



# Every Child an Equal Child

An Equality Commission  
Statement on Key Inequalities in  
Education and a Strategy for Intervention

November 2008

Equality Commission

FOR NORTHERN IRELAND



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“Everything has a consequence. All policy decisions by Government, by public authorities, by large private companies, whether international or national; all decisions by communities, by small companies, by individuals – all our actions have consequences that affect others, whether we wish it so or not. This is a call to those with responsibility to remember the reality of inequality, to have it in mind in the decisions they take and to adjust or modify those decisions so that they can reduce its consequences in the lives of people.”

“It is also well to remember that in many cases the only investment needed to improve peoples’ chances in life is the opening of our minds to new possibilities.”

*Bob Collins, Chief Commissioner, October 2007*

<sup>1</sup>Equality Commission (2007), Statement on Key Inequalities in Northern Ireland



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# 1 EQUALITY COMMISSION'S VISION, AIMS AND ROLE

## Our Vision

- 1.1 The Equality Commission's vision of Northern Ireland is as a shared, integrated and inclusive place, a society where difference is respected and valued, based on equality and fairness for the entire community. We consider that all children and young people must be valued equally and believe that they should be allowed the opportunity to develop to their full potential. The role of the education system should therefore be to foster and facilitate that development.
- 1.2 The Commission's general role is to advance equality, promote equality of opportunity, encourage good relations and challenge discrimination through promotion, advice and enforcement. Part of this role is to ensure that the educational bodies genuinely embed the principles and practices of equality of opportunity and good relations into their core business and that they constantly strive towards greater equality.
- 1.3 This is the essence of mainstreaming equality and good relations. It means more than a school teaching a module on Citizenship, or having an isolated exchange visit with a local controlled<sup>2</sup> or maintained<sup>3</sup> school. It involves making equality and good relations central to the culture and ethos of a school and the education system as a whole. This presents a series of challenges and opportunities for the Commission, the Government, the statutory education sector and other agencies. These are considered in Section 4.
- 1.4 While the Commission does not have an executive role in education, we have a legitimate role in promoting equality of opportunity and good relations in education and supporting and encouraging the achievement of all children and young people's full potential. We aim to ensure that raising the performance and expectations of all children, especially those who are disadvantaged, are core elements of our education system.

<sup>2</sup>State controlled, predominantly attended by children from the Protestant or other communities

<sup>3</sup>Predominantly attended by children from Roman Catholic backgrounds

We consider that a key factor in achieving this aim will be to ensure that the principles and practice of equality of opportunity and good relations are mainstreamed in all our schools.

- 1.5 In developing this work and our position on equality and education, we have three overarching objectives:
    - every child has equality of access to a quality educational experience,
    - every child is given the opportunity to reach his or her full potential,
    - the ethos of every school promotes the inclusion and participation of all children.
- These objectives should be worked towards regardless of a child's community background, religion, age, gender, racial group, sexual orientation, political opinion, disability or caring responsibilities. This is encapsulated in the title of this document, "Every Child an Equal Child".
- 1.6 The Commission will continue to use its full range of powers across equality and anti-discrimination statutes, to ensure that all children and young people in Northern Ireland have the opportunity to flourish and succeed to the best of their abilities.
  - 1.7 As we noted in our Key Inequalities document<sup>4</sup> published in 2007: "In making any society a more equal place and a place where individuals and groups of people can relate well one to the other, there are some fundamental principles that must animate our thinking and our actions:
    - All human beings are entitled to equal respect
    - Equality of opportunity is an entitlement that derives from our inherent humanity
    - Nobody is just an economic unit whose dignity, value or rights are determined or measured in terms of contributions to the economy
    - The real value of a successful economy is in the opportunity for growth and development it offers individuals

<sup>4</sup>Equality Commission (2007), Statement on Key Inequalities in Northern Ireland

- The test of our response to a successful economy is the extent to which we use its bounty to give people equal opportunities to share in it
- Difference is a source of richness not the basis for unfair treatment
- Treating everybody as if we were all identical is neither the meaning nor the measure of equality
- The persistence of inequalities diminishes us all.”

1.8 We are embedding this work firmly in the principles outlined above, which are also informing the development of our corporate and business plans and our strategy to promote equality and good relations in education, outlined in section 5.

## 2 IMPORTANCE OF EDUCATION

### Education shaping personal development

- 2.1 The value of education goes much further than giving an individual the skills to perform a particular job or follow a profession. There is a significant role for education in developing the individual's personality and world-view, which transcends the acquisition of credentials and qualifications.
- 2.2 Education has a role in shaping an individual's views, their conduct, their relationships with others, and it has the potential to counter negative images and views that they can be exposed to outside of a school. Work by Paul Connolly,<sup>5</sup> for example, has demonstrated that children can express negative racist and sectarian views by the age of five. A school can play an important role in countering this phenomenon.
- 2.3 The effects of education should not be seen as a panacea for all our social problems and divisions. It is recognised that 20-30% of an individual's academic performance is shaped by school and related factors.<sup>6</sup> Factors outside the school have a huge impact on the child's educational development. These include economic deprivation, family support, and housing.

### Shared resources between schools and integrated education

- 2.4 The schools' estate can act as a focal point for community development and act as a service delivery point as envisaged by the Extended Schools programme.<sup>7</sup> Sharing resources between schools, a key theme of the Bain Review<sup>8</sup> on sustainability and an outworking of the development of educational communities, develops links between institutions, teachers, children and parents.

<sup>5</sup>Connolly, P., Smith, A. & Kelly, B. (2002) Too Young to Notice? The Cultural and Political Awareness of 3-6 Year Olds in Northern Ireland. Belfast: Northern Ireland Community Relations Council. Available at [http://www.paulconnolly.net/publications/report\\_2002a.htm](http://www.paulconnolly.net/publications/report_2002a.htm)

<sup>6</sup>Cited by Gavin Boyd, Chief Executive Designate, Education and Skills Authority (and others), ETI Conference, Newcastle 2007

<sup>7</sup>Department of Education (2006) Extended Schools – schools, families, community - working together, available at [http://www.deni.gov.uk/index/85-schools/03-schools\\_impvt\\_prog\\_pg/schools-sch-impvt-extschoolsguidance.htm](http://www.deni.gov.uk/index/85-schools/03-schools_impvt_prog_pg/schools-sch-impvt-extschoolsguidance.htm)

<sup>8</sup>Department of Education Schools for the Future: A Policy for Sustainable Schools (2006)

Over time, these links may develop and enhance the sense of commonality that can counteract other divisive influences that impact on both children and their parents.

- 2.5 The history of education in Northern Ireland has been, to varying degrees, one of separate provision for boys and girls, disabled and non-disabled, Traveller and settled, and children of differing faith backgrounds. An added separation occurs at age 11, when children are further differentiated through the current academic selection process.
- 2.6 In recent years, there has been a significant growth in the provision of integrated education, which now caters for approximately 5%<sup>9</sup> of children being educated in Northern Ireland schools. Further, there are a number of schools attracting students from all community backgrounds.<sup>10</sup> These factors can break down the social, gender, religious and other barriers between children. The Commission welcomes the growth of integrated and shared education as a means of breaking down barriers and of providing a further choice for parents and children.
- 2.7 A recent research report on inclusive practice in education concluded:
- It is difficult not to see integrated schools as pioneers in relation to the promotion and development of a particular model of inclusive practice, and as oases of calm in Northern Ireland's post-conflict society.<sup>11</sup>
- 2.8 It is hard to escape the conclusion that educating children of different backgrounds together has the potential to reduce the fears and tensions between communities that are founded on ignorance.<sup>12</sup> It is equally difficult to avoid the conclusion that the long experience of separate educational provision has represented a lost opportunity for everyone in Northern Ireland.

<sup>9</sup>Northern Ireland Schools Census 2007 DENI: The figure for non selective post primary children is 7%

<sup>10</sup>There is anecdotal evidence of increased cross-community enrolments in some grammar schools. However, we are not aware of any empirical evidence that has been gathered on this.

<sup>11</sup>The Potential for Integrated Schools in Northern Ireland to Provide a Model of Inclusive Practice, Lesley Abbott, UU. March 2008

<sup>12</sup>Speech given by ECNI Chief Commissioner at NICIE conference, November 2007

## Education and the economy

- 2.9 Education plays a key role in determining a person's life chances and opportunities in terms of social and economic mobility. Those with fewer qualifications and skills are likely to be disadvantaged when competing for available employment opportunities. The Government views accessing employment as the most effective way of reducing poverty<sup>13</sup> and the predictive effects of poverty on health, life expectancy, exposure to crime and anti-social behaviour.
- 2.10 Our education system rightly celebrates its successes in that 51% of our children achieve five or more GCSEs at grades A\*-C. However, the corollary of this is that 49% of our children do not make this grade. The question remains: are we prepared to accept an education system that effectively results in half of our young people each year not attaining the skills and qualifications they will need in later life? The former Minister of Higher and Further Education, Training and Employment, Dr Seán Farren, noted in a speech in 2001 that 25% of adults in Northern Ireland were 'functionally illiterate.' The recent Department of Education consultation on improving numeracy and literacy in Northern Ireland notes that:

It is at Grades A\*-C at which an average pupil can be described as having the expected levels of functional skills in these subjects. It is therefore a matter of some concern that some 37% of pupils fail to achieve a grade A\*-C in GCSE English; 41% in Mathematics and 47% fail to achieve an A\*-C in both English and Mathematics.<sup>14</sup>

These skills are generally accepted as being essential for young people seeking employment.

<sup>13</sup>No one written off: reforming welfare to reward responsibility DWP, 2008 available at <http://www.dwp.gov.uk/welfarereform/noonewrittenoff/noonewrittenoff-complete.pdf>

<sup>14</sup>Every School A Good School – a Strategy for Raising Achievement in Literacy and Numeracy, Department of Education (June 2008)

2.11 The 2001 Census provides some further evidence in this regard:

- 60% of the long-termed unemployed have no educational qualifications,
- 89% of the long-termed unemployed have either no educational qualifications, or only level 1<sup>15</sup> or level 2<sup>16</sup> qualifications.

2.12 Further, in terms of economic activity for those who are of working age, a similar picture can be drawn. Recent figures<sup>17</sup> in Northern Ireland indicate that of those with no educational qualifications:

- 39% are economically inactive,
- 16% are economically active,
- 27% are unemployed,
- 16% are employed.

2.13 While poverty does not necessitate poor educational performance and the effects of this on later life, it is an indicator of risk with a high correlation. As noted below, the higher one's level of qualification, the higher the likelihood of obtaining a high status and better paid occupation.

2.14 A survey for the former Department of Higher and Further Education, Training and Employment (now DEL) indicated that added qualifications make a bigger difference to workers in Northern Ireland than they do in the rest of the UK, through providing access to more highly paid, higher status occupations.<sup>18</sup> This was reinforced by a further web-based survey in 2007,<sup>19</sup> showing that additional years in schooling and additional educational qualifications had the biggest impacts on careers and earnings in Northern Ireland and Scotland.

<sup>15</sup>GCSE D-G, Foundation GNVQ or NVQ 1

<sup>16</sup>GCSE A\*-C, Intermediate GNVQ or NVQ 2

<sup>17</sup>Labour Force Survey Quarterly Supplement Quarter 2, 2008, Department of Enterprise, Trade & Investment

<sup>18</sup>Education and Earnings in Northern Ireland, Walker, I and Harmon, C, DEL 2004

<sup>19</sup>[www.prospects.ac.uk](http://www.prospects.ac.uk)

2.15 The surveys cited above indicate that:

- an extra year's education at any level can add 8% to male earnings and 12% to female earnings in Northern Ireland,
- in the rest of the UK, an extra year in education can add 6% to male earnings and 10% to female earnings,
- all students receive major lifetime earning enhancements from achieving more GCSEs and A levels.

2.16 In short, investment in education is likely to pay off in terms of higher potential lifetime earnings. These findings have been reinforced by work for the University of Ulster by Vani Borooah.<sup>20</sup> The results of this work were based on the 2001 Census and subsequent Labour Force Survey returns, and showed that in every region of the UK, better qualifications were significantly and strongly associated with a higher probability of labour market success, as defined by being in a good job if employed, or being employed if economically active.

<sup>20</sup>Education, Occupational Class, and Unemployment in the Regions of the United Kingdom V K Borooah UUJ, 2007.

### 3 KEY INEQUALITIES IN EDUCATION

#### Relationship between low educational attainment and social exclusion

- 3.1 As noted above, educational achievement has a profound influence on access to and advancement within employment. Therefore, any persistent underachievement must be tackled to ensure the widest possible access to the range of employment opportunities available within the current and future Northern Ireland labour market.
- 3.2 There is clear evidence that children and young people, who are already at risk of being marginalised in society, often have lower levels of educational attainment. In terms of the attainment levels of disabled children and young people, there is an extremely limited amount of data available on educational outcomes and the terminology of existing datasets is ambivalent. However, we do know that 44% of people of working age with Limiting Long Term Illness have no educational qualifications, compared with 18% of people who do not have a disability.<sup>21</sup> Furthermore, only 12% of disabled people hold an educational qualification higher than A-Level, compared with 26% of people who do not have a disability.<sup>22</sup>
- 3.3 As a somewhat stark illustration of the effect of poverty or deprivation on life chances, a child born in a deprived ward of Northern Ireland in 2001 was likely to live 6 years less than their more affluent contemporaries and, in 2006, this gap had only narrowly reduced to 5.8 years.<sup>23</sup> Infant mortality rates in deprived wards are a fifth higher than those for the general population<sup>24</sup> and while there have been extensive improvements in relation to cancer prevention and treatment, the incidence of cancer is up to 74%<sup>25</sup> higher in deprived areas than more affluent ones.

<sup>21</sup>Census 2001

<sup>22</sup>Census 2001

<sup>23</sup>Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety Northern Ireland 2007, Inequalities monitoring update 2

<sup>24</sup>Ibid

<sup>25</sup>Ibid

- 3.4 The practical consequences of poor educational attainment are to reinforce the cycle of deprivation that many poor, disabled, Traveller, or other marginalised groups experience throughout their lives.

#### Children from the Irish Traveller community

- 3.5 There are high levels of poor literacy attainment among the Irish Traveller community. The vast majority have no formal educational qualifications and 92% have no GCSEs or equivalents,<sup>26</sup> compared with 4% of all Northern Ireland school leavers.<sup>27</sup> In 2006, the Northern Ireland Audit Office reported that 9 out of 10 Traveller children were not achieving the required literacy levels.<sup>28</sup>
- 3.6 Traveller educational attainment is exacerbated by high levels of non-attendance at school, where the majority of Traveller children do not continue to attend school regularly after primary education. Of those Traveller children who did sit GCSE examinations in 2003/04 and 2004/05, Department of Education records that only 10 of the 41 pupils (24%) achieved 5+ GCSE grades A\*-G across the years, compared to 98% for the general population.<sup>29</sup> The number of Traveller children achieving the accepted standard of good GCSEs (5+ grades A\*-C, including English and Mathematics) was too small<sup>30</sup> to be included, but compares with a Northern Ireland average of 51%.
- 3.7 The attendance rates for Traveller children in education have been consistently low for a number of reasons and inter-twined with many other issues such as appropriate accommodation, nomadism and cultural traditions. Paul Connolly<sup>31</sup> argues that

<sup>26</sup>OFMDFM, (2000) Final Report of the Promoting Social Inclusion Working Group

<sup>27</sup><http://www.poverty.org.uk/I15/index.shtml> In 2006/07, approximately 4% of school leavers obtained no GCSEs, 7% obtained some but fewer than five GCSEs and a further 24% obtained five or more GCSEs but fewer than five at grade C or above

<sup>28</sup>Northern Ireland Audit Office, Improving Literacy and Numeracy in Schools (2006)

<sup>29</sup>Department of Education, Indicators on Traveller Education. Available at [www.deni.gov.uk](http://www.deni.gov.uk). <http://archive.nics.gov.uk/edu/050825e-edu.htm>

<sup>30</sup>Less than 5%

<sup>31</sup>Connolly, P. (2003) Racial Equality in Education Conference Report, Belfast. Equality Commission and the Department of Education

non-attendance at school tended to be caused by three key factors which may not be unique to the Traveller community:

- disillusionment arising from what some Travellers felt to be the low expectations of teachers and thus the poor levels of education they felt they received,
- a fear among the children of being bullied, especially at secondary schools,
- for some of the children especially, a view that education was just not relevant to them and what they intend to do in the future.

3.8 Commission research<sup>32</sup> shows that Traveller parents are engaged with education and want their children to do well. The lack of educational qualifications held by Traveller parents has been cited<sup>33</sup> as an obstacle that impedes their efforts to help children with homework, thus perpetuating the continuing cycle of inequalities experienced.

3.9 The starkness of these figures and the implications of these realities are underlined and reinforced by the fact that relatively few children are involved. The number of school-aged Traveller children is a little more than 800. A problem on that defined scale must be amenable to resolution. The Commission is engaged in a continuing process with the Department of Education and the relevant statutory agencies, with a view to securing tangible, early and enduring progress in this area.

### **Disabled people**

3.10 With regard to disabled people, we know that they are less likely than people without a disability to achieve well academically and to be in employment. However, the available data is limited and, as noted in our Key Inequalities document, somewhat ambivalent.

3.11 There were approximately 343,000 persons, or just over 1 in 5 of the Northern Ireland population (20.4%), with a Limiting Long-

<sup>32</sup>Adequacy and Effectiveness of Educational Provision for Traveller Children and Young People in Northern Ireland Hamilton, J et al. NICCY/ECNI 2007pp 75 et.seq.

<sup>33</sup>ibid.

Term Illness (LLTI) at the last Census.<sup>34</sup> People with an LLTI are much more likely to not have any educational qualifications (70%) than those without an LLTI (34%), and of those who are of working age, 44% of people with an LLTI do not have any educational qualifications, compared with 18% of people without. Furthermore, the economic activity rate of persons with an LLTI (20%) was much lower than the rate for those without (74%). Of the economically active, people with an LLTI were more likely than those without an LLTI to be working part-time (24% compared to 18% without), or to be unemployed (13% compared to 6% without). People with an LLTI were much more likely to be economically inactive due to permanent sickness or disability (52%) than those without an LLTI (2%).

3.12 Further, 12% of disabled people hold an educational qualification higher than A-Level, compared with 26% of people who do not have a disability.<sup>35</sup> The number of students with a learning disability enrolled on full-time courses in further education is lower in Northern Ireland (32%) than in England (45%).<sup>36</sup>

3.13 A lack of higher educational qualifications reduces the ability of disabled people to compete in the labour market, to the extent that fewer than 1 in 10 higher managerial posts are held by people with an LLTI, despite approximately 20% of the population having an LLTI.<sup>37</sup> Only 14% of disabled people have a university degree or higher educational qualification, compared to 30% of those without a disability.<sup>38</sup>

3.14 The choices available to a disabled school student are often limited by the availability of accessible transport and suitable classrooms. Choices may be further limited, in that special

<sup>34</sup><http://www.equalityni.org/archive/pdf/LimitingLLTIillness06.pdf> The numbers of persons in households with limiting long-term illness are based on answers to the question "Do you have any long-term illness, health problem or disability which limits your daily activities or the work you can do?" Of all ethnic groups, the Irish Traveller community contained the highest proportion of persons with an LLTI (27.5%).

<sup>35</sup>2001 Census

<sup>36</sup>Department of Higher and Further Education Training and Employment, Participation and Provision for Students with Learning Difficulties And/Or Disabilities (sld0 in the Further Education Sector in Northern Ireland (Belfast: 2000)

<sup>37</sup>Census output table KS13. It should be noted that having a LLTI is likely to be deemed as having a disability within the meaning of the Disability Discrimination Act

<sup>38</sup>Northern Ireland Labour Force Survey, DETI, August 2008

schools are less likely to offer as wide a selection of academic curriculum, therefore limiting the range of subjects they can pursue within this sector. Moreover, teachers, parents and others may make assumptions about what a disabled student can do, potentially restricting their options in subject choice and levels of related examinations. The Commission supports access to mainstream schools for disabled students, where this is appropriate.

3.15 It is vital that the distinction between disabled children and young people and those with Special Educational Needs is recognised and that their different needs are addressed. Not all disabled young people have a Statement of Special Educational Needs, and while the SEN process is highly complex and bureaucratic, it is at present the only mechanism that prescribes a child's educational needs, and sets out steps to meet them.

3.16 Across the UK, the percentage of disabled people in paid employment has risen since 2001, from 43% to 48% in 2008.<sup>39</sup> However, in Northern Ireland, 30-37% of disabled people are in paid employment.<sup>40</sup> This compares with 77% of people without a disability. Of those who are of working age,<sup>41</sup> 29% of all people identify having a sickness or disability as the main reason for not wanting work.<sup>42</sup>

### **Underachievement and social and economic deprivation**

3.17 Statistics show a particular pattern of underachievement among children living in or at risk of poverty.<sup>43</sup> Further disaggregation of these statistics reveals that there are a number of interrelated and reinforcing factors for those on low incomes and risk of educational underachievement in Northern Ireland:

<sup>39</sup><http://www.dwp.gov.uk/mediacentre/pressreleases/2008/jul/drc087-170708.asp>

<sup>40</sup><http://www.workingwithdiversity.org/div/disability/introduction/index.php> and <http://www.disabilityaction.org/publications/Diversity%20Awareness%20Training%20Pack.pdf> and <http://www.poverty.org.uk/l28/index.shtml>

<sup>41</sup>154,800 are of working age <http://www.workingwithdiversity.org/div/disability/introduction/index.php>

<sup>42</sup><http://www.detini.gov.uk/cgi-bin/downutildoc?id=2240> Northern Ireland Labour Force Survey: April-June 2008

<sup>43</sup>As measured by entitlement to free school meals

- in 2005/06, only 26% of students who were entitled to free school meals (FSM) gained 5 or more GCSEs A\*-C including English and Mathematics by the time they left school, compared with 51% of those who were not entitled to FSM,
- in 2005/06, only 22% of students who were entitled to FSM achieved 2 or more A levels (or equivalent), compared with 49.9% of those who were not entitled to FSM,
- in 2005/06, 15% of boys who were entitled to FSM left school with no GCSEs, compared to 7% of girls who were entitled to FSM,
- in 2005/06, 32% of boys who were entitled to FSM achieved 5+ GCSEs A\*-C or higher (or equivalent) compared with 44% of girls who were entitled to FSM,
- in 2001, 29% of Protestant pupils (boys and girls) who were entitled to FSM achieved 5+ GCSEs A\*-C or higher (or equivalent) compared with 42% of Roman Catholic pupils entitled to FSM.

### **Protestant working class boys**

3.18 In terms of Protestant working class boys, research commissioned by OFMDFM<sup>44</sup> in 2001 concluded that the educational non-progressor was most likely to be a Protestant working class male. A more recent report commissioned by the Department of Education<sup>45</sup> found that lower than expected (LTE)<sup>46</sup> performing schools were clustered mainly in Belfast, and often in areas that were more than 75% Protestant in terms of community background. The Belfast schools in the LTE group at Key Stage 3 English had free school meal entitlement levels of greater than 50% and at least 1 in 5 pupils with Special Educational Needs.

<sup>44</sup>Report on Participation Rates in Further and Higher Education, OFMDFM (2001), <http://www.ofmdfmi.gov.uk/search.adv?sr=50&fl2=&ha=3&sb=1&tx0=integrated>.

<sup>45</sup>Literacy and Numeracy of Pupils in Northern Ireland, PricewaterhouseCoopers, No 49, (2008) [http://www.deni.gov.uk/no\\_49-2.pdf](http://www.deni.gov.uk/no_49-2.pdf)

<sup>46</sup>ibid. For the purposes of the project, low or underperforming schools were defined as those falling 20 percentage points or more below the level expected from correlations between attainment and Free School Meal entitlement. These figures were based on a four year average from 2002-03 to 2005-06. For the purpose of this report, these schools are designated as LTE or 'lower than expected' schools.

### 3.19 The report also found that:

- at Key Stage 2 English and Mathematics, proportionally 4 times as many controlled schools were underperforming, compared to maintained schools - 11% (47) of controlled schools, compared to 3% (14) of maintained schools in English and 8% (34) controlled compared to 2% (10) of maintained schools in Mathematics,
- at Key Stage 3 English, almost 25% of maintained schools (75) were classified as higher than expected (HTE)<sup>47</sup> compared to 2% (2) of controlled schools. However, a larger proportion of maintained schools 8% (6) compared to 2% (2) of controlled schools were underperforming,
- at GCSE English and Mathematics, 14% (11) of controlled schools were underperforming compared to 4% (4) of maintained schools,
- 25% (19) of maintained schools were performing better than would be expected at GCSE English and 20% (14) at GCSE Mathematics. There were no controlled schools in the HTE school group.

3.20 While this report identified specific problems in regard to the controlled sector, it noted that the factors impacting on attainment were complex and interactive and consequently there is a lack of clarity in relation to causes of this phenomenon. There may be similar factors here as in other disadvantaged groups that have contributed to these lower than expected attainment levels, such as a negatively perceived relevance of education, poor employment prospects in the area, negative parental experience of their own education, or lack of parental support with homework.

3.21 Fair employment is a crucial issue both socially and politically and the Commission is committed to ensuring that the principles of the Fair Employment and Treatment (Northern Ireland) Order 1998

<sup>47</sup>Schools performing higher than would be expected (HTE) were defined as those with FSM entitlement levels above 40% and with attainment levels above the regression line at each Key Stage. These schools were therefore achieving results which were higher than would be expected given the levels of social deprivation of its pupils (using FSM as a proxy).

apply to all sections of the community. Recently published research by the Commission on educational migration and its causes highlighted low educational achievement in working class Protestant areas.<sup>48</sup> This research reinforced the findings of the taskforce established by the Department of Social Development looking at regeneration issues in Protestant working class areas.<sup>49</sup>

### Looked after children and young people

3.22 Children who are looked after or at risk of being looked after have been identified by the Government as being at high risk of offending, becoming teenage parents, being among the long-term unemployed and becoming homeless once they have left care.<sup>50</sup> All of these factors increase the likelihood of poverty, reduce the chance of social mobility for these children and have the potential to become self-perpetuating social problems.

3.23 Care leavers in Northern Ireland are 10 times more likely than school leavers in general to leave school without gaining any educational qualifications at all.<sup>51</sup> The impact of this is significant, given that these children are taken out of their home environment in order to afford them a better life chance, yet evidence indicates that their educational performance is lower than the average child:

- in 2005/06, just over half (51%) of care leavers were known to be in education, training or employment, which compares poorly with the 82% of all 19 year olds in Northern Ireland,<sup>52</sup>
- in 2005/06, half of all care leavers (51%) left school without gaining any educational qualifications, compared with 5% of all Northern Ireland school leavers,<sup>53</sup>

<sup>48</sup>Educational Migration and Non-return in Northern Ireland McQuaid R et al. ECNI 2008

<sup>49</sup>Taskforce Report: The report of the taskforce on Protestant Working Class Communities, DSD, available at [http://www.dsdni.gov.uk/40708\\_task\\_force.pdf](http://www.dsdni.gov.uk/40708_task_force.pdf)

<sup>50</sup>Care Matters : May 2007 DHSSPSNI

<sup>51</sup><http://www.dhsspsni.gov.uk/care-matters-ni-3.pdf> , p 116

<sup>52</sup><http://www.dhsspsni.gov.uk/stats-cib-oc32006.pdf>

<sup>53</sup><http://www.dhsspsni.gov.uk/care-matters-ni-3.pdf>, p 116

- in 2002/03, only 11% of young people left care with 5 or more GCSEs at grade A\*-C, and a further 26% left with just 1-4 GCSEs grades A\*-C. This compares with 59% of all school leavers in Northern Ireland with 5 or more GCSEs at grade A\*-C.<sup>54</sup>

### Children from minority ethnic backgrounds

- 3.24 In terms of children from minority ethnic communities, their educational and employment achievements span the whole spectrum of outcomes. A higher percentage of minority ethnic<sup>55</sup> pupils (49%) leave with 2+ A Levels, compared to 45% of all pupils. Further, a higher percentage of minority ethnic pupils (67%) leave school with 5+ GCSEs, A\*-C, compared to 64% of all pupils. The proportion of people who are in managerial or professional occupations is almost twice as high in minority ethnic populations (50%), compared to the general population (26%), and the proportion of minority ethnic school leavers who go on to further and higher education is higher (76%), compared to the general population (66%).<sup>56</sup>
- 3.25 However, at the other end of the attainment scale, a higher percentage of minority ethnic pupils (8.2%) leave with no GCSE qualifications, compared to 4.5% of all pupils.<sup>57</sup>
- 3.26 In terms of economic activity, people from minority ethnic communities have a slightly lower level than the total Northern Ireland population - 64% compared to 70% overall. Levels of unemployment are similar with the general population - 6.7% compared to 6.6%.<sup>58</sup>

<sup>54</sup><http://www.dhsspsni.gov.uk/care-matters-ni-3.pdf>, p 116

<sup>55</sup>Other than Travellers

<sup>56</sup>Good Relations Indicators (2007), taken from Census (2001) and School Leavers' Survey (2004/05), available at <http://www.ofmdfmi.gov.uk/goodrelationsindicators2007.pdf>

<sup>57</sup>Ibid

<sup>58</sup>Ibid

### Children of new residents and migrant workers

- 3.27 In terms of the children of new residents and migrant workers, the Commission has previously raised concerns with the Department of Education about the provision of support services for children and young people who have English as an Additional Language. Serious shortcomings have been identified in relation to such provision, as well as with existing funding formulas. Difficulties faced by pupils whose first language is not English stretch beyond discomfort in the classroom and barriers on access to the curriculum. It has been reported, for example, that children of new residents and migrant workers face difficulties in accessing grammar schools in Northern Ireland and that problems with accessing academic selection results in systemic, indirect discrimination in education for this group of young people.<sup>59</sup> Schools may also face difficulties in communicating with parents of children whose first language is not English. This clearly significantly limits parental involvement in the school and their child's school life.
- 3.28 We consider that the fact that a young person does not speak English as a first language should not be a bar to them having the opportunity to reach their full educational potential.
- 3.29 A recent report by the Institute of Conflict Research recommended that the Department should consider going beyond English language support, and include 'mother tongue' provision, in languages such as Polish and Russian.<sup>60</sup>
- 3.30 With the numbers of school-aged young people in Northern Ireland that are the children of new residents and migrant workers remaining fluid, there is potential to examine the issues affecting them in greater detail, including the Department of Education providing separate reporting on their attainment, to assist service providers and planners.

<sup>59</sup>Watt, P. & McGaughey, F. (eds) (2006) Improving Government Service Delivery to Minority Ethnic Groups. Dublin: National Consultative Committee on Racism and Interculturalism

<sup>60</sup>Equality Commission (2008) New Migration, Equality and Integration, Issues and Challenges for Northern Ireland, Agnieszka Martynowicz and Neil Jarman, Institute for Conflict Research

## Gender issues and stereotyping

- 3.31 In terms of attainment by gender, boys leaving school tend to be less qualified than girls and are less likely to progress to higher education. For example, in 2005/06, 38% of boys left school with at least one A-level, compared with 55% of girls while 6% of boys left school with no GCSE qualifications compared to 3% of girls. After leaving school, only 56% of boys progressed to further or higher education, compared to 75% of girls. Further, 60% of all students enrolled at the Northern Ireland universities are women.<sup>61</sup>
- 3.32 In relation to subject choice by gender, the very stark differences in subject choices between girls and boys have lessened in some areas, over the past 38 years. For instance, at A-Level Chemistry in 1970, 20% of entrants were girls. By 2007, this had increased to 54%. Further, in Mathematics in 1970, 22% of A-Level entrants were girls. By 2007, this had increased to 45%. Differences, however, persist in others areas. For example, in 2007, 97% of students studying Home Economics were female compared to only 35% of those studying Economics.<sup>62</sup>
- 3.33 The Commission's 2002 research<sup>63</sup> on primary school children's gender stereotyping of occupations highlighted the extent of this problem, which had the potential to influence career choice and equal pay issues later in life.<sup>64</sup>

<sup>61</sup>DETINI (2007) Women in Northern Ireland

<sup>62</sup>CCEA (2007), Overall Examination Statistics (Provisional) – Summer, Available at [www.rewardinglearning.com/statistics/](http://www.rewardinglearning.com/statistics/)

<sup>63</sup>Betty the Builder, Neil the Nurse, Sex-Typing of Occupations in Primary Schools – a research report produced for the Equality Commission for Northern Ireland, (2002) available at <http://gtcni.openrepository.com/gtcni/bitstream/2428/5884/1/BettyBuilderNeilNurse.doc>

<sup>64</sup>While the majority of occupations presented to children are perceived as appropriate for both sexes, almost one third of occupations are viewed as for one sex only. Girls found more occupations suitable for both sexes than did boys

## Young carers

- 3.34 In relation to young carers,<sup>65</sup> research across the UK has found that almost a third have serious educational problems, with many failing to achieve any GCSEs at all.<sup>66</sup> This research also found that there is a lack of awareness of the issues amongst many professionals which contributes to the most vulnerable remaining hidden. The Young Life and Times Survey (2006)<sup>67</sup> identified the extent of caring being provided by school children in Northern Ireland. Research showed there are approximately 8,500 children and young people in Northern Ireland who have caring responsibilities.<sup>68</sup> However, there is little available Northern Ireland data on the effects that caring has on a child's educational achievement.

## Sexual orientation

- 3.35 A young person's sexual orientation should be entirely neutral in terms of educational attainment. Yet, not every sexual orientation is readily accepted in every school community. In too many cases, that lack of ready acceptance expresses itself in outright hostility and bullying.
- 3.36 There are very limited data, if any, on the presence of gay young people in the school system in Northern Ireland. Neither has much information been collected on the effects of homophobia on educational attainment. While the research commissioned by the Department of Education and others<sup>69</sup> focuses on the effects that homophobic bullying and attitudes can have on young people,<sup>70</sup>

<sup>65</sup>Young carers are people aged from as young as 5 to 23, who have accepted the responsibility of a caring role, perhaps for an ill/disabled, drink or drug misuse parent or guardian. [http://www.crossroadscare.co.uk/young\\_carers/](http://www.crossroadscare.co.uk/young_carers/)

<sup>66</sup><http://www.carers.org/news/vulnerable-and-hidden-young-carers-targeted-with-new-1million-fund,669,NW.html>

<sup>67</sup>ARK. Young Life and Times Survey, 2006. ARK [www.ark.ac.uk/ylt](http://www.ark.ac.uk/ylt), January 2007

<sup>68</sup>Crossroads, 2008, Young Carers [http://www.crossroadscare.co.uk/young\\_carers](http://www.crossroadscare.co.uk/young_carers)

<sup>69</sup>Department of Education commissioned research by Youthnet (2003). NIHRC research - <http://www.nihrc.org/dms/data/NIHRC/attachments/dd/files/19/growup.doc>; Rainbow Project (2006) 'Out on Your Own - An Examination of the Mental Health of Young Same-Sex Attracted Men. Available at <http://www.mensproject.org/ooyo.pdf>

<sup>70</sup>The existing research has highlighted problems around depression, self-harm, and drug and alcohol abuse as the consequences of adverse school culture on LGBT children

the absence of substantive data on the impact on attainment represents an incompleteness of understanding that needs to be remedied. Without such understanding, it is highly unlikely that the necessary supports will be made available to enable the young people concerned to achieve the educational outcomes of which they are capable. This lack of data indicates the need for further research in this area.

3.37 Recently enacted Regulations on sexual orientation<sup>71</sup> apply to educational establishments, including schools, requiring them not to discriminate against children and young people on the grounds of sexual orientation. The Commission has recently produced guidance on these Regulations,<sup>72</sup> setting out the provisions as they apply to educational establishments and encouraging good practice in this area.

<sup>71</sup>The Equality Act (Sexual Orientation) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2006

<sup>72</sup>Equality Commission (2008), A Guide on the Provision of Goods, Facilities, Services, and Premises, available at [http://www.equalityni.org/sections/Default.asp?cms=News%5FNews&cmsid=1\\_2&id=134&secid=1\\_1](http://www.equalityni.org/sections/Default.asp?cms=News%5FNews&cmsid=1_2&id=134&secid=1_1)

## 4 POLICY CONTEXT AND OPPORTUNITY FOR CHANGE

4.1 The social, political and economic environment within which education functions is rapidly changing. Over the last few years, and in particular since the launch of the Burns Report,<sup>73</sup> the structure of education and delivery provision has been questioned and debated at length.

4.2 Driving forces for these changes have come from:

- the changing needs of schools to deliver the Revised Curriculum,
- the Entitlement Framework that individual schools are increasingly challenged to deliver,
- the review of the sustainability of schools in the light of a reduction in the number of school-aged children (the Bain Report),
- the increasing willingness to recognise the positive effects of educating children from different traditions together,
- the changing demographic profile of Northern Ireland and its increasingly diverse ethnic mix.

4.3 Further complexities are generated through the proliferation of regulations, examinations and changes in qualifications, processes and procedures that impact on the delivery of education. A very significant driver for change is the public commitment of the Department of Education to the principle of equality and its efforts to promote equal opportunities in education for all children. Documents such as the consultation document Every School a Good School – a Policy for School Improvement,<sup>74</sup> Every School A Good School – a Strategy for Raising Achievement in Literacy and Numeracy<sup>75</sup> and the ongoing review of the Department's Good Relations Strategy, demonstrate a public willingness to ensure that all children in Northern Ireland are given equality of access to quality education.

<sup>73</sup>Education for the 21st Century: Report by the Post-Primary Review Body, DENI, 2001

<sup>74</sup>Department of Education (2008) Every School a Good School – a Policy for School Improvement

<sup>75</sup>Department of Education (2008) Every School a Good School - a Strategy for Raising Achievement in Literacy and Numeracy

- 4.4 The Review of Public Administration provides an enormous opportunity for consistent practice and direction in Northern Ireland's education sector. The planned merging of education bodies including the Northern Ireland Council for Integrated Education, the Council for Catholic Maintained Schools, Comhairle na Gaelscolaíochta (the Irish Medium education sector), the five education and library boards and the CCEA into the Education and Skills Authority will allow the Department of Education to function as the strategic policy formulation body for education, and the Education and Skills Authority to concentrate on acting as the delivery arm of the Department. This arrangement should ensure a consistent approach to developing policy for schools, as well as to the promotion of equality and good relations, as both the Department and the Education and Skills Authority will be designated public authorities and subject to the full requirements of section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998.
- 4.5 The new structures should enable the collection of information to be standardised across all schools in Northern Ireland and its reporting to be consistent. The discrepancies and inconsistencies that almost inevitably accompany a fragmented structure should be largely eliminated. The new arrangements should also help to ensure that educational practice more clearly accords with agreed policy.
- 4.6 Further, the Programme for Government<sup>76</sup> and Investment Strategy for Northern Ireland<sup>77</sup> are predicated on attracting to Northern Ireland high value employment which is of its nature higher skilled, requiring higher levels of education among our young people. In relation to social investment, investing in education could prove to be one of the most productive uses of taxpayers' money in the long term, both in developing the economy and securing the future of our society.

<sup>76</sup>Programme for Government, Northern Ireland Executive January 2008

<sup>77</sup>Northern Ireland Investment Strategy, Northern Ireland Executive January 2008

## Strategic challenges

- 4.7 In a society which is changing rapidly and where educational structures are subject to radical review, the educational inequalities outlined in this paper make a powerful claim on our attention and priorities. No single agency possesses the key that will unlock all of the solutions. Schools and teachers on their own cannot resolve all the issues. Structural change and strategic focus are essential elements in securing the change that Northern Ireland needs and that children and young people deserve. Addressing the very real inequalities and setting a course that will offer meaningful equality of opportunity to all represents enormous tasks and presents strategic challenges to a range of parties, including the following.

### Government

- 4.8 Government has an important social role in reducing inequalities in opportunity beyond the confines of the educational system. It must continue to recognise the central role that education has in determining life chances and the considerable return that investment in education has for the economy. This can be done by focusing future Programmes for Government and Investment Strategies on supporting equality of access to education.

### Educational bodies

- 4.9 There is both a real challenge and an unrivalled opportunity for the educational sector to tackle inequality. The Commission recognises that educational bodies do not exist in a vacuum and that children and schools are subject to external economic, social and environmental pressures. The education system, on its own, cannot resolve structural, social and economic conditions that impede equality of educational opportunity.
- 4.10 The challenge for the sector, however, is to ensure that it identifies and recognises these constraints, and develops policies and practices to address them. Recognising the diverse needs of all our children's cultures, aptitudes and abilities,

through educational bodies' policies, practices, strategic objectives, expectations and support, can ensure that as much as possible is achieved within existing budgets and resources.

#### Partner agencies

- 4.11 Frequently, we tend to compartmentalise the work of different statutory bodies and agencies by, for example, viewing health as a separate remit from housing, which in turn is removed from education. However, children in care are the responsibility of the health and social services agencies, and a holistic assessment of a child's needs by these agencies must take educational needs into account. Similarly, the housing associations and the Housing Executive have a role to play in delivering a housing strategy that allows children to develop and flourish, for example, by providing a suitable environment for play. Partnership working, therefore, is vital to maximise the impact of resources on children and young people.
- 4.12 We have learned over the years that any strategy developed in isolation cannot hope to address the whole range of causal factors and influences in a person's life. Those who deal with internal investment issues and employment policies also have a role in working with the education sector, to ensure that the system is fit for purpose and equips children and young people with the skills that they need in later life.

#### The Commission

- 4.13 A key ongoing role for the Commission is to continue to raise the public's awareness of the impacts of inequalities of opportunity in education, to make the link between education and improved life chances. Part of our task is to ensure that the educational bodies genuinely embed the principles and practices of equality of opportunity into their core business and that they constantly strive towards greater equality.

## 5 AIMS AND STRATEGIC APPROACH

### **Proposals for embedding equality and good relations in education**

- 5.1 The Commission has been considering how best to implement the vision outlined in this document. Having considered the available options and recognising the pressures on education providers at this time, we have developed a number of proposals that are outlined below:
- a) reviewing curriculum support materials and developing good practice guidance,
  - b) setting strategic actions and outcomes to reduce inequalities through equality schemes,
  - c) developing equality and good relations elements to the training programmes provided for student teachers, existing teachers, heads and governors,
  - d) developing equality and good relations indicators for schools to be used to monitor progress on embedding equality and good relations.
- 5.2 We recognise that the goal of supporting the mainstreaming of equality and good relations cannot be achieved if we do not have the genuine and committed support of all stakeholders, and that the focus of this work must be on schools. There is little point in developing and promoting the principles and practice of equality and good relations for the classroom and wider school if those same principles and practices are not enthusiastically taken up and given an opportunity to be replicated in the real world.
- 5.3 This strategy's success will therefore be dependent on gaining support and ownership of the policy solutions from the Department of Education, the Education and Skills Authority, as well as from educators, students and other stakeholders alike. Feedback from key stakeholders, including the Department of Education, General Teaching Council, Council for Catholic



Maintained Schools, Queen's University Belfast School of Education, teaching unions, Regional Training Unit, education and library board staff and other organisations, have contributed to the options considered.

- 5.4 The Commission's research into equality in education has found that many teachers themselves would welcome more training on equality and good relations issues. Our information and advisory services are already available to schools but we will work with the relevant education bodies to develop a more strategic approach to supporting schools.
- 5.5 Promoting equality and good relations will not be a threat to a thriving school's ethos, either individually or collectively.<sup>78</sup> Indeed, we consider that by actively promoting equality and good relations within a school, it will naturally complement the ethos of a successful school, as envisaged by the Department.<sup>79</sup> Perhaps more significantly, the approach that is being advocated will initiate a cultural change that will ensure that schools and educational authorities see promoting equality of opportunity and good relations as part of their core functions.

<sup>78</sup>In Together Towards Improvement, ETI/DENI 2003, a school's ethos is defined as 'The discernable and distinctive character of the school...the atmosphere and expectations which enable it to promote the all round development of its pupils.'

<sup>79</sup>Every School a Good School - a Policy for School Improvement consultation document (Department of Education, 2008, p 11) envisages that successful schools will have an ethos that "promotes equality of opportunity, high quality learning, [and] a concern for individual pupils and respect for others." – available at [http://www.deni.gov.uk/index/85-schools/03-schools\\_impvt\\_prog\\_pg/03-review-of-school-improvement-policy.htm](http://www.deni.gov.uk/index/85-schools/03-schools_impvt_prog_pg/03-review-of-school-improvement-policy.htm)



## 6 CONCLUSIONS

- 6.1 This policy statement and intervention strategy have drawn on wide and varied sources of information. We have assessed the scope and impact and outlined possible solutions to address the lack of educational opportunity, which is present for too many children and young people in Northern Ireland.
- 6.2 By working with stakeholders in the education and other sectors, we will strive to ensure that all our children and young people have the opportunity to succeed to the best of their ability, thereby maximising the skills and productivity of our young people and developing our society into a more inclusive and harmonious place.
- 6.3 The Commission will continue to use its powers to influence, advise and promote equality of opportunity and to reduce inequalities and discrimination in the education sector in Northern Ireland.
- 6.4 We will work with partners to identify priorities for action and develop systems to ensure that these actions are monitored and being delivered, to provide children most at risk with the opportunity to succeed.
- 6.5 To monitor progress, the Commission will review the strategy after two years, to determine whether projected changes have been made and how effective they have been. This should allow sufficient time to set up processes, develop materials, promote the strategy and train teachers, staff and governors.
- 6.6 By working in partnership with stakeholders, we can help to ensure that no child is left behind.



## APPENDIX

### Key focus areas for the Commission

Research by the Commission in 2007 in preparation for our Statement of Key Inequalities for Northern Ireland publication identified a number of areas of major concern. These areas include educational underachievement by the following:

- Protestant boys in lower socio-economic groups,
- children and young people from the Irish Traveller community,<sup>80</sup>
- gay, lesbian and bisexual young people,
- looked after children,
- black and minority ethnic children for whom English is an additional language,
- disabled children and young people,
- young people with caring responsibilities for other people, eg, elderly or disabled parents.

To address the inequalities in education present among children in these groups, the Commission has developed the following statement of intent.

#### The Commission commits itself:

- to develop and enhance existing guidance materials for embedding equality and good relations in the revised curriculum. This includes a good practice guide for schools' management published in partnership with the Department and developed in conjunction with key stakeholders including the teaching unions,
- to set a series of strategic actions and outcomes for reducing inequalities in schools, which will be delivered through the equality schemes of the designated public authorities,
- to develop equality and good relations elements to the training programmes provided for student teachers, existing teachers, heads and governors,
- to identify how we can best monitor progress and develop equality and good relations indicators for schools that will reflect the creation of a welcoming and inclusive culture for all schools.



<sup>80</sup>Our research into educational provision for children and young people from the Travelling community has highlighted serious concerns about the nature and means of both delivering and monitoring of education services for children from this community.



## Further information and advice

For further information and advice on equality issues or if you would like to find out more about the Equality Commission and its work, contact us at:



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