
Submission to the Shared
Education Bill committee stage

Opening Minds

Integrated Education Fund

The Integrated Education Fund (IEF) welcomes the opportunity to comment on the Shared Education Bill. The IEF would also welcome the opportunity to present evidence to the Education Committee.

About the IEF

The IEF is a charitable trust established to provide a financial foundation for the development and growth of integrated education in Northern Ireland. It is registered with The Charity Commission for Northern Ireland: NIC101149 and is governed by its Deed of Trust. Its mandate is derived from the expressed demand of parents and individual schools who seek integrated education for their children and pupils.

What is integrated education?

Integrated education brings children, staff and governors from Catholic and Protestant traditions, as well as those of other faiths or none and other cultures, together in one school. Integrated schools differ from most other schools in Northern Ireland by ensuring that children from diverse backgrounds are educated together every day, side by side in the same classrooms. Through their admissions criteria, schools aim to ensure a balanced number of Catholic and Protestant children. But it is also the ethos that is particularly distinctive; it is deliberately and strategically planned to promote inclusiveness and mutual respect. Integrated schools do not simply admit students from different traditions and expect them to fit in, nor to pretend that everyone is the same. For example, Catholic children are offered Sacramental preparation at P3, P4 and P7; Protestant children can generally avail of the Delving Deeper programme to develop their own faith knowledge while all pupils are introduced to the ideas, beliefs and practices of the major world religions and humanist philosophies.

In the post-primary schools the integrated ethos is apparent in approaches to Religious Education and History, for example, where sensitive and deliberate care is taken to address different, potentially contentious viewpoints in a balanced and thought-provoking way.

The integrated ethos also extends to the staff and the Board of Governors of each integrated school.

Introduction

Shared education is not a new concept; schools from all sectors have been involved in sharing projects since long before the *Delivering Social Change* signature project was established.

There have been successive initiatives in education since the 1970s to address divisions in Northern Ireland. The Education Reform (Northern Ireland) Order 1989 introduced Education for Mutual Understanding (EMU), which came into operation in respect of all pupils in Key Stages 1, 2 and 3 and in the first year of Key Stage 4 from 1 August 1992.

The IEF has, through our “Promoting a Culture of Trust” (PACT) programme, supported shared education. The Fund distributed £1,064,088 in grants to 552 schools from 2000 to 2015 through the PACT programme to enable cross-community projects to explore and celebrate diversity. Grants were awarded to projects uniting schools of different management types for activities which involved pupils, staff, parents and the wider community in bridging divides and promoting a shared future.

The Department of Education has most recently produced *Sharing Works: A Policy for Shared Education* which accompanies the Bill under scrutiny.

Discussing shared education, the Minister for Education himself acknowledged on BBC Radio that many schools are “way ahead” of politicians in these matters.

Therefore any new legislation must be an additional step to move us forward towards a united community, and must clearly enable all schools to participate in effective programmes to help develop cross-community activity and understanding.

However, the Bill as it stands does not provide this, and is defined by what is absent rather than what is contained within it.

- The definition of shared education is slight and raises more questions than it answers
- There is no mention of integrated education or progression towards integration, even though the *Sharing Works* policy states it is “the highest form of sharing”

- There is no mention of a system of evaluation to measure the impact of sharing projects on educational attainment even though this is a core element of the policy
- There is no system of evaluation or requirement to measure impact of shared education activities on community cohesion
- there is insufficient consideration of the economic sustainability of shared education once the financial support runs out in 2018.

Analysis of the Bill

Clause 1: 'Shared Education'

The first clause in the Bill, the definition of 'Shared Education', is lacking in substance and clarity. The IEF is conscious of the requirement for some flexibility in the Bill. However, public statements from various quarters in recent years suggest a widespread variance in interpretation of the term and it is therefore crucial that any statutory definition is clear and robust.

Despite being drawn up to support the *Sharing Works* policy the Bill has abandoned the inclusive definition of shared education contained in that policy and currently used by the Department Of Education:

"Shared education means the organisation and delivery of education so that it:

- meets the needs of, and provides for the education together of learners from all Section 75 categories and socio-economic status
- involves schools and other education providers of differing ownership, sectoral identity and ethos, management type or governance arrangements
- delivers educational benefits to learners, promotes the efficient and effective use of resources, and promotes equality of opportunity, good relations, equality of identity, respect for diversity and community cohesion."

Instead the Bill simply stipulates that young people of different beliefs and from different socio-economic backgrounds should be brought together. The Bill does not include any statutory requirement regarding time spent, activities experienced nor of outcomes

expected. If the core aim of the shared education Bill is to drive educational achievement, the lack of measurement or evaluation on the face of the Bill undermines this concept.

The definition of shared education in the Bill, significantly, stipulates “...education together of

- (a) those of different religious belief, including reasonable numbers of both Protestant and Roman Catholic children or young persons; **and** (b) those who are experiencing socio-economic deprivation and those who are not.”

Firstly, the phrase “reasonable numbers” whilst allowing for discretion on an individual case basis, is vague and open to various interpretations by potential participants.

In addition, the use of the word ‘and’ instead of ‘or’ restricts the opportunities for schools to share on a cross-community basis by demanding the inclusion of a socio-economic dimension. At the same time this demand in itself does not contribute to tackling educational underachievement.

The omission of integrated education from the Bill restricts the progress and success of shared education. Integrated schools educate young people side by side every day. They experience and learn to celebrate difference. *Sharing Works - a Policy for Shared Education* says ‘integrated education, which has already embraced a culture of diversity, is at the upper end of [a] continuum. Indeed, by supporting shared education, it is envisaged that a proportion of schools may move along the continuum to a more fully integrated model.’ Yet there is no mention of integrated education or of how this progress can be achieved (and measured) in the Bill.

We have too many schools, duplicating provision along segregated lines, which is a drain on the public purse. Shared education activities between schools does not address that issue, but is, rather, an add-on which will possibly incur additional costs in the future. Shared Education will be supported in the short term thanks to funding from a philanthropic donation. To look beyond this, it is necessary to investigate economically sustainable ways of bringing young people together. There must be a concern that sustaining shared education beyond its initial stage will impact on other aspects of the education budget.

Clause 2: Power to encourage and facilitate shared education

The Department of Education sponsors nine Non-Departmental Public Bodies but only three are listed in the Bill Clause 2 subsection (2). There is no mention of the Northern Ireland Council for Integrated Education, the organisation that the Department of Education cites as representing the discharge of part of its duty to “encourage and facilitate the development of integrated education”.

The Minister has committed to mainstreaming funding for shared education; the concern must be that other bodies such as NICIE and CnaG will not be able to access this funding as they will not be given the statutory power to support shared education projects.

Amendments

The IEF would encourage consideration of an amendment placing a duty on the Education Department and / or the Education Authority to help schools involved in sharing projects explore the possibility of moving along the continuum described in the *Sharing Works* policy. Adding this responsibility alongside a power to encourage and facilitate shared education ensures that any school wishing to explore integration as an option will be fully supported in doing so. The lack of responsibility and clear sign-posting at present is impeding schools from exploring models of integration. The amendments the IEF would like the Education Committee to consider are:

- The bodies listed in subsection (2)(a) may encourage and facilitate those participating in ‘shared education’ to explore in accordance with its duty defined in Article 64 and Article 68 of the Education and Reform (Northern Ireland) Order 1989 transformation to integrated status
- It is the duty of the Education Authority to encourage and facilitate those bodies listed in subsection (2)(a) to promote those participating in ‘shared education’ to explore progression from shared education to other integrated models of education

These amendments could be inserted at the end of Clause 2 (2) line 5 page 2.

New Clause: Integration strategy

3. (1) The Department of Education should adopt a strategy (integration strategy) setting out how to support progression of shared education and promote integrated models of education

(2) The strategy must in particular set out—

(a) what outcomes the Department of Education intends should be achieved by this strategy

(b) what actions the Department of Education will take to progress shared education to integrated models of education

There needs to be proper scrutiny of the Bill to ensure that it fully supports the shared education policy and provides a step forward to a more inclusive and shared future.