



**THE RESPONSE OF THE
IRISH NATIONAL TEACHERS' ORGANISATION TO:
A CONSULTATION ON SCHOOLS FOR THE FUTURE:
A POLICY FOR SUSTAINABLE SCHOOLS**

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A CONSULTATION ON SCHOOLS FOR THE FUTURE: A POLICY FOR SUSTAINABLE SCHOOLS

INTRODUCTION

INTO welcomes the opportunity to respond to the Department of Education's 'Sustainable Schools' Policy consultation.

The consultation paper is concerned with the viability of schools (as developed in the Bain Report) as a central consideration for area planning. Schools have to be viable in both **educational** and **financial** terms. It is the failed concept of Local Management of Schools [LMS] that requires the additional issue of financial viability. Schools should be centres of teaching and learning. A serious, continuing concern for INTO is the inclusion of teachers' salaries within the Local Management of Schools formula. INTO repeats its policy position that either Local Management of Schools is amended - with teachers' salaries removed from it, or that school funding arrangements, similar to Delegated Schools Management [DSM] as in Scotland, are introduced.

The two specific recommendations in Bain that DE concerns itself with:

- (i) The policy for sustainable schools in Northern Ireland should ensure that all schools are sustainable in terms of the quality of the educational experience of children, enrolment trends, financial position, school leadership and management, accessibility and the strength of their links to the community.
- (ii) The sustainable schools' policy should ensure that regardless of the financial position of the school or the services it provides it is not considered viable if the quality and breadth of the education it provides is less than satisfactory.

KEY ISSUES

1. INTO rejects the proposed minimum (not optimal) enrolment thresholds for primary schools, post primary schools and six forms as advised by ETI that emerged from the Bain Report and:

- Schools with minimum enrolment thresholds of 105, 140 and 500 can offer their pupils in many circumstances meaningful opportunities for teaching and learning.
- The proposed Thresholds are dangerous as the recent *GMB/Belfast Telegraph* has demonstrated by undermining many schools' viability in the eyes of their parents and local communities. Schools are living communities and artificial criteria and/or proposed 'reviews' can be deeply corrosive to them.
- The ETI advice does not stand up due to the fact that under LMS pupils will be taught in large composite classes, which would be a most unsatisfactory development.

- The implications of the Bain minimum enrolment thresholds for primary/post primary schools in the Republic of Ireland would have a catastrophic affect on the teaching and learning of pupils in what is deemed to be one of the world's more successful economies.
2. The case for small schools enhancing the quality of educational experience of their children is:
- Smaller classes - even if composited - can give as good an educational experience as streamlined classes. There is more teacher interaction with pupils and more one to one teaching.
 - This policy needs to be rural proofed.
 - Bullying and good pastoral care of young children is more difficult in larger schools. Young children transferring from pre-school to primary are often overwhelmed by the size of the building, the noise in the dinner hall and the numbers in the playground. This can result in a negative experience for pupils.
 - The minimum enrolment criteria are based on 'economy of size' criteria. INTO contends that when educational criteria are used, reference to smaller class size rather than school size should prevail because the curriculum is delivered in the classroom.
 - Smaller class sizes ensure greater teacher / pupil contact time resulting in enhanced pupil performance.
 - Smaller class sizes benefit children with Special Educational Needs resulting in enhanced pupil performance.
 - Smaller class sizes mean reduced noise levels and a more harmonious working environment resulting in enhanced pupil performance.

INTO contends that without reference to class size, this consultation document has invalidated the educational dimension within its recommendations. Irrespective of school size the educational effectiveness of a school can be evaluated by the support it receives from its parents and community. Strong home / school links and well-motivated staff are more important criteria for improving educational standards than the minimum school enrolments proposed.

3. The flawed LMS school funding mechanism is the central weakness in educating children in Northern Ireland schools.
- INTO does not accept the acceptance in the Bain report of the continuation of LMS with minor adjustments to accommodate collaboration and sharing.
 - The Bain report has not considered the critical issue of teaching principals in small schools. Saying simply that this issue is a matter for the Board of Governors is not an acceptable position. In reality it is a funding issue. The Curran recommendation of a maximum 3-day teaching week for teaching principals has not been factored in.

- NC principal members will need to specify the necessary changes in LMS/school funding.
4. How do we determine whether the quality and breadth of the education provided by a school is satisfactory or less than satisfactory?
- ETI reports may help.
 - INTO is of the view that no school in NI can adequately offer a satisfactory curriculum. Schools are finding it extremely difficult to keep up with the pace of change. 72 initiatives are too much for schools to bear. Sustainable schools should be seen as an opportunity for change that will empower teachers to teach.
 - The revised curriculum is being introduced too quickly. The experience in the Republic of Ireland is that it took 10 years to roll out its new curriculum. Training resources and materials were superior.

Reference is made to "a sustainable development strategy for NI" published by OFMDFM in May 2006. Essentially this deals with changes in behaviours and practices across society to protect the environment. It presents yet more key targets for formal curriculum change at all Key Stages from 2007 and for 25% of NI schools to achieve Eco-schools' accreditation by 2009.

DE wants to move beyond school enrolment trends to determine whether "a school may be considered fit for purpose".

DE VISION FOR EDUCATION

The current vision for education in NI is: "...to educate and develop the young people of NI to the highest possible standards providing equality of access for all".

INTO concurs with this vision.

THE CURRENT POSITION

The DE objective would appear to be a system of larger schools. Arguments being used are:

- (i) Small schools are more expensive to run. This is true.
 Percentage of schools with fewer than 100 pupils - NI 37%, Scotland 34%,
 Wales 31%, England 14%.

INTO contends that the comparison of Northern Ireland with Scotland, Wales and England is an invalid one. In reality Northern Ireland should be compared with a similarly rural/urban background such as Lincolnshire. It would be more interesting to obtain genuinely comparable statistics. Indeed a comparison with the Republic of Ireland would be most interesting. The schools' systems are largely similar. Indeed schools in the Republic of Ireland are if anything smaller and the implementation of the

Bain minimum enrolment criteria would have such catastrophic consequences for schools and communities in that jurisdiction that it is inconceivable that the political parties would allow such to occur. This scenario has obvious parallels in Northern Ireland.

(ii) Post Primary sector schools with fewer than 300 pupils - NI 16%, Scotland 10%, England 2%, and Wales 2%. A similar argument in relation to the invalidity of these comparisons can be sustained here also.

Demography is impacting differentially. NISA stats suggest a fall of 10% (36,000) of children of school age over next 10 years. Belfast by 25%, whereas Banbridge actually has an increase.

The role of Governors - as outlined in the DE paper (Para 1.11, third bullet point) in sustaining strong and successful schools is largely invalid and cannot be sustained. In the vast majority of schools voluntary, unpaid and ill-trained persons, acting as governors of schools, perform a shoddy and inadequate role. Better training will help somewhat. However local delegation requires thousands of governors to be trained to a satisfactory level. This is impossible in the circumstances.

It is difficult to envisage the DE "Fit for Purpose" school (Para. 1.21) in the absence of criteria for Area Based Planning.

INTO appreciates the emphasis given to budgetary issues and their link to enrolments but points out that this is one of the more baneful aspects of school funding under Local Management of Schools (LMS).

THE POLICY CONTEXT

"A Shared Future"

INTO welcomes the thrust of the Government's policy for "A Shared Future". INTO is surprised in Para 2.2 at the ambiguity portrayed in the references to "potential" diseconomies of duplication arising from the existing diversity of educational provision in Northern Ireland. It was in this context that INTO welcomed the Government's First Tri-Annual Action Plan in April 2006 and in particular the requirements for demonstration of collaboration/sharing for new schools on a cross community basis. INTO is of the view that the Action Plan commitments with regards to education could and should be made more specific and explicit.

EAL remains under-funded. No reference is made to the increasing number of children from different ethnic minority groups coming into the school system and teachers and schools having to cope on inadequate budgets. Translators, translation of policies for parents, support systems for families and training for teachers are required. INTO contends that educational provision for EAL or newcomer children in Northern Ireland schools could be significantly improved by adopting similar provision already in situ in

Republic of Ireland schools. This area would make a useful and beneficial North/South area for joint cooperation and resourcing.

Post Primary Reforms

INTO disputes the Entitlement Framework guarantee in relation to the minimum number and range of course choices (which the Department intends eventually to be 24 courses at Key Stage 4 and 27 courses in the post - 16, one third of which should be of a professional or technical nature).

This provision discriminates against successful, medium-sized secondary schools in favour of grammar schools. It also accentuates the disparity between successful post primary secondary schools and grammar schools with the latter being permitted by the Department of Education to fill up to physical capacity as well as being over generously funded in relation to Age Weighted Pupil Units.

The Revised Curriculum

INTO contends that the revised curriculum (Para. 2.7) being introduced for all schools on a phased basis from 2007/08 to 2009/10 is being undermined by its statutory prescriptive nature and would welcome the development of a more voluntary and flexible curriculum that would empower teachers.

Specialist Schools

INTO deplures the decision by the Government in March 2006 to introduce specialist schools into Northern Ireland (Para 2.8). Specialist schools are a flawed concept and perpetuate further inequity within the Northern Ireland schooling system.

Extended Schools

INTO have several reservations about the manner in which the "Extended Schools" concept has been introduced into Northern Ireland.

Integrated and Irish Medium Schools

INTO is aware of the statutory duty by which the Department of Education has to facilitate and encourage Integrated and Irish Medium Education (Para 2.12). INTO questions the Bain recommendation that in respect of integrated education the Department should explain that it is committed to facilitating and encouraging: **A variety of approaches** to integrating education within a framework of sustainable schools. The main concern that INTO would have is that this recommendation may perpetuate the existing status quo with respect to cross community school collaboration.

INTO also notes that the Department launched a review of Irish Medium education provision on 14 December 2006 and seeks a more inclusive review.

The Educational Experience for Children

With regard to Para 3.2 (i) INTO disputes the premise in the Consultation document that the challenges become greater for composite classes with more than two age groups within most classes. INTO suggests that this is more likely to occur when there are fewer than three teachers rather than the four outlined.

INTO also disagrees with the contention in Para 3.3 that small schools are likely to have a smaller range of teacher specialisms erg. Music. The effects of the under-funding of primary education by LMS have driven music specialist out of almost all primary schools in Northern Ireland currently so school size is not a factor.

Enrolment Trends

INTO contends in para 4.2 that the ETI advice regarding "ideal" primary school having a minimum of 7 classrooms (one for each year group) is an unimplementable straightjacket. Indeed, in an ideal world it could be argued that there would not be an Education and Training Inspectorate.

INTO concurs with the previous DE advice that primary schools should be reviewed when the enrolment falls below 60. There is little evidence that this has taken place in recent years in any sector. However, INTO concurs that with regard to the replacement of school buildings the cut-off point being 85 or fewer pupils is helpful in most cases. Para 4.4 INTO repeats its position that the ideal scenario advocated by ETI is extremely unhelpful and that the Bain minima are too high and perspective for reasons outlined previously.

Financial Considerations

INTO regrets the position as outlined in 5.1 that under the Local Management of Schools (LMS) Common Funding Formula (CFF) the level of funding allocated to a school is determined mainly by pupil numbers. LMS is a flawed concept. It perpetuates largely historic patterns of school funding which are inequitable and unjustifiable. It discriminates against primary schools and renders difficult the implementation of the recommendations of the Curran report with regard to Planning, Preparation and Assessment Time (PPA) and administrative time for teaching principals. This is not withstanding the provisions within the small school support factor.

SUSTAINABLE CRITERIA AND INDICATORS

- Sustainability criteria indicators and equality considerations
- Sustainability issues including amalgamations, federations and clusterings.

INTO is of the view that much rationalisation is ill planned. Recent experience has been so bad that INTO has decided to implement a more challenging role to many rationalisation proposals. Much of the bad practice stems from the attempted implementation of the flawed *Collective Agreement* and the use of appointment procedures which are clearly not fit for purpose. Rationalisation needs to be planned and well resourced in advance and current school funding formula do not permit the necessary flexibility needed to allow school federations and other proposals to come forward.

INTO
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