

COUNCIL FOR CATHOLIC MAINTAINED SCHOOLS

RESPONSE TO DE CONSULTATION PAPER

EARLY YEARS (0-6) STRATEGY

The Council for Catholic Maintained Schools welcomes this opportunity to respond to the Consultation Paper on Early Years (0-6) Strategy. Since its inception CCMS has continuously advocated that quality early years education is an essential pre requisite for effective learning and the ongoing raising of school standards.

The Council considers it necessary to make a number of introductory comments because to the limitations imposed by the structure of the consultation response booklet.

The CCMS Nursery Working Party, in its publication entitled 'Nursery – The Key to the Future' (1995) concluded that the development and expansion of nursery education should be treated as a matter of urgency by all partners in the education service. It recommended that this report, should form the basis for the expansion of nursery education. It is regrettable that it has taken such a prolonged period of time for the Department to publish a formal strategy for consultation.

The Council acknowledges that the Pre -School Education Expansion Programme (1996) has made a significant impact upon access to preschool education. As recently as 15/10/10 Professor Ted Melhiush presenting the findings at the DE Research Briefing (2010) Effective pre- school provision in Northern Ireland Pre- school Experience (EPPNI) and Key Stage 2 performance in English and Mathematics stated that

‘there is a significant beneficial effect of attending a Nursery school/ class for key stage 2 English attainment, with the Nursery school/class group being over 3 times more likely to attain level 5 as the no pre- school group. Also playgroup children are about twice as likely to attain level 4 as the no pre -school group..... in key stage 2 mathematics... the nursery school/class group being almost 3 times as likely to attain level 5, while the playgroup children are over twice as likely to attain level 5, as the no preschool group.’

If this is the outcome within a 3 to 6 strategy then the prospects are even greater for a full 0 to 6 approach. The Consultative paper, however, does not clearly articulate the alignment of its proposals with the Foundation Stage of the curriculum.

The Northern Ireland Assembly supported by central government could take forward an Early Intervention policy strategy to change the paradigm of service delivery from reactive later intervention to proactive early intervention. The provision of new resources immediately, to invest in statutory nursery provision for all 3 and 4 year old children supported by robust family and child services particularly for the 0-3 age range within the statutory, voluntary and community sectors would achieve greater saving in the longer term by reducing the remediation required in the future to address learning, health, economic and justice dysfunctions.

Council concurs with the Centre for Social Justice and Smith Institute (2008) research entitled Early Intervention: Good Parents, Great Kids, Better Citizens Graham Allen MP and Rt Hon Iain Duncan Smith MP that early intervention is good public policy and that continuing with late intervention has no sustainable future. The two public policy strengths of Early Intervention are firstly that it is less expensive and secondly it is more effective than later intervention.

Key responses

Council strongly advocates:

- **that the Government legislates to make Nursery education statutory for all children in the year prior to admission to primary school**
- **the ending of reception provision as soon as alternative provision is in place**
- **the need for the strategy to be more specific in terms of 0-3 initiatives clearly outlining support for parents and how childrens' holistic development can be supported by a range of Health and related professionals**
- **a more determined focus upon collaboration between all service providers working in the 0-6 arena, re-inforced by a 'joined up' Programme for Government (PFG)**
- **the designation of a Minister with responsibility for Children (0-6) within the Northern Ireland Legislative Assembly to ensure a fully co ordinate approach to all children's issues**

There is a significant body of research which highlights that good quality family support and nursery education can be particularly beneficial for children from disadvantaged backgrounds. Whilst welcoming the long overdue Policy Strategy, the Council is concerned that the paper does not fully address the full 0-6 range and the need for parenting support programmes and/or remedial services along with pre Nursery school learning which can be provided by existing statutory, voluntary and community based providers. In addition Council is concerned that there was insufficient engagement with Nursery and Primary school principals and teachers in the compilation of the Consultation strategy document.

The need for further policy in 0-3 is supported by research which suggests that there is a need to examine what goes on in the home during 0-3 phase as the patterns of negative behaviours and dispositions which are sometimes established there are difficult to change in school.

'What parents do is more important than who parents are' (Melhuish) advocates the need for a strong policy focus on parenting and parenting support services. The (EPPNI) longitudinal study also outlines a correlation between low birth weight and developmental problems along with gender performance issues and relationship to a mother's qualifications and babies' exposure to language.

In terms of outcomes at KS1 and KS2, it is clear that children with pre- school experience in a Nursery school benefitted more than other control groups whose experience was in play groups and the home. This would support the key findings of the CCMS (1995) report which placed emphasis on the need for an increase in high quality Nursery School provision with suitably qualified teachers and support staff and good pupil/teacher ratios. Council has long been on record in calling for the cessation of Reception provision since there is no sound rationale for three year olds being educated in a setting with five year olds.

The Council believes that clear protocols need to be developed on the exchange of information and data not just between agencies but also between institutions as children pass through the various transitions. There is also a need to consider the management of 'threshold' reflecting how children are supported when they have 'passed through' a learning or behaviour milestone or threshold and how that progress can be reinforced and secured. A further 'threshold' issue is a consideration of how the funding associated with FSME ceases when a child no longer qualifies. CCMS believes that to ensure maintenance of

beneficial support it might be advantageous if policy was revised to ensure that once a child is deemed to have a level of social disadvantage associated with FSME designation that the financial support should remain with the child throughout their school lives as getting just above the line may not reflect significant additional capacity.

Responses to Questions posed in the Consultation Booklet.

CCMS would agree that the Vision Statement and Aims outlined below are broadly appropriate and fit for purpose. Council would wish to ensure that provision should reflect the principle of ‘Proportional Universal Action’ and would therefore propose an addition to clarify that those with the greatest need, or facing the greatest challenges have priority. It therefore proposes the addition of ‘In proportion to her/his needs’. Unfortunately there is little substance in the policy paper proposal to cover the full 0-6 range. It is also disappointing to note that much of the research and good practice contained in the Evidence Based paper has not been utilised in proposals for future policy development.

Vision: To enable every child to develop to their full potential by giving each one the best start possible. in proportion to her/his needs

Aims :Value and respect the early years of a child’s life, while also laying the foundations of and removing barriers to learning so that each child can develop as a successful learner; and

Achieve positive outcomes for children by supporting their development through high quality, child-centred and family-focused services, ensuring greater equality of access.

Throughout this response reference is made to the additional challenges for children living in areas of social disadvantage. This does not imply any lack of commitment of parents to the well-being and development of their children – it is simply a recognition that the conditions and challenges are not the same in all circumstances but that support should be proportionate to need which on the basis of evidence is likely to be greater in areas with higher levels of social disadvantage.

I Vision and Aims

Question 1

Is this the right vision? Is it an appropriate vision for an early years strategy?

The vision with the proposed amendment, whilst appropriately focused, is aspirational at this juncture. The vision can only be realised if (0-3) provision can be aligned to nursery provision and any interventions still required carried forward into the later primary years. If quality pre-school education is deemed to be an essential pre requisite for the raising of educational standards particularly for children facing challenging circumstances it will be necessary to make statutory nursery education available for all children in the year prior to admission to primary school.

Question 2

Do you agree that the aims are appropriate?

The aims are appropriate if the proper infrastructure exists i.e. appropriate parent and family support matched to specific needs and quality statutory nursery provision for all. The establishment of quality provision across all providers voluntary and statutory addressing the current inequality and variability of standards must be addressed before these aims can be fully realised. The objectives in support of the aims fail to adequately emphasise the critical role of parents and the implications of social disadvantage. Strong consideration needs to be given on how to engage effectively with parents. It is imperative that there is a more determined focus upon Government strategies to ensure collaboration between all service providers working in the 0-6 arena. There needs to be more specific attention paid to the vital contribution of parents and carers within the aims and objectives. Research evidence shows that attachment and bonding relationships cannot be replicated in later life if these are not appropriately developed in the early years. The 'Voice of the Child' is paramount in policy formation, and research shows that there are appropriate methodologies available to have meaningful consultation with pupils as young as 3 years.

Question 3

Are these the key issues for DE to address? – No, not entirely

DE needs to focus upon enhancing the holistic development of children throughout the (0-6) years. While Council agrees with Objective 1 in principle, there is little or no evidence in the listed key issues to demonstrate a strong commitment to anything other than an aspiration to raising standards in language and number. Literacy and numeracy should not be promoted to the detriment of personal, social and emotional well being.

There needs to be an absolute recognition of the critical phase of cognitive development between the ages of 2½ and 3½ and strategies put in place to target support to parents and carers at this vital stage.

Council agrees that there is a gap between those children who are least and those most ready for school but would contend that there is also an issue to be addressed around schools readiness to support the needs of all children. The 0-6 strategy will necessitate the establishment of a seamless continuum of provision where all service providers collaborate in the holistic interests of children.

The issue of milestones needs to be re visited and clarified.

An early focus on and support mechanism for children with additional needs is essential.

Question 4

Do you consider that there are other areas that should be addressed to improve quality of provision? Yes.

It is the view of CCMS that the key issues to be resolved in the pre- school year are the ending of Reception, admission of underage children, full time versus part time provision, quality of accommodation, pupil teacher ratios and professional development. Until all these issues have been addressed by the establishment of a statutory Nursery education for one year for all children, the aims of the strategy will not be realised.

If the DE can establish an equitable nursery provision for all children only then will the Department be in a position to collaborate with Health, Social Services and other statutory and relevant non-statutory agencies. Key issues in the 0-3 range include effective ante-natal care, support for parents, particularly young and first-time parents, nursing (health visitor) and social services support to the family, strategies for early identification of emerging difficulties and good data management to facilitate transition. Standardisation of provision and evaluation of quality stands across all settings requires appropriate financial resources which must be accessed from government.

Question 5

Do you agree with the actions proposed? No, not entirely.

The reference to ESA is not relevant at this point. The strategy needs to clarify the roles of current bodies in the event of ESA not becoming a statutory entity.

Clarification on milestones is required in terms of purpose. There is a grave danger that ‘milestones ‘will be perceived to be assessment of children as opposed to assessment for learning or readiness to learn.

Question 6

What further actions could be taken to ensure that the objective is achieved?

CCMS considers that the proposed actions are not sufficiently robust to address quality provisions.

Aspirational actions such as

“DE will commission ETI” - “DE and DHSSPS will commission” and “DE will work with” are not concrete actions which will deliver outcomes. The ‘how’ is not explained and the resources required are not clearly identified.

Reference to ESA is also aspirational as there is no guarantee that ESA will become a reality.

Concrete actions such as the removal of Reception provision and the management of under age admissions to ensure the non attendance of under age children in settings providing for children in their penultimate school year, followed by the creation of nursery school provision as a statutory element for all children in the year prior to admission to primary school would be more practical and appropriate actions.

DE should consider the establishment of a 0-6 developmental framework- eg along the lines of Aistear (ROI) and Te Wharaki (NZ).

II The Role of Parents and Carers:

Question 7

Are these the key issues for DE to address? No.

The key issues identified by the Department in respect of the role of parents and carers are again aspirational and without concrete action.

If pre -school/nursery is not statutory it is incumbent upon parents to ensure that their child is prepared for formal education. Consequently unless nursery education becomes statutory the current inequality in terms of quality provision will prevail.

The intentions to provide a family programme is welcomed as an integral part of funded pre-school provision. The family programme should be appropriately funded through mainstream resources. There is a wide range of research evidence on the positive effects of parental involvement and interaction which could be used to inform family programmes. A number of emerging initiatives need to be piloted with a view to mainstreaming these include the Family Nurse Partnership and the ‘Seeds of Empathy’ (an early years version of Roots of Empathy).

Question 8

Do you consider that there are other areas that should be addressed to recognise and respect the role of parents and to raise the level of engagement? Yes.

Engagement with parents is imperative but in the past been a problematic issue. A clear strategy and methodology must be established to ensure that parents have the capacity and support to fulfil their responsibilities as primary educators. In addition, consideration needs to be given to educating future parents at the adolescent stage through changes to the revised Northern Ireland Curriculum.

Training for all service providers throughout the 0-6 phase needs to be made available to empower them to engage more meaningfully with parents.

There needs to be a continuum of parenting education programmes commencing at KS4 and including the ante natal/post natal stages, through health visitors and other professionals supporting parents and children in the pre -school years. This is particularly the case for 'hard to reach' parents for when specific contact strategies may need to be devised.

A greater focus upon 0-2 is required (HSS /Day Care /Creche) to maintain a quality continuum of service provision. The work of Sure Start needs to be further expanded and best practice in both direct and facilitated service delivery enhanced.

Question 9

Do you agree with the actions proposed? Yes

Collaborative working between parents and providers is an essential pre requisite for the development of a coherent and consistent strategy to remove barriers to learning particularly for those children who are identified as facing challenging circumstances.

Question 10

What further actions could be taken to ensure that the objective is achieved?

Where expansion of services is proposed Council believes that the provision should be accessible to all children. All parents should be able to access a programme for their two year olds similar to the Surestart

model. As a rational starting point, however, the emphasis should be on all children and not just those with recognised needs and those from disadvantaged background.

Council would pose the question as to how such provision can be made under current arrangements and in the absence of the ESA.

It is difficult to understand how can DE promote regular attendance if provision is not statutory?

Family programmes need to begin before birth and be accessible to all families and not just those availing of funded pre- school places.

EQUITY and ACCESS

Question 11

Are these the key issues for DE to address?

DE needs to ensure that consideration is given to equitable funding across all the pre -school providers eg nursery schools, nursery units, playgroups, SureStart providers and other services provided directly to parents in the early months and years of a child's life.

Question 12

Do you consider that there are other areas that should be addressed to improve equity and access to early year's provision? If so, what are they?

There is currently a lack of equity within the system as follows

- full time v part time nursery provision
- pupil teacher ratios in the voluntary/statutory sectors
- appropriateness of qualifications/training for all staff
- access to services e.g. professional support for all staff
- quality of accommodation
- admissions of underage children
- access to provision which is in keeping with preferred ethos
- removal of reception and its replacement with an appropriate alternative

- appropriate support for community and voluntary providers working with individual parents directly or on behalf of statutory agencies
- dissemination and replication of models of good practice in relation to identification of and provision for additional needs.

DE needs to address all of the above issues in order to ensure that equity and access to early years provision and to necessary interventions actually exists.

DE needs to legislate to ensure that children in their final pre-school year are provided with a statutory pre-school place in a setting which is fit for purpose and staffed by appropriately qualified teachers and other professionals.

Provision needs to be made for 2 year olds in alternate settings with appropriately qualified staff. DE needs to indicate how they could practically achieve these goals. Caution needs to be exercised in regard to the placement of younger children with less qualified staff.

DE needs to ensure a functioning interface exists with other relevant departments and agents to ensure that there is appropriate provision, proportionate to need for parents of children 0-3 and that the specific needs of children are identified and addressed at the point of need. There is a need for agreed protocols on the provision and management of sensitive data to ensure that services can be delivered effectively.

Question 13

Do you agree with the actions proposed? Yes, in part.

Qualifications and training are major issues and careful consideration needs to be given to the value placed on NVQ level 4 qualifications for Sure Start and Non-Statutory early years leaders. There are also major implications for Initial Teacher Education provision. The strategy is particularly weak with respect to these matters. There is also a paucity of linkages from the nursery to the Foundation Stage of the curriculum and implications for further professional development.

Differentiated leadership programmes need to be made available for all providers within the system

DE must support capacity building for the delivery of all services to support the specific needs of children with special educational needs.

Question 14

What further actions could be taken to ensure that the objective is achieved?

It is not acceptable to retain Reception provision as it currently exists.

To retain a mix of part time and full time provision is inequitable. All provision should be full time.

There needs to be a fundamental review of where current provision exists – where it needs to be and the quality of education it can offer. Area based planning of new provision requires a radical review with a clear definition of what constitutes an ‘area’ at each stage of provision.

It should be a matter of policy that in normal circumstances when a new primary school is built it should have a nursery facility included.

Question 15

Are these the key issues for DE to address?

The key issues are valid but aspirational. If DE is serious about these matters then a commitment should be given to pursue policies over time to deliver the desired outcomes.

Question 16

Do you consider that there are other areas that should be addressed to encourage greater collaboration among key partners to promote greater integration in service delivery? If so, what are they?

In practice, considerable work needs to be done to establish an interactive infrastructure where sections within the Department of Education and across other relevant Departments can collaborate effectively internally and ensure cohesive comprehensive policies which relate to each other. A necessary first step is the development of a cogent programme for Government with associated PSAs which require agreed outcomes for relevant Departments working together rather than simple financial accountability. In the Department of Education connectivity of existing embryonic policies such as Every School a Good School, Literacy and Numeracy, SEN Strategy, School Accommodation Schedule, Local Management of Schools, Workforce Planning and Initial Teacher Education is imperative for the growth and development of Quality education for children in Northern Ireland. There is also an urgent need to review the structure of the LMS budget formula.

Collaboration with other Departments can only meaningfully exist if there is unity of purpose from Government with clear child centred goals and adequate funding for providers to drive partnership, working and thereby enhance provision.

The designation of a Minister with a cross cutting responsibility for Children would be desirable within a new political framework.

Question 17

Do you agree with the actions proposed? NO.

The proposed actions are not significantly robust to develop an effective strategy.

Question 18

What further actions could be taken to ensure that the objective is achieved?

There is a need to revisit the strategy in its entirety with greater focus on coherent strategies policy making, establishing appropriate relationships, managing transitions and thresholds resolving practical issues and engaging in in-depth consultation with practitioners.

This strategy, considering the length of time given to its development has no real substance and fails to address the key issues of greatest concerns to schools health professionals and parents. It has also failed to address the entire 0-6 range, particularly the 0-3 phase.

The health agenda is vitally important and it is imperative that it is viewed within the full context of a 0-6 strategy and not a mere addendum to the Primary programme. The purpose for all interests should be to improve the life chances for all children through support services which are connected to deliver according to need.

CONCLUSION

Council believes that a Multi Disciplinary strategy to promote the holistic well being and development of children is both long overdue and of vital importance if we as educators are to raise the bar of achievement, close the gap of attainment and remove barriers to learning. Connectivity of existing embryonic education policies such as Every School a Good School, SEN Strategy, Literacy and Numberacy, Local Management of Schools, Workforce Planning and Initial Teacher Education is imperative for the growth and development of Quality education for children in Northern Ireland.

In summary the proposed strategy is

- aspirational without an action plan and delivery plan;
- insufficiently detailed in terms of provision for 0-2 and 5-6;
- resource neutral in terms of funding- which is inappropriate;
- not time bound;
- detached from primary schools;
- insufficiently robust in terms of equity for all sectors;
- insufficient in detail regarding integrated and coherent services across 0-6;
- insufficient in terms of baselining staff capacity and outlining a programme of on-going professional development and qualifications frameworks ;
- lacking in reference to other investment strategies as evidenced by OECD and others;
- not sufficiently linked to the Foundation stage of the curriculum;
- avoiding the key issues of Reception , underage admissions;
- not sufficiently parent/carer focussed;
- not attuned to the personal challenges of parenting including stress and depression and the impact of these on child development;
- not indicative of joined up working at policy level which is critical to the success of a 0-6 strategy

Council would endorse the following belief that

‘Effecting profound change in human outcomes can be fostered, encouraged and supported, but not forced. When it comes to transforming infant and early childhood care government must create the circumstances and environment that facilitate success.’

Centre for Social Justice and Smith Institute (2008)