

Statement from Oakgrove Integrated Primary School Parents Group in response to the Shared Education Bill.

The proposed Shared Education Bill can give children the opportunity to learn from and with those who come from different backgrounds but it does not set out a vision or framework to show how shared education can progress a shared future for Northern Ireland.

The short four-clause Bill has encapsulated the definition of shared education into a few brief lines. There have been a number of definitions of shared education from different organisations and the department itself over the past number of years which have been more inclusive and robust than the one purposed to be enshrined in legislation.

Integrated education is the highest form of sharing; integrated schools educate our young people side by side every day, they experience and learn to celebrate difference. In “Sharing Works – a Policy for Shared Education” it says, ‘integrated education, which has already embraced a culture of diversity, is at the upper end of the 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 not mention of integrated education or how this movement can be achieved in the Bill.

The integrated education movement would like to see the inclusion of a new clause or amendments putting a duty on the Education Department or Education Authority to help schools involved in sharing projects explore the possibility of moving up the continuum. Putting this responsibility on those who will have a power to encourage and facilitate shared education creates a robust mechanism to ensure that any school who wishes 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 in exploring models of integration.

As parents we would like to see this important Bill shaped to ensure that Shared Education works to the maximum advantage of Northern Ireland’s children and young people. We are confident that the vast majority of the population wants a truly shared future, and we deserve legislation which genuinely moves us forward to achieve that.

Oakgrove IPS
Parents Group Chairperson
Leah McCarron