

Consultation on the Five-Year Education Budget Strategy: Delivering a Stable, Sustainable and High-Quality Education System

Response from the Mental Health Champion

I acknowledge the extremely challenging financial position faced by Department of Education (DE) in meeting the rising cost of delivering education in NI. The consultation specifies that “the classroom must come first”, this emphasis risks exacerbating the impact of inequalities on educational outcomes by reducing the support to facilitate young people with poor mental health from engaging in education and benefitting from education. For many young people the classroom is not the primary mechanism through which they engage with education. This also needs to be recognised. In any case, the proposals outlined are not in alignment with a “classroom first” approach because the services which face reduced or removal of funding, are the very support services that enable some young people to engage with classroom learning. As Mental Health Champion, I wish to recommend an approach that puts the wellbeing of young people at the centre of all policies to ensure that all children and young people can benefit from their education. The need for a trauma informed approach to the delivery of public services is emphasised in our recent Programme for Government. This is particularly important in school settings because education comes at a time of peak neuroplasticity providing opportunities not only for learning and growth but for emotional development to promote positive wellbeing across the lifespan. The disadvantage, trauma and harm experienced at this age has lifelong consequences and as such, a trauma informed approach is a necessary and appropriate guide to all policy decisions affecting children. Cuts to elements of education that prevent mental illness will carry costs in terms of both Health and Justice, and stifle economic growth. In recognition of this, the Executive need to work together to agree a budget that will maximise the benefits of education for all children and young people. They also urgently need to commence the transformation of the education system as recommended by the Independent Review, to create a single, more cost-effective system in the longer term.

Reduction of Earmarked Budgets

Youth services such as Extended Schools, the Full-Service School Programmes and Sure Start should be protected from cuts and the Department of Education, using a trauma informed approach, needs to take responsibility for decisions about services, provide vital relational interventions for children and young people, particularly those from disadvantaged families and children with multiple ACEs who are vulnerable to mental illness, addiction, and engagement with the criminal justice system. These services literally change lives, enabling young people to thrive, set goals, and remain in education. The longer-term economic costs of cutting these services will be borne by the health and criminal justice systems and will ultimately affect peace and prosperity here. The youth work approach is particularly effective means of addressing aggression and violence among boys and young men and should also be viewed as a vital tool in the prevention of violence against women and girls. It is essential that youth work services are aligned with the assessment of need, and, as one of the most cost-effective elements of the Education

Budget, are maintained. Sure Start is another example of an extremely cost-effective intervention addressing the impact of ACEs and ensuring that children have the best opportunities to thrive. Cuts to this programme will again reduce access to early years support for the most vulnerable families and widen the developmental gaps Sure Start was created to address, enabling them to benefit from education in the school setting, and reducing the need for additional more costly supports in classrooms. Cuts to these vital services will have large scale and lasting impacts on young people, for relatively marginal cost savings compared to the wider Education funding block.

Home-to-School Transport

I recognise the need to ensure that transport to school is cost effective, and the need to review the use of taxi transport to school. However, policies to limit transport to the “nearest suitable school” should be implemented only as part of the wider reform of the school system set out by the Independent Review of Education. In the current context changing the eligibility for transport from school of preference to nearest suitable school will disadvantage families who have already placed their child in a school of their preference. It may further amplify the inequalities created by academic selection as children from disadvantaged families may be unable to attend a grammar school due to the additional cost of transport. It would also restrict choice for families who wish to have children educated in a faith school, or in an integrated school. It would disadvantage families who wish to receive specific services (such as wrap around childcare to enable parents to attend work) or facilities that meet their children’s health, or mental health needs. Ultimately, when the cost of transport is prohibitive, families who cannot afford this cost will have to limit filter schools by location, rather than by consideration of which would be the best environment for their child. Policies enacted in NI need to acknowledge the needs of the high proportions of rural dwellers, the limitations of our transport infrastructure, and complex categorisation of school types to consider.

School Meals Provision

The extent of child poverty in NI is such that for some children the school meal is the main opportunity for nutritious food. Any changes to the provision of school meals should ensure that the quality of the meal remains high and that children have access to a nutritionally balanced meal.

SEN Support Model for Statement Pupils in Mainstream Schools

The proposed new model for the funding of SEN support, and a move towards group models may result in children with very specific needs missing out on individualised support that would benefit them. Classroom assistants may need additional training to support children in learning in a group setting. Where reform such as this has come in to place in England, there has been some backlash for the loss of specific Emotional Health Care Plan (EHCP) - [Parents of Send pupils without EHCPs are least satisfied with schools, survey in England finds | Special educational needs | The Guardian](#). The establishment of SEN units creates the opportunity to employ specialist staff who can better meet the needs of SEN pupils; however, this also runs the risk of excluding SEN pupils from the wider school community. It is therefore important that schools ensure that SEN pupils need access to all elements of education and environment to engage with their peers. It also appears that decisions have already been taken in relation to SEN provision and parents have already been advised of changes. This has not only led to distress in parents and children and runs

counter to the policy development process where consultation is undertaken to inform and shape decisions.

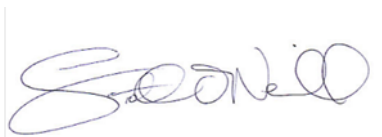
Restructuring of the School Estate

It is important to recognise that currently, SEN pupils are not counted in school enrolment numbers and are classified as supernumerary. This policy may therefore disadvantage smaller schools with higher percentages of SEN pupils which fall short of the minimum enrolment requirement, but function above it. The restructuring of the school estate should only progress following changes to the ways that enrolments are recorded. Children in rural communities can experience disadvantage due to transport and infrastructure limitations, poverty and distance from services. This can in turn impact their wellbeing, mental health and access to services. It is therefore important to assess the impact of this policy on the mental health and wellbeing of children in rural areas. This policy may also result in schools with larger capital works, in deprived areas that suffered historic disadvantage, facing closure.

Reform of the Model of Financial Delegation

Moving staffing allocation and budgets to centralised fund, may be more cost effective, however any impact in class sizes needs to be considered. Funding allocation should always be based on need, with increased investment to support learning in children and young people who live in poverty or who have exposure to multiple ACEs.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'Siobhan O'Neill', written over a horizontal line.

Professor Siobhan O'Neill

Mental Health Champion