SHARED EDUCATION—NOW IS THE TIME

By Dr Denis Rooney, Chairman, International Fund for Ireland

There has been much attention recently to the issue of segregated education, triggered by the comments of the First Minister and the reaction to them. Whatever your thoughts on the First Minister’s views, now is the right time for our society to consider the issue calmly and objectively and to formulate a strategy based on consensus.

There is little doubt that many in Northern Ireland believe that segregated education, whatever the historical logic of its existence, is not the ideal basis on which to construct a healthy, viable society in the future. I believe the argument for tackling the issue is a strong one but great difficulties lie in how we achieve the change.

The International Fund for Ireland has developed and supported a Sharing in Education Programme over the past few years. The overriding objective of the Programme is to get more pupils from Catholic and Protestant communities sitting together in classrooms, mostly on curriculum based programmes, for their first time.

The Programme requires pupils, teachers and parents to work together and to date it has involved nearly 30,000 pupils. While there have been some small pockets of resistance, the Programme has been a success and its beneficial impact has reached out beyond the school environment and into local communities.

The Fund’s Programme, part of which is co-funded by The Atlantic Philanthropies, involves schools, whether they are Controlled, Maintained or Integrated, and it sponsors collaboration among them.

The Programme recognises that for schools the biggest challenge is often taking the first step towards collaboration and it therefore supports a range of strategic projects that enable young people to participate in shared educational experiences. While many of the projects are in the developmental stage, anecdotal evidence from teachers, pupils, parents and communities has been extremely positive to date.

An independent survey last year showed that 75% of pupils had enjoyed the experience of working with those who belong to a different community background. However, a small number said they had not enjoyed it. So, while progress has been made, work remains to be done.

We have also recently developed the Welcoming Schools Programme with the objective of supporting all schools to take proactive steps to make them more welcoming to pupils from the “other” community. Here the objective is to try to move a stage beyond collaboration on a curriculum basis to the position where an increasing proportion of cross-community pupil intake will be encouraged.

We in the Fund, and the vast majority of those engaged with the Sharing in Education Programme, are delighted with the success to date, but it does beg the question as to whether or not this will deliver a sufficient critical mass of sharing education in an appropriate timescale for our society.

We believe that it is now time for the key stakeholders in education to reflect, engage and negotiate the pathway to a shared education with appropriate objectives, targets and delivery mechanisms.

All schools need to make changes to support this objective of gradually increasing the proportion of pupils from the “other” community in a transitional process which renders the original denomination of the particular school less and less relevant over time.

Obviously schools located deep in the heart of one community or the other will find this challenge much more difficult than schools located in more mixed environments - but the key is to gradually achieve a critical mass of sharing. This is part of a broader approach in which the Fund is also supporting the Shared Neighbourhood Programme which is designed to support and encourage 30 shared neighbourhoods throughout Northern Ireland.

The fact that this will be a very big challenge for the education sector doesn’t mean we shouldn’t take it on. The opposite is true, because we have little choice if we are serious about creating a shared society.

We believe that success is more likely if this is a collaborative process freely entered into by the key stakeholders. Progress, however, requires courage and compromise and can be achieved without any risk to the religious education of all those pupils whose parents wish them to have one.

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