

**DREAM, SEEK, EDUCATE,**



**ACHIEVE!**



# **FIRM FOUNDATIONS**

Education: Getting it right for every child



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# Introduction



December 2012 marked a turning point in the recent history of Northern Ireland. The decision by Belfast City Council to restrict the flying of the Union Flag on the City Hall to designated days resulted in a convulsion of anger and widespread, prolonged protests within Protestant Unionist Loyalist (PUL) communities

Notwithstanding the significant progress made socially and economically following the Good Friday/Belfast and St Andrews Agreements, rumblings of discontent and increasing tensions between neighbouring communities had left the thoughtful observer in little doubt that all was not well in many of our more disadvantaged communities. While the flag decision was the touch paper which ignited these protests, the roots were enmeshed in a raft of problems experienced by the PUL community which in turn had generated

growing disillusionment and disaffection with the political process.

Foremost among these social, economic and cultural problems was educational underachievement within working class communities, most pronounced among protestant boys. Dr Paul Nolan's third Peace Monitoring Report for the Community Relations Council highlighted that within the UK only Roma and Traveller children of Irish Heritage had worse attainments at GCSE.

Educational underachievement is not unique to loyalist working class communities nor is it a recent phenomenon. Its importance is underlined by the well-documented association with consequential long term socio-economic malaise. Extensive research has been undertaken, much is known about the problem, it has been widely discussed and yet it persists.

In seeking to identify what actions are necessary to lead to improved outcomes we realise that expectations need to be realistic and goals realisable, given the complexity of the problem and timescale necessary to see sustainable improvement.

Political will and action are essential and have too often been lacking. However educational underachievement cannot be solved by government alone, it requires the commitment of communities, families and the young people, working in partnership with educationalists and government, to improve what are unacceptable educational outcomes for too many of our young people.

The time for rhetoric is over, the time for action is now.



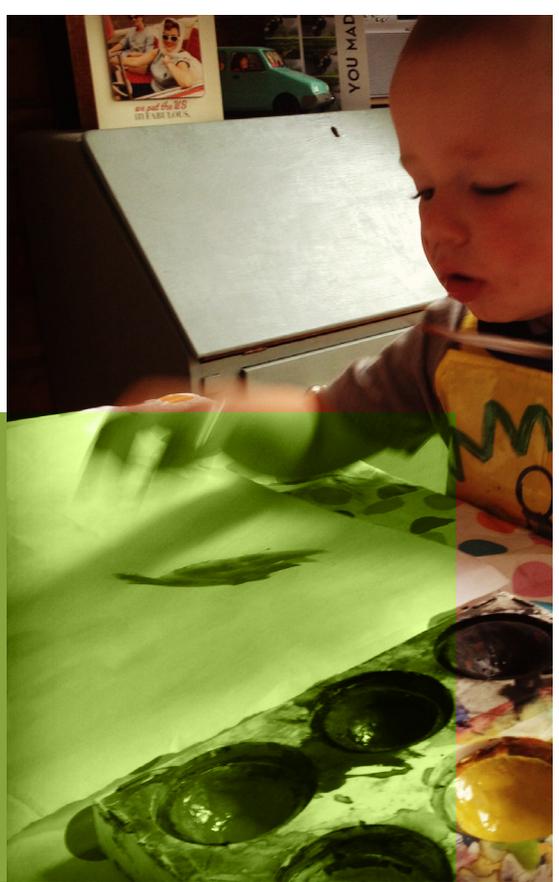
## The importance of the early years.

**'Anyone can create an education system where a few at the top succeed, the real challenge is to push through the entire cohort'**

Andreas Schleicher OECD

Extensive research and much comment have been devoted to the vital importance of the antenatal period and first few years of life. The foundations of all aspects of human development, physical, psychological, cognitive, social and emotional, are laid down in early childhood. Adverse events in these years can have a profound influence on wellbeing, health, and educational achievement.

'Chaotic and uncertain early years have a powerful influence on the full range of psychological and physiological systems. It takes longer to integrate new knowledge; it is harder for children to learn if they have experienced this kind of uncertainty.' (Dr Harry Burns CMO Scotland Kilbar-don Lecture.)



Many children who are underachieving at school have experienced chaotic and uncertain childhoods:-

- ▶ In areas of disadvantage there is a high incidence of teenage pregnancy. Associated problems of poor antenatal nutrition, smoking, alcohol and drug use all have a bearing on cognitive development and future academic achievement. Breastfeeding provides superior nutrition and is associated with optimal physical and intellectual development, yet rates of breastfeeding are lowest within deprived communities.
- ▶ Good speech and language development is the foundation for learning but a significant proportion of chil-



dren are beginning school with very poor language skills. Many children who could benefit are not receiving Speech and Language Therapy.

▶ Early interventions are more effective and less complex than later remedial measures. Research evidence shows that positive outcomes can be achieved in the short and long term, and interventions have high benefit cost ratios. Sure Start has done excellent work in this area but many children who would benefit are not referred, are ineligible or are referred late. Provision is patchy and uptake suboptimal.

▶ There is a need to encourage positive parenting, promoting the role of parents as educators and giving confidence and self belief to parents whose own childhood and school experience may have been difficult or negative. The Family Nurse Partnerships have been particularly effective in this regard. UK pilots have shown a range of benefits; mothers show increased confidence and higher aspirations for themselves and their children, they stop smoking, they

show higher levels of breastfeeding and their children develop in line with age group norms. Relationships within families are healthier and more stable and the home environment less chaotic and more conducive to emotional and cognitive development.

▶ Learning begins from birth not at school entry therefore health care and education need to be coordinated and integrated to ensure optimal development in the early years. There is a need to recognise the overlap between health and education for this age group. Health Visitors have contact with every newborn and are ideally placed to reinforce positive actions and to recognise early warning signs. Their training is medically based but would be enhanced by an educational component.

▶ Fathers have a crucial role to play at this stage and attention should be given to helping health and educational professionals interact with fathers and to creating opportunities for fathers to be role models in Sure Start, pre-school and primary school settings.



# B

## The need for greater parental and community involvement with schools

Parental involvement in schooling results in better academic outcomes. Within working class Unionist communities education can be seen as something that happens in school. Some parents appear to lack the confidence to engage with teachers. This contrasts with attitudes in disadvantaged Nationalist Communities where many have, with demonstrable success, viewed and availed of education as a right and a means of upward social mobility. Thus education has been seen, by parents and community leaders alike, as intrinsically valuable in itself but also as an incentive and a flexible response to changing patterns of employment.

It is acknowledged that in unionist communities a change in culture to embrace education is needed. Although many parents value education highly others need encouraged, motivated and empow-



ered. There is a need to make it easier for parents to be involved in their children's education. This will involve removing real and perceived obstacles and creating a consistent positive flow of information between schools and parents. There are some outstanding examples of schools actively involving parents and community groups but in general many schools serving disadvantaged communities struggle to achieve this. Parent support workers tasked with building relationships with parents and enabling them in their role as co-educators can act as a bridge between home and school, facilitating greater involvement. Social enterprise examples



like the Artemis schools project in Belfast, show how the bridge between schools and community can be constructed creatively and effectively with beneficial social outcomes.

Greater partnership between education, statutory, community and voluntary

**‘The problem is we are creating inequalities....and a community which feels it has no route out of poverty’.**

Dr Paul Nolan

sectors is necessary since all have a role in supporting and delivering education. After schools clubs, homework classes, mentoring schemes, sports coaching and dance classes all aid children’s development and are delivered by the community and voluntary sectors. The community sector should be encouraged to recognise its importance and responsibility. Making school facilities more available for community use would help make schools less intimidating to parents. Schools would benefit from learning how the community sector works and by implementing a community development approach when working with parents.

Careers guidance in many schools is poor. Training for teachers is inadequate, their knowledge of careers outside education limited and links with local industry and employers often tenuous. Organisations such as the CBI and Business in the Community can strengthen the quality and relevance of career advice and offer opportunities for pupils to gain first hand work experience. These contacts need to be explored, developed and prioritised; they can motivate pupils, preparing them better for the workplace.





## Leadership



There is considerable variation in the performance of schools, particularly post-primary schools.

Children's academic achievements are influenced by the ethos, expectations and standards of behaviour within school as well as in the home.

Experienced leadership and teaching in a school can make a tremendous difference. Pupil achievement is closely related to the quality of leadership and management in a school. Outstanding schools have outstanding and well distributed leadership.

Notwithstanding the fact that there are examples of exceptional leadership in non-selective secondary schools more must be done to attract the most able to this sector. This challenging role requires leadership ability, further training and personal development, and adequate support.

The task is hugely important. Its significance and the levels of professionalism involved are underrated by our society and should be given greater recognition.

While remuneration is not the primary motivation for many teachers, the current salary structure does not allow for incentivisation of leadership in schools with high levels of deprivation or pupils with special, multiple or complex needs. Anecdotal reports suggest that the demands of the job are not adequately counter balanced by the rewards of senior management posts. The job has become too bureaucratic, administrative and onerous and judged by criteria which certain schools have little or no chance of meeting. The huge administrative load is a deterrent to many prospective head teachers and significant time can be taken up with crisis management.



pecially significant for young people from disadvantaged backgrounds.

There should be more rigorous performance management in schools. Poorly performing heads and teachers need to be identified and helped. The support and challenge roles within the The Education Authority and Boards of Governors need separated, it is difficult for one person to effectively fulfil both roles.

More people, including parents from disadvantaged communities could be encouraged to act as school governors. It is

## Governance

Poorly performing schools, heads and teachers are not sufficiently held to account. The Education Authority and Boards of Governors are often too acquiescent, do not challenge heads and teachers and do not scrutinize their performance. However it is recognised that school league tables based on crude, predetermined parameters do not clearly define or identify poor performance.

The role of good teaching cannot be overstated. The Sutton Trust has shown that the difference in impact between very good and poor teachers is strikingly large and, importantly, the effects are es-



a service for the community which should be more highly esteemed and promoted. Working class parents should be actively recruited and supported in the role of school governor:

The responsibilities and authority of boards of governors should be reviewed and compared with practice in the Catholic Maintained Sector:

# E

## Selection



'The Eleven-Plus Transfer Tests are socially divisive, damage self-esteem, place unreasonable pressures on pupils, primary teachers and parents, disrupt teaching and reinforce inequality of opportunity' (The Burns Report)

The Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) findings have shown that Northern Ireland pupils in the lowest attainment group do worse than the corresponding pupils in the rest of the United Kingdom. The selection process makes it more difficult for children from disadvan-

tagged backgrounds to achieve their full potential. There is clear evidence that a pupil's educational opportunities differ depending on whether he or she attends a grammar school or secondary school. As a matter of justice children should not be disadvantaged by the social background from which they come.

All children benefit from being taught in socially mixed environments however selection militates against children and young people from different socio-economic backgrounds working and learning together. The present situation in which grammar schools fill all available places regardless of test scores has led to increasing difficulties for non-selective post-primary schools which often have high percentages of children from areas of social disadvantage and with special educational needs. This imbalanced intake poses severe challenges for both pupils and teachers. It deprives schools in the most disadvantaged areas of relatively small but critically important numbers of more able and more motivated pupils and deprives children within these areas of successful peer role models.

While selection is retained, capping the number of places in grammar schools is necessary in order to protect the integrity of the educational system as a whole. However removing academic selection at age eleven will create socially mixed environments within which all children can have the opportunity to reach their fullest potential. This is achieved through a flexible system of banding and streaming within schools which recognises that each child develops at a different rate and has different skills and talents.

# F

## Children & Young People's Action Zone

On 3 September 2014 the Greater Shankill Community Convention designated the Greater Shankill as a 'Children and Young People's Zone' a development endorsed by seven Executive Departments, Education, OFMDFM, DSD, DCAL DEL, Justice and Health. The creation of the zone is a response to many of the issues touched on in the preceding analysis. It recognises that reversing the cycle of educational underachievement is a generational project which will take 15-20 years. The response must be child and family centred, sustained and reinforced seamlessly from birth into young adulthood and supported, not just by schools, but by communities, voluntary agencies, the business sector and a range of government departments working in partnership.

The Zone allows the creation of a framework which gives focus and coherence



to the partnership ensuring that at every stage of a young person's life journey and, particularly at transition points, progress is maintained through to young adulthood.

A learning neighbourhood of this nature could offer educational opportunities for parents which may compensate for unhappy experiences at school and allow access to formal education alongside parenting skills and other matters to do with their children's education.

It will be valuable to observe the outcomes of this innovative project.



# The Way Forward

Educational underachievement is not new or unique to Northern Ireland. It has exercised the minds of the most able educators and frustrated the aspirations of political leaders for decades. However the differences in international educational outcomes and examples of excellence in our own country prove that the cause is not hopeless.

Recognising the severe constraints on public spending and the difficult economic climate which has prevailed for some years and is likely to continue for some time to come, the primary emphasis of this report is on how current resources could be better used to address this long standing problem. While this will entail doing some things better or more efficiently it will also mean a reallocation of finite

resources and a raft of policy changes. Hard choices will have to be made. More investment in preschool and primary school years, will ultimately prevent more costly interventions at a later stage.

## I. Early Years

The Departments of Health, Education and Social Development should create a task force to better coordinate their work with children 0-3 years. The importance of pre-conception and antenatal health behaviours should be given greater emphasis in the educational curriculum. Support for teenage mothers in the antenatal period should become the designated responsibility of a specified health professional. Breast feeding champions should be sought and appointed in working class communities.

Health Visitors should have a dual role of Health Worker and Educator and their training should reflect this with more emphasis on the learning processes of pre-school chil-





# East Belfast

dren. Training in positive parenting skills needs to be much more widely delivered and may carry less stigma if led by health professionals.

The Sure Start Scheme is too restricted in its geographical distribution and is often over-subscribed. Many children and families who would benefit from it are excluded. It needs to be expanded and children referred earlier:

More Speech and Language outreach workers are needed to prepare children who show signs of delayed language development for school. A more consistent approach to this is required by Sure Start, Nurseries and the primary schools to ensure a seamless process.

## 2. Parent and community involvement

Training for teachers and classroom assistants should include the principles of community development and the skills for recruiting parents as co-educators. Schools should have a dedicated person, a non-teaching member of staff, to outreach into the community and engage with parents.

Community groups, particularly those working with children or with an interest in education should champion the benefits of education, and develop cooperative relation-

ships with local schools. Every community group should look at ways in which it can contribute to the education of the children in its community.

The Department of Education and School Principals should take steps to make school facilities available for community use. This can be self-funding or even income generating.

Schools should look at ways to improve their communication with parents. The Parent's Guide produced by the Integrated Education Fund, East Belfast Partnership and Inner East Youth Project for parents of children starting primary school in East Belfast is an example of good practice which could be rolled out province wide at minimal cost. School web-sites should carry more information for parents.

More community based, academically enriched summer schemes are needed to prevent some of the educational loss experienced by children over the summer holidays. Volunteer mentoring schemes should be better promoted and expanded.

The Department of Education should issue clear and explicit guidance on what is expected from Careers Advice Departments in schools. Every Post Primary School should have a clear strategy for careers guidance

with well trained staff and an action plan for engagement with local employers

Vocational subjects should be introduced into the curriculum at year 11 (age 14years)

The Department of Education, Department of Employment and Learning and the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Industry should set up a task force to look at ways to improve links between schools, local colleges and employer networks ensuring more detailed information is provided to schools and career guidance professionals on local job options, business developments and local skills shortages.

### 3. Leadership

Priority should be given to attracting the most able and talented to headships in the non-selective secondary school sector; to those schools which present the greatest educational challenges.

The current salary structure should be changed to incentivise leadership positions in schools with high levels of deprivation or pupils with special, multiple or complex needs.

There needs to be more resource invested in a non-selective secondary school specific leadership programme for aspiring heads such as the Future Leaders Programme in England. This would both motivate and support teachers providing a fast-track and high quality training.

More consideration should be given to link-ages between high performing and low performing schools to raise expectations, create confidence and produce improvement.

### 4. Governance

The Department of Education should institute more rigorous performance management in schools, identifying poorly performing heads and teachers and providing clear processes to help. Improvement plans and, where necessary, dismissal should be tools available and used.

Boards of Governors must be encouraged to hold heads and teachers to account.

A recruitment drive for school governors should be instituted and working class parents actively sought and supported in the role.

The training scheme for school governors is under resourced and should be strengthened and developed.

Cross community training for potential and current school governors could offer benefits, increasing capacity, motivation and vision, and providing opportunity for learning from each other.

### 5. Selection

There should be an end to academic selection at age 11 years. Such a move cannot be achieved without public debate consultation and careful planning. The Burns Report: Education for the 21st Century should be reconsidered and academic selection replaced by a Pupil Profile. The Pupil Profile would depict a pupil's academic progression inclusive of strengths and areas of weakness, creativity and social ability.

In the meantime admissions to Grammar schools should be capped at 35% of all pupils transferring at age 11 years.

# Conclusion

The woeful educational outcomes for children from our most disadvantaged communities is a damning indictment of our 'world class educational system'

In fact our educational results are only average for industrialised nations (PISA 2012) and the 'long tail' of underachievement is greater in Northern Ireland than anywhere else in the UK.

We are failing our most needy children. We have been failing them for decades.

To change this will require political will, determination and long term commitment. The solutions are known but must be implemented in a coordinated and coherent way.

Renewed focus and support for families through early childhood is essential. This should include expanding Sure Start and developing the Health Visitor role and provision.

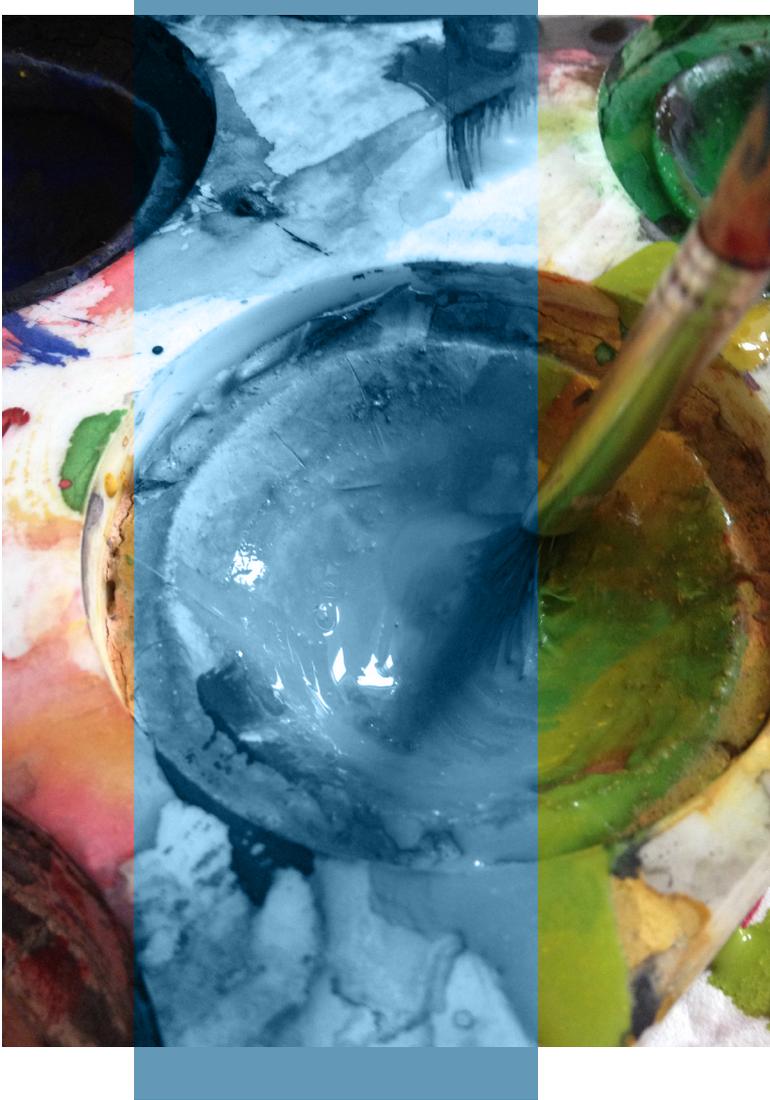
Schools require dynamic visionary leadership, competent teaching and robust and

effective governance; Boards of Governors can no longer simply be cheerleaders for a school. Meaningful partnerships between schools, parents and local communities are essential; this will require dedicated community outreach staff.

Success in the third millennium will have many more definitions than narrow academic attainment in traditional subject areas. Eric Hoffer suggests that learners will inherit the earth rather than the learned. The job of politicians is to ensure that each child, irrespective of background, is given the fullest opportunity to become the best learner they can become. This is their right and there is no more worthy task facing the Legislative Assembly.

The challenge of providing our students with the skills, mindset and resilience to succeed in a rapidly changing employment market will only be met by increased collaboration between educationalists, industry, business and local communities. Economic recovery will not be sustainable without it. However this is not simply an economic imperative it is a matter of social justice. We all have a role to play and our children deserve no less.





# FIRM FOUNDATIONS

Education: Getting it right for every child

**A Progressive Unionist Party Report on Educational Underachievement.**

**Progressive Unionist Party**

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