

**Independent Review of Education**

**Initial observations**

**20 December 2021**

1. The NASUWT welcomes the opportunity to make initial observations on the matters being considered by the Independent Review of Education ('the Review').
2. NASUWT - The Teachers' Union, represents teachers and principals in Northern Ireland and across the United Kingdom.
3. The NASUWT recognises that the Review is at the early stages of its work and has begun by requesting brief position statements on the following issues:
  - a vision of education for Northern Ireland's education system in the 21st century;
  - the strengths and weaknesses in the current system;
  - key issues to be considered during the Review; and
  - the meaning of the term 'a single education system' and its key characteristics.
4. The NASUWT's views on these themes are summarised below. However, each addresses complex matters that will require further and more detailed investigation as the Review develops its remit and areas of specific inquiry. The Union looks forward to submitting further written

and oral evidence to the Review as its evidence-gathering, analysis and formulation of recommendations progress.

### **A vision for education in Northern Ireland**

5. An effective and equitable education system that provides all children with access to their entitlement to a broad, balanced and engaging education is one that is based on the following fundamental principles:

- i. **Education is a public good and a human right**

Education must be recognised as a public good and a human right. This conceptualisation of education is reflected in important international legal frameworks, including the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights and the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. It is also central to the United Nations Sustainable Development Goal 4, the aim of which is to ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all

The purpose of education seen through the prism of human rights is to empower and equip individuals to make the most of their talents and potential. Education's status as a public good means that it serves critical economic, social, cultural, democratic and civic purposes. An understanding of the human rights and public good purposes of education emphasises the importance of effective policy to maintain and further enhance the ability of the education system to secure these purposes in practice. To support the ability of the education system to fulfil its fundamental purposes, it is important that policy is based on a broad conceptualisation of education that reflects both its public good and human rights dimensions.

**ii. Provision of free, high quality education must be guaranteed as a right for all**

As a universal entitlement, high quality education must be available to all children regardless of where they live or the school they happen to attend. It is a core responsibility of the Executive, the Minister of Education and the Assembly to secure provision on this basis. Attempts to establish an education system in which issues of quality are addressed through the operation of a quasi-market, in which parents are conceptualised as consumers of education, fail to acknowledge the right of all children to access their common entitlement to education.

It is, instead, clear that collaboration between schools, driven by a public service ethos that eschews commercialisation and privatisation, helps to ensure that resources can be shared between providers and used as efficiently as possible while also allowing all schools to benefit from professional experience and expertise gained in other settings.

**iii. The centrality of the teacher and school leader workforce must be protected**

The NASUWT is clear that the human rights and public good dimensions of education can only be secured when teachers are given the time, resources and scope to make the fullest possible use of their professional talents, knowledge and expertise. An education system that does not give practical effect to this core guiding principle cannot expect to provide pupils with the full range of high-quality learning experiences to which they are entitled. Respect for the professionalism of teachers is a hallmark of an education system that is genuinely committed to raising standards and extending educational opportunities for all children and young people.

Relevant public agencies and bodies must therefore demonstrate their commitment to teachers in words and deeds and by conferring professional rights on them which affirm their professional status and which are guaranteed across all public education settings.

Critically, public policy constituted on this basis will reflect an understanding of teaching as a complex, multifaceted professional activity which is, simultaneously, an art, a science and a craft. The art of teaching is about being responsive and creative and about developing intuitive capabilities. The science of teaching is about using research and other forms of evidence to inform decisions about how to teach. The craft of teaching is about mastering the full range of skills and practices needed by teachers to discharge their professional responsibilities effectively. The NASUWT believes that this broader vision of teaching is central to understanding its status as a profession. Conceptualisations of teacher professionalism that fail to reflect these considerations fully cannot be regarded as a coherent and credible basis upon which to establish an effective strategy for the teacher workforce.

**iv. Equity and inclusion are key pillars for the success of the education system**

The OECD is clear that the highest performing education systems are those that combine equity with quality. They give all children opportunities for a good quality education and are committed to tackling all forms of prejudice and discrimination and to promoting equality and diversity.

Education systems founded on the principles of equity and inclusiveness are comprised of schools and other educational institutions in which learners and the workforce are included and involved. They recognise that schools and other institutions have a key

role to play, alongside and in concert with other public institutions, in fostering good relations between all groups in society, promoting social and community cohesion and resolving conflict and division.

**v. Social partnership working should be promoted and assured**

What happens in classrooms is central to educational progress and achievement and securing the intentions of education policy in practice. The OECD has made clear that learning outcomes at school are the result of what happens in classroom. Thus only reforms that are successfully implemented in classrooms can be expected to be effective. Teacher and school leader engagement in the development and implementation of educational reform is therefore crucial and school reform will not be effective unless it is supported by those who work in classrooms and schools.

Therefore, public bodies and agencies with responsibility for the education system and its development involve teachers and others with a stake in the education system. However, as the OECD confirms, effective policy development and implementation 'requires teachers to contribute as the architects of change, not just its implementers'.

Trade unions, as the legitimate representatives of the teacher and school leader workforce, must be at the heart of these arrangements. Trade unions play a critical role in securing fairly remunerated, safe, secure and equitable employment opportunities for teachers and school leaders. They provide a means by which the workforce can have a meaningful voice in the education system and through which relevant public bodies and employers can work with teachers and school leaders to identify problems and challenges as well as develop and deliver solutions.

**vi. Democratic accountability is the hallmark of a public education system**

The education system must be subject to meaningful democratic accountability if it is to reflect and respect the views and aspirations of the individuals and the wider society it serves. The education system is a core public service and respect for the status of education as a public good and a human right requires that those given authority for identifying and implementing policy should be held properly accountable for the implications and impact of their decisions.

**vii. Effective approaches must be assured with regard to school and system accountability**

As publicly funded institutions fulfilling a core public service, it is right that schools and the wider education system are held to account for the contribution they make to children and young people's progress, achievement, wellbeing and future life chances. However, it is critical that schools and the wider education system are held to account for the right things in the right ways.

It is right that schools should be accountable for how they spend public money and taxpayers have a right to know that their money is being spent appropriately. Whilst schools should be accountable for ensuring that every pupil receives a high-quality education that meets their needs, other public bodies are also responsible for ensuring that every child receives a high-quality education that meets their needs.

Accountability systems should trust teachers as professionals, support schools to provide a curriculum that is broad, balanced, meets the needs of all learners and maintains high educational standards. They should encourage and support teachers and school leaders to work co-operatively and collaboratively, be fair and equitable and be

streamlined and avoid unnecessary bureaucracy and workload. A core test of the effectiveness of the accountability system is that it is rigorous, reasonable and valid so that the public and the teaching profession can have confidence in the judgements that it makes.

**viii. Equality of opportunity depends upon equitable and efficient funding**

Without adequate levels of public investment, it is not possible for the education system to fulfil its mission to provide high quality learning experiences for the children and young people it serves. Such investment is critical to securing adequate levels of teacher supply and maintaining the recruitment and retention of a high quality teacher workforce. It ensures that children and young people can benefit from the critical contribution made by the wider school workforce, provides resources to establish and maintain fit for purpose physical environments in which learning can take place as well as the quality of instructional tools and resources available to support teaching and learning.

Mechanisms for distributing funding should be fair and transparent. They should ensure that public resources are used efficiently and effectively and that the impact on the educational outcomes of all children and young people is maximised.

**ix. Education policy and practice should be led by evidence**

As a highly skilled, complex professional activity, it is essential that policy decisions impacting on teaching are based on evidence and research. Teachers and school leaders must also be given

opportunities through professional development and training to engage with research and evidence to support their pedagogy and practice.

Public bodies with responsibility for education demonstrate their commitment to evidence-based policy and practice by investing in education-related research and in the professional development of teachers and school leaders.

**x. The importance of wider services for children must be recognised**

An education system with the needs and interests of children and young people at the heart of its concern recognises that factors beyond school have a profound impact on children's wellbeing, educational, social, cultural and personal development and their future life chances. For this reason, such a system has structures and ways of working in place to support effective working across children's sector services, including schools, recognising the distinctive but connected contribution of each service to meeting the needs of the child holistically. Wider children's services in the health, social care, youth and community sectors must be adequately resourced and staffed to fulfil their functions.

Education and wider children's services act on the basis of a recognition of the barriers to achievement and wellbeing can face and take steps to remove these barriers, including addressing the causes and consequences of child poverty.

**Matters to be considered by the Review**

6. The principles set out above reflect the tests that the NASUWT applies to the effectiveness and equity of the education system in Northern Ireland. The Union believes that the matters to be considered by the

Review can be identified through the application of these principles to current policy, practice and experience.

7. It is important to be clear at the outset that the education system in Northern Ireland has many strengths. In particular, it is able to benefit from a dedicated, skilled teacher and school leader workforce that is committed to serving the interests of the children and young people for whom it is responsible and who are committed to giving the highest priority to these needs in all their professional responsibilities. This invaluable asset must be respected and placed at the heart of the Review's investigations and in the development of its recommendations.
8. However, it is clear from the lived experience of teachers, school leaders and learners in Northern Ireland, key aspects of the education system fall short of legitimate expectations and impede its ability to reflect the principles set out above fully. These aspects of the education system that require reform or refinement should be central to the Review's work.
9. Each of these aspects is complex in nature and merits detailed individual consideration. The most important among them are identified below so to draw them to the Review's attention and ensure that sufficient time and opportunity to investigate them is built into the Review's activity planning.
10. The NASUWT would highlight the following as particularly important matters for further consideration by the Review:
  - a. **Increase the levels of investment in the education system**

It is clear from feedback received from teachers and school leaders that the education system in Northern Ireland experiences significant

resource constraints. Evidence given to the House of Commons Northern Ireland Affairs Select Committee in 2019 by the Department of Education and the Education Authority confirms this to be the case.

In his evidence to the Committee, the Permanent Secretary stated:

*‘We have had a combination of a perfect storm over about a decade: flat cash, rising costs and rising service demands. Last year, when the Northern Ireland Audit Office looked at school finances, it euphemistically made the point that schools’ finances have reached a “tipping point.” What they really meant was, ‘It cannot go on like this, because we are in something of a crisis.’ I am not understating the position we are in; it really is very, very difficult’.*

The Committee agreed with this assessment and highlighted particular concerns in relation to the funding of support for pupils with special and additional needs. The Committee pointed to a range of implications of the insufficiency of funding for schools and the children and young people they serve, including:

- shortening the school day for some pupils;
- the introduction of composite classes, in which children from different year groups are taught together;
- cutting back on books and other equipment;
- reduced access to, or cancellation of, extra-curricular activities and school visits;
- reduced maintenance budgets, which in some cases have resulted in classrooms being closed for health and safety reasons; and
- schools seeking or receiving donations from parents, ranging from donations for extracurricular activities that were previously free, such as sports days, to ‘providing stationery and even toilet roll’.

It is evident that the funding crisis has deepened further during the Covid-19 pandemic. It is essential that the Review takes the opportunity to work with the NASUWT and other stakeholders to identify the extent of the resource shortfalls in the education system and the levels of investment required to address the ongoing problems set out above. It should develop recommendations on funding that aims to ensure that every child and young person receives their entitlement to a full, engaging, broad and balanced educational experience.

**b. Provide high quality support for the teacher and school leader workforce**

Teachers and school leaders report that their workload and the pressures they experience have reached unsustainable levels. Prior to the pandemic, workload and the challenges teachers face in securing a reasonable work/life balance were reported consistently as among the principal concerns they had about the quality of their working lives.

These pressures have been exacerbated to a highly significant degree by the extraordinary circumstances in which the education system has been operating during the pandemic. They have compounded the problems teachers experienced in this respect prior to the pandemic.

This is not only an unacceptable state of affairs for the education workforce, it also results in teachers and school leaders not being as well placed as possible to meet the needs of children and young people. In many respects, the principal drivers of the excessive workload experienced by teachers and school leaders involve tasks and activities that distract them from their core responsibilities for teaching and leading teaching and learning and thereby create a barrier to raising standards of progress and achievement in the classroom. Teachers and school leaders report that too many tasks

and responsibilities allocated to them do not make effective use of their skills, talents and expertise as qualified teachers or involve imposed professional practices in areas such as marking, planning and assessment that are not only burdensome but also are not optimal educationally.

Teachers and school leaders often report that their ability to access and benefit from meaningful professional development is constrained by a lack of opportunity to access such opportunities or their limited availability. Addressing these concerns and ensuring that professional development and training are central to plans for the future of the education system represent critical considerations for the Review.

**c. Invest in and secure effective long term workforce planning**

Workforce planning is central to the future viability and success of the education system in Northern Ireland. Without adequate teacher supply, the education system will be unable to fulfil its mission and ensure the continued provision of high quality learning experiences for children and young people.

Northern Ireland's education system is characterised by significant long term demographic pressures that will require the development of an effective strategy for securing teacher and school leader supply. Such a strategy will need to address issues including the extent to which overall pay levels and pay and career progression opportunities will be sufficient to recruit, retain and motivate a graduate teacher workforce that will continue to be in demand in other occupational sectors. It will need to consider whether the organisation and management cultures in all schools will remain attractive to graduates who increasingly expect a working environment in which they have a meaningful say in decisions that affect them and where they can exercise an appropriate degree of professional autonomy and discretion.

**d. Addressing inequity and disadvantage and promote social cohesion**

Evidence from the OECD and other research sources confirms that the Northern Ireland education system is one in which poverty and disadvantage have a relatively significant impact on educational outcomes and experiences in comparison to other jurisdictions. It will be important for the Review to engage with stakeholders to examine the evidence on inequities and disadvantage in the education system, its causes and ways in which drivers can be addressed. Particular attention will need to be paid to the experiences of learners with characteristics that are protected under equalities legislation, those living in socioeconomically disadvantaged households, those with additional and special educational needs or who are looked after by statutory authorities.

One distinguishing feature of the Northern Ireland education system in this respect is the continuing use of academic selection. The Review will be aware that the OECD has been clear that systems based on academic selection not only increase risks of educational inequity but also are not among those education systems regarded as the highest performing or fastest improving. The NASUWT is clear that the current operation and impact of academic selection will need to be subject to robust and critical scrutiny by the Review in its evaluation of the extent to which current arrangements support or detract from genuine equality of educational opportunity.

The distinctive circumstances of Northern Ireland as a post-conflict society will be woven through the Review's consideration of these and other matters within its purview. Not only do these circumstances relate directly to poverty and inequality, they also invite reflection on how the education system can contribute to securing community cohesion. The

NASUWT believes that as part of its inquiries in this area, the Review will wish to consider the plans in place for the development of shared education.

The Union continues to endorse the view set out by the Ministerial Advisory Group on Shared and Integrated Education in 2013 that integrated education represents a distinct and important sector within the education system. It is clear that integrated schools have had an important and legitimate role to play in the education system in Northern Ireland and will continue to do so for the foreseeable future. The Union notes ongoing perceived concern that the Department of Education has failed to discharge its statutory responsibility to encourage and facilitate integrated education. Given the nature of this requirement, it is important that the Review and other relevant stakeholders should seek to examine and, if necessary, address these concerns.

**e. Ensure that accountability is fit for purpose and supports high quality teaching, learning and leadership of schools**

In light of the principles for an effective and equitable education system set out above, the NASUWT is clear that the Review should consider arrangements for accountability in the Northern Ireland education system. Particular focus should centre on the role and remit of the Education and Training Inspectorate (ETI) and the extent to which it evaluates fairly and consistently all of the work that the schools it inspects undertake. The Review should also recognise that given the importance of the support given to, and working environment of, teachers and school leaders, in securing high standards and progress and achievement, it is important that evaluation of these factors are incorporated into the accountability regime.

More broadly, while one of the current strengths of the education system currently is the absence of crude performance tables based on narrow indicators of pupil outcomes, it is clear that judgements about quality are made by the Department, the Education Authority, employers and others on the basis of particular and narrowly ranged outcomes of attainment and progress. Given that it is right that these bodies are held to account for the contribution they make to the education from which children and young people benefit, it will be important for the Review to explore the basis on which these bodies evaluate the quality of provision and how they, in turn, can most effectively be scrutinised by the parents, learners, the workforce and the wider public for their work and its impacts.

**f. Secure systemic cohesion across key education functions**

The education system is characterised by a wide range of public organisations with different remits and responsibilities for aspects of all, or part, of the education system. For example, there are a wide range of employing bodies for teachers in Northern Ireland, while school improvement and support functions are distributed between the Department, the Education Authority, ETI and the Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment. These bodies have complementary or overlapping functions and have a range of different statuses, constitutions and powers.

The complexity of the education system is unhelpful and undermines the development and implementation of policy and impedes effective accountability. The Review should take the opportunity to examine systems and structures within the education system to consider possible reforms to bring greater consistency and clarity to the strategic oversight of the education system.

Further, the experience of NASUWT members confirms that arrangements for multi-agency working in Northern Ireland do not ensure that services for children and young people can collaborate effectively and consistently across the system. Wider children's services are often found by staff in schools to be under resourced and, as a result, pupils and the workforce do always get the timely additional help and support they require. Particular issues in this respect continue to be identified in respect of children and young people's mental health. Multi-agency working and the funding of the wider children's services sector should be central to the Review's deliberations.

### **Establish a single education system that works in the interests of all pupils**

11. It is almost 20 years since a review of public administration was commissioned by the Executive in 2002. A single Education and Skills Authority (ESA) was proposed by then Secretary of State Peter Hain, with a view to setting it up by April 2008. This never happened, instead five education and library boards were merged to form a single Education Authority. While some efficiencies have been realised the NASUWT regret that this opportunity was missed.
12. NASUWT policy is to support the simplification of the delivery of the education service by replacing existing structures with a single employing authority for all teachers and education support staff. The union believes that this body should be the employer for teachers in all grant aided schools.
13. The union believes that the establishment of an overarching employing body as envisioned by ESA would improve industrial relations, reduce wasteful duplication, promote operational efficiency and ensure the release of funding to support the improvement of 'front-line' service delivery, a more developed non-teaching school workforce and a greater focus on enabling teachers to focus on teaching and learning.

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