

Education

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. The Statistical Bulletin published by the Department of Education in May 2015 outlines the proportion of school leavers achieving three or more A-Levels A*-C or equivalent was 37% in 2013/14 and the percentage of school leavers achieving at least 5 GCSEs at A*-C including GCSEs in maths and English was 63.5%. 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. The Progressive Unionist Party believes that we maintain societal division through segregated education and strongly endorses a policy of integrated education at both primary and secondary levels, which, upon implementation, would save a considerable amount of financial resources. Savings that could and should be reinvested in tackling educational underachievement by:-

Increasing the number of Sure Start Facilities:- The first three years of a child's life are pivotal in determining how well he or she will do in terms of education, future employment and health. Sure Start services offer early intervention, giving support to those families most in need. It is the most effective way of helping all children reach their potential.

Ensuring there is sufficient nursery places to meet the demand:- We believe that every child living in Northern Ireland should have a fair start in life and the opportunity to attend Early Years nursery placements. The early introduction of children into such institutions increases and encourages the child's cognitive, social and personal development. Early Years professionals monitor child development which leads to the early discovery of latent learning difficulties that can hinder a child's development. We want to equip children with the capacity to deal with the transition into mainstream, primary education so that they are able to fully engage with classroom based learning.

Implementing the NI Autism Strategy:- Diagnosis waiting times far exceed the goal of 13 weeks. There is no coherent transition process for young people with autism moving from education to employment. We commit to implementing the strategy as outlined in the 2011 Autism Act as a matter of priority.

Introducing Parent Support Workers:- Every primary school serving areas of social deprivation should have a dedicated parent's support worker tasked with building relationships between parents and the school, encouraging the parents in their role as co educators, reducing absenteeism and improving educational outcomes for the children.

Introducing a Pupil Profile:- To replace academic selection -Year on year teachers would be required to complete a profile for each pupil. Such a profile would depict a pupil's academic progression inclusive of strengths and areas of weakness, creativity and social ability. Such a profile will not only assist in early detection of SENs (special educational needs) and identify areas of progression or regression but will also assist post primary schools in streaming their pupils accordingly.

Introduction of Vocational Qualifications (14+) - To would include vocational subjects that are related to a broad employment area such as business, engineering, ICT, health and social care or Vocational courses that lead to specific jobs such as hairdressing, accounting, professional cookery, plumbing, etc. Also introducing Vocational Apprenticeships from 16 years of age which are 'work-related' where the young person will be trained for a job role and get paid as you learn.

Introduction of post primary collegiates:- Each would include 5 to 15 schools that would work together to make a wider range of courses available. (I)Each Collegiate would enable pupils to experience different types of courses. Within the Collegiate children could take courses in, or transfer to, other schools.(II) Schools would provide the statutory curriculum but there would be more flexibility to choose different courses and to develop specialisms like sport, new technology or performing arts.

Introducing LLW as a compulsory subject in post primary education:- Learning for Life and Work (LLW) is a subject that includes the contributory elements of Employability, Local and Global Citizenship and Personal Development. Pupils from year eight up to and including year twelve will be enabled to: (I) Explore self employment and identify relevant sources of support.(II) Develop an understanding of how to maximize and sustain their own health and Well-being. (III) Respond to the specific challenges and opportunities which diversity and inclusion present in Northern Ireland and the wider world.

Performance Management:- We believe a more rigorous performance management is required in schools with consideration given to linkages between high performing and low performing schools to raise expectations, create confidence and produce improvements. In addition we would incentivise performance and leadership encouraging those most able and talented to tackle the challenges set out in areas of educational underachievement.

Oppose a rise in student fees: Education is a human right, and a means of advancing oneself, and achieving a decent standard of living. It provides opportunities and freedoms, which cannot otherwise be enjoyed by ordinary people. Based upon this, we believe that each person within Northern Ireland should have an equal opportunity to attend a first class primary and secondary school in order that the foundations are laid from a young age, for our citizens to enjoy the full benefits of education. This extends to the right to further education, and for these reasons we will oppose rises in student fees, which prevent many of our young people from going to college or university, and so are disadvantaged when entering the labour market. We are opposed to this discriminatory practice, and believe education, as a public good, should be equally available to all.