



# RESPONSE TO INDEPENDENT REVIEW PANEL



UTU welcomes the opportunity to provide input to the Independent Review of Education process.

The UTU represents approximately 6,000 members of the teaching profession including Principals, Vice-Principals, Teachers and Trainee Teachers. UTU members are employed across all the sectors in nursery, primary, post-primary and special schools and support service.

In the interests of brevity, this paper highlights some of the key issues which UTU would like to see considered moving forward. We would, however, seek the opportunity as the process progresses to explore some of the issues further and, indeed, to respond to other issues not identified in this paper as their consideration may arise.

This may be particularly pertinent in the areas where the work of the Independent Review Panel will intersect with the on-going reviews pertaining to workload and where all parties may seek to establish common ground moving forward.

The work of the Panel, combined with the impact of the pandemic, has also both opened and revisited much educational debate amongst UTU members in terms of priorities and failings in the system. The discussion around these issues is on-going and some will be addressed at our Annual Congress at the beginning of April.

UTU would therefore seek leave to furnish the Panel with any additional thoughts following its conclusion.



## **VISION**

UTU seeks an education system which places the interests of the children and young people at its core. The educational value and the consideration of the development and growth of children and young people should be at the heart of each decision made, from policies forged at the highest level right down to practice in the classroom, and the objectives and opportunities created should be clear to all.

UTU agrees with the statements made in the Panel's survey relating to the development of children and young people academically, socially and emotionally and preparing them to take their place as productive citizens in society.

Our education system should not by its structure and practices result in academic or social segregation.

In moving towards such a vision the voice of the practitioners is key. It is our experience that the teachers and school leaders whom we represent are completely committed to delivering where they see benefit and development for the young people in their care – and they are the professionals who are best placed to bring their expertise to bear on those decisions; it is the task which does not deliver for the children which leads to not only frustration with the system but the inappropriate use of the time of our most valuable resource in our system: the teaching profession.

It is therefore imperative that teaching unions which represent the voice of teachers and school leaders are involved in a system of meaningful and timely engagement and consultation with the Department of Education, the Employing Authorities and other associated bodies to deliver educational policies and practices which are robust from the outset.



## **SINGLE EDUCATION SYSTEM**

UTU believes that, in order to move our society forward, our children, regardless of background and identity, should be educated together.

Internal discussion within UTU is on-going and reflects a broad spectrum from those who believe that the schools should facilitate religious instruction to those who believe that schools should focus solely on education. In spite of stance, members do not believe that children should be divided on religious grounds in terms of school attended.

Further, integration should be fostered and developed within communities and not be addressed by providing further Integrated schools.

There must also be a rebalancing of the support provided by DE and the Employing Authorities to schools. The way forward will dictate the role – and indeed existence – of individual bodies but the key issue is that the system is there for the children and young people and resources must be appropriately directed to fully support school leaders and teachers in delivering effective education for all children.

It is the belief of UTU that these bodies are 'too remote', they do not engage effectively with the representatives of teachers and there is a lack of sense of collegiality in working together towards a common goal.

We must also ensure that the system is based on good quality governance who are both well trained and accountable.



## **FUNDING**

It cannot be denied on any level that education in Northern Ireland has been chronically underfunded for many years. It is imperative that education is prioritised by our politicians and that a clear message is given by politicians to society of its commitment to its future through ensuring that the education system is funded at a level which is fit for purpose.

However, it is also understood that no system will ever deliver an infinite level of resource and we must ensure that the resource we do have is used in a manner which delivers for every child. Teachers and school leaders must have resource directed to ensure they have the support necessary to cater for every child.

It would not be the stance of UTU that schools should be completely autonomous, but rather that appropriate and effective external support systems are in place to aid schools in first-class education delivery.

It is also imperative that the value of the teaching workforce is reflected in appropriate and proper levels of pay and robust terms and conditions of service.

There is also a great need for Professional Development for teachers and school leaders which is funded, accessible and relevant to the current issues in schools.



## **STRENGTHS OF THE SYSTEM**

- A strong, highly qualified and committed workforce which in our view is unmatched in terms of pastoral support.
- What has been a natural and informal move towards greater integration – nursery and special schools which have religious integration; a greater move towards mixed gender integration through area planning; informal integration driven by societal choice – which must be built upon in a more formal manner moving forward
- Capacity for flexibility in the curriculum which we hope will be further enhanced by more positive working relationships with ETI moving forward
- High academic achievement amongst a certain cohort of pupils
- Education is a right and is free. We must ensure that superfluous costs are not imposed by schools which lead to socio-economic division in terms of opportunity.



## **CHALLENGES OF THE SYSTEM**

The current system of education in Northern Ireland presents many challenges which have led to the requirement for this fundamental review. The following constitutes some of the areas identified by UTU Central Executive Committee; the practitioners on the ground.



## **PATHWAY THROUGH EDUCATION**

### **EARLY YEARS**

All relevant research shows that early intervention is key to addressing any issues of concern in a child's development. UTU has argued strongly for a number of years that the links between health and education are crucial in the early years of a child's life to ensure that relevant factors are identified and addressed from the beginning of the child's educational journey. Too many of our youngest and most vulnerable children have to wait, sometimes for years, for necessary intervention and this is too late for too many.

### **NURSERY**

It is the UTU position that all nursery education should be led by a qualified teacher.

Further, it is unacceptable that the settings where this earliest and most vital level of education takes place are not afforded the same access as other settings in terms of, for example, technology and guidance materials.

### **PRIMARY**

Class sizes are excessive at primary level.





It must be remembered that average class size as calculated by DE has small Learning Support Classrooms (LSCs) and smaller classes – which are often composite – in small schools factored into the equation. This masks the fact that teachers at primary level are often dealing with class sizes of around, or in excess of, thirty. As previously stated, smaller class sizes in rural schools often incorporate two or more actual classes which do not equate to an equivalent size class with one year- group. We must therefore treat the data with caution.

As mainstream schools become more inclusive it must be recognised that every mainstream class now includes children with a range of additional needs. As previously stated, the appropriate support is often not in place for these children in their early primary years. This, combined with larger classes, often impedes teachers being able to provide the level of individual support for every child that they would wish.

This is the stage at which the system should be addressing the needs of each individual child whilst progressively fostering independent learning. The size of the classes does not adequately facilitate this. The fact that children in this age-group attract less funding per head means that school budgetary constraints do not allow for addressing this issue.

The Engage Programme has shown the benefits to our children of having additional teaching staff in the school, a fact which has been acknowledged by the Department of Education through their extension of the funding. We must build on this moving forward.



## **TRANSFER**

The Panel will be well aware of the long standing position of teaching trade unions regarding academic selection.

The process is socially divisive and has a huge detrimental emotional impact on both children and families, regardless of whether they 'succeed' or 'fail'.

It is the contention of UTU that no child, particularly at such a young age, should be in receipt of any message from the system that education is 'not for them'.

UTU firmly believes that it is not overcoming the hurdle of academic selection which leads to educational success; it is the engagement of the child with teaching and learning within a system where they feel valued and can identify a place for themselves.

As many of our members teach in controlled schools the concerns around the well-documented under-achievement of Protestant working-class boys is only too evident on a daily basis. This has again come to the fore with uncertainty in society opening other routes for these boys which are clearly not in their interests. Delivering a message of failure at such a young and formative age merely serves to disengage these young people from education, and many never find the path again. The fact that there is a disparity in funding within the post-primary sector between the selective and non-selective schools serves to exacerbate rather than address the resultant issues.



## **POST-PRIMARY**

The teaching and learning process for all post-primary pupils should begin from day one; currently that is not the case for non-selective post-primary schools where the initial stages of education are centred on re-engaging those pupils who feel they have failed – but have actually been failed by the system.

Post-primary education should incorporate a range of pathways which enable all children to achieve their potential as individuals. As previously stated, the pathway for children who are highly academic is clear and well catered for. However, education is for all children – and society requires a range of skills outside of the solely academic in order to function effectively. Whilst our system currently has an element of vocational qualifications, the pandemic and the response of DE showed clearly the lack of value placed on these broader based qualifications. Those children with practical skills received little consideration yet the drive to accommodate those who could achieve GCSE A-C grades was evident.

Independent, on-going quality careers advice is required to enable children and young people to identify their strengths, choose paths and understand how to work towards achieving goals which suit them.



## **ASSESSMENT**

Key Stages 1, 2 and 3 require an assessment process which is formative, informs the teaching and learning of children, is incorporated naturally and in a meaningful way into the process, and is customised to the NI Curriculum. We would seek the support of the Panel in working towards this goal.

We acknowledge the need for a systems check but we have learned from prior experience that this must involve sampling and must not set schools against each other by attempting to use Key Stage Assessment outcomes as a blunt instrument.

The time has also come to have a robust discussion about the nature of assessment at post-primary level and the high levels of accountability in the current processes which can place undue stress on young people. The system must cater for the potential of every child and that potential must be valued; education at this level is not just for the high academic achievers.



## **SPECIAL EDUCATIONAL NEEDS**

The raft of on-going reviews around the provision of education for SEN gives a clear picture of the huge shortcomings in this area.

A marked lack of resources has served to greatly deplete the direct support for schools to deal with what is an ever-growing number of children with additional needs. It is no longer the case that individual schools have a small number of children who require expert input; this is now an integral part of every mainstream classroom.

Long waiting lists for appropriate assessment result in schools coping for far too long without the support needed for individual children and insufficient numbers of expert staff have moved this support from a practical hands-on approach to an advisory capacity in most cases.

The role of SEN Co-ordinator is becoming (soon to be Learning Support Co-ordinator) has become unmanageable, particularly when said SENCO also has a class teaching responsibility. A huge element of this is due to the time which is devoted to excessive paperwork as opposed to the needs of the child. We run the risk of losing this expertise as SENCOs can simply no longer do the job.

It is imperative that schools are in the financial position to have a non-teaching SENCO position and that required paperwork, whilst necessary, is determined, in regard to ease of use and avoidance of duplication, with the full input of the practitioners.

UTU welcomes the recent move towards provision of further places for those children who require a specialist setting. However, the future area planning for SEN must be robust to ensure that all children have access to educational settings which provide for their needs and have appropriately trained and experienced teaching staff.



## **AREA PLANNING**

It has long been the concern of UTU that area planning in regards to school estate and school closures and amalgamations does not appear to be based on a long-term strategic plan.

Decisions are taken on a sectoral basis and on the basis of numbers in a school; there is no indication of either planning on the basis of the needs of the children across a community or area or, indeed, of the role and place of the schools in the community.

It must be recognised, for example, that small rural schools are often the choice made by parents who have children with a range of needs that they feel would be better catered for within a smaller school population; the value of these schools cannot simply be viewed in terms of numbers.

There have also been examples where schools across sectors within the same community, with parental support, have presented plans to bring their school populations together and this has been denied.

It can of course be the case that an individual school is no longer viable but there is no evidence of creativity, understanding or long term planning for the educational provision for a particular community when the same blunt instruments are used repeatedly.

It is time to consider moving away from the requirement to have a school from every sector in every area and rather have well-funded primary and post-primary provision where children are educated together.

As previously stated, this document serves to give a brief flavour of the issues faced by the members of UTU currently.

UTU would be happy to discuss any of these issues further and would seek leave to submit any further considerations in the future.