



STANFORD UNIVERSITY

A DELIBERATIVE POLL* ON EDUCATION

Omagh College of Further Education

27th January 2007

NOTES FOR PARTICIPANTS

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Introduction

Education in Northern Ireland is changing. Some of the changes result from new arrangements for post-primary education, and some of the pressure for change arises because the total number of young people is falling and there are an increasing number of empty desks in schools.

Key changes to education in Northern Ireland:

In the future pupils will be expected to receive a common statutory curriculum up to age 14 years, but from this age onwards they will have greater choice in the range of subjects they chose to take.

For pupils aged 14 years and over, all schools will be expected to provide a choice of at least 24 curriculum subjects, a third of which must be 'academic' and a third of which must be 'applied': this will be known as the 'entitlement framework'. Consideration is also being given to the possibility of 'pre-apprenticeships' in which 14-16 year olds would start apprenticeships through partnerships between schools, training providers and employers.

According to the recently published Bain Report, few, if any, schools in Northern Ireland are currently able to deliver the full

range of subjects required by the 'entitlement framework'. However, this does not mean that all schools will have to teach all subjects in future: some subjects can be made available through collaboration with the Further Education Colleges or with other schools:

(a) Under the new arrangements Further Education Colleges will collaborate to a greater extent with schools, partly in order to provide pupils with access to high quality applied and technological courses.

(b) In addition, all schools will be encouraged to develop collaborative arrangements with other schools in order to deliver the 'entitlement framework', but it will be up to schools and managing authorities to negotiate those arrangements locally.

The Situation in Omagh

The Omagh area contains a number of primary and post-primary schools. The largest primary school has almost 500 pupils, while there are a number of quite small rural schools. Among the post-primary schools some have fewer than 200 pupils, while others have almost 1,000 pupils. Some schools are attended mainly by Catholic pupils, some are attended mainly by Protestant pupils and there is one Integrated post-primary school. In addition, there are Special schools and one Irish Medium primary school. In the town itself there are three schools which currently select their pupils in the basis of the 11+ transfer tests and so have a particular emphasis on academic subjects. The other schools are non-selective.

In the Omagh area the number of young people entering schools has fallen by about 10 per cent over a five year period. More generally, pupil projections from the Department of Education suggest that the number of pupils in schools will continue to decline for a considerable period. This means that some rationalisation of schools is likely to occur in the coming years.

Options

This briefing document discusses the advantages and disadvantages of a number of options through which schools might prepare for future challenges.

There are four main dimensions to consider:

Curriculum: the curriculum, or range of subjects, which each school directly teaches.

School collaboration: the extent to which schools collaborate with other schools mainly to provide the 'entitlement framework'.

Denominational collaboration: the extent to which schools from different religious traditions work together.

Age-grouping for schools: the organisation of schools in relation to the age of the pupils they take.

Below we discuss the main options on each of these dimensions. Most involve change, on one dimension or other. Some people may prefer keeping the current arrangements intact as far as possible, although

they will still need to confront the challenges presented by the expected reduction in pupil numbers and the new requirement on schools to provide the 'entitlement framework'.

Curriculum

Although all schools in Omagh are legally required to deliver a common statutory curriculum, in practice the grammar schools tend to give a more focused academic emphasis to their curriculum. Many of the secondary schools also include academic streams or bands for some of their pupils, but they usually have to provide a curriculum which meets the needs of pupils with a much wider range of abilities. In addition, there is evidence to suggest that schools generally have under-represented applied subjects.

There are a number of ways in which schools might change in regard to the type of curriculum they offer:

Academic and Technical/Vocational schools: Under this option existing grammar schools would continue to provide an academic emphasis to their curriculum, while secondary schools would provide a curriculum which focused on vocational or technical areas.

The main advantage of this arrangement is that it would provide a clear choice for parents and pupils between two curriculum options. In addition, some parents would welcome the continuation of grammar schools.

The main disadvantage of this arrangement is that it forces pupils to make an early choice of pathway and, in any case, the schools would still be required to provide the entitlement

framework for pupils aged 14 years and older. In addition, if grammar schools retained their current popularity and continued to attract high numbers of pupils, then they would, inevitably, become less academically selective over time as they took an increasing proportion of the pupils.

Specialist schools: The Department of Education has been encouraging all post-primary schools to consider applying for Specialist status. A Specialist school would have a specific curriculum expertise and they would be expected to share some of this expertise with other schools. To date schools have got Specialist status for Technology, Modern Languages, Arts and Drama, and Music. This option would imply that all or most schools would seek to develop some Specialism.

The main advantage of this arrangement is that schools are more likely to develop an equal status if all or most of them develop a recognised expertise. This arrangement would also provide a wider range of choice for pupils, assuming schools did work together to some extent.

The main disadvantage is that no-one can be sure what types of specialisms might develop in Omagh schools and how long this will take to happen or if they will provide sufficient access to a broad choice of subjects.

All-ability schools: Under this option all schools would seek to

provide the same, wide curriculum for their pupils.

The main advantage of this arrangement is that pupils would be guaranteed a specific range of curriculum subjects, regardless of the school they went to.

The main disadvantage is that the most likely way this could be achieved would be through the development of a very small number of large schools and it is not clear this could be fully achieved in a largely rural area. In addition, this could mean, under current arrangements, pupils located in rural areas would have to travel considerable distances to go to school. That said, there are a number of bi-lateral schools in Northern Ireland that come close to this model: bi-lateral schools select about a third of their pupils on academic grounds.

School collaboration

Under government plans it is intended that schools will collaborate with other schools to a greater extent in the future largely as a consequence of delivering the entitlement framework and for economic reasons, but it is largely up to schools and managing authorities how far they want to develop these arrangements.

Here are a number of possible options:

Staff development: This option would imply that most collaboration is limited to teachers from a number of schools undertaking shared staff development activities.

The main advantage of this level of collaboration is that it would be easy to establish and would likely be seen as of obvious advantage to teachers.

The main disadvantage is that it would probably not help schools deliver the entitlement framework.

Shared facilities: Under this option two or more schools would agree to share the use of some specialist facility, such as a sports hall or stadium, scientific or technology laboratories, or a drama studio.

The main advantage of this is that it would provide economies of

scale in the provision of good-quality facilities for schools and help schools deliver some aspects of the entitlement framework.

The main disadvantage is that it would be of most value to schools that are located fairly close to the new shared facilities and would require new management arrangements.

Shared campus: This option would imply closer collaboration in which two or more schools would relocate to a new shared campus. The schools would operate either within a common building or in different buildings and share a range of specialist facilities, but each school would retain its distinctive identity as a separate school.

The main advantage of this is that it would provide the basis for enhanced collaboration between schools and contribute more generally to their capacity to deliver the entitlement framework.

The main disadvantage of this option is that it would require pupils from rural areas to travel considerable distances to school. In addition, given the different management arrangements for schools, a shared campus may involve complex arrangements for ownership and management responsibility.

Shared courses: Two or more schools could agree to operate common courses which would be undertaken by pupils across all of the collaborating schools. This could be limited to post-16

courses, such as A Levels, or could include GCSE courses for pupils aged 14-16 years.

The main advantage of this is that it directly helps collaborating schools to deliver the under choice entitlement framework and it allows for a degree of flexibility and adaptation over time.

The main disadvantage is that it is easiest to achieve for schools that are located close to another, unless schools can develop innovative ways of organising their timetables. In addition, the larger the number of schools involved, the more complex the arrangements would have to be.

These options are neither mutually exclusive nor the only approaches which might emerge.

Denominational collaboration

Integrated schools, Special schools and Irish Medium schools do not have any particular relationship with specific religious denominations. However, as in the rest of Northern Ireland, most post-primary schools in Omagh comprise those attended mainly by Catholic pupils or those attended mainly by Protestant pupils: in fact, a little less than 10 per cent of these schools have a significant proportion of 'minority' pupils in their enrolments. Despite the traditional role of the Churches in education in Northern Ireland, however, parents have the right to apply to send their children to any school, regardless of their own religious background. Catholic Church representatives have a majority on the Boards of Governors of Catholic schools, while the main Protestant Churches are represented on the Boards of Governors of Controlled schools. Other types of schools normally do not have any statutory representation of the Churches on their Boards of Governors.

There are a number of options for change on this dimension:

Retain denominational schools: Things could stay largely as they are, with the majority of Catholic or controlled schools enrolling mainly pupils from the traditional religious groups with other categories of schools, such as Integrated, Irish Medium or Special schools, operating for parents who wish these options. The schools may or may not decide to collaborate on curriculum delivery along the lines already considered.

The main advantage to this option is that it recognises the

traditional links between communities and schools and it provides a range of choice for parents and pupils.

The main disadvantage is that it may limit the scope for collaboration and rationalisation within the sectors. In addition, some people may prefer that schools in the future should do more to encourage cross-community contact between pupils, although the Churches often argue that 'single-identity' schools reflect parental choice and can and do promote reconciliation.

Jointly managed schools: This option would involve new types of shared schools for all pupils. Responsibility for a jointly managed school could be shared between the Catholic Church and owners of what is currently the Controlled schools or any other school providers. Alternatively, it is possible for an entirely new arrangement such that a school could be jointly managed by the Catholic Church and one or more of the main Protestant Churches.

The main advantage is that it seeks to get the best of both worlds by encouraging sharing and rationalisation, while retaining a key role for Church authorities in the running of schools.

The main disadvantage is that it is an innovative model which might not immediately attract public support and may be complex to organise, even though models of this type do exist in other countries. In addition, some of the potential partners may

wish to preserve more clearly the distinctiveness of their own schools.

Integrated schools: This option would involve the establishment of formal Integrated schools in which all the partners, including the Churches and the other education providers, would have a right to play a role. This could be done in a number of ways. The simplest would be that all post-primary schools would become integrated schools.

The main advantage is that this would allow for the greatest degree of rationalisation

The main disadvantage is that it would remove the traditional role of the Churches in education and, arguably, restrict choice for parents and pupils.

Alternatively, it would be possible to operate denominational schools for 11-14 year olds or 11 to 16 year olds, with pupils then transferring to integrated 14-19 schools or integrated sixth form colleges respectively.

The main advantage of is that this would probably allow for a greater degree of rationalisation in the provision of schooling. Sixth form colleges may act as a useful parallel provision to further education colleges

The main disadvantage is that it would remove, to a greater or lesser degree, the option of denominational education which has been a traditional feature of education in Northern Ireland. Sixth form colleges may conflict with the Department of Education's plans for a more coherent 14-19 curriculum.

Age-grouping for schools

Most post-primary schools in Northern Ireland either take pupils aged 11-18 years, or pupils aged 11-16 years.

There are a number of ways this might change in future:

Traditional pattern: Schools would largely stay as they are, with 11-18 schools and possibly some 11-16 schools.

The main advantage of this arrangement lies in its familiarity: this is the arrangement we know and may feel most comfortable with. This arrangement also reduces the number of times pupils have to change schools.

The main disadvantages are that this arrangement would probably require significant change in other areas in order to help schools deliver the entitlement framework and it might be undermined by a reduction in pupil numbers. While it is the most traditional arrangement, it may not be the one best suited to the new circumstances.

11-16 & 16-19 schools: Under this option most schools would take pupils aged 11-16 years, and one or two schools, probably among the existing grammar schools, would convert into Sixth Form Colleges for pupils aged 16-19 years.

The main advantage of this arrangement is that it seeks to maximise the range of academic choice that can be provided to post-16 pupils. In addition, it allows for the retention of a larger number of 11-16 schools which would act as feeders to the Sixth Form College, and perhaps also in a parallel arrangement, to the Further Education College.

The main disadvantage is that most post-primary schools in the Omagh area would lose their sixth form students. In addition, it may conflict with the idea of a coherent 14-19 curriculum.

11-14 and 14-19 schools: Under this option schools would change either into junior high schools for pupils aged 11-14 years, or senior high schools for pupils aged 14-19 years. This option would change the arrangements in Omagh into something like the arrangements in the Craigavon area.

The main advantage is that it allows for a large number of 11-14 schools to continue to operate, including in rural areas, while the 14-19 schools could take on a number of specialisms. This structure of schools may also fit best with the new arrangements for the curriculum.

The main disadvantage of this arrangement is that it requires pupils to change schools twice, at age 11 years and age 14 years, which some may see as too disruptive. In addition, it may also limit the opportunities for staff development if teachers do not have an opportunity to work across wider age ranges.

Mixed model: This option would involve a more complex arrangement geared to specific local circumstances. It would imply that all schools change to some degree, but that some become junior high schools (11-14), some become senior high schools (14-16 or 14-19) and some become sixth form colleges (16-19). This option would also allow for the possibility of more innovative arrangements such as, for example, schools which cater for pupils aged 7-14 years, or 10-14 years.

The main advantage of this arrangement is that it would allow for a tailored system which best met the specific needs of particular parts of the Omagh area.

The main disadvantage is that it may be overly-complex and present a range of choices to parents and pupils which are seen to be very confusing.

Some additional points

Although most post-primary schools at moment take pupils aged 11 to 18 years, alternative arrangements have operated in, for example, the Craigavon area which uses a system of junior high schools (11 to 14 years) and senior high schools (14-18 years). Consideration may be given to more flexible arrangements for the age groups taken by individual schools in some areas, including the possibility of approaches which link primary and post-primary stages.

It is not quite clear yet whether academic selection will be retained or not in future and if retained what form it might take. Under current arrangements this decision will be taken by the Northern Ireland Assembly if it is re-established by March 2007, otherwise academic selection at 11 will end. It should be noted that while the vast majority of pupils are currently affected by selection at 11, in some areas of Northern Ireland alternative arrangements operate: in the Craigavon area there is no academic selection when pupils transfer from primary to junior high schools, but pupils do follow different routes at age 14 years; some post-primary schools seek to take in pupils across the full range of abilities; and some post-primary schools operate arrangements whereby they select about a third of their intake on academic criteria.

There are proposals to change some other aspects of the organisation and administration of education. The five Education and Library Boards (ELBs), The Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment (CCEA) the Statutory Rules of the Council for Catholic Maintained Schools (CCMS), and some functions of other bodies will be brought together to form a new organisation, the Education and Skills Authority (ESA). It is proposed that the ESA will be the employing authority for all teachers in Northern Ireland, whereas at present the ELBs are the employing authority for teachers in controlled schools, CCMS is the employing authority for teachers in Catholic maintained schools and the Boards of Governors are the employing authority for teachers in voluntary grammar or grant-maintained integrated schools.

Arrangements for funding schools will also be reviewed, but the most significant element of a school's funding will most likely still be derived from pupil numbers, with pupils aged 16 years and over being worth a higher per capita allocation.

Currently about 20% pupils leaving school in Northern Ireland enter higher education, while a little over one-in-four enter further education. 15% pupils leave school to enter government training, about 10% gain jobs and less than 5% are unemployed. The patterns are different for those leaving grammar and secondary schools: currently about 75% of grammar school leavers enter higher education, while a 33% of

secondary school leavers enter further education.