

**The Voluntary Principle and Voluntary  
Grammar Schools in Northern Ireland**

**A Contribution to the Independent Review of  
Education**

## 1.0 Executive Summary

The Governing Bodies Association (GBA) is the representative body for the 50 Voluntary Grammar Schools in Northern Ireland. This paper is a contribution to the recently announced Independent Review of Education<sup>1</sup>. The GBA welcomes the review and the opportunity to holistically evaluate the education system in Northern Ireland with a view to developing workable recommendations that will improve the educational experience and outcomes for children and young people.

Voluntary Grammar schools include some of the largest schools in Northern Ireland. They are diverse and inclusive institutions, attracting pupils from a large catchment area and a wide range of backgrounds and communities. GBA member schools have a proud tradition of providing a high quality education and outcomes for their pupils. Voluntary Grammar schools have strong community roots and are consistently oversubscribed, a reflection of parental choice for a holistic, quality, value added education.

Voluntary Grammar schools are wholly managed by their Boards of Governors who show an immense commitment to the running of their school. This sense of ownership, control and pride has many benefits for the educational experience of their pupils. The Voluntary Principle, and the benefits of this principle, at a system, school and pupil level are outlined in this paper.

Recommendations for the review have been brought forward in the context of the Voluntary Principle and consideration of other evidence such as the recent educational underachievement report. The GBA believes that all schools in Northern Ireland, regardless of sector, can draw from these benefits, ultimately for the benefit of our children and young people.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/news/panel-undertake-independent-review-education-announced>

## **2.0 The Governing Bodies Association**

The Governing Bodies Association (GBA), now identified as a sectoral body, was established in 1948 and is the representative body for the 50 Voluntary Grammar schools in the Northern Ireland education system.

As well as seeking to further and advance the interests and well-being of those Voluntary Grammar Schools in all respects, the GBA provides policy information, advice and support for member schools and presents their views to the Department of Education, educational stakeholders, politicians, and the media. The GBA aims to promote, foster and develop close working relationships amongst Voluntary Grammar Schools and with other educational partners.

### **2.1. Executive Committee**

The Executive Committee members of the GBA are drawn from the Boards of Governors of constituent schools and serve a 3-year term on a voluntary basis. Co-opted members are added as and when required, bringing additional professional skills, experience, and expertise to the work of the GBA.

### **2.2. Funding**

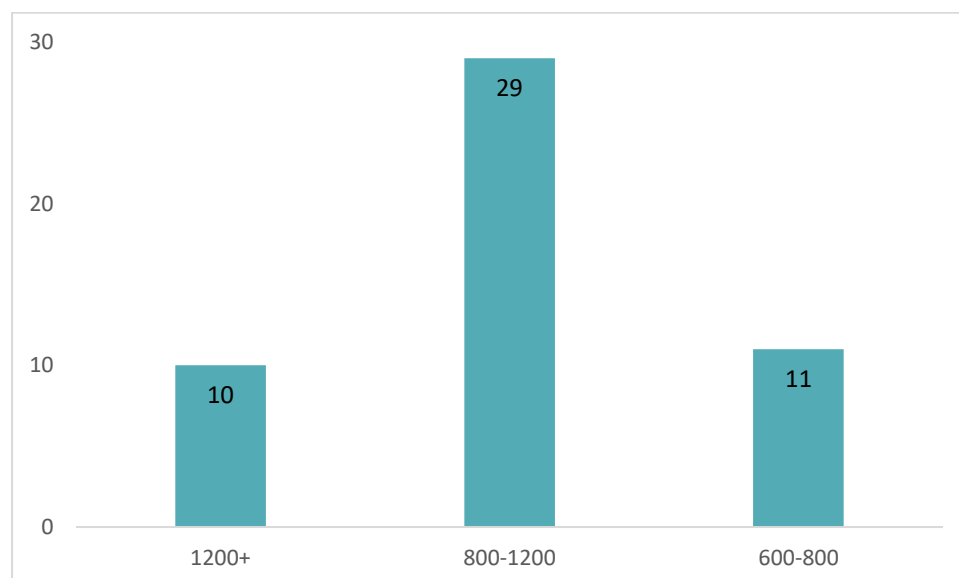
The GBA is funded through member subscriptions and grant aid funding from the Department of Education. The modest funding, which compares poorly with that allocated to other sectoral bodies, and does not match GBA commitment to the education service as a whole, covers the running costs of the association and staffing by a Chief Executive Officer and a part-time Schools' Support Officer to facilitate our work on Area Planning and Shared Education. The GBA continues to press for a fairer funding base.

### 3.0 Voluntary Grammar Schools

#### 3.1. Demographics

There are 50 Voluntary Grammar schools in Northern Ireland (NI) with a wide geographical spread, operating in all of the 11 Local Government Districts (LGDs). Voluntary Grammar schools include some of the largest schools in Northern Ireland, with the majority having more than 1000 pupils (see Figure 1).

Figure 1: Enrolment Numbers in NI Voluntary Grammar Schools (2020/21)



Currently (2020/21) there are 148,918 post-primary pupils in NI and over a third (33.5%; 49,887) are enrolled in Voluntary Grammar schools. There are over 40,000 post primary pupils in NI with Free School Meal Entitlement, i.e 27% of the post primary population, and Voluntary Grammar Schools educate close to a fifth (17.4%) of these pupils. Additionally, the Boards of Governors of these schools employ almost 3000 teachers in the sector<sup>2</sup>. The relatively large size of Voluntary Grammar schools, their roots in local communities, their holistic approach to

<sup>2</sup>Values quoted in section 2.1 are based on figures obtained from the Department of Education's Enrolment Data and Schools Plus facility.

education and inclusivity contributes to their success in delivering a high quality and value-for-money educational experience, in terms of average cost per pupil, reflecting the Department of Education's Sustainable Schools Policy.

It must be stressed that schools in Northern Ireland, regardless of sector, are highly dedicated and successful in delivering a quality experience, securing increasingly high standards for their pupils. The purpose of this paper is to highlight the strengths of the Voluntary Principle and not to undermine or call into question in any way the diligence and success of schools in other sectors.

### 3.2. Ownership and Management

While there may be some individual differences, the framework for Voluntary Grammar Schools is specified in primary legislation. They are wholly and independently managed by a Board of Governors (see section 3) within this legal and regulatory framework and, in most cases, the land and buildings are owned by Trustees.

For the Department of Education to pay capital grants to a voluntary school, the school premises must be 'vested' in the Trustees and the Department of Education. The trustees represent the interests of those who originally founded the school and are usually nominated by the legal owners of the school premises. The arrangements for the selection of trustee Governors in Voluntary Grammar schools can reflect provisions in the school's original instrument of government.

The responsibilities of trustees are commonly set out in a foundation document or deed of trust and there is an obligation to protect and promote each school's values and ethos. In addition to the duties laid on them by their foundation documents, as identified in each Voluntary Grammar School's Scheme of Management, they are charged with carrying out the same statutory duties and responsibilities as every other grant-aided school.

The Boards of Governors (BoG) of Voluntary Grammar schools are responsible for all maintenance in respect of their premises (including grounds) and receive funding for both 'landlord' and 'tenant' elements, under the terms of the DE's 'Common Funding Scheme' for

Local Management of Schools. The BoG of each Voluntary Grammar school is also the Employing Authority for all the staff in its own school (see section 3.4).

### 3.3. Funding

The Department of Education is allocated a budget by the NI Assembly Executive and the Department's Permanent Secretary is responsible to the Education Minister and the Assembly for the use of those resources. Grants are paid from the Department of Education's budget to the Education Authority (EA). Each schools' expenditure plans are approved by the EA.

Some Voluntary Grammar schools operate as companies limited by guarantee and/or charities, and they all have direct control of and responsibility for their finances. Unlike Controlled and Maintained schools, whose annual funding and outturn positions are included within the EA's annual accounts, all Voluntary Grammar schools must prepare their own, externally audited, set of annual accounts which are managed in line with the school's Scheme of Management. Boards of Governors are responsible and accountable for ensuring that their schools operate within approved budgets and for maintaining high standards of financial management and control.

Whilst each Board of Governors is responsible for the configuration and functions of its committees, most Voluntary Grammar Schools can have a Finance Committee and a separate Audit Committee, drawn from the BoG, to fulfill certain responsibilities, monitor expenditure and budgetary management and make recommendations to the full board as appropriate, providing a careful scrutiny of financial matters.

## 4. The Board of Governors

### 4.1. Constitution of the Board of Governors

For the purposes of awarding Capital Grants there are two categories of Voluntary Grammar School.

Category 'B' (2 schools) are entirely responsible for capital development and are ineligible for any funding. The Department of Education does not nominate any individuals to serve on the Boards of Governors of these schools.

Category 'A' schools receive either 85% or 100% Grants for Capital Development approved by the Department of Education and are governed by boards of 9, 18, 27 or 36 members in accordance with the provisions of the Education and Libraries (NI) Order 1986, amended by the Education (NI) Order 1997. The Board of Governors is normally made up of members nominated by the trustees or as specified in instruments of governance and by the Department of Education, as well as members elected by parents and teachers. It is also possible to have co-opted members who bring additional skills to the Board. Such co-opted members do not have voting rights.

The term of office of voting and co-opted members is 4 years, except when a vacancy arises. A governor appointed to fill that post will serve only the remainder of that 4 year term of office. Any voting or co-opted member going out of office at the end of the 4 years may be re-appointed. The appointment of both parent and teacher governors is subject to a process of election. The Department of Education nominates its representatives and tends to limit membership to two full terms of office.

Unless required not to attend for a specific reason, the Principal attends all meetings of the Board of Governors and its standing committees, as a non-voting member because it is considered that to be a voting member would compromise the Principal's position as the Head professional adviser to the Board of Governors.

#### 4.2. Summary of Responsibilities

Governors, working with the Principal, help set the strategic direction of the school including assessing the school's educational and financial viability in terms of the six sustainability criteria published in the Department's Schools for the Future: A Policy for Sustainable Schools (Sustainable Schools Policy)<sup>3</sup>.

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<sup>3</sup>[Schools for the Future: A Policy for Sustainable Schools](#)

Now working in partnership with the Education Authority, the BoG is also responsible for entering into contracts or making arrangements for services of different kinds such as ordering the materials and equipment they need. The BOG has responsibility not just for insuring and protecting the property (buildings, facilities, equipment and grounds) but also all members of staff, pupils and visitors, and dealing with all the financial issues arising.

There is no single model of governance. Each school has committees that reflect the requirements of the school. Typical committees include Finance, Audit, Curriculum, Admissions, Recruitment, Health & Safety, Safeguarding, Extracurricular, and Ethos. The BoGs also conduct regular skills audits to ensure that all areas of need are effectively represented so the school can continue to provide a high quality experience for its pupils and the local community.

All BoGs undertake regular training and development. Training is most commonly provided by the Education Authority or by individual schools. A smaller number of schools provide governor training via a consultancy arrangement. The training opportunities available are generally viewed as very helpful however there are some areas for development that have been identified, for example, human resources in the context of a voluntary grammar school.

#### 4.3. Employing Authority

In addition to those responsibilities outlined above, the BoG of each Voluntary Grammar school is the Employing Authority for all staff (teaching and support) in the school and is therefore responsible for recruiting, deploying, managing and paying all those working in and for the school. Voluntary Grammar schools determine their own recruitment and selection procedures which must comply with the procedures in the school's Scheme of Management and all relevant employment and child protection legislation.

A previous Review of Public Administration in Northern Ireland explored the idea of a single education authority, including a single employing authority. This centralized, over-bureaucratic body did not materialize as envisioned, for a variety of reasons, but largely because of the strengths and institutionalized diversity of the current system and a strong conviction that such a model would hamper rather than enable efforts to meet the challenges facing education.



Furthermore, there was evidence that the cost savings originally suggested would not be realized in practice<sup>4</sup>.

The original purpose of a single authority was to save money on administration and increase front-line spending in the classroom and this was welcomed. A single employing authority, however, goes far beyond this. It would erode and effectively eradicate the role of all Boards of Governors but particularly those of Voluntary Grammar schools which have successfully employed their own staff and managed their own budgets since the last major reform of education in 1947.

## **5. The Voluntary Principle**

### **5.1. Voluntary Philosophy**

The Voluntary Principle is not always commonly understood. At its heart, is the profound conviction that good schools flourish when they are controlled by a Board of Governors drawn from communities; who understand and support the ethos of the school; are committed to the school; are able to respond quickly and effectively to changing circumstances; and, who, along with staff and other stakeholders are responsible for the quality of the educational experience provided for pupils enrolled. All governors serve on an entirely voluntary basis receiving no payment for their work on their Boards and that is but one measure of commitment.

There is no single formula for a good school, but the Voluntary Grammar Schools have demonstrated that the devolution of power, responsibility and accountability to the individual schools combined with strong local community roots bring real excellence and opportunity to education increasingly focused on the capabilities and potential of the individual child; harnessing the capacity of technology to provide useful data, support learning and teaching and communicate effectively with young people and their parents. Appropriate autonomy paired

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<sup>4</sup>[Education, Equality and the Economy \(Gallagher, 2019\)](#)

with effective leadership and accountability processes advantages learners and better prepares them for the unpredictability and complexity of the lives they will lead.

Furthermore, as previously referenced, all Voluntary Grammar schools are large in terms pupil enrolment. The report<sup>5</sup> from an Independent Strategic Review of Education in 2006 chaired by Professor Sir George Bain, discusses the benefits of larger schools, such as a greater ability to deliver the curriculum and a high quality of education for pupils, in and out of the classroom; it also dwells on mitigating a range of difficulties experienced by smaller schools through collaboration with larger schools.

## 5.2. Parental Choice and Demand

The right for parents to choose a particular school for their child is enshrined in legislation and reflects the primary role and responsibility of parents in the education of their children. This choice is restricted by approved admissions and enrolment numbers within which all schools must operate. When a school is oversubscribed, they apply their published admissions criteria to adhere to the approved numbers as set out by the Department of Education.

The Board of Governors determine the admissions criteria for their respective schools; some Voluntary Grammar schools are fully selective; some are bilateral, and others use no selection criteria. Entrance is open to children regardless of parental income and has been historically a key promoter of social and occupational mobility. Despite the debates around the use of such criteria, Voluntary Grammar schools continue to be a popular choice with parents. The table below, which highlights their popularity, shows the number of total applications and first preference applications received by Voluntary Grammar schools for their 2020/21 and 2021/22<sup>6</sup> Year 8 intake.

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<sup>5</sup>Bain, G. (2006). Strategic review of education (Schools for the future: funding, strategy sharing).

<sup>6</sup>2021/22 figures refer to the number of applications at the close of the application process. The actual numbers that will be in attendance will be confirmed by way of the Department of Education census.

Table 1: 1<sup>st</sup> Preference and Total Applications to VG schools

	<b>2020/21</b>	<b>2021/22</b>
<i>No. of VG Y8 places</i>	7315	7297
<i>No. of 1st preference apps</i>	8076	8669
<i>Total no. of apps</i>	9261	11809

### 5.3. Key Benefits of the Voluntary Principle

The following section summarises the key themes and benefits of the Voluntary Principle, illustrating the gains that can be made by maintaining such an approach to education delivery.

#### (i) Increased responsibility and accountability

Governors of Voluntary Grammar schools have a wide range of roles and responsibilities coupled with more direct responsibility and accountability. This enhances the involvement and investment of governors in the direction, and development of their schools and their ability to support effective leadership and efficient management. The requirement by their foundation documents to promote the ethos and values on which they are based gives them a powerful sense of trusteeship, engagement and accountability to the parents of the children in each school.

#### (ii) Effective and efficient use of resources

The Governors of Voluntary Grammar schools are collectively accountable for the management of their schools' finances and, within their legal framework, for any deficits that might arise hence they monitor the ways in which the available resources are used carefully. The austerity of the past decade in the education sector has proven challenging, however Voluntary Grammar schools have continued to manage their finances and deliver a high quality educational experience for NI children.

(iv) Uniqueness and adaptability

Voluntary Grammar Schools are not all the same. As already noted, some apply an academic criterion, others do not. There are denominational, inter-denominational and non-denominational schools; many draw their pupils from all parts of the community, providing an inclusive and pluralist learning environment; a reflection of the schools' adaptability, echoing changes in the attitudes and behaviours of wider society without compromising the central priority: high quality learning and teaching in a secure and caring learning environment. This diversity within a common set of principles and values provides the choices that parents seek in deciding upon the best education for their children.

(v) Proactivity

The Boards of Governors are the employers of all teaching and support staff and have oversight of the resources available to them, i.e. finance, human resources and premises. Governors are well aware of the challenges and pressures created by changing circumstances and are able to support continuous improvement through strategic planning, and by responding swiftly and flexibly to opportunities as they arise.

(vi) Providers of quality education

It is widely recognised that Voluntary Grammar schools have a strong record of enabling young people to secure excellent educational outcomes, progress to Further and Higher Education according to their interests and aspirations, and lay the foundations of interesting and rewarding careers. The ability to recruit staff based on the needs of their pupils and in keeping with the ethos of the school, contributes to the quality learning experience. Voluntary Grammar schools are adaptable and have shown they are able to meet the needs of Learners with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND).

Voluntary Grammar schools do not solely focus on qualification outcomes; they provide a holistic educational experience and aim to equip their pupils with the skills, knowledge and attributes to enable them to contribute positively to society and live fulfilling lives. Many Voluntary Grammar schools excel in areas such as sports, arts, music or technology and provide extracurricular opportunities tailored to the needs of their pupils.

(vii) Collaborative

The increased level of delegation and autonomy in Voluntary Grammar Schools also facilitates collaborative working with other schools in all sectors. Voluntary Grammar schools are highly engaged in collaborative projects, through Shared Education initiatives and delivery of the Entitlement Curriculum in partnership with other schools in their Area Learning Communities. This is particularly evident at post 16 level where a number of VGS provide post-16 pathways for children from other schools and sectors.

Voluntary Grammar schools also work closely with their Area Learning Communities and collaborate with other schools in various contexts such as the delivery of CPD for school staff, providing career experience opportunities for pupils and providing support for each other regarding pastoral matters or Special Educational Needs. Voluntary Grammar schools are also engaged in informal collaborations and support networks with other teachers and Principals, all with the collective aim of providing a quality educational experience to children and young people.

## 6.0 Conclusions

The 50 large, established and unique Voluntary Grammar schools, educate close to a third of the post primary school population in Northern Ireland. The success of these schools in providing a high quality educational experience and in making a major contribution not just to their communities but also to the economy and social fabric of society is well-recognised.

The autonomy which the Voluntary Grammar schools have used so well to improve the educational experience of young people has a profound effect on the work and input of their Boards of Governors as the employing authority for each school.

As outlined in this paper, there are several benefits to this maximum delegation of responsibility, away from centralized authority and standardized control, which is, by definition, remote from the learning environment and much less directly accountability to communities, parents, families, children and young people. Despite the financial adversity of the last decade,

experienced by Voluntary Grammar Schools no less than every other school, their autonomy and strong governance have enabled effective and efficient deployment of available resources, provided a pathway continued successes and given a value for money return on the investment of public funds.

Research evidence and comparison of governance models in other countries supports the argument that increased delegation improves curriculum delivery, quality of learning and outcomes for pupils as well as facilitating community engagement and collaborations.

In an ever-evolving climate and in the face of further challenges, financial and social, adaptability and excellence in education are crucial.

## **7.0 Recommendations**

Based on the evidence outlined in this paper, the GBA puts forward the following commentaries and recommendations for consideration by the panel members:

- One focus of the review is on securing greater efficiency in the delivery costs of education. The prospect of moving to a single education system is highlighted as an area for exploration. As demonstrated by the Voluntary Grammar school model of governance, which is closely tied to the operational aspects of a school, efficiencies can be realized by those who know the school best and are intimately involved in the day to day running of the school. A single system is not a guarantee of efficiency and may negatively affect the educational experience of pupils.
- Improving the monitoring of expenditure for all sectors is a potential mechanism for securing greater efficiencies. Voluntary Grammar schools have responsibility for their own finances and monitor this closely through, for example, finance committees and regular auditing. This creates a sense of ownership and, with this, comes closer scrutiny of expenditure.
- Maximum delegation should be afforded to all schools in all sectors, as appropriate to each school's governance and sustainability.

- The opportunity for schools' involvement in high-level decision making should be increased through collaboration and consultation with the Department of Education, the Education Authority and other stakeholders. For example, as outlined in the New Decade, New Approach, there is a need for an enhanced approach to careers advice, curriculum training and apprenticeships; this is an area that could be addressed collectively and collaboratively to ensure enhanced and equal opportunities for pupils. There is a need for a collective, long-term vision, especially 14-19 provision, to ensure our qualifications are valid and reliable, and to avoid unnecessary duplication.
- Another focus of the review is quality and sustainability. The Northern Ireland Executive recognises the work that has been done to increase quality of provision and sustainability through sharing and collaborating however there is still much to be achieved. Consideration should be given not just to the provision of incentives and support for inter-school and cross-sectoral collaboration but also to the form and delivery of such incentives and support.
- Legislation to enable partnerships in the form of federations, to name but one example, is another area for exploration moving forward in an increasingly challenging environment, which has been exacerbated by the recent and ongoing pandemic.
- Developing and increasing the knowledge and skill-base of governors is essential in the 21st Century educational environment. To that end, there should be greater emphasis on governance using online technologies as an important strand of governor support and training.
- Actively encouraging the key role of school governors in determining the strategic direction and improvement journey of the school for which they are responsible is essential and should be given priority. This need was referenced in a recent report on educational underachievement<sup>7</sup>.

As highlighted by the review, the educational experience and outcomes for pupils are the most important factors. The GBA believes that the voluntary principle contributes positively to a

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<sup>7</sup>[A Fair Start – Final Report and Action Plan \(2021\)](#)

vision of education that maximizes opportunities for young people while making the best use of available resources.