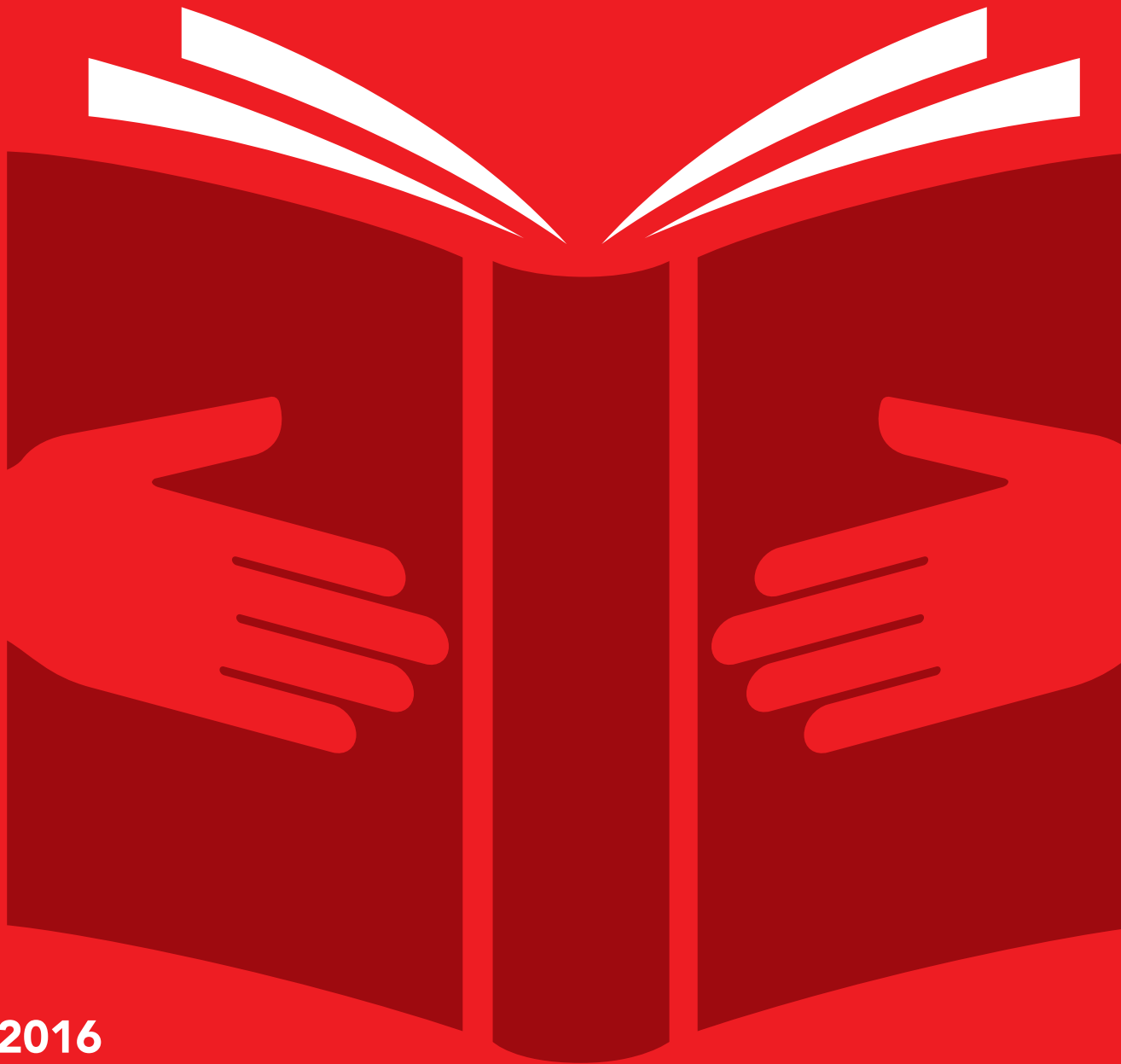




Unionist
Ulster Unionist Party

Doing what's right for Northern Ireland

Book Buddies



April 2016

Introduction by Party Leader



When I was at primary school, the teachers did not think I was likely to set the world on fire, to put it mildly. I remember a class of 24 pupils, and if I finished a test anywhere but in the twenties, there were grim thoughts of cheating! I was sent to big school with little by way of hope or expectation. Then something happened.

There was a very wet Wednesday when the sports pitches were flooded, games were cancelled and we were sent on a run around the perimeter of the school grounds. I came in third! And the teachers reacted. They signed me up for the running club, but they also challenged me academically. They said if I could do well out there running, surely there was a classroom in the school building where I could do better. And with the right help there was. It started with English, then it was History, and from there it spread out across the curriculum. I finished big school running for Ireland and with good enough grades to attend a famous university in England.

Years later, I read a book called *The Element* by Ken Robinson. He is a professor of creativity and his basic theory is that inside every child is a spark of ability, creativity and talent and all we have to do is find out what that spark is and then work on it – just like that school run was the spark that lit my flame and developed a passion for learning and for life.

We need to recognise that we are people of multiple intelligences. A good education system must acknowledge the importance of treating each and every pupil as unique. It highlights how we will fail our children, if we try to make them fit into our teaching framework, rather than shaping the school's resources around individual need.

It is now well established that early years are critical to a child's ability to learn. In my vision, those early interventions must start the search for that individual spark, *The Element*.

Ken Robinson was also the first writer to alert me to an intervention called *Book Buddies*, and I am calling for an army of volunteer *Book Buddies* to help eradicate poor literacy among our schoolchildren.

It is an internationally tested and proven way to help teachers tackle an issue that lowers a child's life prospects. I acknowledge there are those who have been engaged in this type of volunteering in Northern Ireland, not least the organisation *Business in the Community*. My call is to make it a formal strategy by the Department of Education.

The costs are minimal. Volunteers would need an Enhanced Access NI police check, currently costing £33. Even if the Department had to pay for everyone's, we could have an army of 1,000 volunteers for £33,000, out of a Department of Education budget currently above £2 billion per annum.

For some years now, successive Ministers of Education have promoted the idea of *Every School a Good School*. In my vision, the focus switches to the pupils. We must cherish and support each and every one of them, particularly those we fail. The statistics say we do fail pupils. In fact, we fail the same people, from the same communities, generation after generation. In a country which places so much emphasis on equality, why do we tolerate this persistent and life-damaging unfairness?

Book Buddies is part of the solution. It addresses a known problem, enhances community cohesion, and places minimal burden on the education system and its budget.

Mike Nesbitt
Leader, Ulster Unionist Party

The Current Position



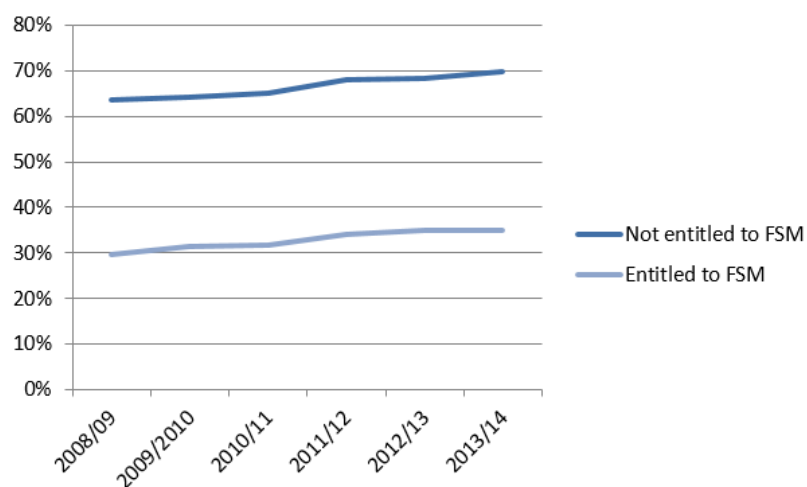
Report after report has highlighted the problem of educational underachievement. Put simply, far too many of our young people are entering the world of work without the basic skills in reading and writing needed to succeed in life. 18 years after responsibility for education was devolved to Stormont, we know there will be pupils who will leave school as under-achievers. Worse, we know who they will be, because it is the same socio-economic groups, year after year.

Catholic girls continue to consistently and significantly outperform Protestant boys and there is wide variation in the performance of students by school type, with just over 5% of grammar school leavers failing to achieve at least five GCSEs at grades A*-C, including English and Maths. This compares to almost 60% of their non-grammar counterparts. That means four out of every ten pupils attending our secondary schools are leaving education without what is seen as a key employability qualification.

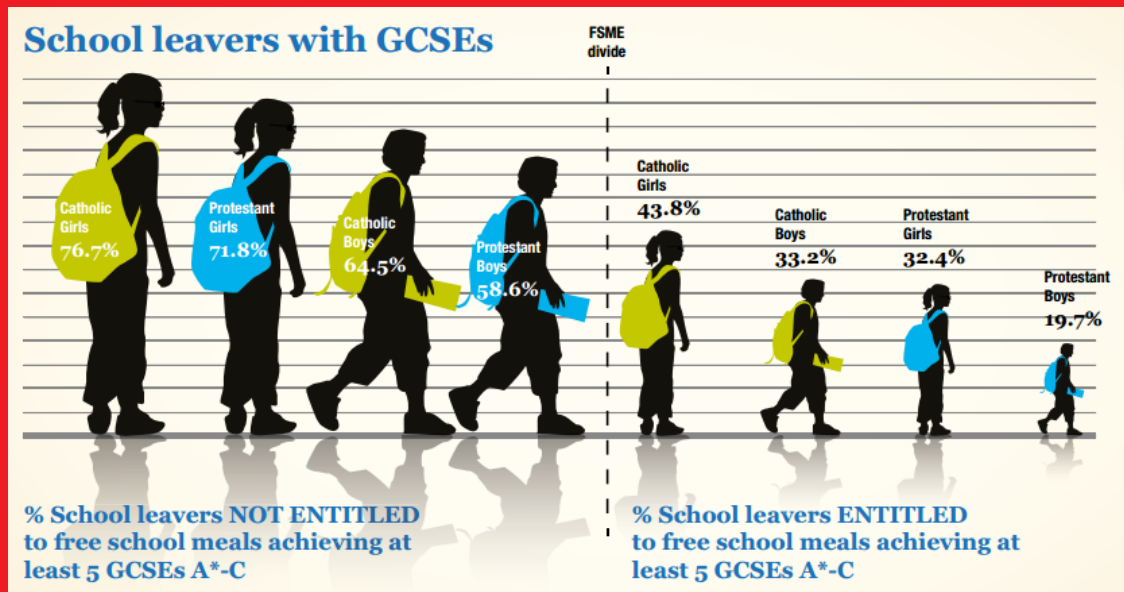
The social and economic costs of supposed school failure are significant and take many different forms: lower rates of economic growth, poor intergenerational effects on children and parents, higher unemployment, lower social cohesion, and even increased criminality.

In addition, Northern Ireland's low achieving schools are significantly worse than the lowest in the league tables across the rest of the United Kingdom. Most worrying of all, however, is the gap in attainment for those entitled to free school meals, a proxy for poverty, with a significantly higher proportion of students with entitlement leaving school without achieving any GCSEs at all. There is also a worrying gap between school leavers entitled to FSM and not entitled to FSM who progress to Higher Education.

Proportion of school leavers achieving at least five GCSEs at grades A*-C, including English and maths by free school meal entitlement



Source: Northern Ireland Assembly Research and Information Service



Source: Third Northern Ireland Peace Monitoring Report

There is also solid research that confirms that teachers cannot be expected to do it all. There are multiple factors that influence a child's progress at school, and teachers need help. A child's home life is critical.

This is not about labelling youngsters as low achievers. We understand there are pupils who are not academic. For them, it is cruel to demand they fit into a standardised education system that says they fail if they cannot achieve 5 A*-C grades including English and Mathematics at GCSE level. What is the difference between that academic test and the old 11-Plus Transfer examination? Both labelled some of our children as successes, and by definition, others as failures.

The ongoing stand-off between the Department of Education and those schools who still make pupils sit a post-primary entry exam has seen those in charge lose control of state education. It has also reduced the focus on what should be 14 years of school learning to a single moment on that journey.

The 11-Plus test also asked the wrong question. It asks a child: "How intelligent are you?" but only allows the child to demonstrate intelligence in their academic ability in English, Maths and Science. The right question to ask is: "In what ways are you intelligent?" and cherish those whose futures are clearly not academic, but who will find happy and fulfilling lives in the vocational, technical, artistic or sporting fields.

While we continue to ask the wrong question of children and impose a system of standardisation that guarantees some will fail, we will continue to see educational under-achievement. Simply put, this means we will fail those young people, and condemn them to a future where their life prospects are diminished.

Our Vision

The Ulster Unionist Party wishes to switch the focus from schools to the people who populate them: the pupils, teachers, non-teaching staff and the parents.

We say 'Let Teachers Teach'. We need to cut the paperwork that dominates a teacher's day and free them up to do what they signed up for in the first place.

We wish to move from the current High Accountability - Low Trust regime to one of Higher Trust and Proportionate Responsibility. No student takes a degree and Post Graduate Certificate in Education in the expectation they can retire after 20 years teaching as a millionaire! Most teachers are there because it is a calling, a true vocation. So, let them teach and let the education authorities concentrate on helping them.



Limitations of a divided system

The Northern Ireland schooling system is characterised by division. It is deeply fractured and the vast majority of children are educated in single identity schools. That's not healthy for them, and it's particularly not good for society.

The current model of education is unsustainable. The Ulster Unionist Party wants to deliver a single state education system where children of all faiths and none are educated together. This would fulfil the vision of the first and last Ulster Unionist Education Ministers - Lord Londonderry in 1921 and Basil McIvor in 1974.

The Ulster Unionist Party commits to a single education system. We see no reason this cannot be done without prejudice to any of the current sectors or their educational ethos. Segregation is a breeding ground for sectarianism and in mixing children together from age 4, you give them a virtual inoculation jab against sectarianism. A single system also makes sense financially. There is no sensible argument for funding and administering State controlled, Catholic Maintained, Integrated and Irish Medium schools where the demand and the pupil numbers do not add up.

We recognise that a single system will not be achieved overnight and we must ensure that any change enjoys public confidence and parental support.

With regard to shared education, we have always been supportive of it, but only on the basis that it is part of a road map to a more unified, less religiously segregated school system in Northern Ireland. It must be a process, not an end in itself.

Targeted Initiatives

Numerous reports have been published over the

past 10-15 years about the attainment gap. It has been identified that there is a significant gap between boys from a working class Protestant background and girls from a middle class Catholic background.

Over recent years the policy of the Department of Education under Sinn Féin Ministers has been to push for an end to academic selection, the basis of Grammar Schools, in favour of all ability 'comprehensive' education.

There is no evidence that this would shorten the tail of underachievement without adversely affecting the enviable results we achieve at the higher end of the scale.

A better way is to target interventions where they are needed. In the 1980s, there was a problem with underachievement in Maintained secondary schools. The solution was government intervention and investment in, for example, capital projects like new science blocks. The result was that the gap was reduced and eliminated. Now that the achievement gap can be found in some controlled secondary schools, similarly targeted interventions should be pursued. Targeted initiatives like the Signature Projects in Numeracy and Literacy need to be given the chance to improve outcomes. There was evidence that this initiative was starting to produce tangible results, but it was one of the first things to be cut by the Minister.

The Ulster Unionist Party will argue that Signature Project is reinstated and mainstreamed in the next Programme for Government.

We also see a role for the voluntary sector in terms of providing extra help for children through 'book buddy' schemes. Drawing on successful examples here and in the USA, we would aim, with the help of the voluntary sector, to recruit suitable volunteers such as teaching graduates and retired teachers to bring their expertise into schools to give extra help in one to one reading.



Book Buddies

Ken Robinson writes of an experiment at a primary school in Oklahoma in the United States of America, where the pupils trailed well below the state average in literacy. In an effort to tackle the problem by bringing some additional resource and help to the teaching staff, the school linked up with a home for older people and with the appropriate police and safety checks complete, the school embarked on a programme where the pupils spent time one-to-one reading with the older people.

The results were fantastic! In short order, the schoolchildren rose above the state average in literacy, but that was not all. The unexpected bonus was that the medical intake by the older people plummeted, because they had a new found sense of purpose in their lives and medication lost some of its importance.

Book Buddy schemes not only address the issue of poor literacy in the young, they also offer the volunteers a new feeling of self-worth and wellbeing.

There can be a third positive outcome as well. At the end of the formal engagement, as the pupils and volunteers chat, there is an opportunity to engage in oral social history. A simple example from the United States was of a volunteer pointing out a nearby factory and telling the young person she used to ride a pony there when it was a green field. Of course, the younger person was amazed to learn the factory site had once been a green field.

In Northern Ireland, we believe the previous voluntary efforts, such as those undertaken in Portadown, should be developed by the Department and the Education Authority into a new formal and bespoke Northern Ireland Book Buddies scheme.

We will:

- **Commission the Northern Ireland Education Authority to roll out a pilot study in the top 10 Super Output Areas of deprivation across Northern Ireland;**
- **Engage the community and voluntary sector to identify and attract suitably qualified and motivated volunteers, including, but not exclusively, those in retirement and teacher training graduates seeking experience in a learning environment;**
- **Ensure volunteers incur no unwanted financial expense, such as paying fees for an Enhanced Access NI check;**
- **Set a challenging target for improving literacy and numeracy rates at the end of formal education.**





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