

NICEM submission to the Transitional Assembly's Programme for Government Committee Sub-Group on the Schools Admission Policy

Introduction

NICEM is an umbrella organisation representing the interests of black and minority ethnic groups in Northern Ireland. Currently we have 23 affiliated black and ethnic minority groups as full members, which represents most of the black and minority ethnic communities in Northern Ireland. Our vision is of a society free from all forms of racism and discrimination, where human rights are guaranteed. NICEM works in partnership, to bring about social change, by achieving equality of outcome and full participation in society.

NICEM welcomes the department's overview of the changing education landscape before 2010, including the end of the transfer exam, the introduction of the pupil profile and the new curriculum, increased cooperation between schools and with further education and the encouragement of specialist schools.

In our perspective there is insufficient attention to the overarching imperatives of promoting equality of opportunity, good relations, human rights and new TSN. We are also surprised that a policy affecting our children and young people contains no reference to the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. Therefore we support the principles and objectives for new admissions arrangements with the following caveats:

1. One of the principles should be to ensure equality of opportunity for every child in our society;
2. Arising from 1 education should also use as a means to bring about social change to improve the life chances of every member of the society, in particular those disadvantaged groups; and
3. We would also like to see the new government policy on Shared Future and Racial Equality Strategy take a central place in new educational arrangements.

NICEM should state at the upfront that black and minority ethnic communities face both relative and absolute disadvantaged position in the exercise of choice for post-secondary admission policy and criteria due to language, culture, religion and unfamiliar with the local system. It affects those settled black and minority ethnic communities, as well as the new comers such as asylum seekers, refugees and migrant workers. Therefore any principles and criterion of admission should take into account of such disadvantaged. The same principle should also apply to other disadvantaged groups and/or areas.

Pupil Profile

NICEM has serious concerns 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. Moreover it would reinforce the impression that the introduction of some specialist schools focused on an 'academic' approach will perpetuate the grammar/secondary division.

Admissions criteria for oversubscribed schools

NICEM 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 the department does not present any evidence about what would be possible in different areas across Northern Ireland and what the implication would be.

We note 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.¹

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 encounter this link between geographical and educational segregation, or selection by postcode.

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.

In our final analysis, there is not enough information about each of the criteria to make an informed decision. We would therefore argue that the proposal should contain EQIA and new TSN analyses. These would help tease out the implications of each option and the potential adverse or differential impacts on those disadvantaged groups and/or areas. They would also underscore the case for investing additional resources to improve the educational and life chance 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 current consultation. We believe this would be important also due to concerns about the number of parents

¹ 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

who have been engaged by this consultation and lack of involvement of young people themselves in the process as set out below.

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

Human Rights, Equality, Good Relations and TSN consideration

NICEM sees there is an opportunity to build a more equitable education system for Northern Ireland based on human rights and equality principle. 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.

The lack of consultation is very disappointing in light of the government's obligation under Section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act and the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. Based on our experience we strongly feel that consultation with parents should amount to more than the distribution of leaflets and as we mentioned at the beginning a lot of black and minority ethnic people do not familiar our school system, as well as the language, cultural, religious barriers in these consultation.

Over the last three years we witness the dramatic change in our demography as the result of migrant workers from overseas and the EU new 10 members. According to the home office figures in 2004-2006 there were around 7,000 approved work permit holders in Northern Ireland in addition to the unknown figures of those from EU new member states (Home Office registration scheme only indicated that just less than 15,000 people and majority are from Poland). These sea changes require more robust monitoring data within the educational system to reflect the needs of black and minority ethnic children and young people. We would suggest a robust needs assessment should be conducted to identify the issues and gap.

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 it clear that good relations should be an imperative for all policy development and we suggest that they should be central to the new admission arrangements to work towards a more tolerant and just society.