



Promoting Excellence:
Improving boys' educational achievement in
Northern Ireland

Policy Paper

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Introduction

The Democratic Unionist Party is committed to improving educational achievement across Northern Ireland. As outlined within our 2019 manifesto and Northern Ireland Plan, all young people in Northern Ireland deserve the opportunity to access the best education system possible and to have the best start to life. It is fitting as we celebrate the centenary of Northern Ireland that we look towards the educational achievement of our children and young people and how we can ensure the best future possible for all. It is our responsibility as the largest political party in Northern Ireland to ensure that our young people can reach their full educational attainment. Tackling educational underachievement is a priority for the DUP, yet we cannot ignore the stark reality that the majority of those children and young people who are underachieving within our education system are boys. Over recent years numerous studies have been undertaken on the issue of boys' educational underachievement. Now is the time to turn this research into action. Clearly more needs to be done. This is our opportunity to do this.

Indicators of educational underachievement

Before discussing the issue of boys' educational underachievement in more depth, it is first necessary to outline what indicators we are using. There are two distinctive ways of measuring educational achievement used in Northern Ireland: key stage results and statistics for pupils achieving 5 or more passes at GCSE level. Examining results at key stages are beneficial for the early detection and tracking of underachieving, allowing more time for corrective measures personalised to each child to be implemented. Whilst GCSE results are the most commonly used indicator and provide perhaps the clearest demographical statistical breakdown, there are concerns surrounding their use.

By the time a child has underachieved at GCSEs, it is too late to help them. Any measures put in place after this point are purely reactionary. Educational underachievement needs to be tackled early. Prevention is better than a cure. For the statistics contained within this paper, GCSE results have been used as an indicator of educational underachievement due to the availability of the data. This is not necessarily to endorse this as the best option available of tracking this. Rather, we believe that only a combined approach using both indicators will provide the information needed to tackle educational underachievement as early as possible.

The 2020 Covid-19 pandemic

The 2020 Covid-19 pandemic and subsequent lockdown saw the early closure of schools across the United Kingdom in March and a move to online distanced learning¹. Whilst it is not the remit of this paper to focus solely upon this pandemic, it would be remiss to leave it out of the wider conversation surrounding boys educational underachievement as it will have long-term consequences for both our education system and young people. A survey of almost 3,000 teachers and headteachers in England conducted by the National Foundation for Educational Researchers in July found that:

- 98% of teachers stated their pupils were an average of three months behind in the curriculum.
- 21% of teachers believed that boys were further behind than girls.
- *The learning gap for poorer pupils has widened by 46%.*
- 53% of teachers in deprived schools said that their pupils were at least four months behind in the curriculum, compared to only 15% of teachers from wealthier schools.²

Whilst this study was focused upon England, there can be no doubt that the early closure of schools has impacted on children all across the United Kingdom. There are many possible reasons behind these statistics, yet it is clear that children from lower socio-economic backgrounds will have been disproportionately disadvantaged by distanced learning due to a lack of educational resources and equipment available within the home (see section entitled **Socio-economic factors**). In the recovery process from this pandemic it is vital that our education system is provided with the resources and funding necessary to protect children and young people who have been impacted by the school closures from any further negative impacts to their education.

As a further consequence of the school closures, pupils were unable to sit GCSE and A-Level examinations. Alternative methods of grading were sought across the United Kingdom and a standardised calculation was created to predict A level grades in Northern Ireland and England³. However, the standardised grades were critiqued as being disproportionately unfair to pupils from disadvantaged schools, resulting in many students from lower socio-economic backgrounds receiving lower grades⁴. Based upon this, the Northern Ireland Education Minister Peter Weir changed the grading method for GCSEs to that of teacher predicted grades and changed the A Level results so that

¹ <https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/news/letter-minister-education-education-sector>

² <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/education-53947982>

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https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/908368/Summer_2020_grades_for_GCSE_AS_and_A_level_110820.pdf

⁴ <https://www.ifs.org.uk/publications/14974>

teacher predicted grades could be used in place of the original calculated grade, if they were higher⁵. For any pupils unhappy with their results, an appeal process was available and pupils could choose to sit their exams at a later date⁶. Hindsight will provide perspective as to how the Covid-19 pandemic could have been handled, but it must be noted that the decision to close schools and cancel exams was not made lightly. It was based on the scientific advice at the time of what was in the best interests of the health and safety of the children and young people involved. What is clear is that the effects of the Covid-19 pandemic are likely to be felt within our education system for years to come. The DUP is committed to ensuring that all our young people receive the best educational experience possible within the uncertain setting of the Covid-19 pandemic and its after effects.

Background

Within Northern Ireland the educational achievement gap between boys (64.2%) and girls (71.6%) gaining 5 or more GCSEs stands at 7.4%⁷. For Free School Meal Entitled (FSME) children, this rises to 11.8%, with only 65.7% of boys achieving 5 or more GCSEs compared to 77.5% of girls. FSME boys have lower levels of educational attainment than both FSME and non-FSME girls across all sectors of education in Northern Ireland.

Whilst the statistics clearly show that FSME children have lower levels of educational achievement than their non-FSME, there is a clear gender disparity which cannot be ignored. In 2014, the Northern Ireland average for all pupils achieving 5 good grade GCSEs was 62%⁸. Non-FSME Catholic boys were slightly above average at 64.5%, but this percentage dropped to 33.2% for FSME Catholic boys. For non-FSME Protestant boys the average stood at 58.6% and plummeted to 19.7% for FSME Protestant boys.

The religious divide

As the above statistics also highlight, there is an educational achievement gap between Protestant and Catholic boys. This gap is most noticeable amongst FSME pupils. These statistics raise important questions about why Catholic boys outperform their Protestant counterparts and what can be done

⁵ <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-northern-ireland-53808428>

⁶ <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/appeal-arrangements-for-as-a-levels-and-gcse>

⁷ <https://www.eani.org.uk/sites/default/files/2018-10/Audit%20of%20Inequalities%20April%202018.pdf>

⁸ <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-northern-ireland-26855040>

to narrow this gap. Reasons which may explain this include community involvement in education, the role of leadership in education and cultural differences.

The New Decade, New Approach deal of 2020 detailed proposals to create a group specifically tasked to look at educational underachievement within Protestant boys⁹. However, groups themselves are not enough unless the recommendations resulting from them are acted upon. Action is needed and it is needed now¹⁰. The religious divide within education can have long-lasting detrimental impacts upon future employment opportunities for young people. A recent Labour Force Survey found that 24% of Protestants aged 16 to 24 were unemployed, compared to 17% of Catholics¹¹. This educational gap must be addressed to ensure that all our young people have the opportunity to reach their full potential.

The DUP propose:

- The creation of community-based initiatives to help promote the importance of education within Protestant areas.
- A review of all current policies aimed at tackling underachievement within Protestant boys to assess their effectiveness.
- Initiatives to promote and encourage quality leadership at both peer and staff level within primary and secondary schools.

The national perspective

Aside from a difference in how the statistics are labelled, there is actually very little difference between Great Britain and Northern Ireland in terms of boys' educational underachievement when the data is examined. In England, girls also continue to do better than boys, with 46.6% of girls achieving grade 5 or above in Maths and English compared to 40% of boys¹². A 2007 report for the

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https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/856998/2020-01-08_a_new_decade_a_new_approach.pdf

¹⁰ <https://www.irishnews.com/news/northernirelandnews/2020/01/20/news/new-review-into-why-protestant-boys-do-worse-at-school-will-be-meaningless-unless-followed-up-by-action-1818408/>

¹¹ <https://www.community-relations.org.uk/sites/crc/files/media-files/NIPMR3.pdf>

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https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/863815/2019_KS4_revised_text.pdf

Joseph Rowntree Foundation found that White British males make up almost half of all educational underachievers in England¹³. It is clear that across the United Kingdom boys are underachieving compared to their female peers.

Early years development

Early years development is vital for preparing a child for the education system and that the foundations developed at this stage can make a huge difference to a child's life chances. Positive parental engagement can have a huge impact on a child's educational achievement. This engagement can be anything from reading children bedtime stories, encouraging active play, the use of puzzles and boardgames and toys, and taking time to help children with homework and discussing school with the child. Measures such as encouraging parents to read to young children can have hugely positive outcomes for educational achievement. The '*Read On. Get On.*' Campaign developed in 2014 by a range of charities and educational organisations to increase literacy levels in primary children in one such initiative encouraging this¹⁴.

Peter Martin, previously a DUP councillor, recommended in the 2016 paper '*No Child Left Behind*' for the creation of a 'social media based literacy campaign could encourage children and parents to read together'¹⁵. Examples such as these prove that not all initiatives to tackle underachievement need to be large scale or expensive to implement.

Some children do not have this positive parental engagement with education. There may be an intergenerational cycle of education underachievement meaning that parents are unable, or not confident enough, to read to their children at an early age or to help with homework. This may in turn be rationalised by the child as parental indifference to education and result in the child placing low importance on education. Alternatively, some parents may genuinely place little importance on education and take little to no involvement in their child's education. This can manifest in low or non-attendance of parent teacher meetings, high levels of pupil absenteeism from school, and having little or no educational material at home. If education is not a high priority at home, it is very difficult for

¹³ <https://www.jrf.org.uk/sites/default/files/jrf/migrated/files/2063-education-schools-achievement.pdf>

¹⁴ https://cdn.literacytrust.org.uk/media/documents/ROGO_The_Power_of_Reading_April_2015.pdf

¹⁵ <http://www.niassembly.gov.uk/globalassets/documents/education/cllr-peter-martin.pdf>

schools to counter this when they only have access to the child for a few hours a day during term time. Children whose parents have not taken an active interest in their early years development may enter education already behind their peers, particularly in terms of literacy. **The DUP are committed to the belief that no child should enter primary school already having to play catch up.**

Educational underachievement needs to be detected and addressed as early as possible to ensure that it does not impact negatively upon the life chances of an individual¹⁶. By the time a child is found to be underachieving at school, it may be too late to fix the problem. Therefore, prevention is certainly better than a cure. DUP Education Minister Peter Weir noted the core role early years development has to play within education in a 2017 speech, stating:

*'The growing recognition of the importance of intervention in the early years has therefore led to the Department's increased investment in Early Years initiatives such as the Pre-School Education Programme and Sure Start. The Pathway Fund provides around £2.7 million funding to support early education and learning services particularly to improve the development of children who are at risk of not reaching their full potential within the school system. In 2016/17 around 3,140 children assessed as being in greatest need are benefiting from support through Pathway funding.'*¹⁷

The DUP propose:

- The development and promotion of a Northern Ireland based literacy scheme targeted at parents of children aged under 5.
- An information campaign (small booklet and online resources) provided to all new parents outlining the importance of early years development and ideas parents can use from an early age.
- Community reading groups for children (possibly attached to community centres, churches or bookstores/shopping centres).
- Greater involvement of parents in children's education through ideas such as parent/pupil homework assignments or 'bring a parent to school days'.
- Re-evaluating current policies of school absenteeism with greater focus on early intervention and parental and community involvement.

¹⁶ <https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201415/cmselect/cmeduc/647/64704.htm>

¹⁷ <https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/education/Ministerial%20Speech%20-%20Tackling%20Educational%20Underachievement%20Conference.pdf>

Attainment versus achievement

Focusing solely on educational achievement as a marker for success may mean that as a society we are doing a disservice to many of our children and young people. For a variety of reasons, not every child will be able to achieve top academic grades. Therefore, it is vital that our education system look for areas in which these children and young people can fulfil their full potential at the level of attainment best suited to them. At GCSE level there is a high value placed on academic subjects and building a pathway to higher education, yet vocational subjects are just as beneficial for young people in terms of developing the skills necessary to seek employment after education (see **Refocusing career advice services** and **Increasing apprentice schemes and opportunities**).

Unfortunately, there is a mindset within our education system and wider culture that vocational subjects are somehow less valuable than academic subjects and as such have less value than their academic counterparts. The DUP know that this is not the case and support measures to address these negative viewpoints within our education system. This is a serious issue as these negative perceptions may discourage a young person from undertaking a vocational subject, even though this may have been the best opportunity for them to achieve their full level of educational attainment. Not everyone in our society can achieve the highest GCSE and A Level grades and it is important that we promote alternatives to the traditionally academic heavy, middle class career paths which are often promoted within schools. As with traditional GCSE subjects, there are gender differences prevalent within vocational subjects. The below tables provides a brief synopsis of this:

Table 1. Gender statistics for 2009/10 Key Stage 4 BTEC vocational subjects¹⁸

Subject	% Male	% Female
Applied Science	48.1	51.9
Sports Science	64.3	35.7
Business and Finance	57.1	42.9
Speech and Drama	28.4	71.6
Systems/Network Management	57.4	42.6

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https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/182677/DFE-RR160.pdf

Art and Design	38.9	61.1
Health Science	5.3	94.7

Academic selection can often find itself on both sides of the discussion surrounding educational disadvantage. On the one hand, academic selection has been shown in the past to favor pupils from middle and upper-class socio-economic backgrounds. On the other hand, academic selection has also provided pupils from lower socio-economic backgrounds with the opportunity to attend a grammar school which they may otherwise not have been able to. Whilst the conversation surrounding the future of academic selection continues, it is vital that parents, carers, teachers and pupils work together to ensure that the best decision is taken for each individual pupil at P7.

Refocusing career advice services

The DUP take the view that historically the advice given by careers advice services in schools has focused almost entirely on academic heavy career paths. While as a society we need individuals to continue to study and train to become doctors, lawyers and teachers, there is a wide range of jobs that our vital to keeping our society moving and our economy growing. We have an ever-growing digital economy which needs a strong workforce and we must ensure that our children and young people are taught the skills necessary to enter into these vital and increasing roles. Those pupils wishing to seek more vocational career paths are often left out of the career advice process and given little, or inaccurate advice. This further contributes to an unhelpful mindset that a career outside of any involving a traditionally academic path is ‘unworthy’ and not something which we should be actively encourage our children and young people to aspire to. Too often career choices such as these are looked down on as somehow being failures – a path only taken because the individual has failed academically. This mindset is inherently damaging and condescending, failing to take into account personal choice and value each job contributes to our society.

What the current Covid-19 pandemic has highlighted is that many of the key workers who are essential to ensuring the continued running of our society are those who are in traditionally lower paid jobs, such as food chain workers. The DUP support the recognition which essential workers are receiving and the continued positive shift in societal attitudes towards these roles. There is also an opportunity for school career advice services to increase their understanding and promotion of self-employment

and entrepreneurship as potential career options. Our society needs innovators and the DUP will be encouraging this within our education sector.

Socio-economic factors

Many of the children who are falling behind in our education system come from lower income households and are often Free School Meal Entitled (FSME). However, it is necessary to note here that the Joseph Rowntree Foundation cautions the sole use of FSME statistics as an indicator of educational underachievement as this data is 'only available from 2013 and includes a change in the eligibility for free-school meals'¹⁹.

Socio-economic factors can affect educational achievement in numerous ways. Lower income families may not be in a financial position to be able to afford to purchase educational material such as books, puzzles, boardgames, computers, IT devices and school materials for their children. Children from lower income families may live in areas with low performing schools and have no financial or practical option of traveling further to attend a better one. Children from lower income families may live in smaller homes or share rooms with siblings, meaning that they do not have a designated quiet space in which to complete their homework or to study compared to their middle-class peers. There may be issues surrounding nutrition that hinder some children within the education system. If a lack of finances or care means that a child does not receive three regular meals a day they may struggle to concentrate on their schoolwork, may be weaker physically and more prone to taking leave of absences due to ill health and may have poor sleeping patterns.

Educational disadvantage can become intergenerational and a cycle which is difficult to break. Some parents may be unable, or not confident enough, to read to their children at an early age or to help with them with homework²⁰. This may in turn be rationalised by the child as parental indifference to education and result in the child placing low importance on education.

¹⁹ <https://www.jrf.org.uk/data/education-northern-ireland>

²⁰

https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/439861/RR439A-Ethnic_minorities_and_attainment_the_effects_of_poverty.pdf

An environment to learn in

The importance of ensuring that children have the correct environment to learn in is central to addressing underachievement. As discussed in the Socio-Economic Factors section, not all children have a private or safe space in which to study or complete homework. In 2017 the DUP Education Minister Peter Weir ensured that ‘over £10.6 million of Extended Schools funding available to almost 550 eligible schools serving areas of the highest social disadvantage’²¹. Extended school schemes are a means of providing a safe and dedicated space for children to undertake homework and out of school learning with the added benefit of having trained staff and teachers on hand to help and answer queries.

Extended school schemes can take the form of Breakfast Clubs, where children attended school early, or a variety of After Schools Clubs. Breakfast Clubs are a way of ensuring that pupils receive a breakfast, providing them with the best start to the day and giving them the energy they need to focus in class. These Clubs are also beneficial for working parents as they can leave children to school earlier before they commute to work. After school activities can include anything from Homework Clubs to sporting, arts and culture activities. Aside from the obvious advantage of Homework Clubs, after school activities involving sport, art and culture are also beneficial for a child’s educational achievement. These activities teach children how to prioritise workload, multitask, work as part of a team, and they provide focus and a positive environment in which to engage with peers. A 2016 study by the Child Poverty Action Group and the Family and Childcare Trust found that interest levels in extended school schemes varied by gender:

Table 2. Interest in extended school schemes²²

Type of scheme	% Male	% Female
After-school sports club	59	46
After-school homework club/revision club and catch-up classes	21	31
Breakfast clubs	22	24
Supervised use of my school computer room before school starts	36	31
I wouldn’t be interested in doing any activities outside school time	8	6

²¹ <https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/education/Ministerial%20Speech%20-%20Tackling%20Educational%20Underachievement%20Conference.pdf>

²² https://www.basw.co.uk/system/files/resources/basw_52853-10_0.pdf

Sometimes, it may be the classroom environment itself which prevents a child from being able to learn to their full potential. Out of classroom learning experiences can benefit children by helping to keep the learning process fresh, interesting and engaging. This may involve school trips to places of interest, taking classes outside to work when the weather permits, encouraging the use of playground spaces for learning, or even being part of programmes where certain subjects are taught at nearby schools resulting in pupils travelling to another school for a few classes a week. Using technology as an alternative to traditional pen and paper learning techniques can also help to engage children and young people who might have difficulties with traditional educational environments.

Addressing educational disadvantage is also about giving our children and young people the confidence they need, not only to achieve their highest level of educational attainment, but also to become an active member of society. Life skills classes may be beneficial in helping to promote confidence as well as helping to teach practical skills in a fun educational environment. Classes may include basic cookery skills, exercise classes, practical guidance for job searching including C.V. writing and interview skills, first aid and CPR training²³. Classes of this nature could be run in partnership with community organisations, helping to foster stronger links between schools and local communities. Initiatives like this are currently being undertaken by some schools in Northern Ireland. The DUP wish to see this extended to more local schools.

The introduction of practical skills classes could also help to prevent practices of informal exclusion, including reduced timetables. Unfortunately, this often negatively impacts on both pupils who are underachieving, and those with Special Educational Needs (SEN) (**For more on SEN, please see the DUP policy paper on Special Educational Needs**). Rather than having a young person only attend class for certain days, or hours, per week, these classes could provide a more positive way of re-engaging young people with the education system. The possibility of combining formal education with apprenticeship training may also be beneficial in these scenarios (see **Increasing apprentice schemes and opportunities**).

²³ [CPR training for schools - apply for a free CPR kit and train your students BHF](#)

The DUP propose:

- Community share schemes for school and educational resources.
- A social media campaign highlighting the importance of a dedicated work and study space for children within their homes.
- Continuation of the Extended Schools Scheme with enough funding to ensure that there are places for all pupils who wish to avail of this.
- Community based after schools' clubs.
- A refocused look at initiatives to tackle 'holiday hunger' and children going to school hungry.
- Better utilising technology within the classroom as a means of engaging pupils.
- The introduction of practical life skills classes within secondary and grammar schools to better prepare children and young people for life outside of education.

Lad culture and a crisis of masculinity

Lad culture can be a barrier explaining why boys, and particularly those from lower socio-economic groups, have traditionally underachieved in education compared to their female and middle-class peers. Boys may engage in so called 'laddish' behaviour in school as a way of training for the masculine culture of workplaces such as building sites and factory floors, and as a means of dealing with the perception that studying and doing well in school are feminine traits. This behaviour can be portrayed as taking little to no interest in schoolwork, challenging school authority figures and in making fun of others who do take education seriously. It must be noted that this theory is somewhat outdated and portrays a negative stereotype of traditionally working-class male roles.

The crisis of masculinity trope focuses on wider society and the difficulties faced by men. Traditional male roles are changing. Men are no longer viewed as the sole 'breadwinners' within families and more women than ever are entering stereotypically male dominated fields. Girls continue to outperform boys in education across the United Kingdom. Boys may feel insecure about their futures and 'act out' in education as a defence mechanism to all of the uncertainty.

2012 research undertaken in partnership by the Department of Education, Department of Justice, Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency (NISRA) and Ulster University entitled *Taking Boys Seriously* examined these issues and devised a list of recommendations tailored towards addressing

boys' educational underachievement and challenging negative aspects of masculine culture²⁴. These recommendations include teaching boys to better understand and challenge masculinity, offering more tailored support to boys at key stages within their education, and adapting youth work methodologies to reengage young people with the education system in a positive way. This research provides a valuable focus on boys' educational underachievement and the recommendations contained within it require further consideration.

Male role models in education

There have also been concerns raised about the lack of positive male role models present within the education system. Traditionally the majority of school teachers are female, with 69.5% of teachers in the United Kingdom being female²⁵. The percentage of female teaching staff rises to 82.4% in primary schools. Boys therefore do not often get first-hand experience of teaching by men, further alienating them from the curriculum and the education system. Encouraging more men to undertake careers in teaching, and in particular teaching at primary school level, would provide boys with positive role models from the beginning of their time in the education system and provide reassurance that boys can and should feel confident to engage with education. Charities such as Teach First have campaigned to raise awareness on this issue and to encourage more males to enter teaching professions²⁶. Aside from the academic benefits of male teachers, increasing the number of male teachers could also help to highlight positive male role models.

Good quality leadership within schools is also vital to ensuring that children and young people receive the best education possible. Both male and female teachers have a responsibility to encourage their pupils to achieve their full potential at all key stages. The DUP will continue to support and encourage positive and outstanding leadership in all levels of the education system.

The DUP propose:

- Bursaries and a media campaign targeted at encouraging more men to become primary teachers/nursery staff.

²⁴ https://dera.ioe.ac.uk/16385/7/taking_boys_seriously_final.docx_Redacted.pdf

²⁵ <https://www.besa.org.uk/key-uk-education-statistics/>

²⁶ <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/education-37552056>

- Specialised citizenship classes aimed at male pupils highlighting negative aspects of lad culture and masculinity and how to address this.
- Extra resources in schools to provide individual help to pupils who are at risk or underachieving.
- Ensuring that the necessary support and resources are available to schools to promote excellent leadership at all levels.

A changing manufacturing sector

The continued legacy of the decline of our traditional manufacturing sector has had a negative impact over recent decades on the career opportunities of many young men who may have found themselves the first male in their family for generations not to be certain of being able to leave school and enter into a secure job with a local company. Traditionally in these circumstances, the knowledge of a secure job place when leaving the education system meant that there was little or no valid reason for some boys to focus on educational achievement or in staying on in the education system.

However, we still have a strong manufacturing and engineering sector in Northern Ireland, albeit this may be a different manufacturing sector to that which existed forty years ago. There are still many opportunities for employment within our manufacturing sector and this needs to be further promoted within our educational institutions. There is also the need for greater connectivity between our manufacturing and educational sectors to ensure that the necessary skills are being taught and developed to enable young people to enter into manufacturing roles.

Increasing apprentice schemes and opportunities

Following on from the previous point is the importance of providing learning opportunities and entry level job opportunities for all our young people who wish to enter into vocational career routes. Apprenticeship schemes, where a young person can gain on the job experience whilst still working in partnership with regional colleges/secondary and grammar schools/universities, are hugely positive ways of achieving this. They are good for the young people as they allow them to continue their education in a work environment, allowing them to earn money and develop the practical skills and valuable work experience in their chosen industries. Apprenticeships are also vital for employers as they ensure that there is a constant supply of new members of the workforce being trained to the

specific needs of the employer. The DUP will continue to promote and support apprenticeship schemes.

For students who wish to enter a vocational trade profession, but who are struggling academically, a combined approach utilising traditional education and on-site vocational training may provide the best answer. In this scenario, a student may be in a formal school environment three or four days of a week to ensure that they achieve the basic qualifications necessarily, while gaining practical first-hand experience of a vocational trade on the days which they are not in the classroom. This could be delivered in partnership with local businesses and Further Education Colleges.

To ensure that apprenticeship places are available for all young people from Northern Ireland who wish to undertake this path, more funding will need to be provided. As our economy changes towards more high-tech, IT based positions, we need to ensure that our education system can produce young people with the skills necessary to enter these careers. If not, they will have been failed before they have even left the education system.

The DUP propose:

- Increased promotion of vocational and digital based subjects in both secondary and grammar schools.
- An overhaul of the school careers advice service to ensure that advisors have the information and training they need to be able to help pupils plan for any future career.
- Greater links between schools and the business sector to encourage innovation and drive amongst pupils.
- An increase in the numbers of apprenticeship scheme places available in Northern Ireland and the promotion of all age apprenticeships.
- Continued support for our 2019 manifesto commitment to abolish and replace the Apprenticeship Levy.
- Increased support for teachers to ensure that children from Key Stage 1 and up receive the best coding training possible.

- A viability study to assess the possibility of combining traditional education with a day-release scheme to learn vocational trades first-hand, whilst also ensuring that young people leave education with basic Maths, English and IT requirements.

Addressing educational underachievement within schools

Tackling educational underachievement within schools has often been the most common route taken by policy makers. The pupil premium introduced in England in 2011 provides schools with a funding grant to address educational underachievement. Under this scheme, schools receive funding for each FSME child and child who is either in care or has been in care. From April 2020 the grants per pupil stand at £1,345 for each FSME primary school pupil, £995 for each FSME secondary school pupil, and £2,345 for each looked after or previously looked after pupil²⁷. Other policies prioritise the individual educational needs of each child. For example, the Improving Schools Programme (IPS) allows schools the flexibility and autonomy to take a tailored and individual approach to helping ensure that all children are given the opportunities to reach the full scope of their educational attainment through ‘personalising learning’²⁸. No one child is the same and as a result standardised education does not work for every child.

The Department of Education policy *Every School a Good School* was published in 2009 to improve and maintain the quality of schools across Northern Ireland. This policy focused on key six areas:

1. *effective leadership and an ethos of aspiration and high achievement;*
2. *high quality teaching and learning;*
3. *tackling the barriers to learning that many young people face;*
4. *embedding a culture of self-evaluation and self-assessment and of using performance and other information to effect improvement;*
5. *focusing clearly on support to help schools improve – with clarity too about the place of more formal interventions where there is a risk that the quality of education offered in a school is not as high as it should be;*
6. *increasing engagement between schools, parents and families, recognising the powerful influence they and local communities exercise on educational outcomes.*²⁹

²⁷ <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/pupil-premium/pupil-premium>

²⁸ https://dera.ioe.ac.uk/7439/7/271cec730a86d5b0573ecee6eac5ed87_Redacted.pdf

²⁹ https://pure.ulster.ac.uk/ws/portalfiles/portal/11364696/Education_Policy_in_NI_a_Review.pdf

The aim of this policy is to create better connections between schools and communities, and to promote teaching and leadership excellence whilst always ensuring the approaches taken remain child-centred. Given the age of this policy, the DUP believe that now is the time to undertake a review into its effectiveness.

The DUP propose:

- Targeted funding similar to the Pupil Premium scheme in England to ensure that every child at risk of underachieving is given the tailored support they need.
- A review of the *Every School a Good School* policy to assess its effectiveness, successes and possible areas for improvement.

The role of wider society in tackling boys' educational underachievement

The measures needed to tackle boys' educational underachievement cannot be achieved through the education system alone. There is no one answer to the question of how boys' educational achievement can be improved within Northern Ireland and it will require policies, initiatives and action across numerous areas with focus on communities, the economy, families and of course education. Formal educational services, informal educational services, the Education Authority Youth Services and other organisational youth services all have a role to play within this. Boys' educational underachievement can be addressed within some current initiatives being undertaken at community level and does not necessarily call for the creation of new and specific projects. Initiatives such as the Communities in Transition (CIT) project have the potential to be used to promote positive narratives of education, address negative male perceptions and encourage better connections between the education system and local transitioning communities.

The DUP believe that a joint approach to addressing boys' educational underachievement is possible and there are examples of this having been undertaken already. In 2010, the Glentoran Community Trust published a book *How the East was won* detailing the early history of Glentoran Football Club³⁰. As part of this local history project, copies of the book were given to Ashfield Boys, Royal Belfast

³⁰ <http://198.46.82.197/~gctnic5/projects/how-the-east-was-won/>

Academical Institute and a school in France. This project successfully combined community, sport and education to engage boys' in reading and learning about local history.

Perhaps most importantly we must all challenge ourselves to do better when it comes to breaking down negative and damaging gender stereotypes within our society. It is only then that we will see a true change to societal attitudes surrounding boys' educational underachievement.

The DUP propose:

- Increasing ties between education and youth work to provide greater support to individuals who are at risk of underachieving.
- The creation of 'Community Education Champions' to promote educational attainment and create stronger links between schools and local communities.