

14 October 2019

Dear sir/madam

### **Supporting Newcomer Pupils – Public Consultation**

Thank you for the opportunity to respond to the above consultation.

The Controlled Schools' Support Council (CSSC) was set up in September 2016 to represent and support the interests of the controlled sector in Northern Ireland. To date 94% of controlled schools have opted-in to register with CSSC.

The controlled sector is:

- Large – it accounts for 49% of all schools and caters for over 143,600 children, making it the largest education sector in Northern Ireland.
- Diverse – providing education across all school types, *i.e.* nursery, primary, secondary, grammar and special schools. Within this, controlled integrated and controlled Irish Medium schools are included.
- Inclusive – providing education for children of all faiths and none (63% of pupils define as Protestant, 10% Catholic and 27% 'other') and over a third of newcomer pupils in Northern Ireland.

CSSC welcomes the opportunity to comment on the Department of Education's review of the Newcomer Policy and the invitation to share our views on how the current policy can be improved. CSSC notes the strategic context for the review of the current policy and DE's focus on Outcome 12 of the Programme for Government: We give our children and young people the best start in life as well as Outcome 3: We have a more equal society. As mentioned above over a third of newcomer pupils in Northern Ireland are educated in controlled schools. As the support body for the controlled sector CSSC is committed to working with the Department of Education and the Education Authority to contribute to raising standards. Our programme of work is therefore grounded in the Programme for Government (PFG), DE's Vision and Corporate Goals as well as the draft Children and Young People's Strategy. CSSC is offering its views on the options for change in the context of supporting the Department's intended outcome of learning from and building on the many positive outcomes Newcomer pupils experience while also addressing areas of concern and barriers to achieving the draft PFG outcome "giving our children and young people the best start in life."

## **Increasing the duration of the Newcomer designation**

CSSC welcomes the proposal to increase the funding for all newcomer pupils from 3 years to 5 years and supports the continuation of the use of assessment to provide evidence to support the continuation of the newcomer designation beyond 5 years. CSSC consultation with schools has indicated agreement with this proposal as schools feel that 3 years is insufficient to allow for language proficiency and in some cases it may take even longer than 5 years for a newcomer pupil to develop their language competency, a fact acknowledged in the consultation document which cites research which suggests that a pupil of average ability will normally take 5-7 years to become fully grounded and competent in a completely new language. One Principal noted that while a newcomer pupil may be able to speak some English after 7 months at school, their comprehension skills can still be very poor and this is compounded by the inability of some parents to reinforce the newcomer pupil's language learning at home. Some Principals also referred to the varying levels of progress made by newcomer pupils from different cultural backgrounds and stated that where it is clear that language proficiency has been achieved schools support the removal of newcomer designation, however, the ability for schools to extend the designation on the basis of a school-led assessment of the child's competence in English remains crucial.

## **Removing the newcomer premium from the Common Funding Formula**

CSSC is of the view that the Newcomer factor should not be removed from each school's Common Funding Formula (CFF) delegated budget allocation and is of the opinion that the Principal and Board of Governors of each school are best placed to decide on how the funding should be spent. Consultation with schools has highlighted the crucial contribution that the funding makes in addressing the needs of newcomer pupils and in allowing teaching staff to successfully manage the needs of other members of the school community alongside newcomer pupils thereby ensuring effective integration and inclusion.

## **Effective use of newcomer funding in controlled schools**

The additional funding received by schools educating newcomer pupils is crucial to allow for the school to facilitate the pupil's access to the curriculum but also in allowing the school to provide effective pastoral care to support the integration and inclusion of newcomer pupils. Increasing the capacity of schools to be able to do this is essential particularly when research suggests that newcomer children are likely to report 'experiences of stress, loneliness and isolation and difficulties establishing lasting friendships beyond their ethnic and linguistic group.' Stranmillis University College conducted a study in April 2018 exploring the mental health and wellbeing of newcomer children and young people in Northern Ireland. The findings confirmed that some newcomer children and young people living in Northern Ireland experience particular adversity as a result of 'lack of awareness due to linguistic difference and language competence, cultural barriers of not being accepted, the stigma of being a newcomer.....family problems including substance abuse, parentification and loss of childhood....., instability and anxiety around political developments including Brexit, community hostility and racism, pressures to succeed academically in tandem with family responsibility, and limited support at home with school work.' CSSC consultation with controlled schools educating significant numbers of

newcomer pupils often focused on the effective practice and provision for newcomer pupils that is facilitated by the additional funding received by schools under the CFF. Investment in staffing is vital to enable schools with a high proportion of newcomer pupils in their classes to facilitate the differentiation that is necessary especially, when in some cases, the school is educating newcomer pupils from different nationalities and cultural backgrounds. Principals of the schools CSSC consulted with were of the opinion that the newcomer factor was also essential in enabling schools to support newcomer pupils but to be able to do so without compromising efforts to meet the learning needs of all pupils within the school.

### **Supporting integration and inclusion in controlled schools**

Hostility towards newcomer populations is a reality in parts of Northern Ireland and therefore in schools with a significant number of newcomer pupils it is crucial that the school's capacity to support the needs of all children is supported with additional funding so that these schools are not only able to provide the best for all pupils but are seen to be doing so by all members of the community. Perceived failure to balance the needs of all pupils could lead to declining numbers for these schools and, coupled with Brexit uncertainty about the future of newcomers in Northern Ireland, could result in schools becoming unsustainable in terms of stable enrolment. Some schools find themselves in the unenviable situation of having to tackle prejudicial attitudes to newcomers whilst working to educate all of the children in their care. Schools' efforts therefore to support the inclusion and integration of the whole school community is an activity that needs to be supported and additional funding plays a significant role in allowing for this to happen.

### **Supporting newcomer pupils' access to the curriculum.**

Controlled schools discussed how, in some cases, the funding allowed for the employment of additional classroom assistants, in other instances, the employment of an additional teacher, the designation of an existing member of staff as Newcomer co-ordinator or the establishment of learning support groups and nurture classes. All of these support strategies require additional staffing to facilitate this type of provision. One Principal of a school with a newcomer population of nearly 50% reported how the funding allowed for class sizes to be kept at a manageable level, which not only allowed for better support for the newcomer pupil but also facilitated more effective differentiation with additional classroom assistant support allowing the teacher to ensure that all members of the class benefit from the teacher's time and attention. Smaller class sizes, (in the majority of cases, around the NI average of 25) for schools with a significant newcomer population are also crucial to support the health and well-being of teaching staff, the capacity of whom, it is acknowledged by many schools, needs to be supported and increased. Funding in a number of schools also allows for withdrawal support focusing on strengthening the newcomer pupils' acquisition of the English language which was seen as particularly important in enabling the pupil's access to the curriculum.

## **Resourcing effective pastoral support**

One Principal spoke about how the level of pastoral support offered to newcomer pupils and their families is unquantifiable. Schools are not only supporting the pupils but also their families. Several primary schools discussed the time resource element of engaging with the parents of newcomer pupils and this support included assisting parents, who have little or no proficiency in the English language, to complete the relevant documentation for their child's admission to the school and support with the completion of necessary documentation at transition to post-primary education. Schools reported how their efforts to support the families of newcomer pupils extend to the provision of support in matters unrelated to the school, however, with the potential to impact significantly on the experience of the newcomer pupil. Such efforts included applications for housing benefits and supporting families to find new accommodation when faced with eviction notices.

## **Parental engagement**

Some schools reported how the translation of some key school documents and policies essential in making the school accessible to parents and pupils (which do not include those provided by the Intercultural Education Service) engendered significant translation fees. Many of the examples of effective practice demonstrated in controlled schools include engagement with external organisations such as Barnardos and their Family Learning and Integration Project. One Principal noted how this project has been crucial in helping the school to support the traditionally 'insular' Roma community and while the school is fully committed to the project and understands the benefits of participation this type of work involves a considerable time commitment. Schools during discussion with CSSC gave examples of work with local churches to support newcomer families in accessing second hand uniforms or help with access to housing. Efforts to engage with parents have led some schools to seek the support of external stakeholders and the ability of staff to engage and to be away from the school requires the school to provide teacher/principal release. Schools are prepared to make this investment as engaging with these stakeholders can lead to enhancing provision through the sharing of effective practice. CSSC would urge against any changes to the funding for newcomer pupils that could potentially limit a school's ability to respond to the specific needs of its newcomer population or to engage in any activities that enhance the educational experience of newcomer pupils and the wider school community.

## **Comment on proposed variations in newcomer funding**

CSSC is not in favour of a limit being placed on the maximum amount of total newcomer funding that a school can receive. Schools report that an increased newcomer population can mean that the school is faced with increased challenges and to reduce the amount of funding subsequently reduces the school's capacity to respond to these challenges whether this is in relation to providing an effective education for the whole school population or providing effective pastoral support. While all schools work diligently to create an inclusive environment there are particular challenges associated with supporting the integration of newcomer pupils which are not only based on language. Some schools report having newcomer populations from a wide variety of nationalities and cultural backgrounds with

evidence of upwards of 40 languages being spoken in some schools. Some schools refer to the particular challenges posed by the increasing number of Roma/Bulgarian newcomers and the effort schools have made to develop the social skills of pupils who have little or no experience of formal education and who may also have a lack of respect for formal education. Schools report great difficulty in ensuring the attendance of some newcomer pupils and in their efforts to support the pupil's attendance much time is spent in trying to engage with 'hard to reach' parents who do not understand the importance of ensuring their child attends school on a daily basis. Schools are conscious of the detrimental effect this has, not only on the child's education but also the school's attendance figures. Schools report that absences are often for protracted, lengthy periods of time.

CSSC notes the potential to set a minimum amount of total newcomer funding that a school can receive and is in favour of this for schools with small newcomer populations. CSSC is conscious that the additional funding to the value of 0.5 of the Age Weighted Pupil Unit does not, in such scenarios, allow the school to significantly enhance their provision for the newcomer pupil. Establishing a minimum amount could therefore support a school in more effectively meeting the needs of its newcomer pupils.

### **Reporting requirement for schools**

In relation to the Department's invitation to provide feedback on potential reporting requirements CSSC would urge caution in this matter. As exemplified in this response the funding supports schools' significant efforts to provide for the effective education, integration and inclusion of newcomer pupils and the current funding arrangements allow the Principal and Board of Governors to be responsive to their own school's context. Consultation with controlled schools demonstrates that the funding allows for a holistic approach which takes cognisance of the needs of the whole school community, for example, the recruitment of additional classroom assistants not only supports the newcomer pupil but also allows the teacher to manage the needs of every child. To expect the funding to be accounted for on a pupil-by-pupil basis would fail to capture the full extent of added value and be detrimental to the efforts of the school to provide for all. One Principal noted how the requirement to report on the funding received as part of the Extended Schools Programme was disproportionate to the money received and urged against DE adopting a similar approach to funding for newcomer pupils. Principals are of the opinion that their budgets are already scrutinised and refer to how there is no such requirement to account for how the money for Special Educational Needs is spent to support each individual child.

CSSC notes the overwhelming message from controlled schools that Principals and Boards of Governors are spending the money appropriately and are doing so with a holistic approach which takes accounts of how best to support the whole school community in establishing an integrated and inclusive environment which allows all pupils to receive the education that

allows them to fulfil their potential. Continued use of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) assessments, and the progress demonstrated in these assessments on a yearly basis, represent a suitable reporting mechanism for schools to measure and demonstrate the impact of funding.

### **Accommodating the home languages of newcomer pupils**

While schools participate in a number of creative efforts to celebrate the different cultures and spoken languages within the school, the pressures of delivering the curriculum and supporting the pupils' acquisition of English leaves little opportunity or resource for progressing the pupils' home languages. Some settings who have been able to recruit classroom assistants who speak the newcomer pupils' language report the positive effect this has had on promoting positive behaviour within the school and facilitating more effective communication in the early stages of the child's acquisition of the language. Schools, however, overwhelmingly, felt that they lack the capacity to support pupils' home languages and that their primary focus should be on fostering the inclusion and integration of the pupils by supporting their acquisition of the language of the curriculum and the language spoken by the majority of their peers. Schools report, moreover, that it is very difficult to recruit support staff who speak the newcomer pupils' language and in schools where a large number of languages are spoken, there isn't the financial capability to resource such support.

### **Encouraging the sharing of effective practice**

Consultation with controlled schools has revealed that Shared Education partnerships have allowed for opportunities to share examples of best practice in supporting newcomer pupils. The partnerships, because they are established with the nearest maintained schools in the same geographical area, benefit from the fact that the schools are providing an education to newcomer pupils from similar cultural backgrounds and therefore facing the same issues in providing support. The funding provided for shared education partnerships facilitates the regular contact between these schools which leads to the sharing of best practice in a number of curriculum areas but also in relation to supporting newcomer pupils. Controlled schools, some of whom do not benefit from the professional development opportunities available through Shared Education, report that staff would benefit from attending cluster group training/meetings which allow for an understanding of the cultural differences within the newcomer population, for example, one Principal noted how school staff in supporting one group of newcomer pupils took some time to realise that the pupils' head shake indicated agreement and compliance rather than defiance. Cluster group training/meetings would facilitate the sharing of such information and lead to the dissemination of best practice thereby building the capacity and confidence of teachers in supporting their newcomer populations. CSSC is, however, aware of the increasing constraints on school budgets and would therefore encourage the Department to explore how Principal/teacher release could be supported in a manner which does not have a detrimental impact on school budgets.

### **Additional support required by schools**

CSSC notes the positive comments made by schools in relation to the provision of the Intercultural Education Service (IES), however, the extent of the contact with IES varies across schools and there is an acknowledgement that there is a need for support in addition to that provided by the IES. CSSC is aware that 33% of schools who responded to DE's online consultation exercise in 2018 made the comment that there was insufficient advice and support available to support their efforts to provide for the needs of newcomer pupils and these comments tended to focus on meeting the pastoral needs of newcomer pupils. Consultation with controlled schools has confirmed this view. CSSC supports a strategic approach to the planning and implementation of support for newcomer pupils and is currently contributing to a Multi-Agency Support Team (alongside the Education Authority's School Development Service, Intercultural Education Service, Behaviour Support Team and the Youth Service) to provide tailored support for a non-selective post-primary school which has a significant number of newcomer pupils. This collaboration will act as a pilot for the development of support which could be extended to other schools and represents a creative and collaborative effort to increase the capacity of schools to support newcomer pupils. CSSC would welcome participation in other such programmes focused on building the capacity of controlled schools.

### **Newcomer pupils and SEN**

Controlled schools revealed concerns around the assessment of newcomer pupils for special educational needs and reported a perceived reluctance by the Educational Psychology Service to confirm a special educational need because of the language barrier impact on their ability to assess the child. Schools believe that more provision should be made to ensure that children are tested in their own language as an undiagnosed, and therefore unsupported, special educational need may be responsible for a pupil's inability to progress in acquiring a proficiency in the English language. Schools also spoke of the need for newcomer pupils with no knowledge of the English language to be supported in availing of intensive English language provision prior to their admission to school so that newcomer pupils have a certain level of proficiency which will allow them to more confidently integrate into their new school environment. Such provision could be provided on a regional basis, and, would not only provide for better access to the curriculum but also allow the newcomer pupil to develop communication skills which will allow for friendships to be progressed.

### **The educational outcomes of newcomer pupils**

More than one school with a large intake of newcomer pupils expressed concerns at how the outcomes of newcomer pupils impacted on the school's overall attainment data and expressed concerns at how this would be interpreted by prospective parents. One school noted how the increase in newcomer pupils had coincided with a 10% decline in the number

of pupils obtaining 5+ GCSE's, grades A\* to C. Principals of controlled primary schools also expressed similar concerns and noted that the assessment data for the school did not take into account the value added to the newcomer pupil's learning and the data alone gives the impression of a failing school when to compare the outcomes for children in schools with large newcomer populations with the outcomes from schools with no newcomer pupils is to make an unfair comparison. CSSC notes DE's work in addressing how to better capture the value added by schools to the educational experience of pupils and would recommend that the experience of schools supporting newcomer pupils is considered in this work.

### **Concluding comment**

CSSC in discussing the options for comment with controlled schools has become very aware of the effective practice that is common in many schools supporting newcomer pupils. CSSC understands the need for schools to take a considered approach in its use of the newcomer premium and has been made aware of how schools have to take a holistic approach to supporting newcomer pupils which also takes cognisance of the needs of the whole school community. Using the funding to resource additional staffing is one of the most common and much valued use of the funding and CSSC remains of the opinion that Principals and Boards of Governors are best placed to decide on the appropriate deployment of this resource. CSSC therefore does not believe that the funding should be removed from the CFF. CSSC is in favour of encouraging collaboration between schools who support newcomer pupils and is also supportive of efforts to encourage the sharing of best practice. Conscious of the increasing demands on schools CSSC is not in favour of a burdensome reporting requirement and would recommend a streamlined approach which recognises that it may be difficult for schools to account for every penny on a per pupil basis.

CSSC is happy to discuss this response with the Department and to contribute to efforts to increase the capacity of all controlled schools to support newcomer pupils.

Yours faithfully



Barry Mulholland  
Chief Executive