



**National Education Union,
Northern Ireland –
Initial submission to Panel
members of the Independent
Review of Education**

**Our ten
demands!**

The Independent Review of Education is understood by NEU (the National Education Union) as a proxy or equivalent in Education to the ‘Bengoa’ report in Health. Our education system is like a curate’s egg – ‘good in parts’ - but decidedly average overall and with some severely ingrained and damaging fractures. Some parts excel, others fail. Public funds are scarce, so spending on the right things is vital. Our system is stuck. Your work is important - difficult and overdue.

The National Education Union is the largest teachers and educators’ union in Europe with some 460,000 members, the 4th largest union in the Trades Union Congress. Our members are education-facing, pragmatic and wedded more to a European style or culture of trade union co-determination than to the British adversarial tradition. We tend to think deeply and with reflection on education policy and practice.

The things our educators notice and say

Our system is too contested, politically and ideologically. We need more evidence-based policy, actions and ideas that demonstrably work. Systems that are fit for purpose, can be evaluated, much like the onus on our teachers and educators.

We need a larger professional “space” or “bubble” for pedagogic inquiry. Teaching is an intellectual endeavour, but teachers are bogged down in too much ‘busy’ administrative work - routine recording, measuring, weighing, assessing, testing, examining, monitoring, tracking. We believe in the old adage that *“You can’t fatten a pig by weighing it.”* We need to learn from what works internationally – notably in Scandinavia, middle Europe and in the Far East.

Our Early Years provision (0-4) is undervalued. This is a critical phase, growing and formalising. Early Years educators should be wholly professionalised and paid properly. There is academic consensus that the more we invest in our children, the earlier, the better¹. Invest in our youngest.

That gives more “bang for buck”. We do the opposite, against what we know is best for our children.

Our young people start school too early. At 4 years and 2 months we have the youngest school starting age in Europe. This is not wholly mitigated by the KS1 curriculum. We get “too formal, too early”. We have children in reading-recovery programmes before Scandinavian children have set a foot in school. Our children are robbed of play and time to be what they are – children.

Children learn best when they’re enjoying it, when they’re relaxed, engaged, fear-free and motivated. There are many different ways to learn.

In Primary schools the NFER’s TIMMS and PIRLS research benchmarks us, in the upper primary school, as globally leading in reading – up with Finland and the Pacific Rim countries². Primaries, it should be noted, are still nurturing environments, local institutions and broadly socially mixed (or comprehensive) in intake. Many, notably rural, primaries are small – surrounded by significant social supports – but are often deemed “unsustainable”.

1 See at Why Early Investment Matters - The Heckman Equation

2 See at <https://www.nfer.ac.uk/publications/PIRR01/executivesummary.pdf>

In secondaries, the PISA benchmarking places us around the average³. Of interest, in our socially segregated post-primaries, is that our *'high-flyers'*, the gifted and talented – do poorly by international comparison – even within our *'selective'* system.

Our *'average'* PISA placement is at odds with the separate PIACC research which places us in the lowest quartile (19th of 24), with a large body of people (a "long tail") in the workforce with no qualifications at all, effectively functionally illiterate.⁴

Only last month a survey by Pivotal flagged that our young people require a modernised careers service, as less than a third report feeling equipped to succeed in the world of work. Careers advice is rarely independent and does not generally keep pace or reflect today's rapidly changing job market⁵.

Our schools' system is the most socially segregated in the developed world⁶.

Traditionally, there has been concern about how communally segregated our system is, with only 7-8% of pupils educated in de-segregated settings⁷. But a greater problem is that we have the most socially segregated education system in the developed world. The OECD's 2012 benchmark placed us at 34th out of 34 developed countries on that measure⁸. Yes, get that! The most socially segregated education system in the developed world, bar none!

We cannot afford this, financially or societally. Social segregation is at least as damaging, if not more so, than communal segregation. Why does social segregation matter? Because all the research, from the 1966 Coleman Report to today, tells us that

systems in countries where income differentials are narrow, do better⁹. At an individual level, a child from a low-income household in a socially disadvantaged area does much better in school with a socially mixed intake. The same child attending a *'high-poverty'* school does much worse, always. The peer effect is vital.

That tells us that socially mixed intakes is *'miles better'* – as a policy response – than any amount of targeting-social-need or compensatory financing. Social mixing is not a *'silver-bullet'*, but a giant step that would impact more than any other measure. Achieving socially balanced intakes in every school is a performance measure, not mere moral virtue-signalling.

Compensatory measures (like targeting social need) may be morally correct, but *'High-Poverty'* schools don't work in the long-run, with or without targeted compensatory funding.

Our school education system is too driven, results driven, data driven, too *'high stakes'*. We have a low-trust, hyper-accountability system – at the cost of eroding teachers' professionalism, judgement, autonomy and discretion.

Our system stands at a juncture between the *'high road'* and the *'low road'*. The "Low Road" is characterised by systems of micro-accountability, excessive testing, bureaucratic assessment and data driven evaluation, with teaching debased as a low discretion craft. The "High Road" encourages reflective, high skill, autonomous professionalism, with practitioners recognised for their knowledge, expertise and judgement.

3 See at <https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/publications/2015-northern-ireland-pisa-results>

4 See at <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-northern-ireland-24441356>

5 See at Pivotal Public Policy Forum, [Transforming the 14–19 education and skills system in Northern Ireland – youth voices and solutions - Pivotal Public Policy Forum \(pivotalppf.org\)](https://www.pivotalppf.org/)

6 OECD Country-by-country Report, 2012

7 See at <https://www.open.edu/openlearn/society/politics-policy-people/sociology/education-northern-ireland-segregation-division-and-sectarianism>

8 See at https://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/2012/09/11/schools-socially-segregated-warns-oecd_n_1872946.html

9 See at https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/James_Samuel_Coleman For updated analysis see Wilkinson & Pickett's *'The Spirit Level: why equal societies always do better'*, Allen Lane, 2009 [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Spirit_Level_\(book\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Spirit_Level_(book))

Our children do too many exams and spend too much time being spoon-fed. The CBI is not wrong to warn of the dangers of our schools turning into “exam factories” with pupils ill prepared for the world of work.¹⁰

Accountability is important. Good accountability means measuring what matters. Excessive weighing and measuring is the direct result of a system responding to narrow performance targets. Add school funding pressures to narrow performance targets and we get a toxic mix. A mix that leads directly to gaming the system, screening out pupils from taking exams lest they “pollute the stats”, practices such as “off-rolling”, pupils being dumped (asked to leave) at GCSE or AS level, exam-switching and exam-board promiscuity (choosing “easier” exams/qualifications), teaching to the test and spoon-fed education. These are all inevitable, if unintended, consequences of high-stakes, narrow, system performance targets as well as features of low-trust, unprofessional environments.

Our accountability system is overwrought, out-of-control and characterised by excessive bureaucracy, reporting and myriad “back-covering” activity. Within our accountability regime, our children are tested, monitored, tracked, and evaluated to exhaustion. This “hamster-wheel” education narrows the curriculum to “ducking the stats”¹¹ to the detriment of a broad-based education. It prevents the development of the sort of 21st century skills required to cope and thrive in the modern world. The skills-deficit in communication, teamwork, collaboration, persuasion, (technology-enabled, inquisitive, and research-based) that a productive economy and stable society require, can only diminish.

Our obsession with exams squeezes time, leaving little space for the 21st century skills required for successful careers, productive-work and enjoyable lives. Children lose out.

Our teachers suffer from inane “work intensity” and are frequently jaded or very tired¹² Their work lacks task discretion or sufficient professional autonomy. Job satisfaction is low¹³. Teacher working hours are longer as compared to other countries, pay has declined in real terms since 2010, 38% of teachers feel stressed a lot of the time, double the OECD average. Teachers are excessively watched, observed and monitored (2nd of 48 OECD countries) and less likely than OECD counterparts to be consulted on professional or curriculum matters.¹⁴

The quality of teachers in Northern Ireland is high, perhaps because fewer good jobs, good careers with prospects, exist in the wider economy, but also due to high standards at our Institutes of Teacher Education.

Academic selection at aged 10/11 is an unnecessary fault-line in our schooling system. NEU opposes early-selection but could ‘thole’ the 2008 compromise worked out by Messrs. McCrae, Mulryne, Young and Donaghy for a form of selection/election at 14.

The expansion of grammar schooling to around 46% of the post-primary level cohort places unfair pressures on other secondary schools. Grammar school expansion disadvantages far too many children, and damages the cohesion of our society in myriad ways.

10 CBI Northern Ireland: Step Change: a new approach to schools in Northern Ireland in Northern Ireland. See at <http://www.cbi.org.uk/cbi-prod/assets/File/pdf/step-change-a-new-approach-to-schools-in-northern-ireland.pdf>

11 Warwick Mansell: Education by Numbers, the Tyranny of Testing - see at <http://educationbynumbers.org.uk/>

12 British Skills and Employment Longitudinal Survey, see at [Work intensity in Britain: First findings from the Skills and Employment Survey 2017 -ORCA \(cardiff.ac.uk\).](http://www.skills.ac.uk/)

13 Francis Green, British Teachers Declining Job Quality, Oxford Review of Education 2021, Vol 47 No.3 388-403

14 OECD TALIS Survey 2018

There is a widespread perception of bias, or snobbery, towards “academic” learning over practical or applied learning. The bias in favour of a university education compounds this. Policy decisions continue to entrench the ‘grammar school-University route’ whilst Further Education (FE) Colleges continues to meet wide, and growing demands. Colleges continue to face a reputational deficit compared to Universities. Individuals and businesses who engage with FE services rate Colleges very highly but despite this, most Northern Ireland parents’ ambitions for their children focus on the grammar school and university route. Many employers still seek their supply of labour from this pool.

The Blair years saw a “massification” of higher education, Now, around 50% of our young people go on to University education. In Germany, a much more productive country and economy, only around a quarter go on to University. University is a very expensive and ineffective investment with a weak case or claim for maintaining its current size.¹⁵

UUEPC’s Skills Barometer (2019) demonstrates that there is an undersupply of those qualified at levels 3-5, but particularly at level 3 (‘A’ level equivalent). Our Further Education system should be more central to our economic efforts – like the Institutes of Technology’s in the Republic of Ireland. Many school children remain at school inappropriately, or undertake courses better supported by FE. Many inefficiencies along the ‘borderline’ between schools and FE exist.

FE Colleges offer a wide array of courses and qualifications, from Essential Skills to Higher Level Apprenticeships and degrees in subjects such as cyber-security, covering levels 0-6. The FE sector, through supported workplace learning and Apprenticeships (including higher-level apprenticeships) offer a more efficient pathway, where students earn as they learn, avoiding significant personal debt at the outset of their careers, yet reaching tertiary education by a different route.



Things we could try – Our 10 demands.

1. Within the limited funds available, we must front-load investment to favour our youngest people. The more we invest, the earlier, the better! We cannot continue with the Early-Years sector as the worst funded segment of our system.
2. Institute a central, cross-departmental Educational Research Unit to establish a bias towards evidence-based policy. This may help reduce political contestability in education and help grow the professional 'space' in developing pedagogic practice and grounded policy -making.
3. Currently, we socially engineer a highly segregated system. Instead, we could socially engineer a different, more balanced, social mix in all schools and settings. This would help the well-off somewhat and help the poorest a lot. Everybody wins! Socially balanced intakes works and costs nothing, other than political capital. It is much better than compensatory funding (like targeting social need).
4. If academic selection is to remain at aged 10 or 11, grammar school intake should reduce exponentially (it currently sits at around 46%, traditionally it was between a quarter and a third of post-primary intakes). Secondary schools must have a better social mix. Alternatively, the 2008 'compromise' of selection/election at 14 could be tried.
5. Remove the GCSE exam point, it is largely pointless. Children do not leave education at 16 anymore. Even Lord Kenneth Baker, who introduced the GCSE in 1988, does not comprehend why we still do it!
6. Try the successful Republic of Ireland "Transition Year" between the Junior and Senior Certificate cycles (broadly, our GCSE and 'A' level cycles).
7. These two measures (ending GCSE's and instituting a Transition Year) will create more space for 21st century skills (inquiry, individual and team research, teamwork, communications, presentation, persuasion skills, technological skills etc) and begin to meet the expressed desires of industry and the economy.
8. The 20-point plan of the General Teaching Council's 2013 blueprint for Accountability should be revisited and implemented.¹⁶
9. The Pasi Sahlberg Report, 'Aspiring to Excellence', 2014, should be revisited as the basis for future teacher education/training.¹⁷
10. The provision of vocational education in schools needs a sharply focussed review so that more learners are encouraged to attend well-equipped, modern FE Colleges with better trained staff to deliver vocational qualifications. Perverse funding incentives (schools vs FE Colleges) must be examined to create a level 'playing field', in order to stop the unnecessary retention of pupils at school who would otherwise be better off attending an FE College. In this context, free, accessible, independent careers advice would help, too.

16 General Teaching Council: Striking the Right Balance, 2013 – presentation to the NI Assembly Education Committee Inquiry into Inspection.

17 See at Aspiring to Excellence Final Review Panel Report (ioe.ac.uk)