



INTO Response to 'Building a Better Future' Draft Programme for Government 2008-2011

Introduction

INTO welcomes this opportunity to respond to the consultation on 'Building a Better Future' [Draft Programme for Government (PfG) 2008-2011]. INTO will confine itself mostly to education and education related matters.

INTO supports the priority of building a stronger, more vibrant economy that offers a better, more secure future for everyone in Northern Ireland. However, in the view of INTO, this Draft Programme for Government misses the opportunity to invest sufficiently in the education and skills necessary to underpin the development of a vibrant economy in Northern Ireland.

Chapter 2 Economic, Social and Environmental Context

Para 2.21

Correctly identifies the continuing brain drain of our best and brightest young people. One third of students who lived in Northern Ireland in 2004 moved away to take their university course. Nine % of full-time students who studied in NI left after graduation; whilst 65% of those who studied in GB did not return but entered employment outside Northern Ireland. INTO regrets that no proposals are made to address this annual haemorrhage or to increase the number of third level student places in Northern Ireland.

Para 2.49

The identified concern here is the small size of the private sector in NI and the significant pay premium between it and the public sector of almost 18% - the highest

in the UK. This demonstrates the need to attract and grow high value, high paying jobs in the private sector. These should not at the expense of public sector jobs.

Para 2.67

INTO agrees that waste management is a pressing problem. Legislation needs to be introduced to outlaw the distribution of free plastic bags as a direct measure to reduce waste and promote recycling in a similar manner to current practice in the Republic of Ireland.

Chapter 4 Resources

Para 4.9

INTO is concerned at the continuing under-funding of schools in Northern Ireland. This is demonstrated by the bureaucratic Local Management of Schools [LMS] school funding mechanism, that does not even fund teachers' salaries. Year on year hundreds of teaching jobs are lost to children's education in spite of INTO proposals to maintain the number of teaching jobs at their 2005 level. LMS is a teacher job cutting mechanism used shamelessly by the Department of Education [DE].

DE should not have to deliver the compound cumulative efficiency gains of 3% per year for this 3-year period. INTO is appalled at the PfG proposal to implement the Treasury's cuts' strategy. This would mean that in the period 2008-2011, DE would have to deliver cash releasing efficiencies of £63.2 million, £1.245 million and £1.84 million. These savings should be directed to frontline services in schools.

Para 4.23

Education has not benefited from significant levels of additional investment in recent years. Most of this resource has gone into capital building and duplication. A recent DE draft proposal to finance the establishment of "Sectoral Support Bodies" is a manifestation of this malaise.

Chapter 5 Priority Outcomes and Associated Public Expenditure Outcomes

Para 5.4

INTO queries the five key strategic and interdependent priorities. Promoting tolerance, inclusion and well being is a significant regression on previous policy to

build 'A Shared Future'. Building 'A Shared Future' seems to have largely disappeared with only the Department of Education and Learning [DEL] making reference to it. How can such a major policy shift to such a low level priority take place and be justified?

Para 5.5

INTO queries if growing the economy is the Executive's top priority in this draft PFG why such a tiny proportion of its budget has been allocated to it?

Chapter 6 Departmental Proposed Budget Allocations

The draft PFG identifies the following targets related to education:

- Ensure by 2011 that 70% of school leavers achieve 5 or more GCSE passes at A* - C;
- Ensure by 2015 that 80% of the working population is qualified at least to GCSE level or equivalent;
- Increasing the number of adult learners achieving a qualification in literacy, numeracy and ICT skills by 90,000 by 2015;
- Increasing by 25% the number of students, specially those from disadvantaged communities at graduate and post graduate level studying Science, Technology and Mathematics (STEN subjects) by 2015;
- Achieving a position by 2011 where 30% of school leavers entitled to free school meals obtain 5 or more GCSE passes at A* - C;
- Increase by 300 the number of PhD research students at local universities by 2010;
- Introduce a new programme to increase the commercialisation of university and college research by 2010;
- Establish a NI Library Authority and an Education and Skills Authority by 2009;

The above goals are of strategic importance to the development of Northern Ireland as a vibrant economy. However, INTO is disappointed that the context to the Draft PFG proposals is the failure by DE to implement and resource the recommendations of the Curran Teachers' Pay and Conditions of Service Independent Enquiry, February 2004. In particular, INTO is disappointed that the DE has not established a Northern Ireland Regional Consultative Forum for the education service where the employers, unions and other key interests would discuss and offer advice at a strategic level on planning options.

Teachers in Northern Ireland schools are overloaded with a plethora of policy initiatives – the Revised Curriculum at all stages; reviews into Special Education Needs and Pre-school Provision; development of Interactive Computer Assessment system (INCAs); development of Pupil Profiles; proposed massive rationalisation of the schools’ estate; under funding of schools, particularly at primary level; a proposed major overhaul of Education Administration and the ending of the existing transfer system at age 11 to post primary schools.

In this context INTO recommends very strongly that the objective of establishing an Education and Skills Authority by 2009 be paused and that Education Administration be reformed gradually from within using the present infrastructure of the five Education and Library Boards, the Council for Catholic Maintained Schools, NICIE and Comhairle na Gaelscolaíochta.

INTO does not accept that the Draft Budget allocation adequately supports the implementation of the Revised Curriculum, nor is there a sufficient resource to facilitate collaboration between post primary schools and the further education sector. In the context of the DE determination not to fund “added years” where teachers are being made redundant, the amalgamation and rationalisation of schools becomes impossible. INTO proposes:

- (i) A phased approach towards the removal of “added years” for PRC;
- (ii) The establishment of a panel to provide continued employment for teachers facing compulsory redundancy;
- (iii) Guaranteed added years for teachers facing redundancy in school amalgamation/school closure situations;
- (iv) Funding for the Curran 2004 recommendation for the implementation of a “Winding Down Scheme” for teachers.

INTO deplors the development once again by DE of a “School Improvement Policy” and “Literacy and Numeracy” strategy without consultation with the teachers’ unions. This continuing lack of meaningful consultation and dialogue seriously undermines the potential of the Draft PfG in this area. The Revised Curriculum encourages teachers to be flexible, adventurous and risk takers in their classroom. The proposed “School Improvement” agenda, if implemented, would derail the success of the Revised Curriculum and encourage teachers into adopting safe, but dull methodologies.

INTO is not convinced of the capability of the Education and Skills Authority to add value to the teaching and learning process in schools in a pupil and teacher friendly manner. INTO, as above opposes the implementation of this objective.

INTO is not convinced of the need for new legislation to implement an area-based planning approach, in view of the fact that the 1986 Education and Libraries (NI) Order already has allocated this power to the five Education and Library Boards.

INTO welcomes the priority given to equality, good relations, poverty/social inclusion and sustainable community development. However, INTO is alarmed at the absence of any reference to building “A Shared Future” in education in the DE section of the PfG.

Conclusion

INTO welcomes the general thrust of the Programme for Government. INTO is alarmed at the continued under resourcing of education, the continued exclusion of the teachers’ unions from strategic and policy-making formulation. The plethora of initiatives and radical change besetting teachers in schools – all of which undermine the thrust of the PfG in education.

INTO calls for a pause to the Review of Public Administration in Education and the beginning of genuine and meaningful dialogue with the teachers’ unions on implementing the draft proposed objectives of the PfG in education.