

**'View from the Chair' article published in the Business Newsletter, 20 Oct 2015  
by Dr Michael Wardlow, Chief Commissioner, Equality Commission NI**

**Business has a role to play in education**

There is little doubt that our education system works well for many of our young people, allowing them to pursue that well trodden path to a job which provides them with the opportunity to become more socially and economically mobile. This is only part of the story, as at the other extreme many young people continue to emerge from the same system having significantly underachieved. This can have a long-term impact on their self confidence and ultimately on their life chances.

This dichotomy is not new, a fact confirmed in the Commission's updated draft 'Statement on Key Inequalities in Education' which demonstrates that progress to address enduring inequalities has been painfully slow since our first statement in 2007.

For example, while we welcome the increase in the overall levels of attainment for all pupils, males continue to have lower levels of attainment than females, something that begins at primary school and continues through to A Level, where there is a differential of over 15 percentage points. Protestants have persistently had lower levels of attainment than Catholics at GCSE and A Levels, resulting in fewer Protestants accessing Higher Education. Only about 1 in 5 of all Protestant boys on free school meals attain 5 good GCSEs. We remain concerned that students with Special Educational Needs or a disability have lower attainment levels and are less likely to go on to higher education. Our report also draws attention to the fact that prejudice based bullying continues to be a problem for many pupils.

It is easy to identify the fault lines in our education system, it is more difficult to address them. However difficult the problems may seem, it is vital we tackle the disparity in attainment levels as these inequalities can ultimately determine the extent to which some children can realise their full potential in all aspects of life including the world of work, effectively denying our businesses access to the best possible talent pool.

There is a primary responsibility on those who shape and manage our education systems – on the Government Departments and the Assembly; Education and School Boards, the Churches and business community. However if we are serious in addressing the fault-lines of under-attainment, any solution must involve all of us.

Employers have much to offer, from training and mentoring to lobbying government. It is imperative that we create a culture where the benefits of both a good education system and the merits of obtaining a good education are embraced and promoted by our employers. Having a better trained and skilled workforce will be to the benefit of any business. Where employers have the capacity to, they should consider supporting their employees to fill any gaps in their training and education.

Our education system must deliver for all, regardless of gender, community background race or disability. For the Commission's part, we will work with all the relevant agencies and interests to assist in the vital work of ensuring equality of opportunity in education. We all must face this challenge head on and our business community can assist with this.