



## **Transferor Representatives' Council submission to the Northern Ireland Assembly Committee for Education on the Shared Education Bill**

November 2015

The Transferor Representatives' Council (TRC) welcomes the opportunity to comment on the Shared Education Bill.

The three Churches represented by the TRC – the Church of Ireland, Presbyterian Church in Ireland and Methodist Church in Ireland – have each passed resolutions of strong support for the concept of shared education at their highest decision-making bodies. The TRC believes that within shared education there is the potential for much good in terms of educational outcomes, efficient and effective use of resources, and the promotion of good relations and community cohesion.

### **Comments on the Bill**

#### *Clause 1*

The TRC is concerned about the definition of shared education contained within Clause 1 of the Bill. The TRC believes strongly that sharing should provide the opportunity for those of different religious beliefs to share educational experiences, and that this will involve schools of different ownership and sectoral identity. In Northern Ireland, the primary focus should be on enabling those from Protestant and Roman Catholic backgrounds to learn together. We also recognise the need to address socio-economic disadvantage in education. We have been and will continue to be supportive of Departmental programmes and initiatives that are designed to do this. However, the inclusion of socio-economic factors in the definition of shared education has the potential to limit the effectiveness of its primary aim stated above.

This concern is well illustrated by the effect of the wording of subsections (2)(a) and (b) of Clause 1, particularly the use of the word 'and' at the end of Subsection (2)(a). We note the Education Minister's comments during the Second Stage of the Shared Education Bill on 10<sup>th</sup> November 2015, when he said:

*The [Education Committee] Chair also raised the issue of whether, under this definition, children with different socio-economic levels may qualify for shared education if they all come from the one religion. That will not be the case because the legislation is quite clear that shared education is the educating together of those of different religious belief **and** socio-economic deprivation, **so there will have to be a cross-community element.** [emphasis added]*



It follows that there must also be a socio-economic element in any proposal, i.e. projects by schools or other educational institutions involving those of different religious beliefs but of largely similar socio-economic backgrounds will not meet the definition of shared education. Our concern, therefore, is that the definition of shared education proposed in the Bill significantly narrows the potential for sharing.

As we stated in our submission in March 2015 to the Department's consultation on a shared education policy, the TRC prefers the definition proposed by the Ministerial Advisory Group on shared education which reported in 2013. It endorsed a definition of shared education that,

'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'.

### *Clause 2*

The TRC notes that Clause 2 of the Bill contains no reference to the role of Sectoral Support Bodies in shared education. We believe that there is a key role for Sectoral Support Bodies to encourage and promote the potential of shared education by close working with other Sectoral Bodies.

The Controlled Schools Support Council, for example, has within its ministerial remit a duty to build cooperation and engage with other sectors in matters of mutual interest, including the promotion of tolerance and understanding. The TRC believes that Sectoral Support Bodies should be referenced in Clause 2 with other bodies that may encourage and facilitate shared education, or included by reference in a separate clause or subclause.

It is vitally important that the bodies supporting schools are formally recognised as having a role in supporting and encouraging shared education. Considering the proposed aim and definition of shared education, it would be unfortunate if the body supporting controlled schools is not referenced, whilst the body supporting Catholic maintained schools is clearly included in the legislation.

The TRC would also welcome clarification from the Department on why the bodies listed under Clause 2 are authorised to 'encourage and facilitate' but not promote shared education, given that the Education Authority is required to do all three under the Education Act (Northern Ireland) 2014.



**Transferor Representatives' Council**

*Chair: Rt Revd K Good*

*Vice-Chair: Miss SR Rainey*

*Secretary: Dr P J Hamill*

*Contact address:*

*Church of Ireland House*

*61-67 Donegall St*

*Belfast*

*BT1 2QH*

*Contact – Secretary Tel: 028 9082 8860 [edunorth@ireland.anglican.org](mailto:edunorth@ireland.anglican.org)*