Educational disadvantage and the Protestant working Class

A Call to Action

Issued by Dawn Purvis MLA and the Working Group on Educational disadvantage and the Protestant working class
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“Many years ago I was involved in the ‘Making Belfast Work’ programme. At that time I highlighted to both the Education and Library Board and to head-teachers that, in my opinion, underachievement would continue to grow for the following reasons:

- the current selection process by the Grammar schools was depressing achievement amongst those who were not selected and lowering their aspirations

- traditionally Catholic families knew and accepted that their children had to have higher qualifications if they were to enter what had been a historically Protestant biased workforce and hence the greater value they placed on education

- there seemed to be a heavy, complacent trend amongst the white working class population of sons following their fathers into ‘trade union protected’ jobs. This often produced a perception of a lack of need to gain qualifications. I predicted that these jobs would disappear as technology improved and that youth unemployment in the Protestant white working class boys sector would rise as a result of these changes

Some twenty years later, I find it personally sad that your report seems to confirm my earlier observations.”

Sir Iain Hall (Great Schools for All Children) letter to Dawn Purvis MLA, 10th December 2010
Introduction
by Dawn Purvis MLA

This Call to Action has arisen out of the work of a small Working Group of teachers, educational administrators, academics, community activists and interested others who have focused on the statistical fact of growing under-performance of Protestant working class young people and, in particular, Protestant working class males.

The remit that this Working Group set itself has been to:

a) Consider existing research and evidence on the issue of the underperformance of Protestant working class young people and, in particular, Protestant working class males;

b) To seek views or short submissions from political parties, educational interests, trade unions, business, the voluntary and community sector and others on what precisely needs to be done to address the issue;

c) To consider UK, European and international experience on tackling communal, ethnic or racial underperformance and international good practice; and,

d) To report on recommendations (by way of a Call to Action) by March 2011.

The question arises, Why just look at educational disadvantage in one community? There is undoubtedly educational disadvantage within all communities and much of what is concluded here is important across all of the groups that constitute our society. However, there is now an established and increasing trend in which the educational non-progressor in Northern Ireland is most likely to be a Protestant working class male. Our work has tried to address why this is the case.

Additionally:

- Political arrangements in Northern Ireland are communitarian, and the majority of Unionist opinion finds the issue of under-achievement difficult (or inconvenient) to deal with;
- Education in Northern Ireland is itself significantly segregated along communal lines;
- The governance of schools attended predominantly by Protestants is different, with perhaps less emphasis placed on driving achievement and standards, or on challenging under-performance;
- The community dynamics and organisational mores differ significantly in the Protestant community, as does the historical emphasis and value put on education within the working class; and,
- There appears to be a tendency towards elitism, and socially imbalanced pupil intakes within schools predominantly attended by Protestants.

This Working Group has no statutory authority, or official remit. It was organized among interested and concerned individuals who felt that if such problems of educational disadvantage were not addressed there would be significant socio-economic and political ramifications. The group, standing solely on their own respective records and reputations, have aimed to highlight a problem and the reasons for it and in so doing contend that it is for others with the resources and influence to challenge a significant inequity.

Given the sensitivity of inter-communal competition within Northern Ireland, it was not the intention of this initiative to enter into, or promote, any sort of zero-sum competition for

1 University of Ulster, report to OFMDFM on Participation Rates in Further and Higher Education, 2001
scarce resources. Rather it was to shine a light on a serious and growing problem. Additionally, we argue that educational needs must be addressed via cooperation, mutual concern and the specific targeting of barriers and impediments, wherever they are found, to effective and inclusive education.

I would like to thank the members of the Working Group who have given many hours over the past six months to ensure that a light is shone on an issue requiring our urgent attention. I am also indebted to the work of the Northern Ireland Assembly’s Research and Library Services team.

We have laid the path towards identifying a problem and hope now that an earnest and worthwhile debate shall begin. It is now for policy-makers, practitioners and politicians to respond to this very real problem and consider our Call to Action.

Dawn Purvis

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Background and Context

This *Call to Action* resulted from intensive discussions of a Working Group over the past six months. It is the practical outworking of two documents.

First, a *Research Summary* produced in November 2010 by the Working Group for public consultation.

Second, a *Summary of Consultation Responses* arising out of the public consultation in November and December 2010.²

For a comprehensive and fully contextual understanding of this *Call to Action*, it is useful to read this paper alongside those first two documents.

This *Call to Action* is, of necessity, more direct in its approach.

While seeking to be concise, we have also tried to avoid generating a simple shopping list of demands which could be cherry-picked by policy-makers for piloting. Such an approach risks oversimplifying a complex situation, and fuels the assumption that a problem can easily be addressed through yet another initiative.

Instead, we have sought to concentrate on a small number of systemic adjustments which would have a chance of implementation in the current economic and political climate, but which would also make a radical difference in the longer term. The comment of one of the Working Group, that “we’ve had more pilots than Ryanair”, was unanimously held. To help illustrate some of the findings and recommendations, we have included a range of existing projects and initiatives, representative of some of the good practice already in place, in case studies throughout the document. A full description of each case study can be found at the end of this *Call to Action*.

Our Vision

If we are to achieve the significant change that is clearly required to reduce educational disadvantage within the Protestant working class, we need to secure a long-term commitment across government to support our vision that:

- All our children will have equal access to education opportunities and resources that help them to aspire and fulfill their potential.
- All our parents, regardless of income or cultural background, will be involved in their children’s learning and want their children to do well in school.
- All our schools will be inspiring and challenging places for children to learn.

There are no quick fixes. Achieving this vision will require a coordinated, determined and long-term plan with real targets for improvement.

In setting a vision of what we want to achieve, we need to take account of the degree to which the economy sets the agenda with education policy discourse. The economy has experienced severe shocks in the past three years which have severely impacted departmental budgets. Financial constraints and the reality of shrinking public spending are given full consideration in the construction of this document.

However, so is the role that education will play in rebalancing and rebuilding the economy. It is anticipated that the UK and Northern Ireland

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² Both of these documents are available for download at [www.dawnpurvis.com](http://www.dawnpurvis.com)
economies will no longer be able to rely on financial services and global speculation to offset budget deficits. In offsetting this challenge we require a labour force with evident skills and flexible capacities. Growth in numeracy and literacy are vital, as is entrepreneurial ability. Such balance will not emerge if the educational base is skewed and unrepresentative of each community. For instance, we encourage some 45% of our young people to undertake university education yet can offer no more than 20% of jobs in the economy which require graduate qualifications. Education, of itself, is not a guarantor of movement towards a high skilled, high value-added economy.³

High post-16 educational drop-out rates are internationally linked to low-waged economies, where insecure, highly-changeable, unregulated employment predominates. Large swathes of the UK and Northern Ireland economies have been run on a low-skilled equilibrium. The motivation of young people within the education system is inextricably linked with the degree to which the economy can provide work opportunities with attractive remuneration and career prospects in stable companies in well regulated trades and industries. The dearth of productive opportunities makes the public sector, by default, the career of choice for too many of our most talented people.

In this regard, the education system has a part to play in economic success, but it will require macro-economic intervention to rebalance the economy. Economic growth drives skills, not the other way round. Yet efforts to develop a more honest, sustainable, balanced economy must take full consideration of the vital contribution education will make to achieving this.

The economic and social times in which we currently live, and the undeniable period of change ahead of us are the context for the findings and recommendations in this document.

Summary of Findings

1. Differentials in educational performance lie largely outside schools and the classroom. Therefore, systemic educational improvement will require comprehensive, long-term responses to inequality.

2. Funding priorities are 'back to front'. Accumulated evidence suggests that the more we invest in young people early, the better the outcome. Proportionately too little is invested in the early years during key stages of a child’s development.

3. Community and cultural factors affect how Protestant families perceive education and participation in schools.

4. Insufficient flexibility in the curriculum and funding of schools weakens the ability of educators to respond creatively to the needs of students who are not achieving, and to adapt to different learning styles.

5. Even though external factors play the primary role in the academic success of a child, exceptional teaching and leadership in a school can make a tremendous difference.

6. The lack of coordination and cooperation among government departments and agencies wastes resources and potential.

7. The lack of social balance in many schools leads to an unequal distribution of resources and an unfair burden on non-selective schools.

8. Academic selection does not cause social division, but it does accentuate it.

Summary of Recommendations

1. The Northern Ireland Executive should, even within current resources, agree a time-bound, measurable, resourced, Child Poverty Strategy.

2. Serious movement towards front-loading investment should take place, within existing resources, aimed at equalizing funding for all pupil age groups within a short timeframe.

3. Parents and local communities should be pro-actively encouraged to become more involved in education and schools. Initiatives which seek their involvement must also seek to understand parents’ values and motivations.

4. The manner in which schools and educational programmes are managed and funded must be amended to provide greater flexibility for individual schools to respond to the changing needs of student populations and differences in learning styles.

5. More must be done to support, encourage and reward exceptional teaching and leadership in schools.

6. Government departments and agencies must make cooperation and coordination an immediate priority. The establishment of a single education authority is a critical first step towards this objective.

7. The education system should move towards socially balanced intakes.

8. Understanding that the legal position on academic selection is unlikely to change, places to grammar school intake should be capped and the compromise solution of transfer at the age of 14 should be revisited.

9. More research may be required in select areas.
Findings

1. Our principal finding, based on local, UK and international research, is that differentials in educational performance lie (to a degree of 80% or more) outside schools and the classroom. Therefore, systemic educational improvement will require comprehensive, long-term responses to inequality.

The comparative importance of various factors in influencing pupil performance has been researched for many years and within a number of research traditions. An important categorisation is between factors internal to the school and external factors. Its importance for policy is obvious: since improving overall performance is a policy priority in many countries, a better understanding of the influences should, in theory, enable more effective spending decisions and policy directions.

The larger the the sample under investigation, the smaller the influence of school factors is found to be. The huge Equality of Educational Opportunity Survey conducted in the United States for President Johnson in 1966 was an early example. It concluded that the school effect was very small. The more recent practice of econometric studies reach the same conclusion. A review of related studies was conducted by Chevalier, Dolton and Levacic. The amount of variance in pupil performance due to schools ranged between 5% and 18%. A more recent study by Cassen at the London School of Economics analysed nearly half a million individual pupil attainment paths. It found that prior attainment, gender, Free School Meal entitlement, and English as an Additional Language accounted for 92% of the variance in later attainment in secondary schools. It states that some of the unexplained variance, i.e., the remaining 8%, may represent differences in school effectiveness.

Therefore, systemic educational improvement will require comprehensive, long-term responses to inequality. Initiatives to address inequality may include moves towards increased health spending, better housing which supports a healthier living environment, robust and innovative early years and childcare strategies, reductions in wage differentials, a higher minimum wage or moving towards a living wage. Only some of these measures lie within the gift of the local Executive. However, the ones that do can make a critical difference.

4 Hanushek & Raymond: Does school accountability lead to improved student performance, 2004  


2. Funding priorities are back to front.

Accumulated evidence suggests that the more investment is targeted at early years children and young people, the better the outcomes. Proportionately too little is invested in the early years during key stages of a child’s development.

According to the most recent figures in Northern Ireland, an average of £5,126 is spent per annum per pupil in higher education, £4,745 per pupil in further education, £5,287 per pupil in secondary education, and £3,969 per pupil in primary education.  

Funding for development and education in the early years, considered to be from birth to the age of six by the Northern Ireland Department of Education, is spotty and indistinct. For example, the Sure Start programme is underdeveloped and under-funded in Northern Ireland, compared to the rest of the UK. The lack of a robust early years strategy means that many young children are likely to access support services at the point of crisis or once they enter the education system at the age of four or five, when vital developmental milestones have passed.

The most significant period for a child’s development, learning capacity and well-being is during pregnancy and the first three years of life. Risk factors which affect brain development before birth are strongly associated with, or exacerbated by, poverty. Research which analysed children’s educational attainment at the end of primary school found that low birth weight continued to have a significant adverse effect on English and Mathematics attainment at P7.  

By the age of 3 years, a child’s brain has reached almost 80% of its full potential. The structuring or “wiring” of the brain in these early years is of critical importance to both emotional development and academic learning. Nurturing, responsive care and the formation of a strong attachment or bond with a primary caregiver enables healthy brain development. A positive home environment in these early years provides the foundation for all future human relationships and promotes resilience in children who are then more able to cope or recover from stresses or trauma as they move through life.

Conversely, infants whose home environment is marked by inconsistent, insecure or neglectful parenting will remain emotionally immature because their brains have already been structured to respond to this environment. The impact of poor attachment within the classroom setting will likely include limited concentration skills, inability to cope with challenge or failure, lack of empathy with peers and distrust of adults. They will frequently be perceived as ‘badly behaved’ or challenging, or conversely eager and willing to please the teacher but on closer examination have actually learnt little. In large classroom situations, the

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8 Higher education costs depend on the course. The clinical stages of medical and dental courses can run more than £18,000 per pupil. See Assembly Questions AQW 4559/11.

9 See Assembly Questions AQW 4560/11 and AQW 4559/11. By way of comparison, AQW 4561/11 revealed that the average annual cost of a sentenced offender is more than £60,000 per prisoner. A number of states in the United States plan for their future prison populations based on the number of young people who leave school at 16 without qualifications.


latter group can fall under the radar and leave primary school with limited literacy or numeracy skills.

Bonding and attachment difficulties can occur across all social classes but as stressors such as domestic violence, parental mental health problems, poverty and debt, addictions and unfit accommodation are higher in working class communities, the vulnerability is much greater. Mothers who themselves did not receive a nurturing start in life will require much greater support in parenting because, for example, their own sense of empathy has been poorly developed. The trans-generational aspect of the early years experience has a specific Northern Ireland aspect given the impact of our long history of civil conflict on families and communities.13

Another frequently interlinked area of child development is the acquisition of speech, language and communication skills. Again the key period for building the foundations of these skills is the period before children enter preschool.14

There is now an acceptance of the social and indeed economic benefits of investing in the early years. However, the reality is, particularly within education in Northern Ireland, that investment continues to be skewed in the opposite direction. Problems or opportunities which could have been addressed in the early years, or even the primary school years, are being missed by the lack of a meaningful early years strategy and insufficient investment in primary education.

3. Community and cultural factors affect how Protestant families perceive education and participation in schools.

One strong theme within the discourse of the Working Group, and in responses to the consultation, was the familiar narrative of de-industrialisation and the loss of traditional labour markets and skills. Generations of working class Protestants were heavily involved in manufacturing industry and viewed getting a trade as the main form of educational requirement. The collapse in this labour market and the movement towards a consumerist, service driven economy has, to a degree, left elements of the Protestant working class stranded with redundant skills-sets and abilities.

Given the historic predominance of trades and apprenticeships, educational attainment via schools, colleges and universities had not been prioritised among this section of Northern Ireland’s working class in the manner required to respond to new ‘flexible’, less regulated, labour markets driven by educational qualifications and skills tied to computerisation and portable learning. The collapse of established, long-term inter-generational labour markets led to some aiming for new skills but many merely feeling ‘out of sync’ with contemporary requirements.

For the latter group, the traditional labour market was replaced by social fatalism, low wage employment, insecure casualised work, feminised labour and benefit dependency. Within that group, education remains both under-valued and under-appreciated. A new and deep-rooted approach is needed to bring about the scale of change that is required.

13 Dr Angela O’Rawe, Speech at the launch of the Association for Infant Mental Health at the Long Gallery, Stormont, November 2009.

Accompanying this educational and labour ‘vacuum’ has been the loss of positive role models, community stability and the post-ceasefire rise of organised criminal groups, often closely tied to paramilitary organisations, that offer short-term status, ‘kudos’ and profit through illegal activity.

Some submissions to the Working Group’s consultation also highlighted the perception of a different spatial geography within Protestant urban communities, with less concentrated disadvantage and more ‘pockets of deprivation’ surrounded by affluent areas. Community capacity in Protestant working class districts is variable and while some neighbourhoods display high levels of both capacity and capability, (as evidenced by recent analysis of social assets across Northern Ireland15) there are also places in which community infrastructure is weaker than in similar, often proximate, Catholic districts.

As we seek a coherent and long-term approach to educational inequalities, the links between deprivation and inter-communal division in Northern Ireland are worth noting:

- Close spatial correspondence exists between the areas of highest deprivation and those that have endured the greatest political tension and violence;
- Inter-group rivalry for socio-economic resources accentuates division between neighbouring communities;
- Elevating ‘bonding capital’ to achieve intra-community regeneration can compromise scope for ‘bridging capital’ to redress inter-communal division;
- Separate social provision involves duplication and diseconomies that deplete public resources16.

Historically, the Protestant community has been more at ease with ‘representative’ democracy than ‘bottom up’ or community development approaches. For that reason, there is greater comfort in universal provision (such as Sure Start, Extended Schools, libraries, statutory youth clubs, Citizens Advice, etc.) rather than locally or community driven efforts.17 Tender calls or funding initiatives therefore need to consider broader development approaches which might include, for example, churches or sports associations in Protestant areas.

4. Insufficient flexibility in the curriculum and funding of schools weakens the ability of educators to respond creatively to the needs of students who are not achieving, and to adapt to different learning styles.

Within schools, there remains a hankering for a “hands on” more practical, vocationally based education. The strictures of the National Curriculum, introduced by Kenneth Baker in 1988 and Brian Mawhinney in Northern Ireland in 1989, was felt to be constraining, leading to

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15 Social Assets – A new approach to understanding and working with communities (CFNI and CENI 2009)


17 Much of the community capacity within working class Protestant districts comes within the sphere of influence of Churches – who are, typically, significant providers of pre-school provision, sporting opportunities, and services for senior citizens. This was underlined by a significant mapping exercise done by current Presbyterian Moderator, Rev Norman Hamilton, as a Minister in Ballysillan Presbyterian Church in the Oldpark Electoral Area, June 1999. Later work through the Community Development in Protestant Areas, conference report (Burrows, Sweeney, Redpath, Wright et al), reinforced this view, as does the Protestant, Unionist, Loyalist (PUL) Network: Facing our Future with Confidence Strategic Plan 2002-05. The rural Protestant perspective is well captured in a Social Audit of the Protestant community in the Greater Newry and Mourne Area (Roy McCune & Associates for Alt naveigh House Enterprise and Culture Society, 2000) and in the Rural Community Network’s, You feel you’d have no say – Border Protestants and Community Development (2003).
difficulties in engaging many young boys. The recent Wolf Report is the latest of a long line of studies highlighting that vocational education remains undervalued across the UK.  

In this regard, the new Northern Ireland curriculum and the movement towards pupil Entitlement will help, with the “24/27” Entitlement Framework offering the prospect of a broader based and more applied curriculum. Nonetheless, the Working Group found strong demand for more flexibility and freedom to divert ‘off curriculum’ to enable meaningful engagement with students with different learning styles, and young boys in particular. The Working Group also identified inconsistencies in the quality of vocational education as an issue requiring review and investment.

5. Even though external factors play the primary role in the academic success of a child, exceptional teaching and leadership in a school can make a tremendous difference.

It takes more than just engaged parents to enhance children’s learning. Studies of high-performing schools identify key characteristics associated with improvement. These include high standards and expectations for all children and the curriculum, as well as instruction and assessments aligned with those standards. They also include effective leadership, frequent monitoring of teaching and learning, and focused professional development, complemented by high levels of parent and community involvement.

**Outstanding schools:**

- excel at what they do, not just occasionally but for a high proportion of the time;
- prove constantly that disadvantage need not be a barrier to achievement;
- put students first, invest in their staff and nurture their communities;
- have strong values and high expectations that are applied consistently and never relaxed;
- fulfil individual potential through providing outstanding teaching, rich opportunities for learning, and encouragement and support for each student;
- are highly inclusive, having complete regard for the educational progress, personal development and well-being of every student;
- operate with a very high degree of internal consistency;
- are constantly looking for ways to improve further; and/or,
- have outstanding and well-distributed leadership.

Throughout our discussions and consultation we were reminded of the importance of leadership in driving change – leadership within schools and within the communities they serve.

Where school improvement has been evident and a more successful learning culture has developed, particularly in some of our most challenging schools, the role of the school leader has emerged as central to this success.

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18 The Wolf Report (2011) was a review of vocational education commissioned by the government. Professor Alison Wolf found that between a quarter and a third of 16–19 year olds (up to 400,000 pupils) are enrolled in vocational courses that will lead to neither a job nor study at an higher education institution. See http://www.education.gov.uk/publications/eOrderingDownload/Wolf-Report.pdf.

The Impact of School Leadership on Pupil Outcomes, a three-year research project commissioned by the Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF) in conjunction with the National College of School Leadership (NCSL) in England, has provided important insight into what makes a good school leader and confirms much of the anecdotal evidence we heard during our deliberations.

The research found that, "heads in more effective schools are successful in improving pupil outcomes through who they are - their values, virtues, dispositions, attributes and competences - the strategies they use, and the specific combination and timely implementation and management of these strategies in response to the unique contexts in which they work." 21

6. The lack of coordination and cooperation among government departments and agencies wastes resources and potential.

Responses to the consultation highlighted the need to use limited resources more wisely, driving an agenda that is centred on rationalisation, integration of services and improving collaboration.

It is widely believed that investments in education yield large returns to both society and the individual. We need, therefore, to move away from debates about who is funding which short-term projects towards a longer-term strategy focused on aligning existing initiatives and funding streams at local level, within a clear model of delivery that can negate the effect of cut backs in public services.

Dedicated resources for education need to be complemented by other key strategic objectives for tackling poverty, reducing inequality, improving health outcomes, improving employability and enhancing community cohesion. These policy objectives exist, but do not yet sit within a coherent framework that is robustly outcome focused over a long enough timeframe.

7. The lack of social balance in many schools leads to an unequal distribution of resources and an unfair burden on non-selective schools.

It has long been generally accepted academically, if not acted upon by policymakers, that overall school performance improves with balanced intakes. The lack of balanced intake in the education system creates a serious disparity among schools in which some flourish, but many are left to fight an uphill battle, coping with larger numbers of students affected by social and economic disadvantage.

If standards are to rise for all, we need schools which are socially mixed, which have a leavening effect in which peer group pressure can be used to open minds, change outlooks and raise aspirations.

The argument in favour of socially balanced intakes makes a case on three levels in particular: 1) better educational outcomes; 2) a higher degree of fiscal responsibility and smarter use of public resources; and, 3) a more just and equitable society.

Educationally, with socially balanced intakes everyone does better, even those pupils who are already achieving at higher levels. Economically, as a society we cannot afford such a long tail of underachievement. High percentages of underachievement create a

20 DCSF – RR108 (June 2009)

21 Ibid.

larger and broader financial burden on the state, which prevents any real movement along the high value-added economic development routes mapped out by successive government strategies. Finally, moving towards a less stratified and class-segregated society is simply the right thing to do. It will leave us more at ease as a society.  

8. Academic selection does not cause social division, but it does accentuate it.

The transfer issue has dominated the educational discourse at political and societal level over the past decade in a corrosive way. Powerful institutional defence has often bested rational discourse. The Working Group were concerned that addressing this issue would distract attention from valuable findings and recommendations contained in this document which do not relate directly to academic selection. It was not ‘at the heart of’ the group’s core remit for this reason.

Working Group members held a variety of individual views on academic selection and the grammar school system. As this paper’s findings on the early years illustrate, and many submissions to the consultation further pointed out, by the age of 10 or 11 the ‘damage is essentially done’, with strong effects thereafter on the aspirations of many. Therefore, the group considered there to be questionable value in focusing on an educational policy which occurs so far along in a child’s development that the proverbial horse has already bolted.

However, the issue consistently inserted itself in the group’s work, particularly when it came to discussions of funding, social balance, sustainable schools, flexibility and a fair distribution of resources among schools and communities.

There is little doubt, for example, that the mixture of academic selection at 11 with open enrolment and a competitive Local Management of Schools (LMS) funding system has had a negative impact. The 1989 Education Order has been damaging for the educational prospects of Protestant working class young people.

It is within this context that we have reached the following conclusions:

a. Whilst the grammar system has the effect of accentuating social division at 11, it does not cause it.

b. With upwards of 42% of pupils transferring to grammar schools, the current transfer procedure has a damaging effect on the overall system, with too many secondary schools fighting an uphill battle, coping with high concentrations of special educational needs, social disadvantage and negative communitarian or peer attitudes to the value of education.

The submission of the Transferor Representatives’ Council, for instance, said “If Grammar schools are to continue in the future,
they should be encouraged to find a way of ensuring their admissions criteria enable them to have a largely academic focus, rather than enrolling pupils to the maximum of their admissions number. This would allow secondary schools to have a wider ability intake of pupils in any particular year.”

Unionist political and community leaders have a vital role to play in addressing this situation. While quick to laud the notable and undeniable achievements of the grammar system, there has been insufficient leadership and honesty among Unionist politicians in acknowledging and addressing underachievement, which has a profound and lasting impact on the Protestant working class community in particular.
Recommendations

1. The Northern Ireland Executive should, even within current resources, agree a time-bound, measurable, resourced, Child Poverty Strategy.

The Child Poverty Strategy should be a key mechanism in breaking the cycle of poverty in Northern Ireland, by addressing the educational underachievement of disadvantaged children across all communities and tackling poor performance strategically and within each community where there is disproportionate disadvantage.

In addition to being a legislative obligation, the Child Poverty Strategy represents a unique opportunity to reverse the cycles of persistent and enduring poverty in Northern Ireland, which reduce a child’s lifetime opportunities from birth. Unfortunately, the current draft strategy appears weak and highly conditional and seems unlikely to make a meaningful impact.

Leading educationalists and community activists consistently cite anxieties, insecurities and stresses which are frequently the result or side effects of poverty and deprivation as significant barriers to helping children and young people understand and achieve their full potential.27

2. Serious movement towards front-loading investment should take place, within existing resources, aimed at equalizing funding for all pupil age groups within a short timeframe.

While it is right that secondary and third level education receive robust financing, it cannot be at the expense of early years and primary education spending. This imbalance prevents sufficient investment in the very foundations of a child’s development, potentially limiting the opportunities available to them later in life. It also ensures that necessary interventions or programmes of support will be more costly as they are likely to be introduced when problems are more acute.

Within the Aggregated Schools Budget, we should aim to taper expenditure from a higher ‘per pupil’ sum in the early years and from Primary 1 to a lower ‘per capita’ sum, per pupil in Year 14. In other words, we should fund pupils in precisely the opposite way in which we do at present.

As a first step, it is recommended that all pupil funding be equal regardless of age, with Special Educational Needs an important exception.28

In addition to addressing the imbalance in funding, the Working Group identified other areas in which early years investment can be enhanced:

a. Extend Sure Start. As noted in the findings, Sure Start provision in Northern Ireland is extremely limited compared with the rest of the UK. In the absence of a comprehensive early years strategy, Sure Start serves as the primary vehicle through which early years support and services are delivered to communities experiencing social and economic deprivation. This ensures that Sure Start will continue to play a vital role promoting early childhood

27 See the Case Studies at the end of the document for several examples.

28 This should not be read to exclude a premium for pupils with Special Educational Needs.
development. The programme should be expanded and funded to its full capacity.

b. **Revise the manner in which areas of social need are identified.** Any further expansion of Sure Start, as well as other programmes designed to address issues related to poverty, should take a more holistic approach to identifying need and operate at more appropriate geographic scales.\(^{29}\) The historic use of criteria of social need, particularly in the form of multiple deprivation measures has led to a ‘rules driven’ approach which is based on deprivation scores that have little connection to real social conditions, or to the assets and capabilities within communities. They simply establish a ranking order that says one place is more deprived than another. Additionally, there can be ‘pockets of deprivation’ surrounded by affluent areas which are missed under this system.

c. **Specialised training is needed for nursery and primary school staff.** More awareness raising and training is required for early years, nursery and primary school staff on infant mental health and attachment issues and strategies to include and support children who have, or are living in, difficult circumstances. There is a need to move away from a ‘zero tolerance’ attitude and exclusion of young children displaying aggressive or challenging behaviour, towards a culture of child protection.

3. **Parents and local communities should be encouraged to become more involved in education and schools. Initiatives which seek their involvement must also seek to understand parents’ values and motivations.**

We know that differences in parental involvement in children’s learning have a greater impact on attainment than differences associated with schools.\(^ {30}\) Schools do not hold the only key to positive outcomes for children.\(^ {31}\)

We know that if a child sees that their parents are enthusiastic about education, they are far more likely to view their schooling in a positive light, and be more receptive to learning.\(^ {32}\)

It is also clear that what parents do, rather than who they are, has a significant influence on outcomes, particularly when children are young. This is important, particularly in neighbourhoods with high levels of disadvantage.\(^ {33}\)

An increased sense of community ownership of schools, particularly primary schools, is essential to developing capacity in the Protestant working class. More local people and those who are active in their communities should be encouraged onto Boards of Governors.

Respondents to the consultation advocated promoting schools as a ‘community hub’, believing that this could play an important part in developing a positive community ethos that values education and creates a natural path for parents to become more involved.

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\(^{29}\) The late Billy Mitchell set out these arguments in more detail in his article “Measuring and Responding to Deprivation” North Belfast News, p8 20 February 1999

\(^{30}\) Melhuish et al. (2006) *Effective Pre-school Provision in Northern Ireland Summary Report* Bangor: Department of Education


\(^{32}\) See for example [www.standards.dfes.gov.uk](http://www.standards.dfes.gov.uk)

\(^{33}\) Henderson & Mapp (2002). *A New Wave of Evidence: The Impact of School, Family, and Community Connections on Student Achievement*. Southwest Educational Laboratory.
The voices of pupils should also be heard more, either through school councils or other means by which young people can participate democratically in their own education.34

The Extended Schools Programme is, at best, patchy in regards to community involvement, and engagement efforts need to go beyond questionnaires with parents about what they want. While there are good examples of joint working and decision-making on Extended Schools programming and budgeting, the year-on-year funding uncertainty works against good planning.

For similar reasons, there is merit in reviewing the use of Free School Meal Entitlement (FSME) as the most effective proxy to measure disadvantage. There is anecdotal evidence that uptake of FSME is a challenge in some Controlled schools, perhaps an attitudinal issue related to a traditional affinity between the Protestant community and the state. Some Principals have reported making significant efforts to discuss and persuade parents to register for entitlements, even if they are not taken up.

School age family programmes need to be flexible enough to work with parents ‘where they are at’ and use people who are best suited to engage those parents who most need it. This may not necessarily be teachers. Such efforts must be aware that parents with low self-esteem and poorest parenting capacity will generally not want to join groups or courses and may need one-to-one support. Self-esteem, personal development, and literacy and numeracy courses for mothers are very important as mothers remain the primary educators of children.35

To provide schools with high levels of parent and community involvement, this Call to Action additionally recommends:

a. A clear plan for parental involvement within the School Development Plan, with targets and opportunities for review processes, which is understood by teaching staff and which fits within the overall plan and ethos of schools;

b. High quality in-service training for teachers which provides expertise in how to promote parental involvement beyond ‘the usual’ attendance at Sports Days and PTA meetings;

c. Greater clarity for parents as to the purpose of programmes designed to support them in their own learning, in order to enhance their children’s opportunities, or intended to further engage parents in school life; and,

d. Greater emphasis on communication and relationships between schools, communities and other stakeholders; to maximize opportunities emerging through regeneration and community development programmes.

34 The Northern Ireland Commission for Children and Young People has been developing models for School Councils – see http://www.niccy.org/

35 While the Department of Education’s, Effective Pre-School Provision in Northern Ireland (EPPNI) research shows that the educational qualifications of mothers and fathers has a significant impact on children’s attainment, it is only the mother’s qualifications that had a significant impact on children’s progress through primary school.
4. The manner in which schools and educational programmes are managed and funded must be amended to allow for greater flexibility for individual schools to respond to the changing needs of student populations and differences in learning styles.

The lesser status of vocational education was raised by many respondents to the consultation as an issue. The roll-out of the “24/27” Pupil Entitlement framework will help to address the bias. Notwithstanding the development of the revised curriculum and the implementation of Pupil Entitlement, there will remain cases where schools should have the flexibility, in the best interests of retaining and engaging pupils, to go “off curriculum”.

One suggestion is, through the ongoing Review of Local Management of Schools (LMS) funding system, that vocational courses should, initially, receive additional front-weighted funding in order to secure a viable level of pupil enrolment. Courses with lower levels of enrolment could be merged to create required levels of participation and stimulate additional collaboration.

Additionally, the Working Group examined local and international work on gender differentials in education and recommends that educational policy be more open to a spectrum of learning styles. This may involve being more gender conscious in the development of curriculum, and more aware that boys and girls often demand different approaches to meeting their educational needs.

This may be particularly true for boys from communities that continue to experience socio-economic deprivation, poverty, academic underachievement and suffer most from the legacy of the troubles. These boys and young men will do best in a classroom environment that understands and connects to the influences in their lives beyond the school gates.

The Working Group noted the increased feminization of the teaching profession, notably at primary level. The introduction of positive male role models may go some way to meeting the challenge of further engaging young men and boys in education.

5. More must be done to support, encourage and reward exceptional teaching and leadership in schools.

Unsurprisingly, it was found that to effect change in more challenging schools, effective leadership practice is required. The Working Group believes that quality leadership within schools needs to be aligned to developing local partnerships beyond the school, to encourage parental support for learning and identify new learning opportunities. To build success, this requires stronger partnerships with other agencies, local leadership and local commitment. Such efforts need to be resourced both within schools and the community, to ensure that progress is embedded and the benefits of effective leadership are felt over time.

Our leadership challenges are:

- To attract and prepare new leaders for our schools and communities;
- To spread high quality leadership across schools;
- To ensure that where there is exceptional leadership it is rewarded and sustained, and;
- To secure investment in ongoing professional development.

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36 See Case Study B from the Centre for Young Men’s Studies at the University of Ulster.
Amongst the specific further recommendations we would make in relation to improving performance in schools are:

a. **Teacher Placements**: Offer meaningful incentives for excellent principals, emerging school leaders and teachers to undertake, as part of a planned Continuing Professional Development (CPD) approach, placements of two to four years in under-achieving schools.

b. **A School Leadership Scheme**: Consider developing a programme in Northern Ireland that learns from the English 'Future Leaders' Programme\(^{37}\), which works with teachers committed to improving the life chances of pupils in disadvantaged areas and offers accelerated paths to headship.

c. **An Excellent Teacher Scheme**: Consider implementing a variant of the Excellent Teacher scheme (also in England) whereby teachers at the top of their scale, and who want to remain, predominantly, classroom focused, could secure additional pay by volunteering to be redeployed to teach in a school within a disadvantaged area.\(^{38}\)

d. **Effectiveness of Teachers**: The quality of the Northern Irish teaching workforce is high. However, some respondents to the consultation perceived that there was, in some cases, a tolerance of poor quality or ineffective teaching that was unhelpful to the improvement of standards. There is no excuse for the wide disparity in outcomes of schools in similar circumstances.\(^{39}\) It is recommended that the Teachers Negotiating Committee reconsider the current Unsatisfactory Teacher Procedure to provide effective and timely intervention to ineffective teaching.

e. **Newly Qualified Teacher (NQT) Guaranteed Year Scheme**: We are aware of the proposals of the Northern Ireland Teachers Council calling for a cadre of 200+ NQTs to be offered a 'first guaranteed year' similar to that implemented in Scotland following the McCrone Report.\(^{40}\) The aim of the scheme, in addition to providing a first guaranteed year of employment, would be to apply the additional resource to cover, allowing for implementation of 10% Planning, Preparation and Assessment for teachers. Additionally, the NQT resource could be directed and applied to reduce class sizes, and provide additional supports to under-performing schools in disadvantaged areas. This scheme brings significant productivity gains in schools and, set against the costs of JobSeekers Allowance and other benefits for unemployed graduate NQTs, is of marginal cost.

f. **School Governance**: One point made by several consultation responses was that the Council for Catholic Maintained School (CCMS) exercises a challenge function in respect of the educational performance within Maintained schools, whereas Education and Library Boards (ELB), until recently, had indicated that this was not their role. Likewise, the ELBs role as managers of Controlled schools gives them more authority

\(^{37}\) [http://www.future-leaders.org.uk/our-programme/the-programme](http://www.future-leaders.org.uk/our-programme/the-programme)

\(^{38}\) The role of a single employing body would be key to the success of such a scheme in facilitating the flexible transfer of staff between schools.

\(^{39}\) As an example, some Working Group members highlighted the Montgomery County Public School system in Maryland, USA, which utilises a successful support-focused performance management system entitled the Teacher Professional Growth System. See “Leading for Equity” Childress, Doyle & Thomas, Harvard Education Press, Cambridge, Mass. [www.harvardeducationpress.org](http://www.harvardeducationpress.org) ISBN 9-781934-742228

\(^{40}\) A teaching profession for the 21st century (commonly known as the “McCrone Agreement”), see [http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Publications/2001/01/7959/File-1](http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Publications/2001/01/7959/File-1). The McCrone scheme is widely considered a success in Scotland, but is currently under review.
to direct Governors, which may lead to Governors undervaluing their own role and, perhaps, shying away from the challenge function to a degree. These differences are important if “maximised autonomy” and the continued centrality of Governors are to continue.

With school rationalisation, and fewer schools, it should logically allow the capacity issue of spreading too few good volunteer Governors too thin to improve. The standard and role of Governors in Controlled schools should improve.

In its consultation response, the Transferor Representatives’ Council (TRC) argued for the removal of the legislative quirk which requires Governors holding office in one school to be a Governor in another school, effectively a requirement to ‘double job’. This tends to present a disincentive to prospective Governors.

It is also the case that the experience of serving on a Board of Governors is not always a rewarding one. The culture of working is highly bureaucratised, and tends to promote a climate of caution with more attention given to administration, policies and procedures than performance. Accountability tends to be upwards to those who appoint Governors, rather than coming from the school or community population.

There is frequently an absence of a relationship with pupils and the community in which the school sits. The composition of a board tends to be very much adult-centric, even middle-aged, and the absence of the pupils’ voice can be striking.

We recommend that the legislative quirk raised by the TRC is considered. Additionally, where a school enters “special measures” under the Every School a Good School process, employers should have the opportunity to appoint a fixed-term principal with authority to take action to facilitate better parental and community involvement.

4. Development of a ‘Good Practice Repository’ for teachers and parents:

There are many ways to achieve this very important policy structure for schools. Within schools, examples of good practice could include sample lessons within departments, learning initiatives between departments, a “My Favourite Lesson” file accessible to students and substitute teachers, or Assessment for Learning Initiatives within and between departments.41

Outside of schools, a single education authority may take a lead facilitative role in disseminating good practice. The General Teaching Council (GTC) currently undertakes a similar function in promoting shared policy and research relevant to teachers through the GTC NI’s research repository, ARTT.42 The University of the First Age website provides another example.43

41 Among schools, there have been several success stories. A few examples include: The Development and Dissemination of Good Practice in Schools 2007 (funding ceased); Learning and Teaching, Belfast 2009 (ongoing); and, Curriculum Leaders Conference Disseminating Practice 2009.

42 See http://www.ufa.org.uk/

43 See the General Teaching Council’s Research Repository, ARTT, at http://arrts.gtcni.org.uk/gtcni/
6. Government departments and agencies must make cooperation and coordination an immediate priority. The establishment of a single education authority is an immediate priority.

The issues and challenges identified by the Working Group and outlined in this document are clearly not entirely the responsibility of the Department of Education, nor are they within the ability of individual schools, Boards or the Department to address. The education system alone cannot drive the sort of sustained change that is required.

If we are to genuinely make a difference in educational attainment and lifetime opportunities for all our children and young people, government departments must work together to coordinate efforts, establish cross-departmental strategies and initiatives, and cooperate in the commissioning of programmes and services for children and young people.

The experience of the Neighbourhood Renewal Programme should be explored to inform any process aimed at cross-departmental working. The mid-term review of the programme concluded that its success has been limited by the failure to ignite interest and connect it to wider policies across government, particularly economic development.

In the case of education, the debate surrounding the proposed move towards area based planning underlined the value of engagement across a wide sector of interests. Unfortunately, the development of area based Learning Partnerships remains in its infancy, at best a work in progress.

 Effective prevention and intervention strategies require joined-up government at a policy level and integrated services at the delivery level, particularly in regard to statutory health and education services working together with the community and voluntary sectors and local partnerships.

This type of cooperation is more likely to lead to intelligent funding and smart investment at a time when public sector funding is facing significant reductions. Across all government departments, priority needs to be given to targeted, timely interventions which will prevent more costly interventions being needed at a later stage.

In addition to the Child Poverty Strategy, the recommendations we would make to ‘join up’ government would be:

a. A Single Authority: The Working Group is cognisant of the political divisions over the setting up of the Educational Skills Authority (ESA). We believe the points of division between the political parties are second or third order issues. We are convinced of the need, within such a small jurisdiction, of a single education authority as the best way to strategically manage and reconfigure education services, particularly at a time of budgetary contraction. Agreement on a single education authority for Northern Ireland, aside from saving some £20m to go towards frontline services,\(^4\) would also provide the sort of redeployment and redundancy trawl that would allow some of our other recommendations to happen, including the radical shift to equal ‘per head’ school funding and the facilitation of larger, educationally sustainable, socially balanced, schools through school rationalisation.

The role of a single authority is also important in the development of a clear CPD offer to teachers and better leadership.

\(^4\) An internal (unpublished) report by Deloitte for the Review of Public Administration estimated savings of some £20 million to front-line education by the institution of a single education authority.
development for school leaders. It could allow for the sort of redeployment flexibility to allow teachers to undertake a two to four year challenge placement, designed as a positive CPD experience, within a disadvantaged school.

b. Controlled Schools Body: It remains the view of government that, despite moves towards a single education authority, a number of sectoral bodies should continue to exist. We have noted a view that sectoral bodies should be largely or wholly voluntary in nature and should not drain or divert resources from the classroom at a challenging budgetary round.

However, our recommendation is that, within the context of a single authority (and the maintenance of a plurality of educational sectors) that there is no reason why a Controlled Schools body should not exist if similar bodies in the Maintained, Integrated and Irish Medium sectors are to continue, provided that the role of such bodies has substance and meaning. Without a real and weighty function, the role of a Controlled Schools body acting in an essentially cheerleading capacity would not be useful. The Transferors Representative Council also made the point that ownership is central to the credibility of such a body to undertake any challenge function similar to CCMS.

It would also be anticipated that the TRC would play a significant role in a Controlled Schools body and it is understood that the informal Controlled Schools Commission has developed and secured broad and plural agreement for the 'ethos' of such schools which should represent a useful starting point for a Controlled Schools body.

c. Invest to Save, Intelligent Funding and Smart Investment: One cross-cutting recommendation, taking account of the current budgetary austerity is for the principle of Invest to Save to inform budgetary decisions, to promote Intelligent Funding and Smart Investment. Across all government departments, including education, priority needs to be given to targeted, timely interventions which will prevent more costly interventions being needed at a later stage. This is an opportunity for the Department of Education and others to strategically review what is effective at achieving the best outcomes for disadvantaged children and invest available resources accordingly.

The following series of principles adapted from the Comprehensive Spending Review Framework should provide a useful guide for all government departments when making spending cuts:

- Are poor families or vulnerable children the main beneficiaries of this activity?
- Will cutting back on this activity cause greater pressure on other local services?
- Will cutting back on this activity cause greater problems for the future that will cost more?
- Could this activity be better packaged with others to avoid duplication and deliver a more holistic service?
- Could this activity be provided more effectively and for greater value for money by non-statutory providers?
- Does this service or programme represent the best investment for the best social return?
7. The education system should move towards socially balanced intakes.

The continuance of the general Bain principles on school sustainability will see, in time, fewer, larger and more educationally sustainable schools. Larger schools, with larger catchments ought to create (all other things being equal) a more harmonious social balance within the pupil intake.

The challenge then is to increase the incentive for relatively well-off families with social capital to stay in areas and change them from within. Monitoring, reporting and targets on social balance should be undertaken as a key baseline indicator in school performance, notably within school inspections. Just as the monitoring, reporting and setting of targets on Fair Employment within the workplace had an effect, so too could the same duty in respect of socially balanced intakes.

We know that balanced intakes are a key determinant in systemic educational performance. Equally, we know that socially imbalanced intakes are more prevalent within predominantly Protestant schools than within predominantly Catholic schools. Prep schools, for instance, are largely a feature of the Protestant community with only 10.7% Catholic enrolment at Northern Ireland’s 16 Prep schools. There are significantly lower levels of disadvantaged pupils attending principally Protestant Voluntary or Controlled grammars than mainly Catholic grammars.

We would further recommend that the monitoring oversight role should lie with the Equality Commission, rather than with the Department of Education. It is understood that such a role would be outside the Equality Commission’s current remit and would require legislation to make effective. However, the Equality Commission has experience of such monitoring, notably in regard to Fair Employment monitoring, and therefore may be best suited for this purpose.

8. Understanding that the legal position on academic selection is unlikely to change, places to grammar school intake should be capped and the compromise solution of transfer at the age of 14 should be revisited.

Under the present political system, it is hard to avoid the conclusion that academic selection is unlikely to be legally abolished. Nonetheless, maintenance of the status quo of unregulated testing and selection will not be without difficulties.

As such, if we are to tackle the systemic damage caused by grammar schools filling all available seats regardless of test scores, there appear to be two realistic options within the realms of current political possibility. These are:

a. That places to grammar school intake could be capped, perhaps based only on the average number of “A” grades admitted, per school, over the last 10 years of the Department of Education regulated test. The capping of places, in order to protect the integrity of the education system as a whole would, we believe, be within the

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45 In Montgomery County, Maryland, where the public school system has achieved significant movement in addressing achievement through equality, this was undertaken through an ongoing campaign to persuade stakeholders, most notably business groupings and parents, of the merits of “lifting all boats.” The benefits to all children, young people and communities were communicated and discussed largely through public Town Hall meetings.

46 Department of Education Equality Impact Assessment of the proposal to withdraw funding from the Preparatory Departments of Grammar Schools, January 2010

47 Northern Ireland Assembly Research & Library Services, Jennifer Betts “Educational Underachievement and working class Protestant boys, Research Briefing, August 2010, Annex A, 13
competence of the Minister of Education and would not require primary legislation.

b. That the compromise solution of transfer at the age of 14, agreed by elements within the Governing Bodies Association and the Secondary Schools Principals Association, supported by the main Churches, be revisited.\(^{48}\)

9. More research may be required in select areas.

This Call to Action does not consider that any more research is required that would have the effect of holding up practical action. However, we believe that more research is desirable in respect of the following:

- **The Urban Effect:** How pronounced is the “Belfast Effect”, or is it an “Urban Effect”? We received mixed views from consultees, and some research evidence suggesting that underachievement was an urban rather than a Greater Belfast problem – evidence too which may have undermined the school sustainability criteria in rural areas. We believe that a quick piece of desk research could provide quick answers.

- **The Holiday Effect:** The work at Rathcoole Primary School (see case study) indicates that more research into the extent and depth of “performance loss” over the long school holiday period, particularly by social class, may be useful. Such research might explore the extent to which good home learning environments, access to books, access to educationally stimulating visits or travel, or educationally focused parental support is likely to mitigate against performance loss.

- **The Integrated Effect:** It is known that integrated schools, particularly at post primary level, tend to encourage both a better inter-communal mix and a better social mix in pupil intake than similar Controlled and Maintained schools. What is not known is whether Protestant working class boys do better in integrated education. A quick piece of desk research could provide answers.

- **Understanding Neurological Development and the Effects of Stress:** The work of the Safe Place Programme (see case study) indicated to us that more research, or a collation of current international evidence, may be desirable into brain and neurological development in the 0-6 age group as well as the effects of stress and anxiety, and how this may affect pedagogic practice, particularly for boys.

\(^{48}\) A delegation from the Governing Bodies Association (Wilfred Mulryne, Fr. Kevin Donaghy and John Young) reached an outline agreement on the problematic issue of Transfer with the Association of Secondary School Heads, a compromise which was backed by the four main Churches in 2009. It should be noted that the ‘Mulryne, Donaghy, Young’ compromise was not subsequently supported by the GBA and would not represent GBA policy. However, this compromise solution remains the likeliest ground upon which the Transfer issue may be agreed.
Implementation and Next Steps

This *Call to Action* is what it says – a Call to Action. Our instinct is that we do not need more pilot work, nor much more research, but concrete action. The case for tilting funding towards the early years is made. So is the case for the Child Poverty Strategy. So is the case for encouraging social balance in schools. And so on! The research base is clear for all to see. **What we need now is the “doing bit”**.

The past six months’ work has been interesting and exhilarating. The evidence we received in many cases confirmed what we knew. In others, it broadened the horizons of our understanding. **Our Call to Action is now for the political arena.** We will host a dissemination event. Our work will be at the disposal of the Assembly’s Education Committee and the Department of Education.

We hope it is discussed with vigour as an election issue in the May Assembly and local government polls. After that, the Working Group hopes to see action.

Thanks

In addition to the 43 groups, organisations and individuals who responded formally to our consultation, we would like to thanks those who met us face-to-face. Our thanks go to Tom Hesketh (Regional Training Unit), Fintan Connolly (FCC Safe Place Project), Billy Macauley (Principal, Black Mountain Primary School), Jim Clarke (CCMS), Rev Trevor Gribben, Rev Trevor Jamison and Rev Ian Ellis (Transferors Representative Council), Margaret Kelly, Linda Wilson (Barnardo’s), Professor Tim Shanahan (Chicago Reading Framework).

Case Studies

Case Study A
**The Effects of Stress on Attainment**
– The Safe Place Project

Case Study B
**Flexibility in the Curriculum**
– Engaging Boys from the University of Ulster and Ashfield Boys’ School

Case Study C
**The Impact of Leadership**
– Future Leaders

Case Study D
**The Importance of Parental and Community Involvement in Schools**
– Home Learning Environments

Case Study E
**The Importance of Parental and Community Involvement in Schools**
– Extended Schools and Community Access from Boys’ Model School

Case Study F
**Flexibility in the Curriculum**
– Academic Performance and School Holidays from Black Mountain Primary School

Case Study G
**The Importance of the Early Years**
– Early Years, Sure Start and Family Learning

Case Study H
**Flexibility in the Curriculum**
– Alternative Education Provision

Case Study I
**Socially Balanced Intakes and Exceptional Teaching**
– Montgomery County Public School System
Case Study A – The Effects of Stress on Attainment

The Safe Place Project

The Safe Place Project is a programme which addresses the emotional well-being of individuals. The training programme is delivered in the school setting and offers much needed skills to assist teachers, carers, children and parents to regulate the emotions that cause anxiety, stress, depression, conflict, offending behaviours and ill-health.

Seven schools in the Greater falls area of West Belfast participated in a pilot programme in 2009. Three primary and four post primary schools participated. The programme produced a number of important findings in children ranging from ages 6 to 16. Definitive improvements were recorded in:

1. emotional problems
2. conduct problems
3. hyperactivity
4. peer relating

James was a nine year old pupil at a primary school in West Belfast. His behaviour at school was of great concern to the teaching staff. He was disruptive in the classroom and displayed an inability to control his anger rages. Despite attending weekly anger management classes (with 3 other classmates), his behaviour continued to be of great concern. One of James’s siblings had died as a result of cot death and James had previously expressed the belief that it had been his fault. It was believed that his anger outbursts were directly related to the death of his sibling.

The Safe Place Programme was introduced to all the children in the class. Each child was taught to use the new biofeedback computer programme installed on the classroom computer. The children were instructed in breathing and emotional shift techniques and through this simple process of self-regulation, learnt how to control their cardiac rhythms and physiology allowing them to become calmer, more focused and attentive.

The class teacher reinforced the programme daily with the 10 minute Audio Safe Place guided meditation for all the pupils.

Within several weeks the children’s behaviour had markedly improved. James in particular, was much calmer, less likely to exhibit anger outbursts and was able to express and control his emotions more effectively. The Safe Place meditation proved to be particularly popular with the class and James wrote a poem expressing his feelings related to this imaginary safe place. This daily routine proved to be an effective way for James to deal with his feelings of grief and guilt. Within several months the four children in the class who had exhibited “anger issues” were able to withdraw from the weekly anger management classes. The teacher reported that overall, the children were more attentive and were able to control and express their emotions more effectively.

The Safe Place Programme uses a dual approach to teach children how to self-regulate their physiology and emotions. They are taught how to quickly and efficiently change their responses to stress and stressful situations. Many children arrive into schools today in an unsettled, anxious and sometimes aggressive state. Negative emotional and physiological states impair cognitive skills and decision making ability. This in turn can lead to lack of attainment at school.

Fintan Connolly  B.Pharm
Educational Consultant
Case Study B – Flexibility in the Curriculum

Strategies to Engage Boys

The following case studies are drawn from aspects of research within the Centre for Young Men’s Studies (University of Ulster) longitudinal study (2006 – 2011) funded by the Department of Education and the Northern Ireland Office, exploring adolescent male post primary school experiences. In this study, the Centre works in partnership with YouthAction Northern Ireland.

Case Study One: Ashfield Boys’ School

Ashfield’s catchment area is mostly east of the city of Belfast and includes a number of wards where unemployment, poverty, educational underachievement and, effects of the Troubles have impacted for more than a generation.

While the success or failure of a school cannot be reduced to one or two components, this case study identified several key reasons why Ashfield has been particularly successful in improving educational attainment amongst adolescent males.

While these steps might not be replicable elsewhere, they represent an approach that has shown significant success for the pupils at Ashfield Boys’ School. It is like pieces of a jigsaw whereby it is not complete unless all the pieces are put together and present. There are 10 pieces:

- Knowing how boys tick and understanding what keeps them motivated
- Results and not process focused
- Strong, clear expectations for behaviour
- Pupil centred and relationship driven
- Community centred
- Home life is left at the door
- A fully committed staff team
- Very strong leadership at the top
- Incentives for fundraising
- Teaching for the ‘real’ world

Any visitor will hear about boys’ need for incentives, competition and strong, clear expectations for behaviour. Boys are introduced to a points system for attendance, punctuality, uniform, behaviour, work produced and points are gained from the absence of detention, behaviour incidents, late or no homework and suspensions.

All teachers are instructed that their first aim is to ‘get the relationship right with a pupil’. The lesson subject comes second to ensuring that pupils are engaged. Teachers are encouraged to find as many different ways of understanding what interests pupils as possible.

There are clear guidelines and boundaries for behaviour. A first violation of these rules results in a yellow card (warning), and then a red card (asked to leave the class and sit in the corridor). Parents are actively involved in discipline procedures.

Leadership is strong. The principal is very supportive of his staff, but even more supportive of his pupils and is primarily concerned about his pupils’ achievements. No-nonsense, direct and practical are the drivers behind the leadership style.

The staff team subscribe to this approach. When new teachers arrive they are inducted into the school’s approach. This often includes senior teachers demonstrating rapport and methods that encourage retention. Staff are also given incentives to keep them focused, engaged, challenged and involved. Ashfield adapt a community-centred approach where boys are actively involved in community projects and fund raising for local initiatives.

Case Study Two: Boys talking about post primary school experiences

This case study captures some of the voices, concerns and opinions of 75 boys aged 15 from six post primary schools across Northern Ireland who participated in focus groups as part of the
Centre for Young Men’s Studies longitudinal study. Key findings included:

• As in the Ashfield case study, the strength of relationship with individual teachers was the decisive determining factor in how well these boys perceived they would do in subjects.

• There was overwhelming evidence that when teachers give encouragement, showed respect and had positive relationships with boys, this improved motivation and attitudes to learning. Where this relationship failed, boys withdrew from these classes and the learning process.

• Participants were concerned about the lack of respect (being listened to and having their opinions and beliefs valued) shown to them by teachers. Being ‘talked down’ to by teachers, or shamed in front of their peers in the classroom made them feel they had to ‘face up’ to teachers or risk be viewed as “soft.”

• Participants believed class sizes were too large and therefore a lot of time was spent on controlling the class which meant there was less time to provide individual tuition.

• There was a strong sense that discipline procedures were often excessive and counter-productive.

• The pattern and structure of the school day and a lack of variety in teaching approaches meant that boys were often bored during subjects, particularly where there was little stimulation, movement or creativity in teaching style demonstrated (i.e. having to sit still for long periods of time).

• Participants were concerned that in the current economic climate that there was little connection between school and the lack of realistic employment opportunities, particularly for those who were struggling in school. They believed that the over emphasis on exams was unhelpful and conflicted with their expectations beyond school.

Ken Harland and Sam McCready

Centre for Young Men’s Studies

The Centre for Young Men’s Studies is located within the Department of Community Youth Work and resides within the School of Sociology and Applied Social Studies at the University of Ulster. The aim of the Centre is to promote the voice, needs and interests of boys and young men in Northern Ireland through action research, training and dissemination of learning.

www.cyms.ulster.ac.uk
Case Study C – The Impact of Leadership

Future Leaders Programme

The Future Leaders Programme was established in 2006 by the children-focused charity Absolute Return for Kids (ARK) and the National College and the Specialist Schools & Academies Trust (SSAT) with an initial group of 20 Future Leaders.

217 Future Leaders are now working in more than 150 challenging schools across five UK regions, improving the life chances of at least 150,000 pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds.

The programme operates with five core beliefs:

EVERY CHILD
All children can achieve even in the most complex environments.

NO EXCUSES
Adults (teachers and other school staff, parents and carers) are responsible for ensuring all children reach their potential.

HIGH EXPECTATIONS
Providing a high quality education is vital for a fair society that affords every child the full range of opportunities in life.

LEAD LEARNING
Great schools are led by great leaders who have a focus on learning and attract, develop and coach great staff to reach every child.

NO ISLANDS
A large number of excellent school leaders can lead to a sustainable improvement across the education system. This is crucial to enable all children to succeed.

The three-year programme offers an accelerated path to secondary headship for qualified current (and former) teachers who believe that every child has the potential to succeed, regardless of background. It involves:

- An intensive initial training course, including 14 days of residential training and a series of seminars with leading educational experts;
- A year of residency in a challenging school under the guidance of a mentor headteacher and dedicated Leadership Development Adviser (LDA);
- Support to secure a senior leadership post following the residency year;
- Continued off-site training and coaching to meet identified development needs; and,
- Access to peer-reviewed best practice and advice and support from the Future Leaders alumni network.

Future Leaders is currently evaluating the impact of its head-teachers on achievement in schools. Initial findings indicate rising attainment, an increase in GCSE scores, and a reduction in persistent absence. Future Leaders participants are also having impacts in Senior Leadership Team positions. Results and finding from individual participants in the programme can be found at http://www.future-leaders.org.uk/impact/case-studies
Case Study D – The Importance of Parental and Community Involvement in Schools

Home Learning Environments

A study undertaken on behalf of the Joseph Rowntree Foundation entitled, How much do affluence and disadvantage influence educational attainment? 49, used a number of large-scale longitudinal data sources capturing groups of children in the UK from early childhood through to late adolescence to examine attainment gaps between richer and poorer children.

They concluded that children from poorer backgrounds are much less likely to experience a rich home learning environment than children from better-off backgrounds. There were significant differences in poorer children’s and their mothers’:

- health and well-being (e.g. birth-weight, breastfeeding, and maternal depression);
- family interactions (e.g. mother–child closeness);
- the home learning environment (e.g. reading regularly to the child); and,
- parenting styles and rules (e.g. regular bed-times and meal-times).

The research identified the following areas where policy might help to reduce educational inequalities including:

- improving the home learning environment in poorer families (e.g. books and reading pre-school, computers in teen years);
- helping parents and children from poorer families to believe that their own actions and efforts can lead to higher education; and,
- raising families’ aspirations and desire for advanced education, from primary school onwards.

Some practical ideas for principals and teachers trying to influence children’s home learning environments emerged during the evaluation of the East Belfast Parent Support Programme (October 2006). These include:

- Improve communication with parents. Are letters, emails and newsletters easy to read and addressed to fathers as well as to mothers? Communication efforts should understand and adapt to the different lifestyles, issues and pressures of children and parents.

- Engage parents at the earliest opportunity. Organise whole-school events during the course of the school year, with a curricular or parent-focussed theme, e.g., literacy events with Story Sacks or story-telling, or Mother’s or Father’s Day events.

- Enable parents to access school resources where possible. Develop a lending library for both books and equipment and encourage parents to share in their children’s learning.

- Organise ‘sharing ideas’ sessions on key aspects of child development that can involve teachers and parents, e.g., child health, speech and language, child safety.

- Welcome parents with an attractive and easy to access ‘Parent information’ area in the entrance area of the school, with information on local services for families with young children and useful telephone numbers and websites.

- Ideally, establish a formal parenting support programme targeted at parents who lack confidence to support their children’s learning. Local voluntary and community sector organisations may be willing to assist in securing resources to support this.

49 Goodman, A and Gregg, G, (March 2010), see www.jrf.org.uk.
Case Study E – The Importance of Parental and Community Involvement in Schools

An Example from Belfast Boys’ Model School

At the start of September 2007, Pupil A’s parents met with the Head of Year and Year Counsellor to explain that he was very upset after his uncle died by suicide during the summer.

Additional concerns included:

- Deterioration in attendance
  - 2006-2007: 78.4%
  - 2007-2008: 65.8%
- Mental health concerns
- Underachievement in Year 11 GCSE Subjects

He had been self-harming and his parents feared for his safety. He agreed to become involved in the Opportunity Youth Life Matters programme. The intention of this initiative is to help young people struggling with low self-esteem. Pupil A was an active participant.

In October 2007, Pupil A was offered the opportunity to become involved in an Equine Facilitated Learning Programme. Young people involved in this programme have the opportunity to care for and ride horses, with the purpose of improving their mental health. Pupil A fully engaged in this strategy.

To this point, Pupil A had been engaging with his Year Counsellor for individual support for his self-harming. It was agreed that the young person required additional counselling so he was referred to Contact Youth for individual support.

In February 2008, the young person indicated he no longer wished to engage with the counseling and indicated that he would prefer to discuss issues with a male worker. Work commenced with a worker from Ardoyne and Shankill Youth Education Help and Advice (YEHA) project. The young person engaged successfully.

Pupil A continued to be supported by his Head of Year and Counsellor, but his engagement in class and his attendance deteriorated. In May 2008 an Alternatives Education programme was offered to the young person. This programme involved 12 young people who were at risk of leaving education before the end of Year 12. They followed a course of alternative accredited qualifications and vocational work experience.

During the next academic year, the young person’s attendance improved from 65.8% during 2007-08 to 89.5% in 2009-10. He continued to be supported by the worker from the YEHA project throughout 2009-2010.

As a result of his success with the Level 2 GCSE equivalent qualifications, Pupil A returned to Year 13 for post-16 study during 2009-10. He studied ICT OCR Level 2 National (worth 4 GCSEs), GCSE Maths, GCSE English, and the Certificate of Personal Effectiveness.

As a result of his success in Year 13, he returned to Year 14 to continue post 16 studies at Advanced level in Leisure and Tourism (Double Award worth 2 A Levels) and ICT (1 A Level).

Without the interventions put in place, this boy would undoubtedly have left school at some stage during Year 12, without qualifications.
Case Study F – Flexibility in the Curriculum

Academic Performance and School Holidays

In 1976, I was asked to head up Special Needs for P1 to P7 at Rathcoole Primary School. I have retained an interest in working with children who find learning a challenge and have picked up a few clues along the way.

The nine A’s which prevent my children from becoming A students include:

- Aspiration and Ambition
- Alienation
- Aptitude and Attention
- Attendance
- Ability
- Affirmation of self-worth
- Anxiety

Some of these inhibitors we can address and change from inhibitors to enablers. We do this day and daily, convincing the most vulnerable children in society that they are valued for what they are and are more than mere beans to be counted.

My school is found in North and West Belfast beside the peace-line. The community has suffered more than most from the Troubles and the scourge of endemic unemployment. Seventy-five percent (75%) of the children are entitled to free school meals; 60% are on the Special Needs register. This paints a grim picture which is grossly misleading.

Today, we had 130 children in school, all of whom wore school uniform, 95% of whom had their homework done to an acceptable standard, and at Parent/Teacher conferences last month every family in school came to consult with their teachers and review their children’s progress.

No child has been suspended from the school in six years and no one has ever been expelled. A complaints procedure is in place which has been used twice in 17 years. There is a lot of evidence to suggest that this school is a happy place where children enjoy learning with highly innovative and caring teachers.

However, our children do less well in transfer test than their contemporaries in other areas of Belfast. They do less well in Statutory Assessment Tests and I.N.C.A.S. The nine A’s above go some way to accounting for this relatively poor achievement, but only some way.

There is one structural aspect of schooling which, every year, contributes to lowering achievement.

Since 1984, I have tested my children on Maths and English in June and again in September of the same year. Over 26 years, the same pattern has been clear to anyone who cares to examine the data.

The graph opposite is a typical trace of a child’s performance over a three year period, 2004 – 2007. This child had a measured I.Q. (Black trace) of 82 in September 2004. The same child’s I.Q. had risen to 123 in June of 2005.

Successive testing yields the typical ‘shark’s teeth’ pattern which is so damaging to children’s progress. Simply state, when at school, children gain up to three years in performance in an eight month period, when measured in standardised tests. **This gain is lost during the summer break when children return to school in September.**
In some cases, the drop is more than the gain from the previous year and is cumulative. Not only will this drop occur in P3, it will occur in all subsequent years for our children, with devastating effects for some.

Some children never recover from this drop and remain at a Quotient of 80, which suggests that their achievements will not reach that which their early potential had indicated.

This year, the pattern revisited us with the following results.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date of test</th>
<th>June '10</th>
<th>Sept '10</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Spelling quotient</td>
<td>98</td>
<td>87</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maths quotient</td>
<td>94</td>
<td>80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reading quotient</td>
<td>96</td>
<td>78</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

On average, the children in this class lost 1.1, 1.4 and 1.8 years in Spelling, Maths and Reading respectively in the two months of the summer holiday 2010. The fact that some children do not sustain improvement when not at school seems irrefutable given the evidence above. While we can play catch up on shorter spells away from the influence of school (and our expectations), we struggle to address the effects of the longer summer holiday despite a raft of corrective measures in place every September and October.

This set of circumstances demands teachers who are innovative, focused on each individual in their class and are a never ending example of unbridled energy in pursuit of the best possible deal for their children. Models of these teachers can be found throughout areas of economic disadvantage in Northern Ireland, but most notably in North and West Belfast. These teachers have chosen to dedicate their considerable expertise and talents to communities worthy of special attention and support to overcome generations of neglect. Their hope is that the reality of teaching as a child valuing activity supersedes the current model of education as bean counting.

W.A. Macauley
Case Study G – The Importance of the Early Years

Early Years, Sure Start and Family Support

Inner City South Belfast Sure Start (ICSBSS) was established 9 years ago and is a Company Limited by Guarantee that is managed by a partnership of community, voluntary and statutory organisations. The Belfast Health and Social Care Trust are the lead and accountable body for the programme. The programme covers the Blackstaff, Shaftesbury, Botanic and Ballynafeigh wards in South Belfast, as well as part of Upper Malone. The programme also provides services to Chinese families living in the whole Belfast area. The services are primarily for children aged 0-3 years and their families, and have four aims:

• Improving Health
• Improving the Ability to Learn
• Improving Social and Emotional Development
• Strengthening Families and Communities

When families start using Sure Start services they become registered ‘members’ and their information is recorded on a database. Currently, there are:

• 652 children under 4 years
• 632 parents (the database only records one parent even if both are using the services)
• 30% of parents have registered themselves as lone parents
• 20% of parents have registered themselves as being black or from an ethnic minority

From this information, we know that ICSBSS has the active engagement of just over 50% of the children in the 0-3 age living in the catchment area.

The programme of services provided includes:

• Outreach/Home Visiting – family support, befriending, parenting, information and resources and advocacy (delivered by Sure Start and East Belfast Home Start)
• Group Based Play – crèches, programmes for 2-3 year olds, nursery school starters
• Programmes for Parents – parenting, health, personal development, leisure and education and training courses
• Parents and Children – parent and toddler groups (Stay to Play), trips and special events
• Health Promotion – Language for Life (speech and language services), breastfeeding support, dental health, nutrition, home safety, children’s physical development, mental health (parents and children) etc.
• Village Sure Start Children’s Centre

To deliver these services, ICSBSS employs 43 staff directly. Most of the childcare staff are part-time employees.

Unlike many other Sure Start programmes ICSBSS has no central base for services and instead works in close partnership with the eight community partner organisations in the eight different communities it serves. As almost all of the services take place in each of these settings for parents, children, and parents and children together, ICSBSS could be described as a completely outreach programme. The home visiting aspect of the programme extends this outreach ethos directly into the families’ homes.

Home visiting was a new concept to most of the communities at the outset, with existing support and services for young families being offered almost solely within community centres or health clinics. There was, therefore, quite a
lot of suspicion initially as to who the Sure Start Key Workers were and why they would want to come and visit families at home.

Over the nine years since ICSBSS was established, both the acceptance of home visiting (and indeed the value placed on this service by parents) has grown exponentially, as well as the understanding as to the purpose and role of home visits within the programme.

All home visits are conducted by the Key Worker team and have a variety of purposes dependant on the needs of the individual family:

- To provide information about ICSBSS services/programmes and help parents access these. This initial home visit is usually a ‘one off’ with sometimes a second visit to follow up on information or bring resources (such as Bookstart packs).

- Child development support. On the initial visit, parents may identify an area that they would like more information or support with such as weaning, bedtime routines or potty training. This usually leads to an agreed series of weekly home visits until the issue has been addressed. However, guidance and resources on child development are a feature of almost all types of home visits as children grow and develop through the different stages. Where there are ongoing concerns about a child’s development the Key Worker will inform and consult with the family’s Health Visitor or encourage the parent to do so themselves.

- Parenting support. Again, this type of work can be reasonably straightforward, such as a time limited ‘play programme’ with weekly sessions on different types of play and activities to give parents some ideas on how they can expand on their child’s learning and development through positive stimulation. Or, it could be a behaviour management programme in the home to support parents with managing the ‘temper tantrum’ stage. However, at a more complex level, where the Sure Start programme is an element of a Social Services child protection plan, the service provided will be focused around what has been assessed as the parenting deficits.

It should be noted that some ‘home visits’ do not happen in the home but in other venues (community centres, cafes etc.) for a variety of reasons such as overcrowding, too many distractions, domestic violence concerns, etc. Transporting and accompanying parents and children to important appointments or court dates is another aspect that is included in the home visiting/family support element of the programme according to the individual circumstances.
Case Study H – Flexibility in the Curriculum Alternative Education Provision

Education By Choice

Education By Choice (EBD) is located on the interface between two communities in inner East Belfast. For the past 10 years, the project, managed by The Bridge Community Association, has offered learning and personal development services for 14-16 year olds no longer in mainstream schools. EBC extended its remit three years ago with Training by Choice (TBC). TBC offers a graduate pathway to 16 year olds not in education or training.

Alternative education is a community response to protect the minimum standards all young people should expect under the United Nations Convention of the Rights of the Child (UNCRC, 1989). EBC and TBC are established on the beliefs that all young people have a right to an education, to have their best interests served, and to have a voice and opinion in order to improve their life chances.

The main route for young people into EBC is referral through the Belfast Education and Library Board Options Panel. Schools also refer students to the project, as do Education Welfare Services and Alternative Justice organisations. However, young people originally self-referred or were referred by parents who found that the educational options for their children were either limited or not sustainable.

The reasons for referral are as unique as the individual experiences the young people bring with them. However, all have not been able to fulfill their potential in mainstream school. Some have made unwise choices, some have difficult family or community circumstances, all are from working class areas of Belfast and most are male. Lindsay is typical of a young person attending alternative education. He attended primary school close to the Bridge Community Association. The school closed and he, along with his peers, found himself in a new school site in a new community area. It was still within walking distance but Lindsay had responsibilities from an early age because his mum had difficulties of her own.

The eldest of three, Lindsay took on caring responsibilities for his siblings, primarily simple things such as waking the household up and organising breakfast each morning. He walked his sister to school in his final years of primary school and then he changed schools.

Things did not go well in his final year of primary school. Lindsay fell behind in his work and was continually late. Some of the issues he could have avoided, but most he couldn’t due to his family circumstances. His behavior became worse as he felt picked on and the school began to lose patience in the midst of all the new pressures of amalgamation. He did not sit the transfer test, but this was not perceived within the family as a problem because neither his mother nor his grandmother had passed it when they took it. He ended up attending a high school outside his local community and a bus journey away.

From day one Lindsay did not fit in, or so he thought. He was bullied in the first two years and began to get into difficulties within the community. Education Welfare became involved as his attendance began to drop rapidly. The school offered alternative arrangements, but Lindsay felt like these classes were for ‘dummies’ or ‘hoods’. Lindsay stopped going to school, hung around the local community and got into bother. He ended up being taken on by NI Alternatives, a community restorative justice organization, and through this engagement was referred to EBC.

Lindsay came to EBC aged 15. He had missed
the bulk of two years at school, was very low in self-confidence, and had a small and fairly destructive friendship group. He was prone to frustration and displays of anger but rarely violent. His literacy and numeracy levels were very low and he had a reading age of an eight year old.

The Bridge worked intensively to get a learning plan together, which was discussed and agreed with Lindsay. This took time, but gradually over the first term he made a couple of new friends and, importantly, he grew to trust the adult staff in the project. The teachers and youth workers who deliver EBC programming took time to get to know him and to recognise his interests.

Lindsay graduated from EBC onto the TBC programme in 2010. He did not gain any formal qualifications during his 9 months with EBC, but he did have 100% attendance. He can now focus his attention and take on work he had forgotten how to do. He can function in a group of peers and he can express his interests in information technology and gaming. He knows that he needs to get English and Maths in order to have a chance of a job and he is taking classes as part of TBC.

Good alternative education facilitates the emotional intelligence in order to develop practical skills. It cannot undo the time that some young people lose, however projects like EBC and TBC demonstrate that it is never too late to intervene. What is often lacking is the vision of what constitutes positive outcomes for some young people and how we measure and validate their success.
Case Study I – Socially Balanced Intakes and Exceptional Teaching
Montgomery County Public School System: Addressing Systemic Inequalities

Leading for Equity, the Montgomery County Public School System

The focus of this Call to Action is on systemic improvement and we are keen to look, internationally, at “what works” and what is applicable to Northern Ireland. In May 2009 officials from the Department of Education, the Education and Training Inspectorate, the Education and Skills Authority Implementation Team and the five recognized teachers unions spent a study week in Montgomery County, Maryland, USA to study its public school system.

Montgomery County’s school population is around 2/3 the size of Northern Ireland’s. Its particular success has been in securing long term, sustained improvement in both educational performance and equity.50

Main Features: The main features of the system were:

• **Over-riding aims:** To make all children college or work ready, with a 80% target for college readiness. Raising standards is the key aim, first set out in the 1999 “Call to Action: Raising the bar, closing the gap.”

• **Quality of Teaching Matters:** Resources are organised to support quality teaching, including investment within a CPD system, the Professional Growth System. Support and underperformance are undertaken through a Peer Assistance and Review scheme, led by teaching consultants (effectively, secondees). Sharing of resources and good practice is conducted through the M-STAT system, a voluntary “bottom up” self-help process for teachers. Class sizes have been driven down, particularly at early years. Pay for teachers is high; work hours are long.

• **Equity:** Focus on equity through a Red Zone (underperforming) and Green Zone strategy. Resources are allocated to and targeted on underperformance. Equitable distribution is taken to mean a requirement for differentiated allocation, not equal or formulaic “per head” formulas. There is no “funding formula” at all.

• **Accountability:** The education Superintendent reports to the (political) County Board. There are no school governors, and no Inspectorate. There is a collaborative leadership, or “shared accountability” with the trade unions deeply involved, as well as college and business leaders. This “blurring lines” strategy is described by Superintendent Jerry Weast “When people help build the barn, they are less likely to burn it down.” There is a high usage of ICT and the system is quite data driven, based on stages to be reached to meet the college ready criterion.

• **Coalition Building:** A key achievement is in convincing and maintaining a coalition of middle class and working poor, of ethnic groups (predominantly White, Asian, Hispanic and African American) to “own the strategy” and to agree the moral imperative that no one is left behind, as well as the business imperative. Parents and business leaders are engaged, with town hall meetings to explain the vision.

Summary: The particular relevance of Montgomery County to Northern Ireland is not necessarily in the way particular aspects of the system would translate, but in the way in which a strong consensus across the education world has developed a growing trust and collaborative arrangements to improve the system as a whole. Within the context of a very fragmented and over-administered system in Northern Ireland, the participants on the study trip came away believing that there was much to learn from Montgomery County’s education system.

Mark Langhammer