

Dear Sirs,

I very much wish to comment on the proposed Shared Education Bill. I am the parent of two primary school children in Co Down. I have a number of points to make:

1. Under the section ‘**Shared Education**’ where the Bill attempts to define shared education it says ‘Shared Education means the **education together** of’etc. As far as I am aware, the dictionary definition of ‘**together**’ is that of an activity happening **WITH** or **IN PROXIMITY TO** one another. Shared Education, as piloted thus far in Northern Ireland, most definitely does **not** take the form of young people being educated **WITH** one another. Rather they have been educated quite separately, with some access to shared facilities. The very terminology ‘Shared Education’ lacks clarity and definition. The Bill ought to be clear whether it is making provision for children to be educated with each other, or in proximity to one another – and if the goal is mere proximity then it must come out and say so clearly. It must also provide definition as to what kind of proximity we are talking about. In the interests of clarity the Bill needs to dispense with the use of the meaningless and misleading term ‘shared education’ or at the very least to come up with a much clearer and meaningful definition. What would the minimum amount of ‘sharing’ to be expected in terms of time spent learning together etc? If public money were to be spent supporting this Bill then the taxpayer would rightly expect to know exactly what they would be paying for and what the expected benefits might be in terms of any ‘peace dividend’. There may well be a place for proximal education but only if it is clearly defined as a step on the road to something more meaningful in terms of children being educated with one another. In its current form I would argue that the Bill is vague and meaningless.

At the moment my small village has the ludicrous situation of 3 small primary schools – all struggling financially. It is a small place and their school populations are already in proximity to one another (less than a mile apart). I strongly believe that proximity alone does little to foster or develop inter-faith understanding or move Northern Ireland towards the shared future we have been promised. Only Integrated Education can offer a solution in this regard.

2. ‘**Power to encourage and facilitate**’ shared education. The absence of any mention of the **Integrated** sector from this list of stakeholders makes no sense at all. It seems to me that as the Bill fails to adequately define or describe shared education, then the Integrated Sector should be paid the courtesy of being included in the list of bodies being given the power to ‘encourage and facilitate’ it. Integrated schools *already* offer a genuine shared educational experience to their students. If there is no robust definition of shared education within the Bill, then who is to say that the Integrated sector is not already and would not in the future be an advocate of shared education (whatever that means...). **The Integrated sector needs to be included in the Bill - it would be a travesty to leave it out.**

I believe if this Bill goes through it will not only achieve nothing in terms of progress towards a shared future but may very well be to the long term detriment of our entire society. It would be a huge dis-service to the children of Northern Ireland – who are already being failed wholesale by the NI Assembly’s inability to make progress on a wide range of educational issues.

I am dismayed that there **is no mention of the Integrated Sector** which has been tried and tested over a thirty year period. Many successful integrated schools are suffering disproportionately in the current financial climate – this I believe is actively discriminating against students within the integrated sector. There is no mention in this Bill of where the additional funding might come from to support the ill-defined white elephant of ‘shared education’.

As a parent within the Integrated sector I strongly believe that no one in Northern Ireland has anything to fear from a genuinely integrated educational setting. The only reason the sector has not grown more rapidly is lack of support from government. If more financial support and political will was given to the Integrated Sector it would grow exponentially. Schools which can offer a genuinely inclusive education, if they had better facilities, more funding and more places available, would eventually draw all but the most intransigent sectors of our community. Frankly, I feel that it is the parts of our society who are **unwilling** to embrace a shared future and who wish to preserve a status quo which we can ill afford, either financially, or morally, who should be feeling the financial pinch – NOT integrated schools who have already demonstrated that it can work. As the expression goes ‘Build it and they will come’.

Ends.