

# Inquiry into Shared and Integrated Education



**Rural Community Network**  
SUPPORTING RURAL COMMUNITIES

## Response to the Inquiry by the Committee for Education by Rural Community Network

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## **Introduction**

RCN welcomes the opportunity to respond to the Committee for Education's Inquiry into Shared and Integrated Education. Our response is informed by a series of public conversation events between November 2011 and June 2012 delivered in partnership with the IEF and local community. These events were designed to:

- Provide parents and communities with information on policy changes in education
- Explore how changes in policy and funding may impact on local schools and,
- Explore the potential for shared and integrated solutions to maintain education provision in rural communities

Overall a total of 419 people attended the 10 events held across Northern Ireland.

Since then RCN has supported rural school communities who have approached the organisation in relation to responding to the Area Planning consultations and some of those schools who have been identified for closure as a result of area planning.

More recently RCN in partnership with Youth Action, NI Youth Forum, University of Ulster, NEETS Forum (Belfast) and Mencap, have engaged with young people living in rural areas (aged 16 – 25 years) to gather their views and opinions in relation to shared education and integrated education. To date one event has been held in Newry with another two events planned for Ballymena and Derry/Londonderry before end of December 2014.

## **The Nature and definition of Shared Education and Integrated Education**

The definition of integrated education is, in our view, reasonably clear both in practice and in law. The recent Judicial Review taken by Drumragh Integrated College in May 2014 of the Department's refusal to allow the school to expand because of the spare capacity within the post primary sector in the Omagh District, further clarifies the definition of integrated education and differentiates it from shared education. The Judge took the view that:

“However, upon analysis I consider that ‘Integrated Education’ is a standalone concept and the second part of the sentence i.e. ‘that is to say the education together at school of Protestant and Roman Catholic Pupils’ clarifies the type of integrated education that is to be supported, i.e. integration between Protestant and Catholic Pupils as opposed to integration within school of any other distinct sets of pupils. The provision plainly envisages education together at the same school.”

Justice Treacy further clarified that a school that has a predominantly Catholic or predominantly Protestant ethos cannot be said to be delivering integrated education because as part of its constitution, as an institution, it is fundamentally oriented to one

religious cannon over another. Against this an integrated school strives to achieve an equal balance in relation to worship, celebration and exposure to both faiths.

The Ministerial Advisory Group on Shared Education which reported in March 2013 defined shared education as:

“Shared education involves two or more schools or other educational institutions from different sectors working in collaboration with the aim of delivering educational benefits to learners, promoting the efficient and effective use of resources, and promoting equality of opportunity, good relations, equality of identity, respect for diversity and community cohesion.”

Both integrated and shared education are to be encouraged in a society, still emerging from conflict and still deeply segregated particularly in rural areas. Whereas the definition of integrated education is clear in law the development of shared education is a more recent phenomenon and can involve a range of contact from schools attending joint one off events to pupils from different schools being educated together on the core curriculum for most of the school day. The spectrum of shared education can span many facets depending on the level of sharing a school wishes to engage in.

RCN is of the view that a formal statutory definition and an obligation in statute to facilitate and encourage Shared Education would be useful in the context of Area planning. In our view, education provision is rationalising within sectors rather than developing grass roots shared solutions which have the potential to be more sustainable in rural communities into the future.

We believe that shared and integrated education can be seen as part of a continuum and that they should not be seen as either/or by policymakers.

### **Key Barriers**

Within many rural communities, segregation remains widespread. Whilst divisions may not be as apparent as in urban areas, they still exist. Patterns of land ownership, patterns of residence and the legacy of the Troubles underpin segregation in rural communities. This has obvious implications for the development of shared education especially at primary level where children are, for the most part, educated within their local community and primarily on a single identity basis. This may be less of an issue at post primary level where pupils travel longer distances to (for the most part) towns and villages to access post primary schooling. However the numbers of primary schools in rural areas are almost double that of the secondary sector, therefore efforts should be made at a primary level to promote shared or integrated education, when young children formulate friendships and attitudes towards others.

Segregation within the education system is a symptom of the wider division in society and this historical legacy is hard to address. In practical terms it may be logistically difficult in some parts of Northern Ireland, which are still highly segregated, to identify partner schools for shared education work. There may also be an unwillingness within the individual schools to engage in shared education as there is no statute in law.

The concept of shared education is not widely understood amongst parents and the wider community as it is still relatively new. This was evident through feedback received from the events held by RCN and the IEF. Local communities need to be fully informed in relation to this concept and how it can and does shape a more inclusive, shared rural community.

RCN believes that it is critically important that parents and the whole community are involved in planning for education in their area. Again this was evident through the localised events, where parents and members of the community were not aware of the area planning process and how their views and opinions could assist and shape education in their own community.

We acknowledge that this is not an easy task for officials whose previous experience of public engagement may only have concerned school closures and is largely negative. RCN is of the view that the promotion of sharing in schools across sectors (if it can be done sensitively with local community support) offers some hope for retaining some rural schools which would otherwise close.

Currently within the area based planning process, no pathway for grassroots shared education models to emerge has been set out. The Terms of Reference for Area Based Planning published in December 2011 includes: "Identifying realistic, innovative and creative solutions to address need, including opportunities for shared schooling on a cross-sectoral basis."

RCN is concerned that the Education and Library Boards and CCMS have embarked on a twin track process that implements area based planning within the controlled and maintained sectors separately. This twin track process means that shared education options are less likely to emerge from communities. Schools that may have been viable on a shared basis will close leading to further segregation within the education system and longer travelling distances for pupils from rural communities. An obligation in statute to facilitate and encourage Shared Education should make the area planning process more sensitive to shared solutions where community support exists.

In terms of how a shared school might look and feel, in terms of symbols and emblems displayed, sports played and general ethos, these are difficult issues in rural communities as they are in urban communities. The sports that schools play, the symbols and emblems they display and the ethos they adopt in relation to religion, are existential representations of our communities and our different allegiances and aspirations. These issues can be even

more sensitive in areas which were badly impacted by the Troubles and where the descendants of victims and survivors carry a legacy of hurt around what happened to their loved ones as well as a strong sense of identity.

Issues of ethos and identity in shared education must be addressed but this will take time and will involve negotiations that will need to be resourced. The Integrated school movement can offer some learning from the practice of education in their sector over the past 30 years and their approach to issues of ethos and identity. However the context of parents choosing to send their children to integrated schools is different in that it demonstrated a commitment to “shared education” that only a small minority of families made. Approximately 7% of all pupils attending school at present attend Integrated status schools, therefore the concept of parental choice in relation to their children engaging in shared education programmes as well as attending shared schools, needs to be fully considered.

Parents may harbour fears about sending their child to a school where they are in a significant minority. These views were expressed at some of the localised events held by RCN and IEF and explicit fears around sectarian bullying and health and safety were identified.

Shared approaches to schooling appear to work best where two schools from different sectors are relatively evenly balanced in terms of enrolment. Where one school is well below enrolment threshold and a neighbouring school is above it there is much less incentive for the latter school to enter into a shared education project. This can significantly impact rural areas where there is a potential for a school closure but no willingness for other schools in the geographic area to engage as their own enrolment numbers are sustainable.

### **Key Enablers**

The area planning process, if delivered in a more holistic way with much more input from local communities, could be an enabler for shared and integrated education in rural communities if people are made aware at an early stage and are involved as part of the process. Currently we believe area planning is being done “unto” communities rather than being done “in partnership with them”. To make area planning truly effective will require a completely different mindset from educational managing authorities.

The experience of the shared education projects that QUB have developed and delivered with a range of stakeholders across Northern Ireland are practical examples of what can be achieved and can inspire other schools across the region to explore the potential for shared education. The joint submissions from several of the school partnerships in Fermanagh to the Area Planning process seeking shared solutions is further evidence of the effectiveness of shared education.

## **Advancing shared and integrated education**

The best way to advanced Shared Education is to keep promoting the shared education projects that Queens and other stakeholders have developed across NI. These are practical examples of what can be achieved in local communities and demonstrate the practical, educational and societal benefits. The recent announcement of additional funding for shared education will allow these projects to continue and deepen the links between schools from across different education sectors.

The Department of Education needs to make a clear commitment to shared education solutions and provide a clear pathway for such solutions that have grass roots support to emerge. ELBs need to examine where resources can be pooled and shared within schools in a locality. Shared education should continue to be promoted through the implementation of the CRED policy in relation to the potential for local cross community school partnership projects. These initial partnership projects, whereby children and parents begin to make links in terms of relationships, also break down barriers and fears in relation to the concept of sharing across different sectors.

With regard to integrated education the statutory duty to encourage and facilitate the development of integrated education should remain in place. RCN recognise that whilst parental choice for children is paramount, support should be given by the Department to integrated schools wishing to increase their enrolment numbers and capacity to deal with the increasing number of people wishing to send their children to local integrated schools.