

Independent Review of Education – April Update

The Independent Review of Education has now been underway for six months. We have reached the end of the first stage of our work.

Up until now, our focus has been on becoming better informed and on listening to the views of the many stakeholders of the education system. We are very grateful to governmental organisations, sectoral bodies, civil service departments and others who have supplied information and, of course, also to teachers, lecturers, parents, young people and other members of the public who responded to our survey and attended meetings to speak with us.

For the two of us from other parts of the UK, it has been a very steep learning curve. I suspect, however, that the three ‘natives’ have learned a lot too. We shall, of course, continue to learn and there will be further consultation. Anybody who wishes to give us their views on any aspect of education in Northern Ireland is most welcome to write to us.

From now on, our emphasis will be on developing our ideas and, eventually, our recommendations. We are due to produce an interim report in October. To some extent, its contents will be formal; listing what we have done, whom we have met, what were the outcomes of our public survey and so on. However, we shall give an indication of what are emerging for us as the main issues. This will provide us with a further opportunity to consult. When you read the interim report, if you think we are putting the emphasis in the wrong places or that we are missing matters of vital importance, please do not hesitate to tell us.

The review is one of the commitments set out in New Decade New Approach which emphasised four matters of concern in relation to education in Northern Ireland:

- Cost efficiency
- Raising standards
- Access to the curriculum for all
- Prospects of moving towards a ‘single education system’

When our panel was established, the Department of Education issued us with Terms of Reference, directing attention to another list of issues:

- Large number of unsustainable small schools
- Poverty-related attainment gap
- Outdated model of school governance
- Increasing incidence of SEN
- Concerns about wellbeing
- Better meeting the needs of the economy.

In our final report, we shall certainly give our views on all of these matters and, I expect, we will make recommendations for change in relation to all of them. However, we are not limited in our considerations to those issues which were identified for us in advance.

We shall almost certainly start with some more basic questions. What is education for? How will it be affected by social, economic and technological change over the twenty or so years for which we will try to establish a direction of travel? How will schools, colleges and other settings need to change if they are going to give every child and young person, regardless of their socio-economic circumstances or perceived abilities, the best possible service? What does all that imply for the organisations that support teachers and others who work in education?

Some of these issues were raised in our recent survey. Although some changes will be needed, our first thoughts on what a good education should look like were generally well-received. When our interim report appears please give us your thoughts on what needs to change to meet the likely needs of the next twenty years.