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Issue: Strategic Review of Education

In a changing environment, the Community Relations Council (CRC) works by promoting constructive and relevant dialogue, by actively supporting those taking real risks for relationship building, by acting as a practical bridge between groups in society and between the public, private, voluntary and community sectors, and by promoting wider learning through developing better practice. We therefore welcome this opportunity to comment on the Independent Strategic Review of Education.

The Independent Review takes place against a backdrop of major educational change and we have recently seen the introduction of an enhanced curriculum and the new entitlement framework, all of which aim to deliver an improved and more effective education system for our children. The strategic review of the schools estate is the next cog in the wheel of change and the task ahead for the review team should not be underestimated.

CRC understands from the terms of reference that the overall objective of the Review is to examine ways to improve the delivery of education to ensure a more effective and efficient system and develop schools that 'are effective in meeting the needs of all pupils, are educationally and financially viable, and are sustainable long-term' (consultation document). Falling pupil numbers in both rural and urban areas have left 50,000 surplus places, a number which is estimated to rise to 80,000 by 2015 (out of a school population of 333,000). Rationalisation of the schools estate in this context is both desirable and inevitable.

CRC therefore accepts the objective but it is important to emphasise that whilst the sector needs to be financially viable, any rationalisation programme, whatever the extent, must also be socially viable. In a society that has come through decades of violent division and conflict, this means ensuring that education is actively structured to prevent the emergence of opposing 'sides', to ensure a culture of tolerance, mutual understanding and inter-relationship and to underpin our peaceful future together. The need to restructure and rationalise the schools estate provides a historic opportunity to ensure that the future does not simply reproduce the past but points in a different

direction. This review will be incomplete if it does not make an active and positive contribution to this critical task.

CRC's response will therefore concentrate on the opportunity this review offers to move forward our own objectives especially as they relate to the government's policy priority 'Policy and Strategic Framework for Good Relations in Northern Ireland: A Shared Future (ASF)'. Education is a critical element in moving towards the vision of A Shared Future 'in which all individuals are considered as equals, where differences are resolved through dialogue in the public sphere, and where all people are treated impartially. A society where there is equity, respect for diversity and recognition of our interdependence'.¹ It is therefore imperative that the Strategic Review delivers its recommendations with ASF at their core. The Review also needs to be responsive to the Racial Equality Strategy (RES) which complements ASF.

Within ASF. Education plays a particularly significant role. The objectives set out are:

- Demonstrably promoting sharing in all levels of education.
- Developing opportunities for shared and intercultural education at all levels - nursery, primary, secondary and tertiary.
- Whilst the exercise of parental choice remains central: however, all schools should ensure through their policies, structures and curriculum, that pupils are consciously prepared for life in a diverse and inter-cultural society and world.
- Preparing and training teachers to educate our children and young people to be effective and responsible citizens of a shared society.
- Providing further, higher and adult education on an open and integrated basis.

The launch of ASF's Triennial Action Plan in April cemented government's commitment to take real action in moving this strategy forward. Lord Rooker stated that 'separate' was no longer an option and headline commitments for the Department of Education (DENI) include 'promote and prioritise sharing in all levels of education, develop sustained opportunities for shared and intercultural education at all levels', and 'continue to ensure that all schools through policies, structures and curriculum, prepare pupils for a life in a diverse and intercultural society and world.'²

This strategic review's recommendations should therefore have 'good relations' and 'sharing' at its centre. In light of ASF and its objectives, a purely economic approach to the rationalisation of school closures and super amalgamations which does not take account of the opportunities this provides to generate new and exciting possibilities for sharing and engagement across traditional lines of division would be an opportunity missed. As we will develop below, this does not necessarily mean a single uniform model of integration, but sets at its core the need to ensure that the education of children does not set people against one another but offers opportunities for engagement and enrichment through a number of models. The Review should set a direction that builds on existing models of sharing and support those models and

¹ Policy & Strategic Framework for Good Relation in NI, p7, 2005.

² A Shared Future, First Triennial Action Plan 2006-2009, p26.

initiatives that could deliver ASF. In so doing, this Review team will be a driving force embedding sharing and co-operation at the heart of our discussions about public resources and setting a direction towards a real shared and peaceful future.

Sharing in practice

Sharing does not mean the elimination of difference. It does mean, however, that our differences must be brought together for mutual benefit rather than set in opposition. In Northern Ireland this is a real challenge. Fortunately for some individuals and sections of our society 'sharing' in terms of living, working and socialising is part of every day life. For others it only forms part of their daily routine, and for some it doesn't happen at all. There are many ways in which we are segregated - where we live, work, shop and socialise. It has become an accepted way of life.

In the most recent Northern Ireland Life & Times Survey high percentages of respondents indicated that *if they had a choice* they would prefer to live in a neighbourhood with people of a mixed religion (79%), workplaces should be neutral (94%) and more importantly in terms of this review, 45% & 46% of those interviewed wanted 'much more mixing' in primary and secondary schools respectively. It is also worth noting that this was equally balanced between Catholic and Protestants, whilst it was slightly higher for those who indicated no religion.

There are other indicators that reveal a demand for more sharing in education and an increasing demand for more integrated education places. In 2003 Milward Brown Ulster conducted an independent omnibus research on integrated education and found that 52% of parents asked as to why they did not send their children to an integrated school stated the reason as there '*being none in there area*'.

At minimum, these surveys suggest that there is considerable support for increasing the opportunities for sharing within the education system. More importantly in terms of the review, it reveals the aspiration of many parents to educate their children in a mixed religious, integrated and shared environment. The ambitions of parents are not currently being met by the Department of Education and it is critical that the Strategic Review integrates the social data against what is currently happening on the ground.

CRC is mindful that the current system existed for a society that was living and coping with conflict. The existence of conflict indicates that people have felt threatened in their ways of life, in their attachments and in their beliefs. Sharing must not be a way to ignore these important elements but must take them into account. For this reason, CRC believes that sharing cannot be seen as a single, centrally dictated model, but must be a core principle which can be applied in different contexts with different results. The presumption that we have parallel and polarised systems, should however be replaced with a common commitment to the welfare of young people. Core religious and cultural values and differences can be protected without fostering a sense of eternal polarisation or antagonism through practical and repeated models of real co-operation, through regular and 'normal' shared resources, and through an openness by schools and communities to experiment together in the structuring and sharing of schools.

To date, the history is one of both exciting experiment and some frustration. Over the years, the Department of Education has acknowledged opportunities for contributing to peace through schools and subsequently devised a number of initiatives to improve and build cross-community relationships. In the Government's Education Reform (Northern Ireland) Order of 1989, six mandatory educational (cross curricular) themes were introduced, including the two complementary themes of Education for Mutual Understanding (EMU) and Cultural Heritage (CH). EMU and CH have been defined as being fundamentally about "learning to live with differences in a spirit of acceptance, fairness and mutual respect". There have of course been questions about the effectiveness of all of these. Some excellent work has been carried out in recent years in relation to EMU and CH, but for some schools the EMU strategy was a short lived success. Due to the nature of separate schools, pupils who took part in the programme returned to their respective schools when it finished. Too often, this type of engagement was short term in nature and failed to have the desired sustained impact on the development of interpersonal relationships.

TACOTIE (Towards a Culture of Tolerance: Integrating Education) is a recent initiative which places a responsibility on all schools to promote the culture of tolerance which A Shared Future aims to create; and as mentioned previously, the new curriculum has a key objective to help 'young people develop as contributors to society' within the citizenship subject. There is a realisation that schools have a responsibility to ensure that 'every child leaves school with a direct and sustained engagement with diversity and is better equipped to meet the challenges of being an adult in a shared society'.³ The TACOTIE initiative is a journey for all partners involved and it established engagement via a working group to discuss the issues of "promoting a culture of tolerance" within the school system. It was defined as a "seminal purpose of the education system" but appears to be slow to develop and deliver its objective. The journey begun needs to be updated in parts and implemented in full.

The Learning Partnerships are a welcomed addition in the delivery of education, but again the rolling out of these initiatives relies heavily on individual schools, principals and their attitude to collaboration on a cross-community basis. Since the 1980s, there have also been encouraging examples of practical ways to demonstrate sharing in school structures. Integrated schools have grown as a result of parental demands. Other current examples of enhanced educational sharing are the successful school learning partnerships in both Limavady and Ballycastle - delivering shared education cross-sector and cross-community within their local community.

It is now essential to build on and develop from these models. The Council embraces all initiatives and measures that are developed and delivered to promote understanding, build tolerance and ultimately forge new meaningful relationships. However, in order to maximise the level of sharing and deliver tangible collaboration, the current education system requires fresh ideas and innovative delivery mechanisms to achieve the objective of credible and sincere sharing. We are moving into an experimental stage for educating

³ Policy & Strategic Framework for Good Relation in NI, p25, 2005.

our children together and it is important to allow an adequate amount of time to examine and review its progress.

Northern Ireland is a changing society. Communities are working together to move forward and deal with the history of the troubles. We are also a society that continues to undergo change as we welcome new citizens into both our communities and schools. It also needs to be time of evolution for our education system. It is essential that we create an education structure that reflects these changing needs and moreover a system that commits itself to experimenting with new versions of educating our children together. What the review offers is an opportunity to spread these principles into the restructuring of the school estate. As we move into the future, schools in Northern Ireland should increasingly expect to interact with one another. In seeking to rationalise the school estate, proposals for change which would support real engagement and sharing among young people should be prioritised for public funding.

Types of Sharing

There are a number of plausible models already exist:

Confederations – schools maintain their independence but pupils move around different schools to be taught subjects together. This could also involve teacher exchange. This would link in with the introduction of the Entitlement Framework.

Federations – schools operate under the current status quo but are managed under a single structure, with a single manager/principal in control. This may produce collaboration and exchange of best practice.

Integrated Schools – children are transferred from an unsustainable school into an existing school and it transforms to integrated status, or there is a new purpose built integrated school which is made up of pupils from unsustainable schools.

Jointly managed school – schools that are in danger of closing form a new partnership either on an existing site or a new purpose built school. This model would require cross community collaboration, and enable children from different backgrounds to be taught together. It would be a joint venture in the real sense and would be reflected throughout the school's structures e.g. the management group, teachers and Board of Governors.

Rationalisation – simple closure of schools which saves money and reduces the size of the schools estate. Unfortunately this would not enhance the sharing element of the terms of reference and would hinder the options of many parents from sending their children to more mixed integrated schools.

A Shared Campus – a number of schools are brought together on one site but each school retains its own autonomy and children are taught separately. Jack McConnell, First Minister of the Scottish Assembly, recently backed shared schools campuses saying 'they helped bridge the divide between faith and non-denominational schools'. However in relation to a shared educational experience it would seem that the level of sharing is minimal.

Above is just a brief outline of what is currently in operation throughout the United Kingdom and Northern Ireland, such as the confederation model (Limavady and Ballycastle learning partnerships).

Local circumstances will dictate different answers. However, if sharing is to be a real priority, Confederations, Jointly Managed Schools and Integrated Schools seem to offer the best opportunities to deliver ASF (although to varying degrees). In some circumstances, federations and shared campuses offer ways forward. What appears to be least satisfactory is rationalisation which simply takes the existing boundaries of schools as set in stone. A generic commitment to 'collaboration' cannot be allowed to disguise the imperative for inter-sectoral sharing which must result.⁴ CRC believes that in all proposals for rationalisation, schools should be encouraged to explore options for sharing, with a clear public preference for those options which promote normalised interaction and engagement.

The task is not a simple one. CRC is aware that there will be many concerns from stakeholders as to who manages schools; concerns over recognition and protection of particular school ethos; and the rights of parents to choose the type of education for their child. Everyone should recognise that we moving into an experimental period and an appropriate timeframe should be established to examine how these models can work best cross sector and cross community. Adequate resources and a realistic timeframe will be required to assess how suitable the models are to a particular area and an evaluation of the different systems will establish best practice.

For some this will be a difficult journey and it is important that those concerned and responsible for the delivery of education engage in meaningful dialogue to discuss the various options. Falling pupil numbers, stretched resources and unsustainable schools have driven the call for this review and hard decisions will have to be taken. Those responsible for devising a new approach are in an excellent position. It is not an unachievable task and should be embraced as an opportunity to educate our children in a fully inclusive environment. Specifically, it is an opportunity to underline that the only option is the search for ASF and its realisation in practice. We need to actively commit to co-produce shared solutions on the ground

Teacher Training

It is essential that we also examine teacher training provision in tandem with the strategic review. There are five teacher training institutions in Northern Ireland catering for both primary and post-primary education. The Osler Report in 2005 noted that, as well as having too many schools in NI, so too, 'it is hard to argue that an area the size of Northern Ireland requires the existing number of teacher training institutions.'⁵ Again, as with the schools estate, any proposed rationalisation of teacher training bodies will produce concerns over the protection and recognition of ethos.

⁴ ASF-the democratic imperative, D Morrow, arch 2006.

⁵ Dr David Russell, CRC-Sharing over Separation, 2006.

However a successful precedent is worth noting – Liverpool Hope; this was an amalgamation of three teacher training colleges who united to form an ecumenical federation in 1980. The strategic goals of the institution include ‘to enhance and develop Hope’s distinctive profile as a unique ecumenical partnership between the Catholic and Anglican Churches in higher education, open to those of all faith and beliefs’⁶

It seems logical that if sustained sharing on a cross community basis is the vision then we need to ensure teaching staff are equipped with the essentials skills to deliver education in a shared environment. This will be crucial in terms of the estates review whereby pupils from different schools may join a school with a different ethos, and it is essential that the new students feel they are entering an inclusive and all-encompassing school environment.

Conclusion

This Review should not be classed in terms of ‘winning’ or ‘losing’. If the principles and objectives of ASF and the Racial Equality Strategy are adhered to when devising the final recommendations then the review will have assisted the Government in achieving their vision for a *‘peaceful, inclusive, prosperous, stable and fair society firmly founded on the achievement of reconciliation, tolerance and mutual trust’*.⁷ This is not an exercise to destroy the gifts of the various sectors or school ethos. It is an opportunity to deliver a sustainable education system serving our local communities, offering parents more options for educating their children, reducing surplus places, redirecting much needed money to front line education and ultimately, putting into practice ASF. More importantly it will help prepare our children.

It is worth noting the attitudes of some young people taken from the Young People’s Life & Times Survey 2003-05. ‘Respondents who attended planned integrated schools or participated in cross-community projects were more likely to be supportive of religious mixing in their neighbourhood, the workplace and in schools’, which highlights the need to continue to maximise sharing and collaboration. Another conclusion is that ‘overall, the 16 year olds who took part in the YLT surveys were less optimistic about community relations and less in favour of religious mixing than adults responding to the NILT surveys’⁸ - all the more reason to maximize opportunities for sharing. It is also interesting to note some of the findings from past pupils of integrated education with 93% saying it ‘had made a significant impact on their lives’ and a further 96% testifying it had generated ‘a respect for diversity and a feeling of security in a plural environment’.⁹ The Review has to ensure that sharing is not simply an add on, it has to be mainstreamed throughout the various models to deliver the real change that is needed on the ground.

⁶ Dr David Russell, CRC-Sharing over Separation, 2006.

⁷ Paul Murphy, Secretary of State, A Shared Future.

⁸ Research Update, Ark, Number 43, 2006.

⁹ Claire McGlynn et al, Integrated Education in Northern Ireland, Integration in Practice, 2003, p42.

The knock on effects of these collaborations will benefit the wider community; it might encourage people to move into areas that they would previously not have considered because it is closer to the school. These educational partnerships will also link with the long term strategy of 'community schools' and 'community development', and will encourage participation from the local and wider community. New opportunities for engagement could emerge from 'sharing'.

The Community Relations Council is committed to helping the Review team realise the potential of this task. The terms of reference concentrate on delivering the goals of sustainable education, schools serving the local community, parental choice and protection of ethos. We too support these objectives but we are of the opinion that whilst we talk about sharing this can mean very different things in practice. It is important that whatever model or models are chosen they *must* have a compulsory clause that insists on real sharing. Schools should receive support in the form of good relations training for those responsible for its development and delivery, and it would be necessary to monitor progress, and evaluate targets met. The Triennial Action Plan advocates using initiatives to encourage sharing, this is an important building block in the delivery of ASF but CRC would urge the Review Team to deliver an approach that guarantees a minimum of sharing and collaboration – there needs to be a protected baseline which can be enhanced to meet the needs of the children, parents, school and the local community.

This issue must not be put in the 'too hard box', it has to be dealt with and this will require real leadership, both from the review team and the stakeholders.

CRC feels that it is important that the recommendations are sold to those involved, particularly parents. It is clear from the research that there are growing numbers of parents who want integrated and shared education. Parents must be allowed this choice. It would be beneficial to consult widely with parents at a later stage and present the different options; they need to understand the vision of ASF and what we want to educate our children for. Schools should be open and transparent with this process in order to deliver a school system that reflects the real aspirations of parents and children.

We look forward to meeting with the Review Team in the next few weeks and exploring ways of moving this vision forward.

ANNEX I

Shared Education – extract from *A Shared Future*.

Demonstrably promoting sharing in all levels of education.

Developing opportunities for shared and intercultural education at all levels - “nursery, primary, secondary and tertiary.

Whilst the exercise of parental choice remains central: however, all schools should ensure through their policies, structures and curriculum, that pupils are consciously prepared for life in a diverse and inter-cultural society and world.

Preparing and training teachers to educate our children and young people to be effective and responsible citizens of a shared society.

Providing further, higher and adult education on an open and integrated basis

- 2.4.1 The Department of Education has a duty under the Education Reform (Northern Ireland) Order 1989 to “encourage and facilitate integrated education”. It also has a duty under S75 (2) to have regard to the desirability of promoting good relations between groups specified in the Northern Ireland Act 1998. Education is pivotal to the search for a more inclusive, reconciled and open society built on trust, partnership, equality and mutual respect.
- 2.4.2 There are now some **55 integrated schools with over 17,000 pupils** across Northern Ireland. This represents around 5% of the total number of pupils in schools in Northern Ireland. The remainder are educated either in Controlled (largely Protestant) or Maintained (mainly Catholic) schools. In 2001/2 5% of pupils in Controlled schools were from a Catholic tradition and 1% of pupils in Maintained schools were from a Protestant background. Still, fewer than 40% of the 1,250 schools outside the integrated sector draw 10% or more of their student intake from the other tradition.
- 2.4.3 It is essential that the challenges of diversity and tolerance are consciously integrated into the development curriculum of each child in all school sectors, so that **every child leaves school with a direct and sustained engagement with the challenges of being an adult in a shared society**. This is already reflected in the present school curriculum and is an integral part of the revised curriculum recently announced.
- 2.4.4 While for some, integrated education is seen as a barometer of good relations between and within communities in Northern Ireland, a move towards greater sharing in education is not a by-word for forced integration of all schools. The exercise of parental choice is, therefore, central: **both integrated and denominational**

schools have important roles to play in preparing children for their role as adults in a shared society. However, there is a balance to be struck between the exercise of this choice and the significant additional costs and potential diseconomies that this diversity of provision generates, particularly in a period of demographic downturn.

- 2.4.5 It is recognised that major investment is required across much of the school stock and in rural areas especially where pupil numbers are falling. In this regard the work ongoing to review educational estate delivery mechanisms, which it is proposed should be across all sectors, is extremely important. **Greater sharing in education means exploring new and innovative ways of sharing these scarce resources responsibly into the future.**
- 2.4.6 The proposed pupil entitlement framework arising from the post-primary review will be delivered by collaboration between neighbouring schools and with further education colleges and other providers. This will provide young people in post-primary education with greater opportunities for sharing part of their learning and educational experiences with young people from different communities. This could, for example, include schools sharing sports facilities and open opportunities to learn subjects not readily available within one particular school or sector. Local partnerships of schools and further education colleges will be key drivers in this process.
- 2.4.7 There have also been important developments within education towards a more inclusive society over the past ten years. These have been designed to encourage greater contact and promote mutual understanding between communities in Northern Ireland.
- 2.4.8 Many pupils have participated in initiatives based on the cross curricular theme, Education for Mutual Understanding and those funded through the Schools Community Relations Programme. These programmes have encouraged children and young people to understand the essence of reconciliation and the importance of building relationships rooted in mutual recognition and trust.
- 2.4.9 The new cross-curricular theme of local and global citizenship also has the potential to make a significant contribution to understanding the causes of conflict between and within communities both in Northern Ireland and elsewhere in the world. **To make a real impact it is essential that this work tackles the reality of living in a divided society.**
- 2.4.10 As the education system and the further and higher education sectors move forward to meet the challenges of the next decades both must play their role in helping shape policy and practice to promote greater sharing. **Both need actively to prepare teachers and lecturers to educate children and young people for a more shared society.** While not all schools will be designated as integrated, all educational institutions should demonstrate their organisational commitment to a shared society.

2.4.11 Finally, the youth sector, in particular, has an important role to play in developing coherent programmes to promote good relationships between children and young people, within and between communities. The JEDI initiative (Joined in Equity, Diversity and Interdependence) is one model that could be built on across the sector. It is recommended that this successful programme should be developed throughout the youth service, including integrating its lesson