



# **Response to the Department of Education's New Admissions Arrangements for Post-Primary Schools**

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CONS 472**

## NICVA Response to New Admissions Arrangements for Post-Primary Schools

### 1.0 Introduction

The Northern Ireland Council for Voluntary Action (NICVA) welcomes the opportunity to respond to the Department of Education's proposed new admissions arrangements. Our comments are informed by NICVA's role as the representative body for the voluntary and community sector and by a vision of society where all citizens are treated fairly, where sectarianism and discrimination are not tolerated and where respect for human rights and equality is regarded as the norm.

### 2.0 Context for new admissions arrangements

NICVA welcomes the department's overview of the changing education landscape before 2010, including the end of the transfer exam (the last transfer tests will be held in 2008), the introduction of the pupil profile and the new curriculum, increased cooperation between schools and with further education and the encouragement of specialist schools.

2.1 However we would argue that not enough attention is devoted to the overarching imperatives of promoting equality of opportunity, good relations, human rights and new TSN. We are also surprised that a policy affecting children and young people contains no reference to the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC). Therefore we support the principles and objectives for new admissions arrangements with several caveats – we call for the addition of a principle about ensuring equality of opportunity for every child. We agree that the education system should serve the individual child, parents and community but since education is also one of the key levers in bringing about social change to improve the life chances of every member of society, NICVA would advocate the addition of a TSN objective. We would also like to see the new government policy *A Shared Future* take a central place in new educational arrangements.

2.2 We also note that change is expected to stem from the decline in pupil numbers in the 11-17 year old population, projected to fall by 9 per cent by 2010 and by 16 per cent by 2015 with 17,000 fewer young people by 2010 and 30,000 fewer by 2015. The department estimates that this decline will lead to a reduction in the demand for places in post-primary schools, which in turn may reduce the number of oversubscribed schools. With the potential for increased immigration to Northern Ireland in future years, we would suggest that any demographic trend forecasting takes into account the change in the population in very recent times as a potential pattern for the future.

### 3.0 Choosing a Post-Primary School

#### 3.1 *Pupil profile*

NICVA would be concerned if prospective post-primary schools were to have access to pupil profiles before the allocation of places. In our view this would be

tantamount to academic selection by the back door. Furthermore it would reinforce the impression that the introduction of some specialist schools focused on an 'academic' approach will perpetuate the grammar/secondary division.

3.2 *Advice from the primary school*

NICVA is opposed to the suggestion that the primary school should offer advice to assist pupils and parents reach a decision about the actual choice of the post-primary school. It is our contention that the role of the primary school should be to advise parents on the strengths, weaknesses and interests of the child, not to advise on the post primary school. This decision is for children and their parents.

3.3 *Advice from the post-primary school*

We support the proposals to inform pupils and parents about the range of available schools with methods ranging from open days and prospectuses to web-based information. We reiterate our opposition to access to the pupil profiles during discussions with prospective pupils. We also question how much staff time will be available in post-primary schools to meet with the family of every prospective applicant.

3.4 *Advice from DE/Education and Library Boards*

We support the proposed supply of information packs and the provision of a helpline in each board, supported by extensive web-based information. We have a concern that the concentration on paper-based documents will disadvantage parents with literacy problems and therefore urge the provision of accessible helplines and widespread publicity for this facility.

3.5 *Continuing Advice*

NICVA strongly endorses the proposal that there should be an opportunity to change educational pathways within a school or move to a more appropriate setting, especially at the end of Key Stage 3. Research indicates that 14 year-old young people are in a better position to make choices than 10 or 11 year old children. By Key Stage 3 they have begun to think about possible choices of career and are more aware of their own strengths and weaknesses. However, we would urge that systems should be put in place to ensure that this is an open and workable opportunity to put in place a genuinely pupil-centred system.

**4.0 Pupils with compelling individual circumstances or a statement of special educational need**

We understand the case for sick children to be near a particular hospital or at a school with a nurse on the staff, but we do not have enough information about other possible scenarios to make a decision about this question. Nor do we have strong views about the admission of pupils as supernumerary. We would refer the department to specialist organisations for their advice. However we support the decisions on these issues being taken by a central panel of independent experts to bring consistency across Northern Ireland.

## **5.0 Admissions criteria for oversubscribed schools**

NICVA supports the use of feeder schools only if a socially-balanced intake can be achieved by prioritising pupils from a mix of prosperous and disadvantaged areas. If feeder schools drew their intake from areas which included social housing, for example, then the opportunity is reduced to buy property near a desirable school, thus pushing up house prices and achieving a kind of social selection by proxy. We suggest that more research is needed to provide guidance about achieving a social mix for every post-primary school as this document simply does not present any evidence about what would be possible in different areas across Northern Ireland and what the implications would be.

- 5.1 We understand the arguments in favour of using the geographical criterion. However it is known that neighbourhood deprivation and educational underachievement are connected due in large part to the nature of school admissions based on geographical criteria. Numerous studies show that this type of admissions policy leads to higher house prices as outlined above, reducing the opportunity for poorer families to access more ‘effective’ schools. Research also shows that parental choice tends to lead to separation in schools on the basis of factors like race and class.<sup>1</sup>
- 5.2 The department acknowledges: ‘it would be important from an equality perspective that geographical catchment criteria do not create artificial areas of exclusivity. It may be necessary to set a maximum percentage of places in each school that may be allocated in this way.’ However we would argue that more intervention is necessary to help counter this link between geographical and educational segregation, or selection by postcode.
- 5.3 Some suggest that a robust TSN approach should direct greatly increased funding to schools and teachers’ salaries in deprived areas. Others argue that there is merit in attaching additional resources to deprived children in order to make them more ‘attractive’ to more popular schools. This is currently done in Northern Ireland for nursery places. London schools are experimenting with a clearing system traditionally used in matching choices and available places in higher education. There are also strong arguments that a ‘blind’ or random selection mechanism for allocating oversubscribed places should replace all the proposed criteria. We believe that all of these options should be investigated, taking into account that in rural areas there will be issues of distance from schools.
- 5.4 In the final analysis, there is not enough information in this document about each of the criteria to make an informed decision. We would therefore argue that the proposals should contain EQIA and new TSN analyses. These would help tease out the implications of each option and the potential adverse impacts. They would

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<sup>1</sup> Paul Gregg, ‘Is Britain Pulling Apart? Area Disparities in Employment, Education and Crime’ Economic Research Institute of Northern Ireland (Scott Policy Seminar Series) April 2004, p23

also underscore the case for investing additional resources to improve the educational and life chances of disadvantaged children who are some of the most vulnerable members of our society. Consultation based on this enhanced information should then follow as a second stage to the current consultation. We believe this would be important also due to concerns about the number of parents who have been engaged by this consultation and lack of involvement of young people themselves in the process as set out below.

- 5.5 We would propose that the finalised criteria should be applied by a central body to encourage a consistent and fair approach across all schools.

#### **6.0 Admissions Appeals**

We do not see any merit in changing the current system.

#### **7.0 Additional comments**

NICVA sees this as an opportunity to build a more equitable education system. We strongly suggest that an integrated impact analysis should be undertaken to highlight inter alia human rights, equality, good relations and new TSN implications of the proposals.

- 7.1 The lack of consultation is very disappointing in light of the government's obligations under Section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act and the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. We therefore urge the department to proactively seek the views of those affected by the proposals. UNCRC Article 12 states that children have the right to be involved in all decisions affecting them. The teaching profession needs to be engaged in consultation about the proposed pupil profile and appropriate advice from primary and post-primary schools. We feel that consultation with parents should amount to more than the distribution of leaflets and that organisations working with children and young people should be given the opportunity to inform the proposals and the consultation process.
- 7.2 The proposals mention the potential of various reforms in the education system to create a more attractive learning environment for pupils in all school settings, but we would argue that they are premised on a static view that looks to the past rather than the future. There should be a vision of the future education system to include the needs of immigrants to this country and the type of post primary system fit for a changing and more diverse society.
- 7.3 It is ironic that cutbacks at Board level have fallen on English as an Additional Language (EAL) at a time when there is a substantial increase in the number of pupils requiring EAL provision due to inward migration of minority ethnic people and migrant workers. Moreover, we do not know the numbers of migrant workers from other parts of Europe including the former eastern bloc because the census and other monitoring exercises do not capture this category. We would suggest further research into this area to provide a clearer picture. Admission arrangements will need to take account of increased inward migration, including

the need to provide information to parents in different languages. This is why the equality and good relations assessments are needed to identify the potential impacts on a range of people. The Shared Future proposals make it clear that good relations should be an imperative for all policy development and we suggest that they should be central to the new admissions arrangements to work towards a more tolerant and just society.