

# WHAT DO WE KNOW? EDUCATIONAL OPPORTUNITIES AND OUTCOMES

## Introduction

Education is as integral today as it always has been in relation to the future hopes and aspirations of Northern Ireland. It can be summarised as both the teaching and learning of knowledge and most would agree that it will have a profound effect on shaping future generations of Northern Ireland citizens and the economy. In this chapter we look specifically at education from the start of compulsory education at age 4 years to 18 years. There is therefore no discussion of pre school education, Further or Higher education or life long learning. The focus is on those areas identified as key issues by the Department of Education and the Northern Ireland Executive. These include structural reform, improving standards and performance and the link between education and disadvantage<sup>1</sup>.

## Types of School

The Northern Ireland education system is segregated along religious lines and by type of school. Schools fall under various management types.

Controlled schools (de facto Protestant) are under the management of the schools' Board of Governors while the employing authority is the relevant Education and Library Board. Buildings are owned and managed by the education authority which is also the employer of teaching and non-teaching staff. Recurrent costs are met from school budgets.

Voluntary schools are managed by Boards of Governors, who are also the employer of teaching and non-teaching staff. The school buildings are owned by the schools' trustees. Recurrent costs are funded by the Department of Education (DE). There are two types of voluntary schools – voluntary maintained (including primary and post primary schools which are mostly Catholic schools) and voluntary grammar schools. Most voluntary maintained schools are managed by the Catholic Church. Responsibility for Catholic maintained schools rests with a statutory body, the Council for Catholic Maintained Schools (CCMS).

Integrated Schools are schools which include pupils from both the Protestant and Catholic communities. The Department of Education accepts a balance of 70:30 (with 30% coming from whichever is the smaller religious group in the area) as the minimum required for a new school to be recognised as integrated. There are two types of integrated schools. Grant-maintained Integrated schools are owned and managed by Boards of Governors, supported by the Northern Ireland Council for Integrated Education and funded directly by the Department of Education. Controlled integrated schools are managed by the regional education authority. There are at present 56 grant-aided integrated schools in Northern Ireland, with a total enrolment of over 17,000 pupils – over five per cent of total pupils.

There are also a number of Irish Medium schools (mostly in the primary sector), where children are taught through the medium of the Irish Language. These are owned and managed by Boards of Governors, supported by Comhairle na Gaelscolaíochta (CnaG) and, generally, funded by the Department of Education.

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Under the Review of Public Administration, from April 2010 the five education and library boards will be replaced by a single authority, the Education and Skills Authority. This will absorb all the functions of the Education and Library Boards (ELBs) including libraries, youth services and the operational functions of the Department of Education. The responsibilities of the Council for Catholic Maintained Schools (CCMS), the Northern Ireland Council for Integrated Education (NICIE) and Comhairle na Gaelscolaíochta (CnaG) will also be transferred to the new authority as will youth and library services.

**Table 1: Numbers of schools in Northern Ireland by school type**

<b>Primary</b>	<b>2002/03</b>	<b>2004/05</b>	<b>2007/08</b>
Controlled	435	425	401
Catholic Maintained	417	413	404
Other Maintained (including Irish Medium)	16	20	24
Controlled integrated and Grant maintained integrated	29	34	39
Preparatory Depts:			
Controlled	5	4	3
Voluntary	15	14	14
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>917</b>	<b>910</b>	<b>885</b>
<b>Secondary (non grammar):</b>			
Controlled	69	66	63
Catholic Maintained	76	76	73
Other Maintained	1	1	1
Controlled Integrated and Grant Maintained Integrated	14	19	20
<b>Total</b>	<b>160</b>	<b>162</b>	<b>157</b>
<b>Grammar Schools:</b>			
Controlled	17	17	17
Voluntary (under Catholic Management)	32	30	30
Voluntary (under other Management)	22	22	22
<b>Independent Schools</b>	<b>22</b>	<b>19</b>	<b>17</b>
<b>Special Schools</b>	<b>47</b>	<b>45</b>	<b>43</b>
<b>Total</b>	<b>140</b>	<b>133</b>	<b>109</b>

Source: DE School Census Data

## Expenditure on Education and School Numbers

In 2006/07 the Northern Ireland education budget was £1,838 million. According to the report of the Independent Strategic Review of Education<sup>2</sup> the budget for current expenditure in education in Northern Ireland grew by 27.2 % between 2001/02 and 2005/06. Table 2 details spending per head of population on education across the countries of the UK.

**Table 2: Expenditure (£) per head of population**

	£ per head
England	98
Scotland	110
Wales	105
Northern Ireland	126

Source: HM Treasury Public Expenditure Statistical Analyses 2008

While public expenditure per head of population in Northern Ireland is higher than in any of the other UK countries, this reflects the high proportion of schools to the school age population.

As can be seen from Table 1 the most marked decline has been in the number of controlled and Catholic maintained primary schools. Sectors which have seen increases are Irish Medium primary schools which have increased from 11 in 2002/03 to 20 in 2007/08, and the number of integrated schools in the primary sectors which increased from 29 to 39 in the same time period. In 2006, the schools' estate had more than 50,000 surplus places and it was estimated that the figure is likely to rise to more than 80,000 (more than a quarter of the current school population). See Table 3 for numbers of children currently in education and projected figures for the future. Table 4 outlines the number of pupils, year by year, in each type of primary school between 2002/03 and 2007/08.

**Table 3: Number of children in primary and post primary schools in Northern Ireland and projected numbers**

	1991/92	2001/02	2007/08	Projected figures 2013/14
Primary Schools	189,481	179,039	166,639	158,286
Post primary Schools	143,295	155,503	147,942	136,804

Source: Department of Education School Census Data

**Table 4: Number of Primary school pupils by management type – 2002/03-2007/08**

Management type	No of Pupils 2002/03	No of Pupils 2004/05	No. of pupils 2007/08
Controlled	85,448	82,182	78,108
Catholic maintained	81,313	78,699	76,480
Other	2,732	2,664	2,529
Irish medium - Other maintained	1,374	1,655	1,902
Controlled integrated	1,502	1,996	2,259
Grant maintained integrated	4,433	4,802	5,361
<b>Total</b>	<b>176,802</b>	<b>171,998</b>	<b>166,639</b>

Source: School Census Data. The figures include nursery, reception and year 1-7 classes

Changing demographics in Northern Ireland have seen a resulting fall in the school population. The Report of the Independent Strategic Review of Education published in 2006 noted that more than one-third of primary schools have an enrolment of fewer than 90 pupils. Approximately one-sixth of post-primary schools have an enrolment of fewer than 300 pupils and nearly two-fifths have an enrolment of fewer than 500 pupils. The downward trend in terms of pupil numbers is expected to continue (see Table 3).

## The Integrated Sector

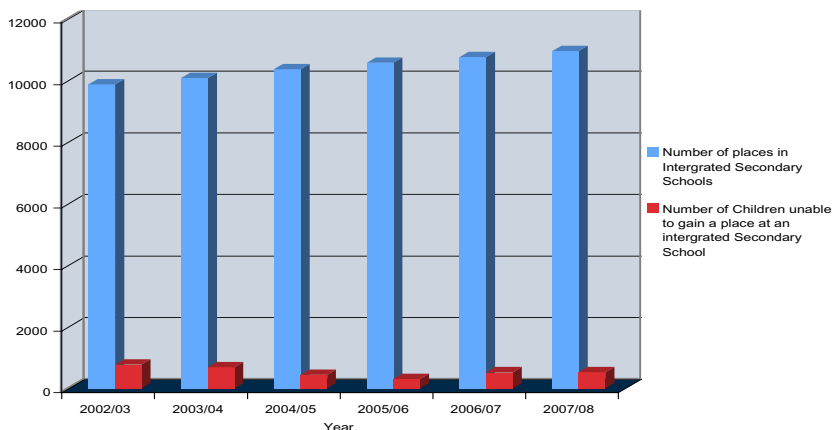
The Education Reform (NI) Order 1989 established a new management type of school in Northern Ireland, Grant-maintained Integrated (GMI) schools. This legislation gave the Department of Education powers to provide recurrent and capital funding for GMI schools, provided certain conditions were met. The 1989 Order also incorporated transformation legislation, transformation being defined as the acquisition of Grant-maintained Integrated status or controlled integrated status by an existing school. The motive for transformation should be the desire to provide an integrated school and schools have to demonstrate reasonable prospects of being able to recruit at least 30% of pupils from the minority tradition in the area.

In 2007/08 19,124 pupils (5% of children in Northern Ireland schools) attended integrated schools. There are 8,164 pupils in primary schools, and 10,960 in secondary schools.

Over the period from 2002/03 to 2007/08 the number of primary level integrated places in all board areas (apart from the Belfast Education and Library Board where the number remained

static) has increased, some substantially. Nonetheless, it is the only sector where there are an insufficient number of places at primary level. In relation to integrated post-primary schools the number of places has also increased in all Education and Library Board areas. At second-level also, demand for places at Integrated schools outstrips supply. Figure 1 details the trends in integrated school places from 2002/03 and 2007/08.

**Figure 1: Integrated post primary schools**



Source: AQW 8391/08 and AQW 7233/08

## Academic Selection

A distinctive feature of the education system in Northern Ireland has been the existence of the selective system of grammar and secondary schools at post primary level. Entrance to grammar schools has been determined by the results in two tests taken in the last year of primary school (the Transfer Test, or “Eleven Plus”). This has been, and continues to be, a controversial issue and one which has been debated over several years.

Unlike other parts of the UK there were no developments towards a comprehensive system of education in Northern Ireland in the 1960s and 1970s. However, the Labour government elected in 1997 made clear its intention to review the system. The Direct Rule Minister in Northern Ireland commissioned two major research projects on the effect of the selective system of education<sup>3</sup>. On the basis of the research findings, the then Minister of Education in the newly devolved administration set up an independent body to consult on the issue of selection and make recommendations. This review (the Burns Review) was published in 2001<sup>4</sup> and recommended the end of academic selection and the introduction of a system of collaborative collegiates of post primary schools. After the suspension of devolution in

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2003, the Direct Rule Minister established a post primary review group to provide advice on future options. The report (the Costello Report)<sup>5</sup> published in 2004 recommended ending the transfer test in 2008, a recommendation accepted by the Minister. With the restoration of devolution in May 2007 the Minister of Education outlined proposals to end the system of academic selection. The last transfer test took place in 2008.

This section updates some of the statistical work of the research project, commissioned by the Direct Rule Minister in 1997, carried out by Tony Gallagher and Alan Smith for the Department of Education and published in 2000.

The updated figures indicate that the trends, which the research published in 2000 had revealed, have continued. Then, figures showed that a quarter of pupils in the final year of primary school tended to achieve a grade A in the Eleven Plus. They also showed that the proportion of pupils who achieved a grade A “varied by, and was correlated with, FSM band”, with schools that had fewer pupils entitled to free school meals (FSM) having higher proportions of pupils who achieved a grade A in the Transfer Test. As can be seen from Table 5, that trend has continued. Indeed, in 2007/08, schools with more than 30% of pupils entitled to FSM were considerably less likely to have pupils receiving an A in the Test than was the case in 1997/98.

**Table 5: Percentage of pupils with Transfer Test Grade A by primary school FSM band 1997/98<sup>1</sup> and 2007/08<sup>2</sup>**

FSM Band	1997/98	FSM Band	2007/08
< 11%	41	>10%	36
11 – 20	28	10 – 19.99	24
20.1 - 30	25	20 – 29.99	21
30.1 – 40	21	30 – 39.99	14
40.1 – 50	20	40 – 49.99	10
> 50%	11	> 50%	9
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>26</b>	<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>26</b>

Table 6 shows the other side of the coin – the proportion of pupils who either achieved a grade D or who were not entered for the Transfer Test, by the level of FSM entitlement in their school. Just over half of all pupils in both 1997/98 and 2007/08 achieved a grade D or did not sit the Transfer Test. However, the proportion of such pupils in schools with the lowest levels of FSM was considerably lower than the norm while in schools with higher levels of FSMs, the proportion of pupils obtaining grade D or not sitting the Test was considerably higher than the norm.

**Table 6: Percentage of pupils with Transfer Test Grade D or Not Entered by primary school FSM band 1997/08 and 2007/08**

FSM Band	1997/98	FSM Band	2007/08
< 11%	34	>10%	38
11 – 20	51	10 – 19.99	54
20.1 - 30	52	20 – 29.99	58
30.1 – 40	59	30 – 39.99	68
40.1 – 50	60	40 – 49.99	71
> 50%	72	> 50%	78
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>52</b>	<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>52</b>

The 1989 Education Reform Order introduced open enrolment for all schools and removed the quotas on grammar school admissions that had operated until then. In 1991, some 33% of Year 8 students entered grammar school – an increase from the 28 – 29% which had been the norm when quotas were in place. As is clear from Table 7, the proportion of Year 8 pupils entering grammar schools has continued to grow. Until the middle of the 2000s, this did not impact on the actual numbers attending secondary schools as the size of the cohort was increasing. However, since 2004/05 when the size of the Year 8 cohort dropped below 25,000, there has been a marked increase in the proportion of pupils going to grammar schools.

**Table 7: Number and percentage of pupils entering secondary and grammar schools 1994 -2009**

Year	Number of Year 8s entering secondary school	Percentage of Year 8s entering secondary school	Number of Year 8s entering grammar school	Percentage of Year 8s entering secondary school	Total number of pupils in year 8
1994/95	16,863	65	8,920	35	25,783
1995/96	16,947	65	9,028	35	25,975
1996/97	17,479	66	9,005	34	26,484
1997/98	17,422	66	9,122	34	26,544
1998/99	17,564	66	9,160	34	26,724
1999/00	17,594	66	9,105	34	26,699
2000/01	16,915	65	9,023	35	25,938
2001/02	16,758	65	9,019	35	25,777
2002/03	16,653	65	9,069	35	25,722
2003/04	16,401	65	9,001	35	25,402
2004/05	15,180	62	9,131	38	24,311
2005/06	15,192	63	8,845	37	24,037
2006/07	14,739	62	8,913	38	23,652
2007/08	14,349	62	8,846	38	23,195
2008/09	15,394	63	8,880	37	24,274

### Participation in post compulsory school age education

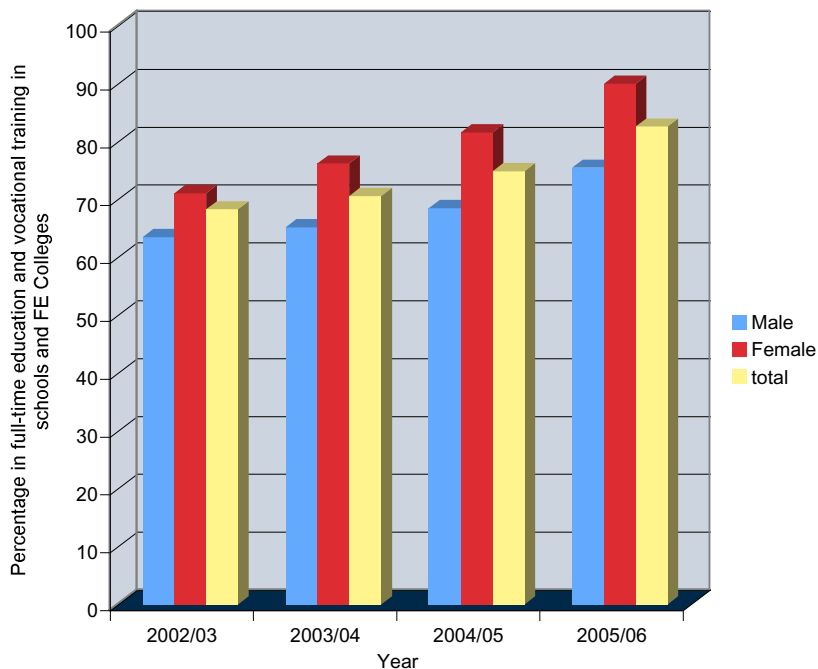
Full time participation rates for 16 and 17 year olds are higher in Northern Ireland than in England (Table 8). Within Northern Ireland there are distinct gender differences with significantly more females than males participating and with participation rates for females growing faster than for males.



**Table 8: Comparison of participation in full-time education and vocational training in FE Colleges between Northern Ireland and England (16 and 17 year olds) 2005/06**

	Northern Ireland	England
Males	80.4	73.9
Females	93.2	81.0
<b>Total</b>	<b>86.6</b>	<b>77.4</b>

**Figure 2: Participation in full-time education and vocational training in schools and FE colleges by 16 & 17 year olds, 2001/02 to 2005/06**



Source: Department of Education Participation Figures

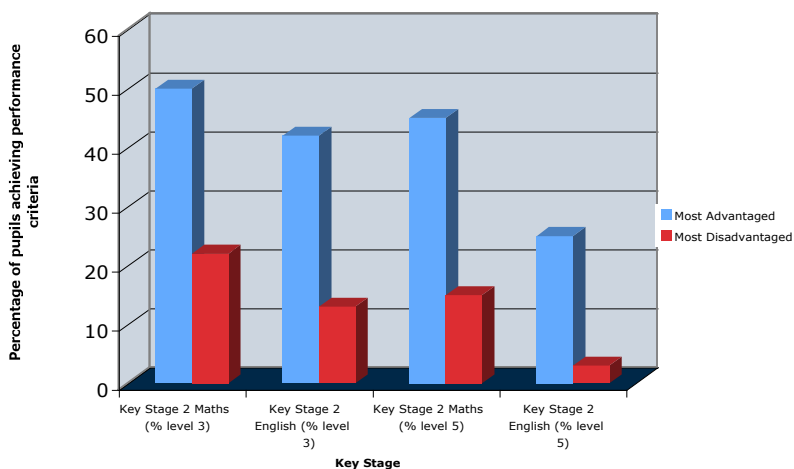
More recent participation data includes vocational training provided outside the School and FE sector – for example, JobSkills/Training for success programmes not delivered through FE colleges. This shows that for males there is a participation rate of 89% and for females it is 95.8%.

## Educational Outcomes

In terms of results of public examinations, schools in Northern Ireland do better than counterparts in England and Wales. Ninety eight per cent of Year 14 pupils achieved two or more A Levels at grades A-E while 52% of year 12 pupils achieved 5 or more GCSEs at grades A\*-C. However, Northern Ireland has a higher proportion of working age people with no qualifications. In 2006 the figure was 24 % of people with no qualifications, compared to 13.6% in England and 17% in Wales (DE, 2006). While data suggests that this picture is likely to improve, with 52% of young people now achieving five or more GCSEs at grades A\*-C, this still leaves 48% who do not. Moreover, 25% of 11 year olds are not meeting secondary school literacy and numeracy targets, 37% of pupils fail to achieve a grade A\*-C in GCSE English; 41% in Mathematics and 47% fail to achieve an A\*-C in both English and Mathematics.<sup>6</sup>

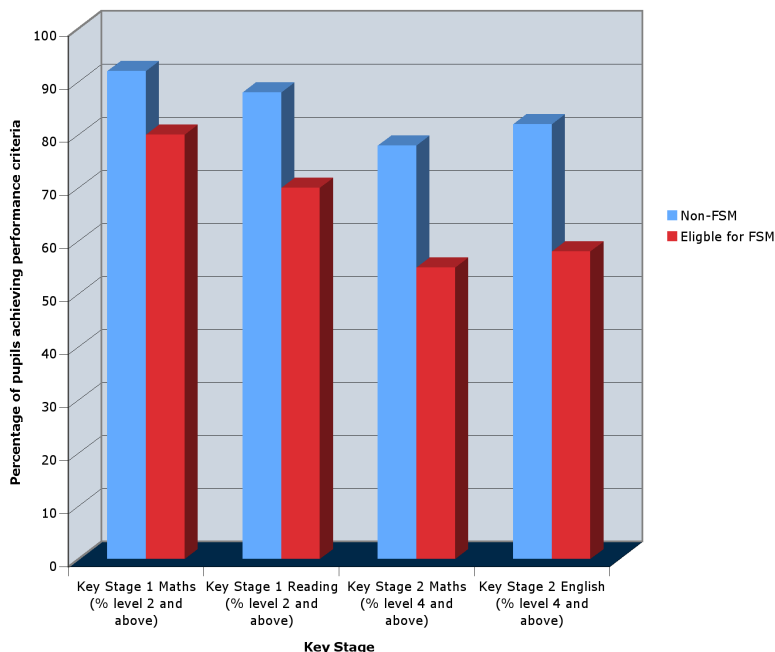
The impact of poverty on educational attainment is well documented.<sup>7</sup> Figures 3a and 3b below, using UK and Northern Ireland Key Stage 1 and 2 (primary school) assessment data for 2002/03, illustrate a link between social disadvantage and education performance across the UK. In every case there is a gap in the performance of pupils in the most advantaged schools as compared with the most disadvantaged schools and between pupils eligible for Free School Meals (FSMs) and those not eligible for FSMs. International evidence demonstrates that these disparities are found across all developed countries<sup>8</sup>.

**Figure 3a: Percentage of pupils achieving performance criteria in the most advantaged schools and the most disadvantaged schools in Northern Ireland**



Source: Gallagher (2006)

**Figure 3b: Percentage of pupils achieving performance criteria by eligibility for Free School Meals in England**



Source: Department for Education and Schools (2005)

The 2006 Northern Ireland Audit Office report, *Improving Literacy and Numeracy in Schools*, concluded that “there has been only limited improvement among lower performing pupils in both primary and post-primary sectors.” The 2005 Literacy results for Key Stage 3 suggested that 6000 14 year-olds in Northern Ireland were at risk of leaving school unable to read at the expected standard (Level 5).

Children from socially disadvantaged backgrounds, as indicated by Free School Meal (FSM) entitlement, were less likely to have positive educational outcomes. In 2007/08, over 18% of primary school children in Northern Ireland were entitled to free school meals as were 25% of pupils in secondary schools and 5.9% of pupils in grammar schools. For the same period, 18.6% of children in nursery provision had parents in receipt of Income Support or Income Based Job Seekers Allowance and so would have been eligible for FSM. The qualifications of school leavers data, as shown in Table 9 below, indicates the continuing educational disadvantage for pupils entitled to FSM. Such pupils are only half as likely to have at least 5+ GCSEs (A\*-C) and are four times more likely to have no qualifications.

**Table 9: Qualifications of school leavers by FSM entitlement**

Attainment	% entitled to Free School Meals	% not entitled to Free School Meals
5 A*-C GCSEs or higher (including A levels)	35.6	70.3
No formal Qualifications	8.4	2.1

Source: Northern Ireland Audit Office (2006)

In order not to identify individual schools, figures on how well children do in tests are produced by grouping together schools according to the proportion of pupils entitled to FSMs. Within each group, the school results have been ranked from the lowest performing school, in terms of test results, to the highest. The median figures quoted below are the actual results of the school in the middle of this scale i.e. 50% of the schools in this group failed to obtain this level and 50% achieved or exceeded the results.

In 2002/03, the median school with 40 – 49.99% of children entitled to FSMs had 29.0% of children achieving level 3 and above in English at Key Stage One and 31.8% of children achieving level 3 or above in Maths. By 2006/07, the median school with a similar level of FSM entitlement had decreased to 26% of children reaching level 3 or above in English and 30% achieving level 3 or above in Maths at Key Stage One. For children attending the small number of schools where 70% or more of children are entitled to FSMs, in 2002/03, the median school had 12% of children reaching level 3 or above in English and 21% reaching level 3 or above in Maths. In 2006/07, the median school with 70% or more children entitled to FSMs had decreased further to 5.5% of children achieving level 3 in English and 9.5% in Maths.

The situation in relation to educational outcomes at Key Stage Two is similar. As Table 10 shows, the proportion of children achieving level 4 and above in schools with high rates of FSM entitlement dropped sharply between 2002/03 and 2006/07. While Table 11 indicates an increase in attainment in English at level 5 for children at the median school, that improvement is not carried through to the schools with higher levels of FSM entitlement where outcomes have declined sharply.

**Table 10: Key Stage Two proportion of children achieving level 4 and above**

Year	Proportion of children entitled to FSM	% of children in median school achieving Level 4 or above in English	% of children in median school achieving Level 4 or above in Maths
2002/03	40 – 49.99	66.7	73.2
2006/07	40 – 49.99	60.6	66.7
2002/03	70% +	53.8	59.6
2006/07	70% +	37.5	41.7

Source: DE Benchmarking data 2002/03 and 2006/07

**Table 11: Key Stage Two proportion of children achieving level 5 and above**

Year	Proportion of children entitled to FSM	% of children in median school achieving Level 5 or above in English	% of children in median school achieving Level 5 or above in Maths
2002/03	40 – 49.99	3.2	25.0
2006/07	40 – 49.99	10.7	24.2
2002/03	70%+	2.3	14.8
2006/07	70%+	0.0	5.9

## Children In/Leaving Care and Educational Outcomes

Data provided by DHSSPS (2007)<sup>9</sup> shows that children and young people in the care system have significantly worse educational outcomes than other young people. Only 11% of care leavers achieve five or more GCSEs grades A\*-C and care leavers in Northern Ireland are ten times more likely than school leavers in general to leave without gaining any qualifications at all. They are also under-represented in post 16 education and training statistics with figures showing that only 57% of care leavers whose economic activity was known were in education, training or employment. Inevitably, this impacts on employment levels with the unemployment rate among care leavers six times the rate among all school leavers in Northern Ireland. Figures for 2002/03 show that 9% of 'looked after' children of school age were suspended from school, compared with 1.7% of the total school population in Northern Ireland.

### **Educational Outcomes for Children from Irish Traveller and other Minority Ethnic Backgrounds**

In 2006 the Northern Ireland Audit Office noted that 9 out of 10 Traveller children were not achieving the required literacy levels. The vast majority have no formal educational qualifications and 92% have no GCSEs or equivalent qualifications.<sup>10</sup> A working group on social inclusion of travellers in Northern Ireland<sup>11</sup> found that, while rates of attendance in primary school had improved, the majority of Traveller children do not continue to attend school regularly after primary education. Of those 41 Traveller children who did sit GCSE examinations in 2003/04 and 2004/05, 10 achieved 5+ GCSE grades A\*-G compared to 98% for the general population and the number of Traveller children achieving the accepted standard of good GCSEs (5+ grades A\*-C, including English and Mathematics) was too small to be included. The Department for Education in 2008 established a task force to review the educational needs of Traveller children and the current delivery of services. It is due to report on the findings before the end of 2009.

A more mixed picture emerges in relation to young people from ethnic minority backgrounds. A higher percentage of minority ethnic pupils (67%) leave school with 5+ GCSEs, A\*-C, compared to 64% of all pupils and the proportion of minority ethnic school leavers who go onto further and higher education is higher (76%) than the general population (66%). However, a higher percentage of minority ethnic pupils (8%) leave with **no** GCSE qualifications.

In recent years the migrant worker population in Northern Ireland has grown and there has been a substantial increase in the number of children whose first language is not English. The Equality Commission (2008)<sup>12</sup> points to concerns which have been raised about the difficulties faced in accessing grammar schools in Northern Ireland and suggests that there are access issues for this group of young people.

### **Children with Special Educational Needs**

Northern Ireland has higher levels of children with particular needs than is the case in the UK generally. Table 12 shows 4% of pupils in Northern Ireland in 2006/07 had a statement of Special Educational Need (SEN). This compares to 2.8% of pupils in England in the same year. The process by which a pupil comes to have a statement of SEN is not a simple one. Once a child is identified as having particular needs in relation to his or her education, those needs are placed on a register. The level of assessed needs range from Stage 1 to 5. For children at stages 1 to 2, Individual Education Plans are drawn up and the school tries to meet his/her needs within normal school resources. If the school concludes that the child's needs are so substantial that they cannot be met within the school's resources, then the Head Teacher will make a request for Statutory Assessment with a view to the child obtaining a Statement of Special Educational Need. Education authorities have a statutory duty to provide resources to meet the needs detailed on a Statement of SEN.

**Table 12: Percentage of children with Special Education Needs by school type 2006/07**

School type	Statemented children	SEN children (not statemented)	% SEN children Stages 1 – 5
Nursery	0.8	16.5	17.3
Primary	2.6	16.3	18.9
Secondary	4.0	15.9	19.9
Grammar	0.5	3.2	3.7
Special	91.2	8.8	100
All schools	3.8	13.6	17.4

Most, but not all, children with Special Educational Needs (SEN) are on the SEN register. In a recent study of primary schools, Head Teachers reported that the Individual Education Plan, which is the minimum intervention for a child on the SEN register, takes up a lot of teachers' time. Therefore, a child is only put on the register if there is no doubt about their SEN status.<sup>13</sup>

## Views of Children and Young People

Article 12 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child provides for children's right to express their views on all matters concerning them; to have their views given due weight in accordance with their age and maturity; and to participate effectively in decision making processes concerning them. Since children are the main users of education services, they have a right to have their views heard in relation to improving educational experiences and outcomes. The government says it is committed to involving children and young people in decision making. For example, the Children and Young People's Unit at Westminster states that:

*"We want to hear the voices of young people, influencing and shaping local services... feeling heard, feeling valued; being treated as responsible citizens."<sup>14</sup>*

The Kids' Life and Times Survey ([www.ark.ac.uk/klf](http://www.ark.ac.uk/klf)), which began in 2008, is an attempt to ascertain children's views on a range of topics. In relation to education, children (11 year olds) were asked whether they were mostly 'happy' or mostly 'unhappy' in school, the majority said mostly happy.

**Table 15: ‘Happy or Unhappy in School’**

	%	
	Boy	Girl
Mostly happy	76	84
Mostly unhappy	6	3
Can't decide	18	13

Seventy seven per cent of children taking part in Kids’ Life and Times had done the transfer test (the remainder had not – apart from 1% who did not know). Of these, 23% said they did not feel any pressure at all because of the test; almost one in five (19%) said they thought there was a lot of pressure on them; while over half (55%) felt ‘somewhere in between’ a lot and none at all.

The majority (43%) said the pressure was from themselves, 31% from parents or someone at home and 26% from teachers. Asked what they thought should happen to the transfer test, 44% wanted to keep the test, 35% of respondents to get rid of it; and 21% were not sure what they thought should happen.

Most young people in Northern Ireland appear to be happy at school. Findings from the Young Persons Behaviour and Attitudes Study (Central Survey Unit, 2008)<sup>15</sup>, a survey of over 6,000 11-16 year olds, show that 78% said they liked school. The vast majority (89%) feel the things they learn there are important and 90% feel what they learn in school will be important in their adult lives. Most attached a lot of value to education with over 80% saying they thought it was important to stay on at school or college after the official leaving age and 70% said they were planning to do A Levels. Data collected by the Young Life and Times Survey<sup>16</sup> which is an annual survey of 16 year olds ([www.ark.ac.uk/ylt](http://www.ark.ac.uk/ylt)) reinforce these generally positive findings with over two thirds of respondents reporting positive school experiences.

However, there are also indications that school can be stressful or difficult to cope with for some young people. Eighty four per cent of 11-16 year olds in the Young Person’s Behaviour and Attitudes study reported feeling a certain amount of stress due to school work, 20% said they had skipped classes in the term in which they were surveyed. Department of Education school absence statistics show that the majority of all unauthorised absences from school are in the older year groups, growing significantly in the final three years of compulsory schooling. Twelve per cent of the 16 year olds did who took part in the Young Life and Times survey said they were not happy at school or felt that it had not met their skills and knowledge requirements in later life, while 16% felt that most teachers did not respect them as an individual and 17% felt they themselves had under-achieved. Young people from less well-off families reported significantly worse school experiences than those from well-off families. They were overall less happy at school, and were more likely to feel not respected as an individual by most teachers in their school.



### Key Policy Challenges

The results of public examinations and especially A Level results indicate that Northern Ireland compares well with England and Wales in terms of educational outcomes. It is also the case that most children and young people are happy at school and attach much value to education. Nonetheless, the Department of Education acknowledges that there remain significant challenges for education in Northern Ireland<sup>17</sup>. There are economic pressures including the fact that Northern Ireland has a higher number of schools for the school age population and the number of school age children continues to fall. Substantive challenges remain in relation to transfer to post primary schools, an issue which has dominated education debate for a number of years. Tackling inequality will be a major challenge for policy makers. The link between poverty and disadvantage in terms of educational opportunities and outcomes has been well established. Particular groups of children fare badly in the educational system including those in or leaving care, children with special educational needs and Traveller children.

## References

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