

Mr Peter McCallion  
Clerk to the Education Committee  
Northern Ireland Assembly  
Parliament Buildings  
Belfast BT4 3XX

16<sup>th</sup> January 2017

Dear Peter,

### **Inquiry into Educational Underachievement: Evidence of ATL**

Further to your letter of 25<sup>th</sup> November 2017, I am writing to provide the Association of Teachers and Lecturers' response (by way of this cover letter) and written evidence (by way of the text of the recent 11<sup>th</sup> ATL Annual Lecture in May 2016, delivered by Jim Curran).

The extremities of educational performance differentials in Northern Ireland is a matter which has been of interest and concern to ATL for generations. As such, whilst welcoming any attempt to "*shine a light*" on the issue of educational under-achievement, ATL is – naturally – somewhat sceptical of another Inquiry.

Why? Because there is no lack of evidence on the causes of educational under-achievement – nor, for that matter, on the potential remedies. There has been academic consensus on these issues for some considerable time. What there is not is *political traction*, or common political will, to turn that consensus into concrete policy action.

I was facilitated with time, by ATL, to chair, and co-author, the 2011 'Educational Disadvantage and the Protestant Working Class: A Call to Action' panel set up by former MLA – so I am no stranger to this area of work. Amongst the many recent research considerations of educational under-achievement that the Committee may wish to look at are:

- 'Educational Disadvantage and the Protestant Working Class: A Call to Action' (the "Purvis Report"), March 2011;<sup>1</sup>
- The OECD's Equity and Quality in Education: Supporting Disadvantaged Students and Schools, 2012;<sup>2</sup>
- Educational Inequalities in Northern Ireland, Burns, Leitch & Hughes, School of Education, QUB for the Equality Commission, Northern Ireland, March 2015;<sup>3</sup>
- Investigating Links in Achievement and Deprivation (ILiAD), Department of Shared Education, QUB for OFMDFM (unpublished) 2016;<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Educational Disadvantage and the Protestant Working Class: A Call to Action' Issued by Dawn Purvis and the Working Group on educational disadvantage and the Protestant working class, March 2011.

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.oecd.org/education/school/50293148.pdf>

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.equalityni.org/ECNI/media/ECNI/Publications/Delivering%20Equality/EducationInequality-FullReportQUB.pdf>

<sup>4</sup> [http://www.qub.ac.uk/research-centres/CentreforSharedEducation/Filestore/Fileupload\\_495437\\_en.pdf](http://www.qub.ac.uk/research-centres/CentreforSharedEducation/Filestore/Fileupload_495437_en.pdf)

- The 'Leading for Equity' approach of Montgomery County, Maryland, USA published by the Harvard Press;<sup>5</sup>
- Publications arising from the London Challenge model, which received cross-party consensus – a model that forms a strong basis for school improvement.<sup>6</sup>

The last three of these works are instructive. The QUB ILiAD research for OFMDFM was, I understand, politically suppressed before the last Assembly election as its recommendations were found to be problematic!

The Harvard research of the Montgomery County experiment is pertinent not just as an area within the English-speaking world which has actually attempted (and achieved considerable success) to 'outwork' the research consensus on educational under-achievement. It is also an area which has been studied by the Department of Education (NI), education employers and trade unions here, who visited Montgomery County to see the system at first hand in 2008. The Education Superintendent of Montgomery County at the time, Jerry Weiss, also visited Northern Ireland on several occasions to share practice.

The London Challenge is another noteworthy success with relevance to Northern Ireland, not least because it was underwritten by a political consensus that is sadly lacking here. ATL arranged a study visit of the London Challenge hosted by Sir Tim Brighouse (and to Tower Hamlets in particular) in 2015 together with educational unions and employers within the Teachers' Negotiating Committee. We were all impressed by the measure of progress achieved.

The main point that ATL would make to the Committee is that there are, broadly, two main ways through which to address educational underachievement. One is by way of **compensatory measures** in and to high-poverty schools and localities. The other is through measures of **socio-economic integration**. An example of the former might be TSN (Targeting Social Need) measures aimed to compensate for the disadvantage of high-poverty concentrations in particular schools or localities. TSN measures can work, but only with a lot of additional resource over an extended period. The gains, however, are marginal, and very hard earned.

By contrast the zero-cost option of working towards socially balanced intakes has neither been understood, nor attempted. ATL's conclusion is that the socially balanced pupil intakes which, evidentially, tackle under-achievement best for all pupils come at a different cost – not a budgetary cost, but at the cost of common political will.

In the current budgetary environment, it is clear to ATL that the focus of the Inquiry (and its recommendations) should be on socio-economic integration measures and, in particular, using political/government leverage to encourage **socially mixed and balanced intakes in schools**. No other single measure would have less financial cost, or more educational performance benefits.

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<sup>5</sup> See Leading for Equity The Pursuit of Excellence in the Montgomery County Public Schools: Stacey M. Childress, Denis P. Doyle, and David A. Thomas, with a foreword by David Gergen, July 2009 ISBN-13: 978-1-934742-23-5

<sup>6</sup> See Brighouse & Woods, The Story of the London Challenge; at <http://londonleadershipstrategy.com/content/story-london-challenge-look-behind-london-schools-success-people-who-were-there>

## On Socially Balanced pupil intakes

It has long been generally accepted academically, if not acted upon by policymakers, that overall school performance improves with balanced intakes. Consider the following (although the references are only a small selection of what is available).

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*"Our evidence as well as that of the DfES and of other researchers is that disadvantaged students and minority ethnic students are likely to attend worse performing schools. This can affect their performance adversely; it does so particularly for students with special educational needs. Anything which gives schools greater opportunities to select their pupils works to the detriment of the disadvantaged; measures which assist fair selection will help them."*<sup>7</sup>

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*"The theoretical benefits of balanced intakes are considerable but the practical problems arising from the complexity of local contexts are great."*<sup>8</sup>

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*"...if children from middle-class backgrounds attend school with predominantly children from the same background they will do less well than if the school has a social mix. The same applies for children from deprived homes who attend school alongside children in similar circumstances."*<sup>9</sup>

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*'There is consensus that school composition effects are important and that schools with a high proportion of students of low social status or low prior academic ability are at a disadvantage (Coleman 1966, Henderson et al 1978, Mortimore et al 1988, Rutter et al 1979, Smith and Tomlinson 1989, Summers and Wolfe 1977, Thrupp 1995, Willms 1986)...Levacic and Woods (2002) find the concentration of social disadvantage in a school relative to other local schools has a strong impact on GCSE improvement over time. These school composition effects may be due to the influence of peer groups on aspirations and behaviour, or they may be due to other processes, such as schools with low proportions of 'able' students finding it hard to attract good teachers.'*<sup>10</sup>

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*Decades of research evidence, most recently in a huge study by academics at UCL and King's College, demonstrates that the one key factor in raising performance at school for the most, the middle and the least able, is a mixed intake of pupils. In schools with mixed intakes pupils learn about each other; they see different dispositions to learning; they recognise each other's skills – and those pupils who suffer the most deprivation and exclusion see that education can provide them with the skills and knowledge to make a different life for themselves. In schools that lack that social mix, where the only examples of other ways of life are teachers – the jump is too big, the gap too wide. Teachers are another country – they do things differently there. For the most disadvantaged young people, the most important role model is someone who looks like them, who is their age, but who*

<sup>7</sup> *Tackling Low Educational Achievement* Joseph Rowntree Foundation/LSE: Cassen R and Kingdon G (2007)

<sup>8</sup> Coldron J, Tanner E, Finch S, Shipton L, Wolstenholme C, Willis B, Demack S and Stiell B (2008) *Secondary School Admissions* London DCSF.

<sup>9</sup> Karley K and Bramley G (2005) *Home-ownership, Poverty and Educational Attainment: Individual, School and Neighbourhoods Effects*, Edinburgh, Scottish Executive

<sup>10</sup> Sullivan and Whitty (2005) 'Life Chances and Educational Achievement in the UK: A Research and Policy Overview' in *'Maintaining Momentum: promoting social mobility and life chances from early years to adulthood'* Eds Delorenzi, Reed and Robinson London: Institute for Public Policy Research:

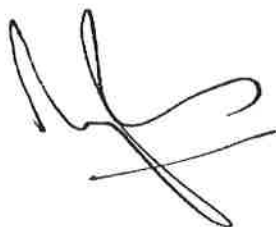
*has different attitudes to learning and different aspirations for life. So, if we are really to make a difference, if standards really are to rise for all, we need schools which are socially mixed, in which peer group pressure can be used effectively to open minds, change outlooks and raise aspirations. Schools which do not have this mix always struggle. They may, under inspirational leadership, change for a while but the change is not sustainable. Unless the intake changes, eventually the challenges will become too much and they will slip back into difficulties. ATL has nothing to fear from schools with balanced intakes – and we should face the future of post primary reform with confidence.<sup>11</sup>*

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The evidence ATL submits to the Committee focusses on this dilemma and is set out in the 11<sup>th</sup> Annual ATL Lecture given by Jim Curran on 19<sup>th</sup> May 2016 in Belfast, on the topic of "Targeting Social Need: Can high-poverty schools help disadvantaged pupils?" In this lecture, Mr Curran draws on research undertaken by Richard D Kahlenberg (which whom he has corresponded since 2012) and I have attached a short article from Richard Kahlenberg and Carl Chancellor from the Washington Monthly, November/December 2014.

On ATL's behalf, I would be happy to give oral evidence along with Jim Curran should the Committee so desire.

Yours sincerely



Mark Langhammer  
**Director (Northern Ireland), Association of Teachers and Lecturers**

**Papers Enclosed**

- "TSN: Can High-Poverty Schools help disadvantaged pupils?" Jim Curran, ATL 11<sup>th</sup> Annual Lecture, Belfast 19<sup>th</sup> May 2016
- "It's Class, not Race.": article in the Washington Monthly Nov/Dec 2014, Carl Chancellor and Richard D Kahlenberg

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<sup>11</sup> Dr Mary Bousted, speech to the ATL Northern Ireland conference, Belfast, 19<sup>th</sup> May 2006