

## INTO Submission to the Independent Review of Education 2022



“It has become clear everywhere that the schools we have today will not be able to provide opportunities for students to learn what is necessary in the future.”

— Pasi Sahlberg, [Finnish Lessons 2.0: What Can the World Learn from Educational Change in Finland?](#)

## Introduction

The Irish National Teachers' Organisation (INTO) is the only all-Ireland teachers' union. It is the largest union for teachers on the Island, currently representing approximately 50,000 members, of whom 7,100 work in the north. INTO represents administrative and teaching principals, vice-principals, teachers in nursery, primary and post-primary schools across all education sectors, and teachers fulfilling various educational roles across the Education Authority.

The review of Education announced by former Education Minister Peter Weir, MLA, as agreed in the *New Decade, New Approach* agreement, comes in the wake of nine other reviews, arising from the 2017/19 Teachers Pay Deal, which are already being carried out by the trade union and management sides of the Teachers' Negotiating Committee. There will be significant synergies arising from these reviews which it makes sense to exploit.

INTO welcomes the establishment of this long overdue review and we are determined to seize the opportunity it represents to contribute to the revision and improvement of the current educational offering available to our young people. Our submission to the Panel will concentrate on what we perceive to be the key strategic areas requiring reform. Reform in these areas will lead, we believe, to consequent change in associated aspects of each. In adopting this approach, we are expecting that the review being undertaken by the Panel is but the first step in what will become a period of accelerated change for the education system

INTO has a long record dating back to mid-19<sup>th</sup> century in being to the forefront of educational provision and improvement on this island. Our members are and will remain central to the provision of the education service and we, as the largest trade union on the island, have a key role to play in its continued evolution. The work of this Panel is important and necessary and INTO is pleased to have the opportunity to contribute to it.

## Vision for education in Northern Ireland.

Holding with the internationally accepted premise that education is a human right, INTO maintains it is essential in building and developing a society that is founded on equality of opportunity. Our education system must be about equipping tomorrow's citizens with both the crucial and necessary knowledge and skills to enable them to make their way in a world which is constantly evolving. These citizens can only be facilitated along this learning pathway via an education system which is accessible to all and does not place any restrictions on an individuals' ambitions.

## Challenges and opportunities.

INTO is firmly of the view that the following elements of our education system require revision and help to change in order to meet the changing circumstances and challenges we find ourselves in.

### Finance.

The current funding of our education system and schools is simply inadequate. INTO believes that if real, meaningful, and positive change is to be made in respect to schools and the broader funding of the education system, the financial cake cannot be shared out in ever smaller slices rather it needs, first, to be enlarged very significantly. Two decades of Conservative government in England informed by neo-liberal financial policy have been catastrophic for our education system. As the then Permanent Secretary of the Department of Education, Mr. Derek Baker CB, told the NI Parliamentary Select Committee in 2019...

*“We have had a combination of a perfect storm over about a decade: flat cash, rising costs and rising service demands. Last year, when the Northern Ireland Audit Office looked at school finances, it euphemistically made the point that schools’ finances have reached a “tipping point.” What they really meant was, ‘It cannot go on like this, because we are in something of a crisis.’ I am not understating the position we are in; it really is very, very difficult.”*

INTO recognises that the response to this established fact on the part of the Department of Education and the NI Executive at Stormont is limited by both the fiscal policies of the British Government and the broader funding arrangements governing the devolution settlement. Nevertheless, it is incumbent on us all to seek to maximise the funding currently available to the entire education system within the present arrangements.

A whole series of reports arising from reviews of the ways in which schools are funded over the last decade has thrown up numerous issues. Issues, such as, targeting social need, newcomer children and small schools have all given rise to unintended consequence causing some schools to accumulate significant budget surpluses whilst increasing numbers of schools were going deeper into deficit. School leaders are having to deal with these pressures and there is growing evidence across the system that opportunities and resource provisions are being negatively impacted upon.

INTO believes that the current model by which schools are funded will continue to result in the unnecessary closure of many schools, impacting negatively on communities across the region and the children and young people who live here. For our children and young people such closures are manifested in increased travel times, longer school days, restricted access to extra-curricular activities and limiting their vitally important social interactions. Such impacts do nothing to contribute to or support their development into the well-rounded and educated citizens our society needs.

The current funding model based as it is, on competition [*“bums on seats”*] is antiquated and outdated and therefore no longer fit for purpose. We recommend the Panel examine alternative funding models founded on access and the meeting of identified needs. Such an approach will

improve, in a relatively short period of time, levels of engagement with education by our young people and the outcomes they achieve.

A funding model, worthy of consideration is that currently employed in the Republic of Ireland. In that jurisdiction the number of children enrolled in a school both informs and determines the staffing numbers, all of which are paid centrally. This, INTO believes, has several positives; it would allow for reduced class size at all levels, facilitate greater movement of teachers across schools and encourage school and community leadership to develop ethos and curricular emphases more reflective of the needs and requirements of the young people they serve and their community.

The funding of the entire system requires root and branch reform. However, the capacity to shape a system of provision which meets the needs of our children and young people and equips them to contribute to society as whole must be informed by a shared view of what we want from our education system. It is only then that we can effectively arrive at an adequate financial underpinning that supports this shared vision going forward. The Panel will need to then put forward rational and practical proposals that can enjoy political buy in from the local political parties whilst also being fluid enough to adjust around fiscal policies originating with the British government. This is the key area of reform and failure to get this right render everything else the Panel may propose meaningless.

## Transfer Test.

It has been INTO policy since academic selection came into being, following the Education [NI] Act of 1947, to see it ended. INTO, together with the entire trade union movement and most academics in the north, believes that academic selection at 11 is unnecessary, harmful and divisive. In addition to exacerbating traditional class divisions, it has corrupted the Northern Ireland Common Curriculum which has been recognised across the world as a model for a more rounded academic pathway for development. Moreover, it has skewed the curriculum at Key Stage 2 in our primary schools in favour of literacy and numeracy while also damaging these subject areas.

The constant rehearsal and preparation of children for unregulated tests has led to other subjects being downgraded in value. Progressive pedagogies have been suppressed to facilitate outdated teaching approaches designed to equip a minority of children to pass an entrance test for a small number of post-primary schools. The disproportionate amount of time, inside and outside of school, children are being exclusively tutored for this test has been determined in numerous studies to be detrimental to their personal and social development and a threat to their mental health.

Grammar schools continue to be allowed to increase their intake to around 46% of the post-primary level cohort placing further unfair pressures on non-selective schools whilst actively devaluing vocational pathways for our young people. The current skills shortages in the areas of construction, engineering and traditional crafts are a reflection of this whilst the number of university graduates employed in lower levels of the retail and service industries suggest change necessary to support economic and societal growth is urgently needed. Reduction in pupil intake for the non-selective post primary schools has led to reductions in staffing in these schools. This in turn reduces the choice of subjects available to children and young people in non-selective schools.

Managing the transfer of children from the primary sector to the post-primary sector by use of this test remains amongst one of biggest inhibitors of progress to a better education system we face. This is a nettle which needs to be grasped.

## System Management.

INTO believes that the decision to abandon the formation of a single Education and Skills Authority Northern Ireland (ESA NI) was unfortunate and extremely short sighted. The issue of a fragmented system wide administrated body has not been resolved with the creation of the Education Authority indeed further fragmentation in the management and provision of education services has seen the emergence of the Controlled Schools Support Council. Too much of an increasingly limited educational budget is being diverted into sustaining a bloated administrative layer at the top of our system serving only to over-administer a relatively small system whilst ensuring that vested interests are well placed to resist necessary change.

The continued existence of what is effectively a system segregated on either religious or socio-economic grounds must be addressed in the interests of both the young people themselves and society going forward. Study after study has demonstrated that children from low-income households, located in a socially disadvantaged area do much better in schools with a socially mixed intake. Where a child is educated in a school with little or no social mixing, results indicate that, in many cases, they will not reach their full potential and societal development continues to be hampered.

In recent years attempts to focus funding more effectively at targeting social needs has been welcomed by INTO but it will not effectively address the issue on its own. The creation of a more effective, tighter operationally focused management body which replaces the plethora of management and representative bodies is urgently required. A body such as this would not only ensure a more efficient running of the system as a whole but would enable significant administrative costs to be avoided. What is required is a fundamental administrative re-write for the system where the future is prioritised over the past.

## Workforce.

INTO in concert with our fellow teacher trade unionists share the view that our current education system is too results/data driven, and ultimately 'high stakes'. Our education system has become a low-trust, high-accountability system that directly undermines teachers' professionalism, judgement, autonomy, and discretion. This is not a good place to be. It is difficult to understand given we have amongst the best qualified and brightest individuals making up the teaching workforce here. Applicants to our teacher training institutions are entering with straight "As" in their A Levels and unlike other neighbouring jurisdictions, they continue to flock to the profession. They remain highly sought after and are valued in schools across the globe. Those charged with managing our system fail to appreciate this reality.

Our teachers strive to deliver a curriculum that allows the children and young people in their care to fully realise their full potential, both academically and socially. Yet this wonderful asset is increasingly forced to follow along narrow pathways to do so. They are forced to conform and adhere to outmoded and restrictive policy documents to the detriment of their teaching and the learning offered to individual pupils. Teachers are excessively watched, observed, and monitored (2nd of 48 OECD countries) and are less likely than OECD counterparts to be consulted on professional or curriculum matters. Teachers are expected to work longer here as compared to other countries and their pay has declined in real terms since 2010. Change is required now.

Professional development on offer to these same teachers over the course of their careers has melted away as a casualty of the cuts arising from two decades of austerity imposed upon the education system. It is essential that teacher professional development is resurrected, and opportunities created to allow the profession to re-new and refresh knowledge and skills over the course of their careers. This makes perfect sense in the context of an ever changing economic and social context. It is important also that the profession is a reflection of the society it has emerged from. There is an unequal gender balance in the profession as a whole at a number of levels with women under-represented at leadership and Governor levels.

There is also an emerging problem at leadership level where increasingly fewer teachers are putting themselves forward for consideration as school leaders. It is now common to have appointments to leadership positions delayed or filled temporarily whilst suitable candidates are sought. It is clear that growing numbers of teachers are concluding that the stress and associated career threatening scrutiny associated with leading a school is no longer something they are prepared to countenance. This is of course exacerbated by salaries which are no longer comparable with those in other professions and do nothing to make the role more attractive. This reluctance to choose leadership as a career option is a worrying development that requires urgent action. If our schools and the system as a whole is to continue to evolve in a progressive fashion, then it is essential our schools are led by individuals who want to be in the role and are possessed of the experience and skills required to be successful at it.

On the other side of the same coin our children and young people are relentlessly tested and evaluated after being coached for the specific assessments to be undertaken. They are denied the important opportunities and experience of learning through doing and experimenting. The learning being put before them is formulaic and uninteresting designed to satisfy the needs of a system fixated on examination results and value for money rather than the rounded development of the whole person. Accountability has replaced learning as the system driver.

INTO appreciates that accountability is important, but we are firmly of the view that it should be useful and informative rather than punitive. There are the beginnings of a recognition on the part of the system that accountability must be negotiated and accompanied with a supporting logic.

As the system is currently organised, accountability is largely about reaching predetermined examination targets. There is no account taken of the supplemental 'value added' element of education. Consequently, as long as the worth of a primary school is determined by the number of pupils who move on to post-primary selective schools, or in post-primary the number of children who attain particular grades at GCSE or A level, there remains a temptation for schools to remove pupils from taking particular examinations lest they "pollute the stats." Practices such as, "off-rolling," pupils being encouraged to leave at GCSE or AS level, exam-switching and exam-board promiscuity (choosing "easier" exams/qualifications), teaching to the test and spoon-fed education will continue. These are all inevitable, if unintended, consequences of high-stakes, narrow, system performance targets as well as features of low-trust and unprofessional environments.

Constant focus on examination outcomes distorts the curriculum, leaving little space for the development of 21st century skills required for successful careers, productive work, and enjoyable lives for both our young people and their teachers. Teachers suffer from inane “work intensity” and a lack of professional autonomy. Job satisfaction is low. Reform is urgently need if the profession is to remain the central driver of a better and more equitable society.