

A Statement from the Board of Governors

1. Introduction

1.1 The Board of Governors of Ballymena Academy ('The Board') has agreed this brief statement on several important matters with which post-primary schools are currently dealing, and about which there is much uncertainty.

1.2 Ballymena Academy is a school with long traditions and a proud record. It is a popular school. It is held in high esteem within the wide and varied community which it serves and enjoys the confidence of its pupils and their parents.

1.3 Over the years the school has adapted and changed to meet differing educational and social circumstances and it will continue to do so in the future.

1.4 The Board believes that there must be judicious and significant change in the education system of Northern Ireland. It has supported the Governing Bodies Association's engagement with various Ministers and Civil servants and endorses these efforts to influence the development of a system better placed to meet the needs of all of Northern Ireland's young people, as well as the economic and communal needs of this society.

1.5 What is required is a democratically-derived, well-planned and carefully-structured programme to enable better achievement for all and give value for money in terms of public expenditure on education.

2. Structures

2.1 Northern Ireland needs schools of various types, rather than imposed uniformity. The value of schools such as Ballymena Academy, with an academic emphasis and a proven record should not be underestimated.

2.2 The Board believes that current policies, if they are not amended, will install one-size-fits-all comprehensive schools, against the stated wishes of the people of Northern Ireland and despite the fact that such schools have been shown to fail the very children they purport to help.

2.3 It is a very strange irony that this Government should be promoting comprehensive education for Northern Ireland at the same time as their policies elsewhere in the United Kingdom are finally bringing this model of schooling to a close.

2.4 The influence and enthusiasm of vocal and powerful individuals in the Civil Service and other educational agencies should not be allowed to subvert our schools to comply with their vision of the future, a vision which is not shared by the majority of Northern Ireland people.

3. Post-Primary Admissions

3.1 The Board supports any measures which enable young people to attend schools in which they can learn and grow and realise their potential. There is certainly a place for parental preference within a framework in which educational factors have priority.

3.2 The Transfer Tests have had their day and should be replaced by a robust pupil profile containing objective data about attainment, supported by formative and summative assessment and reports from the Primary School. The process should be manageable, fit for purpose and avoid unfair or inappropriate parental pressure on Primary School teachers and Principals.

3.3 It makes sense to make this profile available to the receiving schools. It should be used to reach decisions about the extent to which a school is likely to meet a child's needs, interests, abilities and aspirations. Such a process of guided choice will enable oversubscribed schools to make educationally and informed decisions rather than having to rely, for example, on geographical factors.

4. Declining Pupil Numbers

4.1 Although specific demographic statistics may be disputed, the general population trend is downwards. In any case, Northern Ireland already has more post-primary schools than it needs.

4.2 Economies of scale, efficient and effective use of public funds and the imperatives of 21st century education mean it is increasingly difficult for smaller schools to meet the needs of their pupils. Collaboration can make only partial compensation. School closures/amalgamations are inevitable.

4.3 This school is already involved in valuable and popular co-operation with the North-East Institute (NEI), providing vocational courses for sixth formers. We are keen to explore the potential for further collaboration with NEI, and other schools.

4.4 Decisions on these matters should be policy-led, evidence-driven, clearly communicated and promptly implemented, in contrast to the current approach which, by allowing schools to 'wither on the vine', is economically wasteful and educationally destructive.

4.5 Such rationalisation should include all post-primary schools. The current practice of forcing grammar schools to accept applicants, regardless of their transfer grade (or indeed their needs and abilities) should be discontinued. It is a relatively simple matter for the Department to establish a threshold (e.g. B2) which applicants must have if they are to be placed in a school which selects pupils on the basis of the transfer grade.

5. Curriculum and Specialist Schools

5.1 The ending of the highly prescriptive Northern Ireland curriculum at Key Stage 4 is welcome. Ballymena Academy will, however, continue to provide all its pupils with a broad, balanced and coherent programme which is in keeping with this school's ethos, its educational emphasis and the pupils' own abilities and aspirations.

5.2 There is merit in the notion of an Entitlement Framework but as this concept has been presented and defined by the Department of Education it is overly complex, pedantic and costly.

6. Review of Public Administration

6.1 The Board welcomes this review as timely and appropriate.

6.2 The chapter on education is much less well-considered than other sections.

6.3 The Board supports measures to make public administration more effective and less costly and believes that steps to reduce the size of the administrative bodies are long overdue.

6.4 The Board does not support the centralisation tendency of the proposals for education. It is particularly concerning to note the way in which Voluntary Grammar Schools are dismissed. Voluntary Grammar Schools contribute much to Education and have been shown to be cost-effective and efficient.

7. Time Scales and Planning

7.1 The Board supports the emphasis on careful and focused development plans for schools and has been heavily involved in drawing up the Plan for Ballymena Academy.

7.2 It is a matter of concern that the Department of Education does not heed its own injunctions on planning. The fact that so many areas are to be radically reformed at one and the same time is indicative of this lack of planning, as are the many clarifications still needed, and the failure to produce carefully costed financial plans.

7.3 The deadlines and lead-times are becoming increasingly untenable and, if the education of children is not to suffer, they must be reconsidered.

8. Conclusion

8.1 Ballymena Academy is a confident and forward-looking school working with a Department of Education which seems to be characterised by uncertainty of purpose and which has yet to publish a coherent and properly costed plan of action to accomplish the growing backlog of

work to be handled by schools.

8.2 This school will continue to work with young people and their families, as well as other agencies, to provide a high-quality educational service in this area.