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Evidence for Education Committee Re: Shared Education

A Perspective from Kilbride Central Primary School, Ballyclare, Co. Antrim

This document was prepared following a request from the Stormont Education Committee as part of their inquiry into Shared/Integrated Education.

Introduction and Background

This evidence has been submitted on behalf of our school and Board of Governors by Mr C. Currie, Principal of Kilbride Central Primary School.

I am 33 years old and was appointed in September 2012 so I am now entering my third year of headship. I previously had a successful teaching career for 8 years in Loanends Primary School, Nutts Corner which included achieving a Masters in Education and a Professional Qualification of Headship (PQH). I am pleased with what I have achieved and consider myself to have a very neutral and rounded view of education (and all its foibles!) in Northern Ireland.

As a child of a Protestant mother and a Roman Catholic father (both from North Belfast) I was brought up in the controlled sector of education in Bangor but was always taught to maintain a balanced opinion and look at things from all angles before forming an opinion. I continue to do this now and consider it one of my strengths as a school leader.

The following paragraphs are my responses to the issues being debated by the Committee:

1.0 Review the nature and definition of Shared Education and Integrated Education across all educational phases – including consideration of the need for a formal statutory definition and an obligation in statute to facilitate and encourage Shared Education;

1.1 As the above has two clear aims I will address them one at a time...

1.2 As Shared Education and Integrated Education has always been the 'add on' or treated like a luxurious afterthought if one had the political foresight to see its potential since its inception some years ago I think, given the current

political deadlock and fact that the country appears to be going backwards rather than forwards, this is an excellent time to review, promote and formalise this sector of education- even better if it expands.

1.3 There can only be good things that come from a legislative requirement to facilitate and encourage Shared Education. At the moment it is too easy for political parties to 'back their own horses' when it comes to education which results in an ever-widening gap between the maintained and controlled sectors. Nobody seems to take ownership of the integrated sector. The result? Some of the most educationally sound, popular and over-subscribed schools/colleges in the country eg. Slemish, Lagan, Bangor Central, Ulidia etc. filled in the large part by rational-thinking masses who value a good education over political polarisation. The more this is forced upon extremist parties like the PUP/DUP and Sinn Fein, the better education will become and the better future we will have for our country.

2.0 Identify the key barriers and enablers for Shared Education and Integrated Education;

2.1 Unfortunately there are more barriers than enablers however the enablers I can think of are the many, many people (the silent majority of the population I expect) who would back and support the philosophy. I also expect that the majority of professionals would also be behind it.

2.2 Where do we begin with the barriers? The disastrous approach by taken by successive Sinn Fein Education Ministers who appear to have pursued their own political agendas under the guise of 'Putting Pupils First'. It has been one calamity after another, I expect you don't need me to list them. All they have succeeded in doing is segregating the education system further and destroying the morale of teachers everywhere. Whilst we have two large political parties with completely opposite viewpoints and unwilling to compromise (unless a shady deal for mutual benefit has been done in a back room somewhere), it is unlikely the aims of this debate will ever be realised.

2.3 I would absolutely love to promote CRED (Community Relations, Equality and Diversity) and market ourselves as a 'Voluntarily Integrated' School, especially in an area like Ballyclare where pain runs deep, however myself and the staff have been so overwhelmed with changes to the curriculum (indeed some have been necessary) and getting our heads around successive failed initiatives like **Computer Based Assessment** and **Assessment of the Cross Curricular Skills** amongst the many other initiatives that constantly get fired at us that we simply don't have enough hours in the day. Whilst schools continue to be judged and inspected on failing measures of assessment these will always be the priority. As a person who has to bridge the gap between educating young children to the best of my ability and a system which has so many rotten fingers in its pie I can confirm that the whole thing is an absolute mess; it needs knocked down and started again. We are handcuffed by a failing system and until these are removed Shared Education will forever seem like an impossible dream.

2.4 Even as I sit and write this on a wet morning in July I still have no idea what direction assessment will go this incoming September. In the last two months I have received communications from my union that Cross Curricular

Assessment (which shapes my whole School Development direction) is to be shelved; the same week I received a letter from the Minister telling me that it is clearly not working but that it will NOT be shelved. Where do we go?

3.0 Identify and analyse alternative approaches and models of good practice in other jurisdictions in terms of policy interventions and programmes;

3.1 I can't comment on any detailed analysis of the sector having never worked in it. My only experience has been gained through working alongside Integrated Colleges as a feeder primary and additional experiences from parents which have always been very positive.

4.0 Consider what priorities and actions need to be taken to improve sharing and integration – including the effectiveness of the relevant parts of the CRED policy; the need to engage more effectively with parents/carers; and the role of Special Schools;

4.1 I see the solution here as very simple: remove the current failing barriers in our system such as Cross Curricular Assessment; allow schools to use their existing and effective individual approaches to assessment; inspect schools on an individual basis rather than using a one-size-fits-all approach; this will free up time for schools to pursue CRED much more freely and invest in paired/shared projects across the sectors. I don't even see much expense involved!

5.0 Report to the Assembly on its findings and recommendations by Spring 2015.

5.1 I am happy for any of this information to be used by the Assembly and am happy to take part in any kind of further consultation to support my views or elaborate on them. I would actually be quite keen to do this as it's genuinely something I believe is necessary for the future of this country and whatever children/grandchildren I am fortunate enough to eventually have.

Best Regards,

Christopher Currie
Principal
Kilbride Central Primary School