

## New Decade New Approach. What's in it for Education?

Professor Tony Gallagher

29 January 2020

Was there ever such an ambitious agenda agreed by a coalition government as that contained in New Decade New Approach? That they agreed it without confirming a resource commitment now seems a little hasty, but with two years to the next Assembly election they have little choice but to press ahead as quickly as they can.

The ambitious agenda of aspirations and intentions contained in New Decade New Approach (NDNA) are a source of hope and bewilderment: hope that it inspires a different approach to government, marked by openness and inclusion, by the five party coalition in Stormont; bewilderment, as the decision to return did not include any formal assurances about resources, and many of the problems they have pledged to solve pre-date the three year hiatus and were previously irresolvable. It will require a very different approach to government, or else it may spell the end of devolved government.

### Education proposals

The level of ambition is nowhere more evident than in the proposals for education, where a long list of aspirations has been laid out.

The Executive has agreed to resolve how the **pay agreement with teachers** will be paid for, and to give schools **sustainable budgets**. Unless these basic steps are made, and made quickly, little else on the education agenda is likely to be solved.

In their first year the Executive have agreed to:

- deliver an enhanced approach to careers advice and training to enhance employability;
- deliver an enhanced strategic focus and supporting actions on educating our children and young people together in the classroom, in order to build a shared and integrated society;
- establish an expert group to examine the links between persistent educational underachievement and socio-economic background and draw up an action plan;
- address the issues highlighted in the NIAO review of Special Educational Need as a priority.

Beyond this, the Executive will commission an **independent fundamental review of the education system** with the aim of 'delivering long term improvements in the quality, equity and sustainability of the system.'

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The Department of Education will be given a duty to encourage and facilitate the use of Ulster Scots in the education system, while the Office of Identity and Cultural Expression will have an educational role within its remit.

The UK government did not provide a specific resource allocation to cover the costs of this agenda, but asserted that the independent review will lead to 'a better and more efficient education system'. They have also agreed that the funding provided by the Fresh Start Agreement for shared and integrated education and housing can be re-profiled, though this is not the first time this has happened. The Irish government are more specific in their commitment to education, but that is all aimed at higher education in Derry/Londonderry, through the expansion of the Magee campus.

The general tenor of the education proposals reflects the main theme of NDNA in aiming towards a more unified and integrated society. The proposals on identity, language and rights, seem to take social ambitions in a different direction entirely and will have an impact on schools.

### Are there any prospects of success?

The immediate test will be to find the resources to cover the cost of the teachers' pay settlement and reverse the crippling reductions in school budgets. The former is straightforward, the latter more tricky to achieve, but the essential concern is that these are dealt with quickly so that the teachers' industrial action is abandoned and life in schools returns to something approaching normality.

Virtually all the issues then to be addressed pre-date the collapse of the Assembly. These issues aren't new, and in many cases there has already been substantial work on them over many years. The challenge is not about knowing what the problem is, but taking action that is effective, sustainable and has lasting impact.

There have been upwards of seven reports on **low or under-achievement** in the past decade, and a host of others in the decade before that, with the focus of concern gravitating over time towards the situation of working-class Protestant boys. The problem lies not in identifying the problem, but in implementing potential solutions. A North-South governmental working group on educational underachievement has already been established with the aim of promoting the sharing of best practice in this area, so we might expect some reports and papers from the Department quite soon. Hardly anyone believes academic selection is solely responsible for this, although most commentators and analysts claim the evidence of its impact is unassailable.

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Peter Weir, DUP Minister for Education, has made it equally clear that he supports academic selection. This may mean that action is limited to yet more short-term targeted projects, of which we have had many, over several decades, with little systemic effect.

The NIAO report on **Special Education Need** laid out a stark picture: the number of pupils entering Special Schools is rising, as is the number of pupils identified as having special education needs in mainstream schools. The cost is steadily rising, at £250m annually in 2015/16; neither the Department of Education or the Education Authority can demonstrate value for money in terms of economy, efficiency or effectiveness in the provision of support for children with special needs; and a Departmental review of provision, including an examination of 'the inconsistencies and delays in assessment and provision' began over ten years ago. Building consensus on this issue remains a key challenge. Meantime the evidence of need and under-provision increases.

The **independent review of education** has been a strong recommendation of the integrated education lobby for some time, apparently on the assumption that any independent review would conclude that a single integrated system is the only rational outcome. Would a shift towards a single system include the end of academic selection and single-sex schools? Would it include the removal of Church representatives from boards of governors, or a reduction (or removal) of public funding for Catholic schools? Many seem to assume that the rationalisation of the system to a smaller number of larger schools will save money and boost performance, but the evidence of area planning over the past decade raises questions about the former, and there is next to no evidence anywhere of a relationship between school size and performance.

There is no doubt there are some fundamental problems in our system: gross inequality of outcomes, with a range of social factors having an undue impact on outcomes; an insufficiently integrated approach to enhancing skills; a huge backlog in maintenance work in schools; insufficient systemic priority attached to the role of schools in equipping young people to become architects of a shared and better society; and a silo-ed approach in government to 'wicked' problems which are fundamentally beyond the remit of any single Department. A 'fundamental independent review' is unlikely to offer any (practical) short-term radical solutions, but it could try to identify a long-term vision of the type of education system we all would want. Then the real challenge for government will come in trying to chart an agreed course towards that destination.