



ADVANCING SHARED EDUCATION

Ministerial Statement

22 October 2013

ORAL STATEMENT ON ADVANCING SHARED EDUCATION

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Introduction

With your permission Mr Speaker, I wish to make a statement on the report of the Ministerial Advisory Group on Advancing Shared Education, which was published in March.

In doing so I wish to set out my response to the recommendations, and indicate how I intend to move forward.

Advancing shared education is one of the most important and sensitive challenges facing civic society.

If we are to succeed, there must be a shared readiness to change.

Background

Members will recall that advancing shared education is at the heart of the Programme for Government, and establishing the independent advisory group was a key commitment.

I was very pleased when Professor Paul Connolly, from the School of Education at Queen's University, agreed to chair the group, and his fellow members, Dawn Purvis and PJ O'Grady also took up the challenge.

I would like to thank them for their work, and for producing a very comprehensive, thoughtful, and thought-provoking report.

I would also like to thank everyone who engaged with the group for their contributions.

Starting point

In debating the report, let's remind ourselves of why sharing is important, and what we are trying to achieve.

Educational case

My starting point is the educational case for sharing, to contribute to raising standards, tackling underachievement and creating a better society for all.

In planning for the future, we need to address a key question – what sorts of schools do we want?

We have many different types of school, each proud of their identity and ethos.

I know from my visits how much parents and communities value those schools, and how passionately they care about them.

So having that choice in our system is a strength, we need to now build on that with confidence that a shared education system is inclusive of all and marginalises no one.

But Mr Speaker, choice can't be at the expense of good education. Our schools need to change and greater sharing is part of that change.

We have too many schools that cannot – by themselves - provide the rich, high-quality educational experience that children need and deserve.

To make that change we must actively plan for shared education.

That means we must also move away from planning by competition: school versus school and sector versus sector - in a battle for scarce resources.

As Minister I see far too many development proposals that are written as if the school up the road doesn't exist.

That has to change.

We know what parents and children want –quality, high performing schools in their local communities.

The parents and communities that I meet are up for sharing.

They want choice, but they aren't asking for separation.

I believe that the vast majority of parents put quality first.

They will choose shared local schools if they provide a quality education.

The evidence is there.

The Lisanelly complex has fired the imagination of the community in Omagh, and is a game-changer in terms of how we plan education.

I have seen other good examples of communities in the Moy, in Fermanagh; and Ballycastle, coming together to look for shared solutions; and finding new ways to ensure access to good local schools.

So, shared education is not a bolt-on or an optional extra.

It is fundamental to delivering good schools, and central to my vision that every learner should achieve his or her full potential.

Good relations and equality

Mr Speaker, good education comes first, but equality and good relations add to the case for change.

Choice can't be at the expense of good education.

Neither can it be at the cost of separation by religious belief, socio economic status or educational needs.

Such separation is bad for children, and bad for society.

Separation is damaging, unnecessary, and avoidable – Society has the power to change it if the will is there.

In higher and further education, sharing and integration is already the norm.

Why should schools be any different?

We have sharing in preschool education, and youth services.

We have integrated schools, naturally shared schools, and many other examples of good practice in schools working together.

But we can, and we must, do more.

Sharing must become the accepted reality at every stage of education, from early years to post-graduate study.

Equality

There is also a persuasive equality case.

We have good schools serving children of every religious faith, and none.

Today, no child is denied a good education because of their religion.

However, the same cannot be said for socio-economic status.

We know that children living in lower income brackets are at much higher risk of educational under achievement.

Members are familiar with the standard measure.

Our aim is that every child should leave school with at least five good GCSEs including English and maths.

Today, only **34%** of children entitled to free school meals achieve that.

For other children, the figure is **68%**.

So a child being from a lower income bracket is at double the risk of underachievement.

That is unacceptable, and we must change it.

We also know that academic selection is a barrier to children on Free School Meals and from lower income families.

Just over **7%** of children in grammar schools are entitled to free school meals.

For other post primary schools the figure is **28%**.

So poorer children are more likely to be rejected by grammar schools.

Is that what those schools want?

Only they can answer.

But segregation by parental income is a reality that we cannot ignore.

Members know my views on academic selection, and I will say more on that in a few moments when I turn to the recommendations in the report.

But whatever happens in relation to selection, we need greater sharing across the socio economic divide.

Mr Speaker, I'm sometimes accused of having an anti-grammar agenda.

Well let me put it on the record – I don't.

I have an anti-academic selection agenda.

But I offer this challenge to grammar schools.

Educate the whole community, not just a part of it.

Across the world, the best performing education systems combine excellence with equality of outcomes – in other words almost all of their pupils achieve high standards, not just a few.

That must surely be our goal too.

Summing up the case for sharing

Bringing all of that together, it is clear that:

- sharing brings educational benefits;
- sharing builds respect for diversity and good relations;
- sharing builds equality; and
- sharing builds a confident community.

So my vision is one of education without barriers; good schools where children learn, grow and develop together.

Schools where sharing is the accepted normality.

Shared education can - and should - involve every type of school.

It is about developing local solutions to local needs, not 'one size fits all'.

It is a challenge to all, but a threat to none.

Every school can share, and I challenge every school to ask itself, '**what more can we do**'.

Sharing and integration

Before turning to the recommendations, I want to talk about the relationship between shared education and integrated education.

Let me make it clear, they are different routes to the same objective.

The right model is the model that enjoys the support of the local community.

Integrated education will continue to play an important role, and my Department, in line with its statutory duty, will continue to encourage and facilitate it.

Shared education should also be encouraged and facilitated, and communities should be encouraged to choose the model that suits them best.

This is in line with the current approach to integrated education where the transformation process begins with consultation with the local community and a parental ballot before the submission of a development proposal to the department.

Every community should be on a journey to sharing.

Different routes will be chosen and some will get there sooner than others.

When a community takes a first step, however modest, we should encourage and support them, and yes perhaps challenge them to go further, but in a positive manner.

Recommendations

Let me turn now to the recommendations.

The report contains 20 recommendations in 5 groups. I welcome all of the recommendations.

There are some that I accept fully, and will aim to take forward as soon as possible.

There are others that I accept in principle, but there may be a better way forward than what the group recommended.

A third group needs further consideration and debate, here in this Assembly and across society.

Mainstreaming (recommendations 1 to 3)

The recommendations begin with mainstreaming, which is the right starting point.

We need to ensure that sharing is in the DNA of our education system: in legislation, policy and the structure of ESA.

I want to be in a position to bring the Education Bill back to the Executive and the Assembly in the coming weeks, however I cannot do that on my own.

In bringing the Bill back, I propose to include a statutory definition of shared education, and provisions for ESA to encourage and facilitate it.

These will complement the provisions on integrated and Irish-medium education, and will not reduce or dilute them in any way.

I will also require ESA to reflect sharing in its structure, in its corporate plans, and in its strategies, and I will hold it to account for doing so.

The report also recommended the inclusion of a shared education premium in the common funding scheme.

I accept this in principle, but further consideration is needed before we move to implementation.

However, I acknowledge that if shared education is to grow and develop, then we will need to mainstream financial support for any additional costs involved.

Shared education is very much at the heart of the Together Building a United Community programme.

In addition to those programmes my Department is working with Atlantic Philanthropies and OFMdFM with a view to put in place an additional funding programme to support shared education.

As we move ahead I will look carefully at the evidence, so as to ensure that whatever financial support we provide is targeted at what works best.

I also need to see what additional resources my Executive colleagues will make available for mainstreaming.

Supporting schools in shared education (recommendations 4 to 8)

The second group of recommendations deals with:

- supporting schools;
- ensuring that sharing delivers real educational benefit; and
- recognising and promoting the spread of good practice.

I welcome these recommendations.

I have asked the Chief Inspector to consider how best to take them forward in the inspection process and the inspection cycle, and to report back to me.

We ask a great deal of our teachers, and it is right that we equip and support them to deliver.

That is why ESA will have statutory duties to ensure support for teachers and schools governors.

I also welcome the recommendations on supporting and developing teachers.

These will be fed into a revised teacher professional development strategy, which is already under development.

I will ensure that it includes an examination of how best to equip and support teachers to deliver shared education.

Schools and other institutions (recommendations 9 to 14)

The third group of recommendations - numbers 9 to 14 – focus on what schools need to do in relation to engagement with parents; the delivery of the curriculum; and the rights of children and young people to participate in the decisions that affect them.

I welcome these recommendations.

As I said earlier, supporting schools will be a key part of ESA's role, and this will include supporting schools to communicate with parents.

Recommendation 10 calls for a review of the delivery of key aspects of the curriculum.

I accept this recommendation in principle, and welcome the emphasis on promoting equality.

However, taking this forward requires careful thought.

In any review of the curriculum or its delivery, our aim must be to support teachers to adopt best practice.

Therefore, as a first step, I have asked the Chief Inspector to carry out a survey of current practice, with a particular focus on what additional support and development teachers need.

The report draws attention to the right of young people to participate and be heard in relation to the decisions that affect their lives.

I support this, and it is my aim that every school will have an effective method of encouraging young people's participation in the life of the school.

My Department will continue to encourage schools to implement the Democra-school programme, and to take up the advice, support and a guidance pack available from the Commissioner for Children and Young people.

However, I believe that effective participation of young people is likely to be achieved more effectively if the approach is decided by the schools themselves, rather than being imposed from outside.

Therefore, I would prefer not to go down the compulsory route at this time.

However, I will keep this under review and, if sufficient progress is not being made, then I will consider the case for stronger action.

The report also recommended that schools should be subject to the statutory equality and good relations duties in section 75.

I strongly support the intention behind that recommendation.

Every school must play its part in promoting equality of opportunity and good relations.

Every school must tackle discrimination and bullying, whether it stems from religion, sexual orientation or any other aspect of a young person's identity.

Members will be aware that this is a cross cutting matter, as equality legislation is the responsibility of OFMdfM.

I want to discuss recommendations 12 and 13 of the report with my Executive colleagues, and consider how best to give effect to them.

Using section 75 which sets out minimum requirements may be one option.

However, there is nothing to stop us from enhancing our equality duties so as to ensure better policy making.

Another may be to adopt the approach used in England, where schools have to set clear objectives for promoting equality, and are held to account for delivery.

Whichever option we choose, I want the emphasis to be on action, not bureaucracy.

Recommendation 14 deals with special education.

It calls for the development of effective models for collaboration between mainstream, special schools and educational support centres.

One of my priorities as Minister has been the building of an inclusive educational culture both within and between our schools.

Therefore I strongly support this recommendation.

However it would be wrong not to acknowledge the work already being undertaken in this area.

The current special educational needs framework already promotes inclusion, ensuring, wherever possible, that children and young people are taught in mainstream schools.

This will remain a fundamental tenet of the work being taken forward as part of the SEN and Inclusion Review.

That being said, where a child's best interests are served by attendance at a special school, that option will remain open.

In terms of the collaboration across sectors, special schools are full and active members of the Area Learning Communities.

This is essential to provide opportunities for pupils to learn and grow alongside their peers in special and mainstream schools.

Going forward, I will ensure that shared education projects and shared education campuses will include special schools where that demand exists.

Arvalee Special School will be taken forward as part of the Lisanelly Shared Education Campus, with the construction of the new Arvalee School and Resource Centre commencing next year.

Area based planning and the schools estate (recommendations 15 to 17)

The fourth set of recommendations deal with area planning, which will be central to the delivery of shared education.

I will make it a priority for my Department to bring forward:

- guidance on a range of sharing options that schools and communities may wish to explore;
- clear, practical advice on how to bring forward a development proposal for sharing; and
- guidelines on the development of area plans to ensure that shared education is encouraged.

Recommendation 16 calls on my Department to meet parental demand for different types of schools.

I accept that recommendation in principle, with one important caveat.

Any proposal for a new school must be sustainable and capable of delivering high quality education for the pupils it serves.

Let me say clearly that I want to see:

- collaboration, not competition;
- sharing, not duplication.

Recommendation 17 calls for it to be made easier for a school to transform its ethos from one type to another.

I am pleased to say that the Education Bill already provides for this.

Every school will be able to decide its own ethos, and set it down in its scheme of management and employment scheme.

Any school will be able to change its ethos at any time simply by bringing forward new schemes.

There will be no need for any complex or bureaucratic legal procedure.

Academic selection (recommendations 18 to 20)

Finally, let me turn to the recommendations on academic selection.

It will surprise no-one when I say that I welcome, and strongly endorse them.

Some people have criticised the group for including those recommendations.

They claim that they are nothing to do with sharing.

They are missing a very important point.

Sharing means educating without barriers, and without segregation.

The group's advice is very clear.

Selection discriminates.

Selection divides.

Selection is a barrier to children from low income families.

Those who ignore the evidence should ask themselves:

“If segregation by religion is wrong, how can segregation by income be right?”

I look forward to the day when this Assembly decides to end academic selection for good.

Until that day, I will strive to make it irrelevant, and to limit the damage that it does.

I will continue to promote all ability schools where academic and vocational learning is the norm and these will be taken forward through area planning as recommended by the group.

Conclusion

Mr Speaker, the report asks us all to think differently about the delivery of education.

It reminds us that sharing begins with respect for diversity and the right to equality.

It asks us to put the needs of young people ahead of the interests of institutions.

It challenges long-held assumptions about what is possible.

Through sharing, we all benefit, and no-one loses.

Sharing means celebrating diversity, not undermining or hiding it.

Educational ethos, like language and culture, should be used to build bridges, not barriers.

Mr Speaker, our education system should be enriched by diversity; but not blighted by separation.

I commend the report to the Assembly.