



Response to the Shared Education Bill request for written evidence from the Northern Ireland Assembly Education Committee Tuesday November 17th 2015

Association of School and College Leaders Northern Ireland.

1. Shared Education.

ASCL notes that in the definition of “Shared Education” in section 1 of the bill, equal weight is given to (a) education together of those of different religious belief and (b) those who are experiencing socio-economic deprivation and those who are not. Experience in Area Learning Communities has shown that where schools have delegated financial autonomy to develop sharing in a way that suits their local context, that genuine shared education initiatives have thrived and improved cross community contact and cohesion while respecting existing structural realities.

In ASCL’s National Blueprint (2014), it is argued that we can learn from initiatives like London Challenge;

“...where a strong sense of collective endeavour, accountability, a focus on students’ outcomes and deep partnerships between and among schools, brought about significant improvement”.

“School Leaders took on a shared responsibility for the quality of education of all young people in their area, not just those in their own school. There is a strong commitment to principled strategic partnerships, including with higher education institutions.”

This last comment ties in well with the best practice in N Ireland Learning Communities where local FE colleges provide a strong, well equipped, shared, vocational provision and are linked in curriculum collaborations with schools. In these type of contexts shared education becomes a reality. There is no mention in the bill of linkages between schools and FE colleges to facilitate both vocational curricular education opportunities and a naturally evolving shared educational experience for young people from all socio-economic settings.

2. Power to Encourage and Facilitate shared education.

As the bill proposes to give power to encourage and facilitate shared education as defined above, to a range of public bodies with potential financial controls over schools, the danger exists that one section may be prioritised or incentivised over another and become a mechanism for structural change.

The leap of faith needed for schools to move from separate self- interest to educational collaboration needs support and encouragement from government and equally, respect for the excellence and genuine commitment to the existing educational contexts in which schools operate.

Shared education will be enhanced more by changing minds than changing structures. We start from where we are by supporting financially those in collaborative settings who are on that journey however modest their initial projects. This type of change cannot be legislated into existence, it must grow from the local leadership and the emerging confidence of schools and parents.

For shared education to work schools need to agree sharing between themselves locally and prioritise an inclusive, intercultural vision. There must be support for professional development for teachers and leaders engaged in this difficult work. In the ASCL national strategy document “Blueprint for a Self-Improving System” (2014), it is suggested that, “the role of government is to remove obstacles and create the conditions for a self- improving system”.

Published research on N Ireland Area Learning Communities by McGuinness, Abbott and Cassidy (2013) shows that key barriers in Northern Ireland to the effective development of this approach on Shared Education are both the level of delegated funding and the demotivating complexity of funding delegation. The evidence shows that collective ownership of the collaboration by the schools involved and a high degree of autonomy bring about significant change. We note that there is no mention of encouraging local autonomy in the bill. Over centralised government direction will not bring about lasting shared education but legislators can create the conditions which will allow schools and communities to find their own ways to share.

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References:

ASCL, (2014) Blueprint for a Self- Improving System. Leicester ASCL

McGuinness, S.J. Abbott, L. Cassidy, F. (2013) Northern Ireland Some post-conflict challenges in education. In R.P. Clarke, O’Donoghue, T. A. School Level Leadership in Post-Conflict Societies. Routledge. Oxon