At the moment, some schools will deliver the Framework in a positive way, others will focus more on the academic side of education. The Mental Health Champion thinks the Framework is actually "really good" but as schools are not required to deliver it, it is not presented to students in a consistent way. The Department of Education have made a good start with the Framework but unfortunately it can't dictate what schools do with it. The outworking of the Framework also needs to be assessed by Education Inspectors.

Mental Health Recommendations

Recommendations 1 & 2:

The new Emotional Health and Wellbeing Framework for Children and Young People is a positive step in the right direction. The aims of the Framework is to empower young people to understand and take care of, or manage, their emotional health and wellbeing; to assist adults who work within education and youth settings to identify the needs of young people and address these effectively through three methods, are welcome.

However, as discussed with the Mental Health Champion, as schools are not required to deliver it, it is not presented to students in a consistent way.

So, the school curriculum needs to be reviewed to ensure the Emotional Health and Wellbeing Framework is mandatory, quality assured, better resourced and funded.

Also, Boards of Governors should develop a Mental Health and Wellbeing policy (if not already done so) and ensure mental health and wellbeing is specifically included in the self-evaluation process. To quality assure Mental Health support across schools, the Education and Training Inspectorate should monitor delivery, though specific questions, as part of the inspection process.

Recommendation 3:

The non-mandatory nature of the Emotional Health and Wellbeing Framework is not fulfilling the needs of young people. It is vital that the Framework is delivered on the actual needs of young people, rather than the presumed needs as decided by adults.

As part of the 2017/18 ETI report on identifying and evaluating effective practice in supporting pupils to overcome emotional health and well-being issues in primary/post-primary schools and centres providing education other than at school (EOTAS), 35 case study visits were carried out to schools and centres². The visits entailed discussions with the principal and/or vice-principal, senior leaders, heads of years or staff with responsibility

² https://www.etini.gov.uk/sites/etini.gov.uk/files/publications/evaluation-of-emotional-health-and-well-being-support-in-schools-and-eotas_0.pdf, pg.14

for addressing pupil emotional health and well-being. There is no mention of engaging with students!

Therefore, our recommendation is that the mandatory elements of the curriculum should be identified with the support of, and in consultation with, young people.

Recommendation 4:

We recognised that strategies and services have been put place to support children and young people’s mental health and wellbeing. Following NICCY’s recent Still Waiting report, the Department for Health on behalf of the Inter-Departmental Group (consisting of representatives for the Department for Education, Justice and Communities along with the Voluntary and Community Sector) positively published an action plan for delivering on the Report’s recommendations.

The Children and Young People Strategy’s 3-yr action plan has a commitment to deliver programmes and services to support the Children & Young People’s Emotional Health and Wellbeing in Education Framework, which seeks to support educational settings to promote emotional health and wellbeing at a universal level, through a holistic, multi-disciplinary approach, and providing early and enhanced support for those children and young people who may be at risk or showing signs of needing further help.

These are on the back of the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child’s recommendation from the 2016 Concluding Observations which called on the UK Government, and by extension the NI Assembly, to ‘rigorously invest in child and adolescent mental health services and develop strategies at the national and devolved levels, with clear time frames, targets, measurable indicators, effective monitoring mechanisms and sufficient human, technical and financial resources.’

Therefore, we recommend that immediate investment is made in children and young people mental health services, with defined targets and indicators set within timebound periods. This investment should include a quality assurance process.

3.0 Post Primary Transfer

Our conversations with school principals, an education union and professors at QUB proved very enlightening, providing both real professional experiences and opinions as well as academic evidence about the impact of the Transfer Test.

Discussions highlighted how the demands of the Transfer Test impacts the ability of schools to deliver a broad and balanced curriculum which they are legally required to do. As highlighted in the Fair Start Report, this view is supported by OECD’s Review of Evaluation and assessment in 2012³ which states that there is evidence that “academic selection skews teaching at Key Stage 2”. The review also criticised our system of transfer as socially divisive and warned of social imbalance “as some parents and families are better able to support and prepare their children for these tests”.

³ [OECD \(Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development\) Reviews of Evaluation and Assessment in Education \(education-ni.gov.uk\)](http://education-ni.gov.uk)

Discussion also raised the issue of the mental health impact on 10/11yrs olds having to sit multiple tests. Young people are stressed when doing the transfer test and stressed on the outcomes depending on the result, worrying about being labelled depending on the outcome of their test and what school they go to. As Professor Siobhan O’Neill, the Mental Health Champion said in a recent newspaper article⁴, “Test are stressful, and studies consistently show a deterioration in pupils’ mental health during exam periods”. She goes on to note that in a 2018 survey, teachers agreed, with 92% describing the transfer test as having a significant mental health impact.

As one of our interviewees said, “the only impacts on mental health that I have seen in terms of the transfer test have tended to be negative ones”.

We believe the system advantages children from more affluent families and reinforces the social divide. This is evidenced by the fact that 36% of children in non-grammar schools and only 13% of children in grammar schools are entitled to free school meals⁵. 90% of FSME pupils at grammar school get those 5 GCSEs (grade A* - C) compared to only 35% at non-grammar schools⁶

The biggest inequality in educational attainment is the difference between the achievement levels of children who attend grammar schools and those who do not. In 2020/21⁷, 96.9% of grammar school leavers left with at least five GCSEs at grades A* - C or equivalent including GCSE English and Maths. The corresponding proportion for non-grammar school leavers was 62.4%, a stark difference of 34.5 percentage points.

What does the evidence tell us?

- 1973: Burgess Report recommends the abolition of 11+ Transfer Tests
- 1984-88: Northern Ireland Council for Educational Research (NICER) says 11+ test preparation narrows primary curriculum
- 2000: Gallagher and Smith say 11+ test preparation narrows primary curriculum
- 2000: Gardner & Cowan say no evidence that 11+ tests measure ‘ability’ or ‘suitability for Grammar school education’
- 2001: Burns Report Concluded The transfer tests (11+ tests) should end as soon as possible.
- 2004: Costello Report concluded the Transfer Test should be removed as soon as possible and be replaced by arrangements based on parental and pupil choice.

Despite the fact that the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child⁸ has highlighted in 2008 and in 2016 the need to address the segregated education system in Northern Ireland and abolish the use of academic selection, these unregulated admission tests continue to operate.

⁴ Irish News, 14th June 2022

⁵ [Free School Meal Entitlement 202122.pdf \(education-ni.gov.uk\)](#)

⁶ DENI, (2015). Post-Primary School level Data 2014/15 & Examination Performance at Post-Primary schools 2014/15

⁷ [Qualifications and destinations of Northern Ireland school leavers infographic 2020-21.PDF \(education-ni.gov.uk\)](#)

⁸ Para 73, CRC/C/GBR/CO/5, 3rd June 2016.

Children's Rights and Post-Primary Transfer

We note that **Article 28** is primarily concerned with the right of access to education on the basis of equality of opportunity. Article 29 says that education must develop every child's personality, talents and abilities to the full.

We question if the education provided through each form of secondary education is of comparable quality, both in resourcing and outcomes.

Additionally, Article 2 states that the Convention applies to every child without discrimination, whatever their ethnicity, gender, religion, language, abilities or any other status, whatever they think or say, whatever their family background. Again, are the different forms of education in NI equally accessible to all children and groups of children?

And finally, Article 3 states that the best interests of the child must be a top priority in all decisions and actions that affect children but are the best interest of children a primary consideration in the provision of different forms of secondary education.

According to the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development, education systems are more fair if they reward ability rather than circumstance, and conversely, education systems are less fair if they reward circumstances rather than abilities. As we know "circumstances" are things that pupils cannot influence, things like their gender, race or ethnicity, socio-economic status, immigrant background, family structure or place of residence' So, if 'circumstances' don't matter and the current transfer system is fair and rewards ability then we should see no differences for rich kids and poor kids, or boys and girls, or race or ethnic background⁹.

We finish this section by quoting University of Ulster's Transforming Education briefing paper¹⁰ on academic selection which states: "The evidence overwhelmingly indicates that the current arrangements for school transfer at age 11 contribute to the social and financial costs of a stressful process that serves to benefit a few (generally already privileged) pupils while damaging the life-chances of a large proportion of the school population."

Post Primary Transfer Recommendations

Recommendation 5:

Following the review of evidence, the UN Concluding Observations in 2008 and 2016; evidence produced by academics and published reports, including our discussions with stakeholders, we recommend that the unregulated Transfer Test should be removed.

However, we recognise that it is not feasible to do this immediately.

⁹ OECD, 2016, p. 203

¹⁰ [TEUU-Report-10-Academic-Selection.pdf \(ulster.ac.uk\)\(March 2021\)](#)

Recommendation 6:

We also recommend, at the earliest time, that there is a ‘education conversation’, inclusive of children and young people, parents, carers, educationalists and decision makers, to get consensus on a non-academic primary to post primary focused transition process.

4.0 Curriculum Content

The Youth Panel wanted to focus our discussions on curriculum content on the Relationship and Sexuality Education elements of the curriculum and had excellent conversations with both voluntary and statutory agencies on this. We also have some thoughts on how children’s rights are taught in our schools.

Article 24 of the UNCRC relates to how every child has the right to the best possible health. Importantly, it says children and young people have a right to information about their health and that they should have a say in how they get this and be able to say what they like and dislike about the information they get.

Within the 2016 UN Concluding Observations, the Committee on the Rights of the Child recommended that meaningful sexual and reproductive health education is part of the mandatory school curriculum for all schools. It states that such education should provide **age-appropriate** information on:

- confidential sexual and reproductive health-care services;
- contraceptives;
- the prevention of sexual abuse or exploitation, including sexual bullying;
- the support available in cases of such abuse and exploitation; and
- sexuality, including that of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex children;

The Department of Education’s current approach, which enables grant-aided schools to develop their own policy on how they will address RSE within the curriculum, is:

- contrary to the 2016 UN Committee’s recommendation that meaningful sexual and reproductive health education is part of the mandatory school curriculum for all schools in Northern Ireland¹¹; and
- contravenes Section 9 of the Northern Ireland (Executive Formation etc) Act 2019¹² which requires the implementation of the recommendations of the 2018 CEDAW report¹³ and therefore the introduction of a compulsory RSE curriculum in Northern Ireland;

Discussion with our key agencies raised issues about how the broader curriculum suffers as it tends to focus on exams and academic selection. An example was shared of how a Year 8 student was given predicted GCSE grades based in exams held at Christmas, three months after starting post-primary school!

¹¹ **Concluding observations on the fifth periodic report of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland (2016)**

¹² <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2019/22/contents/enacted>

¹³ Para 86; Report of the inquiry concerning the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland under article 8 of the Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (2018)

We also discussed how teachers are generally not trained to deliver the RSE; the minimum mandatory content within the curriculum, the role of Governors in the outworking of RSE; and the lack of consistency in the delivery of the RSE curriculum across Northern Ireland.

Belfast Youth Forum's 2019 report - Young People's Opinions on Relationship and Sexuality in Belfast¹⁴ – compiled in partnership with QUB's Centre for Children's Rights and Common Youth, found:

- i. 86% of young people felt that school was the best place to receive RSE yet only 66% of the respondents had received some RSE at school, but the frequency, content and delivery of this was deemed basic, unhelpful, useless and biased.
- ii. 34% of young people who completed the survey had never received a relationship and sex education lesson in school, and of those young people who did receive lessons, only 10% said the information they received was "very useful."
- 49% of young people felt that the way RSE was taught was influenced by religion or the ethos of the school they attended. However, nearly three quarters of young people felt that RSE should not be influenced by the school's religion or ethos.

Curriculum Content Recommendations

Recommendation 7:

Standardisation of RSE across schools

Along the lines of the recent Children & Young People's Emotional Health and Wellbeing in Education Framework, there should be a RSE Framework developed. This would help support educational settings to promote RSE through a holistic, multi-disciplinary, age appropriate approach. High quality, evidence-based and age-appropriate teaching of these subjects can help prepare pupils for the opportunities, responsibilities and experiences of adult life.

A mandatory RSE Framework should be developed to be delivered in schools. Outworking of the Framework should also apply to all organisations that schools may bring in to enhance teaching.

Recommendation 8:

Pupil led RSE content

Leaving the content of RSE curriculum up to school and governors is not fulfilling the needs of young people. It is vital that the RSE curriculum delivery is based on the actual needs of young people, rather than the presumed needs as decided by adults. Effective RSE does not encourage early sexual experimentation but teaches young people to understand human sexuality and respect themselves and others. A partnership between young people and CCEA could set up a quality assurance process.

The mandatory elements of the RSE curriculum should be identified with the support of, and in consultation with, young people.

¹⁴ Young People's Opinions on Relationship and Sexuality in Belfast, 2019

Recommendation 9:

Monitoring the RSE delivery across schools

The Education and Training Inspectorate (ETI) have recently broadened and strengthened the inspection of school governance to include a self-evaluation stage by Boards of Governors. Self-evaluation is a process through which schools, individuals and various groups within a school reflect on their current practice, identify and celebrate their strengths and identify and address areas for improvement.

Boards for Governors should develop a RSE policy (if not already done so) and ensure RSE is specifically included in the self-evaluation process. To quality assure RSE delivery across schools, the Education and Training Inspectorate should monitor delivery, through specific questions, as part of the inspection process.

Recommendation 10:

Supporting the delivery of RSE in schools

The first review of the RSE curriculum was in 2011 (ETI's Report of an Evaluation of Report of an Evaluation of Relationships and Sexuality Relationships and Sexuality Education in Post Education in Post-Primary Primary Schools) – **an updated review should be carried out as soon as possible**. The 2011 review highlighted the need to provide teachers 'additional in-service training on RSE with particular reference to sensitive topics and to the teaching approaches which are most effective in engaging pupils in learning and promoting their personal development and capacity for decision-making'. Additionally, the review states, 'there is a need for all involved in the initial and continuing professional development of teachers to facilitate opportunities for the teachers to develop a clear understanding of the importance of RSE in promoting pupils' personal growth and development and in supporting their academic achievement.'

There have been many societal changes over the last decade, and it is vital that teachers feel confident and comfortable in delivering an updated RSE curriculum. **Therefore, resources should be made available to support a programme of training for teachers who are delivering RSE.**

Recommendation 11:

Children's Rights Education:

The 2021/20 Kids Life and Times and Young Life and Times surveys combined, identified that only 23.5% of children and young people have heard of the UNCRC. Reflecting one of the UN Committee's 2016 concluding observations, we recommend that **children's rights education should become mandatory as soon as possible**.

5.0 Single Education System

The youth panel are very clear about the importance of creating an inclusive single education system where young people in Northern Ireland can be taught and learn together. To us, the education system has always been reported as being underfunded and a single education system is simply more efficient and cost effective – of this we have no doubt. The Covid crisis and current economic crisis, and the legacy from these will only increase the pressure in the education system.

We note that Article 28 of the UNCRC is primarily concerned with the right of access to education on the basis of equality of opportunity, whilst Article 29 addresses the aims of education and the benefits that every child should be able to enjoy as a consequence of their right to access education.

We believe our system need reformed, ensuring all children equal access to an equal education in line with Articles 28 and 29.

In addition, the 2016 UN Committee’s Concluding Observations recommends that Northern Ireland should actively “promote a fully integrated education system”.¹⁵

We had really worthwhile discussions with those organisations that oversee and support a number of different sectors within our education system. Interestingly, one interviewee had the stance that there was already a single education system, in that there is a common curriculum, common funding, a single inspection process and common GSCE’s and A levels. However, the members of the Youth Panel, amongst many others, think somewhat differently.

- 71% said that integrated schools which intentionally educate children every day in the same classroom, should be the main model for our education system (2021, LucidTalk¹⁶).
- 69% agreed that every school should be integrated (2018, Sky News/Sky Data¹⁷). This includes a majority in each of the 5 main political parties.
- Only 30% of 16 year olds, when asked if they were deciding what school they would send their children to, said they would prefer a school with children of only their own religion (YLTS 2020/21)¹⁸.

Separation of schools along community and religious lines is not limited to pupils. The UU briefing paper on shared and integrated schooling identified that the segregation that is evident in the classroom is reflected in the staffroom and the board room; in the deployment of teachers and in the composition of schools’ Boards of Governors.¹⁹

We are aware that not all types of schools may exist within a single system, for example, Irish-Medium schools or Special Needs schools. We accept the existence of these schools for their unique circumstances and feel that support and investment for these schools

¹⁵ UNCRC Concluding observations on the fifth periodic report of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland CRC/C/GBR/CO/5 (2016) p19

¹⁶ <https://view.publitas.com/integrated-education-fund/northern-ireland-attitudinal-poll/page/1>

¹⁷ NI0318_TABS_v2.pdf (sky.com)

¹⁸ https://www.ark.ac.uk/ylt/2020_21/Community_Relations/OWNMXSCH.html

¹⁹ [Same Difference? Shared Education and Integrated Education \(ulster.ac.uk\)](http://www.ulster.ac.uk/Same-Difference-Shared-Education-and-Integrated-Education)

should be maintained to ensure that children within these systems are not disadvantaged in terms of their right to education in comparison to the broader, integrated system.

During our discussions, when asked, the vast majority of interviewees agreed that a single education system would save money which could be redirected to school services, for example, such as mental health provisions. We understand that segregated education is costly: Ulster University study found in 2016 that the cost of a segregated education system is estimated to be '£16.5-£95 million'²⁰

We believe this money could be much better spent investing in improving the quality of the educational experience and meeting the needs of all learners in Northern Ireland. As noted by Goretta Horgan in her research, "Child Poverty and Education,"²¹

“...too much of the cost of education in Northern Ireland goes into maintaining a segregated system – segregated on lines of religion, social class and gender. Evidence from across the world is clear that mixed-ability schools with a good social mix provide the best educational outcomes. Our children deserve no less.”²²

Single Education System Recommendations

Recommendation 12:

Reflective of 2016 UN Committee on the Rights of the Child’s concluding observations, we recommend that Northern Ireland develops a singular state education system. This system should be UNCRC Article 28 and 29 compliant, fit for purpose, provide greater efficiency and address the cost of education overall as well as for families.

Recommendation 13:

Transformation should be realistically timebound and should identify key milestones during the transformation journey.

6.0 Overarching Recommendations

Student Participation

Throughout all of our meetings with the key organisations and individuals, and through our own experiences as participants, not only within the school environment but also in wider society, we are aware of being part of a democratic deficit with regard to having our voice heard.

Whilst understanding that there are good examples of young people’s participation in the decision making process within schools, within the community and with statutory agencies/government departments, there is no consistency in existing participation mechanisms.

²⁰ Cost of Division: A benchmark of performance and expenditure, UU, 2016

²¹ Child Poverty Alliance, Beneath the Surface Child Poverty in Northern Ireland, 2014

²² Pg 106, *Ibid.*

Children and young people have a right to a say in decisions affecting them. The pandemic has further shone a light on a lack of meaningful engagement with children and young people on the issues that affect them.

In the Republic of Ireland, the 1998 Education Act provides for the establishment of student councils²³, intending them to play an integral and important role in the school community. Where students in a school notify the Board of Management that they wish to establish a Student Council, the Board of Management should provide them, in a timely manner, with a copy of the rules it has drawn up in accordance with these guidelines. Where students have not yet taken the initiative to establish a Student Council, the Board of Management acting through the school Principal and teaching staff shall encourage, facilitate and assist students in doing so.

There is no similar legislation, nor even policy, in Northern Ireland. In 2014, the Department of Education did issue guidance through a departmental circular but, like other frameworks, without an established policy, there is little consistency in delivery and quality across Northern Ireland.

Recommendation 14:

The Department of Education should create a Pupil Participation Policy, aligned with appropriate resources to enable schools to support students to establish participation forums/school councils.

7.0 Conclusion

From what you've heard today, it's obvious that there's appetite for change within our education system amongst young people. Earnestly, our recommendations are only the tip of the iceberg on different issues within the education system that impact young people, and of what we need to see changed in order to deliver a world-class education system.

Be it abolishing the transfer test, an outdated form of assessment that's contributed to socio-economic divides, had profound impacts on the mental health of children, and hampered the quality of education that children receive. Or, the creation of a new, single education system which would allow us to ensure that all young people receive a world-class education, enabling us to pool resources into adequate mental health provision as a result of financial savings, and bridge together young people in our deeply divided society.

This goes along with developing a curriculum that gives all young people the opportunity to learn about Relationships and Sexual Education, regardless of their religious background, and developing a curriculum that is pupil-led and tailored to the needs and wants of young people.

We envisage an education system of top quality, that adequately prepares children and young people for their futures, that's used as an effective resource to deconstruct the sectarian divides so heavily entrenched into our society, one that enables and supports young people in challenges in their life, and one that teaches all young people with the

²³ [Student Councils: A Voice for Students](#)

best educational standards, without heed or barriers from social class, religious background and cultural identity.

It's hard for us to deny that education is a key instrument we can use to shape our society into the original goals and aims of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child - a society free of poverty, discrimination, where every child can live safely and happily to their full potential, not falling victim to circumstances out of their control.

As Nelson Mandela once said, "Education is the most powerful weapon you can use to change the world."

Appendix 1: Summary of Recommendations

Mental Health

1. The school curriculum needs to be reviewed to ensure the Emotional Health and Wellbeing Framework is mandatory, quality assured, better resourced and funded.
2. Boards of Governors should develop a Mental Health and Wellbeing policy (if not already done so) and ensure mental health and wellbeing is specifically included in the self-evaluation process. To quality assure Mental Health support across schools, the Education and Training Inspectorate should monitor delivery, though specific questions, as part of the inspection process.
3. The mandatory elements of the curriculum should be identified with the support of, and in consultation with, young people.
4. Immediate investment is made in children and young people mental health services, with defined targets and indicators set within timebound periods. This investment should include a quality assurance process.

Post Primary Transfer

5. Following the review of evidence, the UN Concluding Observations in 2008 and 2016; evidence produced by academics and published reports, including our discussions with stakeholders, we recommend that the unregulated Transfer Test should be removed.
6. At the earliest time, that there is a '*education conversation*', inclusive of children and young people, parents, carers, educationalists and decision makers, to get consensus on a non-academic primary to post primary focused transition process.

Curriculum Content

7. A mandatory RSE Framework should be developed to be delivered in schools. Outworking of the Framework should also apply to all organisations that schools may bring in to enhance teaching.
8. The mandatory elements of the RSE curriculum should be identified with the support of, and in consultation with, young people.
9. Boards for Governors should develop a RSE policy (if not already done so) and ensure RSE is specifically included in the self-evaluation process. To quality assure RSE delivery across schools, the Education and Training Inspectorate should monitor delivery, though specific questions, as part of the inspection process.
10. An updated RSE Curriculum review should be carried out as soon as possible and resources should be made available to support a programme of training for teachers who are delivering RSE.

11. Children's rights education should become mandatory as soon as possible.

Single Education System

12. Reflective of 2016 UN Committee on the Rights of the Child's concluding observations, we recommend that Northern Ireland develops a singular state education system. This system should be UNCRC Article 28 and 29 compliant, fit for purpose, provide greater efficiency and address the cost of education overall as well as for families.
13. Transformation should be realistically timebound and should identify key milestones during the transformation journey.

Overarching Recommendation

14. The Department of Education should create a Pupil Participation Policy, aligned with appropriate resources to enable schools to support students to establish participation forums/school councils.