

Written Ministerial Statement

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Department of Education

TEMPORARY VARIATION POLICY REVIEW

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Mr Givan (The Minister of Education):

Introduction

I wish to update Members on a significant change in policy direction which will strengthen parental choice, increase responsiveness within our education system and ensure that the interests of children and families are placed at the centre of decision-making.

This statement sets out my intention to reform the operation of the Temporary Variation policy. However, this is about more than admissions arrangements. It is about creating an education system that responds more directly to the choices parents make, reflects changing demographic realities and provides a stronger foundation for school improvement, accountability and long-term sustainability.

At its heart is a simple principle: where capacity exists and schools are willing and able to accommodate additional pupils, parental preference should carry far greater weight than it does at present.

Open Enrolment and Parental Preference

The background to this policy is a commitment to open enrolment and parental preference in school choice as powerful drivers of school improvement because they place families, not systems at the centre of education. When parents can choose the school they believe is best for their child, schools must earn and maintain their confidence. This creates strong incentives to raise standards, strengthen leadership, improve outcomes, and respond more effectively to the needs and aspirations of pupils.

Northern Ireland has a long tradition of parental preference and school choice. Unlike systems where school assignment is largely determined by postcode, Northern Ireland has recognised that parents may legitimately wish to choose between different educational traditions and models.

Families can express preferences for Catholic maintained schools, controlled schools, integrated schools, Irish-medium schools, and grammar schools reflecting the diversity of our society.

This approach respects the importance many families place on faith-based education, while equally recognising the growing demand for integrated education and Irish-medium provision. Rather than imposing uniformity, the system seeks to accommodate parental aspirations and values.

Importantly, parental preference is not only about individual choice; it is also a mechanism for system-wide improvement. Schools that attract families do so because they are delivering something parents value, whether academic excellence, strong pastoral care, a distinctive ethos, integrated education, linguistic immersion, or wider opportunities. As parents exercise choice, schools are encouraged to improve performance.

The result is a system in which choice and improvement reinforce one another. Schools are accountable not only to government and inspectors but also to parents, whose choices provide a powerful signal about what is working. Successful schools are able to grow and extend their impact, while all schools face an incentive to continually improve.

In essence, Northern Ireland's long-standing commitment to parental preference reflects a fundamental belief that parents are best placed to determine the educational environment most suitable for their child.

By respecting choice across Catholic, controlled, integrated, Irish-medium and other sectors, while allowing families to express genuine preferences, this aims to promote responsiveness and continuous improvement benefiting both individual pupils and the education system as a whole.

Overall, Northern Ireland's system of parental preference has served families well. This year, 98.9% of primary school applicants and 90.2% of post-primary applicants secured a place at their first-preference school, demonstrating that the vast majority of families are able to access the education they choose.

However, success for most should not obscure the reality that, for some families, choice is more limited than real and meaningful, particularly where demand for popular schools exceeds places. I want to build on what works well while driving improvement so that more families have access to genuine choice and the opportunity to secure the school they believe best meets their child's needs and aspirations.

I will do this through a more flexible, family focused Temporary Variation Policy.

Context and Purpose of the Temporary Variation Policy

Every school operates with an approved admissions number and overall enrolment number set by my Department. These numbers define the maximum number of pupils a school can admit each year and schools cannot exceed this without my Department's approval.

The Temporary Variation policy provides a framework through which schools may request additional places for named children where they are oversubscribed. It was designed to respond to short-term pressures and ensure children can access a suitable school place when demand exceeds approved places.

It is clear, however, that the historic operation of the policy has not been appropriately focussed on needs of children and their families. We have seen cases where:

- children have been unable to secure a place in their preferred school, even where the school was willing to admit them and capacity existed;
- alternative provision has not reflected genuine parental preference and the circumstances of families; and
- decision-making has at times been overly rigid and insufficiently responsive to individual circumstances.

These are real issues affecting real families. They point to a deeper challenge, that the current system can place too much emphasis on simply providing a place within a given school sector and does not give sufficient weight to the choices that parents and children are making.

I have taken a more flexible approach this year, as a result of which many hundreds of children now have the opportunity to access the school of their choice.

I am now seeking to make that child and family centred approach the cornerstone of a revised Temporary Variation policy going forward.

Refocusing on Parental Preference

One of the clearest lessons from the operation of the admissions process is that parents choose schools, not necessarily sectors. Under the current framework, parental preference for a particular

school is not key to Temporary Variation requests. Instead, decisions focus primarily on the availability of places within a particular school sector.

Recent admissions data highlights, however, that parental preference is often driven by their wish for an individual school, rather than school sector. For example, only 13% of parents selecting an integrated school as their first preference post-primary school chose another Integrated school as their second preference, with almost 50% selecting a controlled school, and over 18% selecting a Catholic maintained school as an alternative. Therefore, for many families, the distinction is not between sectors, it is between individual schools.

Parents engage carefully in the admissions process. They express preferences, they consider what is best for their individual child, who they know best, and they expect that those preferences will carry weight. Parents rightly expect their preferences to matter. This becomes even more important in a system where capacity exists but is not always aligned with demand.

A system which does not adequately recognise those preferences risks producing outcomes which appear counterintuitive and, ultimately, risks undermining public confidence, and in a system with falling enrolments, it is both reasonable and necessary that we respond more directly to those preferences.

Of course, parental preference cannot be the only factor, but it should be given considerable weight in decision making.

A New Policy Direction

I believe it is now time to move towards a new approach to school choice, that puts parents and children first.

Subject to consultation, I propose:

- a **presumption of approval for any requested increases at primary schools** where physical capacity exists and where the school is content it can safely accommodate additional pupils;
- a similar presumption for **non-selective post-primary schools**, where physical capacity exists; and
- continued consideration of requests from **academically selective schools** under the existing principles.

I also propose a more consistent approach for children who already hold a school place, allowing them greater flexibility to move to another school if that is their parents' wish. This represents a clear and deliberate shift: from prioritising institutions to responding more directly to individual school preferences.

This is a fundamental shift to putting children and parents at the heart of decision making. No longer rigid inflexibility but a responsive and responsible system.

Changing Demographic Context

More broadly, we are entering a period of sustained change in pupil numbers, with long-term projections indicating a downward trend in enrolments across many areas. Primary and post-primary enrolments are continuing to decline and, looking ahead, projections indicate that in the 10 years up to the 2033-34 academic year:

- overall pupil numbers are projected to decline by 12.7%;
- primary enrolments by 20.4%; and
- post-primary enrolments by 9.5%.

This reduction in the population of school-age children will result in increasing surplus capacity across the system. Responding to these challenges through restructuring of the schools' estate is a key pillar of my five-year budget sustainability strategy.

Over the coming months, I will make further announcements around the appointment of an Independent Commission to lead this work with urgency and transparency. The Commission will have a clear mandate to carry out a comprehensive viability audit of all schools to assess sustainability against agreed criteria and make evidence-based recommendations for restructuring the school estate, ensuring resources are focused where they deliver the greatest benefit for pupils.

This work is essential to secure a strong, sustainable education system for the future. In that context, it is neither sustainable nor appropriate for provision to be driven primarily by historic structures or bureaucratic processes. Rather, we must ensure that the system increasingly reflects the choices made by parents and where parents actually want to send their children.

The area planning process provides an important opportunity for decisions about future provision to be informed by parental preference and, in turn, for any changes that may be required to be more responsive and receptive to the wishes of parents and local communities. This requires a system that is more flexible, more adaptable and more closely aligned to demand.

Driving Improvement and Accountability

This is not simply a matter of admissions. It is also a critical part of my wider agenda to drive improvement across our entire education system.

For too long, the admissions system has at times masked underlying problems by preventing parental choice from being fully reflected in school enrolments. Parents have been unable to secure places in their preferred school, even where those schools had both the physical capacity and the willingness to admit more pupils. The result has been to artificially sustain schools that families are actively choosing not to attend, while restricting access to schools that command parental confidence.

Too often, it is children from disadvantaged backgrounds who pay the price. Families with the least resources have the fewest alternatives when their preferred school is unavailable, leaving them with less choice and fewer opportunities than others. That is neither fair nor sustainable.

In a period of declining pupil numbers, we need a system that tells us the truth. Enrolment patterns should be a genuine reflection of parental preference, not the product of administrative constraints. Where parents are consistently choosing one school over another, the system must respond. Strong schools should be able to grow. Where demand is persistently weak, it should be recognised as a clear signal that change, support or intervention is required.

We cannot continue to shield underperforming or unsustainable provision from reality. Nor can we allow children to spend years in schools whose enrolments are maintained by the mechanics of the system rather than the confidence of parents - a system that obscures those signals delays improvement and denies children better opportunities.

By placing parental choice at the centre of admissions, we create a platform for more decisive action. It will give policymakers, leaders and communities a clearer picture of where provision is succeeding and where it is failing. Most importantly, it will make it harder to ignore problems and easier to act upon them.

Too often the soft bigotry of low expectations has become the hard bigotry of no expectations. Where intervention is needed it will be delivered. This is how we move beyond aspiration and make the goal of **"every school a good school"** a reality rather than a slogan.

Recognising System Challenges

I also recognise that this approach brings important challenges which must be carefully managed. How we address these will play a central role in the consultation.

These include:

- sustainability pressures at less popular schools;
- increased enrolments in some schools, with associated capacity considerations;
- the need to ensure access to appropriate provision for children with special educational needs; and
- wider implications for area planning and system stability.

There are also wider questions about whether our admissions framework remains fully fit for purpose. These challenges reinforce, not weaken the case for a system that is more responsive to parental choice. They must be actively managed but cannot be used as reasons to resist necessary change.

Consultation

Given the significance of these changes, it is important that they are informed by the views of those directly affected. I will bring forward detailed proposals for public consultation in September.

This consultation will focus on how, rather than whether, this new approach should be implemented, and will allow parents, schools and stakeholders to shape the final policy, ensuring that it reflects the expectations of parents.

Conclusion

The changes I have outlined today are about more than admissions. They are about ensuring that our education system listens to parents, responds to demand and places the interests of children above the interests of institutions.

In an era of declining enrolments and increasing financial pressure, we can no longer afford systems that obscure reality, restrict choice or delay necessary change. We need a system that is honest about where parents wish to send their children, confident enough to act on that evidence and ambitious enough to deliver excellence for every young person.

By giving greater weight to parental preference, we will expand opportunity, particularly for those families who have too often had the fewest choices. By allowing demand to be reflected more accurately across the system, we will strengthen accountability, support improvement and create a firmer foundation for future decisions about educational provision.

This is not an isolated reform. It forms part of a broader programme of transformation through TransformED, Area Planning reform and the long-term sustainability of our school estate. Together, these changes will help build an education system that is more responsive, more accountable and better equipped to meet the needs of future generations.

Above all, this is about ensuring that every child has the greatest possible opportunity to attend a school in which they can thrive, succeed and fulfil their potential. That is the principle that will guide these reforms and the standard against which they should be judged.

Paul Givan
Minister of Education