

**Northern Ireland Assembly Committee for Education  
Written Evidence on the Shared Education Bill**

The NASUWT's submission sets out the Union's views on the Shared Education Bill published on 2 November 2015.

The NASUWT is the largest union in Northern Ireland representing teachers and school leaders.

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## **Executive Summary**

- Shared education is an important means by which educational quality and equality can continue to be sustained and further progressed in Northern Ireland.
- Having set out its position on the value of promoting shared education, it is incumbent on the Department for Education (DE) to ensure that it develops a coherent and credible implementation strategy.
- It is therefore concerning that the Bill merely establishes a definition of shared education and confers obligations on the DE and other bodies to promote it.
- Without further details of DE's strategy in relation to shared education, it is unclear how these obligations would be discharged in practice.
- DE must set out further details of its intentions in this respect prior to enactment of the Bill to support more effective consideration of its potential implications.
- It is not clear why the definition of shared education endorsed by the Ministerial Advisory Group has not been incorporated into the Bill. DE should explain its reasons for departing from this definition before the Bill is enacted.

## **Introduction**

1. The NASUWT welcomes the opportunity to submit evidence to the Northern Ireland Assembly Committee for Education on the Shared Education Bill published on 2 November 2015.
2. The NASUWT's evidence seeks to place issues relating to the development of shared education policy into their appropriate recent context. It also sets out the Union's views on the key provisions contained within the Bill.

## **Background and context**

3. The NASUWT believes that the education system has a critical role to play in the promotion of social cohesion and the development of safe, just, inclusive and tolerant communities.
4. Alongside the important contribution made to building social cohesion by other key public and social services and institutions, the work of schools in creating high-quality educational opportunities for children and young people, celebrating diversity and difference and tackling inequality, discrimination, prejudice and bigotry, must be recognised in the development and implementation of public policy in these key areas.
5. The Department of Education is right to recognise that public discourse on approaches to the achievement of these objectives has continued to focus on the potential contribution of shared and integrated education. The NASUWT notes in this regard that the Report of the Ministerial Advisory Group on advancing shared education, published in March 2013, identified shared education as an important means by which educational quality and equality could continue to be sustained and further progressed in Northern Ireland and advocated its continued emphasis in the development of

policy. Critically, the Ministerial Advisory Group assessed the potential value of shared education not only in terms of the religious beliefs of pupils, parents and wider communities but also in respect of their socioeconomic status, the extent to which they encounter social exclusion or marginalisation and the special and additional learning needs of children and young people. The NASUWT therefore welcomes the fact that this broader conceptualisation of shared education has been noted in the development of policy in this area although specific comments in relation to the definition set out in the Bill are considered elsewhere in this submission,

6. The NASUWT further notes that in October 2013, the Minister for Education, after a period of reflection, accepted the recommendations set out in the Report and sought to encourage a public debate on how best to advance shared education.
7. The NASUWT acknowledges and respects the right of the Minister to identify shared education as a policy priority in light of the recommendations of the Ministerial Advisory Group and recognises that advancing shared education was highlighted as a key objective in the Northern Ireland Executive's Programme for Government.
8. As a trade union committed to organising teachers and school leaders on a non-sectarian basis and to maintaining a genuinely inclusive and world-class education system that meets the needs and interests of all children and young people, the NASUWT takes a particular interest in those areas of the Executive's work related to the promotion of equality, diversity and high standards of provision in all schools.
9. Having set out its position on the value of promoting shared education, it is incumbent on DE to ensure that it develops a coherent and credible

strategy that recognises Northern Ireland distinctive economic and social context.

10. However, the NASUWT notes that the Bill merely establishes a definition of shared education and confers obligations on DE and other bodies to promote it. The Union is concerned that without further details of DE's strategy in relation to shared education, it is not possible to anticipate how these obligations would be discharged in practice.
11. The introduction of a statutory duty in respect of the promotion of shared education prior to the development of a clear and coherent implementation framework would lead to the imposition of duties on DE, schools and other public bodies, including the Education Authority, that they may not be in a position to undertake effectively. As the NASUWT has made clear to the Committee previously, it is not clear that DE's proposed approach to the development of shared education would secure such a framework in practice. It would, therefore, be inappropriate to introduce a statutory duty on the basis proposed by DE until steps have been taken to develop a clear and coherent implementation plan.
12. It cannot be acceptable for provisions to be introduced into law on this basis. The NASUWT is clear that DE must set out further details of its intentions in this respect to support more effective consideration of the Bill.
13. The basis upon which the NASUWT believes a system-wide strategy for shared education should be established was set out in the evidence submitted in October 2014 to the Committee in its Inquiry into Integrated and Shared Education. These issues remain substantially unaddressed and it is important that further consideration is given to them before the Bill is progressed.

### **The definition, nature and promotion of shared and integrated education**

14. The NASUWT is concerned that consideration of the merits or otherwise of shared education has often been attempted without a commonly recognised working definition. Without clarity of definition, potential policy options cannot be developed or evaluated on a meaningful basis.

15. The Union notes the support given by the Ministerial Advisory Group to the definition of shared education in the remit given to it by DE:

*‘Shared education involves two or more schools or other educational institutions from different sectors working in collaboration with the aim of delivering educational benefits to learners, promoting the efficient and effective use of resources, and promoting equality of opportunity, good relations, equality of identity, respect for diversity and community cohesion.’*

16. While debates about the nature of shared education are likely to remain contested, the NASUWT believes that this definition represented a viable and potentially helpful starting point from which to evaluate the nature of shared education and its implications for the education system in Northern Ireland. It should, therefore, be adopted as the basis for the development of future policy in this area.

17. Given the acceptance by the Minister and the Ministerial Advisory Group of this definition of shared education, it is not clear why it has not been incorporated into the draft shared education Bill published by DE. It is, therefore, important that DE sets out its reasons for departing from the definition of shared education contained within its remit to the Ministerial Advisory Group before establishing shared education on a statutory basis.

18. The NASUWT is also concerned that the introduction of a statutory duty in respect of the promotion of shared education prior to the development of a clear and coherent implementation framework would lead to the imposition of duties on DE, schools and other public bodies, including the Education

Authority, that they may not be in a position to discharge effectively. As the NASUWT has made clear to the Committee previously, it is not clear that DE's proposed approach to shared education would secure such a framework in practice. It would, therefore, be inappropriate to introduce a statutory duty on the basis proposed by DE until steps have been taken to develop a clear and coherent implementation plan.