NORTHERN IRELAND COUNCIL

NiCEM

FOR ETHNIC MINORITIES

NICEM

SUBMISSION

Consultation on a Strategy for Improving Pupil Attendance

DENI

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Introduction

1.1 The Northern Ireland Council for Ethnic Minorities (NICEM) is an independent non-governmental organisation. As an umbrella organisation[1] we represent the views and interests of black and minority ethnic (BME) communities.[2] Our mission is to work to bring about social change through partnership and alliance building, and to achieve equality of outcome and full participation in society. Our vision is of a society in which equality and diversity are respected, valued and embraced, that is free from all forms of racism, sectarianism, discrimination and social exclusion, and where human rights are guaranteed.

1.2 Good attendance is vital to the achievement of good grades, with poor attendance and lower academic achievement being clearly linked.[3] In light of this link, the declining academic attainment of BME pupils in Northern Ireland (NI) is a cause for concern. [4]

1.3 This declining achievement may be partially linked with poor attendance rates. While current statistics place overall BME attendance only slightly below that of their 'White' peers, a more accurate image is portrayed by home language statistics, which gives a picture of both 'White' and 'non-White' BME attendance.[5]

1.4 These statistics show that attendance for those whose home language is not English is almost three percentile points lower than those whose home language is English.[6]

1.5 Furthermore, some particular groups, such as Irish Travellers and those whose home language is 'Romanian', have attendance that is significantly below average.[7]

1.6 Overall, a Strategy for improving attendance will need to address the particular factors that may be impacting upon BME attendance - including racist bullying, poor language support and issues affecting the Roma and Traveller populations – if all are to benefit equally from this initiative.

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[1] Currently we have 27 affiliated BME groups as full members. This composition is representative of the majority of BME communities in Northern Ireland. Many of these organisations operate on an entirely voluntary basis.

[2] In this document "Black and Minority Ethnic Communities" or "Minority Ethnic Groups" or "Ethnic Minority" has an inclusive meaning to unite all minority communities. It is a political term that refers to settled ethnic minorities (including Travellers, Roma and Gypsy), settled religious minorities, migrants (EU and non-EU), asylum seekers and refugees and people of other immigration status united together against racism.

[3] Taylor, C., 'Improving Attendance at School' (2012), para.2

[4] Equality Commission for Northern Ireland, 'Key Inequalities in Education: Draft Statement' (2015), p.13

[5] Woods, M., 'Attendance at grant-aided primary, post-primary and special schools in Northern Ireland 2014/15: Detailed statistics' (2016), p.12

[6] ibid

[7] ibid

Racist Bullying

2.1 The consultation document highlights the relationship between bullying and poor attendance, with Departmental research showing that 'almost all participants' gave bullying as a reason for their children not wanting to attend school.[8]

2.2 In light of this, it is important to note that racist bullying affects a significant proportion of BME pupils in NI. NI based research has illustrated that 29% of ethnic minority young people identified as being victims of racist bullying or harassment in school.[9]

2.3 Further research has shown that 53.7% of respondent BME children in secondary education have experienced racist bullying.[10] These findings are reinforced by research showing that 37.6% of Year 6 pupils and 63% of Year 9 pupils in NI feel that a pupil's race or skin colour makes them more likely to be bullied.[11]

2.4 Consequently, if the Strategy is to improve pupil attendance, it will need to ensure that the issue of bullying, including racist bullying, is adequately addressed.

2.5 While there are currently initiatives in place to address bullying, such as the monitoring duty envisaged under the Addressing Bullying in Schools Bill and the requirement on schools to produce an anti-bullying policy, there are still drawbacks in the current approach.

2.6 For example, there is no national guidance on what should be included in an anti-bullying policy, unlike elsewhere in the United Kingdom (UK).[12] This results in inconsistency between schools in the efficacy of their approach, which in turn leads to inappropriate measures being taken in response to racist bullying.[13]

2.7 Additionally, the monitoring duty placed on schools regarding racist bullying does not require any action to be taken that would combat said bullying.

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[8] Department of Education, 'Miss School = Miss Out: A Strategy for Improving Pupil Attendance' (2016), p.50

[9] NCB NI and ARK YLT, 'Attitudes to Difference: Young People's Attitudes to and Experiences of Contact With People From Different Minority Ethnic and Migrant Communities in Northern Ireland' (2010) p.52

[10] Rooney, E. and Fitzpatrick, B., 'Promoting Racial Equality in Northern Ireland's Post-Primary Schools' (2011) p.27

[11] Department of Education, 'The Nature and Extent of Pupil Bullying in Schools in the North of Ireland' (2011), pp.56 and 90

[12] Department for Education and Skills, 'Bullying Around Racism, Religion and Culture' (2011)

[13] op cit n 10, p.29

2.8 Ultimately, the fact that racist bullying remains a concern in spite of the current stratagems in place is concisely evidenced by its placement on the Equality Commission's list of key inequalities in education in 2015.[14]

2.9 Thus, if the Strategy is to tackle this root cause of poor attendance amongst BME pupils in NI, it would be useful to commit to the development of national guidance for schools to inform their anti-bullying policies and to include guidelines on measures for addressing racist bullying.

2.10 NICEM recommends that the Strategy commit to developing guidance for schools on what to include in an anti-bullying policy. This should include measures for addressing racist bullying.

<u>**Language Support**</u>

3.1 It is noteworthy that there is a significant difference between the attendance of individuals whose home language is English and those whose home language is not English, amounting to nearly three percentile points.[15]

3.2 For some languages, the difference is much more pronounced. At primary schools level, where the pupil's home language is Polish, Lithuanian, Slovak or Romanian, the discrepancy is 3.5, 3.6, 4.9 and 9.2 percentile points respectively.[16]

3.3 This discrepancy is made all the more concerning by the fact Polish, Lithuanian, Romanian and Slovak are the 1st, 2nd, 7th and 8th most common languages spoken by newcomer pupils in NI, with these groups accounting for 6647 pupils in 2014/15.[17]

3.4 While it is unclear if there is a direct causal link between language difficulties and poor attendance, this statistical gap is significant and research has highlighted the frustrations faced by newcomer pupils in NI's schools.

3.5 A lack of age appropriate teaching material for older newcomer pupils, limited access to materials outside school hours, difficulties in assessing any Special Educational Needs of newcomer pupils and shortcomings of the Inclusion and Diversity Service combine to make school a difficult

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[14] Equality Commission for Northern Ireland, 'Key Inequalities in Education: Draft Statement' (2015), para.5.1
[15] op cit n 5
[16] ibid
[17] ibid

environment for pupils with language needs.[18]

3.6 This is combined with the standard sense of isolation that a child feels when they are in a situation where they do not speak the native language and thus have difficulty in making friends.[19]

3.7 Additionally, children who have little or no experience of a formal education system exhibit 'low school readiness'. All of these factors could make school an unpleasant environment for children, thus leading to absences.[20]

3.8 Recent research has been clear that more could be done centrally to combat these difficulties, with good practice occurring in isolation and little standardisation emerging across the education sector.[21]

3.9 It is also notable that additional funding provided to schools through the Common Funding Formula to meet the needs of newcomer pupils is not ring-fenced.

3.10 Consequently, there is no guarantee that schools will expend these funds to compensate for the barriers these pupils face and thus ensure that they are not deterred from the education system.

3.11 NICEM recommends that the finalised Strategy commit to the introduction of centralised guidance for schools on best practice for integrating newcomer students into the school system.

3.12 It is also recommended that funding provided through the Common Funding Formula for newcomer pupils be ring-fenced.

Traveller and Roma Pupils

4.1 According to attendance statistics, Irish Traveller students have the most pronounced schools absence rate of any ethnic group. In 2014-15, this amounted to a 73.6% attendance rate at primary school as compared to the 95.6% attendance rate of 'White' pupils.[22]

4.2 At post-primary level, this gap widened significantly, with Traveller pupils exhibiting a 61% attendance rate compared to the 93.5% of their 'White' peers.[23]

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[18] Kernaghan, D., 'Feels Like Home: Exploring the Experiences of Newcomer Pupils in Primary Schools in Northern Ireland' (2015) p.8
[19] ibid p.7
[20] ibid
[21] ibid p.8
[22] op cit n 5 p.12
[23] ibid p.21

4.3 There are a number of particular barriers faced by Traveller pupils in accessing education, which may contribute to this pronounced under-attendance.

4.4 Traveller respondents to recent research highlighted racist bullying, discrimination by teaching staff and the stereotyping of Traveller children as barriers facing them in the education system.[24]

4.5 These difficulties are both evidenced and reinforced by the fact that Traveller pupils are disproportionately likely to be identified as having Special Educational Needs (SEN).[25]

4.6 It is acknowledged that there is provision in place to ameliorate inequalities faced by Traveller pupils, through the Common Funding Formula. In theory, the additional monies accorded to schools per Traveller pupil should be put towards developing schemes, hiring staff and training employees to combat the factors that make Traveller pupils feel unwelcome.

4.7 However, the fact that this funding is not ring-fenced and that no central guidance is provided to schools on what good practice measures could be funded for Traveller children severely limits the utility of these monies.

4.8 Roma pupils also have pronounced poor attendance rates. While data is not gathered on the Roma community specifically, primary school pupils whose home language is Romanian exhibited the lowest attendance rate of any language group in 2014-15.[26]

4.9 Additionally, Belfast-based research has highlighted school attendance and pupil registration amongst the Roma community as particularly weak.[27]

4.10 There are a number of potential factors why Roma children may be more prone to absence from school. Due to the unwritten nature of the Roma language, many families are illiterate.

4.11 Not only could this add to the frustration of the pupil's learning experience, but it also makes it difficult for schools to maintain contact with parents.[28] As indicated in the consultation document, involving parents is vital to successfully addressing poor attendance.[29]

[24] Scullion, G. and Rogers, S., 'Traveller Voices for Change: Mapping the Views of Irish Travellers on Integration and their Sense of Belonging in Northern Ireland' (2014), p.22

[25] Taskforce on Traveller Education, 'Report of the Taskforce to the Department of Education' (2011), p.33

[26] op cit n 5

[27] Northern Ireland Strategic Migration Partnership, 'The Integration of Newcomer Children With Interrupted Education into Northern Ireland Schools (A Belfast Based Case Study)' (2014), pp.16-17

[28] op cit n 18 p.8

[29] op cit n 8 p.5

4.12 It is further relevant that Roma pupils who have interacted with the Hungarian or Slovakian schools systems may have a negative view of schooling, due to the prevalence of segregation and discrimination against Roma pupils in these systems.[30]

4.13 Indeed, the practice of segregating Roma pupils into special education facilities in Slovakia means that they may be undereducated and have little experience of the type of formalised education system that they enter in NI.

4.14 Additionally, as foreign languages are not part of the special education curriculum in Slovakia, pupils could struggle more in learning English.[31] Together, these factors may exacerbate pupils' discomfort and result in low attendance.

4.15 Like Traveller students, Roma pupils will attract additional funding through the Common Funding Formula so that their school may meet their needs. However, the utility of this is limited in the same way as mentioned above, both in terms of the funds not being ring-fenced and no guidance being provided as to how it could best be spent.

4.16 NICEM recommends that additional funding provided through the Common Funding Formula for Roma and Traveller students be ring-fenced.

4.17 It is also recommended that the Department develop guidance for schools on best practice measures for tackling the additional needs of Roma and Traveller pupils.

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[30] Equality, 'From Segregation to Inclusion: Roma Pupils in the United Kingdom A Pilot Research Project' (2011) pp.30-31; Kertesi, G. and Kézdi, G., 'School Segregation: School Choice and Educational Policies in 100 Hungarian Towns' (2013) p.9

[31] Equality, 'From Segregation to Inclusion: Roma Pupils in the United Kingdom A Pilot Research Project' (2011) p.31

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