

A larger percentage of pupils in Northern Ireland obtain 5 good GCSE passes than their counterparts in England and Wales. This is not at the expense of weaker pupils since the percentage leaving with no GCSE grades is virtually identical.

Our performance at Advanced Level is consistently much higher than in England and Wales.

For children in receipt of free school meals, a common indicator of poverty, the gap between our performance and that of England and Wales is significantly larger in our favour.

In our higher education institutions a much greater percentage of students is drawn from lower socio-economic groups than anywhere else on these islands. Social mobility is much greater in Northern Ireland than in Great Britain. Many so-called comprehensive schools in other parts of these islands are highly socially selective, since parents who have the means to do so buy property in the catchment areas of the most popular schools.

While private education has a minimal presence in Northern Ireland, it is popular elsewhere, especially in urban areas (e.g. Edinburgh where over a quarter of pupils is educated in the private sector; in Glasgow 15% of children are educated in the private sector and in Perth the equivalent figure is 20%). Schools which serve areas of social deprivation tend to be more effective when small.

Since our schools for the most part do not need to cater for the entire ability range, they tend to be much smaller than the one-size-fits-all comprehensive schools found in Great Britain.

In parts of Germany when there was a movement away from academic selection towards “parental choice”, the outcome was greater, rather than less, social segregation in schools.

All of this is not to deny the weaknesses of our current system but to celebrate the real achievements of our excellent secondary schools, grammar schools and primary schools and to argue that we should build on success and address the weaknesses rather than import a failed model from elsewhere. The provisions of the St Andrews Agreement which mean that academic selection cannot be removed without approval of the Assembly, have given us the opportunity to explore this future. We argue for the following:

- much greater support for primary schools, particularly, but not exclusively, in disadvantaged areas in order to reduce class sizes, and a much more imaginative approach to deal with problems of literacy and numeracy in some sections of our community;
- the provision of more money to support those young people with Special Educational Needs;
- greater attention to the development of Technical Education at secondary level;
- the development of Computer Adaptive Testing (CAT) for diagnostic use in the classroom and for transfer purposes;
- attention to Nursery Education, especially in disadvantaged areas;
- a review of the effectiveness of the Revised Curriculum.