



House of Commons  
Committee of Public Accounts

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# Improving literacy and numeracy in schools (Northern Ireland)

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**Second Report of Session 2006–07**

*Report, together with formal minutes, oral and written evidence*

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to be printed 27 November 2006*

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## The Committee of Public Accounts

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Angela Browning MP (*Conservative, Tiverton and Honiton*)  
Jon Trickett MP (*Labour, Hemsworth*)

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### Committee staff

The current staff of the Committee is Mark Etherton (Clerk), Christine Randall (Committee Assistant), Emma Sawyer (Committee Assistant), Oliver Denton (Secretary), and Luke Robinson (Media Officer).

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## Summary

While Northern Ireland has a high proportion of pupils at the highest levels of achievement in literacy and numeracy, it also has a long tail of children who are not performing well. In order to raise levels of achievement among school children, the Department of Education introduced its *Strategy for the Promotion of Literacy and Numeracy in Primary and Secondary Schools* (the *Strategy*) in 1998. Since that time, it has invested £40 million on specific literacy and numeracy programmes, in addition to normal spending on the school curriculum.

Improving literacy and numeracy standards in schools continues to be a major challenge in Northern Ireland. As recently as 2002, the Department told the Public Accounts Committee at the Northern Ireland Assembly that it was indefensible that around 20% of children left school unable to master the basics of reading and writing.<sup>1</sup>

A framework of Key Stage targets covering expected levels of achievement by the typical pupil was established under the *Strategy*. Significant numbers of children fail to reach appropriate levels of attainment despite the additional funding. For example, at Key Stage 2 nearly a quarter of children – around 2,000 girls and 3,000 boys – left primary school in 2004-05 with literacy skills below the standard level, while at Key Stage 3, in secondary schools, almost 7,000 of the pupils tested (41%) failed to reach the standard expected of their age.

There are a number of other worrying features of educational attainment in Northern Ireland. Boys consistently have a lower level of achievement in English and mathematics than girls at both Key Stage 2 and Key Stage 3. This has been attributed to the problems some boys experience with engagement and experience of schooling. Moreover, within the Belfast area, in schools with high levels of social deprivation, there are disturbing differences in achievement between pupils of different religious backgrounds.

The evidence shows that, in Belfast, among non-grammar schools with 40% or more pupils entitled to free school meals, Catholic maintained schools achieve, on average, at a higher level than pupils in Protestant controlled schools.

Comparative data on the performance of Catholic and non-Catholic schools in Glasgow shows a much closer fit in performance between the two types of school. In addition, pupils in non-Catholic schools in Glasgow perform much better than pupils in performance between the two types of school.

In addition, pupils in non-Catholic schools in Glasgow perform much better than pupils in Protestant schools in Belfast. These differences between genders and religious groupings are cause for concern because they suggest that pupils within them are facing additional barriers that prevent them fulfilling their potential.

Since the introduction of the *Strategy* in 1998, progress in literacy and numeracy

<sup>1</sup> *Report on School Inspection in Northern Ireland*, Public Accounts Committee, 1/01/R, September 2001, Session 2001-02.

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

On the basis of a Report by the Comptroller and Auditor General for Northern Ireland, the Committee examined the Department of Education on the impact of the literacy and numeracy *Strategy* on the attainment levels of pupils and whether the methods of teaching literacy and numeracy used have been effective.

## Conclusions and Recommendations

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- 1. The importance of developing competency and confidence in the key skills of literacy and numeracy at an early age is reflected in the worrying statistics which show that the skills deficit among pupils in Northern Ireland schools increases as they progress through primary education and into the secondary sector.** The Committee expects the Department of Education to take urgent steps to improve the teaching of literacy and numeracy within schools. This is essential if we are to ensure that deficiencies in literacy and numeracy do not continue to be a major handicap for future generations of young adults after they leave school.
- 2. In our view, schools which are well managed and have proactive leadership are much better placed than others to enable all children, even those most at risk of failing, to succeed.** Unless the teaching of literacy and numeracy is well-led, schools will not provide the best educational experience nor the highest standards for their pupils. In order to raise standards we look to the Department to ensure that support is focused on schools where the leadership and management of literacy and numeracy efforts is weak.
- 3. Under-achievement among boys constitutes a cultural challenge.** We expect the Department to help meet that challenge by seeking to draw together research on best practice so that it can develop both preventative and remedial programmes to help boys who are struggling with literacy and numeracy from falling further behind each year. The Committee urges the Department to give particular attention to the very worrying position of boys in the Belfast Board area.
- 4. It is clear from the evidence presented to the Committee that, among socially deprived communities in Belfast, significant differences between Protestant and Romantholic children exist in GCSE English and Mathematics. This raises a concern that children in Protestant working-class areas may not be enjoying equal educational opportunities.** There is a noticeable difference between Belfast and Glasgow. The data provided by the Department shows that, whereas there is a reasonable degree of consistency between the performance of Catholic and non-denominational schools in Glasgow in English and Mathematics at GCSE/Scottish National Qualification level, this is certainly not the case in Belfast. Here, schools with 40% or more pupils entitled to free school meals do disturbingly less well than their Catholic counterparts, as well as much less well than their counterparts in Glasgow. Differences in performance by pupils from different religious backgrounds is a sensitive topic but we suggest that if real improvements are to be made the issues involved must be addressed. This requires thorough research and rigorous analysis so that evidenced-based actions can be put in place to overcome the difficulties. In its response to our Report, we would like the Department to explain in detail how it is tackling this issue which must be one of the major challenges Northern Ireland faces.
- 5. The Department has a pressing responsibility to take the lead in identifying and championing best practice in literacy and numeracy teaching in schools.** It needs to provide a clear direction and impetus to the promotion of literacy and numeracy

performance. The Committee will be interested to learn what steps the Department takes to address the issue.

- 6. We are extremely disappointed that literacy and numeracy targets have been frequently adjusted since the introduction of the *Strategy*.** We recognise that it is sometimes necessary to adjust targets. However, the Department's record on literacy and numeracy suggests to us that it has lacked commitment to and confidence in its target setting. If targets are to serve as useful and meaningful tools of accountability and retain credibility, they have to become a consistent element in the process of setting literacy and numeracy objectives for schools and for assessing and reporting on attainment levels. We expect the Department's current review of the *Strategy* to establish an approach to target setting which will communicate a clear message around which schools can mobilize resources in tackling under-achievement in literacy and numeracy. We also expect the Department to maintain a consistent approach to targets rather than adjust them when results are falling short.
- 7. Central to the accountability for literacy and numeracy improvement programmes is the establishment of processes to ensure that data collected on attainment levels is analysed and used for planning and continuous improvement.** We recommend that the Department ensures that this data is used to identify any aspects of the design and delivery of literacy and numeracy programmes that can be enhanced and to inform effective targeting of improvement programmes to groups of pupils whose performance is not satisfactory.
- 8. The lack of benchmarking by the Department against comparable cities in the United Kingdom has been a missed opportunity to identify good practice in literacy and numeracy teaching, to learn from others and improve performance.** Benchmarking provides a means of testing achievements and processes in literacy and numeracy against those of other organizations. The Department should make greater use of its liaison arrangements with its equivalent organizations in England, Wales and Scotland to examine whether the approaches adopted in similar cities are proving to be more effective in delivering better literacy and numeracy outcomes. In particular, the results from Glasgow and Liverpool need to be followed up promptly to see what lessons can be learned.
- 9. Teacher quality is an important catalyst for improvement in literacy and numeracy attainment levels.** We consider it important, therefore, that the Department's review of the *Strategy* satisfies itself that the training provided to teachers ensures that they develop a thorough understanding of the relevant literacy and numeracy initiatives and are committed to them as a way of achieving improvement.
- 10. Parental involvement can have an important impact on the educational attainment of children.** Huge gains can be made in literacy and numeracy attainment levels if parents received more encouragement to work with schools in support of their children's education and opportunities were taken to engage parents to provide educational development in the home. However, the greater involvement of parents must not lose sight of the fact that children from deprived backgrounds

are likely to have limited access to educational resources compared to their more affluent peers.

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



# 1 The impact of the literacy and numeracy Strategy

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1. One of the most worrying features of literacy and numeracy levels in Northern Ireland schools is that, in terms of international comparisons, pupils display a wide variation in achievement between the most and least able pupils.<sup>2</sup> To improve literacy and numeracy standards, in 1998, the Department had launched its *Strategy for the Promotion of Literacy and Numeracy in Primary and Secondary Schools*. By 2004-05, £40 million had been spent under the *Strategy* on specific literacy and numeracy programmes in addition to other related initiatives and the resources consumed from general school budgets.

2. However, in 2002, the Department told the Public Accounts Committee at the Northern Ireland Assembly that it accepted that it was indefensible that around 20% of children who left school in Northern Ireland after 12 years of compulsory education were still unable to read and write to a standard that would equip them to deal with the demands of adult life.

3. In Northern Ireland, pupils are assessed by statutory curriculum tests at ages 8, 11 and 14 which also define expected levels of achievement for each of the three Key Stages. While the Department told us that the *Strategy* has had some success in raising standards, particularly with the Reading Recovery scheme in primary schools.<sup>3</sup> The pace of progress has been unduly slow and the true extent of this success is questionable. The statistics show an alarming level of reduction in the numbers achieving the expected standard of attainment at each Key Stage.<sup>4</sup> For instance, at age 11, around 25% of children still do not achieve the success in literacy expected of their age.<sup>5</sup> Furthermore, the Department acknowledged that it had major concerns about literacy and numeracy performance in non-grammar schools, particularly in mathematics, where, annually, 40% of secondary school pupils (around 7,000 children) leave school with under-developed numerical skills.<sup>6</sup>

4. The Department accepts that it remains indefensible that 20% of school children should fail to achieve the standard in literacy and numeracy by the time they leave school.<sup>7</sup> In its view, this demonstrates a need for stronger leadership in schools, a strengthening of the curriculum and better teaching methods.<sup>8</sup> The Department told us that it is currently undertaking a review of the *Strategy* which will look at a range of issues around literacy and numeracy including those covered by the C&AG's Report.<sup>9</sup> It was unable to tell us how much more money will be required to improve the situation but pointed out it hoped to reduce the level of under-performance by 3-4% by 2010.<sup>10</sup>

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2 C&AG's Report, para 1.3

3 Q 3

4 C&AG's Report, para 4.1; Q 4

5 C&AG's Report, para 2.8

6 Q 5

7 Q 30

8 Q 4

9 Q 8

10 Qq 3, 4, 34

5. In 2002, the Department assured the Committee at the Northern Ireland Assembly of “... its earnest intention to deal urgently with the long tail of underachievement in literacy and numeracy.”<sup>11</sup> It is totally unacceptable, therefore, that mastery of the basics of literacy and numeracy among pupils has not improved significantly after eight years of a *Strategy* which emphasizes core skills. Moreover, behind the statistics of poor literacy and numeracy levels lies an untold story of wasted potential. So much more remains to be done to identify what elements of teaching lead some children to realise their potential while their peers continue to do badly.

6. The statistics show us that girls make better progress than boys in English and mathematics at both primary (Key Stage 2) and secondary school (Key Stage 3) level. Indeed, within the Belfast Education and Library Board area the gap is alarmingly wide with boys trailing girls in Key Stage 3 English by 29 percentage points.<sup>12</sup> According to the Department the relatively poor performance of boys can be attributed to the problems some boys experience with engagement and involvement in schooling: for example, peer pressure, negative attitudes to reading and writing and the influence of paramilitaries. It sees the way forward in the need for schools to build a focus on achievement and in the better linking of education to the world of work to raise aspirations and let children see where education is leading them.<sup>13</sup> The Committee realise that the task of tackling underachievement in boys is not easy one, and while we can celebrate the success of girls, the challenge is to develop approaches which will help, not only, to raise the achievement of boys but add value for the entire school.

7. In addition to the data included in the C&AG’s report, we requested further detailed analysis from the Department on the literacy and numeracy performance of non-grammar schools in Northern Ireland along with comparisons with similar cities in Great Britain. The data it produced in response is very helpful.<sup>14</sup> It shows that at Key Stage 3 the performance of “controlled” schools (mainly Protestant) and “maintained” schools (mainly Catholic) is broadly comparable. The analysis also provided a comparison of the performance at GCSE/Scottish National Qualification level in English and Mathematics and of Catholic and Protestant schools in Belfast with their counterparts in Glasgow. This showed that, whereas there is a reasonably close correlation between the performance of Catholic and non-denominational schools in both subjects in Glasgow, the position in Belfast is surprisingly different. The Department’s data relating specifically to those Belfast schools with 40% or more pupils entitled to free school meals shows pupils at Protestant schools do much less well than those at Catholic schools. Moreover, they also do much less well than their equivalents at non-denominational schools in Glasgow. The Department told us that, although Catholic communities in Belfast suffer greater social deprivation than Protestant neighbourhoods, the latter are represented in greater numbers among the bottom 25 to 30 wards in terms of educational attainment.<sup>15</sup> In its view this is linked to issues around the values placed on education in these communities and the changing

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11 *Report on School Inspection in Northern Ireland*, Public Accounts Committee, 1/01/R, September 2001, Session 2001-02.

12 C&AG’s Report, para 2.12; Qq12

13 Q 12

14 Ev 12-14

15 Qq 24-25

industrial structure in many Protestant working class areas where traditional routes to work are no longer available.<sup>16</sup>

8. While there are clearly problems with pupils from socially deprived backgrounds in both Catholic and mainly Protestant schools in Belfast, the gap is particularly pronounced for children attending mainly Protestant schools. Even allowing for the fact that the number of schools involved may be quite small, the Department's figures are very disturbing—with only 17.3% of pupils in these Protestant schools achieving A\* - C<sup>2</sup> in GCSE English and an alarming figure of only 4.4% for attainment in mathematics. We expect the Department to inform us how it is addressing this issue.

## 2 Improving the effectiveness of literacy and numeracy programmes

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9. The Department told us that the *Strategy* launched in 1998 would raise the profile and priority of literacy and numeracy levels but, while it acknowledged the considerable need for improvements, it is clear from performance data that this has not happened. It also said that, while not wanting to denigrate the excellent work done by the Education and Library Boards, the Department accepted that the management of the *Strategy* would have benefited more had it taken a stronger central lead.<sup>17</sup> Allowing the Boards to go their own way, particularly in tackling underachievement in literacy, has failed to produce a joined-up approach. The Department acknowledged that it has learned from the Comptroller and Auditor General's report and recognises, also, that it needs to provide greater clarity to teachers on exactly what outcomes they are to achieve in raising literacy and numeracy performance.<sup>18</sup>

10. The Department also acknowledged that, in the early stages, the *Strategy* was not as effective as it should have been in taking into account the relative learning needs of pupils and individual school requirements. We welcome the fact that, from 2003, a more focused Raising Achievement Programme was introduced to target resources in a manner that better reflects the relative proficiency levels of pupils.<sup>19</sup>

11. Target-setting and the use of pupil attainment data is intended to reinforce public accountability for raising literacy and numeracy standards by bringing into sharp focus teaching practices, school management and literacy and numeracy policy. We were dismayed to find that when targets were in danger of not being met they appeared to be cynically lowered or had their timescale extended. The Department accepted that the moving around of targets in recent years was not credible, helpful nor acceptable. It argued that when initial targets were viewed against subsequent Key Stage results it considered that they were extremely challenging and that they should be revised to make them achievable. The Department told us that its review of the *Strategy* will include the setting of realistic targets which are intended to be both stretching and aspirational.<sup>20</sup>

12. One of the key priorities for the Department is ensuring continued improvement in literacy and numeracy standards in primary and post-primary schools. In our view, the Department's approach to continuous improvement needs to be enhanced. The literacy and numeracy data collected by the Department provides a wealth of information to inform the design of programmes and their delivery by schools. We understand, too, that work is underway within the Department to develop a means of measuring performance at an individual pupil level.<sup>21</sup> However, it was evident from what the Department told us that data was not being used effectively.

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17 Qq 19-20; 40-41

18 Q40-41

19 Q 23

20 Qq 16-18; 49-57

21 C&AG's Report, para 2.15

13. We have already referred, in paragraphs 6 and 7, to the particular problems in the Belfast Board area. Within the United Kingdom the four administrations produce broadly comparable information on the level of literacy and numeracy performance their schools have achieved. This provides an opportunity to identify best practice and learn from each other. While the Department makes some comparisons of performance with England and Wales, we were astounded to discover that it had made no attempt to benchmark the performance of Belfast against comparable cities such as Leicester, Newcastle, Liverpool and Glasgow.<sup>22</sup> This is all the more remarkable when we learned that regular meetings take place between the Department and their counterparts in Great Britain. The Committee believes this is an issue which the Department needs to address much more effectively.

14. The additional data which we requested from the Department shows that, overall, Belfast schools generally achieve results that are at least on a par with those of other cities. However, among the most socially deprived pupils, Belfast achieves results that are worse than Liverpool at each stage but particularly at Key Stage 3. Moreover, in GCSE English, these pupils perform much less well than their counterparts in Glasgow, but as we point out in paragraph 7, this is much more marked for pupils at mainly Protestant schools.<sup>23</sup>

15. In England, schools are now required by law to teach reading through “synthetic phonics”—the way in which sounds are represented by letters. The Department told us that the use of phonics programmes are and always have been an important component of its approach to the teaching of literacy and that it is very interested in the debate on synthetic phonics.<sup>24</sup> As part of a review of the overall *Strategy* the Department intends to examine the mix of methods schools use to teach literacy in order to assess the relative effectiveness of different approaches.<sup>25</sup>

16. The Department told us that £14 million of the expenditure on the *Strategy* was used to put in place literacy and numeracy coordinators in all schools and to train them to analyse data and lead their colleagues in implementing different techniques in teaching literacy and numeracy.<sup>26</sup> It has to be recognized, therefore, that, as well as the content of the curriculum, the *Strategy* is also dependent on the quality of teaching and learning provided by well trained and competent teachers. In view of the slow progress in raising literacy and numeracy levels, it is important that the link between the enhancement of teacher capacity and pupil achievement is properly understood.

17. The success of literacy and numeracy programmes will depend as much on the home environment as the school. For instance, the Department told us that underachievement can be linked to a low value being placed on education in some working class areas.<sup>27</sup> In the Committee’s view, the involvement of parents in their children’s education can have an important impact on the continued development of literacy and numeracy skills.

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22 Qq 77-88

23 Ev 12-13

24 Qq 8-12

25 Q 8

26 Qq 3, 37-38

27 Q94

18. The Department told us that it believes improvements in literacy and numeracy levels will also come as a result of plans to restructure and reorganize the education system in Northern Ireland by introducing a new curriculum and ending the current system of selection at 11 years of age.<sup>28</sup> However, we questioned them about concerns which were expressed to us by the Parental Alliance for Choice in Education. Research this group had gathered from the United States questions the view that low literacy and numeracy achievement is linked to academic selection.<sup>29</sup> The Department's response is that the considerable time from ages nine and ten which is focused on preparing for the transfer test has narrowed the curriculum. It added that this has had an adverse impact on the performance of the 60% of young people not going to grammar schools and seems to damage education overall.<sup>30</sup>

19. We would caution against a simplistic view that structural change is the answer to this problem. The differences which we have highlighted between Roman Catholic and Protestant children in socially deprived areas suggest that there are much more profound difficulties at work than the system of selection. If the education sector in Northern Ireland is to undergo major structural change, it is all the more important that the underlying issues influencing educational attainment are not lost sight of and given the priority they deserve.

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28 C&AG's Report, para 4.2; Qq 14, 26-27, 70

29 Q13

30 Q 15

# Formal minutes

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MONDAY 27 NOVEMBER 2006

Members present:

Mr Edward Leigh, in the Chair

Mr Richard Bacon

Mr Austin Mitchell

Mr David Curry

Dr John Pugh

Mr Ian Davidson

Mr Don Touhig

## Oral evidence

Sir John Bourn KCB, Comptroller and Auditor General, was in attendance and gave oral evidence.

Mr Marius Gallaher, Alternate Treasury Officer of Accounts, was in attendance.

The Comptroller and Auditor General's Report on Delivering successful IT-enabled business change (HC 33-I&II) was considered.

Mr Ian Watmore, Permanent Secretary and Head of Group, Delivery and Transformation Group (Cabinet Office) and Mr John Oughton, Chief Executive, Office of Government, gave oral evidence (HC 113-i).

## Draft Reports

A draft Report (Improving literacy and numeracy in schools (Northern Ireland)), proposed by the Chairman, brought up and read.

*Ordered*, That the draft Report be read a second time, paragraph by paragraph.

Paragraphs 1 to 19 read and agreed to.

Conclusions and recommendations read and agreed to.

Summary read and agreed to.

*Resolved*, That the Report be the Second Report of the Committee to the House.

*Ordered*, That the Chairman make the Report to the House.

*Ordered*, That embargoed copies of the Report be made available, in accordance with the provisions of Standing Order No. 134.

Another draft Report (Collections management in the national museums and galleries of Northern Ireland), proposed by the Chairman, brought up and read.

*Ordered*, That the draft Report be read a second time, paragraph by paragraph.

Paragraphs 1 to 17 read and agreed to.

Conclusions and recommendations read and agreed to.

Summary read and agreed to.

*Resolved*, That the Report be the Third Report of the Committee to the House.

*Ordered*, That the Chairman make the Report to the House.

*Ordered*, That embargoed copies of the Report be made available, in accordance with the provisions of Standing Order No. 134.

Another draft Report (Gas distribution networks: Ofgem's role in their sale, restructuring and future regulation), proposed by the Chairman, brought up and read.

*Ordered*, That the draft Report be read a second time, paragraph by paragraph.

Paragraphs 1 to 39 read and agreed to.

Conclusions and recommendations read and agreed to.

Summary read and agreed to.

*Resolved*, That the Report be the Fourth Report of the Committee to the House.

*Ordered*, That the Chairman make the Report to the House.

*Ordered*, That embargoed copies of the Report be made available, in accordance with the provisions of Standing Order No. 134.

Another draft Report (Postcomm and the quality of mail services), proposed by the Chairman, brought up and read.

*Ordered*, That the draft Report be read a second time, paragraph by paragraph.

Paragraphs 1 to 30 read and agreed to.

Conclusions and recommendations read and agreed to.

Summary read and agreed to.

*Resolved*, That the Report be the Fifth Report of the Committee to the House.

*Ordered*, That the Chairman make the Report to the House.

*Ordered*, That embargoed copies of the Report be made available, in accordance with the provisions of Standing Order No. 134.

Another draft Report (Gaining and retaining a job: the Department for Work and Pensions' support for disabled people), proposed by the Chairman, brought up and read.

*Ordered*, That the draft Report be read a second time, paragraph by paragraph.

Paragraphs 1 to 28 read and agreed to.

Conclusions and recommendations read and agreed to.

Summary read and agreed to.

*Resolved*, That the Report be the Sixth Report of the Committee to the House.

*Ordered*, That the Chairman make the Report to the House.

*Ordered*, That embargoed copies of the Report be made available, in accordance with the provisions of Standing Order No. 134.

### **Spring programme**

The Committee considered this matter.

[Adjourned until Wednesday 29 November at 3.30 pm.]

## List of Witnesses

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### Wednesday 21 June 2006

**Mr Will Haire, Dr Robson Davison, Dr Mark Browne**, Department of Education for Northern Ireland and **Miss Marion Matchett**, Education and Training Inspectorate, Northern Ireland. Ev 1

## List of written evidence

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**Department of Education for Northern Ireland** Ev 12  
**Parental Alliance for Choice in Education (PACE)** Ev 17

## List of Reports from the Committee of Public Accounts Session 2006–07

First Report	Tsunami: Revision of support for humanitarian assistance	HC 25
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The reference number of the Treasury Minute to each Report is printed in brackets after the HC printing number

# Oral evidence

## Taken before the Committee of Public Accounts

on Wednesday 21 June 2006

Members present:

Mr Edward Leigh, in the Chair

Mr Richard Bacon  
Greg Clark  
Mr Ian Davidson

Mr Austin Mitchell  
Kitty Ussher  
Mr Alan Williams

**Mr John Dowdall CB**, Comptroller and Auditor General, Northern Ireland Audit Office, gave evidence.

**Mr David Thomson**, Northern Ireland Treasury Officer of Accounts, HM Treasury, gave evidence.

### REPORT BY THE COMPTROLLER AND AUDITOR GENERAL

#### FOR NORTHERN IRELAND

#### Improving Literacy and Numeracy in Schools (HC 953)

*Witnesses:* **Mr Will Haire**, Permanent Secretary, **Dr Robson Davison**, Deputy Secretary and Head of Schools and Youth Policy, **Dr Mark Browne**, Finance Director and Head of Finance and Strategic Planning Division, Department of Education, Northern Ireland; and **Miss Marion Matchett**, Chief Inspector, Education and Training Inspectorate, Northern Ireland, gave evidence.

**Q1 Chairman:** Welcome to the formal session of the Committee of Public Accounts. I apologise to our witnesses from Northern Ireland for the delay caused by the division and by other business in the House. In this session we are dealing with the Comptroller and Auditor General's Report on *Improving Literacy and Numeracy in Schools*. In Great Britain schools are a local authority function, but in Northern Ireland school education is the responsibility of central Government and, therefore, we welcome Mr Haire from the Department of Education. Would you please introduce us to your colleagues?

**Mr Haire:** Dr Browne is on my left, Head of Finance and Strategic Planning Division, and Dr Davison, Head of Schools and Youth Policy, and Miss Matchett, Chief Inspector.

**Q2 Chairman:** Perhaps you could open the Report of the Comptroller and Auditor General, please, and look at paragraph 1.12 which you can find on page ten. In that Report we learn of the assurance your Department gave the Assembly PAC of your "earnest intention to deal urgently with the long tail of underachievement in literacy and numeracy". After reading this Report, Mr Haire, one cannot avoid feeling that very little progress has been made despite this commitment you gave to the PAC of Northern Ireland and why has it proved so difficult to live up to the expectations you gave to our sister committee?

**Mr Haire:** Chairman, I agree that there is a significant problem of underachievement here. We have major issues in trying to improve the secondary

side, particularly in numeracy in the secondary phase, and we have not seen the progress we wanted to. The key challenges of schools in dealing with major social issues are key to this, but clearly we need to support excellent schools that can make that change, and that is what we are determined to do.

**Q3 Chairman:** Let us try and get into a bit more detail and find out what has been going wrong. After all, you spent £40 million on specific literacy and numeracy issues. How much more do you have to spend to make a difference, Mr Haire?

**Mr Haire:** Clearly, £26 million of that has been used for the Reading Recovery scheme which has had beneficial effects. We have seen P2 five year-olds who had been falling behind assisted by that system very effectively to get back in position and the evaluation has shown that 80% achieved that return to the right level, so there has been good value there. The rest of the money has been setting out basic structures, organisation in the schools and basic curriculum structures there, but we have to get that much more effectively organised. Particularly we need to get the data being used in the classroom more effectively so that the best teaching techniques are used there. That is the place where I think we have to make progress now.

**Q4 Chairman:** Fair enough. You have not answered the question, how much more money are you going to have to spend, but other colleagues can deal with that if they wish. Let us look at the table of the percentage of pupils achieving literacy. You can find this on page 14. What is rather worrying is there is

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an alarming reduction at each Key Stage. For instance, we have got 95% Key Stage 1—that is page 14—76% Key Stage 2 and then going on 73% Key Stage 3, which we can find on page 16 of this Report, so what is going wrong? Mathematics is a similar picture. One cannot escape the conclusion that the more you have these children, the worse the results get.

**Mr Haire:** I think the measurement of Key Stage 1, where we have a very high result, that is a baseline threshold statement. When I talk to teachers they say that, “Yes, that gives you that stage, when they have got the basics of literacy”. I think it is by Key Stage 2 and 3 that you are really getting a better differentiated marking. What you are seeing there, in fact, is that by Key Stage 2, you have this problem of 25%—it used to be 30%, we got that down from a third to a quarter through our achievement here—and you will see that going through to 14. I think what that says to me is what we have to do is really get the basics of numeracy and literacy in the primary phase. It is difficult once in the secondary phase really to get it in a position like that, clearly we need a better curriculum and better teaching methods in the secondary phase to really try and cut that back at that stage, but we have a major challenge here. We are hoping here, the same as in England, but clearly, as in England, we really have to push this much more effectively because of the real problems that young people have, they do not have the basics for future learning.

**Q5 Chairman:** We see in paragraph 3.7, if you look at that, that 7,000 pupils are likely to leave—7,000 pupils is quite a high proportion of the Province I would have thought—secondary school each year with a mathematical understanding below expected level. This is despite the enormous additional investment you are making in mathematics teaching. What is going wrong? Are they being properly equipped for life if they have not got basic numeracy skills? 7,000 likely to leave secondary school without basic numeracy skills, that is pretty alarming, is it not?

**Mr Haire:** It is a major concern for us. In England and throughout the Western World we are not getting this mathematical level as high as possible. We have had quality assurance by the inspections which show good progress at the primary level, but not in secondary schools. The leadership of maths is not as strong as we need. We need to strengthen that and strengthen the curriculum. I think we also need to make the relevance of mathematics clearer to young people, particularly about their jobs, because if we do not get that, we have a significant problem, and we recognise numeracy as a major issue. One key aspect that goes to the work this Committee has done is about connecting that to the world at work to functional skills around vocational courses, which I think will make use of the further education processes. We are working with our sister department on that to make that more relevant so we can have maths taught through vocational courses as well.

**Q6 Chairman:** I am personally quite interested in synthetic phonics. I have got young children and this is a debate that has been raging throughout the educational world. It is mentioned in paragraph 4.15. It is a generally held view that synthetic phonics, as a way of teaching literacy, was very effective and should not have been dispensed with, but you did, of course, in Northern Ireland, did you not? It is now re-emerging into fashion, is it not?

**Mr Haire:** I think we kept a fairly traditional line on English and I will ask the Chief Inspector—

**Q7 Chairman:** You did not issue circulars from the Department discouraging teachers from using synthetic phonics?

**Mr Haire:** No, I am not aware of it.

**Q8 Chairman:** So synthetic phonics went on being taught in all other schools?

**Mr Haire:** No, we had various forms of phonics being taught throughout our time for a considerable time, but I think we are very interested in the debate on synthetic phonics. We have done these pilots in Belfast, in particular, where we have this particular high level of problems. We have used those initiatives and we are very keen to look at that initiative. Dr Davison is leading a review of numeracy and literacy, we have to look at this. Like this Report and other work we are doing, we are determined to look at all these issues. One of the key issues I have asked him to look at is synthetic phonics and what position we would give it. We are obviously very interested in the Rose report from DfES and see how that relates. We want to take stock of this issue and see what place we give it, but I think phonics has been quite a strong tradition in the Northern Ireland education system and one where we want to see which particular form of phonics, how it is taught and what is the best way forward.

**Q9 Chairman:** Dr Davison, are you an enthusiast of synthetic phonics?

**Dr Davison:** I think the evidence that comes through in the Rose report would equally suggest that it is a form of pedagogy which we take very seriously and we will be looking at it in the review with seriousness in mind.

**Q10 Chairman:** Do you agree with it or do you not? Taking something seriously, we all take everything seriously. It is a complete non-answer to the question I put to you.

**Dr Davison:** Personally?

**Q11 Chairman:** Yes, personally.

**Dr Davison:** Yes, I do subscribe to the view that synthetic phonics are an important part of the literacy curriculum.

**Q12 Chairman:** Thank you very much. Then boys' compared with girls' performances, paragraph 2.12, this is rather alarming, is it not? We have got a situation in the Belfast Board area where there is a

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gender gap, 29 percentage points of boys falling behind girls, so what is going on? What is causing the gap? What are you doing to redress the balance?

**Mr Haire:** Boys' achievements are very clearly a major problem for us, a major problem worldwide, in this area. In Belfast it is very demonstrable. There are problems about peer pressure and negative attitudes to reading and writing. There are in Belfast some issues around paramilitaries and other issues that cause this problem. The schools that are solving this in Belfast are about strong school leadership, strong ethos in the school and have very much a focus on achievement. I think schools, like Ashfield in east Belfast, are doing a fantastic job getting into the classroom, using ICT and working with the curriculum and you are seeing significant progress there. It requires that level of focus in the school, producing a very strong discipline within the school and you can see change there. I also would emphasise the point about connecting that to the world at work to vocational education to try and raise aspirations for people to see where education is leading them. That is where I think our focus has to be in the coming while. Also in our work on the general curriculum in the early years and the foundation phase we are working there as well to draw boys into education to try and find routes of education to get them achieving early on. I think that is also a major area of investment for us.

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

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

**Q14 Chairman:** Will getting rid of grammar schools in Northern Ireland improve numeracy and literacy across the board?

**Mr Haire:** I think we emphasise here it has the potential to deliver this process; ministers clearly have a view.

**Q15 Chairman:** I am not questioning the policy as a policy matter. I just want to know what the evidence is.

**Mr Haire:** I think one of the issues here we were focusing on particularly was that the research has shown us that considerable time from age nine and 10 in the Northern Ireland system is focused on the transfer test and preparation for that, narrowing the curriculum and also then the impact that this has on the 60% of young people who are not going to grammar schools and the impact that has had on those particular issues which seem to be damaging to education overall.

**Q16 Mr Mitchell:** This looks like a daft way of proceeding. You set targets and the royal chorus of heralds comes in, then you set them without any research basis or research as to how they are going to be achieved. They are imposed with little regard to how they are going to work. When they do not work, you fiddle them and say, "Extend the period" or "Lower the targets". It looks like a daft method of working to me. Where has the habit of doing this come from? Is it from our infectious desire on the mainland to set targets and fail them, a peculiar local initiative, or what?

**Mr Haire:** I think the initial targets which we emphasised were provisional were very much taken from the manifesto commitments initially about that process. We said they were provisional at the time because we were not sure of the base. We then brought them down to be more stretch targets. Subsequent to that, over years, we moved them around, and I do not think that was an acceptable approach because we did not give consistency or clarity in that process. That is something I am asking, as I review this strategy, that we look fundamentally at these targets to try and get a credible target which we can explain to the public. Obviously we have got a lot of data that this is happening in schools and we know how children are performing at age 11, so we can start projecting on years with the cohorts there. What I have asked Dr Davison to do is to look at that process so we can set realistic targets that are stretching but also have them at a reasonable level and emphasise the aspiration. The point where the DfES is, they emphasise 85% of young people in the best schools are achieving that, whatever the social milieu. I think that demonstrates if we can get all the schools that way, we should be able to achieve that. I think we have to take that into account as well.

**Q17 Mr Mitchell:** It is transferring it to a different setting in Northern Ireland. I do not know much about it, but it is a different setting to one on the mainland for which the manifesto commitments were made. Why did you not do any research as to the best of way of achieving these targets?

**Mr Haire:** In the beginning, I think we were in the situation where we were trying to raise awareness and aspirations, as here, and we chose those rather high levels though we did label them very strongly as being provisional. Subsequently, as we got data in, we adjusted those processes, but I will not defend the fact that we adjusted them year on year.

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**Q18 Mr Mitchell:** You are trying to raise aspirations, it all ends in tears, does it not, when you have these kinds of headlines in the local papers about the collapses? Surely, if it is going to work, it has got to be based on research in a definite way of achieving the targets rather than just aspirations?

**Mr Haire:** I totally agree. I think it is absolutely key that we have to get these right, we have to use the data we have got now to get that right in that process. That is what I am asking Dr Davison to do.

**Q19 Mr Mitchell:** Why was there so little policy direction from the Department of Education? The Report indicates you were not driving this thing forward. Is this because you have a sectarian division in Northern Ireland and, therefore, you have got more of a hands-off policy or is it a lack of a sense of direction from the Department?

**Mr Haire:** The decision was made in 1998 and came, I think, from my own understanding—I am new to the Department—from a feeling that we could empower the five Education and Library Boards to develop this issue; they have the operational knowledge on the ground and they would understand what to do. We see in the numeracy side that they worked together well and did achieve that at the primary level, but my position is that quality and standards are the bedrock of what the Department is about. That is what we have to be in the Department, fundamentally saying what we are looking for here and leading this work.

**Q20 Mr Mitchell:** Is it safe to leave that to the individual Boards rather than give them a better sense of direction?

**Mr Haire:** I think we have to give them a better sense of direction. I am not going to denigrate the excellent work that many people in the Boards have done because many of them have done very good work. We are reforming the system now, we are moving the five Boards into one system, the Education and Skills Authority, which ministers announced last November, so we are rationalising that way. The Department will clearly have a focus on the policy and the accountability lead, so we are, in a sense, already moving in that direction.

**Q21 Mr Mitchell:** Can you fill in the background for me? I do not know how Northern Ireland fits into the international situation, particularly statistics compared with the Republic, which is obviously the main issue. I see at the end of this period when you spent £40 million, the Report says on page 3 that in 2003–04 English schools outperformed schools in Northern Ireland for the first time. Is that an achievement of spending £40 million?

**Mr Haire:** That was in Key Stage 3 mathematics and a scenario we had recognised we should have greater clarity in that area to work. In Appendix 1 of the Report you will see our position on the PISA system because we wanted to get this benchmark and this puts us generally towards the top of OECD countries.

**Q22 Mr Mitchell:** I noticed that.

**Mr Haire:** Clearly, we need to make sure that we do increase our success in this.

**Q23 Mr Mitchell:** Why did you not focus on the worst performing schools? Which were the worst performing? I read from this they were city centre schools, particularly in Belfast. Why did you not concentrate the money and the effort on them?

**Mr Haire:** I think initially the style was we wanted to see if we could raise all areas. By 2001 both the Department and the Inspectorate were saying, “This is not working as well as it should”, so we started focusing towards those schools. From 2003, we had a Raising Achievement Programme for literacy and a similar one more recently for numeracy, and a considerable part of the budget in literacy now is focused very much on those schools. I think we are seeing signs of achievement in those areas growing more rapidly than the overall average. I think there are good signs of starting improvement in that area, schools that really are turning around. Of course, we should have done that earlier, but I think we did spot it in 2001 and moved the system correctly.

**Q24 Mr Mitchell:** Fill me in because, as I say, I know very little about the system in Northern Ireland, which might be why Dr Davison is staring at me so indignantly, but is this a Catholic-Protestant problem like so much else or are Catholic schools worse at performing than Protestant schools?

**Mr Haire:** I do not. I think there are challenges in schools in both communities which are challenged in both ways. We have seen some interesting, very positive movements in the Nationalist community but also schools in the Unionist community.

**Q25 Mr Mitchell:** But where is the performance best?

**Dr Davison:** We did some interesting work in my previous department in relation to Protestant working class underachievement and we looked at the Noble indicators which are at ward level. In terms of overall socio-economic deprivation, there are a lot more Catholic wards than there would be Protestant wards. In educational attainment at Level 2 it spins the other way: there are a lot more Protestant wards than there are Catholic wards in the bottom 25 or 30 in terms of educational achievement. That is evidence we have of the flow through the schools, where these folk are now out of the schools. At school level I suspect the truth is we have issues on both sides of the religious divide.

**Q26 Mr Mitchell:** Thank you very much, that is an interesting answer. As the Chairman was indicating, how far is the problem of selection? I read from this that the grammar schools are exemplary although you are about to abolish them, I understand, whereas the secondary schools, which presumably are the equivalent to selection of our old modern schools, are in a bit of a mess in turning out inadequate levels of high levels of literacy and numeracy. How far is it a problem of selection of the kind that we have got rid of in most of this country?

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**Mr Haire:** As I mentioned to the Chairman, I think selection does have an impact, and statistics are skewing the problems of secondary, and non-selective schools clearly have an origin in that. I would stress we have got some excellent non-selective schools that are producing very impressive results in this and maybe some of our grammar schools are still producing good results but could be producing even better results. I would emphasise there are excellent schools in both the selective and non-selective areas.

**Q27 Mr Mitchell:** You mentioned the thought that things might improve once you have got a non-selective system, but there is no reason to think that.

**Mr Haire:** The key point is that one has to focus on standards. To move towards the new system, we have to focus on the standards in all schools and pull all schools forward that way. It is a reflection of policy decisions being made on that line. We have to focus on standards in every school and that is one of the stronger reasons why the Department will focus very much on standards and must be absolutely key because that is the only way we can drive standards and make sure that overall figures can continue to improve.

**Q28 Kitty Ussher:** If I could perhaps turn your attention to paragraph 1.12 of the NAO Report on page 10 where it refers to the evidence session we had four years ago back in 2002. I do not know whether it was you, but I presume your predecessor assured the Committee “of [the Department’s] earnest intention to deal urgently with the long tail of underachievement in literacy and numeracy”. Do you believe that has been dealt with urgently four years on?

**Mr Haire:** I think that we still have a long way to go here. I think we have done a great deal of work in trying to get systems into the schools to get better use of data to improve the quality of the learning. I think we have also worked on a wider range of programmes of trying to make sure the curriculum is relevant to all, that it is appropriate, including improving early years interventions to improve the opportunities and the skills of young people coming into the education system. Then at the same time we have done a lot of work now with the extended schools and trying to link the schools to the communities. One of the issues that your colleague has raised is in many of these areas of underachievement trying to get education valued in communities. We have got clear signs from our research there is a value and we need to connect the schools more effectively to particular communities.

**Q29 Kitty Ussher:** I understand that work has been done. Perhaps I could ask you more specifically about the previous sentence in that paragraph, which says that in 2002 your Department “accepted it was indefensible that around 20% of children who leave school in Northern Ireland after 12 years of compulsory education should be unable to read and

write to a standard that would equip them to deal with . . .” normal life. What is the corresponding figure now if it was 20% in 2002?

**Mr Haire:** Since we are saying that Level 5 is the level, we still have that problem at this level even though we have seen an improvement.

**Q30 Kitty Ussher:** It is 20% still?

**Mr Haire:** We still argue that is indefensible. We have to get that better. We have improved the figures over this period, but it is indefensible.

**Q31 Kitty Ussher:** It was indefensible in 2002, it is indefensible in 2006. How do we know it will not remain indefensible in 2010?

**Mr Haire:** Clearly, we have to get better work in the schools, better focus on data and better school achievement particularly in those secondary schools and with Boards. That is the focus and that is my determination to do that.

**Q32 Kitty Ussher:** How would you like us to hold you to account? Should we ask you that question again in four years’ time and this time the answer will be different, or is there a different question that should be asked?

**Mr Haire:** Clearly, if I can prove that I have got the mechanisms in place that have shifted that on in the right direction, whether I have achieved my 20%—this is a major problem throughout countries and getting that right down to that level or even beyond that level is a problem—if I can prove to you that I have put in place programmes that have got clear objectives and I can prove how they work, that is what I should be held to account for.

**Q33 Kitty Ussher:** Is it the putting in place of the programmes or getting the results at the other end by 2010?

**Mr Haire:** If I do not achieve those, at least I have to explain why I did not and what were the social problems there or other issues. But my determination is to achieve.

**Q34 Kitty Ussher:** What do you think is achievable by 2010 if it is 20% now and was 20% four years ago?

**Mr Haire:** For Level 5, whether I can achieve another 3 or 4% of that, I do not know. That is why I have a review in place to tell me what is realistic and that is to be reported to me by November.

**Q35 Kitty Ussher:** At least we have a process in train to get a realistic target.

**Mr Haire:** Yes.

**Q36 Kitty Ussher:** We are concerned on this Committee obviously with the taxpayer getting the best value for the resources they put in. It seems to me blindingly clear that money has gone in, but nothing has come out, at least no negligible result has come out the other end. If you take this, the target we were just talking about, the Chairman mentioned a figure of £40 million that has been spent. I see that is specific programmes and perhaps

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the overall amount of money being spent on literacy and numeracy is a little higher. You said in answer to that question that £26 million had been spent on—  
**Mr Haire:** The Reading Recovery scheme.

**Q37 Kitty Ussher:**—which has shown some fairly good results. I am concerned perhaps with the other £14 million and your answer, which was dealing with structures in the classroom which seemed a little vague to a non-expert. I do not know if you can amplify on that and perhaps it would be interesting to explain where the £14 million went.

**Mr Haire:** Can I say first of all, there has been achievement at Key Stage 2, we have seen an improvement of 8% in figures there. Likewise, at Key Stage 3 literacy we had an improvement of 5%. In numeracy we have seen significant progress, as the tables show, over this period. There has been progression. The point of 20% is when we are getting towards 14 year-olds, particularly in numeracy, we have a major challenge. You asked about the £14 million, that has been used to put in place numeracy and literacy co-ordinators in all schools to teach them how to use the data so they can compare where they stand and to look at different techniques of teaching and learning in the process. In numeracy it has been particularly looked at in applying the new curricula and ways of teaching in that area, so it has been done in research. That is the main way in which we have supported schools and the evaluations which we have had from the steering groups, and quite detailed evaluations, have shown very positive feedback from teachers. They found it very useful, it has given them new approaches and they feel more confident about what they are doing. It has shown progress, but there is still a long way to go here. That is the challenge. It is a very difficult area to keep on but one where we need more precision now, and that is what we are determined to do.

**Q38 Kitty Ussher:** Just so I understand the £14 million has been spent putting people into schools to research what works well or is it teaching support?

**Mr Haire:** It is getting the teachers in the schools and giving them the skills, so you will have a maths teacher who will be the numeracy co-ordinator for the whole school and will know how to use the techniques and lead his or her colleagues in that process, and likewise in literacy, so it is the classroom giving the teachers the skills to actually implement these programmes and to work out which best way one can educate.

**Q39 Kitty Ussher:** So it would be expected to yield results hopefully over time?

**Mr Haire:** Yes indeed, and I would point to results here but clearly we need to go further.

**Q40 Kitty Ussher:** Okay, I read from the Report that you decided not to adopt a top-down blanket approach like that which has been adopted in England on numeracy and literacy. Do you now regret that decision? Do you think it should have been more top down?

**Mr Haire:** I think looking at this process we may well have benefited from a taking a stronger central lead. What actually happened was the numeracy team in the boards put together a good central process and that seemed to work. We did not do as formal a process in literacy partly because we have got a very strong tradition in the schools and we spend a lot of time on literacy. We did not, for example, feel we had to do a Literacy Hour because the Inspectorate was telling us the schools were doing even more than that in literacy. What I think I learned from this Report and from the work I have done in this area, and what I am asking Dr Davison to research into further, is that we have to look very seriously at primary frameworks and processing and seeing are there things that we can learn there so there is greater clarity to teachers on exactly the outcomes they are to achieve.

**Q41 Kitty Ussher:** You can say that as a Department rather than devolving it individually to schools?

**Mr Haire:** Yes, I think that is a key point for us and we recognise in the Report that is what we must do.

**Q42 Kitty Ussher:** A final question, you have implied a couple of times that there may be social factors at the end that mean you cannot raise attainment to 100% and I guess—and I do not want to put words into your mouth—that almost implies there are some children you cannot work with to the extent you would like to. I find that rather surprising. I would have thought the purpose of schools was precisely to be able to break the barrier between background and attainment. I make the blindingly obvious point, although I do understand it is changing in Northern Ireland, that a huge proportion of your kids will have English as their first language which is the main social barrier to reading and writing, although the proportion who do not is rising it is still very, very small compared to, say, London. And so I wanted you to unpack that remark about social factors. I would like to perhaps challenge you on that.

**Mr Haire:** On social factors obviously from the work recently done in 2003, I think we recognise that some schools have to fight against atmospheres or attitudes about education where communities do not value education so much and who do not see opportunities there as strongly as other areas and young people who do not see education as a way forward to the same degree as others. I think those are major challenges. There are challenges in that we have inner city problems, as everywhere, in that process where young people's attitudes and peer pressure may not be very conducive to improving education. Behind that we have got also, as I say, excellent schools who put in place very powerful education and they break that tradition. The point is it is harder for them in certain areas to do that than in others. That is the point I was making. I would also make the point that we have areas where for some groups with learning disabilities it is more difficult to achieve in that area, but we are very committed to try to make sure that we include them.

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**Q43 Kitty Ussher:** I simply wanted to encourage you to overcome those challenges rather than accept them.

**Mr Haire:** Absolutely.

**Kitty Ussher:** Thank you, my time is up.

**Chairman:** Richard Bacon?

**Q44 Mr Bacon:** May I start, Mr Haire, by saying when I visited Northern Ireland a few months ago, initially because I wanted to look at the way in which the Belfast City Cancer Hospital contract had been let, I took the opportunity, courtesy of the Comptroller and Auditor General of Northern Ireland Audit Office, who very helpfully arranged the programme, to visit to a couple of schools in Northern Ireland as well—the Aquinas Diocesan Grammar School and Wellington College. I have to say I found them extremely impressive, both led by extremely able head teachers and obviously turning out terrific results. What particularly interested me about them, which is mildly broader than the scope of this Report but if you may indulge me I would like ask about this, was the way in which those two contracts were let. It became very obvious that whereas in the case of Wellington College where they had been consulted and asked what they wanted and then at the last minute that process was ignored and they were told, “Here is your L-shaped school from off-the-shelf, so to speak, take it or leave it,” whereas at Aquinas School the teachers in the school, the head teacher particularly and the governors, had much more say over what was to happen. Even though they were both for £7 million to £8 million and they were both designed for 700 to 800 pupils there were vastly different outcomes which are not changeable in the case of Wellington College. Although Wellington College is still an excellent school, it now has to cope with these huge difficulties which are the result of not listening to the people on ground, particularly the head teacher and the team there with their own ideas. My question is have you learnt the lessons from that deeply within the DNA of your Department? After I visited those two schools my blood was left boiling by the stories I was being told.

**Mr Haire:** My understanding is that Wellington was an early Pathfinder process for the schooling in Northern Ireland and indeed this problem came about. We now have a stronger commitment to inclusion of the professionals in the process.

**Q45 Mr Bacon:** When you say the professionals, you do not mean the quantity surveyors, you mean the people who are actually going to run the school?

**Mr Haire:** Absolutely. I have been in other schools, St Genevieve’s—

**Q46 Mr Bacon:** Which part of Consultation 101 would not tell you to do that as a matter of basic common sense anyway?

**Mr Haire:** I am afraid I do not know the detail of why Wellington went the way it went. It was considerably before my time but I quite agree that it is absolutely crucial. I was talking to one head teacher and she said getting the right size of corridor

reduces friction and discipline issues by about 60% in her classes. It is such an obvious point. You are absolutely right, we have to get them involved because they know and also we encourage new heads as they become involved in new schools and design to go and look at the best opportunities to learn.

**Q47 Mr Bacon:** When you want to show them a good example you send them to Aquinas Diocesan Grammar School, do you?

**Mr Haire:** To many other schools as well.

**Q48 Mr Bacon:** My question was has your Department learnt those lessons deeply?

**Mr Haire:** I certainly understand that it has, yes.

**Q49 Mr Bacon:** May I come on to the specifics of this Report and particularly paragraph 1.8 where in the third bullet point on page 9, but also in the first column there under the reference to Key Stage 2 it says the target for mathematics remained at 80% for 2004 but was reduced for 2006 and similarly Key Stage 3: “The Key Stage 3 targets were also revised down by the Department.” Why were the targets revised down?

**Mr Haire:** Could I ask Dr Browne perhaps to come in on this issue.

**Dr Browne:** As Mr Haire mentioned earlier on, when the initial targets were set they were set on the basis of provisional information.

**Q50 Mr Bacon:** Provisional information about?

**Dr Browne:** About key stage tests. The information was only first coming through and the targets were initially set on—

**Q51 Mr Bacon:** I am sorry, information about what, how well people were going to do?

**Dr Browne:** No, the first set of results had come in on the actual key stage tests. They were only provisional results but we had to set targets at that point in time. Those targets were set on the basis of those provisional results and when the subsequent results came in, it was clear that those targets were extremely challenging and it was felt at the time that the targets should be revised to make them achievable.

**Q52 Mr Bacon:** What you are saying is on the basis of the first set of results it was okay and on the basis of the second set of results it was not okay. Is that not what you are saying?

**Dr Browne:** No, I think—

**Q53 Mr Bacon:** Is this not just basically a slightly cynical attempt to hide the fact that you were not achieving the targets?

**Dr Browne:** As Mr Haire explained, we think that the approach that was taken at that time was not the approach that we would want to take now. We are looking at setting the sort of targets that will provide a stretch, that will be aspirational and that will be credible because they will be maintained and we will

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put the policies in place to work towards them. We do not think the changing around of targets was helpful.

**Q54 Mr Bacon:** So you are not proposing to change them again?

**Dr Browne:** Again, as mentioned earlier, there will be research done around what is achievable and where it is we need to focus our effort—

**Q55 Mr Bacon:** Dr Browne, my question was very simple: you are not proposing to change them? Admittedly, I did not ask it in the form of a question but I hoped I had an interrogative flavour to my voice. Let me ask the question again: are you proposing to change the targets again? Your answer was not, “No, we are not going to change the targets again, we will leave them static,” you came out with some sort of other talk which made it sound to me like you are going to keep it under review. Is this a moving goal post as to what the targets actually are?

**Mr Haire:** What I have said is we have moved round, as I said to your colleague. I do not think what has been done in the last couple of years has been credible. We have moved them around in this process. What I have asked Dr Davison to do is to look fundamentally at what the basis is—

**Q56 Mr Bacon:** The basis?

**Mr Haire:** The basis of why we set targets, what approach has been taken, and to come back to me and say are the present targets right or is there another set of targets that we have to be clear about and which we believe are firm and clear and which we can defend. As I said, I am not satisfied with this movement over this couple of years and coming in I want to know what are the targets I am setting and then more importantly what are the targets I am asking schools to contribute in that way. We do need to fundamentally take stock in this area. It may be that we will find the targets are correct but, if not, I at least want to make sure they are convincing targets and I can explain to the educational world why these are the targets and how it affects the students.

**Q57 Mr Bacon:** But it is possible they will move again?

**Mr Haire:** It is possible. If these movements which we are seeing, which as I say I look at and I am concerned about, are not justifiable, clearly I have to set clear targets.

**Q58 Mr Bacon:** Can I ask you a question about grammar schools. We all understand there are particular problems in Northern Ireland in relation to the sectarian divide, but Northern Ireland education is held up as an example usually to everyone else. I do not know the precise figures but anecdotally what one is often told is that Northern Ireland has 2.5% of the schools but 25% of the best performing schools. To an outsider it is curious that you are about to abolish grammar schools.

Obviously this is a policy matter but have you assessed the likely impact of this on literacy and numeracy levels?

**Mr Haire:** I would say it is a policy issue which has been looked at by ministers over a considerable period and been researched over many years coming from Mr McGuinness’ time. We have not done specific research on the issue you said but we work on the basis of working with schools with clear targets that we will make sure the standards keep on continuing to improve because we believe that all schools can achieve effectively in this way and the structure in itself will not determine the results.

**Q59 Mr Bacon:** And yet with a very small proportion of the total number of schools in the United Kingdom you have a remarkable percentage of the best performing schools. You would agree that 2.5% of the schools and 25% of the best performing schools is statistically significant, would you not?

**Mr Haire:** I would. I have not looked at the question of whether that statistic you said—

**Q60 Mr Bacon:** It is about right, is it not?

**Mr Haire:** For example, if you look at our overall GCSE results going down A to G, our scores are lower in Northern Ireland than over Great Britain as a whole.

**Q61 Mr Bacon:** That is because you have a longer tail, is that right?

**Mr Haire:** Or that our education system is not dealing with that tail.

**Q62 Mr Bacon:** You have a longer tail which is not being dealt with.

**Mr Haire:** We are saying that the schools can continue, grammar schools can continue to focus on their academic process and all schools can move forward and improve scores. We believe that we can keep on continuing improving overall outcomes.

**Q63 Mr Bacon:** That will obviously remain to be seen. Can I ask you about the two tables on page 15 and page 16, this is Tables 3 and 4. They seem to show a steady improvement but is that a real improvement or is it just, in effect, a reflection of the ability of teachers to teach to the test, if you like?

**Mr Haire:** Clearly this is assessed by teachers and by using tests and various tasks to make sure that that is carefully monitored by CCEA so there is a quality assurance in that process. We believe it is a robust system which does give us encouraging signs of improvement there.

**Q64 Mr Bacon:** You have got 23%, I think it is, under-achieving at the primary level and yet the way I read Table 7 on page 18 is that by the time you get to the end of Key Stage 3, so I suppose at age 14, it is more like 40%. How do you account for that decline in achievement?

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**Mr Haire:** That table is purely of the secondary—

**Q65 Mr Bacon:** Yes, but is it not the case—

**Mr Haire:**—the grammar schools are not involved in that—

**Q66 Mr Bacon:** I have moved on from grammar schools. I am just talking about Table 7 on page 18 and its reflection of the number of people who appear to be under-achieving at the end of Key Stage 3, which is 14 years of age, which looks to me like about 40% whereas if you look in the previous page, page 16, paragraph 2.8, it says: “Nearly a quarter (23% of children)—around 2,000 girls and 3,500 boys—still leave the primary sector with literacy skills under the standard Level 4 and are therefore likely to struggle with the literacy demands of the post-primary curriculum.” That is when they leave primary and that is 23% but it appears by the time they get to the end of Key Stage 3 at aged 14 it is 40%?

**Mr Haire:** But the table you should be comparing Table 4 with is Table 5 because Table 7 is just purely looking at secondary schools and in a sense Table 5 is bringing together the data from Table 6 and 7.

**Q67 Mr Bacon:** Surely Table 7 is taking into account from 11 to 14, that chunk of three years?

**Mr Haire:** Only in the non-grammar schools.

**Q68 Mr Bacon:** Yes.

**Mr Haire:** 40% of our young people are in grammar school

**Q69 Mr Bacon:** So you are saying it is an unfair comparison?

**Mr Haire:** Yes.

**Mr Bacon:** Fine.

**Chairman:** Mr Davidson?

**Q70 Mr Davidson:** I wonder if we could look at the chart on page 38 which is distribution of proficiency in reading. I am comparing Northern Ireland, Scotland and, by coincidence just beside it, the Republic of Ireland, all of which have got very similar means and yet the tail in Northern Ireland and the top are stretched. Is that the product of a grammar school system whereby those at the top do better and those at the bottom do worse?

**Mr Haire:** We think it would be the result of our selective system.

**Q71 Mr Davidson:** So that children under a selective system at the bottom are going to do worse than they would elsewhere? Fine, thank you. Could I just look at the page before, page 37, where again, comparing the three, here the mean again is pretty similar, the top is actually pretty similar, but the bottom for Northern Ireland again is much longer, and I think that is a question of those who are doing worst are even more left behind. Why is the top not further ahead in way that it is in literacy?

**Mr Haire:** I am sorry, I am not aware if we have got analysis that would give us that level of detail. Dr Browne, is there anything?.

**Dr Browne:** I think part of the explanation for this is looking at the table, this is a table that does not give us raw scores, it is dealing with literacy scores that have gone through a series of statistical manipulations by the OECD, and it is difficult to interpret them in the direct way in which you are interpreting them and compare them across from maths to English.

**Q72 Mr Davidson:** Why is that difficult?

**Dr Browne:** They have each been taken through a series of statistical manipulations.

**Q73 Mr Davidson:** They have all been dealt with the same. Everything will have been dealt with in the same statistical manipulations. Why can comparisons not be made?

**Dr Browne:** In comparing one table across to the other you have to look very carefully at the particular characteristics that emerge from the nature of the tests. It is just very complex.

**Q74 Mr Davidson:** I understand that but if we accept that the pattern that we see in the literacy figures is valid, and that seems to be accepted, the top do better and the worst do worse and yet in grammar schools in Northern Ireland when we turn to the other page, the mathematical one, in fact there is no compensating gain that might balance out the fact that the worst do worse. You do not even have the better doing better here. It seemed to me that that is something that ought to be explained because basically it would seem, comparing the Scottish comprehensive system with the selective Northern Ireland system, there is no compensating gain here for mathematics. Can you clarify that for me?

**Mr Haire:** Only from the figures—and Dr Browne has indicated this—from this Report and from our analysis we have a problem in Key Stage 3 generally at this level. We are not achieving the same success in Key Stage 3 in numeracy as we are in literacy, as I have emphasised. We see that as a problem and a challenge that we have; how do we make mathematics attractive to non-grammar young people.

**Q75 Mr Davidson:** This is a problem that is not faced in Scotland?

**Mr Haire:** I am not aware of the Scottish situation. I am just saying it is an issue that we recognise that we have.

**Q76 Mr Davidson:** Can I just clarify, I see there are no figures here for England at all. I understand that that is because the Department for Education was incapable of producing a statistically valid sample. Is that correct?

**Dr Browne:** I understand there was a problem with that.

**Q77 Mr Davidson:** That perhaps says something about the Department for Education really, does it not, when judging mathematical literacy? Coming back to the question of comparisons, in one of the paragraphs there is an indication that Belfast

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obviously has a substantial number of difficulties and therefore it is unfair to compare it with the rest of the country. How does Belfast compare with, say, Glasgow or Liverpool?

**Mr Haire:** I am sorry, I am not aware of any analysis that has done that comparison. I think it would be a very interesting comparison to do but I am not aware—

**Q78 Mr Davidson:** How long has the Northern Ireland Education Department been in existence?

**Mr Haire:** Ever since the beginning of the—

**Q79 Mr Davidson:** And nobody has thought to do any comparison between Belfast and Glasgow and Liverpool, the cities that are perhaps most equivalent? You have only done comparisons with, what, rural Northern Ireland, have you?

**Mr Haire:** Obviously we have national or international comparisons, but I am sorry I am not aware of any details.

**Q80 Mr Davidson:** Is anybody that works for you aware of anything?

**Mr Haire:** No.

**Q81 Mr Davidson:** Does it not seem astonishing to you that you have nothing against which to benchmark your work in Belfast? You have made no effort to benchmark your achievements in Belfast against the nearest comparable cities?

**Mr Haire:** I know that my predecessors have and we regularly meet our Scottish colleagues. I do not know whether we—

**Q82 Mr Davidson:** What do you talk about then?

**Mr Haire:** We talk about a range of issues but I am not aware that that issue particularly of inner city schools has been on the agenda.

**Q83 Mr Davidson:** I find it difficult to imagine that you meet with your Scottish equivalents and you do not actually discuss how well yours are doing as compared to theirs are doing?

**Mr Haire:** I would agree with you it is a very relevant part of the agenda.

**Q84 Mr Davidson:** Had it not occurred to you until I mentioned it today then?

**Mr Haire:** I had not been involved in organising such a meeting.

**Q85 Mr Davidson:** Maybe we should chat more often! It does, quite frankly, seem pretty astounding to me, I must confess, that there are no comparable statistics you have looked at. Can I clarify whether or not you believe that statistics will exist within the Northern Ireland Education Department that would be comparable, if you bothered to do so, with those of Liverpool and Glasgow?

**Dr Browne:** Chairman, we do make comparisons with other parts of the UK, particularly England and Wales, less so Scotland because there are different examination systems and a greater difficulty of comparability. We would not tend to

take those down to a city level, they are done more at a global level. We have made some comparisons at various stages with performance of LEAs.

**Q86 Mr Davidson:** Let me just clarify this then; my understanding is that one of the main determinants or indicators of how children are going to do is poverty and one of the lead indicators for that is free school meals. Unless I am mistaken, you would find it difficult to find a city the size of Belfast anywhere else in Northern Ireland to do valid comparisons with, so what have you been doing your comparisons with?

**Dr Browne:** I think some of the comparisons and some of the learning that there would have been around this would have been through the sorts of meetings that Will Haire has described but there would also be contact between the various inspectorates that would look at approaches that work in different areas. They meet on a regular basis.

**Q87 Mr Davidson:** How do they know they work? If you are identifying the approaches that work, how do you identify how well the different approaches are working if you do not actually compare the results?

**Dr Browne:** We do compare in a number of areas. We do have research, for example, in early years to compare things in Northern Ireland as compared to England and we have used our research strategy and our research monies to ensure that we participate in OECD surveys and other surveys to give us the international and national benchmarks. We have not done the specific stuff on cities you have asked for.

**Q88 Mr Davidson:** Chairman, I wonder if I could ask the Committee to request such comparisons as can be made between Belfast and Glasgow and Liverpool, in particular, to try and have a comparison about areas of multiple deprivation in those cities to try and ascertain whether or not Belfast is doing better or worse or pretty much the same.<sup>1</sup> It would seem to me that would be a public service if that was done in order that we can make meaningful comparisons. I wonder if I could turn to paragraph 4.12. This is about the targeting of resources and it mentions here that funding has been “directed at those schools with the highest level of need through the targeting social need factor within the formula for funding schools.” If I come along to one of these schools as a normal human being and ask to see the formula, is the amount that has been added because of social need identifiable or is the formula so complicated that nobody can understand it?

**Dr Browne:** The amount is identifiable and is made available by each Education and Library Board in its published budget statement.

**Q89 Mr Davidson:** Fine, it is a clear supplement and addition. There is no difficulty about identifying that at all? Presumably in that case relating to the rest of

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<sup>1</sup> Ev 12–17

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that paragraph things like in the bottom sentence “targeted support for schools with low attainment levels in mathematics”, all of that is perfectly clear and straightforward and any parent would understand that right away? Is it?

**Dr Browne:** There are a number of ways in which resource is targeted and one of them is through the formula which you describe. The other is through particular earmarked amounts which go to support particular programmes like the literacy and numeracy strategies and the School Improvement Programme. The annual budget formula is published and available at school level.

**Q90 Mr Davidson:** Why I am asking this is having been a chair of an education committee I was always aware that while we would instruct things to be sent there the monies did not always arrive there because the formulas were then so complicated that staff who did not wish to co-operate could lose the money somewhere else. What I am seeking to clarify is whether or not there is any possibility of that happening here?

**Dr Browne:** In terms of specific earmarked funds, it has to be used for the purpose for which it was allocated. That is tracked through to schools. Those monies would be available to schools and should be capable of being traced through to schools so management is aware of how much they have got for those particular initiatives.

**Q91 Mr Davidson:** Okay. The final point I would want to seek to clarify is you mentioned earlier on, unless I am mistaken, about the lack of support and value that is placed on education in working-class Protestant communities in particular. Given the length of the tail in Northern Ireland, would it be fair for me to say that Protestant working-class children get a worse deal in Northern Ireland than they would in Scotland?

**Mr Haire:** Can I first of all say that while we have some evidence to indicate that, we have also done research that shows that the aspirations of many of these areas towards education are strong and people are very keen to get an education. There is a problem about often the social environment in which they live is blocking that.

**Q92 Mr Davidson:** Poor children.

**Mr Haire:** As you say, I have not come across comparative material with Scotland and I think it is a valid area of comparison.

**Q93 Mr Davidson:** Let us just go back to what you said before, I am just trying to be clear. We have accepted, have we, that the tail is longer in Northern Ireland, so if you are at the bottom you are getting a worse deal in Northern Ireland than you are in Scotland? You have also agreed that of the Protestant children as compared to the Catholic children, the Protestant children are getting a worse deal than the Catholic children. If you put those two things together does it not therefore follow that

Protestant children in Northern Ireland are being less well favoured by the overall system, not just by the schools, than they would be in Scotland?

**Dr Browne:** If I could make a general comment. The key main determinant of educational achievement is deprivation, and the deprivation levels are higher in the Catholic community. If you look at the overall levels of achievement you will find they are less high in the Catholic community because of that higher level of deprivation, but within the Protestant community there is a particular concentration and particular difficulty with those in the Protestant community that come from working-class deprived areas and they will have particularly low attainment. When you bring it together, the Protestant and Catholic population as a whole—

**Q94 Mr Davidson:** I am specifically not bringing it to the population as a whole. I am talking about those who are at the bottom of the pile.

**Dr Browne:** There is a particular problem. The levels of achievement are lowest amongst the Protestant working class and that is linked into a whole range of issues around the values placed on education, the changing industrial structure in many of these Protestant working class areas where the routes to work previously available are no longer there and the whole attitude towards education is different and maybe there is not the same support and emphasis and value on education as there is in other areas.

**Chairman:** Mr Mitchell has a supplementary.

**Q95 Mr Mitchell:** I just wanted to follow up something you have just been touching on and Dr Robson Davison dealt with. There is in all the old, declining industrial cities and towns a real problem with, I do not know what you call it, “lumpen proletariat” attitudes, but I assume it was easier in Northern Ireland for Protestant people to get a job in the old industrial sector than for a Catholic to get a job. In other words, families had been assured that their kids would go into jobs even though that tradition has been broken and there has therefore been no push from the parents to get an education, to get qualifications, to get on. This is certainly what we have found in Grimsby where people could go and earn high wages in the fishing industry and therefore left school early and did not want qualifications. Is this a common problem to all industrial areas?

**Dr Davison:** In the work I mentioned earlier that would describe the analysis in the areas in Belfast. What ministers have done is put together a package called *Renewing Communities* which is investing £20 plus million, particularly in North Belfast and the Greater Shankill, where the bulk of that funding will go towards education, training and health with a major effort at the school end of things to try and reinvigorate attitudes towards education and reinvigorate standards in schools.

**Q96 Mr Mitchell:** So it is a question of programmes like this reaching the parents more than the kids so they can give them some push?

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**Dr Davison:** Or as well as.

**Mr Mitchell:** Sorry, it is as well as. Thank you.

**Chairman:** That concludes our hearing. I know that you are new to this Department but there are some worrying aspects in evidence that has come before us, in particular. Obviously your education system has been good at the top end and nobody denies that, but we have got almost a quarter of 11 year olds leaving primary school ill-equipped to meet the

literacy and numeracy standards at secondary level education, a staggering 40% of secondary school pupils failing to achieve the expected standards in English and Mathematics, and there is a massive gender gap in many areas of performance, so I am afraid we are probably going to issue a report that your mother would not have been pleased with had it have been one of your school reports. Thank you, Mr Haire.

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 Supplementary memorandum submitted by the Department of Education for Northern Ireland
 

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Question 88 (Mr Ian Davidson): *Performance of schools in GB cities compared to Belfast*

## SECTION 1. PERFORMANCE OF SCHOOLS IN GB CITIES COMPARABLE TO BELFAST

The use of entitlement to free school meals is widely accepted as an indicator of educational disadvantage. In 2005–06, the proportion of pupils at post-primary schools in Belfast who were entitled to free school meals was 22%. Newcastle upon Tyne and Leicester had very similar proportions of pupils eligible for free school meals (21% and 22% respectively); in Glasgow the proportion was 32% and in Liverpool 30%.

Key Stage 1 figures for England relate to a different age group and are not comparable to Key Stage 1 figures for Northern Ireland. Scottish figures on attainment up to age 14 are not comparable to those for England and Northern Ireland. However, Scottish National Qualification figures can be compared with GCSE figures for England and Northern Ireland. Accordingly in Tables 1 and 2 below, Key Stage 2, 3 and GCSE comparisons are given with cities in England, and Scottish National Qualification comparisons for Glasgow.

The figures need to be interpreted with caution, since similar levels of free school meal entitlement do not necessarily imply that all other background factors associated with educational performance are equal, in particular, the proportion of pupils in Leicester whose first language is other than English is very high,<sup>1</sup> which might reasonably be expected to make its results worse than Belfast and Newcastle. Another point to note is that Belfast grammar schools attract pupils from outside the city and this will tend to enhance the overall post-primary figures for Belfast.

**The figures for all schools** (Table 1) show that Belfast generally achieves results that are at least on a par with those of the other cities. The marked exception to this is Key Stage 2 attainment in Liverpool in English, where 75% of pupils achieved the expected level compared to 68% in Belfast.

**The figures for schools with the most socially deprived pupils** (Table 2) show that in these schools Belfast achieves results that are worse than Liverpool at each stage but particularly at Key Stage 3. Belfast generally achieves results that are at least on a par with Leicester and Newcastle, but at Key Stage 3 its attainment in maths is much poorer than that of these two cities. Belfast's attainment in GCSE English is very much poorer than the equivalent for Glasgow, though in maths Belfast and Glasgow are on a par.

**Analysing schools with the most socially deprived pupils** (Table 3): in English, pupils perform much less well in Belfast than in Glasgow, but this is much more marked for pupils at non-Catholic schools; whilst in maths, pupils at Catholic schools perform slightly better in Belfast than in Glasgow, whereas pupils at non-Catholic schools perform very much worse in Belfast than in Glasgow, in summary, in socially deprived schools pupils at non-Catholic schools in Belfast do much less well than their counterparts at non-Catholic schools in Glasgow (and much less well than their counterparts at Catholic schools in Belfast).

The Committee may be interested to learn that over the last three years some 36 headteachers from Belfast and Londonderry have been participating in a project "Leadership in the Front Line" involving their counterparts in cities in Britain including Manchester, Cardiff, and Liverpool in order to learn from each other, share best practice and develop approaches.

The Department has made contact with the Liverpool local authority to ask if they have any strategies or interventions in place which they feel have contributed to its higher performance. Liverpool has advised that:

- the Primary National Strategy (PNS) has been followed closely and the Leadership Programme within PNS has been particularly helpful;
- particular success has been seen with the Intensifying Support Programme;

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<sup>1</sup> 45% of pupils in primary schools and 43% of pupils in secondary schools.

- over the past two years investment to improve learning has concentrated on the Mind Friendly Learning and Oracy and Assessment for Learning projects which are run by external consultants; and
- for two years Liverpool has been part of the pilot New Relationship with Schools. This has sharpened adviser/inspector discussions with schools.

As part of the ongoing review of the School Improvement Programme in Northern Ireland, (which includes literacy and numeracy strategies), developments outside the province will be taken into account.

**Table 1**

ATTAINMENT<sup>1</sup> IN ENGLISH AND MATHS: WHOLE CITY<sup>2</sup> COMPARISONS LEVEL

<i>Level</i>	<i>Subject</i>	<i>Belfast</i>	<i>Leicester</i>	<i>Newcastle upon Tyne</i>	<i>Liverpool</i>	<i>Glasgow</i>
Free School Meal Entitlement		22%	22%	21%	30%	32%
Key Stage 2: <sup>3</sup> proportion (%) achieving expected level (4) or above	English	68	62	69	75	na
	Maths	72	66	71	75	na
Key Stage 3: <sup>4</sup> proportion (%) achieving expected level (5) or above	English	72	65	59	71	na
	Maths	69	65	64	66	na
GCSE/Scottish National Qualifications: proportion (%) achieving A*-C <sup>5</sup>	English	67	49	50	51	60
	Maths	60	43	43	43	33

<sup>1</sup> Excluding independent schools.

<sup>2</sup> Local authority districts for England.

<sup>3</sup> Teacher assessments.

<sup>4</sup> Tests.

<sup>5</sup> Scottish Standard Grades 1–3 or equivalent.

**Table 2**

ATTAINMENT<sup>1</sup> IN ENGLISH AND MATHS IN SCHOOLS WITH 40% OR MORE OF PUPILS ELIGIBLE FOR FREE SCHOOL MEALS

<i>Level</i>	<i>Subject</i>	<i>Belfast</i>	<i>Leicester</i>	<i>Newcastle upon Tyne</i>	<i>Liverpool</i>	<i>Glasgow</i>
Overall Free School Meal Entitlement in these schools		52%	48%	57%	52%	49%
Key Stage 2: <sup>2</sup> proportion (%) achieving expected level (4) or above	English	53	50	55	61	na
	Maths	57	52	56	63	na
Key Stage 3: <sup>3</sup> proportion (%) achieving expected level (5) or above	English	40	32	28	56	na
	Maths	28	39	39	50	na
GCSE/Scottish National Qualifications: proportion (%) achieving A*-C <sup>4</sup>	English	27	29	18	31	50
	Maths	21	23	11	27	21

<sup>1</sup> Excluding independent schools.

<sup>2</sup> Teacher assessments.

<sup>3</sup> Tests.

<sup>4</sup> Scottish Standard Grades 1–3 or equivalent.

**Table 3**

ATTAINMENT<sup>1</sup> IN GCSE/SCOTTISH NATIONAL QUALIFICATIONS: PROPORTION (%) ACHIEVING A\*-C<sup>2</sup> IN SCHOOLS WITH 40% OR MORE OF PUPILS ELIGIBLE FOR FREE SCHOOL MEALS: A COMPARISON OF BELFAST AND GLASGOW BY MANAGEMENT TYPE OF SCHOOL

<i>Subject</i>	<i>City</i>	<i>Management type</i>		
English	Glasgow	Catholic	Non-denominational	All (with > 40% FSME)
		49.9	49.9	49.9
	Belfast	Catholic Maintained	Controlled	All (with > 40% FSME)
		28.8	17.3	27.4
Maths	Glasgow	Catholic	Non-denominational	All (with > 40% FSME)
		21.5	20.1	20.6
	Belfast	Catholic Maintained	Controlled	All (with > 40% FSME)
		24.0	4.4	20.9

<sup>1</sup> Excluding independent schools.

<sup>2</sup> Scottish Standard Grades 1–3 or equivalent.

## SECTION 2. LITERACY AND NUMERACY IN NON-SELECTIVE SCHOOLS IN NORTHERN IRELAND FOR CONTROLLED, MAINTAINED AND INTEGRATED SCHOOLS

Table 4 below gives Northern Ireland figures on the same basis as Table 7 of the NIAO report.

**Table 4**

PERCENTAGE OF NON-SELECTIVE SECONDARY SCHOOL PUPILS ACHIEVING VARIOUS LEVELS AT KEY STAGE 3 ENGLISH

(a) Controlled schools<sup>2</sup>. (These are attended mainly by Protestant pupils.)

	< 5	5	6	7	> level 5
1998–99	44.51	31.36	16.46	3.79	51.61
1999–2000	43.84	30.34	18.31	3.44	52.09
2000–01	39.21	34.60	18.45	4.51	57.56
2001–02	36.56	32.50	22.08	5.20	59.78
2002–03	37.47	35.71	19.07	4.37	59.15
2003–04*	37.44	36.40	17.45	5.08	58.94
2004–05	36.74	33.05	19.44	7.28	59.78

(b) Maintained schools. (These are attended mainly by Roman Catholic pupils.)

	< 5	5	6	7	> level 5
1998–99	45.42	31.03	16.19	4.41	51.63
1999–2000	43.94	31.95	16.89	3.80	52.64
2000–01	41.99	33.45	18.08	4.35	55.89
2001–02	39.04	33.54	20.08	4.77	58.40
2002–03	40.87	33.61	18.04	4.81	56.46
2003–04*	41.24	34.89	16.25	3.97	55.12
2004–05	37.56	34.89	17.54	6.57	59.00

<sup>2</sup> Excluding Controlled Integrated schools.

(c) Integrated schools. (These are attended by both Protestant and Roman Catholic pupils in broadly equal numbers.)

	< 5	5	6	7	> level 5
1998–99	37.04	35.29	19.05	6.63	60.98
1999–2000	34.19	31.99	24.12	7.30	63.41
2000–01	28.92	35.57	25.83	7.78	69.18
2001–02	32.22	35.44	25.10	4.65	65.19
2002–03	32.33	38.73	21.15	5.24	65.13
2003–04*	35.24	38.03	18.99	3.90	60.92
2004–05	34.01	35.49	19.05	7.88	62.41

\* Due to Industrial action Key Stage 3 test data are not available for a small number of schools.

Table 5 below gives Northern Ireland figures on the same basis as Table 13 of the NIAO report.

**Table 5**

PERCENTAGE OF NON-SELECTIVE SECONDARY SCHOOL PUPILS ACHIEVING LEVEL 5 OR ABOVE AT KEY STAGE 3 MATHS

(a) Controlled schools<sup>3</sup>. (These are attended mainly by Protestant pupils.)

	<i>Boys</i>	<i>Girls</i>
1998–99	54.79	59.70
1999–2000	47.90	55.60
2000–01	57.29	55.53
2001–02	57.38	63.55
2002–03	56.08	58.06
2003–04*	56.28	60.52
2004–05	53.11	59.28

(b) Maintained schools. (These are attended mainly by Roman Catholic pupils.)

	<i>Boys</i>	<i>Girls</i>
1998–99	48.77	56.77
1999–2000	43.66	52.54
2000–01	47.35	55.52
2001–02	54.18	60.84
2002–03	50.04	56.69
2003–04*	52.37	60.15
2004–05	50.09	60.87

(c) Integrated schools. (These are attended by both Protestant and Roman Catholic pupils in broadly equal numbers.)

	<i>Boys</i>	<i>Girls</i>
1998–99	61.15	61.09
1999–2000	58.64	58.64
2000–01	62.65	62.63
2001–02	68.92	66.58
2002–03	61.98	59.85
2003–04*	62.99	62.26
2004–05	60.73	61.89

\* Due to Industrial action Key Stage 3 test data are not available for a small number of schools.

<sup>3</sup> Excluding Controlled Integrated schools.

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**SECTION 3. LITERACY AND NUMERACY IN NON-SELECTIVE SCHOOLS IN BELFAST FOR CONTROLLED, MAINTAINED AND INTEGRATED SCHOOLS**

Table 6 below gives figures for Belfast schools on the same basis as the Northern Ireland figures in Table 7 of the NIAO report.

**Table 6**
**PERCENTAGE OF NON-SELECTIVE SECONDARY SCHOOL PUPILS ACHIEVING VARIOUS LEVELS AT KEY STAGE 3 ENGLISH—BELFAST SCHOOLS**

(a) Controlled schools<sup>4</sup>. (These are attended mainly by Protestant pupils.)

	< 5	5	6	7	> level 5
1998–99	55.74	24.08	10.93	2.01	37.01
1999–2000	52.00	24.94	14.30	1.88	41.13
2000–01	48.75	29.71	13.27	2.49	45.46
2001–02	42.22	31.24	18.82	3.26	53.32
2002–03	52.07	31.91	10.39	0.25	42.55
2003–04*	46.66	32.75	10.83	1.74	45.32
2004–05	48.68	30.61	13.32	1.85	45.78

(b) Maintained schools. (These are attended mainly by Roman Catholic pupils.)

	< 5	5	6	7	> level 5
1998–99	46.43	26.93	20.26	2.46	49.65
1999–2000	51.75	27.30	13.06	2.67	43.03
2000–01	50.12	30.66	14.78	1.39	46.82
2001–02	43.15	32.33	19.88	1.76	53.96
2002–03	49.85	31.39	12.99	1.88	46.27
2003–04*	49.49	35.73	9.06	1.48	46.27
2004–05	46.21	34.94	12.21	1.82	48.97

(c) Integrated schools. (These are attended by both Protestant and Roman Catholic pupils in broadly equal numbers.)

	< 5	5	6	7	> level 5
1998–99	14.29	44.44	33.33	4.76	82.54
1999–2000	43.15	36.51	17.43	1.24	55.19
2000–01	32.79	35.22	26.72	2.83	64.78
2001–02	44.88	38.58	14.17	1.57	54.33
2002–03	32.05	42.47	20.08	4.63	67.18
2003–04*	45.24	40.08	10.32	1.19	51.59
2004–05	41.60	36.00	13.60	4.40	54.00

\* Due to Industrial action Key Stage 3 test data are not available for a small number of schools.

Table 7 below gives figures for Belfast schools on the same basis as the Northern Ireland figures in Table 13 of the NIAO report.

**Table 7**
**PERCENTAGE OF NON-SELECTIVE SECONDARY SCHOOL PUPILS ACHIEVING LEVEL 5 OR ABOVE AT KEY STAGE 3 MATHS—BELFAST SCHOOLS**

(a) Controlled schools<sup>5</sup>. (These are attended mainly by Protestant pupils.)

	<i>Boys</i>	<i>Girls</i>
1998–99	34.49	39.10
1999–2000	36.03	38.34
2000–01	33.91	38.05

<sup>4</sup> Excluding Controlled Integrated schools.

<sup>5</sup> Excluding Controlled Integrated schools.

2001–02	39.57	47.94
2002–03	34.55	41.43
2003–04*	32.25	48.79
2004–05	33.42	45.90

(b) Maintained schools. (These are attended mainly by Roman Catholic pupils.)

	<i>Boys</i>	<i>Girls</i>
1998–99	36.68	48.06
1999–2000	27.31	41.21
2000–01	36.32	51.08
2001–02	39.63	50.74
2002–03	35.60	47.24
2003–04*	39.11	53.07
2004–05	32.35	51.98

(c) Integrated schools. (These are attended by both Protestant and Roman Catholic pupils in broadly equal numbers.)

	<i>Boys</i>	<i>Girls</i>
1998–99	46.15	45.83
1999–2000	57.55	54.90
2000–01	59.15	53.77
2001–02	71.71	71.57
2002–03	57.78	52.80
2003–04*	47.89	58.56
2004–05	51.97	56.12

\* Due to Industrial action Key Stage 3 test data are not available for a small number of schools.

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

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

#### COMMITTEE SUGGESTIONS

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

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

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

#### CONCLUSIONS

1. Mr Haire, when challenged that “the goalposts were being moved”, failed to make clear that the assessment arrangements which generate the data are themselves being radically changed. This failure would preclude the transparency that would enable the Committee to hold the Permanent Secretary to account at a future date (vide question of Kitty Ussher MP).

2. Mr Haire quite erroneously described Project Follow Through as “a particular scheme in American which runs a small number of schools which they (PACE) are attracted to”.

3. This is quite a misleading description of the project which involved 75,000 children in 170 communities over a period of 30 years and was the most professionally evaluated research costing over \$1 billion. It was specifically directed at children in socially deprived and disadvantaged areas. The report ran to seven volumes. Mr Haire also asserted that “I think our research has answered those questions and those concerns”. The nature of the research is not defined. PACE assumes that this is *The early years enriched curriculum evaluation project*, carried out by the School of Psychology, Queens University Belfast (referred to at p 28, footnote 8, NIAO Report, Improving literacy and numeracy in schools). It would appear that the personnel responsible for the Enriched Curriculum are cross-fertilised by those engaged in its research evaluation. PACE has been unable to discern despite the most careful scrutiny any evidence in such research that would validate Mr Haire’s assertion. PACE requests that such evidence be identified.

4. Mr Haire justifies the spending of £26 million on a reading recovery scheme the evaluation of which “has shown that 80% achieved that return to the right level so there has been good value there”. PACE would welcome access to the reliability and validity data appropriate to what is described as the “right level”. It appears that the justification for this assertion is entirely subjective.

5. Mr Haire, in response to question 14, cites research that links the removal of selection to enhance scores in literacy and numeracy. High quality international educational research indicates the opposite. PACE would therefore welcome access to the Department’s research evidence justifying the Permanent Secretary’s claim.

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

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