



**Submission by The Association of School and College Leaders (ASCL)
to the Independent Review of Education, November 2021**

Introduction

The Association of School and College Leaders (ASCL) is a leading professional body and trade union representing more than 21,000 members across the UK. Our members include trust leaders, headteachers, principals, vice-principals, deputy and assistant headteachers, and business leaders, of state-funded and independent schools and colleges. They are responsible for the education of more than four million young people in more than 90% of secondary schools and colleges, and in an increasing number of primary schools. We provide high-quality advice and support to our members, deliver first-class professional development, and we work to influence national education policy on behalf of children and young people.

In Northern Ireland the association has approximately 200 members in more than 80 post-primary schools, across all sectors, the total enrolment of which equates to almost half of all pupils in secondary education and includes some of the largest schools in the province. As a branch of the national association, ASCL(NI) is able to contribute independently to the debate on education in Northern Ireland on behalf of its members and the children it serves. We work to shape education policy, provide advice, and support to members and deliver high quality professional development across the sector.

Executive Summary

In our submission, we were asked to consider the following:

1. How the review should be delivered;
2. Strengths in the system and challenges to be resolved;
3. Our views on a 'single education system';
4. Our vision for education in Northern Ireland.

In considering these questions, we have drawn on ASCL's [Blueprint for a Fairer Education System: A Great Education for Every Child \(2021\)](#) which we have considered in the light of our own context in Northern Ireland. We believe that it provides a framework for what a better education system here should look like, and that the outcome of the review should guarantee the following:

1. **A high-quality curriculum** that delivers a broad and challenging education for all of our young people and that offers stability to schools over the next decade;
2. **Assessments and qualifications** which link seamlessly to the curriculum and which offer suitable academic and vocational pathways for each young person;
3. **A system which invests in its teachers and leaders**, equipping them to deliver the curriculum effectively and to engage in effective and ongoing CPD and meaningful collaboration;
4. **An education system which is properly resourced** at all levels allowing school leaders and teachers to focus on learning and teaching;
5. **Structures and systems that support schools**, operate efficiently and reward those who provide all young people with a high-quality education.

Our submission is also informed by the views of our members who responded to a survey carried out in October 2022 in relation to the ongoing TNC Review of the Impact of School Leader Workload.

1. How the Review should be delivered

We believe that, first and foremost, the review should be pupil focused, and that its priority should be to deliver a high-quality education which meets the needs of every young person in Northern Ireland. The review should take a holistic view of the education system here and, as well as identifying longer-term, visionary aspirations, it should identify short-term solutions which will allow it to have an immediate impact.

That said, we are mindful of the that meaningful and sustainable change involves careful planning and takes time and commitment. We are also aware of the dangers of going too far and dismantling things that are working for the benefit of our young people. System change is disruptive, so major changes should only be implemented where the benefits are clear and where we know what problem we are trying to solve.

It is also important that the review takes into account ongoing work, together with recommendations from previous reports which have not yet been implemented. These include the joint DE/ DfE Transition of Young People into Careers and the work of the Careers Advisory Forum, as well as the Post-Primary Taskforce Report (2016), the Bain Report (2006) and the Public Accounts Committee Report on Department of Education: Sustainability of Schools (2006).

2. Strengths in the system and challenges to be resolved

It should be recognised that the education system in Northern Ireland has many advantages and that, despite the problems we face, there are solid foundations on which to build. We have identified the following key strengths in current provision:

- High levels of achievement. Pupils in Northern Ireland lead the way among UK nations in most measures of pupil outcomes. The [EPI report](#) from July 2021 shows that, from age 5 until the teenage years, children in Northern Ireland display the highest scores on almost all key education and skill outcomes
- State-funded, high-quality education, with virtually no private sector, unlike in other jurisdictions
- High levels of opportunity through extensive extra-curricular provision, contributing significantly to personal and social development
- A high-quality workforce, with a high degree of subject specialism
- Recent initiatives incorporating research-informed professional learning, with a focus on learning and teaching (for example, the John Hattie conference organised by EA)

However, it must be acknowledged that the system also faces significant challenges, including the following:

- Insufficient funding. A [report from the IFS](#) in October 2021 indicates a significant cut in real terms in pupil funding over the last decade, with per capita funding per pupil in NI the lowest in the UK (£6400 against £7500 in Scotland)
- A number of schools and Sixth Forms which are both economically and educationally unsustainable
- Local Area Learning Communities which, in some instances, encourage inefficiency, rather than promoting sustainability
- A lack of meaningful and well-structured collaboration between schools
- An Entitlement Framework which is costly to deliver, especially at KS4
- An entrenched undervaluing of vocational and technical education and an unhelpful elevation of the academic over the vocational
- A disconnect in the curriculum between Key Stages, particularly at the transition between KS2 and KS3, and KS3 and KS4.
- A lack of system-wide comparative measures, with further development of Computer Adaptive Tests required
- An absence of a strong careers strategy and a lack of dedicated training for careers teachers
- Inadequate ICT provision in schools, including Wi-Fi and internet access; this was highlighted during the recent closures and the move to remote learning
- Inadequate training for governors
- Limited training and CPD for school leaders, no commonly recognised qualification for headship, and a lack of subject-specific INSET for teachers
- An ineffective system of Performance Review and Staff Development (PRSD)

- Accountability measures and inspection services which need to be reviewed
- A dysfunctional GTCNI
- An insufficient bank of supply teachers; this was especially apparent during the pandemic

3. Defining a “single education system”

The New Decade New Approach document is unclear in what it means by a ‘single education system’. It should be noted that much of the educational provision is already delivered as a single system, including curriculum, examinations and assessment, ICT provision, SEN, admissions, transport and safeguarding. We would support the further extension of such services to avoid duplication of provision and wastefulness of resources.

However, there is a narrower definition of a ‘single education system’ which we believe needs to be treated with caution. It would be unwise to dismantle a system which has many strengths without knowing what is going to replace it. It should be noted that schools reflect the societies in which they have been established: they cannot solve social and economic inequalities or the problems peculiar to Northern Ireland, but they can play a role in reducing their impact.

We support maximum community cohesion and a reduction in unnecessary duplication. However, we maintain that diversity, with understanding, is a strength and that a pluralist society should be able to deal with difference. A narrow definition of a single system, without choice, could result in the emergence of an environment where families opt out of state provision.

We believe that Integrated Education is part of the future for education in Northern Ireland, but it is not the whole solution. Indeed, it is worth noting that many post-primary schools are naturally integrated and more work could be done to encourage this. At the same time, faith schools play a significant part in the provision of education throughout the world and their impact and ethos should not be undervalued.

We also believe that rural schools can play an important role in the community, and this should also be taken into account when considering a single education system.

Whatever the system, it needs to provide, for all of its children and young people, a high-quality, broad, and challenging education, and no child or young person should receive a lower standard of education because of their background or where they live. Schools should be supported to do everything they can to counteract socioeconomic disadvantages and to ensure all young people fulfil their potential. ASCL believes that excellence and equity are not in conflict with one another: a system which is better for disadvantaged young people is better for everyone.

4. ASCL's vision for education.

As outlined above, ASCL's Blueprint for a Fairer Education System: A Great Education for Every Child (2021) identifies five key areas which we believe provide a basis for a way forward for Northern Ireland and which have informed the recommendations we have made to the Review. In each of the five areas, we need to ask ourselves the following questions:

1. **Curriculum:** what and how should children and young people be taught?
2. **Assessments and qualifications:** how should we judge if the system is doing what we want it to?
3. **Teachers and leaders:** how should they be identified, developed and supported?
4. **Resources:** how should the education system be funded?
5. **Structures and systems:** how should the education system be structured?

4.1 Curriculum

We fully support the Mission and Purpose Statement of the Post Primary Taskforce (2016) which was 'to help create a post-primary education system which promotes the development of skills, attitudes and personal qualities in all young people so that they may contribute positively to the social and economic prosperity of Northern Ireland'. However, we need to go further than this and develop a curriculum which meets the individual needs of each pupil. To achieve this, we should focus on the following:

- A planned, inclusive and long-term approach to curriculum review, involving school leaders, governors, teachers, subject experts, parents, researchers and industry representatives
- A curriculum up until the age of 16 focused on what we collectively agree to be the most important things young people should know and be able to do, and which sets high expectations for all pupils
- Ongoing reform of vocational and technical pathways, which are currently undervalued. This should allow for permeability between vocational and academic courses, enabling pupils to progress to a range of destinations and addressing the skills shortage in the economy
- A strong, adequately funded, careers strategy underpinning post-primary education, with improved funding, training and support for schools and colleges to provide high quality careers advice and guidance, particularly for young people from less advantaged backgrounds

4.2 Assessment and Qualifications

Assessments and qualifications should link seamlessly to the core curriculum and post-16 pathways, and should enable all children and young people to demonstrate their knowledge

and skills, and to be recognised for what they can do. In order to achieve this, we recommend the following:

- A qualifications and assessment review to evaluate how business, entrepreneurial and softer skills can be assessed, without diluting the academic elements of courses
- A reform of vocational qualifications, which should enjoy parity of esteem with academic qualifications and should be supported by appropriate assessment opportunities, allowing young people to demonstrate what they know, understand, and can do.
- A review of the current comparable outcomes-based approach to grading GCSEs, AS and A levels so that pupils can be recognised for what they can do. Currently some pupils - the 'forgotten third' - are required to fail so that others can succeed.

4.3 Teachers and leaders

In order to build a successful education system, we need to invest in the leaders, teachers and support staff in every school in Northern Ireland, as they have the expertise and capacity to provide the education and the broader support children and young people need. For this to be achieved, the following are required:

- Expertise developed through strong initial teacher education, ongoing and research-informed professional development, and the sharing of knowledge and effective practice
- A commitment to ensuring all teachers and leaders have access to, and time to engage in, high-quality, fully funded professional development
- Clear career pathways for teachers and leaders, with a strong focus on coaching and mentoring, and a dedicated qualification in headship for aspiring leaders
- Identification of excellence in the teaching workforce and opportunities for meaningful collaboration
- A commitment to ensuring that teachers and leaders are properly recognised for the job that they do, and that teachers' pay keeps at least in line with inflation.
- Protection for school leaders from the growing entitlement culture
- A reduction in unnecessary bureaucracy for all teachers and for school leaders, with an impact assessment being carried out before new initiatives are introduced
- Timely, targeted and coordinated communication from the EA, DE and other bodies to allow schools to plan properly and to ensure that they are not overwhelmed with information

4.4 Resources

The system is currently chronically underfunded, and unless this is addressed, we will be unable to meet the needs of our children and young people, particularly those who face the

greatest challenges. This is possibly the single biggest issue facing education in Northern Ireland and we recommend the following:

- A review of Common Funding Formula (CFF) that reflects actual costs in schools, to take into consideration the varying financial burdens of curriculum delivery at different stages, and in different subject areas, such as examination fees and specialist science and technology equipment
- Efficient use of the resources which are currently available within the system
- A review of funding held and spent centrally to ensure as much funding as possible goes directly to schools, with schools having greater autonomy over how to spend allocations. Fragmented models where schools have to bid for funding should be avoided
- A review of SEN funding, to move away from the current model where early intervention is impeded by the need to wait for something to go wrong
- A review of spending on home-to-school transport
- Funding for long overdue maintenance work in schools
- An increase in the amount of capital funding available to schools, and a transparent system for funding of capital projects which allows for forward planning and takes into account the needs of individual localities as well as individual schools
- Adequate resources to enable schools to recruit sufficient administrative staff
- Funding for social workers, youth and family workers, and mental health support to allow for stronger pastoral and health support for children and young people in schools. These services could be hosted in schools, but not provided by them
- Funding for CPD in schools to allow school leaders to implement school improvement strategies

4.5 Structures and systems

Structures and systems need to be in place which support schools and reward them for providing all children and young people with a high-quality, broad and challenging education. These structures and systems should encourage and enable schools to act for the good of all, not just those in their own institutions. They should not inhibit schools or incentive risk-averse strategies. In order to achieve a system which is sustainable both educationally and financially, we recommend the following:

- An objective analysis of current educational provision with a focus on small, unviable schools and unviable sixth forms
- More joined up thinking between the Departments of Education and Economy in relation to 14-19 provision. For many young people, accessing opportunities at FE may be more appropriate than the provision offered by Sixth Forms. This will require a review of the number and educational and financial viability of Sixth Form provision, in the best interests of young people.

- Greater autonomy in educational administration for those schools which require it, and which can demonstrate capacity to deliver
- A new inspection strategy that supports schools and incentivises genuine improvement. This strategy could incorporate an accountability dashboard to include attainment measures, destination data, curriculum provision, extra-curricular provision staff development, inclusion socio-economic characteristics and on the school's impact on the broader education landscape.
- Development of Northern Ireland-wide baseline performance data at all key stages. These should not be high stakes tests, or be used to hold schools to account; they should allow them to identify needs, focus on improvement for individual pupils and develop learning
- A review of the external support available to schools and the operational responsibilities of the Education Authority in supporting learning, providing educational support services (Including SEN and school improvement) and effective youth services.

Conclusion

We believe that, while not shying away from the challenges we face, the Review should seek to build on the strengths of the current education system in Northern Ireland. While schools cannot solve all of the problems we face, they have an important role to play in our community. In order for their impact to be maximised, we need a system that is efficient and adequately funded, so that we can invest in teachers and leaders as they serve the children and young people in their schools. We need a curriculum that is robust and meets the needs of all of our learners, and that leads to high quality academic and vocational qualifications. Finally, we need structures underpinning the education system which incentivise improvement and to support the work of schools. We look forward to continuing to work with all those involved with the education of our children and young people as we seek to build a better future for them.



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