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### **Academic Year 2025/26: Key Policy Developments & Reflections**

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The past school year has been significant for education in Northern Ireland, with policymakers focusing on long-term reform including curriculum development, special educational needs (SEN) reform and management of the financial pressures facing schools and families.

As the academic year comes to a close and the summer break begins, this is an opportunity to reflect on some of the key developments that have shaped the education landscape and to highlight the GBA's work and engagement across these important issues.

#### **Financial Pressures**

In response to the funding crisis in Education, the Department of Education developed a five-year education budget strategy outlining proposals for structural reforms to the education system. This includes reshaping Special Educational Needs (SEN) support in mainstream schools, restructuring the school estate, and introducing a new approach to school financial management and oversight.

In response to the proposals, the GBA welcomed the Department's objective of reforming the education system to improve financial sustainability. Reforms such as restructuring of the school estate are necessary. The GBA recognises that the current school estate is unsustainable and that progress on rationalisation has been too slow. Faster action to address issues such as under-enrolment, small schools, and unsustainable sixth forms is welcome and we continue to represent our views on these matters through the Area Planning governance groups.

### **Qualification and Curriculum Reform**

Earlier this year the Department sought views on proposals on the future of CCEA GCSEs, AS levels and A Levels with a focus on reducing the burden of assessment and enhancing the depth of student learning.

In our submission to the Department, the GBA emphasised issues such as the value of modular exams for building student confidence, and the need for streamlined specifications. Overall, we highlighted that reforms must be considered in the wider context of post-16 education strategy, area planning, school sustainability, teacher workload, and the limited funding available to implement significant changes.

In addition to policy changes around qualifications, the Education Minister has also launched a review of the Northern Ireland curriculum. Proposals for curricular reform are currently out for consultation (see article below for more information). The GBA is engaging with the Department on the proposals and will provide updates to our members in due course.

### **Reform of Special Educational Needs provision**

Support for pupils with Special Educational Needs (SEN) has remained a major policy priority throughout the year. Building on the publication of the SEN Reform Agenda and Delivery Plan, the Department and Education Authority have continued work at improving SEN provision.

To contribute to the work around SEN provision, the GBA has engaged extensively with our member schools and wider education stakeholders to hear views on what is needed for successful reform.

On behalf of our schools, we have called for a needs-based, flexible, well-

resourced SEN support system built on collaboration, early intervention, and professional development to better meet pupils' complex needs.

We have stressed that successful reform depends on increased investment and fair funding, noting that comparable investments in England are significantly higher, which impacts service quality and capacity.

Growing demand for SEN provision continues to place pressure on resources, making this one of the most closely watched areas of education policy.

### **School Development and Professional Learning**

Through the TransformED programme, the Department has adopted a renewed focus on school improvement and professional learning, including a new strategy for Teacher Professional Learning.

The GBA supports the Department's view that professional development and strategic planning are essential components of raising educational standards.

The GBA delivered a number of training sessions for our member schools this year, including media training and governor training in areas such as financial management, governance and human resources. We look forward to continuing this programme of work and providing further training and development opportunities.

### **Looking ahead**

Northern Ireland's education system is undergoing a period of sustained reform rather than isolated policy change. The implementation of TransformED NI, continued SEN reforms and curriculum review collectively signal an ambitious agenda for the coming years.

Success will depend not only on policy design but also on effective implementation, adequate funding and collaboration between DE, schools, teachers, parents and wider education stakeholders.

As the school year draws to a close, we would like to take the opportunity to wish our member schools a happy and restful summer break.

## Governance Matters

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### **Martyn's Law - School Preparedness**

The Terrorism (Protection of Premises) Act 2025 — widely known as **Martyn's Law** — represents one of the most significant changes to school emergency preparedness in recent years. Although the Act will not come into force until **2027**, following the implementation period, schools are already being encouraged to prepare for the new duties that will apply across the education sector.

Martyn's Law aims to strengthen organisational readiness and improve the protection of pupils, staff and visitors in the event of a terrorist incident. For schools, the impact is substantial but intentionally **proportionate**, recognising the safeguarding and security frameworks already in place across the sector.

Although the legal duties are not yet active, schools are advised to begin preparing by:

- Reviewing and updating lockdown, evacuation and communication procedures.
- Ensuring staff are trained and confident in emergency responses.
- Identifying the Responsible Person.
- Integrating Martyn's Law planning into safeguarding and health-and-safety frameworks.
- Ensuring governors understand their oversight role

These steps should help schools transition smoothly once the Act comes into force and ensure that pupils and staff benefit from strengthened, proportionate protection.

The EA has developed School Lockdown Guidance which aligns with the anticipated implementation of The Terrorism (Protection of Premises) Act 2025. The guidance can be accessed [here](#).

### **Recent DE Publications**

#### [Circular 2026/14 - Internal Tracking and Monitoring](#)

The circular provides guidance to schools on the use of internal tracking and

monitoring systems to support pupils' learning and progress. It emphasises that these systems should be used to inform teaching and support students, rather than create unnecessary workload or high-stakes accountability.

The Department of Education, recommends that for the 2026/27 academic year onwards, schools are expected to ensure that no more than three formal, school wide internal tracking points take place within a year group per school year.

#### [Circular 2026/13 - Governor Workload and Wellbeing Champion](#)

The Department is recommending that boards of governors should appoint a designated governor or subgroup of governors to act as workload and wellbeing champion for the school leader.

This role will introduce a formal mechanism within school governance to oversee, monitor, and challenge workload expectations placed on school leaders and will be supported by the development and delivery of guidance and training for governors to ensure they are equipped to undertake the role effectively. This guidance will be developed during the Autumn term of 2026.

#### [Circular 2026/08 - Guidance on the recording of information in relation to the young carer field in the School Management System](#)

The circular provides guidance to schools on identifying, understanding and supporting young carers. It recognises that caring responsibilities can significantly affect a child or young person's education, wellbeing and life chances, and sets out expectations for schools to ensure these pupils receive appropriate support.



## DE Consultations

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### **Consultation on the Northern Ireland Curriculum 2028**

The Department of Education is seeking views on the draft Northern Ireland Curriculum Framework 2028. This consultation sets out a new, knowledge-rich curriculum designed to improve clarity, coherence and progression for all learners. Responses from stakeholders will inform the final design of the curriculum prior to implementation.

There are a number of documents in relation to the Consultations as follows:

1. Overview document: “[TransformED: Northern Ireland Curriculum 2028 – An entitlement to excellence and equity](#)” this document outlines the rationale and proposed structure for a major reform of the Northern Ireland curriculum for pupils from Foundation Stage to Key Stage 3. The central proposal is to replace the current broad, area-based approach with a more clearly defined, subject-led curriculum.

2. [Subject Frameworks and Key Stage Documents](#): The Subject Frameworks set out the statutory content for each subject. Each Framework includes:

- A vision statement explaining the purpose and value of the subject
- Clearly defined curriculum content
- Structured sequences showing how learning progresses across stages

These frameworks provide clarity on what should be taught, a structured approach to progression over time and consistency across schools through a shared entitlement.

They form the core of the curriculum, ensuring learning is carefully sequenced and built cumulatively across subjects.

3. [The Capabilities - Outcomes of Learning](#): The capabilities document outlines the overarching capabilities (emergent qualities and attributes) that children and young people will develop as a result of learning the new curriculum.

Further information and details on how to respond are available [here](#). The consultation is open until 30th September 2027.

The GBA will be engaging with the Department in the coming months regarding the review. We will provide schools with updates in due course.

### **Consultation on Leading Together for Excellence: A Transformed NI Strategy for Teacher Professional Learning**

This consultation invites your views on a renewed professional learning strategy for teachers in Northern Ireland.

The strategy proposes a comprehensive overhaul of teacher professional learning in Northern Ireland, centred on new professional standards, a career-long development framework, a national improvement centre, and sustained investment designed to improve teaching quality and pupil outcomes across the system.

Further information on the strategy and details on how to respond are available [here](#). The consultation is open until 6th July 2027.

The GBA is currently developing a response to the consultation which we will share with you via our monthly newsletter.

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### **NI Assembly Debate - Education Inspections Bill**

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The Education Inspections Bill is currently progressing through the NI Assembly legislative process.

The Bill has two main purposes:

1. Allow inspection of Religious Education (RE) following a Supreme Court ruling that highlighted shortcomings in the current system.
2. Strengthen the powers of the Education and Training Inspectorate (ETI) to

carry out inspections, especially safeguarding inspections, even during industrial action.

The Bill does not create criminal offences for teachers - earlier proposals involving criminal sanctions were removed from the Bill clauses.

The Second Stage of the Bill completed earlier this month following a lengthy debate amongst MLAs.

Throughout the assembly debate there was general consensus amongst members that school inspections are important, safeguarding children is essential, and that teachers are valuable and under pressure. Conversely, there was disagreement regarding how to guarantee inspections take place, particularly if during a period of industrial action.

Supporters of the Bill in its current format highlighted that inspections should never be blocked, especially due to safeguarding risks, and that some degree or form of sanction is necessary to ensure cooperation.

Those opposed argued that the Bill gives excessive powers, risks penalising teachers engaged in lawful industrial action, and that better engagement with unions would solve issues without having to resort to disciplinary measures.

Overall, the debate was less about whether inspections should happen and more about whether teachers should face professional consequences for refusing to cooperate during industrial action.

The Second Stage report is available [here](#).

The Bill will be further scrutinised at the Committee Stage which has now been extended until 9th December 2026.

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**Area Planning Updates**

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Operational Plan 3 (OP3) is due to commence in September 2026 and will span one year to accommodate the completion of outstanding projects from previous plans, as well as the inclusion of some new short-term workstreams/ proposals.

Further information on the current strategic and operational plans is available [here](#).

Information on current development proposals is available here:

- [Development Proposals - Pre-publication consultations](#)
- [Published Development Proposals \(awaiting ministerial decision\)](#)

If you are considering a significant change to the size or character of your school please [contact us](#).

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## **Shared Education News**

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### **Teachers engage in international Holocaust education programme at Crumlin Road Gaol**

Teachers from across Northern Ireland recently participated in a two-day professional learning programme, The Holocaust as a Starting Point, delivered at Crumlin Road Gaol, Belfast, in partnership with the Mémorial de la Shoah, Paris, alongside the Education Authority and the History Teachers Association of Northern Ireland.



The programme forms part of an international initiative developed by the Mémorial de la Shoah, bringing educators together to deepen their understanding of Holocaust history, explore effective pedagogical approaches, and engage in meaningful dialogue around complex and contested histories.

The Belfast-based training focused on the fundamentals of Holocaust education, including the historical context of the Holocaust, contemporary antisemitism, and the challenges of teaching sensitive and complex subject matter in today's classroom. Participants also engaged in a range of workshops and discussions designed to provide practical tools and strategies to support high-quality teaching and learning.

The *Holocaust as a Starting Point* programme aims to create opportunities for educators to collaborate across regions and explore differing historical narratives, recognising the role of education in addressing misunderstanding, prejudice and divisions rooted in the past.

### **Young Artists Sketch out Vision for Equality**

Five talented young people from across Northern Ireland have been named as winners of the Education Authority's '*Drawn to Equality*' youth artwork competition, with their creations set to feature in the EA's next Equality

Action Plan.



The competition, which invited children and young people from educational settings and youth centres to submit artwork inspired by the theme of '*what does equality mean to you?*', attracted 42 entries from across Northern Ireland.

Winners were selected across three categories, primary, post-primary and special, by a panel of judges.

The winning entries are:

- **Primary Category:** Oisin (10), Kaison (8), and Finn (8) from Little Oaks EOTAS, Coshquin Road, Derry
- **Post-Primary Category:** Abigail (13) from Our Lady and St Patrick's College, Gilnahirk Road, Belfast
- **Special Category:** Scarlett (19) from Tor Bank School, Dunlady Road, Dundonald

The winning artwork will be featured in the EA's forthcoming Equality Action Plan, giving the young artists a lasting platform to share their vision of a fair and equal society.

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### **Advertising of Teaching and Support roles on the GBA Website**

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The GBA provides a free advertising service for our member schools. Job vacancies are posted on our website and Twitter page. The Education Authority website also links to the GBA jobs section.

If you would like us to host a vacancy for your school, please [contact us](#).

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### **GBA Office Closure Dates - Summer 2026**

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Please note that the GBA Office will be closed from Friday 10<sup>th</sup> July reopening on Monday 20<sup>th</sup> July. Please note that any jobs to be advertised during this period must be received by 2.00pm on the 8<sup>th</sup> July.



