



# **Submission to the Expert Panel on Proposed Actions to Address Links Between Persistent Educational Underachievement and Socio- Economic Background**

Dermot Mullan, November 2020

## 1. Introduction

The Governing Bodies Association (GBA) is the sectoral body representing the 50 voluntary grammar schools who educate 49,240 (34%)<sup>1</sup> of the post-primary pupils in Northern Ireland. The GBA provides policy information, advice and support for members as well as representing their views with other educational stakeholders, policy makers, politicians and the media.

The GBA welcomes and is supportive of the Minister's initiative to tackle educational underachievement and embraces the opportunity to engage with the Expert Panel. In preparing this submission the GBA surveyed and discussed the issue of educational underachievement with chosen school Principals, seeking their views and experiences in tackling underachievement in their schools.

Underachievement is a wider issue than education alone and its adverse impacts are felt by individuals, families, and communities; personally, socially, and economically. Therefore, any solutions must engage with the agencies beyond the education sector such as health, housing, economic generation, social cohesion and Together Building a United Community (T:BUC).

There have been myriad reports and sources of information which recognise that persistent educational underachievement is due to its inextricable links with poverty in society. The causes and effects of educational underachievement have been extensively documented and are frequently categorised as outside school and inside school factors.

While there is a role for schools to shape the outside school factors, for the purpose of this submission, the GBA will mostly concentrate on those which schools can deal directly with, and thus influence in the quest to eradicate persistent educational underachievement. In keeping with the Expert Panel's terms of reference, this GBA submission focuses on the deliverable actions by the education system, and those which may be implemented through in-school factors and in-class.

Addressing the lack of aspiration among underachievers and breaking the cycle of perennial underachievement requires a clear, concise and cost-effective action plan which will be regularly reviewed, monitored and adjusted to meet changing circumstances and contexts. The GBA looks forward to receiving the findings of the Expert Panel and is supportive of an Action Plan for change that will ensure all children and young people, regardless of background are given the best start in life by the time they reach the school leaving age of 16.

### 1.1. Educational underachievement in Northern Ireland

Schools and educators in Northern Ireland have much to be proud of and our academic outcomes consistently out-perform those of other jurisdictions. The GBA would refer the Expert Panel to the recent work of the Association of School and College Leaders (ASCL) who are campaigning to address

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<sup>1</sup> [NISRA: Annual enrolments at schools and in funded pre-school education in Northern Ireland 2019-20](#)

‘The Forgotten Third’<sup>2</sup>; those pupils who do not achieve a Grade 4(C) in GCSE English and Mathematics at the end of 12 years of schooling. Those who fall below this bar pay a high price in terms of reduced prospects in progression to further and higher education and to careers and employment.

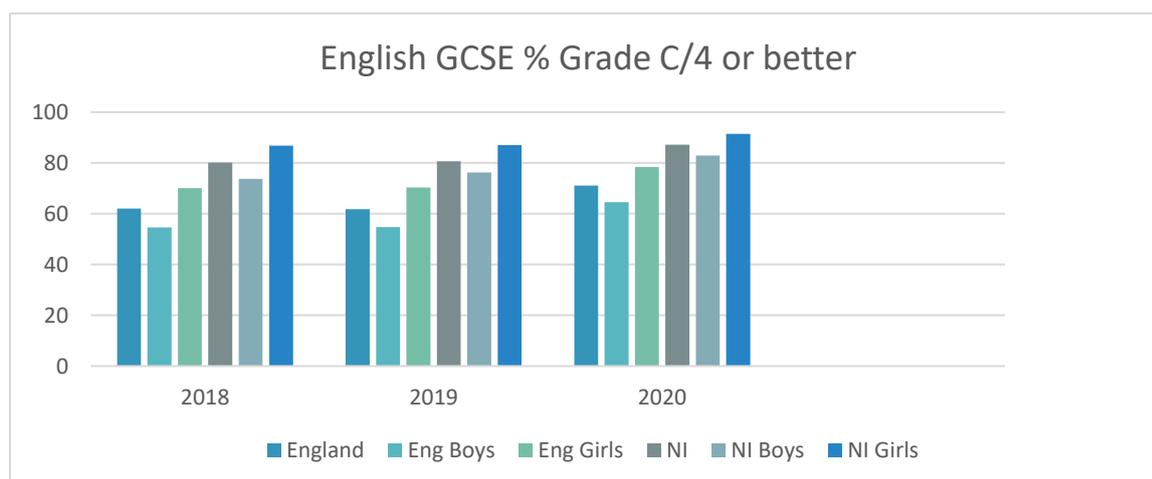
These young people are a product of a system that uses comparable outcomes whereby the spread of GCSE grades is pegged to what cohorts of similar ability achieved in the past. Thus, our examination system guarantees that underachievement is thus a self-fulfilling prophecy.

By this benchmark, the picture in Northern Ireland is more positive. There is still underachievement by this measure, but it significantly less than in England. GCSE exam results for the last three years shows this.

**Table 1: Percentage of pupils achieving Grade C/Grade 4 or better in English and Mathematics**

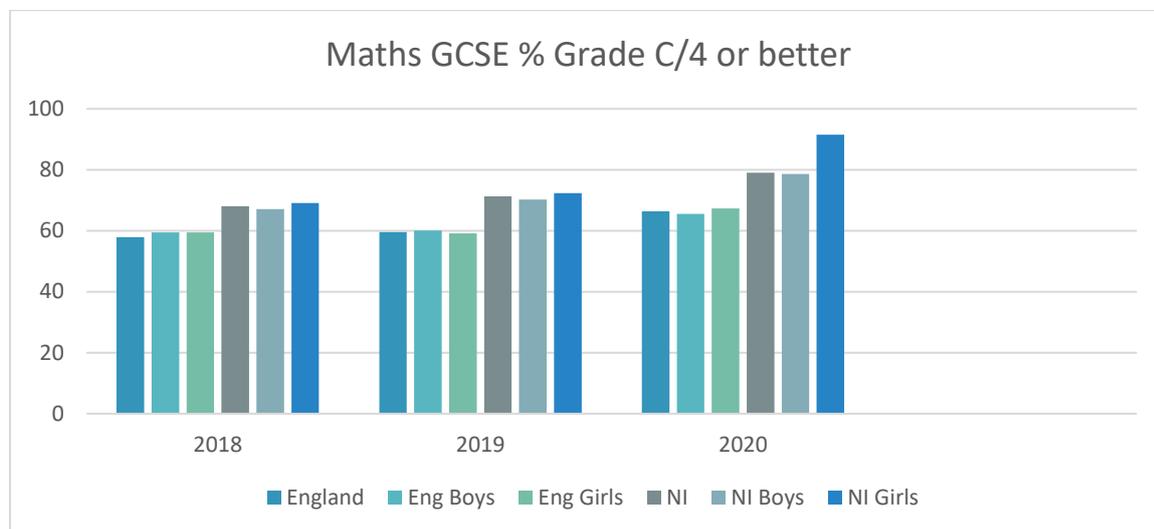
		English	Boys	Girls		Maths	Boys	Girls
<b>England</b>	2020	71.1	64.5	78.4		66.4	65.5	67.3
	2019	61.8	54.8	70.3		59.6	60.1	59.2
	2018	62	54.6	70.1		59.7	60.0	59.5
<b>NI</b>	2020	87.2	82.9	91.5		79.1	78.6	79.6
	2019	80.7	74.3	87.1		71.3	70.3	72.3
	2018	80.2	73.7	86.8		68.1	67.1	69.1

**Figure 1: Comparison figures for GCSE English**



<sup>2</sup> [The Forgotten Third. Commission of Inquiry, ASCL Interim Report March 2019.](#)

**Figure 2: Comparison figures for GCSE Mathematics**



It is accepted that the UK results for 2020 are inflated due to the reliance on Centre Assessed Grades. The comparison of NI figures for 2019 with the figures for England for 2020 show NI almost 9.6% above England for English and 4.9% for Mathematics. We are doing better than we sometimes give ourselves credit for and our boys are doing better than their English counterparts in achieving basic literacy and numeracy qualifications as measured by a GCSE pass grade.

This is borne out by the December 2016 PISA report which found that: ‘There is no statistically significant gender difference in Northern Ireland for either the PISA science or mathematics tests. The gender gap in 15-year-olds’ reading skills is smaller in Northern Ireland than in most other countries and is also smaller than in previous PISA cycles.’<sup>3</sup>

There is never room for complacency and every young person must be guided and assisted to reach their fullest potential. The GBA and its members are not denying that there needs to be action to address persistent underachievement. The problem exists as demonstrated by tables 2 and 3, and figure 3 overleaf<sup>4</sup>.

<sup>3</sup> [Achievement of 15-Year-Olds in Northern Ireland: PISA 2015 National Report, December 2016](#)  
[John Jerrim and Nikki Shure. UCL Institute](#)

<sup>4</sup> [School performance data from Department of Education Northern Ireland](#)

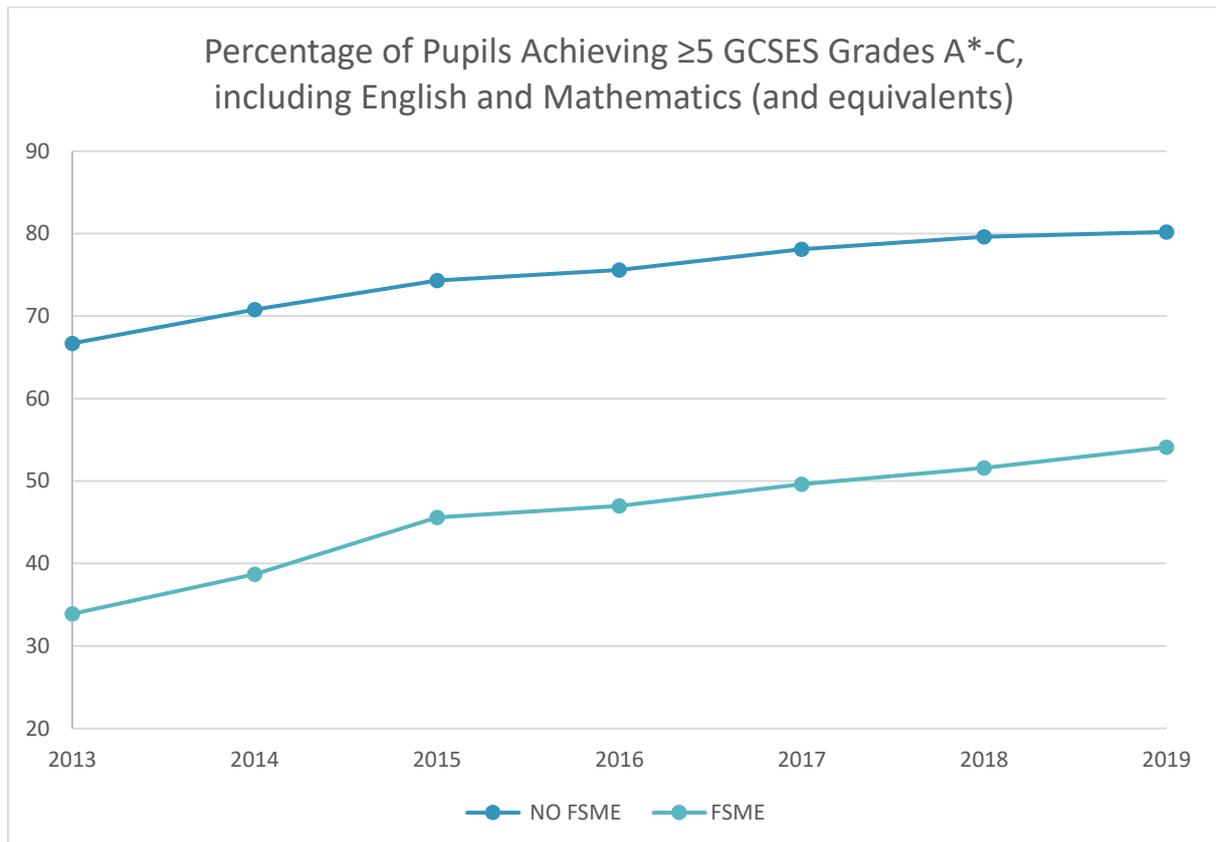
**Table 2: Percentage of NI Students Achieving at least 5 GCSEs grade A\*-C Including English and Mathematics (and equivalents) – Broken down by gender, No FSME \* Gender, FSME \* Gender**

	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019
Male	56.3	55.2	56.4	60.9	63.2	64.2	66.8	67.1	68.5
Female	63.9	65.1	65.5	69.3	70.9	71.6	73.8	76.5	77.1
Total	60.1	60.1	60.9	65.2	67.0	67.9	70.3	71.8	72.8
Gender Gap All	7.6	9.9	9.1	8.4	7.7	7.4	7.0	9.4	8.6
No FSME Male	-	-	62.0	66.7	70.4	72.0	74.6	75.2	75.8
No FSME Female	-	-	71.5	74.9	78.3	79.3	81.6	84.0	84.6
No FSME total	-	-	66.7	70.8	74.3	75.6	78.1	79.6	80.2
Gender Gap No FSME			9.5	8.2	7.9	7.3	7.0	8.8	8.8
FSME Male	-	-	29.2	33.7	41.6	43.0	45.2	45.5	49.0
FSME Female	-	-	38.4	43.6	49.5	51.0	53.7	57.3	58.9
FSME total	-	-	33.9	38.7	45.6	47.0	49.6	51.6	54.1
Gender Gap FSME	-	-	9.2	9.9	7.9	8	8.5	11.8	9.9

**Table 3: Percentage of NI Students Achieving at least 5 GCSEs grade A\*-C Including English and Mathematics (and equivalents)**

	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019
NO FSME - ALL	66.7	70.8	74.3	75.6	78.1	79.6	80.2
FSME - ALL	33.9	38.7	45.6	47.0	49.6	51.6	54.1
GAP	32.8	32.1	28.7	28.6	28.5	28	26.1

**Figure 3: Achievement gap between Non-FSME pupils and FSME pupils**



The gap in achievement by gender and FSME is difficult to explain after each pupil has received 12 years of compulsory education. This brings into question the appropriateness of GCSEs as a reliable and worthwhile measure and illustrates how the Northern Ireland curriculum and exam system militates against success for so many of our young people.

The fundamental question must be posed to the Minister and the Department of Education - “Do a third of candidates have to fail their GCSEs so that two-thirds can pass?”. The GBA contends that this question must be answered and the views of CCEA must be sought and a review of the Northern Ireland Curriculum and our examinations structure commences immediately.

Parents are the first and most enduring educators of their children. Parental engagement with young people’s education is crucial to eradicating underachievement and the recent extension of funding for nurturing units is to be welcomed as is the new “Nurture Approach in Education Programme” which will be made available to all primary, special, post-primary schools and Education Otherwise than at School (EOTAS) settings from this year onwards. This will allow those schools without a nurture group facility to avail of training and support in nurture approaches for use in their schools and with their parents.

Marginalisation and disenchantment with education must be addressed by schools engaging more fully with the parent body and local community to raise their profile and standing while encouraging life-long learning and the role of education as a social and economic escalator.

The GBA recommends that from 2021 onwards, DE publish annual statistics to record the underachievement gap in Northern Ireland following the example of the Education in England: Annual Report 2020 by the Education Policy Institute which on 24 August 2020 stated:

*'Disadvantaged students are 18.1 months behind their peers by the time they take their GCSEs. The gap rises to 22.7 months for children living in the most persistent poverty and 29 months for Looked after Children. The disadvantage gap has stopped closing over the past five years and there are several indications that it is widening'.<sup>5</sup>*

While the Chief Inspector's Report, 2016-18<sup>6</sup>, from the Education and Training Inspectorate, provides statistical detail on underachievement and the gender gap, it is a biennial report and should be produced annually, as it is based on the findings from inspections, surveys, district work across a range of sectors including pre-schools; primary, post-primary and special schools; education other than at school centres; youth provision; further education, training and initial teacher education, as well as work commissioned by other government departments.

Being aware of the magnitude of persistent educational underachievement in Northern Ireland is a required base position and thus accurate annual reports, measuring the attainment gap are required to plot the correct way forward and to determine if remedial actions are effective and working. Northern Ireland needs to know whether the underachievement gap is growing or shrinking and how any Action Plan is achieving its goals.

## 1.2. Definition of underachievement v low attainment.

Underachievement is a widely used term in education policy and practice, but it needs to be treated cautiously to avoid misunderstandings and misinformation.

The GBA urges that any final report from the Expert Panel will take care with its definition of persistent educational underachievement to distinguish between low attainment and educational underachievement. We should not be solely concerned with academic outcomes at GCSE and A Level and equivalents. It is a prerequisite to have constructed an accepted, workable definition of underachievement. Certain questions should be asked:

- Are raw results from high-stakes examinations [GCSE and A Level] to be the sole index of achievement?
- Can a reliable value-added measure help to motivate young people, raise aspirations and erode the link between socio-economic background and educational achievement?

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<sup>5</sup> [Education in England: Annual Report 2020 Education Policy Institute](#)

<sup>6</sup> [Education and Training inspectorate: Chief Inspector's Report, 2016-18](#)

- To what extent is the use of data from raw results as the sole measure of school proficiency distorting our schools and disabling efforts to break the link between low attainment and socio-economic background?

A briefing note to the Northern Ireland Assembly in 2016 stated, *'there are some concerns around current measures of underachievement at post-primary, the Department for Education (the Department) School Leavers Survey uses a number of measures to assess outcomes, particularly the key threshold measure of students achieving at least five GCSEs at grades A\*-C, including English and mathematics (including equivalent qualifications). This approach does not take account of the value the education system has added to student outcomes.'*

The GBA concurs with this view and endorses the importance of a holistic education that equips all young people to be life-long learners and to positively contribute to their families, community and wider society. Our schools generally define educational underachievement as children and young people not reaching their potential based on their ability, evidenced by analytical data and the positive school and societal influence and guidance that shape young people.

### 1.3. Underachievement and boys.

Society has different expectations of boys and girls and there is gender inequality. Measuring boys against girls is not always a helpful comparison. While standards for boys and girls have risen over recent years, and despite a suite of DE policy and papers addressing Literacy, Numeracy, ICT and pastoral support which highlighted boys as a specific target, it is evident that a core number of boys continue to under-perform academically and therefore schools need, and desire, more effective ways of engaging them with their education and learning.

'Taking Boys Seriously'<sup>7</sup> was a five-year longitudinal study (2006-2011) carried out by The Centre for Young Men's Studies at the University of Ulster and funded by the Department of Education and the Department of Justice. It reported that 70% of learning takes place outside school and that from the age of 5 girls out-perform boys at nearly every level. Hence the importance of parental engagement and the provision of quality early years education. Although published in 2012 the report still bears testimony today to the general underperformance of boys and among its recommendations it urged that:

- barriers to learning should be addressed as early as possible (e.g. primary school) and stronger links between primary and post-primary schools, parents and communities should be developed to support transferring pupils and address issues;
- teacher training should support teachers to understand, recognize and respond to the changing needs of adolescent boys and young men;
- further research into gender specific teaching should be carried out;
- boys should explore, reflect and develop a critical understanding of masculinity, and within this should be encouraged to challenge dominant and stereotypical notions of masculinity that can impact negatively upon themselves and others.

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<sup>7</sup> [Taking Boys Seriously – A longitudinal study of adult male school-life experiences in Northern Ireland: K Harland and S McCready](#)

- Each school should offer boys support during key transitional stages such as primary to post-primary school, Key Stage 3, GCSE selection, school to college/university/work, and careers advice;
- school buildings and teaching plans should be designed with flexibility, movement and stimulation in mind. Ideally, young people should be involved in the design of the 'shared space' that teachers and pupils share in the day to day running of the school;
- positive behaviour policy procedures should be clear, immediate and set within a restorative context that is nurturing and relational;
- the importance of teacher-pupil relationships should be at the heart of schools' ethos and approach to learning.

Many of the report's recommendations still chime with those posited by recent research and undoubtedly the extensive corpus of educational literature on persistent underachievement has been exhaustively excavated. Teachers are encouraged to use their professional judgement to assess if a pupil is underachieving and not achieving their potential. This can include classroom observation and analysis of formative assessment or other data as appropriate. Boys learn differently from girls and this must be reflected in the pedagogical strategies employed in classroom and schools by trained staff.

The evidence suggests that a teacher's low expectations for a child can create a climate that encourages underachievement. Yet, care must be exercised not to provide boys with a self-fulfilling prophecy, summed up by the apologetic or wistful exclamation '*well, he's a boy*'. As reported to the GBA by school Principals, parents of underachieving boys too readily accept that he will underachieve and that this is to be expected as part of normal development during childhood and adolescence. Schools which set high standards and have high expectations of pupils and themselves tend to perform better and pupils' self-esteem helps promote achievement.

Although much of what determines boys' underachievement is outside the control of the educational system, there are still many things that schools do to either exacerbate gender stereotypes or mitigate their effects. While the literature argues whether there are different "learning styles" for boys and girls, it does emphasize that targeted strategies to make content relevant and engaging for boys while protecting them from stereotype threat can improve their academic achievement<sup>8</sup>. Some strategies include pair and group-talk related to reading and writing; mentoring from older students or adult male role models; integration of the arts—music, dance, theatre, media—as an outlet for healthy masculine identity-building; extracurricular and co-curricular activities that focus generally on character-building and gender equality; conveyance of egalitarian expectations about achievement to all children; and integration of reading across the curriculum rather than "teaching reading" in isolation. In general, what is good for boys is also good for girls, although the opposite may not be true.

Boys from low-income households experience underachievement differently from girls in several ways, primarily through under participation in school which can lead to underperformance. There is pressure on boys to enter the labor market and find work at an early age; socialization configurations that urge

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<sup>8</sup> [Measurement and Research Support to Education Strategy Goal 1 - Boys' Underachievement in Education: A review of the literature with a focus on reading in the early years. \(August 2016\)](#)

young males to resist the “discipline of learning”; and an immediate view of the future that ignores academic improvement as an advantageous and worthwhile, long-term life option.

One area for action that has been neglected is to redress the absence of men in schools and the importance of fathers’ active involvement in their children’s education. There is a call for more men in primary education whether male teachers, classroom assistants or fathers. The role model debate (‘boys need men’), and strong advocates such as the Fatherhood Institute<sup>9</sup>, who have driven several initiatives, has not been prominent in the persistent underachievement debate in Northern Ireland.

#### 1.4. Outside school factors leading to underachievement

*The OECD’s report, A Broken Social Elevator? How to Promote Social Mobility (2018)*<sup>10</sup> highlighted the increasing lack of social mobility in our societies. For instance, in OECD countries, it would take between four and five generations (or up to 150 years), for a child born into a low-income family to reach the average level of income. In this respect, socio-economic status still heavily influences income and employment prospects, job quality, health outcomes, education and other opportunities.

Absence of role models and mentors from social environments among young people and their families in disadvantaged areas is often thought to explain the poor education levels and jobs of disadvantaged pupils.

We acquire the basic values and attitudes required for educational achievement through primary socialization in the family. However, many working-class households struggle to socialize their children adequately, as a result they develop culturally deprived in the critical aspects of intellectual development, attitudes and language.

We await the publication of the Northern Ireland’s Audit Office’s report, ‘Closing the Gap – social deprivation and links to educational attainment’, which will examine whether DE ensures that funding provided to improve the educational attainment of children from socially deprived backgrounds is being monitored and evaluated effectively to achieve the required outcomes across early years, primary and post primary education. The NIAO study will focus on Sure Start and Targeting Social Need (TSN) funding, which account for over 80 per cent of the amount funded by DE aimed at addressing the performance gap.

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<sup>9</sup> [How can we attract more men into London’s Early Years workforce? Jeremy Davies Fatherhood Institute, 2017](#)

<sup>10</sup> [A broken social elevator? How to promote social mobility. OECD, 2018](#)

## 2. Recommendations and proposed actions to tackle persistent educational underachievement

Recommendations are categorised under three broad areas:

- Removing system wide barriers.
- Furthering school leadership and management.
- Enhancing learning and teaching practices.

### 2.1. Removing system-wide barriers

- The relevance and appropriateness of the NI curriculum** and consideration of how the current qualifications structure perpetuates underachievement needs to be considered. The Northern Ireland Curriculum is overdue a review; this will help to inform and design a curriculum fit for the 21st century, that engages with young learners effectively. There are undoubtedly curriculum barriers which lead to persistent educational underachievement and foster socio-economic distinctions. The usefulness of GCSEs is under scrutiny and the 'gold standard' of A levels has perhaps been tarnished. Vocational courses are regrettably viewed by some as 'Cinderella' qualifications and do not have parity with A Levels. They should.

Beginning with widespread consultation and collaboration, a more relevant and appropriate skills-based curriculum and set of qualifications should be accessible to young people so that they are motivated and engaged in their life-long learning journey. Broad and diverse curricula are crucial for those young people underachieving or at risk of being disconnected or excluded from school.

There is a poor understanding, for example, about what is being tested in a GCSE English Language examination. ASCL argues that there is an argument for replacing GCSE English Language with a National Certificate which values the achievements in speaking, listening, reading and writing of all 16-year-olds, at the conclusion of their 12 years of compulsory schooling.<sup>11</sup> This proposal deserves support and further research.

Curriculum design must also pay attention to the influence of gender stereotypes at each key stage and be conscious of the interests of boys. When planning, teachers must take cognizance and positive action to ensure that every child acquires and projects a positive and confident self-identity and is enabled to understand and reduce bias and prejudice.

- It will be essential to have an emphasis on Early Years learning**, particularly its quality and scope. The Expert Panel should call for a separate enquiry and review of Early Years provision in Northern Ireland and the effectiveness of early intervention strategies. Early years factors (from birth) such as emotional and cognitive development (e.g. pre-literacy skills) are a prerequisite to the eradication of underachievement. What is in place before formal education to encourage positive parental attitudes and provide information for at risk groups?

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<sup>11</sup> [The Forgotten Third. Commission of Inquiry, ASCL Interim Report March 2019.](#)

Goodman and Gregg<sup>12</sup> state that educational arrears emerge early in children's lives, even before entry into school, and amplify throughout childhood. At three years of age there is a significant gap in cognitive test scores between children in the poorest 20 percent of the population compared with those from better-off backgrounds. This gap widens as children enter and move through the schooling system, especially during primary school years.

- iii. **Improve Initial Teacher Training** with an emphasis on identifying and addressing underachievement. Higher Education Institutions would be required to have tackling underachievement as a mandatory, substantive element of the BEd and PGCE curricula.
- iv. The Expert panel should **consider the introduction of a Pupil Premium** following research and best practice taken from other jurisdictions who distribute the Premium through school funding. In England, it involves the provision of funding for each pupil who has had free school meal entitlement (FSME) at any time within the past six years and for looked-after children. In Northern Ireland not enough funding is targeted to pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds by means of the Common Formula Funding scheme. A pupil premium for all pupils with FSME and an additional premium for Traveller, Roma and looked-after pupils would better target funding for the most disadvantaged and those prone to educational underachievement. A Northern Ireland Assembly Briefing Note<sup>13</sup> in 2013 from the Research and Information Service outlined the need to carefully target the use of such a premium for the benefit of designated children to raise attainment.
- v. **Revision of Local Management of Schools (LMS) formula** to address underachievement – this brings accountability issues. More funding is required for centres where underachievement is systemic but not to the detriment of funding to other schools.
- vi. **Employing authorities to have an annual strategy to address underachievement** in their corporate plans which is monitored and reported upon in annual reports.
- vii. Better joined up **collaboration by agencies** with a mission to improve the lot of young people e.g. Youth Service, Health, Social Services, Careers Service, Community and Voluntary organisations.
- viii. Increase the quality and scope of **parenting classes** and nurture centres while delivering support for families from Health and Social Services, NI.
- ix. Continue and **widen the Extended Schools programme** which provides parents and children with an opportunity to engage with schools and lower underachievement. Regularise the expansion of **Summer Schools** for pupils with FSME to encourage aspirations and improve self-confidence.

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<sup>12</sup> [Poorer Children's Educational Attainment: how important are attitudes and behaviour? Goodman A & Gregg P. Joseph Rowntree Foundation, York, 2010.](#)

<sup>13</sup> [Pupil Premium by Caroline Perry, Northern Ireland Assembly Briefing Paper, January 2013.](#)

- x. Harness and **support the voluntary sector** and community organisations and encourage the work of groups such as Princes' Trust, Business in the Community, The Goliath Trust, West Belfast Partnership Board, Eastside Learning, Equipping for Life and Charter NI.

## 2.2. Furthering school leadership and management

- xi. **Improving the quality of school leadership** in order to eradicate persistent educational underachievement is paramount, as described in Michael Barber's report (McKinsey Report): 2010 Capturing the Leadership Premium<sup>14</sup>, "... the overall performance of a school almost never exceeds the quality of its leadership and management. For every 100 schools that have good leadership and management, 93 will have good standards of student achievement. For every 100 schools that do not have good leadership and management, only one will have good standards of achievement."  
Perhaps it is time for Northern Ireland to have a dedicated College for School Leadership tasked with improving the quality and effectiveness of school leadership.
- xii. **Revisit the current PRSD scheme and CPD provision** to focus on quality teaching and good leadership focused on how, when and where educational underachievement was successfully transformed. The redundant PRSD scheme and Teachers Professional Learning (TPL) provision to highlight on quality teaching and good leadership in the classroom and school could be revisited. The implementation of the five key areas of DE's Learning Leaders strategy which was launched in March 2016 could also be accelerated.
- xiii. The increased responsibilities and accountability of school leadership are creating the need for distribution of leadership, both within schools and across schools. Increased **school collaboration to share best practice** and learn from each other should be a key deliverable action. This will require the funding of the Area Learning Communities (ALC) to work with each other and share best practice on addressing persistent educational underachievement by setting communal targets, as well as targets for individual schools. The governance and role of the ALCs should be underpinned by a drive for high standards, the sharing of best practice and cooperation between institutions to provide strategies towards eliminating educational underachievement.
- xiv. Mandatory regular **reports to Board of Governors (BoG)**, by the school leadership, obliging each school to appoint a **dedicated Governor** with responsibility for underachievement, with a specific monitoring remit and accountability. The BoG's Strategy to Address Underachievement, should be a required section of the School Development Plan (SDP).

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<sup>14</sup> [Capturing the leadership premium – How the world's top school systems are building leadership capacity for the future. McKinsey & Company, 2010.](#)

- xv. **Absenteeism**- improve and resource the function and role of Education Welfare Officers with a renewed public relations campaign on benefits of school attendance and parental responsibility for ensuring high attendance levels.
- xvi. **Exclusions from school should be confined to a last resort.** The current policy needs revision and DE to provide more support for EOTAS along with the introduction of effective programmes to engage and incentivise young people Not in Education, Employment or Training (NEETS).
- xvii. Introduce and fund a **motivational speakers’ scheme** primarily aimed at underachieving centres in Northern Ireland e.g. ‘Speakers for Schools’, ‘Education and Employers’. This would assist in improving aspiration and boost the motivation to value education.
- xviii. Comprehensive gathering and **analytical use of data** by schools and the educational community is essential so that each individual pupil in class is known and that they have a bespoke, individual passport to success which is known by teachers and parents. Early identification and support for ‘at risk’ pupils so that remedial interventions are commenced at the earliest possible moment so that no child falls irreparably behind. Literacy and numeracy support should be de rigueur for all pupils who do not meet required standards throughout their compulsory school age.
- xix. The **‘Count, Read: Succeed’ strategy is over a decade old and should be revisited and updated for the 2020s.**
- xx. **Improve transition points**, especially from primary to post-primary by compulsory sharing of data and greater collaboration between phases i.e. nursery to primary and primary to secondary. Identification of educational underachievement between phases would allow practitioners to arrange continuous, bespoke assistance for individual students.

### 2.3. Enhancing learning and teaching practices

- xxi. Interventions to eliminate educational underachievement must be about **effective teaching** whatever the learning scenarios. While we have listed many of the variables and strategies to tackle under-attainment rather than chasing costly interventions, it is imperative that teachers focus on teaching everyone better. The reason why some students underachieve is likely to be a product of some discrepancy with the fundamental teaching and learning process; it is not always some identifiable external characteristic that relates to them and their socio-economic standing.  
Teaching everyone better means that the teacher must know each of their pupils and their place on the learning spectrum. It involves among other factors:
  - how well the knowledge requirements of curriculum are known and understood,
  - how classroom behaviour management is achieved,

- how a lesson is pitched,
  - the openness of questioning,
  - the clarity of explanations,
  - the use of concrete and abstract examples and resources to elucidate learning,
  - the opportunities for students to practice what they have learned and internalized,
  - employing instructional supports or ‘scaffolding’ to guide students’ thinking’,
  - how timely corrective responses are to formative assessments,
  - the quality of feedback to students,
  - how peer and self-assessment are utilized to assist in independent learning,
  - how the teacher checks for understanding.
- xxii. **Increased pedagogical knowledge and understanding of teaching boys** would be helpful. The Investigating Links in Achievement and Deprivation report<sup>15</sup> also suggests that certain teacher attitudes and dispositions lead to more positive pupil outcomes, for example, genuine concern and commitment, kindness, patience and a willingness to help.
- xxiii. **Improved CEIAG** for underachieving pupils to encourage and motivate them to become life-long learners.
- xxiv. Effective classroom interventions for pupils with **Special Educational Needs (SEN)** are required to raise achievement. A recent rapid evidence assessment on SEN support by the Department for Education<sup>16</sup> points out that “...there is quality research evidence about effective interventions in the areas of cognition and learning, social, emotional and mental health, and communication and interaction. However, the evidence about high quality teaching and adaptations that can support those with special needs is significantly less extensive”. Training for teaching professionals, including classroom assistants, should be in place to help increase understanding of the principals underpinning their approaches.
- xxv. A **strong pastoral care** structure is crucial to alleviating underachievement allied to consistently high expectations of pupils. Wellbeing aspects in Personal Development and Mutual understanding (PDMU) programmes encouraging resilience, self-confidence and good mental health could be further advanced. Every teacher also provides pastoral support to children and young people, particularly those who are disadvantaged and who are in jeopardy of not achieving their potential.

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<sup>15</sup> [Investigating Links in Achievement and Deprivation – Queen’s University Belfast, 2017](#)

<sup>16</sup> [SEN Support: a rapid evidence assessment – Research report. Department for Education, 2017](#)

### 3. Conclusions

Whatever actions the Expert Panel recommend to the Minister and whatever policy, strategies and programmes are ultimately implemented, they must be sustainable and long-term interventions which are carefully monitored, properly resourced, evaluated and reviewed. This issue will not be addressed by short-term, unsustainable interventions.

In the GBA's conversations and surveys with school principals, they recorded a number of excellent initiatives which had made improvements and successfully tackled persistent educational underachievement, but were not sustained or co-ordinated, such as Reading Recovery, Extended Schools and Full Service programmes, the Children and Young People's Strategy and Delivery Plan, the policy for school improvement: Every School a Good School, literacy and numeracy strategy Count Read: Succeed, the SEN and Inclusion Framework, the Pre-school Education Programme, Sure Start Programme, Getting Ready to Learn Programme, the Literacy and Numeracy KS2- KS3 CPD Project, Pathway Fund, Toybox Project, Bright Start Grant Scheme, Shared Education and the Signature project. A lot has been happening, but it needs to be built upon.

We acknowledge that there is no single solution to improving literacy and numeracy, nor is it likely that any one method or set of changes would lead to a complete elimination of underachievement in both literacy and numeracy. However, it is essential to ensure that literacy and numeracy improvement initiatives continue to be underpinned by rigorous research and evaluation methodologies and that the Department of Education continues to develop appropriate, sustainable strategies to address areas requiring improvement.

The lives and life chances of children and young people are inextricably linked to the amount and quality of education they receive from pre-school to post-16 level. Much has been written about the causes and consequences of persistent educational underachievement. It is time for action to address the issue. There are aspects of the Northern Ireland system which deserve to be celebrated and while guarding against complacency we must take time to acknowledge our successes and move to replicate best practice in other contexts.

The information gathered, sifted and analysed by the Expert Panel can result in evidence-based decisions which alongside other sources of evidence will develop and adapt education policy for Northern Ireland. The Key Insights from PISA 2018 for the United Kingdom and outcomes in TIMSS and PIRLS indicate that Northern Ireland's schools do a good job. With refinement, focus and support they can eradicate persistent educational underachievement in collaboration with each other, their community, parents and external agencies.

It is anticipated that whatever the outcomes of the Expert Panel, deliverable transformative actions will emerge, and that constant vigilance of the educational achievement gap is tackled and reduced so that underachievement never becomes any young person's destiny.