

Expert Panel on Educational Underachievement launches NI wide survey

Please provide the name of your organisation and outline briefly its context/ aims and scope?

context/aims of your organisation

The Association of School and College Leaders (ASCL) Northern Ireland

The Association of School and College Leaders (ASCL) represents over 20,000 education system leaders, heads, principals, deputies, vice-principals, assistant heads, business managers and other senior staff of state-funded and independent schools and colleges throughout the UK. In Northern Ireland the association has approximately 200 members in more than 80 schools, across all sectors, the total enrolment of which equates to almost half of all pupils in secondary education and includes some of the largest schools in the Province. As a branch of the national association, ASCL(NI) is able to contribute independently to the debate on education in the Province on behalf of its members and the children it serves. We work to shape education policy, provide advice, and support to members and deliver high quality professional development across the sector. This places the association in a strong position to consider this issue from the viewpoint of the leaders of schools and colleges of all types.

ASCL welcomes the opportunity to contribute to this consultation by the Expert Panel on Educational Underachievement.

We believe all should help to create a Post-Primary education system that promotes the development of the skills, attitudes and personal qualities in all young people so that they may contribute positively to the social and economic prosperity of Northern Ireland.

We set out our answers below to each of the questions in the consultation document. While we have a membership in post primary education, we strongly contend that the issue of educational underachievement requires a multi-disciplinary approach with a focus on all age groups both in a formal educational setting and at community level.

What would you say are the main causes of educational underachievement?

As a preface, we would contend that due consideration is given by the Expert Panel to the research and recommendations contained in the *Post Primary Task Force*

Report (No child left behind, every child first); Education, Employability and Skills; a Pathway to Inclusion and Prosperity (March 2016) . In particular we echo here the Taskforce's view that "the work to eradicate underachievement in Northern Ireland needs to accelerate if prosperity and social inclusion for all are to be achieved sooner rather than later; if our education system is to stop failing a significant number of our children and young people; and if we are to meet the emerging, economic needs of Northern Ireland plc through, for example, job creation, skills readiness, research and development, economic growth and inward investment".

ASCL concurs with the Task Force vision of focusing "on preparing **all** of our children and young people to access an education which allows them to develop the skills, knowledge and attitudes to allow them to play a positive role in society and the economy". We further agree with Taskforce view which emphasises "that securing the goal to enabling all of our children and young people to access such an education, represents a fundamental challenge to policy makers and practitioners alike within the broad education family and to other Departments of Government, particularly Health and Community, which have a significant role with families in the early years of a child's life. The development of this new overall vision for education should have a very firm focus on the holistic needs of all children and young people regardless of ability or background".

Underachievement is not restricted to children from any socio- economic class or indeed intellectual capacity. Able children, not adequately challenged, are underachieving as much as those who are less able. John Hattie, the Australian academic has demonstrated this 'the majority of students going backwards are in the top 40% of students; that's where there are more cruising schools and more cruising kids.'

Specifically, we would identify the following as key 'causes of educational underachievement' (though none can be seen in isolation):

- Cultural aspirations and expectations around education, employment and community
- The value placed on education by some
- Parental engagement with their children- there is significant evidence to demonstrate that this can apply as much to middle-class/ high-income earners as to lower income, state support dependent families
- Community fragmentation
- Decline in the influence and input of youth organisations, eg Girls' Brigade, Scouts, Girl Guides, Boys' Brigade
- Reduced demonstration, in some instances, of family responsibility and development of a dependency culture.
- Curriculum provision; perceived or actual lack of parity for vocational education with an academic pathway

Schools do not work in a vacuum; there are important systems links, in all directions, between Education, Health Service, Economy, Community Provision. None of these in isolation, can achieve the desired outcomes. Pathways must be found to reinvigorate an aspirational, as opposed to a dependency culture.

7 In your view, what is the main impact of educational underachievement?

There are many and broad impacts which can best be summarised as

When young people and adults are not as mentally, socially and or economically engaged as they could or should be.

The consequences of underachievement manifest themselves from an early stage and can continue to be born out throughout an individual's life. The potential for this underachievement to impact on an individual's' children too is significant.

Underachievement then impacts on the wider community experiences creating a spiral of decline, with subsequent impacts on the demands on the health service and community provision and cohesion.

Five (only) interventions that you consider have an impact on raising educational achievement and rank in order with 1 being the most effective.

1. A relevant and engaging curriculum
2. Greater family engagement
3. Raising family aspirations
4. Stronger links between the school and community
5. Improving local employment opportunities

All of the above factors are inextricably linked it.

In your experience what has worked to address educational underachievement?

The key to this is understanding and identifying educational underachievement through evidenced based research. There needs to be a focus on emotional as well as academic baseline data; programmes like Pupil Attitudes to Self and School (PASS) help to identify fragile learners and discover hidden barriers to learning. Identification is a first step; the need for holistic intervention, often beyond the capacity of schools is crucial. John Hattie has done useful work in this area, and the panel will be familiar with this.

Identifying disadvantage through Free School meals (FSM) as a means of providing targeted support is crude at best and can result in genuine need being excluded. There needs to be consideration given to alternative models and benchmarks.

How has the Covid-19 lockdown impacted on educational underachievement?

Cancellation of examinations resulted in disengagement by some/many.

The variance in access to online learning, and the engagement with this, even when it was accessible was significant. Many schools still feel it is too early to quantify the extent of this on pupil outcomes

Some pupils, who find large groups and consequently traditional classes a challenge, have thrived under distance learning arrangements.

The efforts of some school leaders have been thwarted to some extent by barriers presented by some of the teaching unions. Unions need to be working alongside school leaders in the best interests of all pupils.

Please add any other comments that you would like the panel to consider.

Careful consideration needs to be given to the findings of the Post Primary Task Force (2016). Implementation of some of its proposals would immediately begin to address some of the inequalities and the social, economic and academic underachievement that exist. This states that *'while there are no short-term, quick-fix solutions, the work to eradicate our untenable, long tail of educational underachievement needs to accelerate if academic excellence, prosperity and social inclusion are to be achieved for all of our young people, and for this to be a reality sooner rather than later'*.

There needs to be an urgency in addressing these issues, if another generation of young people is not going to be disadvantaged.

Strategies need to be well thought out and be effective and not just a 'sticking plaster.'

ASCL Northern Ireland represents members from all types of schools, all ability, selective and non-selective. It is the view of the association that a focus on academic selection would be a distraction to this important debate and will only impede essential progress.

ASCL Northern Ireland, in representing a significant proportion of post primary school leaders, would welcome the opportunity to engage directly with the Expert Panel.

Prepared, on behalf of ASCL Northern Ireland by



A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Robert Wilson".

Robert Wilson
ASCL Northern Ireland Regional Officer

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