

Committee for Education

Inquiry into Shared and Integrated Education

Submission from Sir Robert Salisbury

I do not represent any organisation and write as a private individual, resident in Northern Ireland. In the past I have chaired the Task Force on Literacy/Numeracy, Chaired the Funding Review and a Review of FE Colleges in NI. I have also worked for many years with schools and school leaders in NI, UK and internationally.

For brevity my submission will be in bullet point format, but I will be happy to expand the content at a later date if the Committee for Education think this would be helpful.

1 Virtually every political or educational observer from outside Northern Ireland sees our divided educational system as one of the root causes of the social unrest, innate mistrust 'of the other side' and a crucial factor in prolonging the ongoing tensions which exist in this small country. Many have urged the political and religious leaders to move with speed towards an integrated system which educates all of our young people together. To the neutral observer - and though I have lived in NI for thirteen years, I still regard myself as such - separating children, often from the age of three, into different educational channels where they seldom converge, inevitably fosters misunderstanding and prejudice. In my view the overarching thrust of this review should not be about deciding the relative merits of either Shared Education or Integrated Education, because they clearly both have strengths and weaknesses, but about moving towards a system which is fit for the 21st Century and educates **all** of our children together.

2 Perhaps a starting point is to ask if we are beginning this debate from the wrong end. It might be more useful to ask a fundamental question of all sectors in our present educational system. Are we truly focussed on fulfilling the needs and aspirations of our young people for the next twenty to thirty years or are we tinkering at the edges of what is for many students a failing system and still looking back to a world which is no longer relevant? Flexibility and adaptability, global awareness, co-operation and networking, confidence in meeting ever-changing circumstances, technological competence and high quality communication skills will be vital attributes for all children who are currently moving through our schools. Are our schools actually providing those vital foundations or are we still far too preoccupied with digging our heels in and defending our corner? Young people are our future. We should ask them what they think and all those with vested interests should begin to soften their traditional resistance to change and put the needs of young people before the needs of institutions or particular faiths. Arbitrarily divided education, whether it be in pseudo-academic terms or on religious grounds is surely out of its time and we should all have the confidence and strength to take a truly fresh look at what should happen in our schools.

3 If our current system of schooling was successful enough to compete with the best in the world and all of our young people were being given the confidence, skills and qualifications to be successful in life, there would be some virtue in maintaining the status quo and sticking with what we have. Sadly this is not the case and though many of our top students achieve high standards there is a long tail of underachievement, especially in the inner city areas, where results are some of the worst in the whole of Europe. Whatever changes we consider to the present system must therefore have as a central tenet - the pressing need to raise educational achievement for **all** young people.

4 Consideration of the future shape of our schools must also take into account the current financial situation. During the recent Funding Review it was very clear that Northern Ireland has too many small schools and too many ‘types’ of school to be economically viable as budgets decline. For example Omagh has six post primary schools with salaries, buildings costs etc and Retford in Nottinghamshire, with an almost identical population has two post primaries. Replicate this across NI and the financial implications are obvious. Maintaining the duplication of the Controlled and Maintained sectors, Grammar Schools and High Schools is expensive and will increasingly become financially unsustainable. All ability integrated schools are clearly in the long term a more workable and affordable option.

5 Amalgamations and closures of small schools are inevitable in the future. Not only are many of these small establishments costly to maintain, but a restricted curriculum, lack of opportunity for sporting and cultural events and limited educational experience for the pupils increasingly occurs as numbers on roll decline. Of course no one relishes the closure of schools, especially those in rural areas, but it was very disappointing to discover in the recent Area Planning exercise, that more consideration was given to the separate rationalisation of Controlled or Maintained schools than to the possibility of integrating small schools in order to maintain at least one educational establishment in an area. Taking a school out of an area almost always means more travel and less convenience for both pupils and parents so when closures are proposed, communities should always be given the option to consider cross- sector amalgamations and integration as a possibility. This should take precedence over the present ‘divided’ area planning process which is now taking place.

6 Clearly, in educational terms, one of the main attractions of bringing small schools together to form a larger unit in order to maintain a school in an area, brings wider curricula opportunities for the children, greater diversity amongst the teaching staff and a secure future for the establishment. Integration of this type would also bring disparate communities together because though we hear a great deal about ‘small rural schools being the heart of the community’ in reality having separate Controlled or Maintained establishments a few miles apart is the very thing which divides populations. It may be that to encourage governors, principals and parents to consider ‘integrated amalgamations’ a new range of financial incentives and new build opportunities for the school have to be offered. Similarly an attractive financial package, akin to that arranged for police officers when the PSNI was re-organised, might need to be put together to

encourage principals to retire early, thus facilitating and encouraging opportunity for school amalgamations.

7 Finally we regularly hear ‘parents must have the right to choose the school they want’ which, though it may be understandable, inevitably comes with a cost in terms of transport, financial support for small schools etc which as has been mentioned earlier, is a situation which is unlikely to be sustainable in the future. Eventually parents making such a choice will undoubtedly have to contribute financially, especially towards transport, but a move towards local ‘integrated’ schools might anticipate and alleviate this problem.

8 The ‘integrated schools’ movement has made significant strides over the past years but for various reasons has still not achieved the major break-through in terms of student numbers that it initially hoped for. This may be because:

a) Early development of the movement concentrated more on setting up new schools (which exacerbated the issues mentioned earlier in terms of small schools and the range of schools in NI) and was much less encouraging to schools which wanted to ‘transform’ into integrated establishments.

b) The movement considered that mere ‘integration’ was enough to make them successful and failed to understand that high achievement for all students was also crucial to reputation and sustainability.

c) Schools too often aped the local selective schools and missed the opportunity to create a unique, truly integrated ethos which had high aspirations for all pupils from all backgrounds and all traditions. As one successful former principal put it to me ‘my hope for this school is that we will have students winning places at Oxbridge, students with special needs reaching their full potential and everything in between. In short, a school which truly does provide the best for all students.’

d) For years there has been a lack of strong, committed political support for integration, the continued existence of a selective system, widespread and systematic covert and overt pressure from the various religious groups to block integration, the ‘capping’ of integrated school numbers and the absence of schools in some areas are factors which have all had a detrimental effect on the expansion of integrated schools.

e) Sadly the emergence of the ‘shared education’ movement seems to have been met with defensive animosity by some members of the ‘integrated’ sector. As one principal put it to me, ‘they have stolen our thunder’, which seems an odd reaction when the aspiration to teach all children together is surely common to both movements.

9 ‘Shared Education’ should be viewed as a step in the right direction but there are some fundamental short-comings both in its philosophy and to its long term sustainability:

a) Some schemes are clearly designed as a survival device to protect small schools which may be under threat from closure, thus prolonging the issues raised above.

b) Educational outcomes are usually reported as very positive, though are often ill defined and difficult to quantify and prompt the obvious question that if these schemes work so well on restricted contact, why not fully integrate?

c) Logistically 'shared' educational schemes have a finite limit so definitely do not offer a permanent solution. Planning joint timetables, arranging transport of staff and students quickly begins to exert a negative influence on the rest of the school. There is usually a substantial financial cost involved in this process and it is reasonable to ask if the funding ceases in the future is the initiative likely to survive?

d) Some schemes which have young people sharing the same building but having different uniforms and entering by separate doors are patently absurd and a better way to perpetuate difference is hard to imagine.

e) It would be useful if all shared educational schemes are time-bound so that development of the initial idea is seen to be moving forward as the various parties become accustomed to working together. Hard evidence that all schemes are benefitting the educational and social outcomes for the children should also be a pre-requisite of any coming together between schools.

f) In the long run, for 'shared education' schemes to work practically the structure, purpose and composition of the Governing Bodies of schools will need to be reviewed.

10 There are three areas where full integration would be relatively easy to achieve and would have a significant impact:

a) All pre-school and nursery schools should be integrated. By school starting age many prejudices are already entrenched.

b) Integrated Teacher Training should be introduced with some urgency because professionally it is ludicrous, duplication is expensive and potentially restricts the career opportunities for teachers.

c) Development of joint Post 16 centres linked to FE colleges. Far too many school sixth forms offer restricted curricular packages, compete unashamedly with neighbouring schools for students and are uneconomic. An integrated regional approach to the provision of post-sixteen education based firmly on the needs of students rather than the individual institutions would be a rational move in the right direction.

11 Northern Ireland has moved forward massively in the last few years but huge divisions still exist in our society and many of these are clearly perpetuated by our segregated education system. Powerful religious and social groups conspire to maintain this situation and repeatedly seek to block any move towards teaching all pupils together. Historically there was clearly a need to develop a separate catholic education system to counteract the restricted opportunities experienced by people coming from that tradition in NI. However what was once an understandable route to achieve equality is no longer a solution but is now clearly part of the problem. Similarly, the birth of integrated education initially faced huge obstacles and its proponents had to be single-minded in the pursuit of their aims so that nothing less than 'full integration' was envisaged or tolerated. It would be a shame if these parties and indeed any others with 'self' interest in maintaining segregated education cannot now moderate their entrenched views and begin to see the immense benefits both educationally, socially and economically of bringing all children together into a single system.

For years now I have been asking the question of these vested interest groups ‘What do we actually lose if our schools become integrated?’ and so far have been unable to get any quantifiable or indeed honest response. Interestingly the only submission to this inquiry which came from young people who are part of the next generation (NUS-USI) unequivocally urges the committee to move with all speed towards integration and argues forcibly that ‘children in NI should be educated together within an Integrated Educational system’. Perhaps asking all young people what they feel a modern school system should offer them for their future success and well-being might be a worthwhile starting point for this debate and would I am sure prove very illuminating!

Sir Robert Salisbury

Oct 2014