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PRESS RELEASE

Making a Difference for our Children – Key Inequalities in Education

“Education determines the extent to which our children can realise their full potential in all aspects of life, and inequalities in education are a key component of inequality in our society,” Dr. Michael Wardlow, Chief Commissioner of the Equality Commission said. “We’ve known for a long time that while the education system in Northern Ireland works well for many of our young people: for too long, significant numbers of pupils have struggled to fulfill their potential as a result of that same system.”



Dr Michael Wardlow, Chief Commissioner of the Equality Commission and school pupils Matthew McGinley and Gemma Carlisle

Dr. Wardlow’s comments draw on a draft statement on ‘Key Inequalities in Education’, a new assessment of the experiences of people in education across all the equality grounds in Northern Ireland published by the Equality Commission for Northern Ireland.

The impact of the research findings and statement will be discussed with experts from the education sector and people involved in and affected by it at a meeting in Malone College Belfast on 6 October 2015. The Commission will use the feedback from this event to assist in the finalization of its statement on ‘Key Inequalities in Education’ which we hope will help shape future initiatives on these issues.

“This research and statement highlights areas where there are educational challenges and how these impact on vulnerable children. It highlights the painful truth that not much has changed in this area since 2007 when the Commission issued its first statement on Key Inequalities in Education.”

Amongst other things, the statement highlights that many children in Northern Ireland continue to experience persistent inequalities because of barriers which are linked to

disability, gender, religion and other equality grounds. These inequalities are magnified for children coming from social and economically disadvantaged backgrounds.

“Identifying and highlighting these inequalities is only the first step. These educational fault-lines must be followed by action,” Dr. Wardlow said. “There is a responsibility on those who shape and manage our education systems - those in Government Departments and the Assembly; on Education and School Boards; on the Churches; political leaders and those across the community - to focus on and overcome these enduring barriers which continue to disadvantage the most vulnerable sections of our community. The Equality Commission is eager to work with these groups to help ensure that our education system, which serves all our people, is robust and built on a stable and secure base,” concluded Dr. Wardlow.

The research and statement on Key Inequalities in Education is part of a series of statements which will examine key issues across various areas where people in Northern Ireland face inequality. It will update the Commission’s work on key inequalities carried out in 2007.

Notes to Editor

1. The Statement’s conclusions include:

Gender

- Males continue to have lower levels of attainment than females, beginning in primary school and increasing as pupils move through to GCSE and A level. Despite this overall position, females continue to have a lower share of enrolment in STEM subjects in higher education.

Community background (encompassing religious belief and political opinion)

- The proportions of Catholics achieving the educational targets in GCSEs and A levels are persistently higher than Protestants and the gap widened between 2007 and 2012. This has resulted in a higher proportion of Catholic school leavers entering higher education than Protestants, who have a higher proportion of school leavers entering job training than have Catholics.
- While Catholics represent a greater share of enrolments in further education, Protestants have larger shares of those remaining on and successfully completing courses than Catholics. In respect to job training programmes, Catholics are not as successful as Protestants at obtaining employment after leaving “Steps To Work” programme training courses.

Race

- Pupils who are from minority ethnic backgrounds or who do not have satisfactory language skills have a smaller share of pupils enrolled in grammar schools compared to their share of the population.
- Minority ethnic pupils generally are more likely to leave school with no GCSEs than are white school leavers and are less likely to gain employment after leaving higher education than white students.
- The most negative experiences of education were encountered by Traveller and Roma children and these children also have some of the lowest attainment levels of all equality groups.

Disability

- While there was improvement for students with a disability or with Special Educational Needs (SEN) in relation to A Levels and GCSEs, they continue to have lower attainment levels and are less likely to go on to Higher Education than pupils without a disability or SEN. This may reflect concerns that existing provisions in mainstream schools do not meet the individual needs of all these children. Leavers from further and higher education who self-report a disability are less likely to move into employment, particularly full-time employment.

Bullying

- Bullying, which can be a persistent problem in schools, includes instances of prejudice-based bullying. Equality groups more vulnerable to bullying, or more likely to be bullied, include Trans students, minority ethnic students, students with Special Educational Needs or a disability, and students with same-sex attraction.

2. Link to full [Draft statement on Key Inequalities in Education in Northern Ireland](#) (*pdf*)

3. Further information is available on the Commission's [Key Inequalities in Education web page](#)

