

Committee for Education
The Committee Clerk,
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26th November 2015

Written submission on the Shared Education Bill

Thank you for your invitation to submit evidence to the Education Committee in relation to the Shared Education Bill.

The Community Relations Council (CRC) is not directly involved in educational provision yet we have a critical interest in this policy area and have recently made a number of submissions in relation to enhancing and increasing shared education. Education, both formal and informal, can act as a critical player in developing, supporting and achieving reconciliation in our conflict transformation process. This will require a systematic approach to support the embedding and mainstreaming of good relations across and within educational structures, policies, practices and procedures; as well as requiring a common commitment to enhance and maximise opportunities for meeting, sharing and collaborating on a cross-community basis both at a policy and a structural level.

Furthermore the Executive Strategy 'Together: Building a United Community' shared aim for children and young people is '*to continue to improve attitudes amongst our young people and to build a community where they can play a full and active role in building good relations*'¹.

It is within this context that CRC makes the following comments.

PEACEBUILDING AND RECONCILIATION

The Explanatory and Financial Memorandum to the Bill does not reference the language of peacebuilding or reconciliation. The language of 'traditional divides' and 'reconciliation' are mentioned in the text of the Shared Education Policy document, hence it would be useful if the Committee sought clarification as to why specific reference to these issues are not in the memorandum. This insertion would have been especially important given that our society continues to be negatively affected by sectarianism and segregation.

SHARED EDUCATION

- **Clause 1, section 2 (a).**

In terms of the current definition CRC has the following comments to make.

¹ 'Together: Building a United Community' Strategy; NI Executive; 2013;4.

The current definition focuses on the education together of ‘those of different religious belief, including reasonable number of both Protestant and Roman Catholic children or young people’. The key focus for CRC is supporting cross-community engagement and sustainable relationship building within and between communities that have been affected by the conflict. Our work concentrates on Section 75 (2) categories - religion, political and race.

CRC recognises the development of this Bill in the context of a society that continues to emerge from conflict, as well as a society that continues to become increasingly diverse. Whilst all Section 75 categories are of critical importance, the perseverance of the legacy of the conflict needs to be dealt with. Therefore CRC maintains it remains important to place a focus on the educational interaction of those from different backgrounds i.e. religious belief, political opinion, and racial group.

In addition to the above, CRC asks that further consideration is given to how those who identify as ‘no religious background’ or ‘no religion stated’ will be included. The 2011 Census reported that 1 in 10 of the population stated they had ‘No religion’ (3% point increase from 2001-2011)², and 81% of those in this category were born in Northern Ireland³. It is important children and young people, who do not identify with a religious belief, are not excluded and have equal opportunities to be beneficiaries of Shared Education.

CRC asks that consideration be given to the term ‘reasonable’. It would be useful to provide some detail/policy guidance as to what is considered reasonable i.e. entry thresholds and/or progression to a specific percentage?

- **Clause 1, section 2 (b).**

Whilst the ‘significant’ element has been removed from the draft Bill it would still be useful to consider what information will be used to determine socio-economic deprivation – both within the formal and informal school sector.

POWER TO ENCOURAGE AND FACILITATE SHARED EDUCATION

- **Clause 2, section 1.**

CRC’s response to the draft Education Bill (Committee stage) recommended placing a duty on the Department of Education to promote shared education. CRC is still of the opinion that a duty is stronger and communicates an ‘obligation’.

- **Clause 2, section 2.**

CRC’s submission to the Department’s consultation on the draft Shared Education Bill had sought clarification as to why the Transferor Representatives’ Council (TRC)⁴ (renamed - Controlled Schools Support Council) and the Northern Ireland Council for Integrated Education (NICIE) are not named in the Bill. This clarification is still required. It would be helpful if the Committee could consider this in its deliberations.

² <http://www.ninis2.nisra.gov.uk/public/census2011analysis/noreligion/index.aspx>

³ <http://www.ninis2.nisra.gov.uk/public/census2011analysis/religion/index.aspx>

TIMESCALE

Given the short timescale for responses, CRC has not been able to give detailed consideration to the draft Bill. This submission reflects initial views from the Board. Closer examination is required.

EQUALITY & HUMAN RIGHTS

It is important the final Bill is compliant with Equality and Human Rights Legislation. It would be useful if the Committee sought advice/comment from relevant experts.

Conclusion

CRC looks forward to continuing this important discussion with the Committee. If you need clarification please contact Gemma Attwood, Policy Development Officer at the following email gattwood@nicrc.org.uk