



ASSOCIATION OF CONTROLLED GRAMMAR SCHOOLS

SUBMISSION TO INDEPENDENT REVIEW OF EDUCATION PANEL FEBRUARY 2022

This submission is made on behalf of the Principals and Boards of Governors of the following Controlled Grammar Schools.

Antrim Grammar School	Ballyclare High School
Banbridge Academy	Bloomfield Collegiate
Cambridge House School	Carrickfergus Grammar School
Down High School	Glenlola Collegiate
Grosvenor Grammar School	Limavady Grammar School
Lurgan College	Omagh Academy
Regent House	Strabane Academy
Wellington College	

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Introductory Statement

The *Association of Controlled Grammar Schools* (ACGS) acknowledges that the current education system in Northern Ireland is administratively cumbersome, economically unsustainable and to, a greater or lesser degree, debilitated by its fragmentation. We therefore welcome the advent of the Independent Review of Education (IRE) and we seek to contribute to its work in the most propitious way possible by submission and/or direct engagement. In setting out the points below we aver the following principles:

- The NI education system must work for and deliver the best benefits for all the children and young people whom it serves.
- The topography of the NI education system is heavily contoured but should not be reduced to the plainness of uniformity; rather it must be mapped out to provide the best route to success whilst retaining its salient positive features.
- The inadequacies of the current funding mechanisms must be addressed to ensure equitable provision of material and human resources across all schools and for all pupils.
- Proportionate autonomy for school leaders and Boards of Governors is essential for a system that functions to best effect at local level.

What is the Association of Controlled Grammar Schools?

ACGS is a non-statutory interest group comprising the sixteen Selective Schools within the NI Controlled Sector (see below). It makes up almost 25% of the sixty-five Grammar Schools within the current system and over 8% of the total number of post-Primary Schools in Northern Ireland. Two of its member schools, Lurgan College and Portadown College, sit within the Dickson Plan: one, Strabane Academy, has a mixed selective/non-selective intake.

Membership

Antrim Grammar School	Ballyclare High School	Banbridge Academy
Bloomfield Collegiate	Cambridge House	Carrickfergus Grammar School
Down High School	Glenlola Collegiate	Grosvenor Grammar School
Limavady Grammar School	Lurgan College	Omagh Academy
Portadown College	Regent House	Strabane Academy
Wellington College		

ACGS has one nominee who represents its interests on the Board of the NI Education Authority. The current representative is the former Principal of one of its member schools.

What is the purpose of ACGS?

ACGS is essentially a collaborative group. It meets formally some six times per year, although communication between its members continues regularly throughout most working weeks. Within and across the full gamut of issues facing school leaders ACGS seeks to provide the following for its members:

- A forum for frank and informative discussion;
- A mutually supportive professional environment;
- Development opportunities for recently appointed Principals;
- A coherent voice in all issues of educational interest, contention and development.
- Representation on, and collaboration and engagement with other relevant organisations. E.g. Department of Education; Board of the NI Education Authority; Controlled Schools Support Council; Schools Entrance Assessment Group; NI Hospitality and Tourism Sector.

What is the profile of ACGS?

Intake

With a total enrolment of some 14,500 pupils ACGS typically accounts for almost 10% of the NI post-Primary population. Its schools are consistently highly attractive to parents of pupils transferring from P7. The most recently available Year 8 application statistics¹ demonstrate the following:

- 85% of Controlled Grammar Schools with a Year 8 intake were immediately oversubscribed at First Preference stage by 35%.
- Taking all Preferences into account Controlled Grammar Schools' capacity was exceeded by just over 86%.

Year 11 Transfer:

- 100% of Controlled Grammar Schools within the Dickson Plan were immediately oversubscribed at First Preference stage by 29%.
- Taking all preferences into account the capacity of Controlled Grammar Schools within the Dickson Plan was exceeded by just over 38%.

Ethos

Whilst not falling under the auspices of the Integrated Movement many ACGS schools attract applicants from across the religious and community spectrum. Our ethos, whilst broadly Christian, continues to accommodate those of all faiths and none in a naturally adaptive manner.

Our member schools are defined by their selective nature. We welcome this opportunity to articulate our commitment to this model with a coherent, collective voice. To that end we make the following interrelated points.

We believe that the catchment areas from which we draw many if not most of our intake immediately dispel the misperception that all Grammar Schools are essentially middle-class environments for middle-class children. As non-fee paying schools we place no barriers in front of children from socially disadvantaged backgrounds; on the contrary, we are *ipso facto* more accessible to families than many of our counterparts. Indeed we are confident that our intake is more substantially characterised by families in social grades C1, C2 and DE.

The purpose of selection as introduced through the 1947 Education Act was to enable social mobility: its premise was essentially meritocratic; its quarries were nepotism and social inequity. The generational beneficiaries of this are today's parents and grandparents who have prospered personally, professionally and financially and who are now located largely in social grades AB. The acquisition of social currency provided by the Education Act has thereby enabled them to choose from a broader range of schools than their parental antecedents. We accept that the yield for continued social mobility, in their case, is limited: they, and our society, have duly profited from early 20th century innovation. However it remains an incontrovertible truth that families with more limited financial resources have equally legitimate aspirations for their academically able children; they too deserve to have their potential fostered - this is the aspiration which ACGS seeks to, and

¹ NI Education Authority June 2021

demonstrably does, serve. Our steadfast role is to yield social mobility and improve life-chances for young people with strong yet nascent academic potential, irrespective of their social status.

Free School Meals Entitlement

Whilst it is widely acknowledged that FSME is a crude measure of social disadvantage it nonetheless indicates that ACGS caters for families from an inclusive socio-economic range. Within its membership FSME falls between 4.4% - 34% with an average entitlement across the association of 13.3%: this is indicative of some 2000 pupils.

Special Educational Needs

Contrary to public perception Selective Schools admit and cater for pupils with a wide range of Special Educational Needs. A significant number of transferring pupils will be admitted as supernumerary whose parents and the school have jointly determined that their child's needs and potential can best flourish in an academic setting without the requirement for a Transfer Test result. At the time of writing some 5% of ACGS pupils are currently on Stages 1-3 of the SEN Register, which is indicative of some 700 pupils: within that group 37% hold a full Statement of Educational Need, which is indicative of more than 260 pupils.

Examination Outcomes

DE school performance and value-added data demonstrates that examination outcomes within the Controlled Grammar sector at both GCSE and A-level consistently sit well above the relevant NI and UK averages in all categories.

Funding

All schools in ACGS are funded through the Common Funding Formula and operate strictly within a delegated budget. We charge no capitation fee and request only a modest voluntary contribution from parents. Despite this, all ACGS schools offer and sustain an extensive programme of extra and co-curricular activities, including on Saturday mornings, as we believe this to be essential for the academic, social and emotional development of our pupils.

Summary

- The principle of parental choice within public services is most vigorously exercised in the field of education, and the consistently high rate of oversubscription to Controlled Grammar Schools shows beyond doubt that Year 8 places continue to be much sought after by parents across the community spectrum. This is a robust endorsement of the role played by ACGS in the educational journey of our young people and clearly implies that many parents hold the same view: thus, any recommendation which seeks to dispense with such a strongly supported element of the current system would be highly susceptible to dispute.
- ACGS caters for pupils from a broad socio-economic range; as non-fee paying schools we provide excellent value for money to the education system in general and to parents in particular.
- The existence of a Special Educational Need and strong academic potential are not mutually exclusive; Controlled Grammar Schools provide a fecund and supportive environment for pupils on the SEN Register.

- Strong examination outcomes within the system consistently evidence the high level of service provided for our pupils and parents.

Strengths and weaknesses of the current system

Strengths:

- Northern Ireland has secured a long tradition of academic excellence when set against other sectors right across the United Kingdom. The strong academic environment in many of its schools, including all ACGS members, has led NI to top performance tables at both GCSE and Advanced Level;
- Compared to other parts of the UK Northern Ireland generally offers an education system which requires parents to pay little, or certainly less, for their children's learning experiences;
- NI schools offer a broad programme of extra-curricular and co-curricular opportunities which foster participation, personal development, and self-confidence;
- Furthermore, whilst the above is important because participation in itself helps develop a positive mind-set, it must also be recognised that the programme of activities which ACGS offers leads to outstanding individual accomplishments by its pupils, accomplishments which in and of themselves are not only highly formative but also of a sufficiently high level to propel lives forward. Representative honours on the sports field, precocious musical expertise, and successful entrepreneurial ventures are just some few of myriad examples. We have strong grounds for asserting that our extra-curricular provision is a model of excellence which remains accessible to all pupils irrespective of social background.
- The teaching profession continues to recruit highly qualified graduates who seek employment in a demanding, competitive yet highly rewarding environment;
- Staff retention is generally much higher than in other parts of the UK, an essential factor in system stability;
- The high standard of Safeguarding and Pastoral Care provided by appropriately sized schools with close links to their communities is invaluable.

Weaknesses:

- There is insufficient circuitry on the financial motherboard to maintain even the currently inadequate charge of provision. The NI Block Grant from Westminster continues to debilitate the Aggregated Schools Budget which in turn is distorted by the Common Funding Formula, a mechanism so arcane and complex that it defies comprehension by and explanation to the very educational bodies which it serves;
- The innate inadequacy of the Common Funding Formula has been further exacerbated by a reduction in *per capita* pupil funding, with NI now being the lowest in the UK;
- Long periods of underinvestment in the schools' estate has, in many instances, created inadequate, dated and even dangerous facilities which are unfit for 21st century purpose;

- The emphasis on league tables as the dominant metric for school performance is as reductive as it is uninformative. It has resulted in unhealthy competition between schools as well as, on occasion, unwarranted tension between a school and its community;
- The burden of assessment- driven learning dominates pedagogy and has magnified the difficulties children experience in coping with the pressure of academic attainment;
- The centrality of league table success, underpinned by crude measures of academic standards, and assessment-driven learning, has, on occasion, fostered an overly narrow perspective within the Inspectorate with little emphasis placed upon value-added performance or the inestimable value of holistic provision
- An accompanying lack of system-wide tools for consistent and universally comparable benchmarking;
- An ill-thought out Entitlement Framework which placed financial and staffing burdens on schools without, in many cases, delivering a proportionate benefit for learners.
- A persistently marginalised appreciation of applied and technical courses, abetted by the exorbitant cost to a Controlled School of accessing these through local FE Colleges;
- Patchy postcode provision of courses across and between Area Learning Communities, the constituents of which often remain motivated by institutional self-interest;
- The inherent tension and insularity of CCEA which is at one and the same time the Curriculum Advisory Body and the Awarding Body – these roles should be distinct, not least for reasons of professional probity;
- Poor curricular planning which eschews the expertise of subject specialists for the sake of policy consistency: e.g. the change of content in A-level Modern Language courses which rendered the GCSE course which preceded it unfit for purpose;
- A Careers Service characterised by keen and competent professionals who, due to a lack of joined up policy-making, find themselves in the impossible position of trying to bridge the gulf between curricular provision and local employment needs;
- Insufficient provision of ICT hardware, resources and CPD for teachers who wish to capitalise on its myriad benefits;
- The associated lag in providing teachers with training to provide essential academic courses in computer science and coding;
- The demise of CASS, RTU and the inability of schools to even part-fund formal qualifications for their staff has led to a stagnant atmosphere in a profession populated by willing learners;
- A lack of appropriate training, professional development and career progression for non-teaching staff e.g. Classroom Assistants.
- A NISTR system which is not nimble enough to meet need. This ultimately has an adverse effect on teaching and learning on a daily basis throughout our schools;
- The relentless expectation that schools can deal effectively with broader societal, often parental, issues and ills despite inadequate training and insufficient time. Schools accept our duty to address such matters, and to minimise their sway, but any attempt to do so without sufficient resource can often be counterproductive;
- Whilst we acknowledge that the Covid pandemic has created unprecedented challenges it has also served to confirm a longstanding deleterious disconnect between public health services and schools: this has been an enduring feature of the educational landscape for many decades. Efficient, mutually supportive systems are manifestly absent in numerous

aspects of pupils' lives, from Special Needs provision, to the urgent and time-sensitive need for mental health intervention, to management of the current public health crisis. Given that health and education are the cornerstones of all life chances it behoves all agencies to combine provision to very best effect.

A Note on "Sustainability".

An unwelcome and often unexamined notion of "sustainability" has grown from much of the above and we question the primarily numerical, rather than educational, basis for this loosely used term. Stark figures have gained unwarranted currency across the piece and there have been occasions when "unsustainable" is translated, casually and without basis, into terms such as "underachieving" or, more alarmingly, "problematic". This demonstrates a wrong-headed attitude which ascribes primacy to enrolment over provision. It accepts without challenge the longstanding and debilitating link between intake and staffing/Pupil Teacher Ratio/Full Time Equivalence. The real reason for many schools being under-resourced is understaffing, and this is due to underfunding. The object of Area Based Planning, largely, is tessellation of the schools' estate for economic efficiency. Whilst being pragmatic in the short-term this looks through the wrong end of the telescope. We are not convinced that, for example, it takes into adequate account the organic value to its local community of a small rural school, nor the vigorous efforts of a post-primary School to meet the quite arbitrary, and at times fatuous, demands of the Entitlement Framework for the mere sake of doing so with neither sufficient pupil demand nor adequate staff resource. It also imposes unwanted 'solutions' upon medium and small town communities which, in their operation, create problems that are all too foreseeable in the postcode, but are undetectable within an arid arithmetical template. In short, the numerical and economic arguments which underpin Area Based Planning are, in our view, too visibly distant from educational ideals to go unchallenged.

Key issues to be considered by the panel

Much of the above may be distilled into the following:

1. **Resourcing the system:** review the CFF, refresh the schools' estate, and address urgently CPD needs.
2. **Operating the system:** review the relevance, breadth and endurance of the current suite of academic and vocational qualifications to ensure that our young people achieve the right standards in the right areas, and can thus enhance their societal role.
3. **Evaluating the system:** evaluate the right things, not just those that are more easily measurable. Inspection should emphasise holistic achievement not just outcomes which are more easily tabulated into DE policy.

What does 'a single education system' mean?

The landscape of the Northern Ireland education system is heavily contoured for myriad historical reasons; accommodation of this fact is advisable if not essential. The notion of a "single education system" remains to be defined, but it will be a flaccid concept if it signals a monolithic form of

teaching, learning and personal development in the mistaken belief that it can be universally applied to the benefit of all no matter how well-funded and brightly imagined it may be.

An effective “single education system” is one which is flexible and adapts according to the development and interests of the child. Children are diverse and unique; any system of education of any value must begin with this recognition. The right experience of education for every child will acknowledge their needs and predispositions; this may mean investing at an earlier juncture in creating training programmes for applied knowledge every bit as much as maintaining a curriculum with academic attainment as its goal. Having said that, there are many common denominators in the current system which, if homogenised further, might provide a more efficient and consistent level of service across schools by reducing unnecessary duplication.

We believe that the word “elitism” has been superimposed upon the notion of “excellence” by those who seek to advocate the aggregate rather than celebrate the exceptional. In much the same way “ambitious” is sometimes used pejoratively by those who misrepresent it as pushy and self-serving: but surely we want our pupils to achieve excellence and display ambition?

It is simply wrong to suggest that excellence and equity cannot coexist.

Conclusion: A vision of education for Northern Ireland in the 21st century

The current configuration of the NI education system begs improvement, but it is essential that its current strengths are fostered and retained. An effective system of education is the heartbeat of a successful, safe, and progressive society in the 21st century. A prosperous and healthy Northern Ireland can only be constructed upon a foundation in which children and young people thrive in environments where their talents and interests are nurtured by forms of learning that equip them for the challenges of the future.

A successful society is one in which formal education fosters the circumstances necessary for economic growth, rising standards in public health and clear opportunities for improving social mobility.

A safe society is one in which respect and tolerance shape interaction and where an honest appreciation of a shared space prompts a greater acceptance of the contrasting views of others.

A progressive society is one in which creativity and innovation are pursued in the context of both applied and academic learning so that all members feel valued and able to contribute to the growth of the state.

In an age where there is an unprecedented flow of communication, it is essential that educators prepare young people to be discerning and well- informed when navigating the blizzard of information readily available by digital means.

ACGS is proud of the contribution it has made to the current successes of our system. We look forward to collaborating with our partners in orbit around this review to capitalise on our present strengths and to fortify all efforts to improve provision for our children and young people.

Signed on behalf of ACGS:

Dr. M. Rainey (Chair): Michelle Rainey Date: 4th February 2022

Mr. D. Castles (Deputy Chair): David Castles Date: 4th February 2022