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Planning school provision

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This Research Paper considers approaches to school planning in other jurisdictions, including approaches to rationalising schools where appropriate. It also briefly examines cultural diversity in school planning, and considers the issue of parental choice in education.

Key Points

- In September 2011 the Minister for Education announced plans to take forward area planning based on a viability audit of schools;
- School planning in England, Scotland and Wales is conducted by local authorities; in Ireland, the Department of Education and Skills, patron bodies and local authorities each play a role in planning provision;
- Where school reorganisation or rationalisation is planned, a range of criteria tend to be set out to help inform decision-making;
- In addition, England and Scotland have introduced legislation aiming to help protect rural schools by requiring authorities to consider additional criteria;
- Models for reshaping education to take account of cultural diversity in other countries have met with mixed success, however the literature highlights curricular and cultural methods of incorporating diversity in schools;
- Legislation underpins parents' rights to express a preference over which school their child attends, however this is not an absolute right: this approach is broadly in line with that of many other countries;
- The literature is not conclusive on the impacts of parental choice, however some argue that it can increase competition between schools and drive up standards;
- However, the evidence suggests that better educated and better-off parents are more likely to avail of opportunities for choice: it has been suggested that this can have the effect of widening inequality;
- These findings highlight a number of areas, such as:
 - The review of small schools underway in Ireland, particularly its exploration of the advantages, disadvantages and costs relating to school size;
 - The additional protections introduced in England and Scotland for rural schools (e.g. the requirement to consider effects on the local community);
 - The approach in Scotland whereby one of the factors to be considered in school closures is whether there is potential for the release of resources, capital or revenue for the benefit of the community;
 - The Welsh policy requiring authorities to consider the balance of provision for proposals to close schools with a designated religious character;
 - In the event of restructuring across religious denominations, what measures are planned to incorporate different cultures in schools; and
 - How ongoing provision will be planned when ESA is established.

Executive Summary

Introduction

The Bain Review in 2006 highlighted a lack of coordination between sectors on planning and development matters, and called for the introduction of area-based planning to take account of the overall projected need for provision in an area. Area planning was linked to the establishment of the Education and Skills Authority (ESA) and was not implemented in practice.

In September 2011 the Minister for Education announced plans to take forward area planning, partly based on a viability audit of schools. This paper provides an overview of approaches to planning school provision in other jurisdictions, and briefly explores cultural diversity in school planning and the issue of parental choice in school provision.

School planning in other jurisdictions

School planning in England, Scotland and Wales is conducted by local authorities. In Ireland, the Department of Education and Skills, patron bodies and local authorities each play a role in planning school provision. However, a historical reliance on religious organisations in planning school provision has raised questions on the extent of strategic planning and policy coordination happening in practice in Ireland.

Table 1: Overview of approaches to school planning in other jurisdictions

	Context	Features
England	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Continuing rise in birth rate • Shortfall in school places 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Local authorities required to promote diversity and choice in school provision and consider parental representations • In the case of rural school closures, the relevant body is required to consider a number of factors (such as the effect on community; transport and possible alternatives)
Scotland	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Pupil enrolments to decrease until 2015, then peak in 2022 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Local authorities must develop a School Estate Management plan (for strategic management) • Guidance sets out a range of factors that should be considered in school planning and closures (such as educational advantages, transport, and ‘significant under-occupancy’) • This also includes the potential to release resources, capital or revenue for the benefit of the community • Guidance acknowledges the ‘importance of a school... to rural communities’ and aims to help protect rural schools

	Context	Features
Wales	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Falling rolls and surplus school places, although this is not a uniform trend • Over 95,000 surplus places in schools 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Local authorities must develop plans on how they will organise schools within an area • Guidance highlights the principles that should underpin planning, including effects on education, accessibility, efficiency and cost effectiveness • Where there are ‘significant’ levels of surplus places, local authorities should make proposals for school reorganisation: ‘significant’ surplus is defined as 25% or more of a school’s capacity and at least 30 unfilled places • In regard to proposals to close schools with a designated religious character, implications for the balance of provision in schools must be taken into account
Ireland	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Period of demographic growth expected to continue over the short- to medium-term • High proportion of small primary schools 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A new model introduced in 2004 required collaboration between patron bodies, local authorities and the Department of Education and Skills in decision-making around new schools • Area Development Plans must be created to inform capital decisions in areas of rapid growth • A review of small schools is underway as a result of a recommendation in the 2009 <i>McCarthy Report</i> to amalgamate smaller primary schools with fewer than 50 pupils • The review includes examining research on optimal school size; assessing the location of small schools relative to other schools; identifying the level of costs and staffing resources associated with school size; and identifying outputs

School planning for diversity

Research internationally highlights approaches undertaken by planners in seeking to reshape education systems taking into account cultural diversity. Such research may be of interest in regard to plans to reshape the structure of education provision here, taking account of the largely denominationally-based approach to education.

Examples of this include ‘Bi-Lingual, Bi-National’ schools in Israel, in which Jewish and Arab children are educated together, with Arab and Jewish joint principals and equal numbers of Arab and Jewish staff. This approach has been found to be effective, although it is resource intensive and small in scale. A less effective example is the ‘Two

Schools Under One Roof' approach in Bosnia and Herzegovina, whereby children of two ethnic identities are taught in the same school building, but separately. This has been condemned by the international community as promoting ethnic segregation.

Beyond structural organisation, a UNESCO report states that curriculum, pedagogical practice and assessment and the school's culture and links to the community can play a role in incorporating different cultures within education.

Parental choice

A further issue relating to planning school provision concerns parental choice and demand. Legislation here underpins parents' right to express a preference for the type of education their children avail of. However this right is not absolute, and Boards of Governors are required to admit all pupils only where the number of applicants does not exceed the school's approved admissions number. This approach is broadly in line with that of many other countries.

Giving parents the right to choose which school their child attends is a popular approach with policy-makers. Its reported potential benefits include increasing competition between schools which may lead to higher standards; and allowing better matching of pupils according to personal tastes and pedagogical needs.

However parental choice policies can be controversial. Research has shown that better educated and better-off parents are more likely to avail of opportunities for school choice. This may have the effect of widening inequality by increasing the gap between sought-after and other schools.

Conclusion

These findings in this paper highlight a number of areas, such as:

- The review of small schools underway in Ireland, particularly its exploration of the advantages, disadvantages and costs relating to school size;
- The additional protections introduced in England and Scotland for rural schools (such as the requirement to consider the effect on the local community);
- The approach in Scotland whereby one of the factors to be considered in school closures is whether there is potential for the release of resources, capital or revenue for the benefit of the community;
- The policy in Wales requiring authorities to consider implications for the balance of provision for proposals to close schools with a designated religious character;
- In the event of restructuring across religious denominations here, what measures are planned in regard to incorporating different cultures within schools;
- How provision will be planned on an ongoing basis when ESA is established.

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1 Context

The *Bain Review* in 2006 set out a number of weaknesses in arrangements for planning the schools estate, including a lack of coordination and consistency and differences between sectors regarding how planning and development matters are resourced. In light of this, it recommended the introduction of area-based planning in order to take account of the overall projected need for provision in an area.¹

The Department's policy on sustainable schools stated that area-based planning would be rolled out in 2008, and that its aim was to anticipate the educational needs in an area and plan to meet the needs effectively through an estate of sustainable facilities.² However, area planning was intended to come into effect with the establishment of the Education and Skills Authority (ESA), and as ESA has not yet been established, full area planning has not happened in practice.

On the 26th September 2011, the Minister for Education, John O'Dowd MLA, stated that there is a need to take forward strategic planning on an area basis. As a precursor, the Education and Library Boards (ELBs) and the Council for Catholic Maintained Schools (CCMS), working with other sectors, are undertaking a viability audit of all schools. This audit in part aims to support the development of a detailed area profile which will contribute to the area planning process.³

This Research Paper considers approaches to school planning in other jurisdictions, namely England, Scotland, Wales and Ireland, including approaches to rationalising schools where appropriate. It also briefly examines cultural diversity in school planning, and considers the issue of parental choice in education, providing examples of approaches to this in other jurisdictions.

Terms of reference for area planning in NI

The Department of Education's (the Department's) area planning Terms of Reference state that '*progress on reshaping the structure and pattern of education provision cannot be delayed.*' It states that in delivering an area plan the ELBs and CCMS, working with other sectors, should seek to fulfil the following aims and objectives:

- Ensure a network of sustainable schools, within reasonable travelling distance for pupils and capable of delivering effectively the revised curriculum and, in post-primary schools, the Entitlement Framework;
- Identify and meet the needs of all children and young people in the area;
- Enhance the quality of provision and raise standards;
- Reduce the number of surplus places;

¹ Bain, G. (2006) *Schools for the Future: Funding, Strategy, Sharing* Bangor: Department of Education

² Department of Education (2009) *Schools for the Future: A Policy for Sustainable Schools* Bangor: DE

³ *Area planning* [online] Available at: <http://www.deni.gov.uk/index/85-schools/area-planning.htm>

- Reduce duplication of provision;
- Identify realistic, innovative and creative solutions to address need, including opportunities for shared schooling on a cross-sectoral basis;
- Maximise the use and sharing of the existing schools estate;
- Identify potential for co-location of mainstream and special schools;
- Take full account of appropriate and relevant FE Sector provision for 14-19 year olds; and
- Explore opportunities for cross-border planning.

2 Approaches to school planning in other jurisdictions

The following paragraphs provide an overview of the approaches to school planning in England, Scotland, Wales and Ireland. They also provide examples of plans or measures taken to reorganise or restructure provision in these jurisdictions as appropriate.

England

Context

In contrast to Northern Ireland, England is facing a shortfall in school places as a result of a continued rise in the birth rate. Currently, the issue is most apparent at primary level, however it will affect post-primary provision in future years.⁴ The Government has stated that the creation and development of state-funded schools is ‘strongly in the national interest’.⁵

School planning

Local authorities in England are responsible for ensuring that there are sufficient schools in their area to meet the needs of the population, and have responsibility for planning their section of the schools estate. Parents have the right to express a preference for a particular school, but there is no guarantee of a place if there are more children wanting to attend than places available.

The Education and Inspections Act 2006 requires local authorities to promote diversity and choice in their provision of schools, and to consider representations from parents

⁴ Financial Times: *English schools face shortfall of 200,000 places* [online] Available at: <http://www.ft.com/cms/s/0/63eb578e-3b93-11e1-a09a-00144feabdc0.html#axzz1jFhKHH9G>

⁵ Department for Communities and Local Government (2011) *Policy statement – planning for schools development*

about school provision in their area.⁶ The act also requires local authorities to publish proposals around the closure of local authority maintained schools.

Rural school closures

The Education and Inspections Act 2006 set out additional requirements around the closure of rural schools. In regard to rural primary schools, the legislation requires the relevant body to demonstrate that they have considered the following factors in developing their proposals;⁷

- The likely effect on the local community;
- The availability and cost of transport to other schools;
- Any increase in the use of motor vehicles which is likely to result and the likely effects of any such increase; and
- Any alternatives to the discontinuance of the school.

These requirements indicate that the case for closing a rural school must be carefully considered and be based on evidence of the potential impacts.

Scotland

Context

Pupil number projections suggest that school enrolments will decrease steadily from the current 670,511 until 2015, then rise to a peak of 684,000 in 2022.⁸

Local authorities in Scotland are required by law to ensure that there is adequate and efficient provision of school education in their area. As such, they can reorganise the schools estate in their area at any time, including through amalgamation and rationalisation. They are required to engage in a formal consultation process if they wish to bring about changes to their segment of the schools estate. The Schools (Consultation) (Scotland) Act 2010 aimed to ensure that the process used to make major changes to provision is robust, coherent, open and transparent.⁹

⁶ Administration and Governance at Local and/or Institutional Level [online] Available at: https://webgate.ec.europa.eu/fpfis/mwikis/eurydice/index.php/United-Kingdom-England:Administration_and_Governance_at_Local_and/or_Institutional_Level

⁷ The Education and Inspections Act 2006 [online] Available at: <http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2006/40/contents>

⁸ High Level Summary of Statistics Trend Last update: Monday, December 12, 2011 Pupil Numbers [online] Available at: <http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Topics/Statistics/Browse/School-Education/TrendPupilNumbers>

⁹ School reorganisation proposals [online] Available at: <http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Topics/Education/Schools/Buildings/changestoschoolestate>

Planning the schools estate

The Scottish Executive and the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities (COSLA) published a joint strategy for the schools estate in 2003, aiming to support the creation of a learning environment that is fit for purpose.¹⁰

The framework for the implementation of the *Schools Estate Strategy* includes the development of a School Estate Management plan by each local authority. This aims to help authorities identify needs, priorities and funding streams and to consider a range of issues that have an impact on the schools estate. The resulting plans are intended to act as strategic management tools, formed based on evidence and consultation.¹¹

Guidance from the Chartered Institute of Public Finance and Accountancy (CIPFA) states that councils had, in the past, not considered how their assets were used in a systematic manner.¹²

Local authorities are required to consider the relevant issues with regard to school planning. The guidance states that the 'mix and weight' of factors to be considered will vary in each case, but outlines a number of factors that could be considered:¹³

- **Educational advantages** (including how best to deliver a modern curriculum; access to facilities; and quality of the learning environment);
- **Travel distance and times** (including new patterns of home to school distances and travel times; the availability of transport; and impact of extra-curricular activities);
- **Future pupil and population projections** (using population, pupil and school roll projections);
- **Community planning and use;**
- **Rural sustainability and development;**
- **Urban communities and regeneration;**
- **Financial considerations** (including the cost of proposals and expected returns; considerations of cost-effectiveness over the long-term; and maintenance expenditure);
- **Other alternatives:** for example, whether buildings can be used differently or more imaginatively.

¹⁰ *School closure guidance* [online] Available at: <http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Topics/Education/Schools/Buildings/guidance>

¹¹ *School closure guidance* [online] Available at: <http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Topics/Education/Schools/Buildings/guidance>

¹² CIPFA (2008) *A guide to asset management and capital planning in local authorities*

¹³ *School closure guidance* [online] Available at: <http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Topics/Education/Schools/Buildings/guidance>

School closures

The guidance does not outline specific criteria for school sustainability. However, it does illustrate a number of possible reasons that may prompt a local authority to close a school. These include:¹⁴

- The school roll (which ‘may have fallen below what is optimal in terms of educational opportunity, choice, flexibility and social interactions for pupils’);
- Significant under-occupancy of the school buildings;
- Condition of the school buildings (which may be below acceptable standards and beyond economic repair)
- Potential for a ‘significant release of resources, capital or revenue’ that would benefit the community.

In regard to rural schools, the Schools (Consultation) (Scotland) Act 2010 introduced changes aiming to protect schools in rural areas, by requiring local authorities to explore:¹⁵

- Any viable alternative to closure;
- The likely effect on the local community if the school were to close; and
- The likely effect of different travelling arrangements occasioned by the closure.

Guidance on school closures by the Scottish Government states that the inclusion of these factors acknowledges ‘*the particular importance of a school to the more fragile and vulnerable rural and remote communities of Scotland.*’

Commission on the Delivery of Rural Education

The Scottish Government reports that this legislation has been interpreted differently by local authorities and Government. As a result, a Commission on the Delivery of Rural Education has been established, tasked with reviewing the legislation and its application. In addition, the Commission’s responsibilities include:¹⁶

- Examining how the delivery of rural education can best support attainment and outcomes and how this can be applied more widely;
- Making recommendations on how to reflect best practice in rural education;
- Examining the links between rural education and the support and development of rural communities and making recommendations on how these might be strengthened;

¹⁴ *School closure guidance* [online] Available at: <http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Topics/Education/Schools/Buildings/guidance>

¹⁵ *School reorganisation proposals* [online] Available at: <http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Topics/Education/Schools/Buildings/changestoschoolestate>

¹⁶ *Commission on the Delivery of Rural Education* [online] Available at: <http://www.scotland.gov.uk/About/CommissionRuralEducation>

- Examining and making recommendations on funding issues around rural education.

A voluntary moratorium until June 2012 has been agreed in order to allow the Commission 'to form a fair assessment of the closures process.'

Wales

Context

Wales is currently facing a similar challenge to Northern Ireland in terms of falling rolls and resulting surplus places in schools in many areas. Recent figures suggest that there are over 95,000 unfilled school places (18% of total pupil number) across Wales. However, this trend is not uniform: for example there is evidence of population increases resulting from inward migration in some areas.¹⁷

Local authorities have responsibility for planning their segment of the schools estate and for providing school places to meet the needs of their area.¹⁸ They have powers to make proposals to establish, alter, change the category of and close schools.¹⁹

School planning

Welsh Assembly Government methodologies are used by each local authority in Wales to calculate capacity in primary and post-primary schools, and this is then compared to the numbers of pupils on rolls to determine whether there is a surplus or oversubscription. Local authorities develop their own plans on how they will organise schools within an area.²⁰

Guidance issued in 2009 outlines the principles that should underpin the planning of school places by local authorities in Wales including:²¹

- The effect on the standard of education to be provided in the area;
- The effect on accessibility to schools, particularly in rural areas;
- The extent to which proposals will improve efficiency and the match between the number and location of school places and demand;
- The cost effectiveness of proposals in relation to the capital and recurring costs;
- The views of those most directly affected, including children, parents and other schools.

¹⁷ *School organisation and pupil place planning* [online] Available at: <http://www.wlga.gov.uk/english/school-organisation-and-pupil-place-planning/>

¹⁸ Welsh Assembly Government (2009) *School organisation proposals* Cardiff: Department for Children, Education, Lifelong Learning and Skills

¹⁹ Welsh Government (2011) *School Standards and Organisation (Wales) Bill: White Paper* Cardiff

²⁰ *School organisation and pupil place planning* [online] Available at: <http://www.wlga.gov.uk/english/school-organisation-and-pupil-place-planning/>

²¹ Welsh Assembly Government (2009) *School organisation proposals* Cardiff: Department for Children, Education, Lifelong Learning and Skills

In terms of process, the evidence suggests that local authorities use a variety of methods in planning for school places, but broadly undertake the following activities:²²

- **Collecting data** (including the size and condition of schools within the area);
- **Projecting pupil numbers** (including information on birth rates, birth rates and immigration);
- **Looking at where pupils live** (including looking at information on housing developments);
- **Assessing parental choice**; and
- **Assessing current school capacity.**

Asset management plans

Local authorities in Wales are required to prepare Education Service Asset Management Plans detailing the school property they hold or maintain. The plans should enable value for money issues to be addressed, accountable decisions to be made and service improvements to be delivered. The guidance states that local authorities should plan strategically using asset management plans and by assessing demand for places.²³

Criteria for sustainability

Guidance from the Welsh Assembly Government states that where there are deemed to be excessive numbers of surplus school places, local authorities should make proposals for school reorganisation, particularly where there are individual schools that:²⁴

- Have 'significant' levels of excess places. 'Significant' surplus is defined as 25% or more of a school's capacity, and at least 30 unfilled places;
- Require significant investment; or
- Have a catchment area that is unlikely to make the school sustainable in the future in terms of pupil numbers.

Dealing with surplus places

The guidance states that local authorities should make sure that an appropriate number of schools are retained within an area, but that there should be no more than 10% surplus places across a local authority. However, it also notes that there is no presumption in favour of or against the closure of any type of school, and that any case

²² Welsh Local Government Association (2008) *Planning School Places* Cardiff: WLGA

²³ Welsh Assembly Government (2009) *School organisation proposals* Cardiff: Department for Children, Education, Lifelong Learning and Skills

²⁴ Welsh Assembly Government (2009) *School organisation proposals* Cardiff: Department for Children, Education, Lifelong Learning and Skills

for closure *'must be robust and in the best interests of educational provision in the area'*.

In addition to the principles that should underpin the planning of school places outlined on the previous page, the guidance sets out a number of additional matters that must be considered when considering closure. These include the effect on journeys to school and:²⁵

- Whether savings can be made or services provided cost effectively to the community by using school premises for another purpose;
- Any capital investment that would be required to bring premises up to a suitable standard for the delivery of the curriculum;
- Whether alternatives such as a federation or multi-site school would be more appropriate;
- Whether the school provides education of a good standard compared with others that might be alternative schools.

With regard to proposals to close schools with a designated religious character, the guidance states that the implications for the balance of provision in schools must be taken into account. It notes that in some cases it will not be cost effective to maintain schools with and without a religious designation, but that proposals must be dealt with in a sensitive manner and that they should reflect the balance of demand, where possible.²⁶

Ireland

Context

Irish schools are currently experiencing a period of demographic growth which is expected to continue over the short- to medium- term. At the same time, the Government is facing significant financial constraints which have an impact on its ability to meet these needs.²⁷

The sector has a high proportion of primary schools in relation to Ireland's population, and a high proportion of small primary schools. This is in part due to the low population densities in some areas and a historical trend of declining enrolments throughout the 1990s.²⁸ Almost half of all schools enrol fewer than 100 pupils. Current plans to rationalise the system focus on primary school size.²⁹

²⁵ Welsh Assembly Government (2009) *School organisation proposals* Cardiff: Department for Children, Education, Lifelong Learning and Skills

²⁶ Welsh Assembly Government (2009) *School organisation proposals* Cardiff: Department for Children, Education, Lifelong Learning and Skills

²⁷ Department of Education and Skills *Small Primary Schools Value for Money Review*

²⁸ Walsh (2010) *Strategic Spatial Planning and the Provision of Schools: A Case Study of Cross-Sectoral Policy Coordination in the Dublin City Region* Maynooth: National Institute for Regional and Spatial Awareness

²⁹ Department of Education and Skills *Small Primary Schools Value for Money Review*

School planning

Primary schools and many post-primary schools in Ireland are locally owned and managed. Almost all primary schools are denominationally owned and controlled and the board of management has responsibility for their management.³⁰

Before 1999, patron bodies were required to acquire sites for schools. In 1999 it was announced that the Department of Education and Skills would take responsibility for the purchase of sites for schools, leading to a more direct role in the planning of school provision. Due to the historical reliance on religious denominations to provide schools, research suggests there has been inadequate strategic planning and policy coordination by the Department of Education and Skills and local authorities. It also points to planning and provision of schools on the basis of vocal demands from parents, rather than through a sector-led planning and development approach.³¹

A new model for school planning was announced in 2004 requiring collaboration between patron bodies, local authorities and the Department of Education and Skills and transparent consultation to inform decision-making around new schools. The model involved the development of 'Area Development Plans', aiming to inform capital decisions in areas of rapid growth.³²

In 2008 a Code of Practice on Provision of Schools and the Planning System was published, outlining best practice approaches to be followed by planning authorities in planning capital investment. In terms of forecasting future demand, the Code states that the Department of Education and Skills will consider the anticipated increase in the overall and school populations; the current school population; and the number of classrooms required in total.³³

Currently, a range of patron and public bodies have responsibility for planning provision of primary schools:

- Department of Education and Skills has responsibility for education policy, the provision of capital grants, recognition of new schools and school building;
- School patron bodies are responsible for the ownership and management of schools, school admission policies, the initial establishment of new schools and demonstration of the viability of new schools;
- Local authorities: limited role in planning new schools and identifying sites.

³⁰ Organisation and Governance [online] Available at:

https://webgate.ec.europa.eu/fpfis/mwikis/eurydice/index.php/Ireland:Organisation_and_Governance

³¹ Walsh (2010) *Strategic Spatial Planning and the Provision of Schools: A Case Study of Cross-Sectoral Policy Coordination in the Dublin City Region* Maynooth: National Institute for Regional and Spatial Awareness

³² Walsh (2010) *Strategic Spatial Planning and the Provision of Schools: A Case Study of Cross-Sectoral Policy Coordination in the Dublin City Region* Maynooth: National Institute for Regional and Spatial Awareness

³³ Environment, Heritage and Local Government (2008) *The Provision of Schools and the Planning System*

Review of small schools

The 2009 McCarthy *Report of the Special Group on Public Service Numbers and Expenditure Programmes* made a series of recommendations for reducing spending and public service numbers across Government Departments. The report highlighted the high proportion of small schools with five or fewer teachers (47% of 3,200 primary schools).³⁴

Among the recommendations for education was rationalisation of the schools estate, in particular the amalgamation of smaller primary schools with fewer than 50 pupils. The report states that amalgamating such schools would result in reductions in teacher numbers and in other support staff.³⁵

A value for money review of small primary schools with fewer than 50 pupils was subsequently launched by the Department of Education and Skills aiming to assess the efficiency, effectiveness and examine the value for money of such schools. Its key terms of reference include:³⁶

- Identify the relevant objectives of policy on primary school provision and examine their current validity, particularly in regard to small schools (including categorising primary provision in terms of school size; examining research on optimal school size and assessing the locations of small schools relative to other schools);
- Define the relevant outputs associated with primary provision and identify the level and trend of these outputs;
- Examine the extent to which the objectives of primary school provision have been achieved;
- Identify the level and trend of costs and staffing resources associated with school size;
- Examine the scope for alternative policy or organisational approaches to improve effectiveness and efficiency in terms of school size and identify potential implications of such alternative arrangements.

In a Dáil Éireann Debate on 21st June 2011, the Minister for Education, Ruairí Quinn TD, stated that the review aims to gather evidence and that no particular outcome is sought as a result.³⁷

³⁴ Special Group on Public Service Numbers and Expenditure Programmes (2009) *Volume 1 Report* Dublin: Government Publications

³⁵ Special Group on Public Service Numbers and Expenditure Programmes (2009) *Volume 2 Report* Dublin: Government Publications

³⁶ Department of Education and Skills *Small Primary Schools Value for Money Review*

³⁷ Written Answers - Schools Amalgamation [online] Available at: <http://debates.oireachtas.ie/dail/2011/06/21/00102.asp>

3 Approaches to planning for diversity

Research published by UNESCO discusses the approaches undertaken by planners internationally in seeking to shape education systems that facilitate equality, participation and cultural maintenance, while supporting social cohesion. The findings may be of interest in regard to planning and reshaping the schools system here as a result of the Department's viability audit and area-based planning, taking account of the different cultural backgrounds of pupils.³⁸

The report describes three main policy approaches to incorporating diversity that have been undertaken internationally:³⁹

- **Assimilationist model** (or integration model): envisages that minorities are incorporated fully into society through a process of change in which individuals abandon their distinctive linguistic, cultural and social characteristics;
- **Differentialist model:** eliminating or minimising contact among ethnic groups, sometimes including the development of parallel institutions to cater for the educational or health needs of the minority; and
- **Multiculturalist model:** accepts cultural and social distinctiveness, envisaging that groups can be fully incorporated without losing their distinctiveness.

The UNESCO report describes the differentialist model as 'unrealistic' and the assimilationist model as 'flawed.' With regard to the multiculturalist model, it indicates that state institutions may need to be modified to provide equity for those of different cultural backgrounds, or that this approach may require the support of parallel institutions.

International Examples of planning for diversity

The focus of integration in many other contexts has been in relation to ethnicity.⁴⁰ Northern Ireland's experience with models of integrating education contexts dominates the literature on shared education, indeed models here are being used to inform integration processes in other divided societies.⁴¹

The following are international examples of the experiences of shaping the approach to educating children of different identities in divided societies.

³⁸ UNESCO: International Institute for Educational Planning (2008) *Planning for cultural diversity* United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation

³⁹ UNESCO: International Institute for Educational Planning (2008) *Planning for cultural diversity* United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation

⁴⁰ McAleavey, G., Donegan, T. and O'Hagan, C. (2009) 'Visioning New Models of Integrated and Shared Schooling in Northern Ireland' in *European Journal of Education*, 44:4, p.543.

⁴¹ For example, the School of Education at Queen's University Belfast is engaged in a UNICEF project to develop integrated education in Macedonia.

'Two Schools Under One Roof' and bussing: Bosnia and Herzegovina

The 'Two Schools Under One Roof' approach involves children of two ethnic identities being taught in the same school building, but being kept largely separate. The children are taught in different languages and through different curricula.⁴² In addition, the schools have separate legal identities, administrations, governance arrangements and teachers' rooms.⁴³

While this approach has provision for two identities in the same building, this is sometimes carried out in shifts; and in other schools at the same time but with different entrances. This approach remains controversial, being 'roundly condemned' by the international community for supporting the segregation of pupils along ethnic lines.⁴⁴

From 2003 stakeholders were required to carry out administrative unification of such schools. However, unification has been met with resistance from some parents, staff and authorities, and does not necessarily lead to integration of the students (who are still taught in separate classes, using separate curricula and teachers belonging to their own nationality).⁴⁵

'Bussing' is another approach that has been undertaken, whereby returnee parents do not want to send their children to a school with children of a different ethnic background. In order to avoid assimilation, children are bussed across regional boundaries to enable them to attend a school serving their own ethnic group.⁴⁶

Bi-Lingual, Bi-National Schools: Israel

A small number of joint Arab-Jewish schools have developed in Israel. These aim to educate children from Arab and Jewish backgrounds together, and have roughly equal numbers of Arab and Jewish pupils, Arab and Jewish joint principals, equal numbers of Arab and Jewish staff, a balance of Arab and Jewish parent governors and bi-lingual Hebrew and Arabic lessons.⁴⁷

The experiment, while not without its problems, has demonstrated that sustained inter-group contact can have a positive impact.⁴⁸ The bilingual model has been shown to be effective; however it is small in scale and resource intensive.

⁴² Magill, C. (2010) *Education and Fragility in Bosnia and Herzegovina*, Coleraine: University of Ulster

⁴³ Bozic, G. (2006, 'Re-educating the Hearts of Bosnian Students: An essay on Some Aspects of Education in Bosnia and Herzegovina' in *East European Politics and Societies*, 20, pp.328-334

⁴⁴ Magill, C. (2010) *Education and Fragility in Bosnia and Herzegovina*, Coleraine: University of Ulster

⁴⁵ Bozic, G. (2006) 'Re-educating the Hearts of Bosnian Students: An essay on Some Aspects of Education in Bosnia and Herzegovina' in *East European Politics and Societies*, 20, pp.328-334

⁴⁶ Magill, C. (2010) *Education and Fragility in Bosnia and Herzegovina*, Coleraine: University of Ulster

⁴⁷ Beckerman, Z. and Horeczyk, G. (2004) 'Arab-Jewish Bilingual Coeducation in Israel: A Long-Term Approach to Intergroup Conflict Resolution' in *Journal of Social Issues*, 60: 2, 389-404.

⁴⁸ Hughes, J. (2007) 'Mediating and Moderating Effects of Inter-group Contact' in *Journal of Ethnicity and Migration Studies*, 33:3, 419-437.

Voluntary De-Segregation: South Africa

In the transition from the Apartheid regime in South Africa, schools were obliged to have an open admissions policy, but there was no enforced de-segregation. Separate education systems were amalgamated at the national level, but a semi-federalised compromise allowed for separate provincial education systems and previously white schools were given quasi-independent status to preserve Afrikaner culture and language.⁴⁹

However, at the time of transition there had already been a trend of declining pupil numbers in white schools leading to surplus places and school closures, so from 1988, when legally allowed to do so, some schools voluntarily opted to admit pupils of other identities. Criticisms of the post-Apartheid education system have suggested that racial divisions have been replaced by class divisions.⁵⁰

Today, most disadvantaged black pupils attend deprived and often poorly equipped schools. Their white counterparts and a small number of black children from better-off backgrounds attend the former all-white “Model C” state schools or private schools, which have much higher standards of attainment.⁵¹

Other approaches

The report states that there are debates internationally on how best to meet the needs of students from diverse cultural backgrounds, and raises concerns around the potential inflexibility of centralised schools systems due to their focus on homogeneity. However, it notes that this approach can be appropriate where resources are limited.⁵²

One approach described is the use of ‘zoning’, whereby students are required to attend a school located in their residential area or zone. However, as populations are often grouped according to social class or background, this mechanism has been found to be only partially successful in supporting cultural diversity in schools. Nonetheless, the UNESCO report finds that removing ‘zoning’ leads to a decrease in socio-cultural diversity, as better educated and better off families are more likely to avail of school choice, as discussed in the subsequent section.

Beyond structural organisation, UNESCO suggests that curriculum, pedagogical practice and assessment and the school’s culture and relations with the community can play a role in incorporating different cultures in education.

⁴⁹ N’zimande, B. and Mathieson, S. (2000) ‘Educational Transformation in South Africa’s Transition to Democracy’ in Mebratu, T., Crossley, M. and Johnson, D. (eds), *Globalisation, Educational Transformation and Societies in Transition*, Oxford: Symposium, pp.111-119.

⁵⁰ Lemon, A. (1994) ‘Educational De-Segregation’ in John Brewer (ed), *Restructuring South Africa*, Houndmills: Macmillan, pp.94, 106.

⁵¹ The Economist (2011) *E is for Education* [online] Available at: <http://www.economist.com/node/17913496>

⁵² UNESCO: International Institute for Educational Planning (2008) *Planning for cultural diversity* United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation

4 Parental choice

The Education (Northern Ireland) Order 1997 underpins parents' rights to express a preference for the type of education their children avail of; however this right is not absolute. Under open enrolment, the Board of Governors is required to admit all pupils whose parents have expressed a preference for their children to be educated at the school, but only where the number of applicants does not exceed the schools' approved admissions number.⁵³

This approach appears to be broadly in line with that of many other countries. Research from the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) finds that parental choice in education has become '*a more-or-less permanent feature of education systems*' internationally.⁵⁴

This research has found that parents often have an entitlement to choose which school their child attends, particularly in regard to institutions outside the typical catchment area. However, this is generally not an 'absolute freedom', and schools retain the ability to choose which children to accept.⁵⁵

Benefits and challenges of parental choice

Parental choice is often popular with policy-makers, and there are two main arguments in support of this approach:⁵⁶

- More choice may allow better matching of pupils with schools according to personal tastes and pedagogical needs; and
- Increasing competition between schools may lead to higher standards, as schools must adapt to meet parental demand for quality.

However, policies around parental demand and choice can be controversial. Research from OECD finds that better educated and better-off parents are more likely to avail of opportunities for choice and to send their children to the 'best' school they can find.⁵⁷

The report notes that this can have the effect of widening inequality by increasing the gap between sought-after schools and other schools. Indeed, 'failing' schools are often attended by pupils from the most disadvantaged backgrounds. Other arguments in favour of neighbourhood-based schooling rather include the distances pupils need to travel to get to school and issues around pupil turnover.⁵⁸ Overall, there is no

⁵³ *Pupil admissions* [online] Available at: http://www.deni.gov.uk/index/85-schools/5-school-management/79-school-governors_pg/schools_79_governor-roles-and-responsibilities_pg/schools_79_chapter-10-pupil-admissions_pg.htm#compliance-with-parental-preference_alink

⁵⁴ OECD (2006) *Demand-Sensitive Schooling? Evidence and Issues* Paris: OECD

⁵⁵ OECD (2006) *Demand-Sensitive Schooling? Evidence and Issues* Paris: OECD

⁵⁶ Gibbons, S., Machin, S., Silva, O. (2007) 'The educational impact of parental choice and school competition' *Centrepiece* Winter 2006/07 pp. 6-9

⁵⁷ OECD (2006) *Demand-Sensitive Schooling? Evidence and Issues* Paris: OECD

⁵⁸ Gibbons, S., Machin, S., Silva, O. (2007) 'The educational impact of parental choice and school competition' *Centrepiece* Winter 2006/07 pp. 6-9

consensus in the literature on the effects of choice and competition on school performance.⁵⁹

Approaches elsewhere

The following paragraphs provide examples of approaches to parental choice in other countries.

Finland

While pupils are able to apply to a school other than the one assigned to them, the majority of pupils in Finland are admitted to their local school. The distribution of choice in Finland varies, with much greater choice available in larger cities than in small municipalities.⁶⁰

Denmark

Policies on school choice in Denmark have prompted much public debate. The notion of better-educated and better-off parents being more likely to avail of opportunities for choosing the best school is seen as being ‘at odds with Danish ideas about equity’. More than three quarters of municipalities in Denmark offer a choice between the district school and other schools within the municipality.⁶¹

Austria

Primary education in Austria is based on a ‘local matching model’ which gives each child access to a particular school, although a child may attend another school if accepted into it. As such, parental choice depends on the supply of accessible schools which is in turn related to population density.⁶²

Hungary

Schools are obliged to enrol any child of compulsory school age living in the district, and may only reject pupils living outside the district on the basis of insufficient capacity. Data from Hungary indicate that better educated parents are more likely to choose a school for reasons other than location.

5 Conclusion

Planning school provision is carried out by local authorities in England, Scotland and Wales, and by a range of bodies working together in Ireland. Where school reorganisation or rationalisation is planned, a range of criteria tend to be set out to help inform decision-making. In addition, England and Scotland have recently introduced

⁵⁹ Gibbons, S., Machin, S., Silva, O. (2007) ‘The educational impact of parental choice and school competition’ *Centrepiece* Winter 2006/07 pp. 6-9

⁶⁰ OECD (2006) *Demand-Sensitive Schooling? Evidence and Issues* Paris: OECD

⁶¹ OECD (2006) *Demand-Sensitive Schooling? Evidence and Issues* Paris: OECD

⁶² OECD (2006) *Demand-Sensitive Schooling? Evidence and Issues* Paris: OECD

legislation aiming to help protect rural schools by requiring planning authorities to consider additional criteria.

Models for reshaping education to take account of cultural diversity in other countries with a history of division have met with mixed success. However, the literature highlights curricular and cultural methods of incorporating diversity in schools as an alternative approach.

In regard to parental choice, the literature is not conclusive on its impacts. Those in favour of this policy argue that it can increase competition and drive up standards, while others argue that it can widen inequality. The findings in this paper highlight a number of areas, such as:

- The review of small schools underway in Ireland, particularly its exploration of the advantages, disadvantages and costs relating to school size;
- The additional protections introduced in England and Scotland for rural schools (such as the requirement to consider the effect on the local community);
- The approach in Scotland whereby one of the factors to be considered in school closures is whether there is potential for the release of resources, capital or revenue for the benefit of the community (rather than to the local authority or government department);
- The policy in Wales requiring planning authorities to consider implications for the balance of provision where there are proposals to close schools with a designated religious character;
- In the event of restructuring across religious denominations here, what measures are planned in regard to incorporating different cultures within schools;
- How school provision will be planned on an ongoing basis when ESA is established in 2013.