

Northern Ireland Teachers' Council

Presentation to the Education Committee

**Every School a Good School:
The Way Forward for Special Educational
Needs and Inclusion**

25 November 2009

1. The NITC recognises the need to modernise both policy and practice relating to SEN and inclusion in Northern Ireland. The NITC supports the principles of an inclusive education system that enables every child to have a high quality learning experience, of early intervention to identify and meet a child's needs and of professionals working together effectively to meet the needs of an individual child.
2. However, the NITC does not believe that the proposals will enable schools and teachers in Northern Ireland to deliver the vision set out in the document. Indeed, the NITC has very major concerns about what is proposed and argues that a more detailed assessment of the policy options for SEN and inclusion must be undertaken. The policy proposals will need to be revised to reflect the findings of this assessment.
3. The assessment of the policy options must:
 - include a detailed analysis of the impact of what is being proposed both for mainstream and special schools. It must be clear that the policy proposals will not have a detrimental impact on pupils or on staff in mainstream schools or in special schools;
 - address the relationship between the model of SEN and inclusion set out in the policy proposals and the funding and resources needed to deliver that model. The NITC accepts that the policy proposals cannot provide precise details about how funding and resources will be allocated. However, it must be clear that the level of funding and resourcing and the arrangements for distributing/accessing funding and resources are both appropriate and sufficient and will not have a detrimental impact on pupils or teachers in mainstream or special schools;
 - include a detailed analysis of the impact of what is being proposed on the workload of teachers and other staff and an examination of the impact of the proposals on the roles and responsibilities of staff working in mainstream and special schools. This must be linked to the strategy to remodel the school workforce so that teachers and principals focus on their core responsibilities for teaching and leading teaching and learning.
 - involve a review of the roles and responsibilities of special educational needs co-ordinators (SENCOs) as part of the wider review of the school workforce. This must recognise the distinctive roles and responsibilities of the SENCO as a qualified teacher and other staff.

- include a careful assessment of how collaboration and partnership working based on a 'team around the child' approach will impact on teachers and other staff in schools. The assessment must identify and the proposals address issues such as the barriers to effective partnership working; and
 - include a package of training and ongoing professional development that recognises and builds upon teachers' existing skills, knowledge and expertise. It must be clear that the policy proposals are not based on a 'deficit model' that sees teachers' lack of skills, knowledge and expertise as the problem.
4. The policies for SEN and inclusion that replace the current ones must be achievable and have the 'buy-in' and support of teachers and others who will be responsible for implementing them.
 5. The document identifies inclusion as a multifaceted construct that is used in a number of different ways: as an ideology usually linked to a human rights agenda; as a place, usually mainstream versus special schools; as a policy, normally from government; as professional practice, such as inclusive teaching; and as a personal experience, such as how a learner experiences inclusion. The report highlights the confusion that can arise as a result of these different interpretations and emphasises the need for teachers to have a workable version of the different agendas.
 6. The document uses inclusion in different and sometimes contradictory ways. The most notable point is that inclusion is used to define the place where children should be educated. However, whilst the document says that there should be a continuum of provision, perhaps reflecting an underlying ideology, there also are strong references throughout the document to most pupils with SEN being educated in mainstream schools and mainstream teachers being expected to meet the needs of the vast majority of pupils with SEN. The document also uses inclusion to define an approach to teaching: in this case, the expectation that teachers should teach inclusively so that they meet the different needs of all pupils in their class and it is used to define the policy approach underpinning the document. The NITC is extremely concerned about the different uses of the term throughout the document. The expectation that teachers should teach inclusively so that they meet the needs of all pupils in their class builds on the assumption that all pupils

should be able to access the same curriculum, albeit in different ways. This does not necessarily follow from a position that nearly all pupils should be educated in a mainstream school or from the expectation that all pupils have the right to participate in education. The NITC believes that the proposals are unwieldy and completely unmanageable and that the end result will be an education system that cannot meet the needs of a significant number of children with SEN.

7. The NITC's definition of inclusion is a pragmatic one, recognising the importance of building a range of expertise in teaching and learning, including expertise in teaching pupils with SEN. An inclusive education system is one that offers a range of provision, including both mainstream schools and special schools. Within an inclusive education system, a child's social and emotional needs, as well as their educational needs, must be met. So, for example, in some instances, the social and emotional needs of a child may mean that it is most appropriate for them to be educated in a special school rather than a mainstream school.
8. The NITC is extremely concerned that approaches to inclusion that focus on most pupils with SEN being educated in mainstream schools place huge demands on the schools concerned. Further, enabling such schools to provide a high quality education experience that meets the widely varying needs of all learners, including learners with profound and complex needs, is resource intensive and costly. Disturbingly, decisions to adopt a model of inclusion where most pupils with SEN are educated in mainstream schools often appear to be based on ideological grounds with little consideration being given to the funding and resources that will be needed to implement the approach effectively and without due regard to the educational merits of the policy. The NITC is alarmed that the proposals fail to address adequately the resource and funding implications of implementing the proposed approach.
9. Finally, the timescale for phasing in the proposals is far too short. The proposals are very complex and there are major issues that have not yet been resolved. In light of this, the timescale must be amended, with much more time being allocated to both the pre-implementation and implementation phases.