



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Committee for Education

OFFICIAL REPORT (Hansard)

Independent Review of Education Panel:
Systemic Overview Briefing

29 May 2024

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

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Members present for all or part of the proceedings:

Mr Nick Mathison (Chairperson)
Mr Danny Baker
Mr David Brooks
Ms Cheryl Brownlee
Mr Robbie Butler
Ms Cara Hunter
Mrs Cathy Mason
Ms Kate Nicholl

Witnesses:

Dr Keir Bloomer	Independent Review of Education
Ms Marie Lindsay	Independent Review of Education
Sir Gerry Loughran	Independent Review of Education
Mr Robin McLoughlin	Independent Review of Education
Ms Isabel Nisbet	Independent Review of Education

The Chairperson (Mr Mathison): Good afternoon. You are welcome to the Committee. I put on record the Committee's thanks, especially to those who have travelled to be with us to give evidence. The plan at this stage is to have another two evidence sessions with the review panel. Your time today is very much appreciated, and we look forward to hearing from you in more detail. I formally welcome Dr Keir Bloomer, who was the chairperson of the independent panel; Sir Gerry Loughran, the vice-chair; and Isobel Nisbet, Marie Lindsay and Robin McLoughlin, who were panel members.

It is my pleasure to hand over to you to make some opening remarks. The review was obviously a significant piece of work for the education sector in Northern Ireland. It was a wide-ranging review of the whole system, and it crosses a number of departmental briefs. We appreciate that there will be a lot of questions that members will want to get through, and there is no possibility that we will get through them all today. We are in your hands about what you want to raise in your opening remarks, and then we will move to questions and answers. I will hand over to Keir, and we will take it from there.

Dr Keir Bloomer (Independent Review of Education): Thank you very much, Chair. Good afternoon everyone. Thank you for inviting us. I will make a brief opening statement, and then we will be happy to discuss any aspect of our report that is of particular interest to you. As the Chair said, I hope that your interest will not be exhausted in one afternoon. We are happy to take part in the other two sessions in June.

We were presented with a unique opportunity, because, although every jurisdiction conducts reviews of education from time to time, they tend to be focused on relatively narrow areas of interest. However, we were asked to look at an entire education system with virtually no gaps. We were not asked to look at the research function of the universities, for example, but we were asked to look at virtually everything else. The strength of that approach is that we were given the opportunity to develop a coherent vision for the system as a whole. That is what, I hope, we have done in the report, which you will have, obviously, looked at carefully.

It is important to stress that we recognised from the outset that financial circumstances were difficult and that it would therefore not be realistic to produce a report advocating reform of the whole system over a short period. Therefore, we set for ourselves a notional 20-year period within which change might take place, obviously with a clearer view about what might happen in the early years than in the later years, while recognising that we were talking about a process over time rather than a short-term series of large events.

It is also important to stress that, because the report touches on all aspects of education, it is not a report about schools or the functions of the Department of Education. We also looked with considerable care at matters of further and higher education and things like youth work and careers education, which, I know, you spent time on earlier today. Indeed, some of our concerns, which were important concerns, relating to the early years were also about where there is a crossover between learning functions and health functions.

Although the Departments that are involved here have constrained remits — as a Committee, you have a somewhat constrained remit — it is important that you recognise, as does everybody associated with the process, the need to look beyond the constraints of their area of interest and to make sure that the matters with which we deal and that cross over between different functions receive the same attention as those that fall more conveniently within departmental boundaries. For example, an important area of interest is the way in which the pathways available to adolescents embrace vocational and academic education and, therefore, draw on the resources of the schools and the further education (FE) colleges. That is not easy for them to do. I do not want to go into detail on any particular issue at present.

That is all that I want to say. We were delighted to be given this broad-ranging remit, and we enjoyed undertaking the review. We hope that our report fulfils that remit. It is now open to the system, of which you are a very important part, to make sure that the entirety of what we had to say is taken into account and gets dealt with appropriately.

The Chairperson (Mr Mathison): Thank you. Do any of the other panel members want to add anything at this point? If not, we can move to questions and answers. We are entirely in your hands this afternoon. OK. We do not have a full attendance at the moment, so given the nature of the issue, we will, perhaps, have a little more time for questions and answers. I will allow up to 10 minutes per member for each enquiry as we have a bit of scope to go into a bit more detail.

I would like to begin with a higher-level question, rather than getting into too much of the detail of the report. Members will be familiar with yesterday's Budget debate and the constrained financial position that we are in. You were clear from the outset of the review that it was not set up with the purpose of saving the Department of Education money. That was not the review's purpose; it was about delivering an excellent education system for all. However, most of what has been recommended is likely to require some expenditure. As we were discussing before the session, when you arrived, everything in the report, given the fact that it is a review of the whole system, is interconnected. It is difficult to do one thing without it having an impact on another. Bearing all that in mind, does the panel have a view on whether there are recommendations that, in the current context, the Department should prioritise? Given the constrained resource and the shortened Assembly mandate, is there anything that, you feel, could and should be taken forward that balances the potential for maximum positive impact in the system against the required investment? I will hand over to you.

Dr Bloomer: I will start by mentioning three things, but first, read the title of the report. It is important that the Parliament and Government see education as an investment. It is expensive, but it is the most important investment that any society can make for its future. When we advocate more money being spent, that is the context in which we do so.

As I said, I will mention three issues. First, we are suggesting some things that are important and would contribute significant educational benefits but do not have high price tags. Prominent among those is the reform of the curriculum and assessment structure. The average amount that you have to

do that at the moment is inadequate. The Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment (CCEA) is a good organisation in many ways, but, essentially, it is an assessment organisation with a minimalist curriculum wing attached. There is a need for a wee bit of investment there, but getting the curriculum based on sound principles of learning is not a resource-consuming thing. That is the first thing that I will mention, on the basis that it does not impose great demands.

The second thing is in a different category. We came to the conclusion that special educational needs (SEN) provision in Northern Ireland is in a state of crisis. It is tempting to see it as a crisis for children who have special needs and their families, but it is potentially a crisis for everyone, because the uncontrolled growth in the expenditure on SEN threatens the entire system. Again, we are happy to go into detail on any of those things, but, as a headline message, you cannot duck that. In the three years of this Parliament, something has to be done to improve the service and get the expenditure under control.

The third thing, which I mentioned in my introduction, is that you have to find a way to improve collaboration between school and further education centres. The entitlement framework that you have is admirable in purpose but unsuccessful in reality, because the two systems operate on different bases and are funded in different ways. That is one reason why we have advocated that the education functions of the Department for the Economy should be merged into the Department of Education. Whether or not you see that as an early priority, bringing about an effective mechanism for collaboration most certainly is. I am sure that my colleagues have things to add.

Sir Gerry Loughran (Independent Review of Education): I will add a couple of things. My colleagues will have other things that they want to mention. First, the possibility of reforming the organisation of the Education Authority (EA). Most schools — all schools — have had direct experience of working with the Education Authority. A particular group of schools, however, is more dependent on the Education Authority than the remaining schools, and that is the controlled schools. The managing authority for controlled schools is the Education Authority, yet it is expected to deliver the responsibility of being a managing authority alongside all the other services that it has responsibility for to the entire school network. We think that reform is needed there.

In the long term, there might be an argument for having a dedicated managing authority for controlled schools. That would take legislation, but, Chair, you are probably asking us what can be done earlier given the fact that the mandate has three years left. We have suggested that there should be an internal reorganisation in the Education Authority to create a dedicated directorate that looks after the management of controlled schools — and only that — so that controlled schools could look to that directorate knowing that their interests are being looked after in a specific way in the Education Authority. That is one thing that could be done fairly quickly.

The other issue is the area of learning together. We placed considerable emphasis in our report on learning together. At present, there are ways and means by which that is being achieved and achieved well. I mentioned integrated schools, for example, in that connection. There is also shared education, and some good initiatives have been taken on shared education in recent years, particularly the project in Limavady. As well as those more formal and sometimes quite expensive ways of sharing, there are less expensive ways of sharing, particularly through the use of area learning communities (ALCs). Area learning communities exist but not in any structured way throughout Northern Ireland. Some areas have good ALCs; others do not have functional ALCs. They are a good way of sharing and of making the best use of scarce resources. Not every school can afford a huge, broad curriculum, but, if a school is part of an active area learning community, it can offer its pupils a much wider range of options, and it is relatively inexpensive to do. Indeed, I could argue that it probably saves money in the longer term, because you will get more bang for your buck, as the saying goes. We would like to see a much stronger roll-out of ALCs throughout Northern Ireland. That, again, can be done in the short term.

Mr Robin McLoughlin (Independent Review of Education): I will add to Keir's comments, and this links to your question, Chair. Many of our recommendations, if you take them as a whole, cut across Departments, as we mentioned when we met prior to the Committee meeting. The key aspect of that is our workforce: we need to ensure that we have an appropriate workforce that can meet our young people's needs.

Chair, perhaps you will forgive a bit of latitude. It was great to meet the Youth Assembly Members. It is great to see them here today and to see how articulate they are and their vision for our country. "Well done" to all of them for that and for the contribution that they made to our report.

We need to plan our workforce to fill the needs that are there, which is not that expensive to do. It is about putting in place training now for educational psychologists, ensuring that we have specialist education training for all teachers and that we have special education teachers to go into special schools. A challenge for the Department for the Economy is ensuring that we have all the teachers that are needed and upskilling our entire workforce to meet the needs. That links back to the SEN issue.

We fully support Fair Start. I know that all parties have done so and understand the need to fund and implement it. Linked to that are health and visitation, ensuring that all children have health visits in order to identify issues early with targeted intervention so that we can start to address the problems pre school, rather than waiting until a child is four or, worse, later in their education journey. That will not be a quick fix, but, if we do not start it, we will end up with even more problems in a number of years. We need to start that training now to ensure that we have the workforce in place. Linked also to comments about ensuring that you have appropriate pathways for young people — FE, post-primary, vocational and academic — is a need to look at the efficiency of the system and ensure that we spend our money effectively. A simple example of that is efficient enrolment and admissions numbers in schools, particularly sixth forms. Our report demonstrates that we have a lot of unsustainable sixth forms that put schools in a situation in which it is almost impossible to deliver on the young people's curricular needs. We need, to go back to Keir's point, better linkage with FE to ensure that we provide the high-quality vocational and academic curricula that are required. That comes back to efficient and effective sixth forms and ensuring that they are sustainable. None of that adds cost to the system, and we need to ensure that we utilise the moneys that are already there to plan better for 10 years in the future.

Ms Marie Lindsay (Independent Review of Education): I will build on what Robin said about the workforce. As a panel, we were so impressed by the high standards and the commitment of people whom we met who work in education at every level. We are lucky here to have such a committed and hard-working workforce, and it would be remiss of us not to emphasise that. Needless to say, what Robin said about workforce planning and development is very pertinent, but it in no way diminishes the commitment and the efforts that are being made in our schools.

We have spoken quite a bit about curriculum. Linked to curriculum is assessment. We need to get back to standardised assessment across the system so that we know how well our schools are doing. They are doing well, and reports from elsewhere tell us so, but, within the system, we do not know that. I see that the young people from the Youth Assembly have just left the Committee room. Every young person whom we met talked about the need for a curriculum that would develop the skills that they need for life. They talked about their well-being and how the curriculum could support them to develop skills of resilience and so on, and they wanted to be able, when in crisis, to access support in school, because that was where, they felt, support was most reachable. Those two things are needed: statutory assessment across the system and, remembering the well-being needs of our young people, access to counselling, particularly for those in crisis, in every school.

Ms Isabel Nisbet (Independent Review of Education): Finally, I will add a couple of points from the viewpoint that I was looking at the review in light of what I saw in other parts of the United Kingdom, in Europe and in America. What we see a lot elsewhere is forward thinking about the curriculum and about assessment having its right place as a handperson to rather than a distorter of the curriculum and thinking that through in light of moving into the second quarter of the 21st century. That does not mean that there have not been hugely strong achievements — of course, there have, particularly here — but the forward movement and engagement of the education community in that, which is not terribly expensive to start, needs to be started now, and it cannot be left to a small number of dedicated people in CCEA to do that.

Something that I found striking, having visited a lot of further education colleges in different countries, was that I was bowled over by the quality of the equipment and facilities that I saw in the colleges here but not by the numbers of students using them or by the best use being made of them. When we talk about a need to take short-term decisions and have forward-looking planning that takes account of the sector at its best, that is another headline.

Mr McLoughlin: I will add to Marie and Isabel's comments. It links to curriculum and assessment. When we talked to the Youth Assembly previously, feeding into its report, and today, we heard that they want a curriculum that meets their needs. We need a curriculum that meets the needs of the economy. We have articulated that that needs to be driven. Alongside that, assessment has to inform

them how well they are doing. It has to inform the parents; it has to inform the teachers; it has to inform the school; and it has to inform the system. At the minute, it does not do that.

The Chairperson (Mr Mathison): Where to begin? I am glad that you are coming for three sessions, because those are just the headlines on issues that we could look at not even in the short term but in this mandate. We look forward the two further sessions that we have arranged. I could pick any number of those to ask a further question on. I will ask one that most members will, I imagine, want to pick up on. It is on SEN, and I draw it out because we have identified it as a Committee priority. Also, however, particularly in light of the comments from Keir, it is, effectively, an unavoidable one.

There may be things that we pick and choose out of the review, but there is no choice when it comes to SEN. It needs to be dealt with to ensure that the provision is right for the children who need it. We need to ask the question about how we can get SEN provision to a position where it receives the right investment but not an investment that is out of control and is still not delivering outcomes. That is the bit that concerns me: we spend so much, but I hear from parents that their child's needs are not being met. That is the scandal of the failure.

We have focused heavily on SEN. Given the context that we are in — we are looking at a really challenging position with placements in September for children with a statement of special educational needs — rightly, the Committee has been focused on that response and what the Department is doing to resolve that. Does the panel have a view on how we can break out of that loop of constantly looking at the next September and dealing with the next crisis — where will we place the children who have a statement? — and move to meaningful interventions to reform the system so that children's needs are met appropriately and in the right place? I know that the Department is undertaking work on that, but we probably do not hear enough about it, because we are in crisis mode. How do we break that cycle and make the necessary intervention?

Sir Gerry Loughran: In fairness, the Department took action recently in asking schools whether they would volunteer to provide special educational facilities. I understand that the Department had a good response to that, with something like 100 schools putting themselves forward. Obviously, you have to match the schools with the people — whether they are in the right location and that sort of thing — but it is not a bad start.

There is no short-term solution to the problems that we have in special education. One of the objectives for all of us over the next year or so is to explain more fully the consequences of continuing as we are. As Keir said, with escalating costs year-on-year eating up such a huge proportion of the school budget, we have to educate people on what the consequences will be if we continue like this. At the same time, we have to start a reform programme.

The central reform that we advocate is a significant switch away from classroom assistants — the biggest cost in SEN is, of course, classroom assistants — to fully trained SEN teachers. If we start that process soon, you might, in seven or eight years, get to the point where you will have achieved quite a big change in the way that we deal with special educational need. The way to think about it is this: a properly trained, equipped and provided for teacher who teaches 10 SEN pupils in a classroom is a heck of a lot cheaper than 10 classroom assistants. Not only do you get a better outcome in terms of the children's needs, you save money in the long term. However, you will not get there unless you start soon, and I see no reason why that journey should not start as soon as possible.

Ms Lindsay: If I could just add to that, Chair, if you do not mind —.

The Chairperson (Mr Mathison): If I may just come in quickly, Marie, I want to be really clear that we on the Committee value the work of classroom assistants. It is important, too, that I do not want it to be thought that classroom assistants are part of a problem. We know that they work extremely hard in the system. However, we need to look at what are the best outcomes for children, so I hear the point that you make.

Sir Gerry Loughran: There will always be a role for classroom assistants. Classroom assistants will be essential for children with physical disabilities. That is just a straightforward, absolute need. Many classroom assistants go far beyond their remit in the way that they encourage and support children, but there is no substitute for a properly trained special education teacher.

The Chairperson (Mr Mathison): Sorry, Marie. I cut across you.

Ms Lindsay: I want to address what you said about meeting the needs of those children. There is a real danger, because we are in crisis, that the emphasis is always on placement and on getting to stage 3 and getting some classroom assistant hours. The problem with that is that we still do not know, once they are placed, whether their needs are being met, and that is really where the emphasis should be.

You asked where we start: the only place to start is earlier, with early intervention. That is why we support the recommendations in the 'A Fair Start' report. There are some powerful recommendations in that, and we want to build on that. We see that this is the crucial crossover between Health and Education, with the role of the health visitor in those early visits from 12 months to 18 months when those early signs start and how those are referenced. How can Education access the information that is held in Health, not waiting until they come into school or nursery school or often even later, as has been suggested? Early intervention is key to breaking out of the cycle by starting early. While we are in crisis, we still have to change the conversation to meeting the needs of the children. Once the placement is there, we might still not be meeting well the needs of these young people. Therefore, we need to shift the emphasis.

Mr McLoughlin: Linked to Marie's comment, if we do not do more at stages 1 and 2, we will constantly have to push towards stage 3, and the problems have been well rehearsed at the Committee over recent weeks. The 'A Fair Start' report is a great initial report, but there are more recommendations, particularly around health and early interventions at stage 1 and stage 2, and we need to prioritise that.

The Chairperson (Mr Mathison): That is what we hear from parents: the support does not come at the point it is needed. We hear that repeatedly in the Committee.

That is helpful, and I am happy to pass on to other members at this stage. I am sure that there are many other subject areas that we want to cover.

Ms Nicholl: Thank you so much. I was at the launch of the review. First, are you disappointed by the lack of implementation and commentary from the Department since the launch of the document? I am. I sat and listened to all of those amazing ideas that would reform our education system, but it does not feel like it has really been mentioned that much since. Do you share that view?

Dr Bloomer: Our understanding is that the Department of Education is developing an education plan that it will put to the Minister. I must say that I am somewhat disappointed that we are six months on from the launch and that is not yet to hand, but I do not think that it is the case that no work is being done. I think that quite a lot of work is being done, but it is important that that should get to the Minister as quickly as possible and that you, as the Committee taking an interest in this area, should facilitate that and make sure that, once he has it, the Minister starts to take decisions on implementation. You are right: Northern Ireland has a lot of reports on education — some of them very good — sitting on shelves. We are not particularly wishing to join that group.

Sir Gerry Loughran: I do not disagree with your comment, Kate, about the time that it has taken. On the other hand, in fairness to the Department and the Minister, at the time of our launch, we were expecting and hoping for the return of the Assembly. That did happen, but it did not happen until February. When Ministers come into office, the first things that they have to deal with are, by definition, the most urgent things. While I would prefer to see a faster pace, I am satisfied that the Department is working on it and that the Minister is seized of it. I told the Chair earlier that we had a meeting with the Minister yesterday. It was a good meeting that we found useful. Nonetheless, I am on your side on getting on with it.

Ms Nicholl: It is a significant piece of work, and there is so much in it. I am glad that there are several sessions, because there is so much in it. Your point about early intervention is absolutely key for me, and we keep talking about the appropriateness of SEN.

The one question that I am interested in is ratios in early years settings. That is being reviewed. What is your assessment of the best ratios for those settings, including for childminding, safeguarding and child development? I am curious about what the best ratios would be and what, as politicians, we should advocate. It sometimes feels like, when changing the ratios to fix the system, it is about how you balance that with safeguarding and quality. I am interested in your views on that.

Dr Bloomer: We found that there was a significant disparity between the private sector and the state sector and that private nurseries were obliged to maintain more costly ratios and were less well resourced to do it. We feel that that is an anomaly that needs to be addressed and that, probably, the arrangements that exist in the state sector should be extended across the board. That would help the expansion of the sector.

You are right, of course, that this is always a matter of compromise. The less generous the ratio, the more places you can afford, but the greater the risks you run. We did not go into that as a matter of principle for ourselves. We did not ask ourselves, "What is the ideal ratio?". We confined ourselves to saying, "If the state is satisfied with the arrangements that exist in its sector, it is unreasonable not to extend those more widely". That would have a beneficial impact on supply as well.

Mr McLoughlin: Of course, it involves two Departments, and that is maybe one of the reasons for the anomaly.

Ms Nicholl: We have been talking in Committee about school boards of governors. That keeps coming up. The review notes:

"The current approach to school governance is complex and diverse, lacking consistency across sectors and stages and adding the perception of a fragmented system."

That is a particular issue around feeder school criteria, leaving some parents with limited options. What do you think about the level of independence that boards of governors have in their schools?

Mr McLoughlin: I will answer for the controlled sector, because I am a controlled head at the moment. I kept my job on, while these guys were retired when we put together the report. I tried my best to do that alongside working.

In a controlled school, we have independent representatives from the Department of Education and representatives from the Education Authority who are equally independent. They are appointed by EA and DE. We then have four parent reps and two teacher reps. We have that cross section in the controlled sector. Other sectors are represented across the panel, and they will be able to testify to their sectors.

As you outlined, Kate, we have this fragmented system of different governance arrangements in schools. As Gerry mentioned at the start, one of the challenges is for controlled schools. We have no foundation, no transferors and no trustees, so, every time there is a reconstitution of the board of governors, the entire governance in the school changes. It is the only sector where that happens. It is unusual.

Dr Bloomer: You will find a table of the different arrangements on page 267 of volume 2. No doubt you have looked at that. There are indeed a number of anomalies between one sector and another. We have tried to draw together a number of principles for how that should be addressed. In doing that, we had to take account of the fact that the voluntary grammar sector can decide its own arrangements. We can make suggestions for the various bits of the state sector, but all we can then do is suggest to the more independent sector that it might wish to apply the same thing.

I draw your attention to the list on page 83 of volume 1. Essentially, there are things such as the size of the board of governors; the matter that Robin just touched on about trying to make sure that there is a revolving membership, so that you do not get a rapid disruption to the arrangements at a particular time; and the training of governors so that they are aware of their responsibilities. Having said all that, the evidence that we got was that there were a surprising number of well-functioning boards of governors and that the Northern Irish system gets valuable input from a big cross section of the community that feels involved in the education system in a way that they otherwise might not.

Mr McLoughlin: I will add one point. As Keir was speaking, I came to an observation. It is that critical reconstitution point. When we reconstitute, the entire governance can change. That is not a good way to manage any organisation. For instance, I have been talking to colleagues over the past few weeks who have major projects such as new builds taking place, and the speciality of two or three of those governors was looking after the build. There is a risk that they will not be included among the new governors. That poses massive, critical challenges to those schools. There is a better way of doing it whereby there would be more change of membership as we go through a cycle, rather than just a one-

off reconstitution point. I agree with Kate, however, that we need to have representation from the community serving on the boards of governors.

Chair, if you can forgive me a bit of latitude, I will go back to Kate's previous question. Thanks are due to all political parties. All parties were represented at the launch and, throughout our work, all parties were keen to engage with us on multiple occasions. We were pleased to see that. Linking back to what Marie said at the start, we are fortunate in Northern Ireland to have the quality of teaching workforce that we do, as well as the other professionals who work in schools, across FE and across the different roles and responsibilities. That links back to the political leadership, who are keen to talk about education. We are in a good place, with people whose hearts are in the right place, to make a difference to the communities that we serve. I argue that that is totally what governance is: we see so many committed governors who want to make a difference in the area where they live and have the expertise to do so.

Ms Nisbet: I will add one point that, I think, came up in our report. The modern standards of good governance in individual institutions need to be balanced with the right kind of accountability. That theme came through the review and is important. There are ways in which accountability could be improved in a sensible and proportionate way, so that the public, who fund all these activities, whatever the nature of the school, have the right kind of informed vision of how it is doing. That is in the interests of governors as well. Having been a governor for various institutions, I can say that it is often felt to be quite a burden and that you are rather on your own. To feel that you can give a clear account to the right people is an important part of the package.

Ms Nicholl: Thank you so much.

The Chairperson (Mr Mathison): I declare an interest as a governor of a controlled primary school.

Kate referred to the independence of schools and the parental perception that it can be difficult to hold a school to account. There is guidance from the Department on admissions and uniforms, for instance, but some of that guidance is routinely ignored. Did the panel take a view on whether the mechanisms for accountability for boards of governors were there? From my experience of serving on a board of governors, everybody is there because they want to give something positive to their community and to that specific school community. As a Committee and as elected Members, we receive correspondence from parents who may have struggled to get the accountability piece right. Is that something that you considered?

Dr Bloomer: We felt that there were ways in which accountability ought to be strengthened. One of those, which has already been touched on by one of my colleagues, is the question of accountability for performance and the need for standardised assessment. It has become a feature of all of the UK jurisdictions, apart from England, that accountability for performance has weakened over recent times and that the information necessary to hold schools to account is not always available. That is why it is important to have the kind of assessment that we referred to. It is important that governors should — if they have that information, obviously — see that holding the school to account for discharging its main function is their main function and that they should be active in that field.

Mr McLoughlin: Back to Isabel's point: throughout our report, we stress that we believe in autonomy for schools but with accountability, because it is public money. We have to be accountable to the public to deliver the best education that we can. That is throughout all of our recommendations. It is not a specific recommendation but a general theme throughout the report.

Mrs Mason: Thank you very much. It is really interesting. There are such in-depth answers to everything that is being asked.

I want to pick up on the aspect of educational underachievement in the report. The review does not claim that there is evidence of underachievement here, but other reports do. They outline that there is educational underachievement and that the North lags behind the South, in particular. What is your view on how your research compares with that of others? We were talking to the economic research institute that produced that report. It said that the proportion of early school leavers in the North, as compared with the South, is two or three times higher: what do you attribute that to? Is academic selection a contributor to that?

Dr Bloomer: Let me be absolutely clear about this: there is significant educational underachievement in Northern Ireland. We had been anticipating that Pat Sheehan would ask us about this today

because [*Laughter*] he pursued us about it at the launch, so it is a great disappointment that he is not here.

The Chairperson (Mr Mathison): We were all looking forward to round two.

Mr Butler: He is always here. His presence is here. We can all feel it.

Dr Bloomer: Anyway, what constituted a wee bone of contention at the launch was the statement in the report that it is not true that there is a long tail of underachievement in Northern Ireland. The point about the "long tail of underachievement" is, of course, that it is a quotation from earlier reports and is a comparison. It suggests that there is a greater tail of underachievement than anywhere else, and that is not the case. Just to be absolutely clear about this, there is a great deal of educational underachievement in Northern Ireland. It is not worse than in other — well, in some other UK jurisdictions, but it is there. It is important to do something about it. That is why we made it clear in the report that we endorse the findings of 'A Fair Start' and that there are various ways in which we see our report as taking the 'A Fair Start' report and recommendations to a further stage.

I draw your attention to a picture in volume 1. It is quite nice: it is on page 26 of volume 1, and you may look at it later. What you find — this is true of every developed country in the world — is that educational achievement is strongly correlated with socio-economic status. The more affluent you are as a family, the more likely your child is to succeed in school. Conversely, if you are poor, the chances are considerably diminished. You can draw a line on a scattergraph of school performance, plotting the degree of poverty or affluence against performance, be it at GCSE or A level. What you find is a strong diagonal line across the page connecting those two things. The line in Northern Ireland is not as strong as in some places, and that is a good thing.

As I say, look at the diagrams for yourself later: this is the GCSE one, and that is the A level one. They are very similar. The difference between them does not matter. You will see that, in each case, there is a cluster of schools represented by green dots. Those are schools that serve areas of acute deprivation but are doing well. That is a significant thing. It is a worthwhile feature of the Northern Irish system, and it is not as strongly evident in some other jurisdictions.

The other thing to draw to your attention about the diagram is that its centre is connected by a nice little oval. This is right in the middle. These are the people who are neither rich nor poor; they are pretty much in the centre of the range. There is an astonishingly wide variety of school performance there. Some are doing very badly indeed, and some are doing very well.

One of the things that, we think, are important and that we recommend is that we should learn from our experience. What are those green schools — the ones in poor circumstances that are doing well — getting right? What could we pass on from them to other people? At the same time, were we to look in greater detail at that oval in the middle of the diagram, how does it come about that some of them are doing so badly and others among them are doing so well? What are the differences between them? We take the attitude that there is an empirical question here and that evidence is available to us that we have not yet explored as thoroughly as we might. That is one important aspect of addressing underachievement.

The second aspect, which runs through our report strongly, is the importance of early childhood. We do not intervene early enough. Even when we know about things, it does not always lead to effective action at an early age. Early intervention is usually more effective and is also usually cheaper than trying to remedy problems at a later stage in life. I will not rehearse all the things that we say about early years, but it is a vital theme of the report that we should invest more in early years and should be enriching the experience of very young children, because that is how they form concepts. Concepts — knowledge, if you like, of how and why things are as they are — are the basis of all subsequent learning. The problem is that children from disadvantaged backgrounds build up a less good picture in those early years of what the world is like, and the education system in its widest sense has to try to remedy that problem and, where it is really serious, intervene as quickly as possible.

Robin touched on that when he was talking about health visiting. We attach great importance to that, and we think that it is vital, as I mentioned in my introductory remarks, that that is seen as a cross-departmental responsibility. The health visitors are employed and trained by Health, and it would be surprising if they did not see the health dimension of their work as the most important, but they are also the people who see learning developing or not developing. They play a vital role, for example, in diagnosing the emergence of speech and language difficulties, detecting impoverishment in

vocabulary and so on. Even if we are not at the stage of going to the length of creating the integrated early years service that we advocate, we can certainly, surely, make sure that the health visiting system works as was originally intended and that the health visitors receive the in-service training in relation to learning that will enable them to handle that part of their remit as effectively as the bit that deals with health matters.

Mr McLoughlin: It is worthwhile touching on another part of your question. This summer will be no different, and I suspect that Northern Ireland will outperform all other jurisdictions in GCSEs and A levels. The nuance in Pat's question is that the tail of underachievement is not greater than in other jurisdictions but, as Keir has rightly outlined, there is massive underachievement across a range of schools and there is massive overachievement across a range of schools. The graph demonstrates that, and we have to learn from those schools that are doing really well to address that.

The other question was about leavers. Back in time, Northern Ireland's education system did not deliver those quality outcomes, and, in the adult community, we have very low levels of literacy and numeracy. Obviously, there were issues a long time ago. In Northern Ireland, at the moment, you can leave school at 16; that is a possibility. One of the recommendations in the report — this is technically what the South does by having the leaving certificate at 18 — is for everyone to stay in education and training until 18. We do not believe that anyone should leave school or training at 16. They need to stay in training and education.

Another thing that is linked to the question is the curriculum and the qualifications framework that are on offer. The qualifications framework is predominantly A level-based. We have chatted today, and we can chat at greater length, about vocational and technical. If you look at other jurisdictions, a wider curriculum is on offer. We need to have a serious look at what those qualifications are post 16 that, yet again, allow children to move on into the world of work and be successful. We absolutely agree that people should stay in education until they are 18. We should not have early leavers. There should be a curriculum and pathways suited to everyone's needs.

Mrs Mason: Do you think there is a link between academic selection and educational underachievement?

Dr Bloomer: Obviously, this is a highly contentious issue, and we looked at it in considerable depth. If you look globally at the evidence on selection, you see that the evidence varies somewhat, but the consensus in it is probably that selection marginally improves performance at the top and marginally diminishes it at the bottom. The amounts are not big, and whether the netting off of that gives you a net plus or a net minus is something that you could debate. Although it is a contentious issue and one about which people feel strongly, its impact on the problem that you are talking about is nothing like as significant as the issues that we have been talking about in the last five or 10 minutes.

Ms Nisbet: I will just add that we looked at the issue of early leavers in the report. We went to two presentations of the report, and there was a contrast with the South. Marie can say more about the culture and habits in the South that strongly contributed to that. There is also always a danger that some young people fall off the measurements, and those are the ones that we should be really worried about. We are not at all complacent even about small numbers. Another point to make, which Robin has already made, is about adults who have not achieved and continue not to be able to participate fully in society. That is part of our report. It is not a children's or young people's report; it is about the whole population, so we say things about older learners as well, and there are issues of historical underachievement that are particularly important here.

Ms Lindsay: To finish off, going back to your point about the contrast between the early leavers in the Republic of Ireland and here, one of the biggest changes that came about was when the South changed the curriculum and had the leaving certificate applied. There is a vocational leaving certificate and a general leaving certificate. The curriculum is a core theme running through all of our report. When you get the curriculum right, you will meet the learning needs of more of our young people for a longer time. We have to ask ourselves what is happening to our young people at 14, 16 and even 17, when they are midway through their A levels, meaning that they disengage. There are a lot of prompts in our report for a way to address that, and it is through the curriculum. That is what the South has got right in terms of the endgame and how it changed the leaving certificate to meet the needs of those learners. That has contributed significantly to what looks like a difference. Another thing that the South has is education and training boards (ETBs), which meet the needs of other types of learners as well.

The Chairperson (Mr Mathison): I am sure that we will come to post-primary transfer in future sessions. The issue of transitions is dealt with really well in the report. I like the concept of softening transitions at every point that we can so that we do not present children or young people with cliff edges when we do not need to do so. There is more to unpack there, for sure.

Mr Baker: Thank you, panel. I will go back to special educational needs. Over the past number of weeks, we have heard from officials who said that we are not in a crisis when it comes to placements again this year. My questions will go down the route of getting your views on admissions, on ending the practice of viewing statemented children as supernumerary and on the possibility of changing the policy to a "SEN first" approach. Also, when we talk about early interventions, I would include pre-school and nurseries as part of a "SEN first" approach. Will you delve into that a bit?

Mr McLoughlin: I am happy to make a start on that. It is in our report. Why on earth are we waiting to this stage of the year to place children for September? We should easily have placed children so that they know where they will be a year in advance. There absolutely is a case for a "SEN first" model. Parents need that security, and schools need it to prepare and put in place the appropriate support, the appropriate training for their staff and, potentially, classroom assistants. Absolutely, we are not planning in the best way possible. We make that recommendation in the report.

We also made the recommendation that children with SEN should be part of the numbers. I return to a comment that I made in my introductory remarks about efficient enrolment numbers. It is about ensuring that practical class sizes and other things can be planned for accordingly, rather than what happens at this stage of the year, which is that pupils get added on to classes, then you find out that it breaks various health and safety regulations and you have no plan in place because you have been, basically, left with two months or less to make arrangements. You almost answered your own question. Those are recommendations in our report.

Mr Baker: I have a wee concern that I picked up from the union representatives who spoke to us about specialist provision in mainstream schools. That happens because we do not have a big enough estate when it comes to special schools. Are our children getting the best outcomes? One of the previous answers mentioned moving from classroom assistants to teachers: in your work, did you come across best practice on that? Are there any schools that have the flexibility in their budget to employ specialised teachers? Is that taking place now?

Ms Lindsay: I left teaching more than four years ago, but, when I was a principal, I gave a nudge towards doing it. I said that I would like a specialist teacher. It was not open policy, but I did it, and I know that other schools are definitely doing it. We have encountered teachers who have seven classroom assistants in the classroom because of the needs of the class. Can you imagine what that is like, not just for the teacher, who is trying to teach the class with the other seven adults there, but the children, who have all those adults around them all the time? It cannot be conducive to good learning all the time, although, sometimes, as Gerry explained, they may need the classroom assistants. For special education, we really have to rethink the whole model right from the beginning. We have to look at it.

Mr McLoughlin: I will come back to your question. Marie is correct: some schools are doing it very well, but it is not widespread. A lot of colleagues do not realise that there is the potential to do it, which I find a bit strange. Why are some schools using good practice to meet the needs of their students within their budgetary situation and other schools are not doing it? There is a disconnect there.

Mr Baker: I suppose it needs buy-in from the parents as well. A lot of constituents come to me with their child's statement. That is their legal document, and they fight so hard to get it in the first place. There is consensus, however, that the whole statementing process needs to be looked at, including what the statement says in it, in order to have a child-focused approach. It is interesting that there are schools doing it but it is not policy across the board. The serious question is this: why not?

Ms Lindsay: You will find it hard to meet a parent who will disagree with you when you tell them that you will better meet the needs of their child. That has to be put centre-stage. We are adrift from doing that in the area of special educational needs at the minute. It is about asking, "What better meets the need of the child, and can the school itself decide best how to use a resource to better meet the needs of the child?". It is well worth having that conversation with parents. As Keir said at the beginning, they fought hard for what they have, and they think that that is the best means. If they hear and understand how something could work better, they will buy in to it and understand that their child will benefit.

Mr McLoughlin: I will issue a political challenge to you. In legislation, you need to protect schools that are trying to do the best for those children. As you said in your question, the parent has a piece of paper that says that the legislation says that they get X. We are saying, "No, X may not be the best solution. Here are better solutions to help your child." We need protection for schools and school leaders who are trying to meet those needs, because, inevitably, we could end up in a situation in which a parent says, "I demand", and a school tries to do. You can see the complexity of that arrangement. That will be a long process to move.

How do we help children? How do we help them at stage 1 and stage 2, as we articulated? How do we help them pre school? How do we help them in the early years? Then, when we have children who are statemented, it is about looking at bespoke solutions. Some will need classroom assistance — absolutely. Others need specialist teachers. Others need specialist training for the teachers in the school. Others need other interventions. We need different approaches for different children. We seem to have a one-size-fits-all approach at the moment, and we need to move away from that.

Dr Bloomer: Very quickly, an important part of the answer to your question is about access to expertise. We make a series of recommendations about that. At present, pre-5 settings have no access to SEN expertise: we recommend that they should. Primary schools have some limited access; we recommend that that should be increased. Who are the most expert people in the field of special educational needs? They are probably the educational psychologists. They are a rare resource. Northern Ireland has, I think, slightly fewer than 40 of them for the whole Province. How do we use them? Eighty per cent of their time is spent drawing up statements of need. Some of the psychologists whom we met said that that took 95% of their time. That is a complete waste of effort. It is bureaucratic activity, not seeing a child or helping a child. We have to do something about that. There is an important question here. Obviously, we would like to increase the pool of expertise, but we also have to make sure that the expertise that exists is directed towards actually helping children.

The Chairperson (Mr Mathison): I will pick up on one point that follows on from our concurrent meeting with the Economy Committee earlier. Thinking about a child with special educational needs and their whole journey through the system — Cathy flagged it earlier — we had contact from one parent who is running a campaign about her son Caleb and his transition, which is approaching soon, as he leaves special school. We have heard from a lot of parents who have a real concern that that transition for a child, particularly as they come out of the special school system, is particularly challenging. Did the panel take a view on whether the pathways for young people leaving special education were adequate and whether there was a need for legislative protection for them to ensure that their needs are met at the next step of their journey?

Mr McLoughlin: We discussed that. We would echo your comments about the individual. It is a cliff edge. The feeling is that an opportunity has to be addressed in the further education system to meet ongoing training needs and offer opportunities for all children, no matter what their need, to develop the skills necessary to have a successful life. We genuinely believe that that needs to be addressed in the FE sector.

Dr Bloomer: Incidentally, there is a need to look at the special school estate. I think that you know that, but it is important. Sticking in my mind from the many school visits that we made is the fact that the most attractive and best-resourced school that we set foot in was a special school and the most disgracefully accommodated school that we set foot in was another special school. Both were providing an excellent service. People in both schools were doing a first-class job. In one case, they were really up against it, labouring against extremely unsuitable accommodation.

Mr McLoughlin: To avoid any doubt, they were in the same sector. They were both special schools. One was incredible. Dare I say it, in the one that was incredible — the outreach that it was doing into its community — all of the panel were exceedingly impressed with the leadership of the school to step outside the boundaries to do things and spend appropriately to meet the needs of the young people. It was clever in how it did that, and its pushing of the boundaries was obvious.

The second point — Keir has already referenced this — is on the specialists who were in that school regularly from health and other areas of need. Parents then came to the school to get their children that specialist treatment in a building that was familiar to them. That upskilled the staff who were in that school, so they were a beacon of excellence, not just for their school but out into the community that they serve.

Mr Brooks: "A beacon of excellence". By the way, the descriptions of some of the facilities in the special schools that they have to operate in are familiar to everyone across the Committee. That has been discussed here numerous times, and it is something that we have all experienced.

I want to talk about the transitions and progression part of the report, which the Chair mentioned. I was heartened by, first, how you are looking at how schools are doing better than expected rather than it simply being a case of selective schools versus non-selective schools and so on. I like the idea of the tertiary college, bringing schools together with some of our colleges that struggle for numbers. Yet, as you said, some of them have adapted quickly to the needs of the Northern Ireland economy. I think of the cybersecurity element at the Castlereagh campus of Belfast Met. Why would that not be used by schools? That kind of idea has been pitched previously to bring it in at 14 for those, likely to be in non-selective schools, who may not be as academic in their skill set. In that changing economy in Northern Ireland, it would equally be applicable to people in grammar schools. Do we see that being implemented across the board, if possible, rather than simply for those who, we imagine, might go to the technical college anyway?

Sir Gerry Loughran: The suggestion of vocational pathways at age 14 applies to all post-primary schools, including voluntary grammar, controlled grammar and non-grammar schools. Our perception, based on the experience of people in teaching and people who are governors, is that, at round about 13 or 14, many children switch off the academic path. That results in behavioural issues, apart from any other considerations.

Mr Brooks: In some ways, we are trying to push square pegs into round holes, rather than adapting to what that child's skill set is.

Sir Gerry Loughran: Yes. The answer to your question is that it absolutely applies to all schools.

Mr Brooks: That is great.

Mr McLoughlin: To touch on your meeting this morning, it is the careers advice that ensures that all people, not just young people, understand the labour market information, the job opportunities, the salary that they will earn, what chances there are if they get a certain skill set or qualification and where they can go. Currently, they do not. I was talking about this earlier with the Chair. I would face a challenge — I work in education full time — to find out that information. It is a real struggle, so how do we expect a child, a parent, a granny, an uncle or an auntie to have that information? Let us be honest: they are the real career advisers, and they need to be able to access that information easily to understand the opportunities in Northern Ireland. Northern Ireland is full of wonderful opportunities. Let us be positive: there are huge opportunities in employment and vacancies in many significant firms, and we have a huge opportunity to develop a really growing economy here.

Mr Brooks: That leads onto another point that I discussed at the Concurrent Committee of the Committee for the Economy and Committee for Education this morning. Usually, when Pat Sheehan does his bit on grammar schools and selective schools, I tend to come back in the other direction because I see grammars as agents of social mobility. Many families will have seen grammar schools as their route for the first child to go to university and so on. That is a reasonable aspiration, but, in my experience, if there is one negative, it is that those schools often use how many children get to university as a yardstick for the success of the school. How do we change the outlook and culture around that so that children in every school are looking at the wide range of options that we have, the careers that are available and the route that suits them to get into the career that they want to get into? That might be through our colleges, as we said, or it might be through the increasing number of programmes provided by industry for school leavers. How do we change that culture? Educating parents is probably one part of it, but how else should we do that?

Mr McLoughlin: An example of that is higher-level apprenticeships. In my school, a number of students are going down that route. It is back to the fact that we want young people to have the skill set to develop the career path that they want to follow, but we need to educate them and educate their parents, grandparents, uncles, aunties and all the people who will give the training. A big problem in Northern Ireland society is that we are negative, and, dare I say it, that applies to Stormont, all political parties and our media. We are negative. We need to be positive and perpetuate the message that there are huge opportunities and many jobs. You will not have one job for life; that has probably gone. You will move through different jobs and find different opportunities, and we need to upskill people who are able to do that and, as they go on that journey, reskill them and upskill them again as they go on to their next career path.

Ms Lindsay: Your greatest lever to bring about change is the fact that the world is changing, and it is just a matter of getting the word out to parents and young people when they make those critical decisions. Social media is where they get their information, so we have to start thinking smarter about how we get the message across to those young people. The careers portal, which, I am sure, you have heard about this morning, is also critical and should have been in place years ago.

Ms Nisbet: We agree with you about the short-sightedness of holding schools to account on the basis of the proportion of students going to universities or even on the basis of their A-level grades. We met people who are developing ideas about dashboards for achievement and all the rest of it. It is difficult for that to strike home with the public, but it is important. The other thing is that we are quite critical, rightly so, of practices where lack of achievement — not getting particular grades — becomes a criterion for people being excluded from schools completely or from courses in schools. It becomes a hurdle and a barrier, and that is not the right use of assessment. We are quite strongly critical of that in our report.

Mr Brooks: Thank you very much. I do a fair bit of engagement with the US at times, and what you were saying about Northern Ireland often presenting itself in a negative way or underselling itself is cultural across the board in every sector. We all have to take that on board.

Mr Butler: Thank you, guys. I will not get into the minutiae, if that is OK, because we have already spent quite a bit of time together on these things. Keir, my first question is directed at you. I will ask three questions, guys. I have them written down so that I do not forget.

The first question, Keir, relates to a conversation that you and I had, as opposed to something that came from the panel. I highlighted what, I thought, was a potential weakness: the Department not holding you guys as a panel to reporting on the implementation and the journey of this. As you rightly pointed out, it is a 20-year plan, but it also runs into three considerable volumes. The authors of the report and those who put together the studies and all the work that went into it will know more about this. Has there been any development in that sense? Has there been any work? The second question is this: in recognising that it is a 20-year plan, what does success look like? The third question has two parts: will you refresh our memories on, first, what parents wanted and, secondly, what pupils wanted? None of this matters if we do not have the most important stakeholders at the front and centre of the delivery of what we hope to achieve.

Dr Bloomer: Did you say that you were asking me?

Mr Butler: The first question, yes.

Dr Bloomer: Only the first one. Right, that is good.

I am not aware of the Department seeking any further involvement from us, and, obviously, I cannot speak for my colleagues. Speaking for myself, I would be happy to be involved further and to help in any way that I could and, indeed, as you were saying, to keep an eye on implementation. However, as I say, there has been no such approach.

Mr Butler: With the report running to the level of detail that it does — three volumes — and the considerable work that has gone into it, it might be a useful benchmark for the Department.

My second question was on what success would look like if the 20-year plan were implemented. Why are we doing it, and what would it look like if we did it?

Ms Nisbet: We started our review by surveying members of the public, including young people, parents, teachers and others who wanted to respond, on what a good education was and what, they thought, a good educational system was. We hope that our recommendations will make it more like that.

One aspect that we have not really talked about is our planning recommendations about bringing schools together in the longer term, how that would be done and the rationale for that. That is one of the most important aspects of our work. We had good support from Departments in some of the economic planning models. I was impressed by that work. I hope that success will look like a good educational system that has met those expectations, which are about preparation for the 21st-century world of work; preparation to be a fulfilled individual and have a healthy life; and preparation to bring

up a family and prosper in Northern Ireland. Also, success will be a system in which learners learn together, so that somebody looking back 20 years from now will say, "Goodness, it has changed", because of the progressive plans for change that we had.

Ms Lindsay: That is exactly as I see it. It is particular to Northern Ireland that education could promote community cohesion. That is unique to Northern Ireland. Isabel spoke of bringing learners together, but it is about doing that in a particular way in Northern Ireland by bringing learners from different backgrounds together. In doing that, as well as equipping them for a fulfilled life, you promote community cohesion. That is critical as well, and we hope that our report has consciously addressed that.

Mr McLoughlin: Robbie, volume 2 is the report. Volume 1 is the summary, and volume 3 is the appendix. If anybody in the room has read all three from cover to cover, fair credit to you. Volume 2 is the report, and, as Keir said at the start, which is the vision of all of us around the table, including the Committee, we do not want it to sit on a shelf and gather dust. We want it to be implemented. We want to see the change.

You asked what would success look like. We spent a significant amount of our time on that. The report, on pages 8 and 9, states that an excellent education system should:

"Put the needs of learners first and ensure they are fully supported by a skilled and committed education workforce".

The report also states that such a system should promote social cohesion and:

"Equip learners at every stage of life".

That is what we are trying to do with this holistic report. It is not about one wee bit. It is about people saying, "This prepared me for life in a more inclusive, socially cohesive society", meeting the needs of the economy and moving our part of the world forward together. That is what success will look like. I use the word "will" because I am optimistic. Together, we can make a big difference, but it has to be together, and there will be challenges and compromises for all political parties and within the system.

You asked about students. The Youth Assembly was brilliant. Its representatives met Marie and me on a couple of occasions, and we met again today. They were great. They had a common theme almost every time we met, which was, "We want an education system that meets our needs", and that was focused mostly on the curriculum not being fit for purpose. Messages mentioned climate, whether we were all going to survive and how we ensure that we had a planet that was sustainable.

Appropriate relationships and sexuality education (RSE) provision across the school estate was mentioned, as was mental health and the challenges that young people face in today's society. Unfortunately, we hear some people say naïvely, "It was the same in my day": no, it was not. A young person's experiences growing up are much different from my experiences and, dare I say, from the experiences of anybody in this room. It is a complex, difficult and challenging world, and added to that is the online and digital world that they live in. That was the commonality.

For parents, it was more nuanced. It was, "We want our child to do well. We want our child to be looked after. We want to know that the school down the road is a good local school that will meet our child's needs, where our child will be happy and will get the knowledge needed and develop the skills necessary to allow them to move on to what they want to do".

Mr Butler: Thank you for that. Robin, I will just tie that to something that you and Keir said. Keir, you said that the most important investment that we can make for our young people is in education. That is absolutely perfect. It is the most potent preventative measure that we can take to tackle inequalities and exclusion.

In Northern Ireland, we have a measurable tail of exclusion of people with a disability, including those with intellectual learning disabilities and so on. Do you think that the report will help to bridge that gap so that, regardless of background, we will see measurable changes, which is what I was trying to get at when asking about success? It will be part of addressing the fundamental inequalities that have existed for many in our community for years.

Ms Lindsay: Robbie, one of the chapters in our summary is called, "Learner support, inclusion and wellbeing". We are nudging towards looking at an inclusive education system. We know where we are at the minute, and we have talked a lot about special educational needs, but what is the vision for 20 years from now? What rights will those young people and their parents have in being able to choose where they are educated? We need to start thinking about a rights-based, inclusive education system. We point in that direction. We know that there is a lot of work to do to get there.

Mr Butler: We will need 20 years, but we need to do it.

Ms Lindsay: We need to do it, and it is there in the report. That is why the word "inclusion" is there.

Mr Butler: I cannot understand the graph that has been sent through. I have looked at it repeatedly. It is the one with the dots that Pat will refer to. I think that you would need to be a science teacher.

Mr McLoughlin: I will just add one comment to what Marie said. Inclusive society is not just about inclusive schooling. We want an inclusive society. I forget who asked the question about the precipice when a child leaves special school. We need an inclusive society so that there is a career path for children who have particular needs, and that has to be across the full spectrum of need.

Ms Hunter: Thank you all so much for being here and for answering such a diverse range of questions. I have three questions to the panel, so whoever feels that they are the most appropriate person to answer, feel free to do so. Essentially, they are around three themes. My first question is around children from the Travelling community. The second question focuses on vulnerable learners and combating disadvantage. My third question is around mental health and bullying. Whoever feels that they are best placed to answer can respond.

I was reading through our briefing and looking at children from Travelling communities and the unbelievable challenges that they have when getting an education. The Department referred to it as a collective failure. There is a lack of support for Traveller children, with such a high percentage leaving without any qualifications or fewer than five GCSEs. I am also mindful that they face a certain level of prejudice and have a particularly high level of special educational needs. I am aware that there is £1,100 for each Traveller child but that it is not explicitly allocated to the child; it is given to the school, so there is not a lot of monitoring there, and that presents its own challenges.

Ten years ago, the Department came out with a strategy. There has been a real lack of implementation and monitoring of that strategy. What more can we do to support those vulnerable children?

Dr Bloomer: We had a useful meeting with a range of organisations representing minority groups of one kind and another. Travellers were among those, and so were the Roma. Incidentally, we could not get any figures on their levels of achievement. That is because their numbers are few, but, even so, it was disappointing that no information at all was available in relation to them. There were others from organisations representing ethnic minorities of more than one kind and so forth.

In a perfect world, I would like us to have said something more specific about each of those groups in the report. However, we were operating against a tight timescale and with an enormous remit. In a sense, what we have to say about Travellers is very much bound up with what we have to say about underachievement. As you rightly say, their levels of achievement are extraordinarily disappointing. That is the context in which we have to answer that question.

There are, obviously, specific questions that relate to a group of that kind. I do not know much about Travellers in Northern Ireland, to be perfectly honest with you. I did a bit with Traveller education in Scotland at one time. Some of them were travellers in the literal sense of the word, and others were much more stationary. Clearly, for those who travel, school attendance is a particular difficulty. Boosting support, even on a short-term basis, in schools where groups of Traveller children have arrived for a short period is important. That probably needs to be mobile support, and it is difficult to organise that. There is also a question — we touched on this a second ago — about prejudice. My impression is that that is even more true for Roma than it is for Travellers. It is a question of making it perfectly clear what is acceptable and what is not acceptable in schools.

It is an area where, undoubtedly, specific work related to each minority group is still required, but we have to begin from the starting point that those are groups who suffer a considerable degree of

exclusion from the system and whose level of attainment requires the kind of support across the board that we have suggested for those in that position.

Ms Lindsay: Evidence that we got from some minority group representatives that we met suggested that some schools' admissions criteria were prohibitive of them gaining access. We specifically recommend that that should not be the case. You will find that, in its admission statement, nearly every school will describe itself as welcoming and inclusive. That issue is specific to the Traveller community. A difficulty is that their cultural context is different. That may be better understood in respect of asylum seekers and refugees than Travellers. Travellers have specific cultural practices that create challenges and barriers for them in accessing education. We could do more to better understand their cultural context, to have better advocacy for them when they present in school and to support the school, as it may not be familiar with their needs.

In working with the Traveller community, I have always found that, in that community, there are strong advocates who look out for the best interests of the young people. Those key people in their community — often, might I say, they are older women such as the granny — are hugely influential. If you can get to those people, they will work well with the school in enabling the young people to access education. A big difficulty that I see, particularly for girls in the Traveller community, is the early leaving age. That is a particular challenge, and I could not recommend how that should be tackled. However, where you have them in school, we must understand the cultural context of the Traveller community, have stronger advocacy for that when they are in education and find the key person in the community who will work with you and ensure that the young people get the best possible education.

Ms Hunter: That is brilliant. Thank you so much.

I will move on and group these two questions together. We have talked about one vulnerable group. I am looking at other groups who have particular challenges in educational attainment: looked-after children, child carers, children of parents who have an addiction and children who grow up in homes where there is domestic violence. Often, those children — I have engaged with them in my office — are seen as school refusers, but, really, they face complex challenges and difficulties in the home. We have seen the success of Operation Encompass, which enables the sharing of important data and information by teachers and the PSNI if domestic violence takes place in the home. That is a really positive example of what we can do to support children who are struggling. Is there anything else that we could do or that you would like to see from the Department? I am mindful that some children come from really complex homes and face so many challenges there that going to school can feel like a massive challenge.

Mr McLoughlin: While colleagues are thinking, I will say that one recommendation in our report is the provision of services at school level such as counselling provision for mental health, which you referred to. In other words, when a child is in school, there should be help and support there for the family. Teachers are brilliant, and our non-teaching staff are brilliant, but there are specialists who have so much more knowledge of the issues that you outlined. We need to have those specialists in schools so that a parent can get the provision and the help in a familiar place rather than a distant building in another part of the government world that they are never going to access. It is about making services available to help families in a wrap-around manner to ensure that we can support the child in going back to school.

Ms Hunter: That is why we, as a Committee, were so sad to see the funding cut for projects like Happy Healthy Minds. We know — it is evidenced — that that support works and helps children to open up and talk about things that they have endured in the home.

Lastly, because I am running out of time, we know that the suicide rate in the North is 25% higher than in other parts of these islands. I believe, having spoken with young people who experience suicidal ideation, that it is undeniably linked with bullying and feelings of loneliness and isolation. What role can our schools play in empowering our young people in their mental health? What role can they play in suicide prevention?

Ms Lindsay: The Department of Education has a very sound well-being framework, but it is not well implemented or well highlighted in schools; it could be given greater priority. The young people told us that that is the kind of learning that, they feel, is critical. They want to be able to manage themselves in challenging situations, such as when they are faced with unpleasant comments, whether that be face to face or on social media. Solutions are there. There are many resources. Many schools now use

trauma-informed practice to support young people, but, in some schools, that is not really where the emphasis lies.

It is shifting. COVID allowed schools the space to think about what young people need, first and foremost in order to be ready to learn. At many schools, we met practitioners who talked about the resilience and mental health programmes that they have in place and about the support people whom they bring in. Many schools bring in pastoral counsellors at their own expense at a time of strict, limited budgets. There are green shoots when it comes to addressing mental health. Could more be done? Of course it could, but the best resource is sitting in the Department in the form of the well-being framework. We recommend that that be better used.

Ms Hunter: That is brilliant. About two weeks ago, I was at St Patrick's and St Brigid's College in Claudy. It had just opened a mental health and well-being hub, and I met the staff there. During the stressful exam season, it is a place where students can open up. You can tell that it will have an incredibly positive impact. I really welcome that. Thank you all for being here. You have provided detailed answers, and I appreciate it.

Ms Nisbet: May I just say that people —

Dr Bloomer: I will add, if I may, just a little, because you are taking us into interesting territory that, in truth, was not fully explored. Educational success — indeed, a large part of social success, come to that — depends on building positive and trusted relations between learner and teacher. If you think of a secondary school in particular, where the learner is in touch with a large range of teachers for relatively short periods in the course of the week and the pupils travel round in small herds of 25 or thereabouts, you see that building those relations is a difficult task. We probably need to be much more flexible about what we are prepared to do to accommodate those who find it difficult to form that kind of positive relationship. That is about modifying timetables to reduce the fragmentation of the week and making sure that the groups are smaller and the number of adults with whom the groups are in contact is smaller. That is an important part of it: looking at how you develop the trusting relationships that are necessary. On your last point, an important part of well-being is developing resilience.

Ms Hunter: Yes, absolutely. It is interesting how phones and social media have changed so many aspects of young people's lives and their sense of resilience.

Sorry, Isabel: you wanted to come in.

Ms Nisbet: Almost everybody we saw emphasised the importance of well-being for all pupils. My judgement is that that was much more so than it would have been 20 years ago. That includes the three levels: the acute problems; the early spotting of problems; and people feeling well and being prepared to live a full life, including those who are doing well academically. Across the sector, we found strong awareness of those issues at all three stages. It is not unique to Northern Ireland, but it is strong here. That is a sign of the cohesiveness of the community commitment to education, which is a great strength that we saw.

Mr McLoughlin: I am sorry to hold the session back, Chair, but this links to what everybody said.

The Chairperson (Mr Mathison): Briefly, Robin.

Mr McLoughlin: It is really important to get this across. We have an opportunity through the report. As Keir articulated, other aspects impact on mental health. I note in the report that one major aspect that affects children's mental health is the curriculum and the workload associated with it. There is also the workload for teaching staff. The mental health of teachers and students is suffering because our qualifications are far too content-heavy, so there is not the time or space to do the other aspects that we need to do as a schooling system. There is a need to look at all of that, but it is about mental health being good across all of society.

Ms Hunter: That is really interesting. Thank you, all.

The Chairperson (Mr Mathison): The curriculum bit is huge, and we may pick up on it. A cultural shift is needed. If you ask most people on the street what the curriculum is, I think that they would say

something like, "It is what I need to learn to pass an exam". That, fundamentally, is not what the curriculum is. We need to explore that in more detail.

Ms Brownlee: Thank you so much. This has been interesting. I was writing down many questions, and then David whispered in my ear, "Don't worry; they're coming back" [*Laughter*] so I will save a few of them.

We have touched on this already, but I want to touch on the SEN statement process from start to end. I find that there is real frustration among parents about the whole process, particularly around communication and understanding the flow and what is to be expected. You can talk to anyone, and they will all have been dealt with in different ways and have experienced a different process. Even the language of the statement seems to be changing. What are your recommendations for streamlining the process and making communication of the process better for the parent and the child?

Dr Bloomer: What you say is true. We face the problem that the process is grounded in law and, in many ways, the law does not serve us particularly well. One of the things that the Minister but also the Committee will have to consider is the appetite for making legal changes, because, in a perfect world, you would make legal changes. A great deal of energy and money goes into servicing the legal process and engaging people who can undertake it on behalf of the family. Of course, the Department does that as well.

The process would benefit from being simplified. There may be scope for improvement through looking in detail at the code of practice, which is what the tribunals use when cases reach that level. We did not do that, but it would be in the interests of implementing change to have somebody look specifically at the content of the code and how it operates in practice; that would be useful. It may well be that there are ways in which it can be rewritten so as to simplify the process, reduce the bureaucratic element and increase fairness. At present, there is undoubtedly a haphazard element to it.

One of the things that we found out was that — I will not get the percentage figures exactly right off the top of my head — in 80%-plus of the cases where the Department is challenged, it just gives in. In 80%-plus cases of the ones that the Department sticks with, it loses. That cannot be good. It suggests that there are real process failings that have to be addressed. I would suggest that, at some point, there needs to be consideration of the need for legislative change. As a first measure, there would be merit in looking at the contents of the code and how those might be simplified and made easier to operate for all parties.

Ms Brownlee: I appreciate that. It is about everybody being able to understand what, I know, is a complex legal document. Not everybody can understand the process, and it is difficult. If you look after a child with special needs, it is probably the last thing on your mind when you get home at night. It is about trying to make that process as accessible as possible.

I want to touch on data. I understand that a report on the prevalence of autism in school-age children is published every year. The Department of Education said that it could not provide that data for 2023-24. Basically, because of action short of strike, 25% of schools could not provide all the information. In compiling your report, did you have any concerns about the data provided by Education that would have an impact? How did that fare?

Dr Bloomer: We had considerable concerns about the effect that action short of strike has had in a wide range of areas. The provision of information by schools is certainly one of those. The conducting of some assessments and the operation of the inspection system are other examples of where that action has impeded smooth operation of the system. We would like to think that we have arrived at the end of that phase of history.

There is, by the way, in all education systems, a need for improvement in the available data. That is the way in which we can learn from the system as it is. One of the recommendations that we make, to which not a lot of attention has been paid, is that DE should have a horizon-scanning unit — an intelligence unit, if you like — so that it is aware of what is happening not only here but elsewhere and is able to anticipate trends and see opportunities arising from ideas elsewhere. That would chime in well with the notion of taking a serious look at the nature of the data that exists and at the data that, ideally, you would like to have in your possession but do not. We found that, when we asked for information, it was readily accessible sometimes, and, at other times, it was not readily available, even though we had an excellent secretariat provided for us by DE that did wonderful things to get

information for us. Often, however, information was not there until we asked for it and it had to be discovered in one way or another.

Ms Brownlee: I appreciate that. That is great. One of the things that we see more and more of is the importance of high-quality data for decision-making. That applies not just to the Department of Education but across the board. We are failing at that, and it needs to be dramatically improved so that we know that we are putting our resources into the right places at the right time.

My last question, quickly, is about school absenteeism. It feels as if that is increasing dramatically. Children are suffering more and more with their mental health, as we have touched on. What are your recommendations for how we tackle that? We have touched on counselling support and mental health support in schools. Is there anything that you see as a direct priority to introduce now?

Ms Lindsay: Curriculum. We are back to where we started. If you get the curriculum right, they come. There has been a COVID impact that is not well recognised. Certainly, the practitioners whom we met talked about that. It is largely not known, but the principals, particularly, say that their absentee rates have not gone back to pre-COVID levels. Robin, you can probably correct me.

Mr McLoughlin: It is a very interesting question. It is the same in most jurisdictions. We have a high absence rate. We need to tackle that, because it is not fair that children just get lost in the system, which is what is happening. I agree that is about curriculum, but it is also about what is in the entire report — wrap-around care, counselling and so on. It is not a quick fix. There is no one wand that can be waved and it all gets sorted. Everything is intrinsically linked. Unfortunately, there is a lasting legacy from COVID, and it is mental health. A lot of professionals say that that is the true pandemic. We need to address that in the whole of society, because it is a prevalent issue in adult society as well as in young people. We need to do a lot more to build resilience and the capacity to develop and cope in a modern world.

I have just one comment to make, Cheryl, about data. Absolutely, you need quality data. One of the things that we observed throughout our work was a real willingness from every source and from everyone who was asked to engage with the panel. It was absolutely brilliant. Going back to what I said at the start, we were delighted to see how people wanted to see a better education system. However, one of our observations was that you have to ask for this bit of data and that bit of data, and it was produced, in many cases, by our colleagues in the secretariat. In the age of digital solutions, significant work needs to be done to ensure that data is accessible without the associated workload for schools, teachers or anybody else in the system. There are solutions to how we can gather data much easier.

Ms Nisbet: I support that. I work on a committee for the Office for National Statistics on how publicly available data can be combined ethically without having to retrieve it afresh every time by asking hard-pressed school principals to produce it all. There is huge scope in a place the size of Northern Ireland to bring available data together ethically. I hope that the intelligence function would not be blinkered to just educational data but would bring in publicly available data.

Ms Brownlee: That is really important.

Ms Nisbet: That is a really important challenge.

Ms Brownlee: I appreciate that. Thank you so much.

The Chairperson (Mr Mathison): Thanks to all of you for your time today. You have given us a lot of it; that is very much appreciated. We will probably now have a think and reflect on what, perhaps, we need to focus on in the next two evidence sessions. We may not have as long next time around. There will be other witnesses attending, so we, as a Committee, will have a think about the areas of your report that we would like to focus on in the next two evidence sessions. Thanks to those who travelled. We hope to see you soon.