

Response To The Review of Post Primary Education - Burns Report

Introduction

The TRC believes strongly that there is a duty to ensure that all pupils are catered for fully and that this report on 'Education for the 21st Century' can be the catalyst for reform that is long overdue

- We welcome the recommendation that the present system of selection should be abolished. Whilst this system has enabled a minority of pupils to achieve high standards of academic excellence, it has been at the expense of a huge loss of the self-esteem of a greater number of pupils who have felt the stigma of being considered 'failures'. The present system also makes little allowance for the range of levels and stages of maturation of pupils, and gives little thought to their full variety of talents, aptitudes and learning abilities.
- We acknowledge that across the province, there are unequal opportunities for admission to Grammar schools - some fill their places with pupils graded C and D, whereas, in another area, only a grade A is accepted.
- We whole-heartedly support the guiding principles, especially that it is of paramount importance that each child should be valued equally. It is also important that each child is facilitated to find the most appropriate educational pathway, and that there should be adequate provision and opportunity for pupils to change pathways.
- We agree strongly that there should be parity of esteem of vocational and academic opportunities. There is an ongoing need for children to be equipped with the values, skills and training to meet the needs of a rapidly changing society, in which the use of information technology and associated skills are constantly developing.

Education has the difficult task of preparing young people for the anticipated needs of society while at the same time encouraging the development of an all-rounded person, including the intellectual, spiritual, moral, cultural, social, physical, emotional and creative aspects of the individual.

We wish to make comments in particular, on the three main proposals outlined in the report, followed by concluding comments and recommendations.

1. Use of a pupil profile.
2. Abolition of transfer tests and academic selection and the priority placed on parental choice.
3. The collegiate system.

1. Use of a Pupil Profile

We consider that carefully-devised profiles should offer a fairer way forward and will hopefully be more tailored to individual needs and strengths. However we have the following concerns:

1.1 It would be vital for profiles to be composed in a uniform way across all primary schools, and for teachers to be provided with appropriate training in their construction.

1.2 It would be essential to have a process of moderation of profiles to ensure that there is parity of value and reliability of information included. *Meaningful pupil profiles must also have some elements of objective assessment.*

1.3 Resources should be provided to ensure that primary schools enable pupils to correct deficiencies in their profiles which could lead to underachievement continuing at post-primary level. It is therefore essential that, as early as possible in a pupil's education, areas of weakness and deficiency are properly and expertly diagnosed and that there is then immediate and adequate provision of professional help and resources.

1.4 This priority, highlighted in (1.3), is further supported by the 'Northern Ireland Audit Report' which found that 10% of pupils in the Belfast Board and 6% of pupils across the province are leaving without any GCSE qualifications. Also at Key Stage 3 the Department of Education's stated target is that 72% of pupils should be working at level five or above in English and Mathematics. However, in 1999/2000 only 53% of pupils in Northern Ireland were found to be at level five or above in English and only 50% in Maths.

1.5 We are concerned that while the intention of Pupil Profiles may be to help parents, pupils and teachers, they may result in Parent/Teacher conflict and disagreement over what is considered to be in the pupil's best interests.

1.6 We are concerned about the extra workload the new process will place upon Primary Principals.

1.7 We believe that the actual Pupil Profile should be professionally compiled by the school without parental influence.

1.8 We draw attention to 8.23 of the report and the use of pupil profiles in connection with 'the educational provision within Collegiates which would match well with the parents' aspirations and the child's preferred learning and career pathways.' For this to be effective, there would need to be impartial, honest and effective information about the types and nature of the educational/vocational provision that is available and an effective means by which such information can be shared.

1.9 We believe that parents would value the advice of an experienced post-primary school principal in considering an appropriate pathway for their child. In order for a more fully informed choice to be made, we suggest that a means is found for the pupil profile to be shared with the proposed receiving schools without being used as a criterion for selection.

1.10 We refer to 8.26 where there is recognition that 'as a child matures, his/her ability to engage in self-review strengthens.' We are concerned that very often at the age of 11 this ability is not sufficiently developed and so it is important that the post-primary educational pathway into which the pupil enters is such that during and at the end of KS3, the curriculum enables the pupil to transfer to a school that is better suited to his/her strengths and abilities without jeopardising his/her opportunities. In short, all choices should be kept open as long as possible although we recognise that, for some pupils, certain pathways may be unrealistic. **We suggest that a common-core curriculum should be delivered**

in all post primary schools until the end of KS3, when decisions regarding the appropriate pathway could be made.

2. Abolition of Transfer tests and academic selection and the priority placed on parental choice.

2.1 The assumption that parental choice should be the dominant criterion in the admission of children to schools is challenged. **Parental choice is one of a number of factors which should be considered at transfer.** A new way forward might be to devise a system whereby a range of suitably weighted factors and evaluations would be brought together in a points system to determine an appropriate outcome for transfer at the end of KS3.

2.2 We note that the report acknowledges in 9.25 that 'it is a natural feature of the Open Enrolment system that some schools will be more or less popular than others..' Perceived 'successful' schools will receive many more first preference choices than can ever be accommodated. We are concerned that the application of the proposed admissions criteria will quickly result in admission mainly by proximity to the school. This and the proposed collegiate system will rule out the traditional large catchment areas of many schools in the urban areas and elsewhere.

2.3 With reference to 9.25 we quote 'It is a natural feature of the Open Enrolment system that some schools will be more or less popular than others . . .' In the light of this we believe that strenuous efforts need to be made to ensure parity of esteem among schools, including a curriculum provision which recognises the differing needs of children.

2.4 In order to provide a good range of vocational and technological education, it is important that schools, especially from the end of KS3, are adequately resourced in terms of finance, staff and facilities.

2.5 Closely allied to these points is the urgent need to put adequate resources into schools whose pupils demonstrate educational deprivation. This should not be done by the inequitable method of previous TSN schemes. It is important that the funding provided should be additional.

2.6 Regarding the criteria set out in 9.30 we express concern that the principle 'that each young person should be valued equally' appears to be set aside by the criterion 'that children of staff at the school' be given preference over other children.

2.7 We envisage transport problems arising particularly on boundary areas where parents choose a school in a collegiate, which is not in their grouping. Careful local consultation will be necessary to establish that the groupings reflect traditional feeder routes.

2.8 While acknowledging that the process is driven by parental choice, we are concerned that in reality, given the groupings, geography, and community divisions, there is likely to be little choice for many parents

2.9 The grounds and procedures for any process of appeal should be clearly set out. This is particularly important for pupils deprived of a place at the school of their parents' preference through not living near enough to the school.

3. The Collegiate System

3.1 **We welcome the concept of co-operation and co-ordination as against competition**, but express concern at the practicalities of delivering these objectives. We consider that the collegiate system as proposed would be impractical. Smaller clusters of schools, co-operating on a voluntary basis, would be more realistic.

3.2 We refer to para 48 (page 22): 'We are convinced that a collegial system of post-primary education would provide the structure and opportunity for schools to co-exist and work together to best serve the educational needs and abilities of all their pupils.' We consider that to facilitate such levels of co-operation, funding of schools should no longer be based chiefly on pupil numbers but on pupil need.

3.3 The planning, management and support systems proposed appear unnecessarily complicated and seem to be creating layer upon layer of bureaucracy. **We would be concerned that resources, which should be targeted at improving the delivery of education in the classroom, will be spent on administration.**

3.4 We would envisage principals being presented with frequent and impossible dilemmas within the Board of Principals regarding what is best for their school and the demands of collegiate policy.

3.5 We are of the view that centres of learning excellence are engendered, not manufactured.

3.6 Given the proposal to share resources between schools in a collegiate, we are concerned at the safety of pupils moving around between schools. Who will have ownership of these children and be responsible for their protection, safety, pastoral care etc?

3.7 We foresee difficulties arising regarding contracts of staff members who may be relocated to other schools and issues regarding discipline and management of staff.

3.8 We have concerns regarding the responsibility of Boards of Governors who at present have a vital role in the management of schools. In any new proposals the rights and interests of parents, teachers and transferors must be protected.

3.9 We are not clear about the role of Area Boards in the collegiate system particularly in the provision of curriculum support. We believe that the established systems are of great value.

3.10 There are also considerable financial implications, so we question if there will be sufficient positive outcomes to merit all the angst generated in managing a collegial system. We, therefore, express concern as to the benefits and effectiveness of a collegiate system in practice.

3.11 We believe that schools are living communities which generate loyalties and promote a sense of ownership among parents and pupils. This may well be lost in a Collegiate.

3.12 There is a concern, that, in implementing the collegiate system, education is not reduced to 'a screen and a keyboard' and the ethos of schools dissipated.

Concluding Comments

While welcoming the intention to abolish the present method of selection we are very concerned that all possible steps are taken to ensure that the process of change is introduced in a manner that will obtain the maximum possible community support and confidence. Incremental change is therefore important.

- We express deep concern that the proposed criteria for admissions will not, in practice, achieve the objectives as stated in 9.25: 'It is essential that these criteria should be equitable and designed to provide equality of opportunity in support of the best interests of the pupil.'
- In our considered view, there are great difficulties surrounding the effective working of a collegiate system that would need to be resolved before such a proposal could be given a greater measure of support.
- We are also aware of the danger of introducing a system that changes what is already good and care must be taken to encourage and maintain excellence.
- While we have welcomed the intention to abolish the present method of selection, we are very concerned that the proposed replacement should have the maximum possible support from both the general community and those directly involved in education. We consider the proposed changes highly risky given that the proposals are untried and do not follow the customary piloting procedure.
- We are concerned about the short time scale for the proposals to be implemented and are of the view that it is more important to get it right than to get it soon.

Recommendations

- We consider that the end of KS3 is a more appropriate age for informed decisions to be made about the future of educational pathways for a child. (cf Report, 8.26)
- We consider the continuing development of the pupil profile throughout KS3 to be important to facilitate the choice of the most suitable pathway for each pupil. During or at the end of KS3 the pupil should be enabled to transfer to the pathway that is best suited to his/her strengths, abilities and gifts.
- To enable this to function more smoothly we suggest that a common-core curriculum be delivered in all post-primary schools until the end of KS3.
- We believe that, with all urgency, every effort should be made to improve and enhance the ethos and standing of schools that are perceived to be 'less successful' within the system.