

The Northern Ireland Education System

This report is divided into 5 sections:

1. The history of the education system in Northern Ireland
2. Key structures
3. The Northern Ireland curriculum
4. Public examinations in Northern Ireland
5. Changes to the Northern Ireland curriculum – the way ahead.

1. The history of the education system in Northern Ireland

This historical account of the Northern Ireland (NI) education system is divided into four key periods in its development: the period before the abolition of the NI Parliament, the period of direct rule from 1971-1999, the period of the NI Assembly and the system in operation today.

The period before the abolition of the Northern Ireland Parliament in 1972

In 1921 the partition of Ireland established NI as a separate political entity to the rest of the UK. Although still part of the UK, NI developed its own parliament and government. Prior to this, almost all National (primary) Schools in Ireland, established from 1827 onwards and publicly funded, were denominational schools controlled by the churches.

In the decades leading up to the partition, education reforms in England had increased public control over schools and lessened the influence of churches. However, these reforms were not introduced in either part of Ireland until about 20 years after the partition, when Protestant churches transferred their schools to state control. However, Catholic churches in the North maintained control over their schools. The state schools became known as 'controlled schools' and the Catholic schools as 'maintained schools'.

Both types of schools had their recurrent costs, including teachers' salaries, paid for by the government. Initially in controlled schools, capital costs were met by the government, while maintained schools had to find 50 per cent of their capital costs. However, the state share of capital costs for maintained schools has increased over the years to the point where schools that agree to waive their right to a majority on the board of governors can receive 100 per cent of capital costs.

In 1944, the Butler Act (the Education Act 1944) was introduced in England and laid the foundation for the modern English education system. It abolished the distinction between elementary and higher education, and set up a unified system of free, compulsory schooling from the age of 5 to 15. The NI government introduced similar measures in 1947 - The Education (Northern Ireland) Act, leading to the possibility of secondary and university education for many people from less advantaged backgrounds.

Although comprehensive education was introduced to England in the 1960's, no similar measures were taken in NI (with the exception of one small area), where grammar schools remain prevalent. Selection for the grammar schools is based on Transfer Tests for 11 year olds, which assess academic ability.

The period of direct rule from 1972 – 1999

In 1972 the NI Parliament was abolished and legislation for NI, on various matters including education, was by way of Order, in Council at Westminster. Debate on legislation was limited and the typically reforms that had already taken place in Great Britain were reproduced in NI.

Since 1986 there have been four major Education (Northern Ireland) Orders, each mirroring (albeit with some delay) provisions at Westminster. For example, the Education Reform (Northern Ireland) Order 1989 replicates many of the major changes in the English and Welsh Education Act 1988, including open enrolment, the statutory curriculum, the reform of governing bodies and LMS (Local Management of Schools). In many instances the law is identical (for example, special educational needs). In other areas, the legislation has been tailored to reflect the local political and cultural context (such as the inclusion of the theme of education for mutual understanding in the NI Curriculum).

The period of the Northern Ireland Assembly from 1999 - 2002

With the establishment of the Northern Ireland Assembly in 1999, direct rule ceased and devolution was reintroduced to NI. This gave the locally elected Minister for Education (Martin Maguinness of Sinn Fein) legislative responsibility for education. The Minister did bring in some changes; for example, he abolished league tables and initiated the abolishment of the Transfer test (11+), following a review of the selection system.

The Assembly was dissolved in 2002 and direct rule was reintroduced.

The education system today

In January 2004, the Government announced that the Transfer tests will end in 2008. This will have a profound effect on the education system in NI.

Today, there are more than 350,000 pupils in full time education. The Department of Education dispenses, through the five regional Education and Library Boards (ELB's), an annual budget of £1.3 billion.

More than 35 per cent of pupils now leave with A-level qualifications (three quarters of these with 3 or more A's) and more than 58 per cent gain GCSE's. The figure for those who leave with no formal qualifications has been reduced to around 3 per cent (in the mid 1980's, this was more than 17 per cent).

There are now more than 20,000 teachers and the pupil: teacher ratio is almost 17:1.

2. Key Structure of the Northern Ireland Education System

The structure of the education system in NI is complex, with 10 **Statutory Bodies** involved in the management and administration of the system, including:

- The Department of Education (DE)
- The Education and Library Boards (Belfast, North-Eastern, South-Eastern, Southern and Western)
- The Council for Catholic Maintained Schools (CCMS)

- The Northern Ireland Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment (CCEA)
- The Staff Commission for the Education and Library Boards
- The Youth Council for Northern Ireland

There are also a number of **voluntary bodies** which play a significant role in the administration of the education system, including:

- The Northern Ireland Council for Integrated Education
- Comhairle na Gaelscolaíochta (the council for Irish-medium schools)
- The Transferor Representatives' Council, which brings together representatives of the Transferor Churches (Church of Ireland, Presbyterian and Methodist)
- The Association of Governing Bodies which represents the voluntary grammar schools

The Department of Education

The DE is responsible for the central administration of education and related services in NI. Its primary duties are to promote the education of young people of NI and to ensure the effective execution of its policy in relation to the provision of the education service.

Education and Library Boards

In NI, educational services are administered by regional education bodies known as Education and Library Boards (ELBs). There are five of these and their function is similar to that carried out by Local Education Authorities (LEA's) in England and Wales. They are funded by the DE. The ELBs:

- Provide milk and meals, free books and transport for pupils
- Enforce school attendance
- Provide a curriculum advisory and support service to all schools in their area
- Regulate the employment of children and young people and secure the provision of youth service facilities
- Secure the provision of recreation services
- Award university and other scholarships
- Are responsible for the appointment of staff in controlled schools

School types

Until 1989 NI had only two basic categories of school: **controlled schools** (managed by the ELB for the area) and **voluntary schools** (owned and managed by trustees, normally the local churches).

There are two types of voluntary school: **voluntary maintained** (including voluntary primary and secondary schools) and **voluntary grammar** (which are permitted to select pupils on the basis of ability).

The majority of voluntary maintained schools are controlled by the Catholic Church. In order to facilitate the management of these schools the Education Reform (Northern Ireland) Order 1989 transferred responsibility for all Catholic maintained schools to a statutory body, the Council for Catholic Maintained Schools (CCMS). The CCMS exercises certain responsibilities in relation to Catholic maintained

schools, including providing advice in matters relating to this sector and the employment of teaching staff.

The 1989 Order also introduced a new category of schools, the **integrated school**, whose primary focus is to provide a religiously mixed environment capable of attracting reasonable numbers of both Catholic and Protestant pupils. Managed by a Board of Governors, there has been a steady increase in the numbers of these schools. The total number of schools in 2005 is given in Table 1.

Table 1. The number of schools in NI by school type

| School type | Number of schools |
|-------------|-------------------|
| Hospital | 3 |
| Independent | 17 |
| Integrated | 17 |
| Preparatory | 18 |
| Special | 45 |
| Grammar | 70 |
| Nursery | 99 |
| Secondary | 162 |
| Primary | 894 |
| TOTAL | 1308 |

In addition, there are 16 Colleges of Further and Higher Education.

Significant features of the Northern Ireland Education system

NI's school system is distinctive from the rest of the UK in a number of ways:

1.) Religious division

Currently more than half the children in NI attend Catholic schools. Some Catholic children attend non-Catholic schools and a very small minority of non-Catholic children attend Catholic schools. Many people in NI hope that more religiously integrated schools will develop as NI moves towards a less socially divided society.

2.) The Transfer Test (11+)

A grammar-secondary divide is still prevalent in NI. At the age of eleven, pupils can undertake an aptitude test (the 11+) is used to determine which children will attend grammar schools. This system is to be abolished in 2008 and schools will no longer be able to select pupils on the basis of academic ability at the age of 11 years.

3.) School starting age

In NI the school starting age is four (compared to five in England and Wales), with nursery provision offered to three-year-olds.

4.) Irish-medium schools

Irish-medium schools are peculiar to NI. In these schools, children are taught through Irish in more than half the compulsory subjects (excluding English).

Science technicians

Most secondary schools in NI provide a science technician, with the bigger schools of 1000 pupils+ allocating three technicians for the separate sciences. Provision of technical assistance is not statutory.

3. The Northern Ireland Curriculum

The NI Curriculum was phased in after 1990, following the introduction of the National Curriculum in England and Wales. It was drawn up by the NI Curriculum Council, which later merged with the Council for Examinations and Assessment to form the CCEA (the Council for the Curriculum Examinations and Assessment).

The Education Reform (Northern Ireland) Order 1989 sets out the minimum educational entitlement for pupils aged from four to sixteen years and requires schools to provide a curriculum for all pupils that:

'promotes the spiritual, moral, cultural, intellectual and physical development of all pupils at the school and thereby society; and prepares such pupils for the opportunities and experiences of adult life'.

The curriculum is defined in terms of four Key Stages which cover the twelve years of compulsory schooling. The only difference from the Key Stages in England and Wales is that Key Stage 1 spans four years (rather than three), and Key Stage 2 spans three years.

In addition to the NI Curriculum, schools can develop additional curriculum elements to express their particular ethos and meet the individual needs of their pupils.

Key Stages

The four Key Stages are outlined in Table 2.

Table 2. Key Stages

| Year 1 2 3 4 | 5 6 7 | 8 9 10 | 11 12 | 13 14 |
|-----------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|--------------------------------------|
| Key Stage 1 | Key Stage 2 | Key Stage 3 | Key Stage 4 | Post 16 FE & Training Post 16 School |
| Pupil Age 4 - 8 | 8 -11 | 11 - 14 | 14 -16 | 16 -18 |

Science is taught at all four Key Stages. At Key Stages 1 and 2, it is taught through the learning area of 'The World Around Us,' which comprises geography, history, science and technology.

1.) Key Stages 1 & 2 (KS1 and KS2)

The curriculum for KS1 and KS2 includes:

- Religious Education
- English
- Mathematics
- Science and Technology
- History and Geography (known as the Environment and Society)
- Art and Design, Music and Physical Education (Creative and Expressive Arts)

- Irish, in Irish speaking schools only

There are 4 educational cross-curricular themes (education for mutual understanding, cultural heritage, health education and information technology). The cross-curricular themes are not separate subjects but are woven through the main subjects of the curriculum.

2.) Key Stages 3 & 4 (KS3 and KS4)

Compulsory for KS3 and KS4 are:

- Religious Education
- English
- Mathematics
- Science and Technology
- The Environment and Society (one of History, Geography, Business Studies, Home Economics, Economics, Politics)
- Creative and Expressive Studies (Art and Design, Music and Physical Education)
- Language Studies (French, German, Italian, Irish or Spanish)
- Six educational themes (four as in KS1 and KS2, plus economic awareness and careers education)

The structure of the curriculum

As in England and Wales, each subject in the NI Curriculum has a Programme of Study, which sets out the opportunities that should be offered to all pupils, subject to their age and ability, in terms of knowledge, skills and understanding at each Key Stage. Teachers use the Programme of Study as a basis for planning schemes of work. Each programme has Attainment Targets which define the expected standards of pupil performance in terms of level descriptors. These provide the basis for judgements on pupils' attainment at the end of each Key Stage.

Assessment

There is a statutory assessment in specified subjects for all pupils aged eight, eleven and fourteen. Teachers are required to make formal assessments of pupils' work at age eight and eleven. This is done through a series of short assessment tasks involving 20 – 30 minutes work by pupils, undertaken at a time chosen by the teacher. Pupils are not required to sit formal tests. Schools are required to tell parents which level their child has reached in these subjects. In addition to the statutory assessment at age 11, pupil may opt to take the transfer test (11+).

At age 14 there is statutory assessment of English, Irish (in Irish speaking schools), Mathematics and Science. This takes two forms: teacher assessment and end of KS3 subject tests. The results of these are reported to parents. At the end of KS4 pupils are entered for public examinations.

Inspection

Schools are inspected by the DE's Education and Training Inspectorate (ETI). An inspection may last anything between 3 days and 2 weeks with both an oral and written report are given to the Principal at the end.

4. Public Examinations in Northern Ireland

GCSE (16 years old)

There are a total of around 196,000 students who take GCSE's each year (separate entries). Students begin their GCSE's in year 11 (age 14) and finish in year 12 (age 16).

Around 41,000 students take Science GCSE each year: approximately 31,500 take GCSE double award Science (worth 2 GCSEs) or triple award, i.e. Chemistry, Biology and Physics (3 separate GCSEs); the remaining 9,500 students take single award Science (reduced content).

57% of students achieve grades A – C at GCSE and are eligible to take AS and A level in Chemistry, Biology or Physics. Of those eligible, only 5% go on to take A level Chemistry.

GCE (16+)

In 2003/04, the A level student cohort for NI (the total number of students sitting A level examinations) was 11,398; around 15.3% of these students took A Level chemistry. The cohort in England and Wales in 2003/04 was 265,257 students, of which around 14.5% took A level chemistry.

Table 3. A level student data for England and Wales and NI

| | A Level student cohort | Percentage studying chemistry |
|------------------|-------------------------------|--------------------------------------|
| England/Wales | 265,257 | 14.5% |
| Northern Ireland | 11,398 | 15.3% |

GCE is divided into 2 levels:

1. AS level
2. A2 level

AS level is normally taken in Year 13 (old lower sixth) and students typically choose 4 AS subjects. This is followed by the A2 in Year 14 (old upper sixth), when students typically take 3 subjects.

The GCE specification adopts a modular structure and candidates are required to study 3 teaching and learning modules for the AS course and 6 modules for the full A level course. The modules are listed below:

- | | |
|--------------------|---|
| AS Module 1 | General Chemistry |
| AS Module 2 | Organic, Physical and Inorganic Chemistry |
| AS Module 3 | Practical Examination |
| A2 Module 4 | Further Organic, Physical and Inorganic Chemistry |

| | |
|---------------------|---|
| A2 Module 5 | Analytical, Transition Metals and Further Organic Chemistry |
| A2 Module 6A | Synoptic Paper |
| A2 Module 6B | Teacher Assessed Coursework |

The specification provides opportunity for assessing the following key skills at the level indicated:

- Communication – Level 3
- Application of Number – Level 3
- Information Technology – Level 3
- Working with Others – Level 3
- Improving Your Own Learning and Performance – Level 3
- Problem Solving – Level 3

Schools can choose their own examinations board. In 2003, the breakdown for A level Chemistry was:

| | |
|---|-----|
| CCEA (Council for the Curriculum Examinations and Assessment) | 58% |
| AQA (The Assessment and Qualifications Alliance) | 17% |
| ED EXCEL (Educational Excellence) | 17% |
| OCR (Oxford, Cambridge and RSA Examinations) | 8% |

5. Changes to the Northern Ireland Curriculum: The way ahead

During the past few years, the NI Curriculum has undergone an intense period of review, with the aim of providing a framework to meet the changing needs of pupils, society and the economy.

The CCEA has launched a series of detailed and radical proposals for a new NI Curriculum. A common theme running through all Key Stages in the proposed changes to the statutory curriculum is the centrality of skills and competencies. The proposed changes are at both primary and post-primary levels and commence in 2006/7.

Primary curriculum

In June 2004 the Education Minister gave approval for the revised primary curriculum at KS1 and KS2 to be implemented from 2006 onwards. This integrated curriculum will have a strong emphasis on the development of skills. The changes will also include a new Foundation Stage (Years 1 and 2) which will link into KS1.

The new curriculum is not about a significant change of content; rather there will be a greater emphasis on developing children's skills, capabilities and the capacity to learn for themselves – i.e. on pupils' Personal Development. There are also ongoing developments by CCEA to introduce modern language teaching in primary schools. Continuous formative assessment will be summarized in annual reports.

The Primary phase comprises the following stages:

| | |
|-----------------------|-------------------------------------|
| The Foundation Stage: | Years 1 and 2 of primary education. |
| Key Stage 1: | Years 3 and 4. |
| Key Stage 2: | Years 5, 6 and 7. |

The curriculum for Key Stages 1 and 2 is set out in six areas of learning. These are listed in Table 4.

Table 4. The six areas of learning for KS1 and KS2

| | |
|--------------------------|---|
| The Arts | including art and design, music and opportunities to incorporate drama |
| Language and Literacy | including talking and listening, reading and writing and opportunities to incorporate drama |
| Mathematics and Numeracy | focusing on the development of mathematical concepts and numeracy across the curriculum |
| Personal Development | focusing on the development of emotional development, learning to learn, health, relationships and sexuality education, understanding in the local and global community |
| Physical Education | focusing on the development of knowledge, skills and understanding in a range of physical activities |
| The World Around Us | focusing on the development of skills and knowledge in geography, history and science and technology |

Although the curricular areas are set out separately, teachers are encouraged, where appropriate, to integrate learning across the six areas to make relevant connections for children. Teachers have considerable flexibility to select the aspects they consider appropriate to the ability and interests of their pupils from within the curricular areas.

Transfer Test (11+)

The Costello Report: Future Post-Primary Arrangements in Northern Ireland, published in 2004, sought to establish a reasonable educational entitlement for each pupil at post-primary age across NI in a system, which would deliver sufficient choice and flexibility to enable each young person to meet his or her full potential. Following this, the Education Minister announced in June 2004 that the Transfer Test (11+) would cease to exist in 2009, with the last test to be held in the autumn of 2008.

Once the Transfer Tests end, post-primary schools will no longer be able to select pupils on the basis of academic ability. Parents will be able to decide on the most appropriate school to meet their child's needs. They will have a range of valuable information to make informed choices, including a Pupil Profile which will provide a fuller picture of a child's aptitudes and needs. Parents may choose from a range of schools which could include schools with:

- An academic *or* a vocational style of curriculum
- A mixture of both styles
- A specialist approach (there will be an opportunity for schools to develop as specialist schools, which will be centres of excellence and expertise in particular areas of the curriculum)

Post-Primary

The main proposals are:

- A new curriculum at KS3 and KS4
- Replacement of Key Stage assessment with annual reporting

1.) Key Stage 3

At KS3 a new specification has now been formally agreed. It includes areas such as Employability, Citizenship and Personal Development. These will become a compulsory and integral part of the NI curriculum. The philosophy is a shift away from the current focus on content, towards a greater emphasis on skills development, creativity and enterprise.

The new curriculum is defined in terms of a minimum entitlement, as opposed to detailed programmes of study. This will give schools greater flexibility to develop a curriculum to meet the needs of their pupils.

2.) Key Stage 4

At KS4 the new slimmed down curriculum will provide flexibility for pupils to choose from a wider range of courses envisaged in the Entitlement Framework. The purpose of the Entitlement Framework is to provide each young person with access to a guaranteed minimum number and range of courses at KS4 and at post -16 level (Costello recommended 24 courses at KS4 and 27 courses at post -16). At least one third of the range of courses on offer should be of a vocational or applied nature.

It is envisaged that schools will work in collaboration with each other and with their local Further Education (FE) colleges to provide pupils with the full range of courses required by the Curriculum Entitlement Framework.

Table 5. The curriculum at KS3 and KS4

| | |
|----------------------------|---|
| Learning for life and work | Education for Employability Local and Global Citizenship PSHE (personal, social and health education) Home Economics |
| General Learning Areas: | |
| The Arts | including Art & Design, Drama and Music |
| English/Irish | including Media Education |
| Environment and Society | including Geography and History |
| Modern Languages | (currently) French, Spanish, German, Italian, Irish |
| Mathematics | including Financial Capability |
| Science and Technology | including Science, Technology and Design |
| Physical Education | |
| Religious Education | |

Developing Skills and Competences in:

- Personal and Interpersonal Skills
- Critical and Creative Thinking Skills
- Communication
- Using Mathematics
- Information and Communication Technology (ICT)

The new curriculum at KS4 will include a statutory minimum of learning opportunities covering:

- Skills and Capabilities (Communication, Using Mathematics, ICT, Self-management, Problem Solving and Working with Others).
- Learning for Life and Work (PSHE, Local and Global Citizenship and Employability)
- Physical Education
- Religious Education

Students at KS4 will no longer be required to follow courses in particular subjects leading to qualifications. However, the overall programme that they follow, including assessed and non-assessed work, must, in total, cover all of the statutory requirements.

It should be noted that, from 2006, there will be no statutory requirement for pupils to study Science at KS4.

GCSE Science Provision to Change

CCEA will be introducing a new GCSE Science specification for first teaching in September 2006. The introduction of this new specification is a result of the curriculum changes, which, effective from September 2006, remove the statutory requirements for all learners in NI to study Science at KS4.

This will allow learners to take Biology, Chemistry or Physics, any combination of two or all three (as is the case at present). The curriculum changes required new GCSE Science criteria to be drawn up. The new criteria have been produced by the NI, England and Wales regulatory authorities in consultation with all of the awarding bodies. For more information, visit www.rsc.org/newgcse.

As well as changes to the specification content, the current structure for assessment of coursework is likely to change. CCEA intends to produce a new Single Award specification to replace the current Single Award Modular and Non-Modular specifications.

CCEA currently offers GCSE qualifications in:

- Science: Double Award (Modular and Non-Modular)
- Science: Single Award (Modular and Non-Modular)
- Science: Biology, Chemistry and Physics i.e. single subjects

Table 6. An outline of the timetable for the revised curriculum and assessment arrangements

| | 2005-2006 | 2006-2007 | 2007-2008 | 2008-2009 | 2009-2010 |
|--|------------------------------------|---|--|--|---------------------------------|
| FOUNDATION (Subject to evaluation of pilot) | No statutory change | No statutory change | New Learning Areas statutory in Year 1 | New Learning Areas statutory in Year 2 | |
| KEY STAGE 1 | No statutory change | New Learning Areas statutory in Year 3 | New Learning Areas statutory in Year 4 | Pupil profile becomes statutory | |
| KEY STAGE 2 | No statutory change | New Learning Areas statutory in Year 5 | New Learning Areas statutory in Year 6 | New Learning Areas and Pupil Profile Statutory in Year 7 | |
| KEY STAGE 3 | No statutory change | Learning Areas statutory Year 8-10. In LLW only Citizenship statutory | Employability becomes statutory | PSHE becomes statutory | Pupil Profile becomes statutory |
| KEY STAGE 4 | Selective Disapplication continues | New requirements statutory in Year 11 | New requirements statutory in Year 12 | | |

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www.deni.gov.uk

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