



Dear Mr McCallion,

I write on behalf of Portaferry Integrated Primary School with the intention of submitting evidence for the Education Committee re Shared and Integrated Education Inquiry.

Background

Our school transformed to controlled integrated status almost 20 years ago. I began my career as a teacher in the school in September 1995, the beginning of the first school year as an integrated school. I was impressed at the time with the level of involvement and commitment of the parents in establishing the first integrated school in the Ards Peninsula, and perhaps more importantly, promoting integrated education within the local community. In this respect, not much has changed in the last 20 years. Parents continue to be a major driving force in promoting the school and raising awareness of its importance in a community which suffers from economic and social deprivation. Our school remains the only alternative to maintained school provision in the Portaferry area, and although small, is vitally important to the non-Catholic minority as well as people from the Catholic tradition who do not support a segregated education system. Thanks to the efforts of parents, past and present and many supporters within the local community, the school is valued and respected as an educational provider and a place where children of any faith or none feel valued, secure and nurtured.

Shared / Integrated?

Firstly, I wish to acknowledge the work going on in many schools across the province with regard to sharing of educational opportunities, facilities, resources and professionals. This is a big step forward from the total segregation of the past. I feel, however, that sharing of this nature does not go far enough towards addressing the fundamental issue of segregation. This issue can only effectively be addressed if the school ethos goes further than merely acknowledging difference. Difference should be respected and celebrated, and the ultimate aim is to help children as they grow into young adults to realise that difference isn't so different after all. In my experience, both as a teacher and a principal in an integrated school, the children do not see each other as different in terms of religious, social or economic background. They accept each other exactly the way they are. I would have concerns about the potential for shared education to highlight religious or cultural difference, because the sharing organisations still have their individual ethos, name and code of values.

Small World

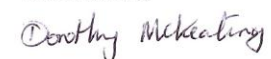
Huge advances in recent years in travel and communication technology have effectively reduced the size of our world. Through social networking and the internet, it is possible to communicate efficiently with people from a vast array of racial, cultural and religious backgrounds. When placed within the context of a dynamic and ever changing global network, the idea of a segregated education system seems archaic and backward thinking. Half measures will not solve this problem. The way forward is integrated education, especially in areas of the province where demand for places is greater than the number of places available. I consider it a basic human right for parents to prepare their children for a future in a multi-cultural society by opting out of segregation from the age of five.

Let's look closely at the evidence, surveys and opinion polls. The demand is there, the parental willingness is there, the committed teachers are there, and, most importantly, the children are there. Let's not narrow the wonder and glory and variety of the child into protestant or catholic. Rather let's celebrate the uniqueness of each individual and give them the confidence to grow up as tolerant and forward thinking individuals willing to work to build a united community.

Inquiry

This inquiry is necessary and very welcome. It is right that all sectors within the education system have opportunities to contribute, because only through open and candid investigation and discussion can the barriers to societal unity be broken down. If there is a genuine desire to move Northern Ireland forward through this inquiry, I look forward with anticipation to the results.

Yours sincerely,


Dorothy McKeating (Principal)

