

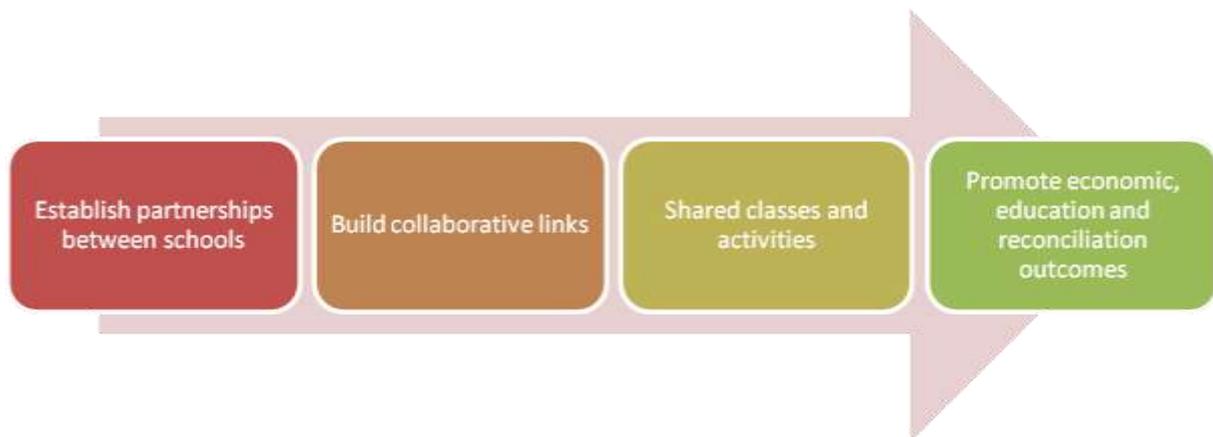
DELIVERING SHARED EDUCATION: KNOWLEDGE EXCHANGE SEMINAR: 1st November 2012

What is Shared Education?

Shared Education refers to schools from different sectors working together in a sustained process ranging from two or more schools making shared use of specialist facilities, through to coordinated timetabling, and pupils taking classes across a network of schools. Shared education is distinct from Integrated Education which involves the removal of sectoral differentiation in favour of unitary common schools. Shared Education has the potential to contribute to school improvement and access to opportunity, encourage more effective use of resources, and promote social cohesion through the achievement of a shared and better society.¹

How does it work?

The focus of Shared Education is delivering core curriculum activities where teachers and pupils work together across schools to achieve higher quality educational experiences. The delivery model involves 4 basic stages (see below).



Shared education recognises that schools have interdependent relationships and promotes positive collaboration to support the common good. Ultimately it is about creating interdependencies between schools and making boundaries porous – it isn't about threatening anyone's identity or the creation of a Catholic/Protestant hybrid.

In practical terms the implementation of this model is best exemplified through the **Shared Education Programme** [SEP] which started in 2007, is funded jointly by the International Fund for Ireland and Atlantic Philanthropies, and is managed by Queen's University School of Education, the Fermanagh Trust and PIEE (Primary Integrating/Enriching Education Project in North Eastern Education and Library Board). The programme currently involves 150 schools, 44 partnerships and 11,000 children on a yearly basis. Three short examples illustrate shared education in practice:

- (a) **Enhanced Qualifications Framework:** six schools in the Magherafelt area (two Maintained, two Controlled, one Integrated and one Special Education Needs (SEN) school) provide support for

Year 13 pupils to prepare them for third level education by extending the post-16 curriculum provision. There are 29 different shared subjects/courses offered to *all* Year 13 pupils on a weekly basis. Overall 390 pupils availed of the subjects on offer, resulting in 574 hours of shared classes being delivered. The delivery model implemented by the partnership involves the majority of subjects being taken as ‘twilight’ classes and the remaining subjects are embedded into the school timetable in a collaborative block.²

- (b) **Rural Primary Schools:** Two small adjoining rural primary schools (Controlled and Maintained) in Tempo, County Fermanagh came together to enhance the educational experience for pupils and teachers through collaborating with one another rather than working separately. Every pupil within the two schools (n=176) was given the opportunity to participate in shared classes in drama, dance, art & design, health related fitness, and science. All the subjects contributed to the pupils’ development within the NI Curriculum. A joint shared education policy has been developed between the schools, and teachers have also collaborated for staff development (e.g. Child Protection and First Aid training) and curriculum planning. Parental endorsement has been hugely positive in an area where the legacy of the conflict is significant.³
- (c) **Shared Teacher Initiative:** Two primary schools (Controlled and Maintained) within the North Eastern Education and Library Board area whose future is at risk separately formed a education partnership and shared resources to deliver Key Stage 2 in areas such as literacy, personal development and mutual understanding (PDMU), music, art and sports, Such was the success of the collaboration that this partnership now employs a shared teacher appointed by a joint board of governors – an initiative which offers much wider potential for schools throughout Northern Ireland.⁴

What are the benefits of Shared Education?

There are at least three significant types of benefits arising from shared education: economic, education and reconciliation benefits.

Education benefits: research evidence based on 4 selected primary and post-primary schools involved in the Shared Education Programme concluded that involvement in the initiative would increase the likelihood of: getting good GCSEs; gaining fluency in a foreign language; and going to University. This translated into increased lifetime earnings for participants in study. For an investment of £2m across the four projects, the educational benefits for children involved in the 4 projects were calculated at £25m. In short, the **total net benefits** across 4 primary and post-primary schools involved in shared education amounted to **£23m**.⁵

Reconciliation benefits: There is a considerable body of research evidence to show the reconciliation benefits of sustained contact across school sectors in Northern Ireland. In one study, for example, researchers examined social identity and intergroup attitudes amongst children attending a state controlled Protestant school and how they dealt with issues of diversity and difference. The findings suggest that separate schooling is more likely to contribute to ‘own’ group bias, stereotyping and prejudice.⁶ Researchers have also considered the impact of pupils’ participation in the *Shared Education Programme* on cross-group friendships and intergroup anxiety. The study confirms the value of contact as a mechanism for promoting more harmonious relationships that can help promote social cohesion in a society that remains deeply divided.⁷

Economic benefits: Some schools which are ‘stressed’ under three of the six criteria (education performance, school enrolments, and financial viability) from the Department of Education’s *Sustainable Schools Policy* can offer budgetary savings through shared education ‘solutions’. School closures achieve limited savings to the Department of Education because the Age Weighted Pupil Unit (AWPU) is a significant element of the school funding allocation (80%) which follows the pupil when his/her school closes. One study puts the savings to the Department of Education at 3.1% of their budget were they to close all primary and post-primary schools below the ‘sustainable schools’ enrolment thresholds. At the level of the school, shared teachers, classes and educational resources will provide schools with economies of scale.⁸

The reconciliation benefits described above have been costed for the *Shared Education Programme*. The study puts a monetary value on the reduction of sectarian hostility and suspicion towards the ‘other’ community using survey data on attitudinal and behaviour changes in SEP participants. In societal terms this would lead to: reduced police costs; increased foreign investment; and a reduction in the number of sectarian incidents. Savings are estimated at **£80m per year**.⁹ The reconciliation benefits of shared education can therefore contribute directly to the Government’s commitment to cohesion, sharing and integration.

Social Justice and Education

Beyond the direct and indirect education, economic and reconciliation benefits outlined above, the current education system is socially unjust. We know from research that post-primary pupils from deprived backgrounds face considerable difficulty accessing grammar schools.¹⁰ There is a much greater problem for pupils accessing Protestant than Catholic grammar schools.¹¹ We also know that children in receipt of free school meals and those with special educational needs are disproportionately under-represented among grammar schools. The education performance of Maintained secondary and grammar schools is significantly better than their Controlled counterparts. Shared education offers a real opportunity to improve the education of those pupils from the Controlled sector and, in so doing, contribute to the wider societal reconciliation benefits associated with cross sectoral working.

Mainstreaming Shared Education

Mainstreaming shared education fits in with a number of the Department of Education’s priorities. First, within DE’s strategic objectives, the economics research above offers proposals which begin to ‘close the performance gap and increase access and equity’. Second, within the *Programme for Government* (PfG) commitments, improving education performance at GCSE level with specific reference to those from disadvantaged backgrounds has been highlighted as a priority. In addition, there are 4 explicit commitments in the PfG to shared education (Lisanelly, ministerial advisory group, shared education programmes, and shared facilities). Third, the Department’s *Community Relations, Equality and Diversity in Education* (CRED) policy document makes a clear commitment to sharing and collaboration across and between all educational settings on a cross-community basis. Fourth, shared education is an integral part of the devolved government’s commitment to cohesion, sharing and integration in Northern Ireland.

Key features of shared education

- ✓ Offers local solutions to cross-sectoral working (as opposed to a 'one size fits all' area planning approach).
- ✓ Works best where schools are in close proximity to avoid transportation costs of sharing.
- ✓ Basis of sharing is sustained contact in the delivery of core curriculum activities.
- ✓ Clear education, economic, reconciliation and social justice effects.
- ✓ Maintains the identity of communities, threatening no-one's ethos.

Evidence informed policy making

So how might the above research inform education policy? There is an opportunity in the current review of the schools estate through the viability audits of primary and post primary schools and the associated area planning process to embed shared education.

We propose, in admittedly, embryonic form, a new approach to issues in post-primary education in Northern Ireland. The central objective of this new approach is to *raise the educational performance of post-primary schools in Northern Ireland*.

We emphasise that our intention is to achieve this objective by focusing on a spectrum of schools. To state our intention in terms of athletics: we would like to improve the 'personal best' of many schools - good, bad, indifferent – *by making the good better, making the indifferent good, and making the bad less worse*.

In contrast to the viability audits, area plans, which draw attention to schools' educational performance only when they fall below a critical threshold and ignore schools which perform above this threshold, we believe that most schools have potential for improvement and that a good education policy should facilitate schools in realising this potential. Northern Ireland's overall school performance will improve through the incremental improvement of schools encompassing a range of performance.

We recognise that educational performance has several dimensions but here we focus on the one that commands the greatest respect and attention in education circles: *the percentage of pupils obtaining GCSE passes at A*-C grades, including English and Mathematics*.

The overarching theme underlying our approach is that *the rising tide of peer learning, between suitably matched schools, will lift every school's educational boat*. The mechanism through which this *peer learning* would take place is *shared education* – higher performing schools offer joint classes, mentoring, teacher exchanges, shared teachers, joint training days etc, for which they are incentivised through a new revised common funding formula.

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[November 2012]
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- ² For additional information see: <http://www.schoolsworkingtogether.com/>
- ³ For additional information see: <http://www.fermanaghtrust.org/cms/publish/sharededucation/index.shtml>
- ⁴ For additional information see: <http://www.neelb.org.uk/schools/piee/>
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