

Submission with Regard to the
Independent Strategic Review of Education

Northern Ireland Rural Development Council

Policy and Innovation Research Unit

Contact
Nick Mack
Director
T: 028 867 66980
E: nmack@rdc.org.uk



Introduction

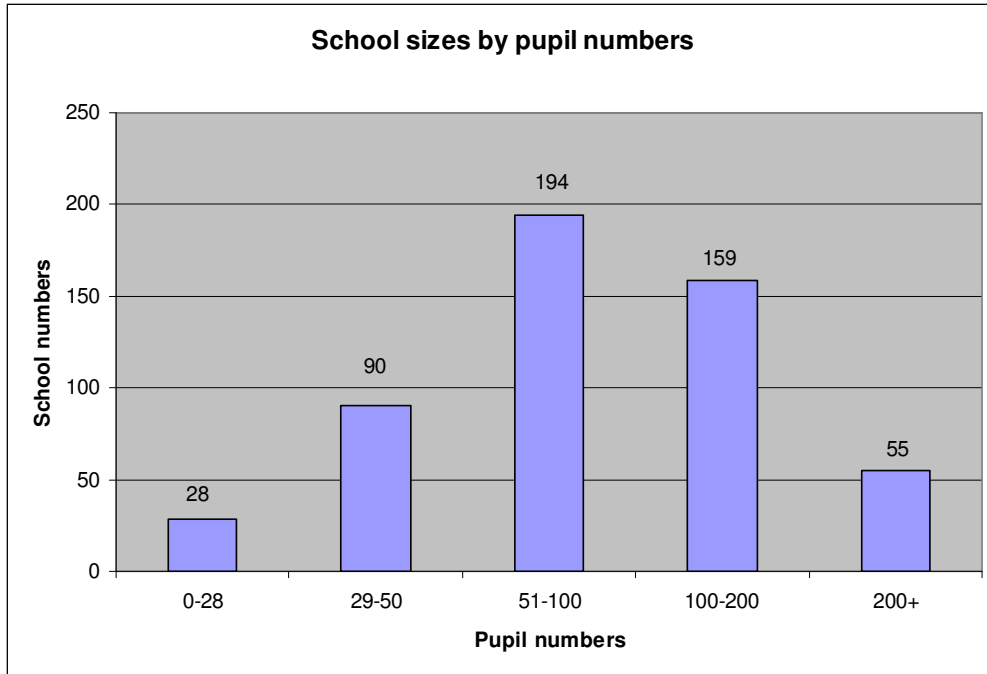
Thank you for providing the opportunity to contribute to this important review. Our comments are based on a recent rural proofing analysis on small rural schools conducted on behalf of DE and commissioned by DARD which we enclose. In it you will find a more detailed consideration of many of the issues highlighted in the consultation paper. Here we provide some summary comments and signpost where in the report the issue is dealt with further.

The Northern Ireland Rural Development Council and Rural Schools Study

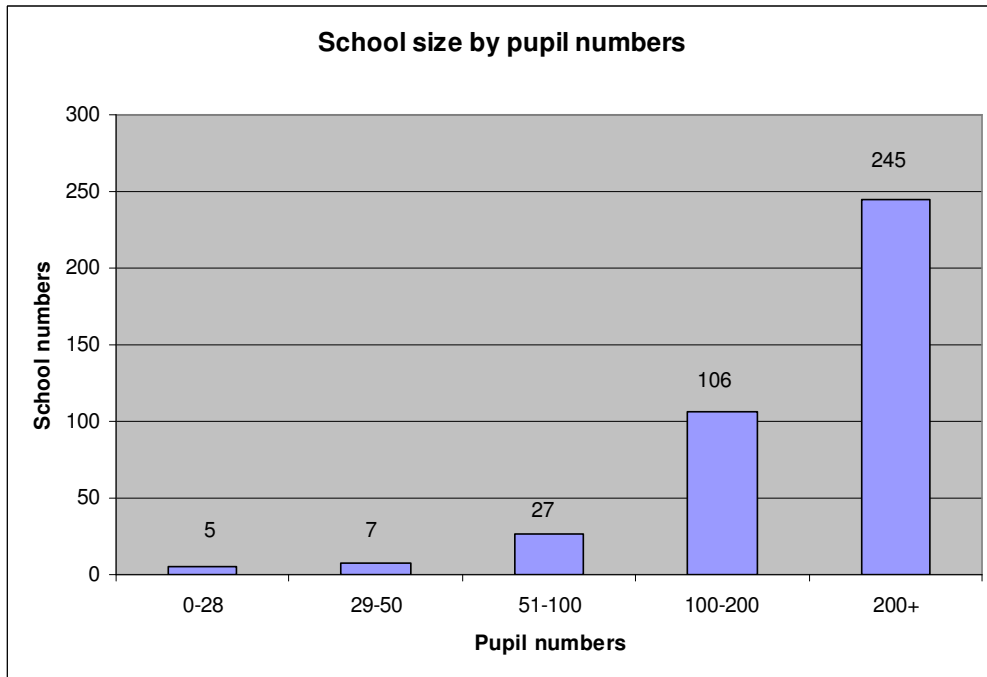
The Northern Ireland Rural Development Council (RDC) was established in 1991 under the DARD Rural Development Programme. We summarise our role as being an independent regional rural organisation, which plays a key role in influencing rural development policy, developing and delivering practical programmes, conducting research and development, sharing information and building effective partnerships. RDC has played a key role in promoting best practice in relation to rural proofing and recently, the issue of the sustainability and role of rural schools in rural communities has become a significant focus of attention.

During 2005, RDC carried out an extensive scoping study on rural schools. The purpose of the study was to explore how developing policies toward small schools might be 'rural proofed'; in other words, assessed for their potential to impact unfairly on rural populations in comparison with those living in urban areas, or for opportunities missed to utilise rural resources as part of policy thinking.

As the bar charts below illustrate, small schools are predominantly a feature of rural areas



Rural Schools



Urban Schools

As a template for Enhanced Rural Proofing, the study was conducted in three steps:

Step 1. The Policy Perspective: Mapping the policy drivers and their influence on the approach to educational delivery, identifying those most likely to have the main impact on rural sustainability.

Step 2. The Community Perspective: Assessing the **potential impact** of a rationalization of schools in rural areas- drawing on available research and carrying out targeted assessment work through case studies and interviews.

Step 3. Bridging the Gap: Assessing **potential solutions** which could help bridge any gap suggested by step 1 and step 2.

Step 3 in particular offers a number of key suggestions and considerations for the independent strategic review for rural schools, which is presented in detail in Sections 2 and 3 of the report.

Successful Planning

The overall conclusion of the report was that a rural proofed approach to the planning and resourcing of the schools estate should:

- Recognise in the first instance the need for a school to be in a location if it is remote from other possible alternatives;
- Examine extended school and school clustering options as mechanisms for minimising the requirement either for school closures or for larger sizes of school;
- Seek a balance in the size of any new school arrangements which ensures the conditions for good linkages between the school and its communities.

We draw attention in particular to this latter point. The support role of a school in rural areas, particularly its capacity to contribute to social and community well-being and broader social and economic goals (*para 10.ii in the consultation paper*) means there should not be a substantial time / distance gap between a school and households or communities within its overall required catchment area. Key broader social and economic goals in this case are the NI strategy for Sustainable Development and the Rural Development policy agenda.

See Connectivity; Social Viability and Sustainable Development page 116 onwards of the main report

Children from poorer backgrounds are disproportionately affected by travel problems within rural areas. Such children are more likely to be dependent upon the school bus for travel to and from school, and therefore have difficulty in accessing both informal and formal after-school hours activities. Those who are most likely to benefit from homework clubs, access to computers and leisure activities are therefore least likely to be able to participate unless these activities are provided close to their homes.

Planning and Data

We fully endorse the need for high quality data noted in the consultation paper. Longer term planning of the accommodation needs of the schools' estate over a ten to fifteen year period calls for robust survey data. Key data required from a rural proofing perspective is discussed in Section 3 as

- Demographic changes including that from out-migration or in-migration and new housing developments
- transport and journey costs, particularly in terms of time costs
- options for collaboration; the potential for and costs of clustering arrangements
- issues of community sustainability, the wider roles and service options schools might provide and the potential for extended services
- issues of community identity and cooperation

Data should in addition be provided in an accessible and understandable manner to parents, governors and other stakeholders who might participate in a planning process. **Good communication and information is a crucial element** in a successful planning process if it is not to result in distrust and conflict.

Additional planning considerations are discussed in Section 1 page 53 onwards;

Capturing New Investment In Rural Areas

Schools which are badly below standard and of a very small size may not be considered appropriate for investment; rather, the opportunity for new build may be more cost effective but require a sufficient forward projection of pupil numbers to justify. It is highly likely this would point toward some degree of amalgamation. However, this should not immediately be viewed as a threat, rather, **if managed correctly, offers an important opportunity for young people and communities in rural areas to benefit from new investment.**

Improved Local Planning: A Whole System Approach

The significant amounts of planned investment, amounting to some £2-300 million / annum, call for significant rationalisation of the approach to procuring new buildings or refurbishments.

By 'Whole System Approach' the procurement strategy is suggesting 'educational communities' as the 'spatial unit' for planning assessment, made up of primary, post-primary and post 16 schools and the flows of pupils between them.

The proposals for a whole system approach could offer a more participatory, systematic and equitable approach to planning the schools estate, rather than the current, 'case-by-case' approach to individual schools. Whilst the latter allows for the particular circumstances of each school and the parents and children who use it to be considered, it also places a single school in the spotlight in isolation, leading to anxieties amongst parents and staff and often, a defensive approach to keeping the school open come what may.

A key recommendation of Costello is that in providing for a wide, well-balanced and flexible mix of educational provision, one recognising that "*schools of varying type are of equal value*", schools should collaborate with neighbouring schools, FE institutions and other providers, and that future planning for local areas should be done in the context of the 'Common Good', with schools working together to deliver the best provision for all pupils in an area in the context of the entitlement framework. Such an approach should also involve "engagement with parents, pupils, and the business and wider community to determine local needs and wishes".

Under such arrangements, Costello sees schools becoming more equally valued, with parents having a wider range of acceptable schools and an ensuing reduction in the competition for pupils between schools, which has the effect of hindering cooperation between them. Competition is also linked to the current funding arrangements, however and such a partnership approach raises the issue of whether different funding arrangements can be identified which include **an element at area level which funds overall provision and shared support resources** rather than focusing only on individual schools in isolation.

Rural Schools cost more to run relative to urban counterparts and can be viewed as a drain on overall resources. In such a wider system perspective, rural schools should also be viewed as a key resource for some aspects of curriculum delivery for both rural and urban pupils. In this way investment in rural schools is not a loss but an overall gain to the system as a whole. **Better strategic linkages should be made between urban and rural schools in achieving a good education.**

An area approach could also try to take better account of urban outmigration and wider infrastructural developments which influence it. Outmigration is influenced strongly by improvements in roads and telecommunications infrastructure, and lower cost housing relative to urban centres. Rural regeneration improving the attractiveness of smaller settlements could also influence settlement patterns. Migration factors are a key social trend to take into account not only for how they might influence demand for rural school places across the region, but also in **the**

scope for schools to broaden services in responding to changing expectations of the countryside.

An area approach however, is likely to face **challenges in ensuring an equitable and effective participation in the planning process**. Structural patterns vary in the mix of small and larger schools. Within districts such as Ballymena, Coleraine, and Newry and Mourne, for example, there are relatively high proportions of larger schools, and this may present particular challenges for small schools to be treated on a basis of 'equal value'. A higher proportion of larger schools in the district may exacerbate the difficulty of attracting pupils to small schools (or vice versa) and accelerate declining viability. Equally, larger schools might find it more difficult in some parts to continue to fill capacity. Amalgamation in which small schools are 'sucked into' larger schools is unlikely to represent a satisfactory solution if the resulting schools are too big to hold onto the positive attributes of small schools discussed earlier. An additional concern indicated by the distribution of larger schools in urban centres is that rural pupils could find themselves having to attend an urban primary school, something we would recommend is fully guarded against.

School Buildings and Joined-up Services

As an additional dimension to the planning process, planning for investment should not deal only with educational services but could also be linked to wider local regeneration. The integrated health and educational services aspired to by wrap-around schooling and Every Child Matters point the way to buildings designed to accommodate a wider range of key services in rural and urban areas.

Gaps in services can be identified as part of the planning process and may encompass information provision, post office, IT access, community hall provision, or other leisure and recreational services.

Doing so could help offset the amount of money required from education to ensure the economic viability of a school. It also offers a means to 'future proof' provision to enable adaptability around changes in pupil numbers over time. If pupil numbers continue to decline, the building can continue to play a role in providing other services. If numbers do not decline or at some future point return, provision can still be retained.

Schools as Rural Hubs

As Section 2 (page 108) explains, The close relationship between Education and Development as 'Inseparable Siamese twins' ¹ recently explored in detail through

¹ Waclaw Idziak : Impulse Presentation for Discussion Forum 'Development and Education' 5th European congress on Village Renewal Sept 2005

a European initiative under the title ERDE (European Rural Development through Education 2003 - 2005)² examined how (adult) education should also “prepare rural people to earn a living from the knowledge based economy” particularly in “accessing village resources of formal and informal knowledge”

Suggestions include changing village schools into village development centres, revisiting and making better use of farm and cultural resources, using ICT for local economic development support and encouraging villages to be ‘learning organisations’. **DARD is currently considering the idea of Rural Hubs as a mechanism for supporting rural regeneration. There should be close liaison between DE and DARD on this issue in planning use of the schools estate.**

Additional perspectives are presented in the report from Sweden which illustrate and reinforce the case for a school also working to help rural communities ‘re-imagine’ their roles and options within a knowledge economy; helping to cultivate a creative and enterprising approach across children and adults.

In Sweden, co-operation between schools and others in the local community, in industry and in trade *“is the most interesting part of enterprise in schools and the part that is most capable of being developed...network building and co-operation, both inside and outside schools, will be advocated in schools in the future, based on the belief that knowledge, insight and understanding are based on how others exist, what motivates people and how the individual relates to others”*.

The ERDE project envisages schools changing to work “not like a catapult sending the best students outside, rather, also working according to the needs of rural society” The village as a learning organisation would be open to new thinking and interested in what outside experts such as scientists or artists might contribute to village life – a role a school might play in hosting talks and workshops. We feel this role is not as novel as it might first appear; but to have been done to some extent already³.

A key resource in enabling this role for a school must be an additional community coordinator attached to one or a cluster of schools. Such a coordinator might be part funded through DARD or DEL. Planning and development models are available, including examples from Orkney mentioned earlier, to take forward the role of the school as part of a village development centre and learning village approach in such a way as to avoid placing additional burden on school staff.

² www.erde.it

³ Physics and the home – a series of talks held recently in a rural school in County Down

Forms and Models of Sharing

The RDC study highlighted the need to provide clarity and vision around what are currently a hodge podge of part-tested options and initiatives in different parts of NI pertaining to school viability and sustainability. Issues such as clustering have been addressed in a fragmented way and are not helped by the climate of competition between schools for pupils and (hence) budget units. **A cohesive model of clustering or extended schools backed up by leadership training for principals is needed in order to see this option properly considered and integrated into the planning process.**

The RDC review of clustering for example, suggests a tiered approach linking forms of clustering to appropriate spatial scale:

Scale: Regional / Northern Ireland –wide:

IT-based approaches. (training, information, advice , policy discussion, sharing best practice.)

More a forum or network less a cluster per se

Problem addressed : isolation and professional support for managing change

Scale: New Council areas

Networked / shared support services

(eg admin, additional support services, specialist teaching, extra-curricula activities

Problem addressed: cost efficiencies for key additional resources and delivery requirements particularly joined up support services.

Scale – Educational Community

Clustering (shared teachers / joint planning/ shared resources / exchange visits)

pupil-centred – travel is now an issue so needs to be smaller scale but relationships also crucial

Problem addressed – isolation of pupils from peers, access to wider subject areas and resources.

Scale: neighbourhood level

Federation (single school in law – shared principle and governing body, but two or more sites)

Proximity is required if shared management is to be practicable and sustainable

Problem Addressed – some of the overheads of staffing small schools could possibly be reduced, if economies of scale can also allow a non-teaching principle.

Combination of Factors in Estate Planning

Section 3 explores this in detail. We suggest that a proper appraisal of a school should consider how clustering or sharing can be combined with extended services to retain connectivity to local communities and the range of benefits that might offer to a good education whilst improving sustainability.

We would of course, also fully recognise the need to ensure an up-to-date and effective education for rural children as a priority, but we should not turn all our attention to the global at a time when a number of societal and economic trends are placing greater emphasis on the value of the local.

Concluding Remarks

I trust this quick tour through the RDC study report will be of some immediate assistance. The full report is, I appreciate, substantial. Section 1 may well cover topics which are very familiar already, however and I would recommend examining Section 2 and 3 in more detail. I would be happy to clarify / elaborate at the planning meeting in August.