

## **THE NORTHERN IRELAND SELECTIVE SYSTEM: A WIND OF CHANGE**

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The views of pupils, parents, and teachers involved with the procedure for selection to secondary school in Northern Ireland are reported against the background of prospects for change to the system. Evidence concerning the impact of the transfer procedure is examined, and the alternative system put forward by the Post-Primary Review Body is reviewed. As the current transfer procedure is recognized as being untenable, change is almost guaranteed. However, it is unlikely that the proposals put forward by the Review Body will be readily accepted. Stakeholders are willing to embrace change, but change on their own terms. The most probable course will be a slow shift, in which some stakeholders will be willing to work towards the adoption of the system proposed by the Review Body. If pioneering actions are successful, other stakeholders may move towards its implementation. If actions are judged to be failing, there will be attempts to block reform and 'stick with what we know'. At the heart of the debate lies the challenge of striking a balance between making provision for high achievement and social inclusion for all pupils.

The system of selection for secondary schooling in Northern Ireland rests on what is known as the 'transfer procedure', which occurs in the last year of primary school and is the basis for determining the type of secondary school individual pupils will attend. Transfer to secondary school is a major crossroads in pupils' lives. Depending on one's viewpoint, it either affords educational opportunity or reinforces educational inequality.

The transfer procedure, which was introduced to Northern Ireland in 1947, involved a Qualifying Examination (11+), as in England and Wales following the 1944 Education Act. The partial demise of the procedure in England and Wales was brought about in the 1960s by the gradual acceptance of the comprehensive system of secondary education (Benn & Chitty, 1996; Rubinstein & Simon, 1973).

Comprehensive education never gained a solid foothold in Northern Ireland where a strong and powerful grammar school lobby ensured that selection at 11+ remained in place in the province's local education authorities [the five Education and Library Boards (ELBs)]. However, steps have been taken in some areas to introduce comprehensive style education, such as in the 'Dickson Plan' in the town of Craigavon (Southern ELB), and in three other towns in the same

ELB (Cookstown, Fivemiletown, and Kilkeel) and one in the North Eastern ELB (Maghera).

Throughout its existence, the selective system in Northern Ireland has been controversial, with proponents and opponents arguing for its retention and abolition respectively. Criticisms that are levelled at the transfer procedure as it currently exists are that it is socially biased in favour of the middle class; distorts the curriculum; causes stress in pupils; is open to abuse through coaching for the test; and leaves a sense of failure and stigma amongst those who 'fail'.

The existence of social bias in the transfer procedure has been asserted by various groups (ACE, 1981; UTU/INTO, 1985) on the basis that children from middle-class backgrounds tend to fare better in the tests than children from working-class backgrounds. A study into social deprivation and attainment at GCSE level found that 18% of pupils at grammar school received free school meals, compared to 41% of other secondary (non-grammar) school pupils (Shuttleworth, 1995). In investigating social bias, the Department of Education for Northern Ireland (DENI, 1996), which also used data based on free school meal (FSM) eligibility as an indicator of social deprivation, found a strong relationship between social deprivation and pupil performance in the transfer procedure: schools with a low FSM ratio achieved more 'A' grades than schools with a high FSM ratio. For example, in the school year 1995/96, over 50% of pupils achieved grade 'A' in schools where the FSM eligibility was less than 11%, compared to 16% of pupils who achieved a grade 'A' in schools where it was more than 50%. Gallagher & Smith (2000) found that an increase in FSM ratio was associated with a corresponding drop in achievement. Thus, schools with low FSM ratios, usually grammar schools, achieve higher standards in examinations than schools with high FSM ratios, usually non-grammar schools, further widening the gap between these two types of school.

One of the main criticisms of the selection procedure is that 60% of pupils entering for the tests will 'fail', that is, they will not gain a grammar school place. Thus, the system 'creates' children who perceive themselves to be failures at an extremely young age. The pressure *not* to become a failure at eleven years of age places pupils under enormous stress. The selection process has also been criticized for disrupting curriculum delivery, resulting in over-emphasis in primary school on the elements that will be examined, namely aspects of English, mathematics, and science (Sutherland & Gallagher, 1986). Primary school teachers have claimed that the curriculum becomes distorted midway through primary 6, when teaching strategies change to deal with preparation for the transfer tests. Madaus (1988) states that whenever the results of a test act as sole or partial arbiter of future educational life choices, the test becomes the goal

of schooling, that is, the situation of 'teaching to the test' arises. Indeed, Gallagher and Smith (2000) reported that teaching strategies were strongly influenced by methods that teach to the test. The transfer procedure can become so important that it overshadows other aspects of school and home life. The *raison d'être* of primary schooling can become success on the test and, if this perception prevails, it can lead to a variety of tactics to 'guarantee' such success. Such changes adversely affect pupils taking the test who have little prospect of success and must struggle to keep up, as well as those who, by parental choice, have decided not to take the transfer tests (Gallagher & Smith, 2000).

Coaching for the tests is extensive: up to 35% of pupils received additional tuition outside school hours (Caul, Eason, & McWilliams, 2000). Coaching has two important impacts on the transfer procedure. First, it artificially raises performance, giving a false measurement of academic ability, and second, the fact that it is based on ability to pay means that it introduces an element of social bias into the procedure, favouring more affluent members of society.

The political stability in Northern Ireland that has been ebbing and flowing since 1996 has generated discussion in areas distinct from the usual themes of Northern Ireland politics. Relatively peaceful political conditions have prompted the Northern Ireland Assembly to discuss selection in the public arena, by calling for general discussion of the issues surrounding the current transfer procedure. A major study by Gallagher and Smith (2000) formed the basis for this debate, which involved representatives of all groups in the education system. The Post-Primary Review Body (2001) was established to facilitate the debate, and its recommendations form the basis for proposed changes to the current system. They were put to the general public in Northern Ireland in May, 2002 in the form of a questionnaire. The public response is expected to play a role in the decision process with respect to change.

Prior to and during the research commissioned by the Department of Education for Northern Ireland (DENI), to support the work of the Post-Primary Review Body, the author was conducting a small-scale study of the selection system. The study was carried out amid rising interest in the possibility of change to the current transfer arrangements. The findings of the study which are reported in this paper provide a snapshot of the views of the main groups that will be affected by change (pupils, parents, and teachers), and provides further evidence that the time is right for changes to the structure of education in Northern Ireland.

## METHOD

*Participants*

The three sample groups in the study consisted of 60 pupils, 50 parents, and 45 teachers from primary, secondary, grammar, and integrated (educating Catholic and Protestant pupils together) schools.

The pupils were drawn from within the author's old primary school, which currently enrolls 250 pupils. The school has a wide catchment area for pupils of varying socioeconomic status, due mainly to the fact that many parents bring their children in to the city en route to work.

The teachers came from schools which were randomly selected within the Education and Library Board's area. The criterion used for selecting primary and post-primary teachers was that they had experience of teaching pupils who would sit or had already undergone the transfer procedure. The criterion for selecting parents was to have children involved in the transfer procedure (including those children who had opted out of the test).

*Procedure*

Parents and teachers were interviewed, and written personal accounts were obtained from pupils. Separate group interviews were conducted with parents, primary, secondary, grammar and integrated school teachers. Each group interview was conducted using a different school; thus 11 schools were involved in the study (one primary school provided teachers and parents for interview). There were 4 parent group interviews, each attended by 10-15 parents, 2 primary teacher group interviews (each with 10 teachers), 2 secondary teacher group interviews (each with 6 teachers), 3 grammar teacher group interviews (each with 4 teachers) and 1 integrated teacher group interview (with 6 teachers). This information is summarized in Table 1.

Table 1  
*Numbers of Interviews, and Numbers of Attendees, by Category of Interviewee*

Category of Interviewee	Number of group interviews	Number attending each interview
Parent	4	10-15
Primary teacher	2	10
Secondary teacher	2	6
Grammar teacher	3	4
Integrated teacher	1	6

At the beginning of each group interview, the group was told that the study was being conducted to gain insight into the views of pupils, parents, and teachers about various aspects of the selective system and the possibility of change. It was also told that the interview agenda consisted of a series of open-ended questions to discuss the following issues: general opinion of the selection procedure; preparation for the tests; stress and failure associated with the tests; social bias in the tests; coaching for the tests; factors maintaining the system; and alternatives to the current system. The interviews were conducted within each focus group's own school. Interview responses were tape-recorded, with the consent of each group, and later transcribed.

The pupil perspective was obtained through written responses by the children relating to their experiences of test preparation and doing the actual tests. The children, in class, were asked to write no more than one page on their feelings about doing or not doing the tests.

## RESULTS

### *The Pupil Perspective*

The following extract is included to serve as a reminder of the focus of the study. It reflects the experience of children undergoing an intense examination preparation period, culminating in two high-stakes tests which will decide their future path in terms of schooling, consequent career choice, and possibly their path in life.

The work leading up the 11+ was very hard and it put me under a lot of pressure. There was a lot of work and homework to get through so it was non-stop every day. During the summer we got a lot of tests to do. So I did a few every night and day. Coming into November the work was even harder and there was 3 practice tests a week. My mum and dad were helping me all the way. On the morning of the 7th I came to school not feeling very nervous, but when I settled down in the room I felt very nervous. At the end of that test I didn't know how I'd done.

This piece of writing was typical of the thoughts and feelings of children involved in the transfer procedure, and the author's analysis of it and other pupil essays revealed the following main concerns: preparation at home and at school was too much; work had to be of a high standard and was very difficult; stress was associated with this phase in their lives; children were nervous about sitting the examination; there was an immense desire to do well; there was fear of disappointment; the pupils tried to adopt a grown-up approach when it came to accepting disappointing results.

*Views of Parents and Teachers*

There was a general acceptance among parents and teachers in interview that the current method of selection based on two one-hour tests was no longer suitable or acceptable as a means of determining the type of post-primary education that children will receive. One parent said:

It's terrible at the age of eleven to have your future decided.

The degree to which the system needed to be changed, however, produced a less uniform response. Those parents and teachers in favour of the selective system wished to maintain grammar schools, on the basis that they have a reputation for academic excellence, while those not in favour proposed a restructuring of post-primary education, thus removing the need for a selection procedure.

*Preparation for the Tests.* Parents and teachers stated that they considered the transfer procedure to have exerted an unreasonable impact on the primary curriculum. They believed that preparation for the procedure adversely affected the curriculum in primary schools because it focused disproportionately on those subjects that were addressed by the tests.

Parents thought that preparation for the tests was too intense. Extensive rote learning of facts, particularly in science, placed unreasonable demands on the children in terms of the knowledge that they were expected to acquire, and in relation to the skills that they were expected to employ. They queried the wisdom of this 'learning' because they thought the children were not learning concepts, but simply facts that they would inevitably forget. Only one parent spoke about the tests in favourable terms, stating that they had provided motivation for her son because he enjoyed the competitive nature of the tests.

The primary school teachers pointed out that there had always been a lot of preparation for the 'eleven-plus'. In the present day situation, the teachers thought that this distorted delivery of the curriculum in the classroom. This disruption usually began in the second or third term of primary 6, in some cases earlier, and lasted until the transfer tests were finished, late in the first term in primary 7. During this time, teachers who taught primary 6/7 said that they concentrated almost exclusively on English, mathematics, and science. Aesthetic subjects, such as art and music, suffered very severely because there was no time to fit these subjects *and* transfer test preparation into the school day. Commenting on this issue, teachers said:

Primary seven is English, maths and science for the first term.

[Eleven plus preparation is] from Easter, primary six onwards.

So what does that do to your relationship with the class as a whole if they lose out on all those subjects that provide balance in the curriculum?

*Stress and Disappointment.* References to stress associated with the transfer procedure tend to be anecdotal, a result of adult reflections on their personal experience of the 11+ or the observations by parents and teachers of children sitting the examinations. Parents and teachers agreed emphatically that stress is a consequence of being part of the transfer procedure situation – not just ‘nerves on the day’ - but stress associated with the preceding weeks and months of preparation.

Both parents and teachers identified parents as the main group responsible for generating heightened awareness of the implications of performance in transfer tests and for transmitting this to their children.

The primary school teachers raised several important points in relation to the issue of stress. They did not believe that it was induced by teachers, but that it was one effect of parental aspirations. They thought that both pupils and teachers were put under pressure to perform well by parents who judged schools on the basis of transfer procedure results, and in terms of how much preparation a school was seen to be doing in relation to other schools. Intense transfer preparation at some schools also put others under pressure to do an equal amount of preparation, or else be seen as failing in their duty to their pupils. This, of course, had two adverse effects. It raised the number of pupils who were successful in the transfer procedure in an unrealistic, unnatural manner, and it put pupils into a sector of education to which they might not be suited.

Failure is an area not entirely divorced from stress, since fear of failure can be responsible for much of the tension that pupils encounter in relation to the transfer procedure. Like stress, much evidence of the existence of an enduring sense of failure associated with the transfer procedure is anecdotal.

An interesting insight was provided by one parent who spoke about the real manifestation of failure in the transfer procedure, which she saw in her job in post-secondary education:

I work at the other end of the scale which is 16+ and I can see a lot of things coming through there. Children that have failed or, you know, feel that they have been let down ... there's no self-esteem. I have 16+ coming into me and really they need assertiveness training and personal development. It's amazing how many of them actually do need it.

*Social Bias.* Both parents and teachers accepted that social bias was present in the current transfer procedure, and that this was a cause for concern. The secondary (non-selective) school teachers stated very clearly that, in their opinion, the transfer procedure was biased in favour of middle-class pupils. Worse than this, the procedure perpetuated a system of social division within society.

The primary school teachers, too, were very concise and direct in regard to their comments relating to social bias. The general consensus was that any test would favour pupils coming from a background where education was valued; pupils from a background where a learning ethos prevails; and pupils who were afforded a variety of social and cultural experiences in life. The teachers agreed that this type of background is frequently, but not exclusively, found in middle-class surroundings. On the basis of these opinions, the primary school teachers thought that there would inevitably be a middle-class bias in the transfer test.

*Coaching.* Primary school teachers with first-hand experience of coaching expressed the view that it was widespread and, indeed, had become an accepted course of action adopted by many parents once their child reached the transfer situation. Grammar school teachers stated that the overt nature of being able to pay for coaching, and indirectly almost paying for entry to grammar school, was a major social flaw in the system. One said:

What I meant by social bias, is children who are ‘upwardly mobile’ – those are the children whose parents are encouraging and paying for tutoring.

They also said that coaching ‘trains’ pupils to perform in tests, gives an artificial indication of ability, and results in pupils attending grammar school who were not suited to this form of schooling. One remarked:

Before the end of September we had spotted the kids that had been coached.

*Who is Maintaining the Transfer Procedure?* Although a number of factors were considered by parents and teachers to be responsible for maintaining the transfer procedure, the forces that were considered to exert most influence in maintaining it were parents and the Governing Bodies’ Association (GBA).

The predominant view of parents was that they were responsible for maintaining the system to an extent. Some said they were powerless to effect change; others that if they were really unhappy about it, they would do something to look for change. They said:

The reason is that we’re the problem.

It must be parents – if we wanted something badly enough, we’d change it.

Parents voiced their disapproval of an examination at age 11 that brought pressure to bear upon their children, could leave an enduring mark of failure upon them, and introduced unfair social bias by allowing coaching of pupils. Yet they were still prepared to enter their children for the transfer procedure. They worked with it because if it achieved the right result in the end, then it was worthwhile. The force driving these parents to make this decision was based

partly on the view that superior resources were available in grammar schools. They expressed the view that having recently attended open nights at a variety of second-level schools, it was plain to see what was best and, of course, this was what they wanted for their children. Thus, their decision to enter their children for the transfer procedure was vindicated by visiting a range of schools. However, they did not believe that good teaching was available solely at grammar schools, and acknowledged the existence of good secondary schools.

The elitism associated with grammar schools in the past, when entry was gained either by paying or by scholarship through the Free Place exam (for the fortunate few), also affected parents' decision to participate in the transfer procedure. At an entirely superficial level, the view was expressed that some parents wanted their child to have the prestige of being seen in a particular school uniform:

... it could be class. They want the prestige.

Some parents felt guilty about perpetuating the system. How would it ever change if they did nothing to change it? Although these parents accepted some of the responsibility for maintaining the status quo, they also regarded grammar schools themselves and the Churches as partly responsible.

The primary school teachers clearly believed parents to be responsible for maintaining the current system. Parents wanted their children to have the chance of a grammar school place because they believed it to be a good educational opportunity, as well as allowing their children to be part of an 'elite' group. Other groups which were considered by teachers to exert influence in maintaining the current system were the grammar schools, the Churches, and teachers who coached children outside school.

Secondary school teachers identified three main groups as being responsible for maintaining the transfer procedure: parents, the Churches, and the grammar schools. Parents were responsible for perpetuating the system, simply because they wanted what was best for their children. Secondary teachers did not agree that grammar schools were academically better, but conceded that they had a better social element and that this was a major deciding factor for parents. However, teachers did not condemn parents for deciding that they preferred their children to sit the transfer procedure, recognizing that it was a difficult decision for them. The secondary school teachers also believed the Churches to have a role in the retention of selection, as well as a strong grammar-school lobby. This lobby, according to the teachers, was very powerful and was the main body responsible for maintaining the current system of secondary education – a force against which those wishing for change could have little impact.

Teachers in the post-primary integrated school reiterated the view that the forces maintaining the current transfer system were parents, the Churches, and a strong grammar school lobby. Grammar school teachers also considered parents to be a major force maintaining the transfer procedure. Some grammar school teachers considered the poor image presented by secondary schools as another reason why parents felt they had no choice but to try for a grammar school place for their child. Given the Churches' role in maintaining the system, it was felt that change would come about only if both Catholic and Protestant grammar schools embraced the momentum for change.

*Possible Alternatives to the Transfer Procedure.* Some parents and teachers referred to the fact that most people accepted the current system in the absence of a good alternative. It was clear in the parent group interviews that most were unaware of possible alternatives, other than comprehensive education, to the current system.

The primary school teacher discussion of alternatives began with one teacher saying that the onus should be on grammar schools to do the examining, since they are the beneficiaries of the testing system. However, as in the parent interviews, it was realized that this would not solve the problem, and would further exacerbate the problem of coaching. Thus, basing the decision on entrance examinations to secondary or grammar schools was not a feasible alternative. The primary school teachers discussed at length the alternative of delaying selection to the age of fourteen. While they did not rule out delaying selection as an alternative, they were wary of it and highlighted the need for considerable clarification of the criteria of selection, before they would consent to it as a better alternative. Comprehensive education was not favoured at all by the primary school teachers. Like some of the parents, they thought that it sounded ideal in theory, but did not work. In discussion, they referred to inner-city comprehensive schools in England and the creation of 'sink' schools.

Most of the primary school teachers were in favour of using continuous assessment as the basis for selection, while recognizing the need to build external monitoring into such an arrangement to ensure uniformity of standards. Continuous assessment in conjunction with examinations was also considered as a possibility. In this case, it was felt that that the tests should not play a major role, but rather act as a back-up for continuous assessment decisions. Delaying this process to an older age could be considered, although the teachers did not seem to feel very strongly on this point.

Secondary school teachers favoured a comprehensive-style system because it catered for pupils of all abilities and would eliminate the narrowing of intake that reduced the social mix in schools and, by implication, society. Comprehensive

education would also eliminate the transfer procedure and all its related problems, most notably the idea of 'failure'.

Teachers in the integrated college were totally in favour of an all-ability comprehensive-style education which, they stated, was already being offered to their pupils. They believed selection was inherent in any system and while it was possible to have an all-ability school, there was a need for differentiation of ability within it.

Although not in favour of selection, the grammar school teachers thought that it had to be retained and saw it as an integral part of the education process. This group did not favour a comprehensive system as an alternative form of secondary education, and considered that it was impossible to achieve since so many factors, particularly social ones, acted against it. A merit of the comprehensive system, recognized by several of the grammar school teachers, was its flexibility, namely, the ability to move between streams within the school. These teachers highlighted the inflexibility of the current system, resulting in most pupils being unable to change from one type of school to another if the need arose.

Grammar and secondary schools setting their own entrance examinations was not considered a valid alternative because it did not remove the examination situation, and coaching would continue, perhaps becoming even more prevalent. Some grammar school teachers thought that delaying selection until pupils were 14 years of age produced a new set of problems and did not solve anything. It was accepted that selection at 14 was the basis for the 'Dickson Plan' and, while this was an alternative to the existing system, it did not seem to be a better one and was no more successful than the current system. Indeed, if delaying selection, as exemplified by the Dickson Plan, had been a successful alternative, it would probably have been adopted elsewhere in Northern Ireland by now. However, many of the grammar school teachers liked the possibility of an informed decision at the age of 14, which would allow pupils to proceed academically, technically, or vocationally. They liked it because it continued to facilitate grammar school education. Maintaining the grammar school system was a common bond between grammar school teachers. Although opposed to the transfer procedure, they remained very reluctant to relinquish grammar schools.

#### CONCLUSION

The views expressed by the pupils, parents, and teachers suggest that change to the current system would be welcome, and that the current selective system is no longer tenable. The nature and extent of change, however, is not so universally agreed. The proponents of grammar school education seek to

preserve this system of schooling, while effecting change to the selection process and the secondary schools in the system. Those who see the retention of a bipartite system as the central issue needing change seek to alter the existing structure of post-primary education and thus remove the reason for a selective process. The views of these groups reflect those generally held on the subject of selection by society in Northern Ireland; calls for change are based on different views of the change that is required.

The system recommended by the Post-Primary Review Body (2001) consists of a collegiate system of post-primary education. The Review Body stated that the two most important guiding principles for this system were that each young person should be valued equally, and all young people should be enabled to develop their talents to the full and to realize their creative potential. The recommendations based on these principles are that: selection for post-primary education based on examination should be removed; selection would be replaced by parental choice, informed by a pupil profile developed by the primary school; and a system of collaborative post-primary schools, known as collegiates, would be created based on complementary, not competitive, education.

It was the hope of the Review Body that these changes would result in a system that would achieve higher standards, fulfil aspirations, and meet the economic needs and expectations of society. Movement from the current bipartite system of post-primary education to a collegiate system based on a co-operative system of schools would be a gradual process. The most striking change would be the removal of selection, based on testing, and its replacement with parental preference (or open access) as the basis for selecting the type of post-primary school children would attend.

The Post-Primary Review Body recommended that 20 collegiates should be established across Northern Ireland. Each collaborative network of schools would contain denominational, non-denominational, integrated, Irish-medium, secondary, and grammar schools, providing a common curriculum at Key Stage 3. After Key Stage 3 (post-16 years of age), students and teachers could move between schools providing wider educational opportunities, within a system based on mutual co-operation and respect. Each collegiate would have a governing body, formed by a board of principals from member schools, which would be assisted by a support centre (for example, catering for special education needs) and a liaison council. The boards of governors of each school in the collegiate would also play a role through involvement in an annual collegiate standing conference.

While the Review Body sought to address issues of educational equality and opportunity, the central issue for pupils, parents, and teachers is the removal of the selective system, and it is this issue which will come under closest scrutiny. The most immediate problem will be the over-subscription of schools. These schools will most likely be grammar schools since they have been portrayed as centres of high academic achievement in the current system. The subject of oversubscription was recognized by the Review Body as a potentially difficult area:

The present selective system, in recent years, has increased school enrolments in the grammar school sector at the expense of other school types: its ending would provide the opportunity for the development of a process of informed parental preference as the basis for choosing which school would be most likely to meet the educational needs, aptitudes and interests of each child. Of course, the expression of parental preferences does not mean unqualified parental choice and there would continue to be oversubscribed schools. Nevertheless, the allocation of priority to parental preference, when applied in context of the changes in pupil assessment and a revised curriculum, would support the delivery of equality of opportunity, access and parity of esteem for all. (Post-Primary Review Body, 2001, pp.131-132)

In addition to parental preference, admission criteria were devised by the Review Body to act as entry guidelines for schools in the new system. However, these could be the source of controversy. It has already been mooted that the pupil profiles as well as informing parental choice would also enable schools to make an informed choice. It is essential that this does not happen; otherwise selection by testing will be replaced by selection by profile. Primary teachers would not welcome the added responsibility that would result from such a move. Using profiles in this manner would be reminiscent of the failed attempts to use teacher judgment as a basis for selection, associated with the Alternative Transfer Arrangements (1977-1979).

After the main criterion of parental preference, the criteria in order of priority are: siblings already at the school, or the eldest child of a family; children of staff; compelling individual circumstances; and proximity to the pupil's home.

The goal of parents is to achieve the best for their children, and the additional criteria can be considered as either helping or hindering its achievement. Parents could object to the sibling or staff criteria, while the criterion of compelling individual circumstances is open to interpretation. However, perhaps the most discriminatory criterion, and the one with most potential for controversy, is distance from the pupil's home. Children in rural areas may well be disadvantaged in respect to distance from home as most post-primary schools

are located in centres of population concentration. Thus, given the statement that ‘the expression of parental preferences does not mean unqualified parental choice’ (Post-Primary Review Body, 2001, p.131), and the fact that admissions criteria are subject to interpretation, it seems possible that parents who do not get the school of their choice will seek legal help.

A challenge with any new system will be its ‘teething problems’; getting the system running effectively, and ensuring implementation of the guiding principles of equality and achieving the full potential of all pupils will need time to become a reality. Pupils in the interim will not have the full benefits to which the system aspires. The impact of a changing system will exert critical influence on the future of these students, and this must be recognized in establishing the new structure.

The central theme of this article has been the selective system in Northern Ireland: from its inception, through the many years of its existence and the criticisms levelled at it, leading finally to the review that currently provides focus for the debate surrounding selection. The acceptance of the proposed collegiate system would eliminate selection by testing at the age of eleven. It is envisaged that it would allow for greater flexibility between academic and vocational routes, and widen educational opportunity for students. The Department of Education has endeavoured to be inclusive in reaching a decision whether or not to adopt the collegiate system.

It is very unlikely that the proposals put forward by the Review Body will be readily accepted. As already stated, stakeholders in the current transfer procedure are willing to embrace change, but change on their own terms. This was exemplified by the parent and teacher groups who were interviewed for this study. Even within these groups, there were different visions of alternatives to the current transfer system. The current transfer procedure is recognized as untenable and, therefore, change to this aspect is almost guaranteed. However, associated changes to post-primary education may not be so easily achieved. The most probable course will be a slow shift in the current system, with some areas being willing to work towards the adoption of the collegiate system. On the basis of the success of these pioneering actions, others may move towards its implementation. If it is judged to be failing, there will be attempts to bring about its demise and ‘stick with what we know’. It is also possible that some schools may choose to opt out of the overall system and become private, although such action may be difficult to sustain within the demographics of Northern Ireland with its large rural school population.

The most salient fact to emerge from the selection debate is that there will be change to the selective system of education in Northern Ireland. We now enter the

challenging stage of managing the change to deliver education that allows all pupils to achieve their potential, and that is, at the same time, socially inclusive.

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