



ParentingNI

Independent Review of Education (IRE)



Independent Review
of Education

Parental Engagement Consultation Report December 2021



parentingni.org

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INTRODUCTION

Parenting NI has in partnership with the Independent Review of Education (IRE), undertaken a parental engagement consultation that ran throughout December 2021 and consisted of focus groups and 1:1 parent interviews. The report has 30 responses. This consisted of 16 parent participants in the focus groups and 14 1:1 interviews. Some of the parents' responses are taken directly as quotes and highlighted in italic print throughout the report.

BACKGROUND TO CONSULTATION

The Independent Review of Education team have been appointed to review most aspects of education in Northern Ireland. This work was identified as a key priority within the New Decade, New Approach agreement.

They will assess the effectiveness of the education system within Northern Ireland and how it delivers positive outcomes for children and young people.

The review is considering a wide range of issues. They are concerned with the experience of young people from their early years through until they leave formal education.

As well as developing a vision for education in Northern Ireland, the Review will consider key aspects of education across the three following themes:

- The education journey of children and young people.
- The support provided to schools and teachers.
- The structure of education in Northern Ireland.

***It is important to note that parents attended focus groups face to face and virtually and 1:1 interviews were conducted over the phone. A parent profile online survey was sent out to parents to ensure anonymity, parents were not required to complete each question within the survey and could leave the survey or skip a question at any stage; therefore, some numbers may not tally, as they may not have answered a particular question.**

KEY FINDINGS

The consultation with parents was broken down into the following areas:

- Education
- Delivery
- Strengths and Weaknesses
- Educational Journey
- Support
- System as a whole

In summary parents were very positive about their child(ren)'s education:

- 97% of parents did not disagree with IRE on what they suggested as good education
- 97% of parents did not disagree with IRE on what they suggested as good systems for the delivery of education, training and support to children and young people

Parents offered their thoughts on the strengths and weaknesses of the Education system within Northern Ireland:

Biggest strengths

- Education system
- Life skills
- Results
- Teachers
- Integration
- Sports
- Options
- Pastoral care
- Availability of Grammar schools

Biggest weaknesses

- Communication
- School starting age
- Funding/budgets
- Academic selection
- Homework
- Disparity across schools
- Lack of support for families
- Not making use of local resources
- Segregation
- Buildings
- Engagement with parents

37% of parents believe the panel should prioritise early years

37% of parents believe the panel should prioritise experience of pupils with special educational needs or disabilities

60% of parents believe the panel should prioritise supporting mental health and well-being

43% of parents believe the panel should prioritise meaningful participation of children and young people

57% of parents believe the panel should prioritise help for students facing difficulties

57% of parents believe the panel should prioritise the delivery of initial teacher education and ongoing professional development

33% of parents believe the panel should prioritise the condition of educational buildings

65% of parents believe the panel should prioritise provision of 'early years' education in NI.

45% of parents believe the panel should prioritise the future of integrated education

41% of parents believe the panel should prioritise making the provision of education in Northern Ireland affordable

METHODOLOGY

Development of the Consultation Tools

To facilitate this consultation process, it was decided to use both a focus group and 1:1 parent interview approach to gather information from parents across Northern Ireland.

A facilitation pack was developed in conjunction with IRE team and was based on the information required.

Focus Groups and 1:1 Interviews

It was decided to undertake these parental engagements through focus groups and 1:1 interviews. Focus groups have the potential to bring parents together in a way that enables them to share their views and identify issues both of individual and common concern through informal, stimulating discussion. 1:1 parent interviews have the potential to ensure those that are hard to reach and unlikely to engage have a chance to express their thoughts.

***It is important to note that parents attended focus groups face to face and virtually and 1:1 interviews were conducted over the phone. A parent profile online survey was sent out to parents to ensure anonymity, parents were not required to complete each question within the survey and could leave the survey or skip a question at any stage; therefore, some numbers may not tally, as they may not have answered a particular question.**

PROFILE OF FOCUS GROUP PARTICIPANTS

In total 30 participants took part in either the focus groups or 1:1 interviews.

The 30 participants had 52 children ranging in age from a few months old to over 16 years old.

The following table shows an overview and a breakdown of the demographic details of those who attended each focus group/1:1 interview. Not all parents responded to every question in the parent profile survey therefore some demographics might look uneven. Further scoping may ensure a broader representation of parents are reached.

Figure 1: Demographic overview and details of focus groups/1:1 interviews

Gender	Total	Percentage (%)
Male	9	30%
Female	21	70%

Religious Background	Total	Percentage (%)
Roman Catholic	14	70%
Protestant	3	15%
Other	3	15%

Ethnicity	Total	Percentage (%)
White	20	90%
African	1	5%
Chinese	1	5%

Age Band	Total	Percentage (%)
18 - 34	4	19%
35 - 44	11	52%

45-54	5	24%
55+	1	5%

Education	Total	Percentage (%)
Pre-school/Nursery school	9	30%
Primary school	15	50%
Secondary school	10	33%
Grammar school	4	13%
Integrated	4	13%
SEN	1	3%

Disability and/or additional needs	Total	Percentage (%)
Yes	6	20%
No	24	80%

Area lived in	Total	Percentage (%)
Rural	5	24%
Suburban	7	33%
Urban	9	43%

County lived in	Total	Percentage (%)
Antrim	11	50%
Armagh	3	13%
Derry~Londonderry	2	9%
Down	4	18%
Fermanagh	1	5%
Tyrone	1	5%

LIMITATIONS

The focus group method of collating information brought parents together in a way that enabled them to share their views and identify issues both of individual and common concern through informal, stimulating discussion. However, while not statistically representative of the parent population of Northern Ireland; both parental engagements and 1:1 interviews are represented by a diverse group of parents living in Northern Ireland. Respondents were not required to complete each question within the parent profile survey and had the option to leave the survey or skip a question at any stage; therefore, some numbers may not tally, as respondents may not have answered a particular question.

FINDINGS

The facilitator explained the facilitation pack with the parents in the focus groups and in the 1:1 interviews. They ensured parents understood each section they were sharing their views on, had plenty of time to read and think about these while engaged in discussion and exploration of each question.

The IRE team suggested what they seen as good education; parents discussed and shared their thoughts below.

Good education should support and equip children and young people to:

- Develop their personality, talents and mental and physical abilities to their fullest potential.
- Develop their moral and spiritual awareness, together with social and emotional skills.
- Become ambitious, capable learners, ready to learn throughout their lives.
- Become healthy and confident individuals.
- Become ethical, informed citizens of Northern Ireland and the world.
- Prepare to play a full part in life and work and to adapt to change.
- Aspire to a better future for their community and wider society and play their part in seeking to achieve it.

Parents were asked if they disagreed with any of the above statements:

YES	NO	NOT SURE
0	29	1
0%	97%	3%

Parent comments:

Parents all generally agreed with these statements and thought these were good although they did question how they would be implemented and achieved in schools and education.

The facilitator again explained in detail what the IRE team have suggested as good systems for the delivery of education, training and support to children and young people. The facilitator encouraged discussion and exploration of these topics.

IRE suggest that good systems for the delivery of education, training and support to children and young people in Northern Ireland should:

- Make efficient and effective use of resources.
- Promote equality of opportunity.
- Promote good community relations.
- Promote respect for identity, diversity and community cohesion.
- Respect the cultural identity, language and values of children and their families.
- Take all reasonable action to enable children to be educated in accordance with the wishes of their parents.
- Meet the needs of the economy and of employers in Northern Ireland and beyond.
- Command the trust and confidence of the population of Northern Ireland.

Parents were asked if they disagreed with any of the above statements:

YES	NO	NOT SURE
0	29	1
0%	97%	3%

Parent comments:

Parents again agreed with these statements although they do not believe they are achievable and again questioned how they would be implemented and achieved in schools and education.

The facilitator split the parents in the face-to-face and virtual focus groups into smaller groups, using the break out room option on zoom, asking parents to think and discuss the three best things about education in Northern Ireland and the three biggest weakness to education in Northern Ireland. For 1:1 interviews, the facilitator had an in-depth discussion. The responses were:

Biggest strengths

- Education system
- Life skills
- Results
- Teachers
- Integration
- Sports
- Options
- Pastoral care
- Availability of Grammar schools

Biggest weaknesses

- Communication
- School starting age
- Funding/budgets
- Academic selection
- Homework
- Disparity across schools
- Lack of support for families
- Not making use of local resources
- Segregation
- Buildings
- Engagement with parents

The facilitator explained to parents that the IRE need to understand the needs of children and young people as they progress through education and to ensure that these needs are met at each stage. The facilitator read through the list provided by the IRE which highlight a number of issues and explained that the IRE want to know which they think are the most important, and whether there are other important issues that should be added. The facilitator asked the parents to pick their top three priorities. The table below shows their responses:

Issue	NO.	%
Early years	11	37
Academic selection	4	13
Separate education of children and young people by community	2	7
Transfer to further and higher education or careers	6	20
Experience of pupils with special educational needs or disabilities	11	37
Structure and delivery of curriculum	6	20
Assessment - how we measure outcomes	1	3
Qualifications	3	10

Provision of education other than at school (EOTAS).	0	0
Provision of youth services	6	20
Supporting mental health and well-being	18	60
Meaningful participation of children and young people	13	43
Learning from experiences of the COVID19 pandemic	8	27
Role of technology	8	27

Is there anything missing, or anything you think could be added to this list?

YES	NO	NOT SURE
6	24	0
20%	80%	0%

Parents shared their thoughts on why they had chosen what they thought should be prioritised:

- *I'm sure there could always be something added especially after COVID and the aftermath of this*
- *It would be good to involve children and young people in decision making or asking them what works, what doesn't work and what would help them*
- *Facilitator explained that teachers, lecturers and others who work in education need to be supported, empowered and resourced to help children and young people learn. This refers to how schools and colleges are funded, how they are managed and what help is given to staff and students, again they read through the list provided by IRE which highlights issues they may need to consider*
- *I live in Derry and work with some of the schools so YW is very important to me as when children leave school at 3/3.30pm there is nothing for them*
- *If we concentrate on early years children have a better chance of moving forward and doing well*
- *We are all one and each child should be treated equally moving forward*
- *The curriculum needs reformed, we need to be teaching children life skills and health and wellbeing*
- *Increase in alternative educational pathways*

- *Funding*

The facilitator explained that teachers, lecturers and others who work in education need to be supported, empowered and resourced to help children and young people learn. This refers to how schools and colleges are funded, how they are managed and what help is given to staff and students. The facilitator read the list provided by the IRE that highlight a number of issues and explained that they want to know which they think are the most important, and whether there are other important issues that should be added. The facilitator asked the parents to pick their top three priorities. The table below shows their responses:

Issue	NO.	%
Help for students facing difficulties	17	57
Help for teachers/lecturers/education leaders with curriculum/teaching methods/assessment	7	23
The delivery of initial teacher education and ongoing professional development	17	57
The role of education inspection	1	3
The condition of educational buildings	10	33
Making use of new technology	7	23
Helping teachers and lecturers learn from each other	4	13
Learning from arrangements during the COVID19 disruption	7	23

*1 parent left at this stage to collect child who was not settling

Is there anything missing, or anything you think could be added to this list?

YES	NO	NOT SURE
0	24	6
0%	80%	20%

Parents shared their thoughts on why they had chosen what they thought should be prioritised:

- *Education is special and with new technology being developed all the time we need to concentrate on this*
- *During lockdown there was a child in my daughters class with very little English and my daughter helped translate for her but while in lockdown I don't know how she coped with school work and I always worried she would fall behind because my daughter wasn't there and her parents did not speak English, I would like to know what is being done to help these children*
- *They need to look at the full picture, teachers need to realise that it doesn't matter what way a child's hair is cut or what colour pens they have or the length of their skirt, that child might not have had dinner or breakfast, they might have witnessed something they shouldn't have seen so more care and training should be in place*
- *It's important that children feel comfortable and safe in their environment to learn more*
- *The COVID pandemic has generally been handled well but it is ongoing*
- *With teachers I feel their training stops after their PGCE and more ongoing training is needed as there is an awful lot of responsibility placed on teachers*

The facilitator explained that the system as a whole refers to how government and its partners manage and organise education and whether these arrangements need to be improved. The facilitator read the list provided by the IRE that highlight a number of issues and explained that they want to know which they think are the most important, and whether there are other important issues that should be added. The facilitator asked the parents to pick their top three priorities. The table below shows their responses:

Issue	NO.	%
Ensuring that education meets the needs of the NI economy	7	24
Provision of 'early years' education in NI	19	65

The relationship between schools and further and higher education	5	17
The future of integrated education	13	45
Making the provision of education in Northern Ireland affordable	12	41
Promoting climate change awareness	4	14
The appropriateness of multiple sectors and managing authorities	1	3
Creating a “single education system”	2	7

Is there anything missing, or anything you think could be added to this list?

YES	NO	NOT SURE
0	17	13
0%	57%	43%

Parents shared their thoughts on why they had chosen what they thought should be prioritised:

- *Schools and colleges should be working hand in hand, they need to know where schools left off and pick it up from there*
- *I don't think children at 16 know what they want to be and are left at this age to make life decisions*
- *My child wants to be a teacher and it is because of her teachers, teacher should be valued and know the part they play in children's lives*
- *Everything should be under one system with an equality expectation that it is reviewed and looked at continually*
- *Early years is so important and ensures children start off on a good footing*
- *I can't believe we have multiple education systems that more or less do the same thing, we are duplicating and this needs to change*
- *Organisations that are commissioned to carry out the building work on schools should be limited on profit made (Price capped)*
- *Tax relief for schools getting work done on building*
- *Absolutely against a single education system*
- *Needs to be more support for all parents regarding expense of education in NI. School meals should be made affordable or free for all, especially at primary school age. School uniforms should be affordable for all.*

- *There needs to be more funding/money spend on Early Years, the more support given at this age would hopefully alleviate problems in the future.*
- *There needs to be more funding/money spend on Early Years, the more support given at this age would hopefully alleviate problems in the future.*

FINAL COMMENTS

Parents within the focus groups shared the following final thoughts

- *No other comments, we have covered a lot. It was good to have the chance to talk about these issues as a group and share our views*
- *Good to know that education as a whole is being reviewed and parents are involved in these discussions, I hope that what is discussed is actioned.*
- *Going by my own Children I am quite happy with their school and the education they have received. Only concern is the lack of resources especially regarding books, teachers have had to photocopy books so there is enough reading books for children to take home.*
- *All schools should provide the same support, education and opportunities for children and young people. More training needed for teachers*

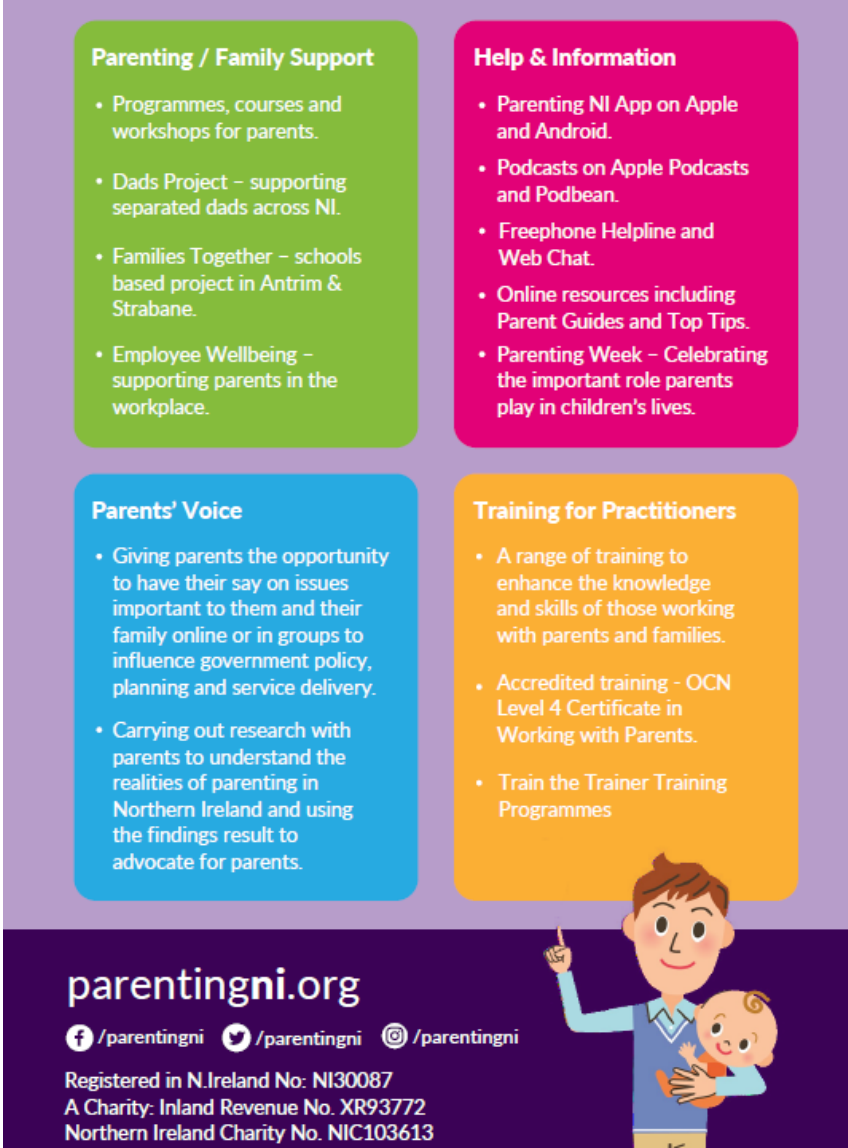
APPENDIX

- Facilitation Pack
- Parent Comments

***It is important to note that parents attended focus groups face to face and virtually and 1:1 interviews were conducted over the phone. A parent profile online survey was sent out to parents to ensure anonymity, parents were not required to complete each question within the survey and could leave the survey or skip a question at any stage; therefore, some numbers may not tally, as they may not have answered a particular question.**

PARENTING NI

Parenting NI is the lead voluntary organisation, which focuses on parents. The mission of the organisation is to support families. We work with parents to improve outcomes for children and young people and to influence policy and practice on parenting. The work is based on the principle that by empowering and working with parents, outcomes for children are improved. Parenting NI's work:



Parenting / Family Support

- Programmes, courses and workshops for parents.
- Dads Project – supporting separated dads across NI.
- Families Together – schools based project in Antrim & Strabane.
- Employee Wellbeing – supporting parents in the workplace.

Help & Information

- Parenting NI App on Apple and Android.
- Podcasts on Apple Podcasts and Podbean.
- Freephone Helpline and Web Chat.
- Online resources including Parent Guides and Top Tips.
- Parenting Week – Celebrating the important role parents play in children's lives.




Parents' Voice

- Giving parents the opportunity to have their say on issues important to them and their family online or in groups to influence government policy, planning and service delivery.
- Carrying out research with parents to understand the realities of parenting in Northern Ireland and using the findings result to advocate for parents.

Training for Practitioners

- A range of training to enhance the knowledge and skills of those working with parents and families.
- Accredited training - OCN Level 4 Certificate in Working with Parents.
- Train the Trainer Training Programmes

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Parenting NI has been advocating on behalf of parents since 1979, and is keen to ensure that the views of parents are taken seriously in the planning and delivery of all services for

children in Northern Ireland. Seeking parental feedback is now an integral part of the work of the Parenting Education and Participation Team within Parenting NI, and as such, the organisation has developed an effective methodology to carry out such consultations. It is important that parents are confident that the consultation process is worthwhile and that they feel comfortable sharing their views. Consultation with parents requires skilled and experienced facilitators who are capable of working sensitively with diverse groups.

If any parent indicates distress or the need for support during a consultation process, Parenting NI Facilitators can signpost them to the free Parenting NI telephone helpline service (0808 8010 722), or to other support services as appropriate.

Parenting NI responds regularly to various government strategies and policies and as such produce organisational responses. However, when we undertake consultations with parents our facilitators remain impartial and independent. The views represented throughout this report are those of the parents in both the focus groups and online respondents. This report provides an accurate summary of what was discussed and the key themes that parents highlighted and has not been influenced by any organisational views on the subject in question.