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**To:** +Comm Education Public Email <committee.education@niassembly.gov.uk>

**Subject:** submission

A response from The Parental Alliance for Choice in Education to an invitation by the Northern Ireland Assembly Education Committee request for submissions to the Inquiry into Educational Underachievement.

The Parental Alliance for Choice in Education have a long-standing interest and involvement in the subject of educational attainment in Northern Ireland and have sought to engage with elected representatives, academics, the teaching professionals and the media using an objective, evidence and reference-based approach to the subject with limited success. This lack of engagement speaks volumes about the priorities placed on the issue of educational attainment by the official stakeholders and is evidenced by the persistent lack of success in delivering long term solutions.

The Committee may need to be reminded of the Report of the House of Commons Committee of Public Accounts **Improving literacy and numeracy in schools (Northern Ireland)** HC 10 8 [Session 2005-06] Published on 8 December 2006. Somewhat extraordinarily, The Parental Alliance for Choice in Education were the only organisation to submit written evidence to the Committee of Public Accounts apart from the Department of Education

In a Summary the **Improving literacy and numeracy in schools (Northern Ireland)** Report states: Since the introduction of the *Strategy* in 1998, progress in literacy and numeracy attainment levels has been manifestly unsatisfactory and the Department has failed to show sufficient leadership in driving things forward. For example, when targets have not been met, they have, too often, simply been relaxed. To address the lack of progress and to move literacy and numeracy up its agenda, the Department has now embarked on a comprehensive review of the *Strategy* which will look at a range of issues around literacy and numeracy. ***The Department also believes that improvements in literacy and numeracy levels will come as a result of current plans to restructure and reorganize the education system in Northern Ireland with the introduction of a new curriculum and the ending of the current system of selection at 11 years of age.*** [Emphasis added]

Conclusions and Recommendations

1. **The importance of developing competency and confidence in the key skills of literacy and numeracy at an early age is reflected in the worrying statistics which show that the skills deficit among pupils in Northern Ireland schools increases as they progress through primary education and into the secondary sector.** The Committee expects the Department of Education to take urgent steps to improve the teaching of literacy and numeracy within schools. This is essential if we are to ensure that deficiencies in literacy and numeracy do not continue to be a major handicap for future generations of young adults after they leave school.

2. **In our view, schools which are well managed and have proactive leadership are much better placed than others to enable all children, even those most at risk of failing, to succeed.** Unless the teaching of literacy and numeracy is well-led, schools will not provide the best educational experience nor the highest standards for their pupils. In order to raise standards we look to the Department to ensure that support is focused on schools where the leadership and management of literacy and numeracy efforts is weak.

3. **Under-achievement among boys constitutes a cultural challenge.** We expect the Department to help meet that challenge by seeking to draw together research on best practice so that it can develop both preventative and remedial programmes to help boys who are struggling with literacy and numeracy from falling further behind each year. The Committee urges the Department to give particular attention to the very worrying position of boys in the Belfast Board area.

4. **It is clear from the evidence presented to the Committee that, among socially deprived communities in Belfast, significant differences between Protestant and Roman Catholic children exist in GCSE English and Mathematics. This raises a concern that children in Protestant working-class areas may not be enjoying equal educational opportunities.** There is a noticeable difference between Belfast and Glasgow. The data provided by the Department shows that, whereas there is a reasonable degree of consistency between the performance of Catholic and nondenominational schools in Glasgow in English and Mathematics at GCSE/Scottish National Qualification level, this is certainly not the case in Belfast. Here, schools with 40% or more pupils entitled to free school meals do disturbingly less well than their Catholic counterparts, as well as much less well than their counterparts in Glasgow. Differences in performance by pupils from different religious backgrounds is a sensitive topic but we suggest that if real improvements are to be made the issues involved must be addressed. This requires thorough research and rigorous analysis so that evidenced-based actions can be put in place to overcome the difficulties. In its response to our Report, we would like the Department to explain in detail how it is tackling this issue which must be one of the major challenges Northern Ireland faces.

5. **The Department has a pressing responsibility to take the lead in identifying and championing best practice in literacy and numeracy teaching in schools.** It needs to provide a clear direction and impetus to the promotion of literacy and numeracy performance. The Committee will be interested to learn what steps the Department takes to address the issue.

6. **We are extremely disappointed that literacy and numeracy targets have been frequently adjusted since the introduction of the *Strategy*.** We recognise that it is sometimes necessary to adjust targets. However, the Department's record on literacy and numeracy suggests to us that it has lacked commitment to and confidence in its target setting. If targets are to serve as useful and meaningful tools of accountability and retain credibility, they have to become a consistent element in the process of setting literacy and numeracy objectives for schools and for assessing and reporting on attainment levels. We expect the Department's current review of the *Strategy* to establish an approach to target setting which will communicate a clear message around which schools can mobilize resources in tackling under-achievement in literacy and numeracy. We also expect the Department to maintain a consistent approach to targets rather than adjust them when results are falling short.

7. **Central to the accountability for literacy and numeracy improvement programmes is the establishment of processes to ensure that data collected on attainment levels is analysed and used for planning and continuous improvement.** We recommend that the Department ensures that this data is used to identify any aspects of the design and delivery of literacy and numeracy programmes that can be enhanced and to inform effective targeting of improvement programmes to groups of pupils whose performance is not satisfactory.

8. **The lack of benchmarking by the Department against comparable cities in the United Kingdom has been a missed opportunity to identify good practice in literacy and numeracy teaching, to learn from others and improve performance.** Benchmarking provides a means of testing achievements and processes in literacy and numeracy against those of other organizations. The Department should make greater use of its liaison arrangements with its equivalent organizations in England, Wales and Scotland to examine whether the approaches adopted in similar cities are proving to be more effective in delivering better literacy and numeracy outcomes. In particular, the

results from Glasgow and Liverpool need to be followed up promptly to see what lessons can be learned.

**9. Teacher quality is an important catalyst for improvement in literacy and numeracy attainment levels.** We consider it important, therefore, that the Department's review of the *Strategy* satisfies itself that the training provided to teachers ensures that they develop a thorough understanding of the relevant literacy and numeracy initiatives and are committed to them as a way of achieving improvement.

**10. Parental involvement can have an important impact on the educational attainment of children.** Huge gains can be made in literacy and numeracy attainment levels if parents received more encouragement to work with schools in support of their children's education and opportunities were taken to engage parents to provide educational development in the home. However, the greater involvement of parents must not lose sight of the fact that children from deprived backgrounds are likely to have limited access to educational resources compared to their more affluent peers.

**11. To date, the *Strategy* has failed to narrow the long standing gap between the best and lowest literacy and numeracy performers in Northern Ireland schools.** The wide variation in achievement levels between pupils suggests to us that problems exist, either in the implementation of the current *Strategy* or inherently in the methodologies it promotes. The Department cannot continue with an approach to literacy and numeracy that, despite good intentions, appears to set up a significant number of children for failure. It has to be a priority of the utmost importance for the Department's current review of its *Strategy* to ensure that this gap is closed. It will be vitally important, therefore, to determine whether current prescriptions and approaches are the best available methodologies for teaching literacy and numeracy in schools. In our view, further comparative research on the best ways of teaching will be necessary to establish which interventions can lead to the most effective use of taxpayers' money. ***As part of this process, we also expect the Department to have regard to whatever wider research is available in Great Britain or elsewhere.*** [emphasis added]

**Q13 Chairman:** My last question relates to academic selection which is dealt with in paragraph 4.2 where you say the removal of academic selection and the introduction of a new curriculum has "the potential to make a positive impact on standards of literacy and numeracy". I have got to put to you the letter we have had from the Parental Alliance of Choice in Education and they say that this view of yours has been challenged by research findings elsewhere, particularly in the United States. Have you taken this evidence into account?

**Mr Haire:** I met with this delegation very recently and had a useful discussion. In particular, their focus is looking at what happens at age four and five and they are particularly concerned about the early years of education. They are looking at a particular scheme in America which runs in a small number of schools there which they are very attracted to. I think that is a concern of theirs. We hope to write back to them and meet them further on this issue. In our work we have been very conscious of these sorts of concerns. I think our research has answered those questions and those concerns.

The Education Committee may be unaware that the Permanent Secretary, William Haire was admonished by the Chairman of the Public Accounts Committee but nevertheless went on to become ADVERTISING

become Permanent secretary, Department for Social Development. He was subsequently awarded Order of the Bath for services to government. The Order of the Bath is the fourth-most senior of the British Orders of Chivalry. Mr Haire was the Chair of Governors at Friends School, a Lisburn grammar school.



### **Supplementary memorandum submitted by the Parental Alliance for Choice in Education (PACE)**

Subsequent to the appearance of Mr Will Haire, Permanent Secretary, Department of Education for Northern Ireland (DENI) before the Committee and the invitation of the Clerk to make further submissions and correction, PACE submits the following comments:

#### **Committee Suggestions**

PACE endorses the suggestion of Mr Davidson that the Department should consider comparisons with similar areas in England. Liverpool, Manchester and Newcastle offer themselves as appropriate subjects. It is vital however, that any comparative studies are on a like for like basis, otherwise the expense of the exercise would be wasted.

In England the National Curriculum levels are validated using a range of technical fidelity indices. In Northern Ireland the Department has never compiled or published such indices. Or used a recognised standard setting procedure to calibrate the levels of the Northern Ireland Curriculum. Indeed it was the absence of such validation that resulted in the failure to make any meaningful comment of the success or failure of the strategy for the promotion of literacy and numeracy in primary and secondary schools. Using Glasgow as a comparator city is unlikely to be useful because of its entirely different system of reporting pupil achievement.

The use of the suggested comparisons would be invaluable in demystifying the relative impacts on underachievement of social deprivation and poor quality teaching. The interaction of both often lead to case hardened teachers, to failure, and low achievement.

## Conclusions

1. Mr Haire, when challenged that “the goalposts were being moved”, failed to make clear that the assessment arrangements which generate the data are themselves being radically changed. This failure would preclude the transparency that would enable the Committee to hold the Permanent Secretary to account at a future date (vide question of Kitty Ussher MP).
2. Mr Haire quite erroneously described Project Follow Through as “a particular scheme in American which runs a small number of schools which they (PACE) are attracted to”. This is quite a misleading description of the project which involved 75,000 children in 170 communities over a period of 30 years and was the most professionally evaluated research costing over \$1 billion. It was specifically directed at children in socially deprived and disadvantaged areas. The report ran to seven volumes. Mr Haire also asserted that “I think our research has answered those questions and those concerns”. The nature of the research is not defined. PACE assumes that this is *The early years enriched curriculum evaluation project*, carried out by the School of Psychology, Queens University Belfast (referred to at p 28, footnote 8, NIAO Report, Improving literacy and numeracy in schools). It would appear that the personnel responsible for the Enriched Curriculum are cross-fertilised by those engaged in its research evaluation. PACE has been unable to discern despite the most careful scrutiny any evidence in such research that would validate Mr Haire’s assertion. PACE requests that such evidence be identified.
3. Mr Haire justifies the spending of £26 million on a reading recovery scheme the evaluation of which “has shown that 80% achieved that return to the right level so there has been good value there”. PACE would welcome access to the reliability and validity data appropriate to what is described as the “right level”. It appears that the justification for this assertion is entirely subjective.
4. Mr Haire, in response to question 14, cites research that links the removal of selection to enhance scores in literacy and numeracy. High quality international educational research indicates the opposite. PACE would therefore welcome access to the Department’s research evidence justifying the Permanent Secretary’s claim.

Bearing in mind the Permanent Secretary’s assurance that “quality standards are the bedrock of what we are about”, “that research on targets is absolutely key” and this his Department’s needs “credible standards we can explain to the public” the endemic failure to apply the most basic quality assurances for reliability and validity are the central concerns of PACE which the evidence of Mr Haire has done nothing to allay.

vidence from the results of the current transfer test operated by the Association for Quality Education indicates that 50% of pupils entering the test who are entitled to FSM attain scores that will gain them a place in a grammar school. Around 40% of FSM candidates achieve scores that would gain them admission to the Methodist College, B Not one penny of Department of Education or Executive Office funding has been made available to support these tests yet over £300,000 of taxpayers' money was paid to Queen's University Belfast for the Investigating Links in Achievement and Deprivation study which has yet to be published. According to the submission of the Association of Teachers and Lecturers "The QUB research for OFMDFM was, according to Mark Langhammer of ATL, politically suppressed before the last Assembly election as its recommendations were problematic."