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Rt Hon Tom King MP
Secretary of State for Northern Ireland
Whitehall
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23 March 1988

Tom King

File with PG

EDUCATIONAL REFORM IN NORTHERN IRELAND

Thank you for copying to me your minute of 1 March to the Prime Minister on this subject. Our Departments have of course been in contact about the approach you propose, and generally our conclusion has been that, given the different circumstances in Northern Ireland, the differences in approach on the curriculum and on grant-maintained schools are acceptable. I have however delayed replying until I had seen your Department's comments on the letter of 8 March from the Prime Minister's Private Secretary, as the place of religious education in your curriculum proposals was a matter about which I too was concerned.

As you will appreciate, inclusion of RE as a foundation subject in legislation for the Northern Ireland common curriculum would cause us considerable difficulty in taking the Education Reform Bill through the House of Lords. We face pressure from the Churches to include RE within the list of foundation subjects defined in the Bill, but then to treat it in a different way from other foundation subjects: this seems to be what you are proposing. But I have resisted such demands on the grounds that it is unnecessary to legislate to make RE a foundation subject since it is already compulsory, and the only reason for making it one would therefore be if we wanted to prescribe centrally, or to issue central guidance on, programmes of study and assessment arrangements as for other foundation subjects.

I think that what you now suggest - namely open-ended consultation that asks people in the particular circumstances of Northern Ireland to choose between RE as a foundation subject with a centrally-

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determined syllabus or not having RE as a foundation subject but having locally agreed syllabuses - avoids the main difficulties. I would be content for you to consult on that basis.

Your proposal to issue guidelines on "underlying objectives" for non-foundation subjects, such as home economics, goes further than anything I have proposed, though we have acknowledged that the National Curriculum Council has a role in relation to such subjects. I presume that you have no intention of giving statutory backing to guidelines in non-foundation subjects, since to do so would blur the distinction between foundation and non-foundation subjects.

Your proposals for grant-maintained schools would give the trustees of former voluntary schools at least half the membership of the new Board of Governors, except in the case of grant-maintained integrated schools, where they would be the largest single grouping, but short of an overall majority. I appreciate that you have your reasons for not proposing for Northern Ireland a guaranteed majority for the foundation governors. Equally, I am sure you will understand that for England and Wales this represents an essential assurance to the Churches that, even if they cannot stand in the way of schools wanting grant-maintained status, they will have all the necessary means for ensuring that those schools' religious identity is maintained. We shall need to be prepared for the possibility that some commentators may seek to exploit the difference of emphasis.

Paragraphs 72 and 73 of your draft consultation document, on college governing bodies, reflect the proposals in our consultation document "Maintained Further Education: Financing, Governance and Law". However, as a result of consultation the provisions in the Education Reform Bill differ in certain respects from those proposals. The changes concerned were made in response to strongly expressed views. I imagine that you may want to follow the policy in the Bill for your own document, and am asking my officials to contact yours to let them have the details.

Finally, I should say that given the great sensitivity of some of the areas addressed in your consultation document, I should have greatly preferred its publication to have been delayed until the Lords have completed consideration of the Education Reform Bill - before the end of June, we hope. Its earlier publication will certainly give the Opposition an opening to exploit differences between your proposals and mine. If however delay is not possible, I believe that its early publication, before Lords consideration of the Bill gets under way, is the best way of minimising the damage.

I am copying this letter to the Prime Minister, Geoffrey Howe, Peter Walker, Malcolm Rifkind, John Major and Sir Robin Butler.

Tom
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'EMBARGO' 10.30 a.m. WEDNESDAY 30 MARCH 1988



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NORTHERN IRELAND Information Service

30 March 1988

EDUCATION REFORM IN NORTHERN IRELAND

The Government today launched its consultative paper outlining proposals for education reform in Northern Ireland.

1st Folder

Introducing the Consultative Paper, Education Minister, Dr Brian Mawhinney MP, said:

"This paper sets out the Government's views about the future shape of education in Northern Ireland and the changes which would be necessary to bring this about. The decisions taken on these proposals will determine what happens in our schools and colleges well into the next century. The proposals reflect national education policy, in a form appropriate to the needs of Northern Ireland. As such I hope they will be given careful study by everyone involved or interested in the education service, including parents. In addition I think it is important to have full and constructive consultation on all aspects of the proposals before we proceed to make decisions and to legislate. The publication of draft legislation will provide a further opportunity for consultation. Details of implementation and phasing will be firmed up at a later stage.

"As in the case of England and Wales it had been my intention to have a two month consultation period on this paper. Bearing in mind, however, that the paper is issuing at the start of the Easter holiday, I have extended the consultation period to 10 June.

The main features of the paper on which consultation is invited are:

- a common curriculum for all schools in Northern Ireland, consisting of 8 essential areas of study ("foundation subjects");
- new arrangements for testing pupil performance at ages 7 (or 8), 11, 14 and 16 against specific assessment criteria;
- greater freedom of choice for parents in selecting the school their children should attend;
- the delegation to schools (starting with secondary schools) and to colleges of further education, of responsibility for the management of their own budgets;
- the introduction of 2 new types of school management: "grant-maintained schools" and "grant-maintained integrated schools".

Dr Mawhinney said:

"There is much in Northern Ireland's education service about which the people of the Province can justifiably be proud. This is certainly true if we compare the performance of our A level pupils with that of their counterparts in England and Wales. But we have to take account of performance across the whole ability range, not just at the upper end.

When we do this, we find that whereas about 1 in 10 pupils leave school without recognised qualifications in England and Wales, the ratio in Northern Ireland is closer to 1 in 4. The reasons for this are complex but to some extent the system is failing these children. That has to be a matter of concern to us all. Our first objective must therefore be to enhance the quality of the education we provide for all our children throughout their years of schooling. To achieve this we need to build on the professionalism and dedication of teachers, and to provide a framework within which parents and teachers can work even more closely together.

"Such a framework will also allow parents to exercise their primary responsibility for the education of their children. Under the proposals in this paper, parents would be told in advance about what their children are to be taught and how it relates to the common curriculum. They would be able to see how their children's performance compares with the assessment criteria. They would be able to compare the performance of one school with another. They would be able to make more informed choices about which school their children should attend, and have greater freedom in exercising that choice. Parents would know what resources have been allocated to the school and, through the Board of Governors, have a say in how those resources are used. Thus parents and teachers together would be aware of progress, needs and resources and would be able to work in closer partnership in the interests of providing the best possible education.

"But our proposals go further. I believe it is right that parents in Northern Ireland should have the same opportunity as those in England and Wales to influence the future development of the schools their children attend. The paper therefore offers, for consultation, proposals similar to those in the Education Reform Bill which would enable

schools to seek a form of grant-maintained status, under which they would become corporate bodies, with a high level of autonomy, funded directly from central government.

"There is already a range of different types of school in Northern Ireland, yet it is still not always possible for parents to find within their own locality the kind of school they would ideally like for their children. There are many parents - an increasing number, I believe - who would like to see their children educated in circumstances which are different from those which have been traditional in Northern Ireland for the last six decades. The introduction of grant-maintained status would provide the opportunity for parents to have much greater influence on the management and evolution of the schools' future, while preserving the character and values, including the religious ethos, of those schools at the time they become grant-maintained.

"In addition, many parents have a desire to see their children educated together with children from other religious backgrounds. The integrated school movement is the tangible evidence of this growing trend. Realistically, however, these aspirations cannot fully be met through the creation of new schools because of the obvious need for any new school to show that it can attract sufficient pupils and provide a balanced curriculum before it can receive state funds. The proposals in the consultative paper are therefore designed to allow these parental wishes to find expression in another form of grant-maintained status - to be known as grant-maintained integrated status - so that existing schools could seek this new status provided there was sufficient parental support and evidence of an existing degree of religious integration."

Turning to the curriculum aspects of the proposals in the consultative paper, Dr Mawhinney said:

"There is now a generally accepted need to ensure that every child has access to all the essential knowledge, understanding and skills required in today's complex society. As in England and Wales, the proposals in this paper aim to secure the necessary breadth and balance in the curriculum. In so doing, we will wish to build as far as possible on the sound basis which has already been laid by, for example, the Primary Guidelines and the 11-16 Programme and to draw heavily on the professional knowledge and experience of teachers.

"Under these proposals, every school would provide the necessary range of foundation subjects. Each foundation subject would have a centrally-defined programme of study, and assessment criteria against which each pupil's attainment could be measured and tested. The tests would monitor progress and provide a means of determining whether each child is being intellectually stretched and performing to his/her maximum potential. They will also assist in identifying pupils in need of additional help and support.

"The paper also invites comment specifically on the position to be accorded to religious education, which already has a statutory place in the curriculum.

"I wish to make it quite clear that the present system of secondary education which operates with widespread public confidence here is not in question, and parents will continue to be able to choose between the two main types of secondary school. But the introduction of new assessment and testing arrangements at age 11 would provide a valuable opportunity to look afresh at how we assess the suitability of pupils for the various forms of secondary education. The paper describes the options. Adoption of these proposals may also lead to a less rigid distinction between different types of schools."

The consultative paper also contains proposals for delegating to schools and colleges of Further Education the management of their annual budgets. Commenting on this aspect of the proposals, Dr Mawhinney said:

"We know from the experience of a number of local education authorities in England and Wales that greater financial delegation creates opportunities for schools and colleges to match the use of their resources more closely with educational needs and objectives. It also relieves the maintaining authority of a certain amount of day to day administration."

In conclusion, the Minister added:

"I hope there will be the widest possible discussion of all the proposals in this paper. They are of the utmost importance to the future of education in Northern Ireland. I realise that they involve big changes and that there is a natural reluctance to change. But the world is changing and the needs of our children are changing, so we too must change. I believe that through these proposals, and with the constructive involvement of the teaching profession, we can significantly raise educational standards in our schools and, in the wider context, promote greater community and cross-community involvement in education, which can only help to overcome the divisions in Northern Ireland society."

CONSULTATIVE PAPER ON EDUCATION REFORM IN NORTHERN IRELAND

SUMMARY OF MAIN PROPOSALS

1. The consultative paper sets out, for discussion and comment, the Government's proposals for education reform in Northern Ireland. The proposals are broadly parallel to those in England and Wales and have as their main thrust a range of measures designed to increase the involvement of parents in their children's education. The main proposals are:

- a common curriculum for all grant-aided schools consisting of 8 essential areas of study;
- attainment testing at ages 7 (or 8), 11, 14 and 16, with the options of using the attainment test at age 11 in place of, or in addition to, the existing transfer arrangements;
- greater freedom of choice for parents in selecting the school their children should attend;
- delegation of responsibility for the financial management of schools and colleges of further education to their Boards of Governors; and
- the opportunity for schools to seek corporate identity as grant-maintained schools, or grant-maintained integrated schools, receiving all recurrent and capital funding direct from central Government.

A New Common Curriculum

2. The Government proposes to introduce legislation which would require a common curriculum to be provided in all grant-aided schools so as to ensure that all pupils study a common agreed group of essential ("foundation") subjects which would provide a sufficiently broad and balanced education. These subjects, which should take up approximately 70%-75% of curriculum time, are:

English

Mathematics

Science

History/Geography/Environmental Studies (either singly or in combination)

Technology (incorporating Craft, Design and Technology)

Music/Art/Drama (either singly or in combination)

Physical Education

A Modern Foreign Language (secondary schools only).

3. Within these foundation subjects, particular attention would continue to be given to English, mathematics and science, at both primary and secondary school levels. Programmes of study would be devised for each foundation subject, usually with associated assessment criteria upon which attainment testing and formal teacher assessment would be based. For music, art, drama and PE, as well as for some of the non-foundation subjects, guidelines would be set, incorporating the underlying objectives of the programmes of study, rather than specific assessment criteria. Working groups would be established to make recommendations about programmes of study and assessment criteria for each subject. The programmes of study would not be narrowly prescriptive, and teachers would be free to determine the detail of what was taught and the teaching approaches used, so long as these would allow pupils to fulfil the assessment criteria. In the Northern Ireland context, regard would be had to the approaches advocated in Primary Guidelines, and the curricular structures which have been developed under the 11-16 Curriculum Review and Vocational Education Programmes. This flexibility of approach would allow scope for differentiation in the depth of treatment of subjects, depending on pupils' abilities, and would therefore be consistent with the continuation of a selective system of secondary education.

4. The consultation paper invites comment on the position of religious education in relation to the proposed common curriculum. Although the place of religious education in the curriculum is already secured by law, it may be considered that religious education should also be included as a foundation subject to recognise its central contribution to the spiritual and moral education of pupils. If it were to be a foundation subject, this would imply that it should be studied by all pupils throughout their compulsory school

career, which could be inconsistent with parents' freedom to exercise their rights of conscience, and that it should have a centrally-prescribed programme of study, which some might find unacceptable.

Assessment

5. The assessment criteria would be certain key aspects of learning identified within the programmes of study. They would be developed initially in English, mathematics and science, and at a later stage for the other foundation subjects. The aim would be to establish what children should normally be expected to know, understand and be able to do at regular intervals throughout compulsory education. It is proposed that Northern Ireland should follow broadly the same pattern as England and Wales, with targets set for ages 7 (or 8), 11, 14 and 16. At age 16, attainment for the majority of pupils would be measured via GCSE.

Information

6. So as to provide a substantive profile of each pupil's progress and attainment, records of achievement would be introduced for all pupils, and would be available to them at the end of the primary stage, and when they left secondary school. These records would include less formal aspects of achievement as well as the pupil's performance in attainment tests and examinations. In addition, it is proposed that all parents should be kept regularly informed as to how the school's schemes of work relate to the common curriculum, and how their children have performed in attainment tests against the assessment criteria, and that teachers should know how their classes were doing in comparison with others. It is also important that Government, employers and the general public should be able to monitor Northern Ireland standards of attainment and improvement over time, and to be able to make broad comparisons with standards elsewhere in the United Kingdom; appropriate information on school performance would therefore be published on a regular basis.

Supporting Structures

7. A new body, to be known as the Northern Ireland Curriculum Council, would be established by legislation to advise the Department of Education on the curriculum. Its remit would include oversight of the working groups which would be preparing the proposed programmes of study. NICC would be responsible for updating these as well as for liaising with the Northern Ireland Schools Examinations Council in establishing assessment criteria. NISEC would have a new statutory role in conducting, monitoring and moderating the attainment tests at all levels, retaining its present responsibility to ensure that standards of examinations in Northern Ireland are recognised as equivalent to those elsewhere in the United Kingdom.

Parental Choice

8. The consultative paper reaffirms the Government's declared policy to improve opportunities for parental choice of school by removing the limits on admissions to secondary (including grammar) schools from the 1988/89 school year, and indicates its intention to introduce open enrolment in the primary sector in the amending legislation.

9. In addition, the introduction of attainment testing at the end of primary education at age 11 might well have implications for the present procedure for transfer to secondary school. This currently takes the form of verbal reasoning-type tests, and includes a formula whereby predetermined percentages (or "quotas") of pupils are awarded the various grades. The Consultative Paper specifically asks for views on what are seen as two main options. Under the first, children could take both types of test around the age of 11. It might be argued that together the tests would provide a valuable range of complementary information on the development of pupils.

10. The second option, based on the view that the simultaneous operation of two separate tests could be a severe imposition on pupils and schools, would require pupils to take only one set of tests at age 11, and this would be the proposed attainment test. If this second option were chosen, the existing transfer procedure would be discontinued and schools would need to look, for the purposes of selecting pupils for the different types of secondary education, to the results of the proposed attainment test at age 11 together

with its associated teacher assessment. Taken together with the removal of admissions limits upon secondary schools, this would significantly enhance parents' freedom to choose the secondary school they wish their children to attend.

Financial Delegation to Schools and Colleges

11. There are clear benefits for schools and further education colleges in being able to manage their own finances. It is proposed to introduce arrangements similar to those advanced for England and Wales which will enable schools and colleges to match expenditure decisions to educational objectives and to reflect their particular needs and aspirations.

12. The key features of the proposals for financial delegation for Northern Ireland schools are that Education and Library Boards would be required, after appropriate consultation, to draw up schemes whereby the budgets of controlled and maintained schools (which are fully maintained by Education and Library Boards) would be delegated to the Boards of Governors, to be managed at their discretion for the purposes of securing the delivery of the full curriculum in the school. To determine a budget for each school, an Education and Library Board would first establish its total financial resources available for schools and deduct certain items of centrally administered expenditure. A formula would be established for the distribution among schools of the remaining resources. Similar proposals are being canvassed in the Consultative Paper for financial delegation to the Governing Bodies of further education colleges. The Paper lists the main cost elements which might be delegated and sets out how the schemes might operate in broad terms; it also proposes the publication of information on how school and college budgets are determined.

Grant-Maintained Schools

13. The Consultative Paper puts forward for consideration proposals which would enable primary and secondary schools in Northern Ireland, whether controlled, voluntary or independent, to seek a form of grant-maintained status, similar to that proposed in England and Wales. Such schools would be

known as grant-maintained schools, and would likewise acquire a corporate identity, and a high degree of autonomy, with 100% of recurrent and capital funding paid directly by central Government.

14. In addition, the Consultative Paper reiterates the Government's commitment to encourage educational integration between Protestant and Roman Catholic pupils in schools in Northern Ireland. Proposals are therefore advanced for a further category of grant-maintained schools, to be known as grant-maintained integrated schools, committed to the development of integrated education and distinguished by the composition of their managing bodies. In order to attract GMI status they would have demonstrated a substantial degree of integration, with at least 20% of the enrolment being Roman Catholic where the majority is Protestant, or vice-versa. It is proposed that the growth of grant-maintained integrated schools should not be subject to the normal (physical capacity-based) controls and indeed they would attract a high priority for capital projects designed to provide necessary additional pupil places.

15. In general, as with grant-maintained schools in England and Wales, it is proposed that basic recurrent funding would broadly reflect the same level of resources as the school was already receiving from its maintaining authority, to which would be added an element for teachers' salaries already funded by the Department of Education. Additionally, it is proposed to make provision in the legislation for the payment of special purpose grants to take account of special needs, related for example to the make-up of the population of the area served by the school.

16. As for England and Wales, a proposal to obtain grant-maintained status could be initiated by the Board of Governors or at the request of 20% of the parents. In either case this would be followed by a secret postal ballot of parents and a majority would have to vote in favour of the proposal for it to proceed.

17. Views are particularly sought on the management structures for grant-maintained schools, but it is envisaged that in principle they would be made up of members representative of parents and teachers, members appointed

by the Department of Education, and a body of foundation governors. The trustees of the former voluntary schools would retain at least half of the membership of the new Board of Governors of those grant-maintained schools which were not seeking integrated status. For grant-maintained integrated schools, it is proposed that while the foundation governors would be the largest single grouping, this would be short of an overall majority.

EDUCATION REFORMS - KEY POINTS

A. CURRICULUM

Foundation subjects/areas of study - similar to England and Wales.

Special consideration required of position of Religious Education.

Assessment criteria and testing at ages 7/8, 11, 14, 16.

Continuation of selective system of secondary education, but possible need to change basis of selection.

Improved arrangements for advising parents about child's progress and advising public about performance of schools.

Changes needed in supporting structures - NICED, NISEC.

B. PARENTAL CHOICE

Schools able to admit pupils up to the physical capacity of their premises, with protection given to some isolated schools.

C. FINANCIAL DELEGATION TO SCHOOLS

Similar to proposals in England and Wales but taking account of NI funding arrangements.

Formulae to be developed to determine amount for each school.

Schools to manage budgets within approved procedures with some expenditure to remain with Boards or the Department eg external/structural maintenance.

Delegation initially to secondary schools : in meantime primary schools to get uprated "consolidated allowances" scheme.

D. GRANT-MAINTAINED SCHOOLS

Principles as in England & Wales - ie autonomy and direct central government grant.

Initiative of parents or Board of Governors: simple majority of parents

For grant-maintained status, character/ethos of school protected, and trustees retain at least 50% holding in new board of governors.

For grant-maintained integrated status, school with existing 'integration' record can apply (minimum 80:20 religious mix).

Management structure in grant-maintained integrated schools to reflect 'integrated' nature: trustees/transferrers largest group but in minority.

All grant-maintained schools would be funded via 100% recurrent & capital grants.