

News Release

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Ministerial Advisory Group launches report on the advancement of shared education in Northern Ireland

The Ministerial Advisory Group on the advancement of shared education in Northern Ireland has launched its independent report and sets out a challenging vision for the future of local education alongside 20 core recommendations.

The Group was appointed by John O'Dowd, the Minister for Education, in July 2012 to advise on how best to advance shared education in the region.

The Ministerial Advisory Group, chaired by Queen's University's Professor Paul Connolly and including former MLA Dawn Purvis and retired school principal P.J. O'Grady, sets out a vision for advancing shared education that requires fundamental changes to the education system.

Through its 20 recommendations, the report calls for shared education to be mainstreamed so that it is the main driver for improving schools and educational standards, while also preparing children and young people to play an active role in an open, diverse and inclusive society.

The recommendations include:

- The Department for Education to be proactive in encouraging and facilitating sustained collaboration between schools from different sectors, especially through the current area-based planning process;
- The introduction of mechanisms to support shared education including financial support for schools and a strong system of training and support for teachers;
- A fundamental review of how schools and other educational institutions currently provide children and young people with opportunities to explore controversial issues in the context of Northern Ireland and the need to develop ways of doing this more effectively; and
- Making schools legally accountable for promoting equality of opportunity and good relations.

Underpinning this vision for shared education is an emphasis on a more diverse school system that better reflects parental choice. The report calls for the Department to allow popular schools to grow and new schools to emerge, where there is sufficient demand, that have a distinct religious or cultural ethos; whether these be particular faith-based schools, integrated schools, secular schools or schools with a distinct cultural ethos such as Irish Medium Schools.

Chair of the Ministerial Advisory Group, Professor Paul Connolly said: “We do not view shared education as just another initiative but as the core mechanism for improving the quality of education and also for preparing children and young people to play a full and active role in building and sustaining an open, inclusive and confident society.

“The arguments for shared education are compelling. We know from the international research evidence that the more schools collaborate together and share expertise and resources, the more that educational standards improve. We also know that the more children and young people have opportunities to learn together in a sustained and meaningful way, the more they will develop positive and inclusive attitudes towards one another.”

The Report also makes clear that progress towards achieving this vision of a truly shared education system will remain seriously limited while the current system of academic selection remains in place.

As Professor Connolly states: “There is clear evidence that the current system of secondary and grammar schooling is not only creating and sustaining divisions on the basis of socio-economic background but it is also exacerbating achievement gaps.”

The Report recommends the end of academic selection and the move towards creating a system of post-primary schools with all-ability intakes. Within this, the Report calls for more flexible and sophisticated systems of streaming to be introduced within schools to ensure that all children and young people are given the opportunity to reach their full potential.

Professor Connolly continues: “We recognise the need to create environments that push the most able pupils so they reach their full potential. However, this can be done much more effectively and fairly within the context of all-ability schools through the careful use of appropriate forms of academic streaming.

“All children are different, with differing skills and abilities and differing needs. They also develop at different rates and in differing ways. Given this, the current system that only offers two educational pathways – grammar or secondary – and that determines which pathway a child will follow based upon one high stakes and unregulated test at the age of 11 is divisive, archaic and not fit for purpose.”

Professor Connolly concluded by saying: “If we want a world class education for our children then we need to move beyond our existing system that was designed for a bygone age. Northern Ireland currently ranks among the best in the world in relation to its achievements in literacy and numeracy at the end of primary school. However, by the time our young people reach the end of post-primary education, their performance in these areas has fallen back in the international rankings and can be described as no better than mediocre.

“The vision we set out in this report of a diverse range of all-ability schools, collaborating together, has the potential to drive up educational standards while also giving our children and young people the skills they require to make a full and active contribution to building a prosperous, diverse and inclusive Northern Ireland.”

Notes to Editors

Further details of the Ministerial Advisory Group and its work is available on their website at: <http://www.qub.ac.uk/mag>

Copies of the executive summary and the full report are available to download from the above website.

Members of the Ministerial Advisory Group are available for interview. Please contact Kevin Mulhern, at Queen’s University Belfast at: 028 9097 3259 (office), 07813 015431 (mobile) or email: k.mulhern@qub.ac.uk

Over the last seven months, the Group has engaged in a major consultation exercise with key stakeholders, many of which are at the launch today. The Group received 111 written submissions, conducted 25 face-to-face meetings with a wide range of organisations and visited a range of schools and colleges. The Group also directly sought the views of children

and young people and of parents and has considered the existing research evidence locally and internationally.

Shared education involves schools and other educational institutions from different sectors working together to provide opportunities for children and young people from all different backgrounds to learn together.

In its Programme for Government, the Northern Ireland Executive has given a commitment to ensuring that, by 2015, all children have the opportunity to participate in shared education programmes and that there is a substantial increase in the number of schools sharing facilities.

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