

## Parents and Shared/Integrated Education

### A response on behalf of PTA NI

#### PTA NI

PTA UK is one of the largest voluntary sector membership organisations in the UK. We have over 13,600 PTA members that represent 1 million volunteers. We are a charity. Children and schools are at the heart of what we do. For almost 60 years we have been supporting PTAs to build parent communities, run effective and efficient organisations that raise money and run activities to support their school.

Within Northern Ireland, PTA NI is working with an estimated 100,000 parents through our 300 PTA members; PTA NI represents the largest group of parent communities in statutory education in Northern Ireland. Based on the 2011 [census results](#), there are an estimated half a million parents with dependent children in Northern Ireland. Through our membership, PTA NI is working with 20% of the NI parent population.

Our membership is representative, comprising 243 primary, 45 post-primary and 12 special schools (respectively 28% of primary, 20% of post-primary and 30% of special schools). PTA NI membership engages across all political and religious affiliations.

PTA NI has an existing reputation in providing access to NI parent opinion. We have supported the Education Committee to gain parent opinion on Common Formula Funding and Area Based Planning, with an emphasis on ensuring representation and geographical spread.

#### Mission

It is our vision for every school to have the benefit of a successful and supportive PTA to enhance the education and futures of all our children.

To achieve this, our mission is:

- To be the voice for all parents and PTAs
- To provide credible, well research and authoritative support
- To enable PTAs to achieve more and serve their community
- To innovate and inspire as an expert voice
- To be market leaders in the benefits, services and practical tools we offer

Over the next year, PTA NI membership will increase by 10%, growing our parent community to around a quarter of all NI parents with dependent children. By 2018, PTA NI membership will be close to half of all schools.

#### Parental involvement

PTA NI's specific interest with regard to the Shared Education and Integrated Education policies is parental involvement. We welcome the [findings](#) of the Ministerial Advisory Group on Education, "*Parental involvement was seen as crucial to ensuring that shared education becomes a reality.....Barriers to the advancement of shared education outlined by parents included perceived prejudices in the wider community in relation to disability, racism and sectarianism and the teaching of religion in schools. Some felt that parents themselves may need to be educated to deal with prejudices they may have which can be passed on to their children*".

The influence parents have on their children's learning is well documented and is expressed in terms of attainment<sup>1</sup>. PTA NI therefore welcomes this inquiry's focus on parents and the need to engage effectively.

### **PTAs and parental involvement**

Our PTA members have a proven track record in parental involvement and supporting the implementation of Shared Education and Integrated Education:

#### **1. Case study 1: Shared Education**

After many years of Shared Education, the PTSA at Brookeborough Primary School has forged an excellent relationship with the PTA at St Mary's PS Brookeborough.

Through the Shared Education programme, children, staff and parents from both the controlled and maintained schools have engaged in Shared Education classes covering respecting difference, choral speaking, drama, history and art projects. Highlights have included the pupils joining together in choral speaking for the Fermanagh Feis. The children won this section and followed on with both schools producing a drama on racism.

This shared working was infectious and led to the PTSA considering working together. The focus was on how to enhance the local village. The objective was for something that visually showed how the two groups had readily taken on a project together. Children from both schools came together with the Friends of St Mary's representatives and the Brookeborough Parent Teacher Support Group to plant flower boxes in the village. Grandparents also helped. The local community enjoyed the colourful floral display that enhanced the village.

Recently the cross-community Playgroup Committee organised a Halloween disco for 0-P3 age group and their parents. The PSNI provided the music and this was another example of Shared Education in Brookeborough for all the children in the village.

Following a consultation process with parents and the community, the playgroup and two schools are currently preparing an application for a Shared Education campus in Brookeborough.

Both schools, supported by their parent groups continue to look at ways to work together to continue to develop a vibrant community spirit and shared community environment.

#### **2. Case study 2: Integrated Education**

Rowandale Integrated Primary School was founded in 2007 by a group of local parents responding to a need for Integrated Education in the area. Continually supported by these and many other parents, the school has grown significantly in the past eight years and today prides itself on providing a wonderful and

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<sup>1</sup> "Typically parents and caregivers are a child's first and most interested teachers. This role does not cease to exist when children enter school; in fact, families play a critical role in the education of their children. Working with the school, parents and caregivers can help create collaborative partnerships that support all aspects of a child's achievement at school", (Parental Involvement: The Missing Link in School Achievement, Larocque, Kleinman and Darling, 2011). Sacker et al (2002) states that parents have five times more influence on achievement at age seven than school. This diminishes as children get older but parents still have more influence on achievement than school at age 11. Whilst school has much more influence at age 16, parents still have some influence. Desforges, (2003) states that "parental involvement in the form of 'at home good parenting' has a significant positive effect on children's attainment and adjustment even after all other factors shaping attainment have been taken out of the equation".

stimulating environment where 198 pupils are educated together as equals, sharing and celebrating each other's faiths and beliefs.

Parents founded their own Council to strengthen the school and assist its growth, to foster community relations and share the positive message of integration throughout the area. Children at the school do not experience segregation; they know one another as individuals, not stereotypes and together they explore the diversity of their country. Value is placed on the importance of playing, creating and learning together. Monthly art clubs are run for all children in the area and a Community Playgroup has been opened giving families the opportunity to access an integrated environment at the earliest possible opportunity.

Fundraising by parents is always important to any school but for a newly opened one it is vital and the Parents' Council has organised many events both in the school and the surrounding area which raise money and local awareness of Integrated Education. Whether it be Christmas bag-packing in supermarkets whilst wearing Rowandale t-shirts, successfully gaining sponsorship for the school cross-country kit from local businesses, running the popular annual Christmas craft fair, entering teams in the Belfast Marathon, organising social events or putting on simple fundraising initiatives such as car boot sales, parents are involved in the school and the community with significant benefit. As a direct result of fundraising many items have been provided including cameras, interactive whiteboards, iPads, kindles, e-books and musical equipment. The Parent Council has also successfully applied for grant funding which allowed the school to develop an 'extended care' scheme including a breakfast club and an extensive range of after-school activities. At the heart of these activities is a desire not only to provide for children but also to spread the positive message of integration far beyond the school walls.

### **3. Case study 3: Parental Engagement**

The Parent Teacher Association of Carnalridge Primary School was set up over 25 years ago, and right up until 2010 was exclusively involved in fundraising activities. Since then, it has explored other ways to benefit pupils and the school community. Over the past 4 years, it has introduced new after school activities, such as archery and golf, and assisted with running these by supplying volunteers to help the coaches. The PTA has expanded its work to promote increased engagement between parents and school governors, with the latter becoming much more visible and accessible as a result.

In short, the PTA's focus has shifted from fundraising developing a closer and stronger partnership between the school and PTA, with the benefit felt across the school community.

### **Opportunities**

PTA NI provides a range of opportunities to support and enhance the implementation of Shared Education and Integrated Education:

- 1. Giving parents a local voice:** as the only parent organisations that exist within the majority (75%) of all NI schools, PTAs are the prime opportunity by which to engage and consult locally with parents around the implementation of Shared Education and Integrated Education, achieving the recommendation of the Ministerial Advisory Group. PTA NI is working to ensure every school has a parent organisation that gives parents the opportunity to be part of the school environment, to have a say on what is happening in school and developments that effect their children's education.
- 2. Supporting implementation:** as shown by the case studies, PTAs are a valuable asset in delivering activity that supports the implementation of Shared Education and Integrated Education. They bring additional resource and support to help achieve these policies and crucially are the means by which to get parents actively involved, providing ownership and engagement.
- 3. National consultation:** with our reach to the NI parent population, proven track record and credibility with parent groups, PTA NI provides a unique opportunity to consult nationally with parents on Shared Education and Integrated Education. This could be used to benchmark parental attitudes towards both initiatives using a demographically weighted sample, assess barriers to participation and then monitor movement in perceptions and engagement. PTA NI also provides opportunities to understand attitudes

in depth with assessment through focus groups and parent representation at the Education Committee enquiry.

### **Summary**

Parents are important in achieving Shared Education and Integrated Education; without engagement parents may become a barrier to the success of both policies. PTA NI has a well-established and extensive parent reach within statutory education. Our PTA members are already working to support the implementation of Shared Education and Integrated Education. This provides a range of opportunities to consult and engage parents as well as harnessing PTAs to help deliver Shared Education and Integrated Education policies.