

The Programme for Government 2016/2020

Building a Better Future for All the Young People of Northern Ireland

A Perspective from the Council for Catholic Maintained School

Executive Summary

- The Council for Catholic Maintained Schools (CCMS) believes that education should not be regarded as an end in itself but rather as central to the creation of a fair and inclusive society and a productive economy.
- Education, like any Department of government, cannot achieve its core objectives nor maximise its contribution to our future by acting in isolation from other Departments and associated bodies. CCMS sees a central role for education as a key contributor to the solutions to the many social and economic problems now facing Northern Ireland.
- While the perception is that the Northern Ireland education system is characterised by excellence, the reality shows a long tail of educational underachievement and an unacceptable gap between those achieving highly and those who take little from their schooling. The next Programme for Government (PfG) must challenge underachievement in a multi-faceted, structured and sustained manner.
- While primary aged education in Northern Ireland is judged internationally to be performing well, unwelcome trends in post primary outcomes are clearly evident. Employers consistently identify a lack of work related skills from school or further and higher education leavers. Consequently, a more flexible and relevant curriculum and better outcomes are needed from education; this requires systemic change, not a focus on short term targets and initiatives. An emphasis only on performance targets for individual schools narrows the curriculum and promotes a competitive rather than a collaborative culture, thus constraining the broader vision and outcomes for education.
- Our education system must be characterised by inclusion, inter-dependence, flexibility of curricular choice, an appropriate emphasis on skills and high standards. This requires a shifting of mind sets to valuing the development of vocational pathways as much as the academic and making them available to young people of all abilities. Education legislation must now be reviewed to ensure that the needs of all pupils and their access to the curriculum over the interests of any institution.
- The Council sees the new PfG as a critical opportunity to transform Northern Ireland by placing education at its centre and ensuring that preparing all children and young people to be active citizens and contributors to the economy is the priority, not the school or a political ideology and that both curriculum and assessment are responsive to emerging needs.
- In the Council's view the current PfG does not sufficiently tackle in a structured and systemic manner challenges such as poverty, welfare dependency, a disproportionately large public sector and an on-going skills deficit. Government itself has in many ways been characterised by Departments working in silos which lacked a collaborative culture and therefore had only a limited impact.
- No single Government department is likely to achieve a more inclusive society and a prosperous economy in isolation, however, collaboration across Departments working to an outcomes focused agenda has the potential to create that positive future.