

ONE EDUCATION

This paper deals with the issue of ending segregated education in Northern Ireland. It does not address the issue of the type of education, for example grammar versus non grammar but rather deals with the administrative changes required whichever style of education is adopted.

The fact that over 90 per cent of our children attend effectively segregated state funded schools means that the State is responsible for sponsoring and underpinning segregated education. Opinion polls have consistently confirmed a substantial majority in favour integrating education and of all the shared future issues facing us this is the easiest one to address.

The Integrated Education movement has done an excellent job in the most difficult of circumstances in building a viable integrated sector over the past 50 years. It has clearly demonstrated that we have nothing to fear from integration but with an attendance level of around 7 per cent of pupils and a complex and challenging system of delivering additional schools it is not going to be the solution.

Back in 2006 when I chaired The International Fund for Ireland we thought of ways in which we could use our funds to make a difference in some of the more complex areas of division. We looked hard at Education and devised the Sharing Education Programme (SEP) and appointed Queens University to develop our brief and to run the programme which was co-funded by Atlantic Philanthropies. The SEP and linked programmes have been very successful but we did not envisage them as the solution to our segregated system but rather as another building block towards integration. It demonstrated that there was nothing to fear from bringing children from segregated schools together even in strongly divided communities. The evaluation of the SEP can be found on the International Fund's website.

The Catholic Church has consistently fought hard to retain the status quo in which they can maintain control over management of their Maintained and Voluntary schools, and influence over the curriculum. A recent statement from CCMS argued for maintaining faith based schools and promoted their view that they welcomed a diverse range of pupils. While this is no doubt true it is equally clear that the vast majority of people from a Protestant background are very unlikely to send their children to a Catholic faith based or Catholic voluntary school even if they believe it offers an excellent education. This is the inevitable consequence of a divided society in which to the majority, the badging of the school supersedes all the normal considerations.

The Department of Education holds the purse strings and is in a strong position to deliver change. The Department should issue a statement of intent that it will take all necessary steps to enable integration but in a manner which does not go against substantive parental choice. The Department should organise a phased ending to the separate classification in the sector on the basis that on a closed date all State funded schools shall be structured, funded and managed on the same basis with no distinction between the controlled, maintained and integrated sectors.

Religious education can be made available in all schools in response to the local demand and parental choice. Support should be given to all schools in dealing with the implications of change throughout the transitional period. Segregation of teacher training should be ended. All schools will be expected to make genuine efforts to try to work to ensure that their enrolment increasingly represents denominational diversity and part of the Department's support role will be to facilitate this. The ultimate objective will be to deliver a school system increasingly free from the historic tribal badging we have experienced to date with parents feeling increasingly free to select the nearest school which delivers a good standard of education.

The adoption of this proposal will not alter the denominational mix of schools overnight but will enable an organic process of school selection based on appropriate social and educational criteria alone to begin. This will not threaten the ethos and nature of any school in any negative way and post the introduction of the new system, changes in any school will be minimal and will not impact the day to day experience of pupils or staff. Nobody will be expecting schools in predominantly Loyalist or Nationalist areas to change their pupil mix to any great degree in the early years but in due course schools will incrementally better reflect the denominational balance in their immediate neighbourhood. This will have a consequential influence on improving the possibility of more integrated neighbourhoods.

Whatever the long term political status of Northern Ireland evolves to be, the functional viability of us as a society depends on mutual tolerance. Segregated education deprives so many of our children from mixing freely across the denominational divide and threatens future viability. The ending of state funded educational segregation is a relatively easy win for society.

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