Northern Ireland
Assembly

COMMITTEE FOR EDUCATION

OFFICIAL REPORT
(Hansard)

Developing the Case for Shared Education

20 October 2010

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

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Members present for all or part of the proceedings:
Mr Mervyn Storey (Chairperson)
Mr David Hilditch (Deputy Chairperson)
Mr Dominic Bradley
Mrs Mary Bradley
Mr Jonathan Craig
Mr Trevor Lunn
Mr Basil McCrea
Miss Michelle McIlveen
Mr John O'Dowd

Witnesses:

Tina Merron	}	
David Thompson	}	Integrated Education Fund
Geraldine Tigchalaar	}	
Mark Magill	}	Oxford Economics

The Chairperson (Mr Storey):

I welcome to the Committee Geraldine Tigchelaar, the chairperson of the Integrated Education Fund (IEF), David Thompson, a trustee of IEF, Tina Merron, the chief executive of IEF, and Mark Magill, senior economist from Oxford Economics. You are very welcome. It is not so long since you were last here. There has been some public discussion about this issue over the past few days. I ask you to make your presentations, and then members will ask questions.

Ms Geraldine Tigchelaar (Integrated Education Fund):

Thank you very much. As I recall, the last time we were here we were challenged to make people more aware of what was going on and we said that we needed to see political movement. I will not ask anything again; we are in the midst of a perfect storm. However, we are pleased that there is a debate. We are here to make a presentation and provide information. I have maps that I would like to pass round to show you the position of unsustainable schools in the Province, although I will not go into that in any depth at the moment.

I sometimes feel that I am a little out of my depth, but I am enjoying it as well. The debate, which I do not wish to go too far into, is going on because we are all conscious of our cultural deficits; that is why we are talking. Mark will speak to the scoping paper that Oxford Economics has prepared.

Mr Mark Magill (Oxford Economics):

I am delighted to be here; it is great when one's work goes places fast. I will give some background on what we were commissioned to do. It is a scoping paper with the aim of stimulating debate. Given recent press coverage and the fact that we are here today, it has been successful in doing that. Its second aim was to ask whether there is an interest in exploring the matter further and, if so, to look at the road map for future research to explore and answer the questions that are posed.

I will start by asking why we should consider alternatives to current provision. Our report articulates three key reasons, the first of which is international competitiveness. If the Northern Ireland economy is to continue to move forward, it needs to be internationally competitive, and skills and education are a key element of that. It is 13 years since Labour came to power, and, in the 10 subsequent years, education spending across the UK doubled while performance in the UK, including Northern Ireland, fell back relative to international comparators.

It is not only exemplars such as Finland that have maintained and, in some instances, extended their lead over us; emerging economies such as Estonia and South Korea have overtaken Northern Ireland. There is a challenge for us to keep up with those economies. We are falling behind those countries in the programme for international student assessment (PISA) scores for

maths, general reading and the science subjects, so there is a debate to be had. In comparison with some other international economies, Northern Ireland has a greater spread of achievement. Northern Ireland does not compare favourably to Finland with its no child left behind policy: two in five pupils in Northern Ireland leave with fewer than five GCSEs.

The second key pillar why we need to consider alternatives to the present system is the public sector finance crisis. After initial prudence in Labour's public spending, its second and third terms saw excessive public spending and excessive growth in its third and final term. As a result, state share in the UK is now more than 50% of GDP, and the UK's public borrowing has risen to unprecedented levels; it is forecast to peak at about 70% of GDP in three years' time.

The coalition Government has boldly decided to take radical steps to address the deficit sooner rather than later. That will affect us all, and our education sector will be far from immune. I am sure that, later today, there will be an announcement on our block grant; that will affect our education sector, as it will have to operate in a significantly different fiscal environment over the coming years.

Unlike health, education is unlikely to be ring-fenced. It will be up to those in charge of the Budget to decide what happens to education, but some estimates put cuts to it as high as 25% over four years. If those cuts are implemented without substantial change to education delivery here, it will affect the quality of learning and the schools estate.

The final pillar of why we should look at the education system is its structure. Our unique history means that, compared with other economies, we have an unusually complex school system, with a range of management types and provision on a denominational and gender basis. Over time, partly due to demographics and changes in the birth rate, there has been a fall in average school sizes. Despite recent rationalisation, there are still some very small schools, and financial inefficiencies have crept into the system.

Many small schools will struggle to meet the sustainable schools criteria and the entitlement framework, which states that all Key Stage 4 and post-16 pupils should have the opportunity to avail themselves of between 24 and 27 subjects. In general, Northern Ireland has a more

narrowly focused subject range than some other UK regions.

Fewer people here with creative arts and design or STEM degrees are in employment than anywhere else; therefore we need to ensure that every child has access to a full curriculum so that they can compete not only nationally but internationally.

The alternative poses several questions. School building projects are in trouble; it is estimated that about £3·6 billion needs to be invested in the schools estate over the next ten years. The school maintenance cost backlog has risen to £300 million, about £100 million of which is essential maintenance to allay health and safety concerns. How will we address that with a substantially cut budget? Will it be possible to spare front-line services, teacher numbers and salary levels? There are big questions about how we will operate our education system with a declining budget and an inefficient structure.

However, those circumstances present an opportunity. The public finance crisis could be a catalyst to do things differently and perhaps generate an appetite to do more with less. One option is shared education: schools and teachers delivering services to communities and collaborating in a joined-up manner to ensure efficient service delivery; sharing common-core lessons and teaching staff; collaborative governance arrangements and achieving economies of scale through amalgamating schools — two unsustainable schools in the same region may merge further down the line — shared community or village schools; and strengthening communities through retaining education in them and by ensuring that we have strong, sustainable schools rather than scattered schools with excess capacity and inefficiencies.

How will shared education be put into practice? By pooling sports equipment, science labs and ICT, schools in the same vicinity could deliver the curriculum jointly. When I was at school I wanted to do business studies, but my school, Wellington College, did not offer it; five minutes away, Aquinas Grammar School did. It would have made sense for both schools to deliver subjects jointly to provide students with access to the subjects that they wanted to do and, ultimately, to proceed into the careers that would have enabled them to develop their lives.

There is evidence of shared education happening. A Queen's University study found that

almost half of schools here have collaborated on shared staff development activities and more than a third have collaborated on sporting activities. In 2008, a Millward Brown survey found that four fifths of parents and grandparents with children of school age or younger supported sharing school facilities with another school, even if it was from a different sector.

What are the benefits of shared education? It could be an innovative delivery solution to the fiscal crunch. Done properly, education could be viewed as an example of best practice in delivering quality outcomes with a tight fiscal budget. It could be a form of area-based planning, with schools working together to deliver education, all of which could link up with the policy of the entitlement framework of delivering through area-based learning.

Shared education could provide an opportunity to address inefficiencies and excess capacity in the system and to reorientate today's provision for tomorrow's demand. In the past ten years, we have seen changes to demographic projections. For instance, there has been a large increase in the birth rate, which, in the short term, will lead to high demand for school places. In the longer term, however, the birth rate is expected to fall again and continue in long-term decline. That creates the challenge of how to deal with a temporary, short-term boost but a longer-term fall in demand that may lead to more half-empty schools. Shared education will support the realisation of the entitlement framework, and it can enhance cross-community relations in line with our shared future agenda. Therefore we need to ask whether the concept is worth exploring further.

Tough times require smart solutions, and a local solution is better than a national one. Delivering from the educational purse is in the Executive's power. We must ensure that we do it right. The CSR will today verify the future spending environment in Northern Ireland. If there is truly an appetite to do more with less, the Executive should explore alternative methods of delivering education here, shared education being one of them.

If there is an appetite for further research to quantify what would happen were we to pursue shared education, we recommend research possibly entitled, 'study into the viability and impact of alternative primary and post-primary delivery options'. Such a study should look at the viability of existing primary and post-primary provision; the development of alternative delivery options; a fiscal costing or alternative education delivery options, in line with the green book

appraisal; and the wider impact of alternative education delivery options on wider society, the economy and legislation in Northern Ireland, such as the sustainable schools criteria. Finally, the study should recommend how to deliver education in Northern Ireland.

Tough funding times lie ahead. There is already a maintenance and capital backlog. The Executive have to ask whether they are prepared to continue to fund more than 1,100 schools, many with excess capacity, from a shrinking pot. Shared education is just one of the options to be considered; it is our choice and no one else's. There are many aspects of international competitiveness in which NI will struggle to compete and be a world leader; however, the school system need not be one of them, particularly as the Executive have strong powers over how education is delivered. Ultimately, the goal must remain efficient, high-quality and fair provision for our children.

The Chairperson:

Do the witnesses wish to add anything?

Ms Tigchelaar:

That summarises the independent scoping paper. We will go through the other bits and pieces and take questions afterwards. Is that fair?

The Chairperson:

OK. Although questions will be inter-related and will overlap, to help the witnesses and members we will probably divide up our questions by asking Mark about the paper before coming to broader issues.

Ms Tigchelaar:

Tina Merron will explain our draft strategy, which the Committee has not yet seen.

Ms Tina Merron (Integrated Education Fund):

The IEF-commissioned independent survey by FGS McClure Watters is not complete. Its aim is to consider all the information available on shared, integrated and collaborative educational projects in Northern Ireland.

The survey will identify key stakeholder groups, the numbers involved and outcomes; it will also identify the funders involved and estimate total funding across a three-year period. The draft report is heavily evidence-based and outlines the strong legal, policy and research context to support greater sharing in education. Co-ordinating the delivery of education between schools can use public resources more efficiently and effectively and improve the educational experience for all pupils, as well as contribute to a more shared and cohesive society.

The main funders included Peace II EU funding; the Irish Department of Foreign Affairs; the DSD neighbourhood renewal programme, such as the Dunclug initiative; Atlantic Philanthropies; the International Fund for Ireland; Sharing in Education programmes 1 and 2; the Spirit of Enniskillen; the Families and Schools Together programme; the Integrated Education Fund; the promoting a culture of trust (PACT) programme; and supporting and developing integrated education (SADIE).

Funding for the schools community relations programme has been withdrawn from the Department and the Big Lottery.

There is a wide range of funded projects, from the multimillion pound capital such as Big Lottery projects, to the larger revenue-based projects of the shared education programme, and the smaller-scale revenue projects. The shortest is one academic term; the longest, such as the shared education programme, is across three years.

Projects are driven by the community or by schools: Dunclug is driven by the community; other projects, such as promoting a culture of trust, are driven by schools. Other projects are driven from the top down, such as the North Eastern Education and Library Board curriculum work.

Of the 14 projects identified, three are for primary schools only, six for post-primary and five for primary and post-primary. Approximately 1,000 schools have been involved, which is more than 80% of all schools. However, there may be double counting, and some schools may be involved in more than one project. Over three years, £21 million was spent in that area; of that, £5 million, or 23%, came from the Northern Ireland public sector. More than £15 million came

from philanthropic organisations, such as the Atlantic Philanthropies. The balance came from the EU.

A policy context exists for the Department to lead that work, but it is not doing it. The Department needs to mainstream that work and take over the lead from the philanthropic organisations, which provide most of the funding. Judging by the numbers, schools want to be involved. When the research is completed, about the end of November, a copy will be sent to the Education Committee.

Mr David Thompson (Integrated Education Fund):

The Integrated Education Fund welcomes the very wide engagement of our politicians, the public and others in discussing the education system, and, in particular, shared education. It would be useful to give you an overview of the integrated education movement.

The movement evolved from the work of All Children Together, which in 1974 said that it sought:

"changes in the education system of Northern Ireland which will make it possible for parents who wish to secure for their children an education in shared schools acceptable to all religious denominations and cultures, in which the churches will provide religious education and pastoral care. The movement shall be non-party political and non-sectarian."

Most of the parents who founded the All Children Together movement were of a Catholic background, and they took particular account of Dr James Doyle, Catholic bishop of Kildare and Leighlin, when in 1826 he said:

"I do not know of any measures which would prepare the way for a better feeling in Ireland than uniting children at an early age and bringing them up in the same school, leading them to commune with one another and to form those little intimacies and friendships which often subsist throughout life."

All Children Together went on to say that:

"We believe that the high degree of religious segregation in the Northern Ireland education system is an obstacle to the solution of Northern Ireland's problems. We believe that parents have the fundamental right to choose the kind of education that shall be given to their children. We believe that the education system of Northern Ireland has permitted excessive representation of the churches and their clergy in both Catholic maintained and Protestant controlled schools and that such high representation is unnecessary from an educational viewpoint. We believe the essential role of the clergy in schools is the religious education of children."

Donald Akenson, Professor of History at Queen's University, Kingston, Ontario, provided the epilogue to the book 'The History of All Children Together'. He did a great deal of research into the national schools in the nineteenth century. In the epilogue, which he calls 'The Long View', he wrote that, undeniably, the Irish national system of education transformed the population from illiteracy to functional literacy and numeracy.

"A successful educational system in the narrow sense then, but a complete failure in terms of implicit social content for the national school system's original intention of mixing Catholic and Protestant children together took a terrible kicking — from the churches, from lay religious enthusiasts and from simple demography (in lots of places there were just not enough Protestants to go round)."

Thus, by 1860, segregation in the state-provided and state-governed schools was the normal social configuration, and thus the latent social lesson, of the schools. This lesson — 'don't get near the other side' — was greatly reinforced by the aggressive stance of the Catholic Church internationally in the early 1870s and by the politically aggressive posture of the unionist population in the north of Ireland from the mid-1880s onward. It was a perfect feedback system, a swirl of misunderstanding, divisiveness and ultimately hatred, and its impact on education seemed destined to be a perpetual mortmain on the nation."

In 1977 Derry City Council held a debate on integrated education, and a resolution in favour was passed by a majority of councillors. On 1 April 1977, Easter Sunday, Dr Edward Daly, Bishop of Derry, preached a sermon that caused ever-widening ripples of disappointment among the members of All Children Together. He expressed fears that schools might be forcibly integrated, saying that closing Catholic schools and introducing an integrated school system would create new and added problems. He also expressed grave concern about religious education in state-integrated schools and dismissed the idea that Catholic schools were divisive. All Children Together responded that Catholic parents had a right to Catholic schools and that it did not believe that shared and integrated schools had to be godless, saying, "Our movement is totally against any idea of forced integration."

Although the Catholic Church remained the most overtly opposed to integrated education, All Children Together felt that there was much hypocrisy in the attitude of all the Churches to what it was trying to achieve.

A seminar held by All Children Together in March 1979 was entitled "Co-operation in education." It focused on the ecumenical developments that had led to the establishment of the Roehampton Institute in London, a federation formed by the amalgamation of four education

colleges: Anglican, Methodist, Catholic and Froebel.

Nevertheless, in September 1981, great frustration led to the parents in the area founding Lagan College; it was the first planned integrated school and was privately funded. In total, £750,000 had to be raised from private and charitable sources to fund the school before the government decided that it had a right to exist. The money was raised by the founding parents between 1981 and 1984; 95% of the funding came from outside Northern Ireland, mostly North America.

However, times have changed. The 1997 agreement has led to the majority of people in Northern Ireland and their politicians now being committed to maximising inclusivity and protecting minorities from exclusion.

It is right for parents freely to choose the type of school that they want for their children, but few rights are absolute. Where a majority or a significant minority exercises its rights, account must be taken of how that affects the ability of a minority freely to exercise its equivalent rights. No group can enjoy its rights in isolation; an equality impact assessment is essential, and that may result in the need for the larger groups to review and adjust how they exercise their rights.

Nevertheless, one cannot build an inclusive community by removing people's right to express their culture and tradition. Accommodation is essential. People, groups and organisations need to evolve into the new circumstances; we are watching that take place with our police service, which now enjoys the support of most of our community. With others, we are working to support the evolution of the education system from mainly segregated to more shared through our grants programme, support and development work, fundraising and lobbying.

It is essential that we look to you, our politicians, and to the Department of Education to assist schools to embrace shared education by providing a supportive environment with a high level of encouragement, guidance and associated resources.

Ms Tigchelaar:

Those are the main facts that we wanted to bring to you. We maintain that we will be an

independent trust. We hope that we can bring things to the front and that the issue will now move forward. We do not have all the answers, but we are willing to work towards a resolution to our problems, financial and otherwise.

I am aware that this week there was a report that Northern Ireland had received more than £175 million a year from charities and outside funders over the past ten years. We cannot continue to live on money from outside; it will not last. I am talking about EU, British Government, Irish Government, American and other funds that have been given for peace and reconciliation over the past ten years; they will not last for ever. We need to find a way forward. The fact that you are in this room addressing the issue and finding a way forward is heartening. Having said that, I will now be quiet and take questions.

The Chairperson:

Thank you very much. I think that there will be a considerable number of questions and, to reassure members, they will not all be from me. We will try to draw the two parts of the presentation into one. The first was Mark's on the scoping paper, which I am sure members have read. I am tempted to ask if we have all read the book that David kindly gave us the last time he was here, but I will not push it.

Mark, your scoping paper mentions a five-part road map. The first part covers the viability of primary and post-primary provision, and the information is in various reports, such as Bain's. What is the timescale for the other parts?

Mr M Magill:

It is difficult to say without fleshing out a full-blown proposal. It would probably take a minimum of three months to carry out the proper research for an exercise on that scale, or perhaps longer. Certain elements of that programme — such as learning best practice from other economies and what can be transferred to the Northern Ireland education system — are exercises in themselves. It is difficult to give a precise timeline, as those are just ideas; how any review or subsequent research is commissioned on the back of them would be up to the Committee. The Department of Education could do parts of it; other parts could be outsourced.

The Chairperson:

Some policies have been about for a considerable time, including the sustainable schools policy. There have been even more reports, such as the Bain and Costello reports, to which you had access in drawing the conclusions in your paper.

Mr M Magill:

Our scoping paper reiterates some of Bain's comments, many of which have been about for some time. Bain promoted area-based learning and sharing in schools; from memory, there is a chapter on that in his report.

The Chairperson:

Shared education was just one option on which you focused. What were the others?

Mr M Magill:

There are various other approaches. For example, fees could be charged in schools. In the UK, a different approach is being adopted: charities and parents are setting up schools as part of David Cameron's "big society". However, since the focus of the scoping paper was shared education, we did not explore other options in any great depth, although any subsequent review should consider all areas.

The Chairperson:

You mentioned the entitlement framework, about which concerns have been raised in the Committee, as it is clear that we will not meet the requirement for it by 2013. We already have some £17 million. The money that will be available for the entitlement framework has been reduced, and the report into the entitlement framework did not give it a clean bill of health. It was presented as a model, but it gives the impression that there is no appetite for that approach. Why should shared education be any more successful in its delivery? What good example of collaboration and shared education have you seen? Perhaps that is not a fair question as it was not part of your remit. Since shared education is not working as intended, why adopt another system that might produce the same outcome?

Mr M Magill:

That is a difficult question. The research was to find out how we produce more with less. There are obvious quick wins through collaboration and sharing facilities and resources. You say that there is not much appetite for the entitlement framework; however, survey evidence suggests that there is an appetite among schools and parents for sharing resources. Research from Queen's University provides evidence that not only is there sharing of resources, but there is evidence of cross-delivery of the curriculum. In some instances, it is between schools; in others, it is between schools and further education colleges. Collaboration exists. The approach is to deliver more with less. I am not sure how to answer your question on the mechanics of overcoming lack of desire.

The Chairperson:

The Queen's University's Report on Options for Sharing and Collaboration states that in the most successful models of school sharing, ethos and religious traditions were not only protected but strengthened. That contradicts what David said earlier about Bishop Daly's fears. If I were to articulate the fears of that sector, I suppose that they are that new arrangement would dilute ethos and identity, particularly religious ethos and identity.

Mr M Magill:

I am reluctant to get drawn into debate on social and religious issues. When the report refers to shared education it is not referring purely to integrated and cross-community education, although that is part of it; it is also referring to sharing and efficiencies between Protestant schools and between Catholic schools and how to deliver more effectively for all.

Mr Thompson:

It might be fair to Mark to point out that it was an independent report and survey. It was not necessarily carried out to meet our needs; it was done independently according to a remit, and the remit was not to look at the pros and cons of integrated schools. There has been fear over the decades that sharing may lead to dilution. I have seen that fear in small controlled schools, where there has been a dumbing down of identity. If that were to continue, the confidence and strength of the communities attending that school would be damaged.

In the integrated sector most schools make a conscious and positive effort to ensure that the culture and traditions of all sections are properly and equally supported and recognised — not by the percentage attendance of different cultures and traditions but in the respect that the traditions have, one for another. Ethos and culture can be well protected in integrated schools and, in fact, reinforced, because there is a better understanding, and therefore less fear, of the other and more confidence in the individual identity.

The Chairperson:

I would like members to ask questions on the Oxford Economics scoping paper; then we will open it up to the wider issues of shared education.

Mr D Bradley:

Good afternoon. Mark, what does your paper offer that is different from the Bain report? I cannot see a huge difference between what you say and what Bain said.

Mr M Magill:

There is not a huge difference. It was a very small-scale study articulating ideas and thinking. Many of the ideas come from previous reviews, but we have expressed them in our own way. Our remit was to examine them in the economics of delivering more for less. There was a literature review involved, and we have included much of what other people said. There is a list of research at the front of the report, showing the studies that we consulted when carrying out the research.

Mr D Bradley:

My other points are probably more related to policy and so on, so it might be more appropriate to ask David and Geraldine.

The Chairperson:

We will come back to that.

Mr O'Dowd:

I have a follow-on question to Dominic's. Mark, I am sorry to pick on you as an economist, but

you are the topic at the moment. Economists are like clergymen: they all say that they will bring salvation, but it depends how much pain you want to take along the way. *[Laughter.]* I agree with Dominic: when I sat down to read the report I hoped for an economics study. I am no economist, but I am no longer mystified by it because there are so many of you about that we have good information all the time. I thought that I was going to get a report dealing with economies of scale and the finances of shared services.

Trevor's party produced a paper on tackling the cost of division. I thought that we were going to go through that. To be frank, I am not sure of the purpose of your report.

Mr M Magill:

Its purpose was to use the existing information to reignite the debate and to relay evidence from the economic conference and to inform people that this was an option for delivering education; we also wanted to show that it could be a source of fiscal savings and different delivery. It also raised the fact that this is within the Assembly's remit; there are problems, but we have the power to look at them. Deloitte was probably paid £40,000 for the cost of division report; Oxford Economics got £3,000 for this. There is a vast difference in scale. From a commercial perspective, the things that you are looking for do not come from a £3,000 study.

Mr O'Dowd:

I was going to be a gentleman and not ask how much you were paid, but I am glad that you volunteered the information.

Economists, like clergymen, come with baggage. I read the document last night, and I could not get past some of its points. For instance, you state that shared education could:

"Serve as a proactive 'local' solution and offer invaluable input to the Comprehensive Spending Review and thereby demonstrate clearly, to the coalition government"

That is, we have to demonstrate to the coalition Government and the public that

"the Executive's preparedness for dealing with cuts (addressing what has often been a criticism of the Executive, especially when compared to more proactive responses in ROI to its fiscal crisis)."

There is also a criticism elsewhere in the report of those who are lobbying against cuts. Is it fair to say that the report is presented to us from a Conservative economic point of view? I thought that David Cameron was a Cambridge boy.

Mr M Magill:

If I had to put a political slant on it, it would probably lean towards the Conservative side, but it is not a Conservative report.

Mr O'Dowd:

I will leave it at that. Thank you.

Mr Craig:

I want to speak to Mark, because I have been looking through his book. On page 26 there is a summary of the PISA results back to 2006.

Mr M Magill:

Those are the most recent data.

Mr Craig:

Judging by the results, you seem to be arguing for a single education system. The graph shows that the countries that are doing well have a single education system whereas countries that are struggling have not. It does not matter whether it is a religious-based education system, because Ireland seems to be well ahead of Northern Ireland on some of the fundamentals, including maths and reading. It is a faith-based system; there is no getting away from that. It is more or less a single education system, and it dominates the population down there. The complexities of Northern Ireland would lead one to say that it probably should be non-religious, but we need a single education system.

Are we back to the argument that Northern Ireland cannot afford to continue with several education systems? Our party leader made a strong argument for that case; he is probably arguing from a financial point of view. The graph shows that, from an achievement point of view, Northern Ireland deserves a single education system. What is your view?

Mr M Magill:

You are right. The report does not call for a single education system, although I see an argument for it. We were talking about short-term solutions for sharing, although a single education system is possibly further down the line and is, perhaps, a longer-term goal.

Mr Craig:

It may be a longer-term goal, but the achievement figures alone indicate that we should have a single system. We are not stupid; we all know the financial answer: a single system would save the country a fortune. Whether it ever happens is another matter entirely, because elements in Northern Ireland will not let go of their sector. It will probably not happen in my lifetime or in my children's, and we have to live with that. However, everything indicates what we should be aiming at.

Mr Lunn:

This is definitely the week for fascinating revelations, and we just had another one.

The Chairperson:

Repeat it or share it.

Mr Lunn:

I was referring to Jonathan's assertion that we are moving towards a single education system.

Mr Craig:

I said that we should be moving towards a single education system.

Mr Lunn:

That is confirmation of what his party leader said, and I welcome it.

Mark, you referred to schools collaborating and shared activities. I do not know how much we can dig into the extent of that collaboration. You gave us percentage figures. The £3,000 that you spent on the report looks like better value than what we got from Deloitte a few years ago for £40,000.

Mr O'Dowd:

There is another revelation. *[Laughter.]*

Ms Tigchelaar:

That is the art of negotiation, Trevor.

Mr Lunn:

How far did you drill down into the figures? I see that sports activities have a figure of 36%. Does that mean that one school borrowed another school's playing field, or does it mean that schools attempted to share sporting activities?

Mr M Magill:

The survey covered both elements, whether collaborating in sharing fields or in activities such as having a joint football team.

Mr Lunn:

There was not room in your study for much detail.

Mr M Magill:

That survey is sourced from research by Queen's, and its report has drilled down detail.

Mr Lunn:

Perhaps I should take a look at it. Your presentation says that if we do nothing, we face death by a thousand cuts. Did your research indicate how long that would take? It looks as if the system is accelerating towards death not by a thousand cuts but by a hundred. We are running out of money, the school estate is falling apart, and the whole system is so obviously in need of change that we cannot afford to wait much longer. No matter what new approach we take, something has to be done. Have you any views on timescale?

Mr M Magill:

We do not have the luxury of time. I have not seen today's comprehensive spending review and how it will affect us, but it will affect us more or less immediately; therefore we need to do

something about it straight away. It is time for action.

Mr B McCrea:

The report is almost too big to get anything useful out of. Trevor said that it represented value for money in its weight. I understand why you might be asked to pull together such a report, because in the absence of the First Minister's intervention it would have created a platform for debate. However, we still have not addressed the reasons why we are not moving towards a shared education system.

If there is an academic case, if the life and times survey supports it, if Bain indicates it, and if the financial rationale is already known, what is really of interest is why it is not happening.

Mr M Magill:

That is an interesting question. However, it was not within the remit of my research to look into why it is not happening; that could be a study in itself.

Ms Tigchelaar:

We got the report to seek a debate on why it is not happening. That may give you something to go on, Basil.

Mr B McCrea:

I understand that you could not have anticipated the First Minister's recent pronouncements; no one could have.

The Chairperson:

Apart from me, according to the deputy First Minister; I allegedly wrote the speech.

Mr B McCrea:

I never cease to be amazed by your impact, Mervyn; it is tremendous.

Ms Tigchelaar:

For the sake of integration, the deputy First Minister said that if he were starting with a blank

sheet, we would not be where we are now, so I think that it is general.

Mr B McCrea:

As I understand it, the perfectly legitimate purpose of the report is to pull together what we know and get the debate reignited because, frankly, it has been on the shelf for some time. That is understood, and the fact is that other things have helped you to do that. However, key economic issues are not addressed in the report: one of the reasons schools do not co-operate more fully is that they are in competition with one another. The funding formula, which is calculated on a per capita basis, puts people at one anothers' throat, and the problem is compounded by the entitlement framework, among other things. I would like to have seen some financial analysis of what the driver is.

The Chairperson:

In fairness, is that not covered in the other four parts?

Mr M Magill:

It is. That is in the road map for further research, which outlines what we need to do.

The Chairperson:

It is at the very beginning of the road map for follow-up research. Part one of the paper looks at the viability of existing primary and post-primary provision, which has, by and large, been examined through the Bain report and other documentation. The other four parts are: developing alternative education delivery options; financial costing of alternative education delivery options; wider impact of alternative education delivery options; and optimal delivery solution for Northern Ireland primary and post-primary education. There is a huge amount of work to be done, and part four would cover what you are referring to, Basil.

Mr B McCrea:

Absolutely. I will not labour the point because we want to get to the wider discussion. However, there is some regurgitation and some people suggested that there might be quality benefits from a single education system. However, the challenge seems to be to have choice in a system: there are people who do not want their ethos diluted, for whatever reason. As Bain identified, there is

also a challenge in rural areas: we can afford choice in urban centres but not in rural ones unless we fund it.

Mr M Magill:

The report says that the issue in rural areas is different from that in urban areas. In a rural area there may be a Protestant school and a Catholic school with no alternative for miles, whereas there may be five different schools on one road in Belfast. That issue is not covered in our paper; further research into it will have to involve a geographic information exercise.

Mr B McCrea:

I will not go on, because we have the paper and we have talked about the substance of the matter.

The Chairperson:

We will open up the conversation with Geraldine. You will not be excluded, Mark.

Ms Tigchelaar:

I do not mind.

The Chairperson:

Geraldine, answer a question that has been on my mind since I wrote — sorry, heard — the First Minister's speech. What is the difference between integrating education and integrated education? The report talks a great deal about developing the case for shared education. Is there a distinction between integrating education, which is shared education, and integrated education?

Speaking as an individual and not as Chairperson of the Committee, the current form of integrated education could lead, in some cases, to a dumbing down of an ethos. The controlled sector in particular has always felt under pressure because of the emergence of the integrated sector. It would be interesting to see some of the work that is being done. In my constituency, for example, there is an integrated college that is way over-subscribed: parents want to send their children to it. However, in one instance a transformation took place solely because of competition for places; it was a case of bums on seats. That process was about preventing an integrated school starting so that the numbers would not move. Sadly, however, when the

transformation process started, 25 parents took their children out of the school. Emotive issues would be raised, the flag would not be flown, and they were afraid that activities would be introduced with which they would not be happy. Is there a difference between integrating education and integrated education?

Ms Tigchelaar:

Like you, I will speak as an individual rather than as the chairperson of the Integrated Education Fund if I may. We have a spectrum, and people are at different places on it. We have good schools in which quality education is being provided, and that is fine; it is not confined to any particular sector. The difference between integrating education and integrated education is where you find yourself on that journey.

As the head of a controlled school that transformed, I can say that by transforming we made a statement of intent to be integrated. We said that we would give a commitment to the parents that we would provide an integrated school for all children. By putting my head above the parapet, I could have lost it. The process will take time; I am talking about a generation. I do not think that Jonathan will be around by that time either. [*Laughter*.]

We are making a commitment; we have to do something to move forward. Integrated education means that you can come to me and ask why I am not doing this or that because I said that I would do it. I am bound to offend half a dozen people by saying this — can we switch off the tape? It is a bit like asking why co-habit or why get married? It is a statement of intent. In integrated education we are actively working to enhance the lives of children and to address their needs.

A good school with a good pastoral system will always look after the needs of its children; if it does not, it should not be a school. However, the difference between integrating and integrated is that integrating is a process about learning along the way; whereas integrated means that we have taken another step, we have to put our money where our mouth is and say that we must deliver. No child should come to school feeling that they are a minority individual.

The Chairperson:

I would be fascinated to see a piece of work carried out on that issue. I do not know whether you or the Department could undertake such a study, but in a radio interview the other morning John reminded me that the majority of the pupils in a controlled school in his constituency are Roman Catholic; and examples were given in a newspaper, which I will not name, of a high percentage of Protestants attending a maintained school. There are examples in every sector. The numbers may not be huge, but it would be interesting to know the challenges, the difficulties and the outcome.

A parent came to me last night and said that her 16-year-old daughter wants to go to a particular school, which I will not name, to do her A levels. It has nothing to do with the name of the school; it has to do with the outcome that it provided. However, its ethos and identity are completely different from those of the parents. Despite that happening increasingly, we are not getting any analysis of the challenges and issues faced. Non-denominational grammar schools have been in this place for years, and it has not been an issue. They may get a battering for other reasons, but they should be commended for the fact that there has not been a problem in non-denominational grammar schools since they came into existence.

Mr Lunn:

Chairman, I want to ask you and Ms Tigchelaar a question, if you do not mind. I have heard you use the example before of the 25 parents who took their children out of school because it transformed. However, 25 pupils out of how many?

My impression is that when schools transform they do not lose many pupils; they will always lose some, but it is not normal.

Ms Tigchelaar:

We did not lose anybody, but it is about how we address transformation. You do not go in with the wrong attitude; you bring people with you or you learn with people. Parents decide to transform a school, not the school. A school may agree to consider transformation, and its governors decide. However, once the decision is made, they hand over to the parents — end of story.

The Chairperson:

The school that I referred to had 340 pupils, and 25 left. You raised an issue, Geraldine, which is that transformation is approached in a variety of ways. A decision is a simple 50% plus one. It split the school. There were three attempts. There was a majority on the board of governors, but on two previous occasions they were unable to convince the majority of parents. However, they kept flogging it until it became an issue. I was never content that the figures proved that we had the majority of parents. The majority of those voting eventually got it over the line and decided to go down that road. That said, we lost only 25, but it was still a loss.

Mr Lunn:

What was the final vote?

The Chairperson:

I think that it was almost 52% of the 40 something percent that attended, although I can get you the figures.

Mr Lunn:

Was another suitable school near at hand for the 25 to go to?

The Chairperson:

Yes, and now it is over-subscribed.

Mr Lunn:

Like the integrated ones.

The Chairperson:

It was the same type; it was a controlled primary.

Mr Thompson:

Does that not illustrate the absence, to date, of area-based planning and the ability to put in place, from a Department-led level, the opportunity for schools to build from a simple to a fairly complex sharing model? The school that you mentioned has been treated totally in isolation, and

you mentioned the consequences to another school that is now over-subscribed.

Where were the resources to enable the interlocking of local schools to allow an evolution of provision in that area instead of, essentially, transformation? The term "transformation" is forced on us by the legislation. We are not trying to transform schools; we are hoping to enable them to evolve into schools that are seen as inclusive. We are trying to facilitate a process of change.

On the Friday before last, I attended the launch of the Craigavon Area Learning Community, and I would like to thank John O'Dowd for attending it. Nineteen post-primary schools have come together over the past 10 months to share and develop projects; some are cross-sectoral and others geographic. Every teacher from the 19 schools was present, as were three major industries: Galen Pharmaceuticals, Irwin's Bakery, and Kingspan; the Southern Regional College was also represented.

Properly supported, such an approach can build sharing into a community to allow an evolution process to take place. The IEF is not trying to drive schools to include the word "integrated" in their name or suddenly to adopt the statement of principles. However, we feel that it is essential, if we are to protect minorities in an area, that any change to the schools in an area must take account of its minorities. To do that in Portadown throws up, regrettably, one anomaly, although I speak personally, in that Drumcree College, the CCMS secondary school — even though it is on the Garvaghy Road — is not part of the area learning community because the Church has deemed it to be part of Armagh. It is a great loss to Portadown that that school is not part of Craigavon Senior High School, Clounagh Junior High School, Portadown College and Killicomaine Junior High School in the area learning community.

We need to facilitate sharing much more quickly as well as the protection of minorities. It does not benefit the Catholic minority in Portadown that its school is not part of the Craigavon Area Learning Community; it is detrimental to the educational outcomes of the pupils of Drumcree College.

We must focus on the needs of children, not those of institutions or sectoral bodies. At the launch, the representative of the Department of Education spoke about the need to introduce the

entitlement framework and to implement it coherently. Achieving that in Portadown can be done only through collaboration to make sure that 24 or 26 subjects are viable in schools and that we have the necessary expertise and resources. However, it was obvious that cost savings will not be made through sharing at first.

It will cost money initially. Problems with timetabling will lead to inefficiencies, and teachers may be displaced and children bussed, although that should be kept to minimum. There will be establishment costs. The savings from the sharing project will come when there is soft and hard federation, and, possibly, the coming together on a campus of its own.

Initially, through sharing and co-operation, we may start to move away from the need to have one bus driving from a community past one school to another school while another bus does exactly the same thing for the other tradition. We may get to the point where children get used to seeing other children at school in their own uniforms so that we can move children from the rural and urban community to schools, irrespective of the type of school that they are coming to. The principals involved in the sharing project said that the novelty of children with different uniforms being in the school quickly wore off. In fact, one of the most difficult sharing exercises was when a girls' school and a boys' school came together. Having the other sex present probably generated a greater dynamic than any other issue.

Mr O'Dowd:

I have a confession to make: on that Friday, I thought that I was attending a small meeting, but I walked into a hall of about 600 people. That was impressive. When you are led to the top of the hall and cannot escape, it is even more difficult.

Mr Thompson:

It meant that your presence was noted by everyone there, and I thank you for that.

Mr O'Dowd:

The gathering was impressive, and not just because of the numbers. The presentations from the business community showed not only a sharing of educational facilities but a sharing of community interest in the matter.

The debate on Peter Robinson's comments has been well aired, as has our party's view on integration. You spoke about what Martin McGuinness said, and I support that. The fact remains that if we live in a physically divided society, we will not be able to close down one particular sector. That is a financial and physical impossibility. Most parents, certainly those of primary-school children, send their children to the local school. In urban areas, there is more division, but in both urban and rural areas there is room for sharing facilities and real area-based planning.

Most parents will send wee Jonny or Jane to the nearest school, whether controlled or Catholic. They do not send their children to those schools to avoid the other community; however, the difficulty is that pupils do not meet children from the other community. I support the integrated sector, but a substantial proportion — about 50·1% — of children are educated in the Catholic sector. One cannot simply say that that sector has to go away now.

The Chairperson:

In fairness, John, that is not what the First Minister said; he was not talking about closing down any sector but about having a system of shared education without duplication. To paraphrase him correctly — not having written his speech — he said that the difficulty was that in introducing the integrated sector, we created another sector. The example that I gave is prime evidence of that. There is then a resistance to avoid creating another sector, and that creates problems. It is not about picking on a sector. I could say the same to you about the Minister's having a go at grammar schools. Those sectors exist; it is about how to accommodate and work with them in a more pragmatic, practical and economic way.

Mr O'Dowd:

I will not be tempted into a debate on the transfer system; I do not wish to ignore the witnesses. Concerns were raised about Peter's speech, and your example touched on them.

Many nationalists and republicans send their children to a school where they want them to be taught Irish culture; they want the Catholic religion in the school, to a lesser or greater degree, depending on people's personal views; they want the Irish language and Gaelic sports to be available. They want their children brought up in their culture. The address at the weekend caused concern because it was really about removing all those aspects to create a monocultural

education system. That caused concern, including for some of your constituents in the integrated sector. You have to overcome all those concerns.

Ms Tigchelaar:

If we recognise that they are concerns, we can work on them. We may not overcome them, but at least we will be making progress. I would not have thought that I would be sitting in this room with you discussing the issue, but it has happened. You are learning from and with one another; it is a process. There may be concern that you are going too fast or not fast enough, but things are moving.

You are addressing differences and a way forward, so let us do it. If you do not do it on your watch, history will judge you. Sorry, I am being very personal, but I am a foreigner, so I can say those things. You are getting there, so let us move forward, not to do anybody down but to make progress. I have a quote here, although I am reluctant to use it.

Mr B McCrea:

Go on.

Ms Tigchelaar:

A representative of the Rowntree Trust said that the goal of reconciliation had been replaced by "mutual accommodation". That is not good enough; it needs to go further. I have said so many times that I did not go into teaching to teach Catholic or Protestant children; I went in to teach children. That is what it is about. Children do not have the baggage that you or I or anyone else has unless we ask them to carry it for us. Let us not do that. Sorry, that is very rude.

Mr Thompson:

In the inclusive society that we are trying to build additionality is the way forward. In an environment where an identity or culture is not properly recognised, you do not talk about taking away what is there; you ask what is missing. If there was a controlled school and a small minority Catholic population in a non-viable school, surely it would be the responsibility of that school and the Department of Education to ensure that recognition was added to that school to ensure that full recognition was given to the minority community and that it was welcome. The

last thing that we want to see is dumbing down; we want to make sure that our community in its three-dimensional, holistic form is reflected in the facilities offered by the state to that community.

The Chairperson:

Perhaps that is a reason for not doing it. I would not want our schools to end up like the Assembly, where the Speaker regularly threatens to throw some of us out because of our bad behaviour. Perhaps we are not the best example, but I understand your point.

Mr D Bradley:

I agree with your efforts and I support them. You mentioned three rules: educational, societal and financial. A shared education also has to be a quality education. John said that he thought that parents would send their children to the nearest local school. However, I have seen Catholic parents send their children to the nearest maintained school because they thought that it was better than the nearest Catholic school. They went for quality rather than —

The Chairperson:

You mean the nearest controlled school?

Mr D Bradley:

Yes. They went for quality rather than proximity, and parents will do that in most cases. We should not underestimate the difficulties. I have been involved in cases in two separate parishes. In one there were three maintained schools that the CCMS was trying to reform; it failed because each of the three churches in the parish wanted to maintain its own school.

They fought tooth and nail to do that, and, at the end of the day, CCMS abandoned its plans. In another area, because of numbers, it made sense to amalgamate two controlled primary schools, but it did not happen because each community wanted to retain its own school. Those are the difficulties with single-identity examples. However, things get even more difficult with cross-sector sharing. Nevertheless, it is doable.

As well as influencing public representatives here, you need to influence the various sectors

that decide where to locate new schools. At present, they are the CCMS, the education and library boards, NICIE, which I suppose would not be so much of a problem, and the council for Irish-medium education. Those are the people we need to get on board and whose attitude we need to change. If they were in front of us, they would probably tell us that they are in favour of sharing; however, that is not always evident in operational decisions. In addition, in its response to your paper, the Department shows no great enthusiasm for actively promoting sharing. In fact, it said that it will respond to parental demand. The Department could be more proactive, and rather than being reactive, it should have a policy on the matter.

Ms Tigchelaar:

That is a very important point, Dominic. I do not want a robust policy in setting up schools and a weak policy when closing unsustainable schools, but that is what I see. You have the maps, so you know what we will face. Nobody wants to close schools. However, as an ex-teacher, I know that to get quality education you have to give schools the resources that they require, and if you spread money too thinly it will not go where it is needed. I would rather see two small schools become one school that delivers quality provision in classes of 20 where children's needs are met than see resources spread too thinly between two schools.

Mr D Bradley:

I do not disagree. However, as well as influencing the people in this room, you need to influence providers. Rather than forcing one sector to abandon its ethos, you need an approach that involves gaining people's agreement to work in partnership. We need to persuade people, get their agreement and work in partnership with them. Outcomes from that approach would be more self-sustaining than any that might be brought about artificially.

Ms Merron:

As I said, the shared education review, which has yet to be published, will point out that more than a thousand schools do that anyway. We should make the public aware that, although they are at very early stages, many schools already do that work. The schools are starting to see benefits. It is important to remember that they are doing the work while everyone else is just talking about it. Nevertheless, I agree that that work is not being led by the Department; it is funded mainly by philanthropic organisations, but that money will dry up.

Ms Tigchelaar:

We heard about the entitlement curriculum, which probably works because older, sixth-form children can be move around. However, what is being done in the primary sector? I understand that there was a meeting this week of primary-sector governors, who complained about funding. As an ex-head of a secondary school, I will not say yes or no about that.

In the past 10 years, never mind whatever agreements there have been, the change in education has been colossal. There is technology now. That is fine, but try replacing whiteboards and computers. Demands have changed. A teacher can no longer stand at the chalk face and do what I used to do. We have to make sure that we have the funding. Teachers are still in the classrooms; they are still delivering to the best of their ability. Let us help them.

Mr B McCrea:

Your financial argument does not stack up; it is also misleading, and it takes us in the wrong direction. You said that there are 40,000 empty spaces and that our schools estate is unsustainable. You can resolve that by using your nice map of closing schools. Protestant schools, if there were such a thing, could merge with other Protestant schools and Catholic schools, if there were such a thing, could merge with other Catholic schools. The reduction in the number of pupils in the Western Education and Library Board gives several options, one of which is to have a mixed school in Lisnaskea and a mixed school in Enniskillen or have a Protestant school in one of those towns and a Catholic school in the other. That seems to be the argument. The number of empty spaces creates a financial problem, and the question is how to resolve that. Rather than argue that it is all about finance, it should be about a strategic vision for Northern Ireland; that there should be integrated shared education because, fundamentally, that is what is important to the development of our part of the world.

Ms Tigchelaar:

I am looking for a strategic blueprint that will allow us to address the financial, social and educational issues that we face. It is as simple as that. I am not making an economic argument on its own.

Mr B McCrea:

I am on record as supporting integrated education. I was quite taken by some of Dominic's revelations. He made an interesting observation. I hope that I am not putting him on the spot. In the face of financial or entitlement framework difficulties, CCMS has been able to bring together its school estates to make sure that it has viable schools and has protected its integrity while other sectors, particularly the controlled sector, have not been able to do so. The financial case for integration in CCMS does not exist because it can make schools viable. However, that does not achieve sharing. I was not involved in the discussion between Mervyn and John, but integrating education in some way is a direct challenge to powerful vested interests; in particular, those of faith-based organisations, and we should recognise that. Many people think that the integrated strategy is about having no cultural bias as opposed to having equal cultural opportunity, which is what it has. As Dominic said, although he probably used slightly softer terms, other sectors have to be convinced that it is in their interests to adopt a different model. Do you agree?

Ms Tigchelaar:

It is an interesting thought, Basil, on which I would need to reflect. There is value in it, but, on the other hand and to throw it back to you, is it my job to convince them?

Mr B McCrea:

You are providing leadership.

Ms Tigchelaar:

Thank you.

Mr B McCrea:

You are, which is why you produced the report. I am committed to bringing that forward, but I also believe in the principle of choice, and, as Mervyn said, there are those who choose a different way. Is there any difference between what you proposed and the idea that the Ulster Unionist Party (UUP) put forward in its manifestos about having shared faith schools? That would mean the various Churches working together.

Ms Tigchelaar:

That is not excluded by any means. If you are sharing, how you share must be considered.

On Tuesday evening, I heard a gentleman who worked in Fermanagh some years ago speak about a primary school there that served the local community. I cannot substantiate his remarks, but he said that that school had an agreement whereby they had a Catholic principal and a Protestant vice-principal, and when one moved on those positions switched. No one has said that joint-faith schools could not be part of sharing.

I also have an option for choice, and I do not suggest that we should take a particular approach. We can find local solutions for local issues. Nothing is closed and you must make the strategic blueprint work.

Mr B McCrea:

Tina spoke earlier about benefits and schools doing all this. The problems lie in what benefits many schools will achieve, apart from having a nice opportunity to talk to others. Someone needs to make an argument that is backed up by resources. If the argument is not made that there is a benefit, you will not get the resources to do it. I hate to say it, but you are far too nice, Geraldine.

Ms Tigchelaar:

You told me that the last time. *[Laughter.]*

Mr B McCrea:

It remains the same. With the ethos that you are trying to put forward, you are confronting some very strong and well-developed cultural interests. The document includes a little about the history of educational development in Northern Ireland. When the system was being set up, Lord Londonderry took the view that there should be a secular, non-denominational education system, but that was opposed by the Protestant and Roman Catholic Churches.

We have to create a debate because if we really want a shared future, we must do something about it. The Administration is lukewarm about a shared future and it needs someone to take it forward. Having our children meeting, playing and being educated together in some shape or

form is the way that we will secure the future for everyone.

Ms Tigchelaar:

Thank you, Basil. I do not need to reply to that, because you have said it all. Having said that I was too nice, you have been very kind.

Mr Thompson:

I put a question to your colleague who presented the paper at the economic conference. The paper refers to creating alternative provision in an area and the population in that area. However, it is an economic paper, and I asked your colleague what account would be taken of the culture and tradition of the people in that area when looking at alternative provision. That is not within the scope of the paper, but it is within the scope of what we are talking about today.

I do not doubt, from what I have heard, that there may be a lack of commitment to a shared future. I do not believe that any of the parties present are not committed to the protection of minorities. If we are to ensure that the population remains stable and grows and does not feel the need to shift geographically in order to find its own identity, school provision in an area, particularly in rural, less-populated areas, must be totally accommodating and inclusive. We cannot have a child travel 11 miles to his or her type of school and be driven past the other type of good school or go to the other type of good school and be quiet about the fact that he or she is different. That is not a positive way forward.

Therefore, we look to you to ensure, through your policies and leadership, that minorities are protected. Bigger groups, Protestant, Catholic or other, will protect themselves. As I said, however, no right is absolute; it may be necessary to qualify and challenge it. I put it to the Department: what society requires is mediative behaviour. It would be of assistance if the Department of Education were to provide resources for mediative support to allow for a constructive conversation to take place in a locality in order to enable some of those issues to be addressed. In the meantime, small programmes or a single event — perhaps even the sharing of a football field — might start to open up that process and to quell the fears, which are legitimately held, of the minority in an area.

Mr Craig:

I will play devil's advocate. We would all like to see a single education system. I do not believe that anyone here would say otherwise, except, perhaps, John. We all know, however, that it is a pipe dream. I am fascinated by the area planning that you put forward as a way of getting schools to co-operate, because I see it from both sides: on one hand, we tell people to go away and do it; on the other, we sit with another hat on and see that, in reality, it cannot work— not while schools and, more important, three education sectors in Northern Ireland compete with one another. There are four sectors, if we include grammar schools, competing aggressively with one another. It is all down to how schools are financed. Pupils on seats equates to finance. Can you see any scenario in which area planning will work while that competition exists, not only among sectors, but among schools in sectors.

Mr Thompson:

I believe that Geraldine covered that. There seems to be a soft policy towards unsuccessful schools. Oversubscribed schools are not allowed to improve their admissions because they are likely to threaten local schools. Yet, there is no penalty for non-sustainable schools that are not achieving educational standards. There is a soft policy towards underperformance. If we challenge underperforming, unsustainable schools in an area and ask parents whether they are willing to accept less-than-adequate provision for their children — which the Department should be doing anyway — we can facilitate a constructive conversation on how to move education forward in that area. It need not involve a move towards an integrated school; the ownership of the school is absolutely irrelevant. What is relevant is how a child and his or her parents perceive the school when the child considers going there.

Ms Merron:

In the past, if the Department of Education wanted to do something, it would have provided incentives — although it would never have called them that — such as specialist schools and so on. If the Department wants to be proactive, it could encourage schools to work together by providing incentives for those that are willing to share and co-operate with one another. It could provide incentives if it wanted to go down that road.

Mr Craig:

Do you think that it will work when schools are competing with one another in and between sectors? The system is far too competitive, and for the wrong reasons. Schools are competing for financial survival, not for academic or other achievement by children.

Ms Tigchelaar:

If schools are more important than children, something is wrong. That is not a throwaway comment; it is something that I have thought about for a long time. We need to put that into the debate. That does not answer your question, but I hope that it challenges schools to provide quality.

Mr Thompson:

The way in which engagement in shared projects is likely to devolve, if funding continues, means that we should have support from the community, providing that we deliver quality education, either on a small scale or through some form of soft or hard federation. However, it will not initially threaten schools. Soft federation does not threaten a school; neither its board of governors nor its ownership changes.

Mr Lunn:

Basil made an interesting point about joint-faith schools; he said that they could be an option. There is a perception that the main obstacle to such schools is the Catholic Church. However, a joint-faith school was set up a few years ago in County Laois, which was supported by the Catholic Church and the Church of Ireland. I do not think that the Catholic Church in Borris-in-Ossory in County Laois would go on a solo run; that project must have been sanctioned by the Catholic authorities. At least it provides an example; there is no reason why it should not be replicated.

Ms Tigchelaar:

There is no reason at all. Bishop McKeown said that he would talk to anyone. I have a copy of an interesting speech by the Archbishop of Armagh, Alan Harper. He said:

"We still need to articulate a coherent vision for the society … such a vision must not seek solutions to the challenges of a divided society on the basis of equal but separate communities: separate development is not a recipe for a sustainable and

harmonious future."

There are Church leaders who are willing to talk, to think and to consider; let us utilise that. They are there to address the spiritual needs of individuals; let them do that.

Ms Merron:

It is not just about the Churches; it is about what parents want. Integrated schools are for Catholics and Protestants, all faiths and none.

Mr Thompson:

I know parents from the professional classes in the Catholic tradition who are fearful of the loss of CCMS schools because those same children are absent from church on Saturdays or Sundays. The same feeling exists among members of the Protestant churches, albeit less well articulated. It is my belief — and there is evidence for it — that in a successful shared and inclusive school with more than one faith present but properly acknowledged, the child's faith structure is reinforced and developed.

Mr Lunn:

I will repeat my mantra: every time we have a group of experts here, we seem to have an outbreak of harmony. I said that last week as well. You appear to have had an indication of support from every party at the table. That does not surprise me, because I have heard it from each of them in the past; we have now heard it from on high, from Mr Robinson. I wonder where we are going with it, but it is encouraging. I hope that you are getting some encouragement from it as well.

Ms Tigchelaar:

Very much so, although, as I said, we are not experts. However, now that it is on the table it cannot be put back in the drawer; it must be addressed in some way. To say that I believe that the Committee will address it would be putting it too strongly. We will keep shouting at you until you do, and I will continue to shout at Basil McCrea, because I am too nice to him.

Mr O'Dowd:

People always say that I am too nice.

Mr B McCrea:

Let's leave your mother out of this.

Ms Tigchelaar:

I was going to ask whether it was true.

Mr O'Dowd:

It has a hint of truth. I want to ask about the map, which has a Housing Executive logo. What is the source of that map?

Ms Tigchelaar:

We are talking to the Housing Executive —

Mr O'Dowd:

Is that information with the Departments?

Ms Tigchelaar:

No. We are talking to the Housing Executive. We are an independent trust. In looking at issues such as shared housing, we talk to the Housing Executive, not just to the Department of Education. We asked the Housing Executive for some very interesting maps, which it provided. The Committee has seen the soft ones, but there are harder.

Mr O'Dowd:

The map presents its information by indicating schools of "below enrolment sustainability". There are six elements for school sustainability: does the map deal only with enrolment?

Ms Tigchelaar:

Yes, this is solely and simply enrolment. Enrolment for a secondary school is 500, but we know that some schools do not have approved enrolment for 500 pupils. In other words, they cannot

hold 500, so the information in the map is based only on enrolment. The Housing executive has been supportive and has enabled us to use its geographical information system, which we would like the Department to be included in as well, if possible, so that everybody will have access to its information. It is important to see data presented in this way.

Mr O'Dowd.

Thank you.

The Chairperson:

That is useful, because, just as I support the retention of the ballot box on Rathlin Island, I also support the retention of its school. Therefore, its colour on the map, which depicts it as below enrolment sustainability, will have to change, although the reason for that position is obvious, given that the school is on an island.

The evidence has been very useful. I thank the witnesses for their time and for coming and sharing.