

GOVERNING BODIES ASSOCIATION - COMMENTS ON THE INTERIM REPORT OF THE INDEPENDENT REVIEW OF EDUCATION IN NORTHERN IRELAND (NOVEMBER 2022)

The Governing Bodies Association (GBA) welcomed the publication of the interim report from the Panel for the Independent Review of Education in Northern Ireland. While it does not yet identify any specific solutions or recommendations, the report was useful in helping us to understand some of the key issues and challenges which the review will seek to address in its final report.

The purpose of this further short submission from the GBA is to offer our perspective on some of the issues highlighted in the interim report and to draw attention to other areas where we feel there is scope to place greater emphasis and analysis in the final output from the review.

It is apparent from the report and its Annexes that the Independent Review of Education has generated a considerable amount of interest and input from practitioners, stakeholders, and external commentators. The Independent Review of Education Panel has also gone to considerable lengths to engage with a wide range of organisations and individuals and to listen to their views. This is to be welcomed. However, the range and diversity of the organisations and individuals listed in the Annexes to the report highlight the potential for debate about the future of the education system to become distracted by issues which are peripheral to the core objective of providing the best quality education to children and young people. The GBA therefore noted and welcomes the observation from the Panel its introduction that, *“while stakeholder opinion is important, it is vital that the recommendations are based solidly on evidence and centred on the learner”*.

Whatever the institutional and regulatory structures surrounding the education system here, education is delivered to children and young people by teachers in schools. Therefore, if the education system here is to be maintained and improved into the future, there must be a core focus on supporting these key participants -

children and their parents, teachers and support staff, and individual schools. Section 4 of the report highlights priority areas of inquiry identified by the panel and notes that further issues are likely to be added as the work continues. We would offer our preliminary observations on some of these, as well as highlighting some other issues we believe need to be given greater emphasis in the review.

Early years

We welcome and support the references here to the need to enhance and extend the provision of support to children and their parents up to the point of entry into primary school. These years are critical to the future development of children, and we welcome the references here to the need to provide families with access to high-quality services through the whole period from pre-birth to the beginning of school, with priority given to services to children from disadvantaged families and those experiencing developmental difficulties. One additional point of emphasis here should be an aim to ensure that families here have access to the same levels of financial support for pre-school provision as is available generally to children and their parents in Great Britain.

Learner Support, Inclusion and Wellbeing

We welcome the panel's observations and comments about support for children and young people with Special Educational Needs (SEN). This is an area which is important but is also not well served by present arrangements which, as the panel observes, are not financially sustainable and with little evidence that the approaches adopted are as effective as society would wish. Given these rising costs, it is essential, as the panel notes, that funding is targeted effectively towards the learning needs of individual children.

Supporting the education workforce

Teachers and support staff in schools are critical to the delivery of education to children and young people. Without them nothing else can be achieved. Therefore, we welcome the commitment in the report to ensuring that there continues to be

high-quality initial teacher education as well as Continuing Professional Development for teachers and school leaders. We also believe there is a need for professional support structures to be in place that both promote and support the high teaching standards and hold individuals to account for the maintenance of those standards throughout teachers' careers. We also think that these issues should be given a prominence and priority in the final report commensurate with their importance to the future success of the education system here.

Governance of schools and colleges

The interim report makes reference to various institutional bodies involved with regulating the education system and providing specialist support to schools and colleges. We believe it is also important to highlight the governance of individual schools and the role played by Boards of Governors in doing so. As with the roles of teachers and support staff, the impact of wider institutional and regulatory reform of the education system will be blunted if greater emphasis is not also placed on supporting the work of management and governance at the level of individual schools. The GBA highlighted these issues in our submission to the review and we believe they need to be given prominence and consideration in the final report.

Funding – Sufficiency, Efficiency and Impact

The report highlights that the education system in Northern Ireland is not adequately funded and notes the concern that for some areas of significant investment, there is a lack of data to demonstrate the benefits and impacts of the investment. We welcome these observations and preliminary conclusions. Whatever progress may be made in addressing these funding shortfalls, it seems inevitable that the education system here will continue to face significant financial pressures which may become even more acute over the next few years.

In these circumstances, and as the interim report highlights, there needs to be a greater emphasis not just on the totality of expenditure on education but also on how effectively that expenditure is currently being used. Therefore, we believe that the final report from the panel should include an analysis of the effectiveness of the

current allocation of expenditure on the education system, with an emphasis on ensuring that priority is given to the reallocation of available funding to support the front-line delivery of education and associated support services to children and young people in schools and colleges.

We hope the Review Panel find these observations and comments on its interim report helpful. We would like to offer our congratulations on the work carried out to date, and best wishes for the successful completion of its further work over the coming months.