

**Report of the Literacy and Numeracy Taskforce  
2010/11**

**May 2011**

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## Foreword

This is the final report produced by the Literacy and Numeracy Taskforce. It will reinforce the areas for development made in earlier reports, chart the progress to date and will make some further recommendations for the future.

The Taskforce was formed in January 2008 and includes a team of experienced, successful educationalists from a range of institutions north and south of the border. Its membership remains unchanged and is not designed to be representative of all stakeholder groups, but to have at its heart people who are passionate about improving the educational service for **all** children in Northern Ireland. A relatively small group such as this, meeting around six times a year, cannot be expected to lead reform of literacy and numeracy across the whole school system. What it can do and will do is signal to policy-makers and practitioners what it sees as the strengths and weaknesses of the present system and what might enhance future educational provision.

It is becoming more widely acknowledged that there are serious failings in our current education system and that there are still far too many children who struggle with reading, writing and mathematics and who leave school without the fundamental skills which will equip them for life in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. Two excellent policy documents, *Every School a Good School – a policy for school improvement* and *Count, read: Succeed – A Strategy to Improve Outcomes in Literacy and Numeracy*, are being implemented in an attempt to address these basic weaknesses and it is anticipated that these strategies will bring about the necessary positive change. The Taskforce welcomes the revised literacy and numeracy strategy, which is more practical and contains more concrete targets than its predecessor.

The efficacy of earlier policies undoubtedly suffered from a lack of consistent application across Northern Ireland and, if real progress is to be made this time, it is essential that all teachers, school leaders and Governors understand, and put in to practice, what is expected of them. During our many investigations, the Taskforce has been fortunate to meet school leaders who have established effective and imaginative literacy/numeracy

schemes in their classrooms and are clearly making great strides forward, including in some of the most disadvantaged areas. Conversely, there are schools where this is not so and where a degree of complacency or lack of rigour still hinders progress and where good opportunities to move children forward are being missed. In the view of the Taskforce, the level of challenge to these schools has to be raised if overall standards are to be improved; a more streamlined system is also needed to address and support teachers whose work is unsatisfactory.

The changing demographics in Northern Ireland, dealing with an ever harsher economic climate and attempting to improve less than satisfactory standards in parts of the school system, seem to make this an ideal time to review the whole of our educational provision. Key strategies which should have an impact on raising standards of literacy and numeracy have been proposed or implemented, but changes such as the abolition of the 11-plus and the establishment of the Education & Skills Authority are still issues which generate confusion and uncertainty for teachers and which ultimately distract them from fulfilling their core purpose.

I would like to thank personally the members of the Taskforce for their invaluable contributions over the past three and a half years and for the high level of professional expertise they have displayed at all times. Throughout our lengthy deliberations it was very evident that the group shared a common belief that good schools do make a difference and that the successful education of **all** children is an immensely important part of our society.

Sir Robert Salisbury  
Chair

May 2011

## Context

The current position in achievement in literacy and numeracy and the challenges involved in raising standards have been well rehearsed in earlier reports so for brevity the position to date is summarised below:

- 1 In 2006, over 12,000 young people left school not having achieved 5 or more “good” GCSEs<sup>1</sup>. In 2008/09 (the most recently available figures) the number fell to around 9,500 or 42% of pupils leaving school not having achieved 5 or more good GCSEs, including English and maths.
- 3 Only 30% of school leavers entitled to free school meals, a recognised proxy indicator for socio-economic disadvantage, achieved 5 or more good GCSEs including English and maths, compared to 64% of leavers not entitled to free school meals.
- 4 While 47% of boys left school without achieving 5 good GCSEs including English and maths, we also note that 36% of our young women did not achieve at this level (4,236 female leavers in 2009). In percentage terms, slightly more Protestant males than Catholic males (49% versus 46%, respectively) leave school without obtaining 5 good GCSEs. However, in terms of absolute numbers, slightly more Catholic males than Protestant males (2,608 versus 2,363, respectively) failed to reach this benchmark. The issue remains that underachievement represents a significant problem, regardless of a young person’s gender or religious background, with many young people leaving school without the skills and qualifications they need to continue in education or to secure employment.
- 5 Almost one in five pupils continues to leave primary school not having achieved the expected level in English and Maths (in 2009/10, 81% achieved the expected level in English and 83% in Maths). The picture is similar at Key Stage 3 (in 2009/10, 80% achieved the expected level in English and 77% in Maths). Some discrepancy is

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<sup>1</sup> We define this as achievement of 5 or more GCSEs at grades A\*-C (or equivalent).

claimed to exist between teacher-assessed levels awarded to pupils at end of KS2 (in both English and Maths) and actual abilities of these pupils at start of Year 8, as evident from teacher observation and results obtained from standardised testing during Term 1 in post-primary schools. This should be addressed when revised assessment arrangements, which involve externally-moderated teacher assessment, are introduced from 2012/13.

The results from the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) 2009 show that the reading and maths performance of 15-year olds in Northern Ireland is not significantly different from the OECD average and we continue to have a significant body of underachievement. Our performance in reading and maths lags behind that of the highest performing systems and the 2006 and 2009 results for Northern Ireland represent a decline in performance on earlier cycles of PISA.

Most evaluations of the Northern Ireland education system are based on internal comparisons. While comparison within the system is essential, it must be complemented by proper external evaluations and comparisons. In this regard, PISA (at post-primary), the Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS) and the Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS) (at primary) are vital tools. However, Northern Ireland is only joining PIRLS and TIMSS now, while the (disappointing) data from PISA do not get, in the view of the Taskforce, the attention it merits, including from public representatives and members of the business community.

Certain commentators cast aspersions on the validity of PISA as a measure. PISA is an internationally respected survey carried out to strict quality standards. It is unreasonable to state that Northern Ireland produces top quality students and then ignore any evidence to the contrary. Further, to attribute poor performance on PISA to factors such as a limited match with our curriculum is an inadequate response. If there is a set of skills and knowledge that is internationally recognised as “core”, yet which are not adequately addressed in our curriculum, this should be a cause for concern. The performance of an education system needs to be evaluated in many ways, of which PISA is one. A

thorough examination is needed of the factors associated with poor performance in 2006 and 2009, with reference to the relatively better performance in earlier PISA cycles.

Northern Ireland's participation in PIRLS and TIMSS is welcome, and we hope that it will provide a broad context within which to interpret the achievements of our primary school pupils. Rather than being included as a subset of UK reporting, it would be helpful if an in-depth evaluation of the school- and pupil-level factors related to performance on PIRLS and TIMSS in Northern Ireland were produced. PIRLS and TIMSS also take curriculum into account when interpreting pupil performance, which should provide interesting perspectives.

### **Taskforce Report to the Department of Education**

The volunteer Taskforce has received detailed inputs from a range of relevant organisations over the past three and a half years and members have also undertaken many informal consultations and visits to try to gain a greater understanding of the underlying issues. Extensive analytical data has been provided by DE and Taskforce members have attended North/South collaborative events on literacy and numeracy in order to ascertain the situation pertaining across the whole of Ireland. Key issues have been addressed in a positive constructive manner but many of the educational shortcomings listed in the two earlier reports remain and there still exists:

1. A marked gap between achievements in the highest- and lowest-performing schools;
2. A marked difference in the performance of boys and girls but an even greater difference when socio-economic status is taken into account; and
3. A significant tail of underachievement.

### **Capacity of the Education Service to Deliver**

As highlighted in the previous reports, the formation and introduction of the Education and Skills Authority is, in the view of the Taskforce, a vital ingredient in the revised literacy and numeracy strategy. It is hugely frustrating and highly confusing for teachers

and schools, charged with their own strategic planning, to find that there has been yet more political delay in moving its planned operations forward. The literacy and numeracy strategy has set out a very clear set of expectations for the system, which we feel would stand the best chance of being advanced if there is clear, coherent leadership through a **single organisation** charged with raising standards for all pupils and with reducing the differentials in achievement that have persisted in the past. The delay in establishing ESA has caused considerable confusion and uncertainty among school leaders as to who has responsibility for providing guidance and support. In the view of the Taskforce, this has a detrimental impact on the core purpose of what an educational service should be about. We hope that some rational solution will be forthcoming in the near future but in the interim, the Taskforce has highlighted some requirements and expectations from the educational service that would assist teachers and help to raise performance:

- support for schools in their development planning and target setting;
- monitoring of each school's achievement in literacy and numeracy; and where necessary, challenging schools on their plans, targets or outcomes;
- providing guidance and support on systematic and structured approaches to the use of data for monitoring and evaluating progress
- providing advice, support and professional development to schools, school leaders and teachers on the most effective whole-school and cross-curricular approaches to developing literacy and numeracy;
- providing support for school leaders and teachers on effective literacy and numeracy pedagogies;
- identifying (along with the ETI) and disseminating best practice within and across schools;
- working in partnership with all stakeholders (including statutory agencies) to meet the literacy and numeracy needs of all pupils and ensure that teachers' ability to support underachieving pupils is enhanced through any external support provided; and
- providing parents with information, guidance and support in relation to literacy and numeracy.



The revised curriculum has now been implemented in schools and has been fully accepted as a step in the right direction. It has undoubtedly provided an excellent framework for school leaders and, where it has been fully implemented, has challenged those establishments which geared their curriculum towards selected pupils and the passing of the Transfer Test. Though there has been clear and unequivocal policy on the future pattern of post-primary schooling, in practice areas of resistance or non-compliance with stated policy still leave many primary school leaders in a state of confusion and uncertainty. A clear resolution of this matter would greatly assist schools in establishing common assessment strategies, transfer of key data on individual children and consolidation of curricular continuity at the transition stage.

### **Progress towards the Public Accounts Committee (PAC) recommendations**

DE continues to take positive steps towards improving pupil literacy and numeracy levels. The implementation of *'Every School a Good School'* and the new *'Count, read: succeed – A Strategy to Improve Outcomes in Literacy and Numeracy'* demonstrate its firm commitment to raising standards for all children and moving the educational system forward.

The Department has worked hard to challenge the complacency which undoubtedly existed surrounding the educational outcomes in Northern Ireland. There is now general acceptance that there are fundamental, deep-rooted failings in parts of the NI educational system which require immediate action.

In the view of the Taskforce, not enough has yet been done to identify good practice and to share this with other schools. Excellent practice exists and some schools have established very successful schemes which are clearly having a marked impact on standards. Seeking out these exemplary schools and using their expertise to inspire and guide others has so far been under used as a resource and, in the view of the Taskforce, the sharing of good practice is a cost effective way of moving things forward. Ultimately the way to achieve a high performing educational system is to have a highly trained, motivated teaching force, regularly sharing their most effective classroom

techniques with colleagues (both within their school and from other schools) in a professional learning community. In a similar way, the Taskforce feels strongly that there must be much greater accountability and challenge for those schools which are consistently underperforming in terms of literacy and numeracy.

The Department has set clear targets for schools and has stressed that these will be used as the objective measurement of the attainment levels of schools. The most effective way to achieve system-level targets is the achievement of clear and specific school-level targets for raising standards.

A common baseline data system, which would inform the development of a 'value-added' measure and facilitate benchmarking against schools with similar characteristics and the setting of realistic targets, has not yet been implemented. However, work is in hand to develop an appropriate system.

Many parents have expressed a strong desire to be involved and informed about the curriculum to enable them to provide appropriate support for their children. Greater efforts need to be concentrated on highlighting the role that parents can play in developing their child's literacy and numeracy skills, particularly prior to starting school and in the early school years. Such efforts need to be made in conjunction with other government agencies and departments.

Parental involvement in their child's education remains a vital ingredient to raising achievement, though in many schools 'opening the doors' to greater outside cooperation may require a major cultural and operational shift. However, such a shift is a prerequisite for any literacy or numeracy strategy to effect significant change.

In short the PAC recommendations have been progressed and further work is ongoing.

### **Progress towards the NI Audit Office recommendations.**

The central recommendations identified by the NIAO report have been addressed by the DE with the development of *'Every School a Good School'* and *'Count, read: succeed'*. Earlier in this report, the Taskforce again stressed the frustration felt surrounding the delay in establishing the ESA. The NIAO clearly identified the structural, economic and strategic weaknesses of operating with five Education and Library Boards in Northern Ireland, but the situation as it exists at the moment, where the work of the Boards has been compromised in anticipation of the ESA, has left all concerned in a state of severe confusion and uncertainty. For example, the absence of ESA has delayed much needed work to establish a more coherent, high quality and cost effective support service for schools that has the necessary focus on raising standards and tackling underachievement.

The NIAO recommendations have been accepted fully in principle and progress to address them is ongoing.

### **Though some progress has been made during the year, the Taskforce still feels there are ongoing Key Challenges which should be addressed:**

1. Most schools already collect data in some form but its use is unsystematic and varied so benchmarking performance with other similar schools is very difficult. A 'value-added' system, which takes a detailed look at the context of each school, would help schools determine realistic targets for action and would reassure them if they are on the right track. Evidence from recent inspection reports is emerging that some schools are beginning to heed this message and are now using data analysis in a more structured and systematic manner. Linking this with school and pupil self-assessment programmes and some form of standardisation of the assessment process across all schools would be beneficial.
2. Development of an individual plan for every child based on the outcomes of standardised diagnostic tests and teacher assessment conducted within the school.

This should include better provision for pupils with special educational needs (SEN) because the present situation is not conducive to raising standards and requires urgent and thorough review. Some finance is available for material resources and the modification of school buildings but very little is made available for human resources to support the education process. Classroom assistants and teachers are not adequately trained to meet the specific needs of statemented pupils, which impacts greatly on achievement in literacy and numeracy for pupils with SEN. As a Taskforce, we still have not received definitive answers to the level of support that will be available to these pupils in the future, the level/extent of training for classroom assistants and class teachers to best address the specific needs of pupils. At present no substitute cover is provided for teachers involved in any professional development for SEN. This is an area of great concern for teachers and principals, as it is becoming increasingly more difficult to access external resources. In addition, looking more closely at effective teaching styles and strategies to re-engaging disaffected pupils would have an impact, as it is likely that a substantial percentage of D grades achieved at GCSE are a result of pupil disengagement, rather than low ability.

3. Development of a 'shared good practice' culture across all schools is essential and inexpensive but as yet there appears to be no clear strategy or desire to introduce a systematic in-service programme to make this happen.
4. Evidence shows that establishing an internal school culture for analysing and sharing pedagogy which works is also highly effective. Clearly a strong correlation exists between teachers' knowledge, enthusiasm, ability to motivate, confidence, competence and the quality of lessons they teach. Literacy and numeracy co-ordinators play an important role and they must be able to lead, to ensure ongoing discussion between staff concerning teaching approaches, to identify and disseminate good practice, to effectively plan and resource the maths and English curriculum and to assess pupils' learning. It is essential that literacy and numeracy

co-ordinators in primary schools demonstrate a strong background in maths and English respectively and ideally are specialists in the respective areas.

5. Teacher quality is central to pupil attainment. We must attract, and support the development of, highly effective teachers. It must become a priority to ensure that trainee teachers have a more than satisfactory grasp of numeracy and literacy skills. The current entrance requirements (Grade C in GCSE Maths and English or equivalent) are, in the view of the Taskforce, too low, and this may impact on the effectiveness of the teaching profession here. DE should give urgent consideration to the raising of this entry requirement or to following the example of England, Scotland, Wales and requiring applicants for teacher training places to pass basic literacy and numeracy tests. Improving the quality of mentoring that trainee teachers receive whilst on teaching practice must also be a priority.
6. To attract more able newly qualified teachers, schools should consider enhancing the criteria in their job descriptions by considering the standard of the applicants' literacy and numeracy skills.
7. Substitute teachers are an essential part of the teaching workforce and they, especially those in long term temporary employment, should have opportunities for professional development on the same basis as for permanent teachers.
8. The Taskforce is also concerned that the Chief Inspector's Report 2008-10 continued to identify poor quality teaching as an area for improvement in one-fifth of primary schools and in more than one-quarter of post-primary lessons. Swift action must be taken to improve poor teaching to enable pupils to achieve good outcomes in literacy and numeracy.

9. A need for early targeted interventions and more consistency (which will hopefully be addressed by the recently introduced literacy and numeracy strategy) in the leadership and management of literacy and numeracy to prevent some children being left behind. The Taskforce feels that the most cost effective form of intervention is early intervention. Development of literacy and numeracy is not just a job for DE employees. The foundations upon which these core skills are based need to be in place by the time a child enrol in school. This necessitates intervention (targeted at disadvantaged/at risk families) by other agencies.
  
10. *Count, read: succeed* gives clear guidance to those responsible for the strategic governance of schools but the Taskforce still feels that it is vital that school governors should ensure there is a literacy/numeracy 'thread' running through all aspects of the work of the school so that it is clearly viewed as a priority. It is possible for governors, especially those who are new to the process, to be unsure of their legitimate areas of responsibility, so the development of 'key questions' for Governors to ask of the school leaders about assessment, actions and outcomes ought to be introduced. These could be offered as part of the Governor training programme and would help to ensure that matters of literacy and numeracy are constantly part of the agenda.
  
11. It is very difficult for any school to raise standards of literacy and numeracy in isolation and it is clear that a culture must be developed, which strives to create an appropriate nexus between home and school, parent and child. Many other countries have already implemented successful home-school intervention models which have proved effective but the current process is weak here. Often teachers take the understandable view that school should be an 'island haven' separated from home or outside influence but this is an approach which is, in the view of Taskforce members, not based on sound educational principles. In order to move things forward we need to introduce strategies which 'blur the edges' where traditional schools stop and where outside communities begin and to promote greater

engagement and involvement of parents in their child's education. A great deal of urgent work needs to be done in this area.

12. Parents, business, commercial organisations, charitable organisations and other interested stakeholders should be invited and encouraged to be part of the overall push to improve literacy and numeracy.
13. Public attitudes to numeracy also need to change and the media especially should be encouraged to promote mathematics in a more positive way. This is a huge area for development which potentially could have a substantial impact.

Literacy & Numeracy Taskforce 2011

**Terms of Reference to end June 2011**

- a. Finalise a vision, strategy and targets for the promotion of literacy and numeracy building the capacity of all students;
- b. Make recommendations in relation to the implementation of the strategy and evaluation thereof;
- c. Report to the Department the effectiveness of the strategy and make recommendations on improvements which could be made. A report to be delivered annually to the Department. The report should comment on progress, actions taken and their impact and include recommendations for any future actions which need to be taken in order to improve standards; and
- d. To receive and comment on reports from the Department on progress against all agreed actions set out in the Department's response to the PAC report into literacy and numeracy.



## **Membership**

### **Chair**

**Sir Robert Salisbury**, former principal and Director of Partnerships at the University Of Nottingham School Of Education, now retired and works to support principals and schools in challenging circumstances in England.

### **Members**

**Maureen Smyth**, Principal of Cumber Claudy Primary School.

**Andy McMorran**, Principal of Ashfield Boys' High School.

**Máire McGinn**, Head of Mathematics, Dean Maguirc College, Carrickmore.

**Anne Moran**, Dean of the Faculty of Social Sciences, University of Ulster.

**Dr Robbie McVeigh**, researcher, co-chair of the Department of Education Taskforce on Traveller Education, and former chair of the Board of Governors of Gaelscoil Éadain Mhóir Derry.

**Dr Eemer Eivers**, researcher at the Educational Research Centre, Dublin.

### **Observers**

The Departments of Education; Employment & Learning; and Social Development have observer status on the Taskforce, as they all have work areas contributing to the raising of standards in literacy and numeracy.

This is to ensure that the Taskforce benefit both from the experience of these observers and from the workings of their respective Departments and for the Departments to be kept informed and take account of the work of the Taskforce.