

To the Committee for Education in Northern Ireland,

I would like the following views on shared and integrated education to be considered by the Education Committee as part of your ongoing review.

I am one of 6 siblings all of whom have attended an integrated primary and post primary school in Omagh. I am also a member of the Integrated Education Alumni Association in London. I have just graduated with a degree in English Language and Special Needs Education from a university in London and have a great passion and interest in education in general. As part of my degree I had to do research into the different types of education providers and the ratio of school places needed and those available in different localities and the impact of parental choice. I was shocked to discover that in Northern Ireland we have a massive duplication of provision and as a consequence our education system is not economically viable or cost effective. With future austerity measures looming now is the time for those decision makers in our midst to take brave decisions and bring our finances back into shape. In my own town of Omagh we have a total of 7 post primary schools an equivalent area here in London with similar population size has 2. It is obvious that 3 times the amount of provision is definitely overkill and needs to be addressed as this is only one area of Northern Ireland what must it be if the whole of Northern Ireland were to be surveyed.

When talk of a shared education campus was first mooted I was only in my third year at my post primary school, myself and my classmates were not quite sure what it all meant but we were eager to hear more. Eight possibly 9 years on, millions of pounds spent and not a brick built. Young people in the area still have no say in what is being provided decisions are being made by service providers and politicians instead of listening to the service users the students. What we do know is that when the shared education campus is complete we will still have 7 post primary schools in the area thus continuing the duplication of provision, young people will still be segregated as each school will still have their own building and there is no provision for any integration of sport facilities or outside space as each school will have separate times for use of such facilities and to crown it all the only integrated post primary school in the area has been refused permission to relocate to the site. What is being proposed is also not going to save any money at all in the future and therefore offers no financial savings and poses the question what are the benefits?

Our hope at the time a Shared Education Campus was announced was that there would be one large school for all in the Omagh area regardless of gender or religion up to the age of 16/17 and then a Sixth Form College catering to the needs of young people. This would have been a truly courageous initiative putting our needs before those of our outdated institutions who are only interested in protecting themselves. Calling it an Integrated Campus or Shared Education Campus is irrelevant what it provides is much more important.

I feel very privileged and thankful that my parents supported integrated education and bravely chose our local primary and post primary integrated schools for us to attend. They went against what their families, friends, neighbours and church believed in. Attending schools not dominated by one view, belief or idea and so open minded that it allowed all of us not to be afraid to discuss our differences, be less judgemental and respect what makes us all different while at the same time pushing us to academically achieving our best whatever that might be. Being educated alongside

those with learning disabilities helps us develop our communication and interpersonal skills and allows us to integrate with those who find life more challenging than others. I have found this foundation so relevant during my studies for my degree and my present employment with Greenwich Council. There is so much we can do to make our education system in Northern Ireland better. It should start by educating us all together from nursery right up to leaving school. If young people choose to go down the vocational route and attend one of our FE colleges they have an integrated education why not then if we choose the academic route.

Integrated Schools in Northern Ireland have been a choice for parents but so many are oversubscribed and their expansion blocked by religious and social groups that it is not available to all children and therefore so many are losing out. To learn side by side and in a completely neutral environment where differences are celebrated discussed and explored should be a right and not a choice and this is what NI should be aiming for rather than continuing with segregation.

In conclusion I would like to state that although I am not a fan of the shared education concept it is a tiny step towards integration but is it sustainable and where is it going? It appears to be just a buzz word for politicians and others who are afraid of the term integration . If it is such a great concept then why not be brave, save money and take a big step rather than a tiny one and recommend full integration of our education system including our teacher training and provide an exciting future for young people now and those not yet born. I know I would like to believe that any children I might have will have the right to an integrated education not the possibility of one.

Finally I thank you for allowing me to submit my thoughts and I would ask that you speak to as many young people like myself and those still attending school as you can. We know what we want our schools to provide, we know what makes a good lesson a good teacher and what makes us want to learn and helps us to learn.

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