



Friday, 19th November 2021

Response to the Independent Review of Education Panel

The role of the Protestant Churches in education.

Controlled schools are 'church-related schools' because in the 1930s, 40s and 50s, the three main Protestant Churches (Church of Ireland, Presbyterian Church in Ireland and Methodist Church in Ireland) transferred their school buildings, pupils and staff into state control.

During the Transfer process the leaders and Boards of Education / Committees of the three Protestant churches undertook the transfer process on the clear understanding that that it was not simply buildings which were being transferred but staff and pupils and a concept of education directly informed and shaped by Christian teaching and values.

Consequently, the 'Transferring Churches' were given rights of representation on Boards of Governors (formerly school management committees) and the Education Authority (formerly Education and Library Boards). The Transferring Churches were also given rights of representation in the management of new controlled schools built subsequently by the state.

Transferor governors are nominated by local churches or, for historical reasons, by the relevant education body within the denomination. In addition to the multiplicity of responsibilities held by Governors, Transferor Representatives also have special responsibility on a board of governors to uphold the non-denominational Christian ethos of controlled schools, including in respect of the delivery of Religious Education and Collective Worship. Nominating congregations ensure that their nominees to school boards have the requisite skills, experience and enthusiasm for this vital role within the education system.

The Transferor Representatives' Council represents the Church of Ireland, Presbyterian Church in Ireland and Methodist Church in Ireland in matters of education policy in Northern Ireland.

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Transferor Representatives' Council (TRC)

The TRC was formed as a body to represent the three Churches in all matters of education. When the ELBs were in existence there were over 60 members of the TRC, overseen by an executive. Following the creation of the Education Authority, TRC now functions as an executive group with 11 members - 4 Church of Ireland, 4 Presbyterian, and 3 Methodist.

The TRC carries out the following functions:

- 1. Support for over 1800 transferor governors in Controlled Schools**
 - Governor training
 - Recruitment video
 - Governor Handbook
 - Work closely with EA at reconstitution and to fill vacancies which may arise mid-term

- 2. Representation**
 - Education Authority Board
 - EA Joint Consultative Forum
 - Controlled Schools' Support Council Board
 - General Teaching Council Board
 - Area Planning including on the Steering Group, Working Group and Local Groups
 - SEN Review Stakeholder Panel

Other representation work carried out over the last few years:

- CCEA / TRC Religious Education Advisory Group – this is currently in abeyance but TRC is in discussions with the Department about re-commencing this work
- CCEA RSE Hub – Stakeholder Group
- EA Transgender Guidelines Project

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3. Religious Education

The Transferor Churches along with the Catholic Church developed the most recent iteration of the Religious Education curriculum which was published in 2007. Recognising that the curriculum is due a refresh, particularly in augmenting material relating to other World Religions, the Churches have been working on revising and redeveloping the course across all Key Stage Levels. This work is at an advanced stage within the Churches, but will require further engagement with the Department of Education and consultation with other stakeholders.

4. Jointly Managed Church Schools

Jointly Managed Church Schools describes an initiative where both the representatives of the Transferor Churches and the Catholic Church work together to have a joint role in the management of a school. It is envisaged that this would work in a community which has a controlled school and a maintained school which individually are under the threshold for sustainability, but together would provide viable education provision at primary or post-primary level. Ideally, the relevant schools should already have a strong working relationship and partnership through Shared Education. Much work is going on behind the scenes with the Catholic Trustees on the legal and practical out workings of the scheme and further information on JMCS can be found in this DE Circular: [Jointly Managed Schools \(education-ni.gov.uk\)](https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/jointly-managed-schools) .

5. Underachievement Research

TRC recently commissioned research through the Stranmillis University College Centre for Research on Educational Underachievement which has considered the influence and practice of school leadership in response to educational underachievement. This research is to be launched before the end of 2021 and a copy will be issued to the Review Panel on publication.

6. Ethos

Transferor governors have a particular role with regard to upholding the non-denominational Christian ethos of controlled schools. TRC has therefore worked closely with the CSSC on the design and production of the ethos toolkit, which encourages controlled schools to consider their ethos and values. TRC continues to encourage schools to undertake this exercise and to review it regularly.

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Vision of Education

In the 21st Century, education in Northern Ireland should aspire to enable children and young people of all faiths and none, to learn, develop and grow together, in order to reach their God-given potential through a quality educational experience that incorporates excellent pastoral care; is supported by a sufficient resource allocation and support structures, and which is underpinned by core principles informed by Christian values.

Such an education system will continue to contribute towards the spiritual, moral, cultural, intellectual and physical development of the community (1986 Education Order) by:

- prioritising the holistic development of children and young people, which we believe will continue to be best achieved through the values and moral framework underpinning Christianity;
- motivating and equipping children and young people for life and work in the 21st century;
- building resilience in children and young people;
- enabling children and young people to develop healthy relationships with their peers, families, and wider society.

Strengths and weaknesses of the current system

(a) Strengths

- i. Education in Northern Ireland is open and available to children and young people of all faiths and none, within a framework and ethos of non-denominational Christian values and principles;
- ii. Dedicated and highly qualified teachers and senior leadership teams (most of whom view teaching as a vocation) deliver quality education to children and young people across Northern Ireland;
- iii. Schools work hard to provide opportunities for their pupils outside of the classroom environment through sports, music, drama and other extra-curricular clubs and societies;
- iv. Free pre-school education provides social and educational benefits for young children;
- v. System of voluntary governors ensures strong connections with local communities, and provides schools with a cadre of skilled, enthusiastic

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- and committed people, who oversee the strategic direction of each school;
- vi. Particularly in rural communities, schools can provide a hub for wider community engagement;
 - vii. Engagement of local clergy and churches to support emotional and spiritual wellbeing of school staff and pupils;
 - viii. Engagement of local churches in providing practical and additional support for educational programmes including the use of additional space and facilities needed by small schools;
 - ix. The development of shared education, providing opportunities for pupils to learn together;
 - x. Area Learning Communities, particularly at post-primary level, have provided opportunities for schools to collaborate and offer wider educational opportunities;
 - xi. Strong sectoral bodies (i.e. CSSC, CCMS, NICIE, CnaG) providing support to, and promoting ethos within, their constituent schools;
 - xii. The opportunity for parental choice within the education system.

(b) Weaknesses

- i. Significant under-resourcing over a number of years both within the capital infrastructure and personnel within schools and their support structures;
- ii. The burden on, and expectation of, voluntary governors has become greater as the governance requirements have increased and the needs of schools have changed
- iii. Pressure on schools to fill the gaps left as a result of other societal and economic factors, for example through wrap-around provision, free school meals, expectations around preparation for life and work;
- iv. Disproportionate focus on academic achievement over and above opportunities to pursue vocational opportunities;
- v. Effectiveness measured in results, rather than the educational journey, and a narrow focus of the assessment regime that fails to measure value-added or the holistic development of the child/ young person;
- vi. Disparity in educational achievement with NI producing some of the highest examination results in the UK, but also some of the lowest academic attainment;

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- vii. Transfer of children from primary to post-primary education causes much media scrutiny and criticism, but yet there has been no credible alternative to put in place of the current arrangements;
- viii. Discrepancy in financial resourcing of the non-selective secondary sector, as against the selective or voluntary grammar sector. This would need to be checked to ascertain how much of this discrepancy is down to parental contributions. There are other discrepancies in financial funding for example Irish Medium and Integrated;
- ix. Continued educational underachievement in areas of socio-economic disadvantage;
- x. Competition between schools which can prevent effective collaboration through Area Learning Communities;
- xi. Competition between schools leading to some schools transforming their status and changing sector under the perception that this will be more appealing to parents and pupils in the local community, even if the demographic of the local community and school remain a majority of one community;
- xii. Often initiatives to promote educational benefits are undertaken on a 'pilot' basis and once a funding cycle is completed a new and different initiative is introduced. A key example would be the Delivering Social Change Literacy and Numeracy Programme. This programme delivered on its aims to
 - increase the number of pupils in primary schools, in particular those entitled to free school meals, achieving at the expected level or above at the end of Key Stage 2 in both literacy and numeracy;
 - increase the number of young people in post-primary schools, in particular those entitled to free school meals, achieving at least a grade C or above in GCSE English and GCSE Mathematics by the time they leave school;
 - and provide employment opportunities for newly graduated teachers.Although successful, once this funding cycle ended, so did this project;
- xiii. Role of inspection has more potential to support school improvement;
- xiv. Special Educational Needs provision within mainstream education is under resourced;

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- xv. The pursuit by some of a 'rights-based' ethos for education, without highlighting the need to understand responsibilities one to another.

Key issues to be considered during the Review

- A true estimate of the funding and resources required both now, and in the future, to sustain high quality education in Northern Ireland;
- The values and principles that underpin education, and the basis on which any alternatives might be founded;
- Suitability of the curriculum for the challenges and opportunities presented by life and work in the 21st century;
- Further improvements in literacy and numeracy;
- Sufficient and appropriate resourcing for Special Educational Needs and improved mechanisms to measure the effectiveness of special needs provision;
- The role, function and operation of the Department of Education and the Education Authority to assess how effectively the educational needs of the children and young people of Northern Ireland are being planned and provided for;
- Review of the school estate and what funding is in place to ensure that all buildings and facilities are fit for purpose. What is needed is increased capital and revenue expenditure and a funding mechanism that does not take 10+ years to build a new school with the consequent increase in costs that this will entail. School maintenance has been neglected and underfunded for too long;
- Consistency of support mechanisms to schools across all sectors and within all curriculum subjects;
- Robust and consistent support for governors;
- Whether the system of primary to post-primary transfer is fit for purpose, and what viable alternatives might be available.

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What the term “a single education system” means to you and what the key characteristics of a “single education system” might entail

A “single education system” will have the following characteristics:

- Be founded on non-denominational Christian values of compassion, respect, tolerance and impartiality; and which, without impinging upon the freedoms of children of other faiths or none, provide for Christian spiritual and moral formation;
- Be child- and young person-centred, encouraging and developing the aspirations of all young people and promoting equality of opportunity regardless of socio-economic background, gender, community or religious background, ethnicity, sexual orientation, disability, status or age;
- Have equality of access to the curriculum fit for all to equip for adult and working life, including placing value on vocational training as a successful career basis;
- Have a motivated and driven workforce providing quality teaching supported by in-service training, opportunities for continuous professional development and specialist subject support;
- Measure effectiveness not solely through academic achievement and high stakes examinations;
- Be properly funded and supported, providing for the fair, impartial, equal and timely distribution of resources;
- Exhibit quality leadership both within school management, and school governance;
- Contain a range of sustainable educational campuses which provide opportunities for parental choice whilst, at the same time, encourage community cohesion and working together so that every school will be a good school.

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Chairperson

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