

To: Post-Primary Support Team  
Room 6.02  
Department of Education  
Rathgael House  
Balloo Road  
Bangor  
BT19 7PR

From: The Community Relations Council  
6 Murray Street  
Belfast  
BT1 6DN

Contact Person: Gemma Attwood, Policy Development Officer

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The Community Relations Council was established as an independent body in 1990 to lead and support change in Northern Ireland towards reconciliation, tolerance and mutual trust. In a changing environment, the Council 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. The aim of CRC is

“to lead and support change towards a peaceful, inclusive, prosperous, stable and fair society founded on the achievement of reconciliation, equality, co-operation, respect, mutual trust and good relations”.<sup>[1]</sup>

The Community Relations Council comments will focus primarily on the area of developing community and good relations within education. An Education system should support every child to flourish, and take their place as part of a shared and diverse society. Education is at the centre of a number of government strategies responsible for promoting a shared and inclusive society. ‘A Shared Future’ looked closely at how education could perform a central role in delivering A Shared Future and the key priorities were determined as:

- **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.**

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<sup>[1]</sup> CRC, Strategic Plan 2004-07.

- **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.**

We have enclosed the full section relating to education as Appendix 1 in order to allow the Department of Education to reflect on their main priorities set out in the Government Strategy. A Shared Future should be the benchmark when developing all policy and 'Shared Education' is a critical element of any strategy. We want an education system that promotes tolerance, respect for diversity and an opportunity for reconciliation and we are disappointed that DENI have not re-enforced the importance of 'A Shared Future' throughout the wording of the draft education order. The strategy is a government priority and needs to be a priority in all government departments and subsequent strategies.

Our society is more diverse than ever before and the challenge ahead for the education system is to ensure that our children are taught within a diverse environment. All children need to learn that our society is an enriched place, and that new cultures and traditions enhance our life experiences. There is a real opportunity for the Department to deliver its priorities as set out in the Racial Strategy:

- The need for additional support for children who have English as a second language
- a multi-cultural and anti-racist curriculum
- relations between teachers and parents (difficulties of language and meeting times) and
- serious under-achievement of Traveller children

The above areas are classed as priority areas for action and CRC wants to see these educational priorities amalgamated into all educational policy.

Another policy in place is the Department's own 'Towards a Culture of Tolerance: Integrating Education' – TACOTIE, which places a responsibility on all schools to promote the culture of tolerance which A Shared Future aims to create. It is essential that the 'citizenship' element of the new curriculum addresses the challenges of coping with the variety of citizens' intricate identities in the adult world, while recognising and reinforcing our inter-relationship with one another through planned and guided activities.

Already it is clear there are a number of policies in circulation that address the aims and objectives of CRC, but we want a firm commitment that all new educational policies and strategies will have these respective priorities at their core.

## **Religious Education**

Northern Ireland is a growing and diverse region in relation to religion, culture and race and those views must be sought when devising the religious section of the curriculum. The Steering Group and Working Party membership needs to be broadened to reflect this diversity. Other faiths need to be included and the debate widened as to what religious study should be? It is crucial that the drafting group leads the way and engages with other faith groups. Diversity and respect for all cultures and beliefs should be a central part of religious study. The delivery of religious study needs to have a balanced and equality led approach in order to build awareness and respect of other faiths.

## **Learning Partnerships**

Children and their educational experience must come first – schools are the architects of their learning and achievement, they help nurture and shape a child and their thoughts and perceptions. It is essential that schools lead the way. The draft order provides opportunities for developing partnerships between neighbouring schools and further education colleges to deliver the entitlement framework. This is a positive development in that it will encourage new relationships between different schools within their locality and region. This strategic cooperation and collaboration between schools will enable pupils to learn in a new flexible environment and help build new relationships. There are a number of examples where this is already a huge success in terms of cross community partnerships, such as the Limavady Learning Partnership, and the Ballycastle partnership. These schools have shown that education can be delivered through strong partnerships and at the same time build educational environments where everyone is welcome and in turn promote inclusion and diversity.

These partnerships are very relevant when we consider that many schools, both rural and urban, are vulnerable due to falling numbers and surplus places. There is huge potential for different schools (integrated/Irish medium/controlled/maintained) within a neighbourhood to deliver education together. The pooling of educational resources and expertise provide another opportunity to deliver effective learning together.

All schools to be entitled to form partnerships with each other, if this is what best suits the needs of their pupils. This should include Special Schools – no school or students should be excluded from this experience.

These relationships need to be more actively promoted, particularly on a cross community/cross-sectoral basis. Schools need to be energetically encouraged to engage in this type of collaboration or else we run the risk of schools opting out of this new and creative way of delivering education in welcoming and diverse surroundings. Collaboration should explicitly seek to address and reduce sectarian fears and prejudices.

The Government has stated that the Education Order will be delivered within existing budgets. CRC urges the government to make additional funding

available, particularly with regards to school partnerships, to ensure that schools choose to deliver education alongside others. Education and Library Boards are currently operating on fragile budgets, these new collaborations have to be long term partnerships and secure funding should be available to ensure take-up.

## **Conclusion**

A shared educational future is one where meeting and learning together is normal and expected, part of all educational structures and planned within the curriculum of every school, no matter what its ethos or identity.

We need to ensure that future generations are taught in open, diverse and welcoming educational centres. Education needs to support diversity, respect differences and provide opportunities to learn and create shared communities. The Costello Report and the New Estates reform will maximise the opportunities of engaging and embracing new partnerships and achieve the goals of A Shared Future.

CRC looks forward to building its relationship with DENI and is willing to assist with this important work.

END.

## ANNEX 1

### 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 lessons into the training of youth workers.