

EDUCATION: BRIDGING THE DIVIDE?

The Burns Report: The 11 Plus And Post-Primary Education A Discussion Leaflet By Community Dialogue

June 2002

This leaflet provides:

- A summary of the Burns Report on the future of education in Northern Ireland.
- Views, feelings and perceptions from a cross section of Community Dialogue participants.
- Questions to consider.

1. BACKGROUND TO THE BURNS REPORT

The 11+ was introduced in the 1940's. It streams those pupils who 'pass' into grammar schools and the rest into secondary schools. It was abolished in the rest of the United Kingdom 30 years ago.

How Do Children Perform Under The Present System?

The problem with this question is that answers vary depending upon what we measure and how we measure it (e.g. academic or creative ability, pass or fail rate, grade etc).

- Government figures indicate that Northern Ireland pupils do 'better' at GCSE and A-level than the rest of the United Kingdom.
- In the mid-1980s 1 in 5 pupils in Northern Ireland left school without a GCSE, but the figure fell to 1 in 13 a decade later and continues to improve.
- Grammar schools achieve high academic standards but the current system also results in large numbers of low achieving schools.
- Few children from low-income families get into grammar school.
- Children who don't pass the 11+ often feel they are failures and lose confidence in their ability.

The Review

Martin McGuinness, the Education Minister, ordered an independent review chaired by former Ombudsman Gerry Burns. It made recommendations on the most appropriate future arrangements for post-primary education, and was published as the Burns Report in October 2001.

2. SUMMARY OF THE BURNS REPORT

The 11+

- The 11+ should end. Schools should not be allowed to use academic ability, measured by a test or any other method, to decide who should be given a place (as grammar schools do now).

Pupil Profile

- Primary schools should prepare a Pupil Profile for each child during the last 3 years of primary education to show how the child does in all areas of schoolwork (not just English, Mathematics and Science as in the 11+).

Choosing A School

- In the last year of primary school the teacher should discuss the Pupil Profile with parents to help them decide what type of post-primary education would be most suitable for their child.
- Parents would decide which schools to apply for and list them in order of preference.
- Post-primary schools would not be allowed to use Pupil Profiles, or any test, to decide who gets a place.

Admissions

- Many schools get more applications than there are places available. Currently each school draws up its own criteria for deciding which pupils to admit. Only grammar schools use the 11+ results and they admit pupils on strict order of grades.
- Burns proposes that all schools use the same criteria (set out below) to decide who should get a place. Priority would be given to children in the following order:
 1. Children whose parents listed that school as the first preference.
 2. Children with a brother or sister at the school.
 3. A child who is the eldest in a family.
 4. Children with a parent working at the school.
 5. Children with compelling circumstances i.e. social, welfare or other personal reasons.
 6. Distance of the school from the child's home.

Collegiates

- Burns proposes establishing 20 networks of post-primary schools, called Collegiates. Each would include 5 to 15 schools of all types (e.g. denominational, non-denominational, Irish-medium, integrated etc).
- Schools in each Collegiate would work together to make a wider range of courses available.
- Schools would provide the statutory curriculum but there would be more flexibility to choose different courses and to develop specialisms like sport, new technology or performing arts.
- Each Collegiate would enable pupils to experience different types of courses. Within the Collegiate children could take courses in, or transfer to, other schools.

3. VIEWS, FEELINGS AND PERCEPTIONS OF COMMUNITY DIALOGUE PARTICIPANTS

The 11+

- "Wealthy parents pay for private tutors to ensure their kids get a grammar place."
- "Primary school is geared to push kids through the 11+; it's a strain on parents, teachers and kids."
- "The system forces parents and children to make educational choices at too early an age."
- "Performance in the test, affected by a toothache or trouble at home, could blight a child's future."

- "If it works don't change it, our grammar schools are the best in the United Kingdom."
- "Why is so much value placed on a child's academic ability and so little on its creative ability?"
- "No kids here get to grammar school. Wasn't the Agreement about equality for our kids too?"
- "The success of grammar schools is based on their rejection of 65% of our children as failures."
- "This issue is about middle class privilege and working class exclusion."

Collegiates

- "They'll lead to a network of independent fee-paying schools with our kids banished to inferior 'state' schools."
- "We haven't been given enough information to decide on Collegiates. How much extra will they cost, how much more red tape will there be?"
- "With Burns we'll still have separate Protestant, Catholic and other exclusive schools reinforcing the divisions at the core of this society."
- "I want my child educated in my religion, that means separate Protestant and Catholic schools."
- "House prices will rise around prestige schools, excluding people like me."

The Burns Report

- "The questionnaire is weighted so they get the answers they want."
- "It doesn't matter what we think, it'll be imposed on us anyway."
- "How can I take this report seriously when it comes from McGuinness? A terrorist is overseeing my child's education."
- "When I got Burns in the post it was the first time I felt that the Agreement work for me."
- "I feel like a responsible citizen, being consulted about my child's future feels good."
- "I don't know if I agree with Burns. But the 11+ isn't fair, we need to do something."

4. SOME QUESTIONS FOR YOU TO CONSIDER

If you don't want to see the 11+ abolished:

- Are there ways of dealing with unfairness in the current system e.g. children who feel like failures because they didn't pass?

If you do want to see the 11+ abolished:

- Do you have enough information e.g., on the implications of the Collegiate system, to make a decision on Burns?

Is your view of the Burns Report based on:

- The fact that you're Protestant or Catholic?
- What is educationally best for your child or all our children?

5. THE CONSULTATION

The Burns Report has stirred deep emotions in Northern Ireland. It is perhaps wise, therefore, that a wider consultation is under way.

- 670, 000 households in Northern Ireland are being polled in June about the proposed reforms.

- The Department of Education stresses that it wants you to make your views known.
- Forms must be returned by 28th June- no decisions will be made until all comments are considered.

Note:

Community Dialogue has no party political position. We promote informed dialogue and decision making about the critical issues affecting our future. We hope this leaflet helps you to consider the issues raised in the Burns Report and reach an informed decision, whatever that may be. We welcome comments in response to this leaflet and will forward them to the Department of Education.