Thank you for your letter of 5 September seeking updates on five educational issues for the Commission's 2016 Annual Statement.

The requested updates are as follows:

i. Educational needs of Traveller Children

The Independent Monitoring and Evaluation Group has not been established. However, the Department of Education (DE) does monitor actions in the “Traveller Child in Education Action Framework” through its oversight of the work of the regional Traveller Education Support Service and the progress made in relation to the educational outcomes for Traveller pupils.

In relation to Paragraph 3(3) of Schedule 13 to the Education and Libraries (NI) Order 1986, DE’s focus to date has been to tackle the barriers to attendance that are experienced by traveller pupils, with the establishment of the regional Traveller Education Support Service by the Education Authority (EA) being an important tool in these efforts to improve the educational outcomes of Traveller pupils. The supportive nature of the mechanisms that are in place are the primary focus of DE’s approach to improving the attendance of travellers, rather than to divert resources towards reviewing this legislative provision, which applies to a broader range of pupils than just Traveller pupils. While there remains significant room for further improvement in the attendance rate for Traveller pupils, DE’s approach has seen Traveller pupils' attendance rate increase at primary schools by 5.6% since 2008/09 and at post
primary schools by 8.1% since 2008/09. DE also allocates additional monies to schools within their delegated budget to support Traveller pupils.

ii. Shared Education

The Shared Education Act (Northern Ireland) 2016 provides a legislative definition of the minimum essential requirements for Shared Education. It places three new duties on DE which will impact across all policy areas:

- To encourage, facilitate and promote shared education;
- To consider shared education when developing, adopting, implementing or revising policies, strategies and plans and designing and delivering services; and
- To lay a report before the Assembly on the operation of the Act within two years.

In September 2015 DE launched Sharing Works: A Policy for Shared Education which aims to support the Act by providing a practical description of Shared Education and guidance on delivery.

Following the enactment of the Bill DE wrote to named bodies within the Act advising them of the implication. In addition, DE officials ensured that the requirements of the Act were reflected in the annual business plans of the named bodies and other sectoral bodies where appropriate.

Work has been ongoing to raise awareness amongst DE staff and with the relevant educational bodies; steps have also been taken to identify, collate and monitor data on a six monthly basis to meet the reporting requirements.

Delivery of the Delivering Social Change Shared Education Signature Project (SESP) continues. This is jointly funded by The Executive Office, Atlantic Philanthropies and DE providing £25m for schools to embed Shared Education up to June 2019. This project focuses on schools that have previously engaged in Shared Education.

€35.3m is being made available for Shared Education through the PEACE IV Programme covering Northern Ireland (NI) and the border region of the Republic of Ireland. This funding will target schools that have limited or no previous experience in Shared Education and complement SESP.

iii. Integrated Education

The Education Reform (NI) Order 1989 provides a statutory framework for the development of integrated schools and Article 64 places a duty on DE, 'to encourage and facilitate the development of integrated education'. It also sets out the arrangements for the establishment; management and governance of grant maintained and controlled integrated schools. There are currently 63 integrated schools providing education to around 22,000 children.

DE funds the Northern Ireland Council for Integrated Education (NICIE) to encourage and facilitate the strategic development of, and provide guidance and advice to, the
integrated sector. I acknowledge the contribution that NICIE has made in promoting the development of the integrated sector.

However, DE also has a statutory duty to have regard to the principle that all children are, as far as practicable, educated in accordance with the wishes of their parents. Our system therefore reflects the wishes of parents who may want to see their children educated in an integrated school, a voluntary grammar school an Irish medium school or indeed any other type of school. It is my view that all children should be treated fairly and equitably regardless of the type of school they attend. The recommendation to replace the current system with one that is fully integrated does not, in my view, seem a practical one.

I am currently waiting for the report of the Independent Panel set up to undertake a strategic assessment of the current arrangements for the planning and development of integrated education and to make recommendations to support a more integrated education system. I look forward to receiving the Panel’s report in the next few weeks and considering its recommendations. While I don’t want to pre-empt what the report might conclude, I would be expecting it to make recommendations around how money provided under the Fresh Start Agreement (FSA) can be used to grow the integrated sector. You will be aware that a number of projects have already been announced.

New, improved and additional accommodation for existing integrated schools and new builds to enable the physical implementation of Shared Education Campus projects will undoubtedly contribute to a more inclusive education system. DE is in further discussions with the Northern Ireland Office to agree the approach to the further allocation and anticipated impact of the FSA capital and I look forward to taking this important work forward.

iv. Academic Selection

On 7 September I announced DE’s revised guidance for schools which endorses the use of academic selection. Where it is in line with the wishes of parents and pupils, the guidance sets out how primary schools may help children prepare for the tests so that they can achieve their very best. I have made it clear that I support the right of schools to select on the basis of academic ability. Every child, regardless of background, postcode, social group, religion or ethnicity has the opportunity to get into a grammar school. These schools can, by setting demanding standards and offering rich educational opportunities, secure impressive outcomes for those who will derive the greatest benefit from them.

v. Education of Children in places of detention

From 9 May 2016, the EA took on joint responsibility for the delivery of education services within Woodlands Juvenile Justice Centre. An interim statement of Joint Operating Arrangements was signed on 4 May and in line with those arrangements, the EA is now providing ongoing direction and practical operational support for the delivery of education and vocational training within the Juvenile Justice Centre, with an EA centre manager appointed to oversee the educational provision at Woodlands.
The EA will also facilitate staff cover arrangements, to ensure adequate teaching provision is maintained, and integrate Woodlands existing teaching staff into the EA’s training and development plans for its own Education Other Than At School (EOTAS) staff. Existing teaching staff in Woodlands are in the process of transferring to the EA, under Transfer of Undertakings Protection of Employment (TUPE) conditions, and any current vacancies are being filled by using the NI Substitute Teacher Register to ensure full cover is maintained. Vacant posts will be permanently filled once the TUPE process is complete.

The centre is moving rapidly to implement an enhanced curriculum reflective of the pupil entitlement framework and EOTAS best practice. The new EOTAS service and curriculum have already been informally assessed by the Education and Training Inspectorate (ETI) and found to be compliant with the relevant elements of DE’s 2014 guidance for EOTAS services. As part of this assessment, ETI have provided recommendations for enhancing both education delivery and governance arrangements, ahead of a formal ETI inspection. A formal ETI inspection is being scheduled, as part of a wider inspection of Woodlands by Criminal Justice Inspection NI in 2017.

It is anticipated that the full transfer process, including all financial and staffing arrangements, with the associated transfer of the relevant duties of care, will conclude in the autumn.

       

PETER WEIR
MINISTER OF EDUCATION