



Response to the Shared and Integrated Education Inquiry request for written evidence from the Northern Ireland Assembly Education Committee

Association of School and College Leaders Northern Ireland.

As an association of school leaders, we believe in the need to promote system leadership which encourages school leaders to care for and work for the success of other schools as well as their own. This idea has relevance to many countries but especially those like Northern Ireland which are emerging from sectarian conflict.

In recently published research on Area Learning Communities in Northern Ireland by McGuinness, Abbott and Cassidy (2013), evidence is drawn from the direct experience of former ASCL heads who participated in innovative area learning communities in Limavady and Ballymena. They argue that the problem in the case of Northern Ireland, is that schools for decades that have been divided on sectarian grounds do not easily collaborate. This provides unique challenges for school leaders and teachers. Schools need to agree and prioritise an inclusive, intercultural vision. There must be support for professional development for teachers and leaders engaged in this difficult work. Innovative use of technology and the help of expert outside agencies are vital to stimulate change and progress. Most importantly, leaders in government departments need to ensure that overall strategic plans make provision for the widest possible uptake of Area Learning Community schemes and to lobby for the necessary funds to ensure that the plans can be translated into practice. In the ASCL national strategy document “Blueprint for a Self-Improving System” (2014), it is suggested that, “the role of government is to remove obstacles and create the conditions for a self-improving system”.

Key barriers in Northern Ireland to the effective development of this approach on Shared Education are both the level of delegated funding and the demotivating complexity of funding delegation. The evidence shows that collective ownership of the collaboration by the schools involved and a high degree of autonomy bring about significant change. Practical measures like the funding of an executive co-ordinator relieves the tensions between school leader allegiance to their own school and ALC plans. Concerns about dividing focus between ALC objectives and individual school accountability to inspection pressures can also inhibit school leader commitment to collaboration.

In ASCL (2014), it is argued that we can learn from initiatives like London Challenge;

“...where a strong sense of collective endeavour, accountability, a focus on students’ outcomes and deep partnerships between and among schools, brought about significant improvement including and especially for children and young people from economically deprived backgrounds”.

“School Leaders took on a shared responsibility for the quality of education of all young people in their area, not just those in their own school. There is a strong commitment to principled strategic partnerships, including with higher education institutions.”

This last comment ties in well with the best practice in N Ireland Learning Communities where local FE colleges provide a strong, well equipped, shared, vocational provision and are linked in curriculum collaborations with schools. In these type of contexts shared education becomes a reality.

One of the great strengths of Northern Ireland society is the deeply rooted value systems which inform principled citizenship and are exemplified in the ethos of schools from all traditions. There is already shared understanding and commitment to providing the best opportunity and future for the young people in our care, in spite of the anxieties, hurt and residual tensions from our difficult past. The leap of faith needed for schools to move from separate self- interest to educational collaboration needs support and encouragement from government and equally, respect for the excellence and genuine commitment to the existing educational contexts in which schools operate.

Shared education will be enhanced more by changing minds than changing structures. We start from where we are by supporting financially those in collaborative settings who are on that journey however modest their initial projects. This type of change cannot be legislated into existence, it must grow from the local leadership and the emerging confidence of schools and parents.

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References:

ASCL, (2014) Blueprint for a Self- Improving System. Leicester ASCL

McGuinness, S.J. Abbott, L. Cassidy, F. (2013) Northern Ireland Some post-conflict challenges in education. In R.P. Clarke, O'Donoghue, T. A. School Level Leadership in Post-Conflict Societies. Routledge. Oxon