

A Response to the-

**'The Education (Northern Ireland) Order
2006'**

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The Women's Support Network (WSN), established in 1989, is an infrastructural umbrella organisation, which provides support and services to, and represents over 30 groups (mostly in the Greater Belfast area), including community-based women's centres, women's projects and women's infrastructure groups.

WSN aims to achieve social, political and economic justice through the promotion of the autonomous organisation of women. The Network aims to strengthen the collective voice of women's groups and to promote and develop networking opportunities, to enable collective action and to impact upon policy and decision making processes. We provide an accessible, feminist, relevant and high quality support service and resource for member groups. The Network is also an important information provider on issues relevant to community-based women's organisations and for other infrastructure groups, nationally and internationally.

The Women's Support welcomes the opportunity to respond to the Education (Northern Ireland) Order 2006. The majority WSN members are based in areas of Greater Belfast that suffer from severe socio-economic disadvantage. It is widely acknowledged that educational attainment is intrinsically linked to socio-economic status; life-chances and choices and general well-being. There is little doubt that the transfer test has generally had a negative impact on the lives of the children in the areas where our members are based. The WSN, therefore very much welcome that this test will no longer 'stream' children according to their academic ability after 2008. We agree wholeheartedly with the Minister when she states *'The education system must give all of our young people equal opportunity to fulfil their potential no matter where they live, the school they attend or their social background'*.

We have outlined below some of our main concerns and recommendations regarding the proposals:

We agree with the need for an enhanced and high quality careers advice and guidance services within schools. This service is currently poor in many of our post-primary schools and a high quality service in **all** schools would ensure that every pupil has access to up-to-date careers information enabling them to make informed choices.

Within the context of careers advice and guidance, the Women's Support Network is concerned about the issue of 'gender specific' subjects and the economically detrimental affect these choices can have on girls and young women when they move into the world of work. The Women and Work Commission has recently presented a report entitled 'Shaping a Fairer Future' to the Prime Minister. One of the recommendations urges government to ensure that Education Departments throughout the UK regions to publish strategic documents in reaction to the analysis of the report, *'which describe a strategic systemic change in the way education is delivered in order to reduce stereotypical choices, improve take-up of vocational skills training, and improve employment outcomes for young women.'* In the current overhaul of the curriculum in Northern Ireland, we would therefore urge the Department of Education to examine and address the problem of 'gender stereotyped subjects' which leads to job segregation in the workforce.

The Entitlement Framework is an important development in enhancing 'choice' for all pupils. However, it remains to be seen how this new framework will impact on pupils from deprived areas. The prevailing view in our society is that 'academic study' is of higher value than 'vocational study'. WSN believe that there is a need to publicise the significant value of 'vocational study'. It would be shameful if the 'vocational' choice was seen as the poor relative of 'academic' choice. We want to see the very best of high quality standards introduced in both the academic and vocational route. Training organisations, schools and further education colleges must be inspected regularly and all treated equally in terms of attaining and maintaining high quality standards.

Following on from the above, WSN believe it is crucial to ensure vocational qualifications are equivalised with their counterpart academic qualifications. This is not only important to employers but for students and for Further and Higher Education Institutions. We would reiterate that a quality standard must be implemented across Regional Training Organisations, Further Education and Higher Education.

As mentioned earlier, the Women's Support Network are in support of the abolition of the transfer test as we believe the system to be inequitable and having an unfair, detrimental impact on children from disadvantaged areas and backgrounds. However we believe that more action is required in order to ensure children from disadvantaged areas/backgrounds are given the opportunity to realise their full potential through the education system. In order to redress current inequities perpetuated by the education system, we urge the Department of Education to consider the following to be put in place in schools situated in disadvantaged areas:

- Ensuring smaller numbers in classrooms
- Incentives to attract and retain teachers
- Up-to-date equipment
- Adequate resources in terms of Special Needs teachers (particularly in early years education).

WSN also recommend the promotion of partnerships between schools and relevant community and voluntary sector organisations. This occurs currently in some disadvantaged areas in Greater Belfast and has proven a successful way of increasing parent involvement in schools.