



Schools in Northern Ireland: Sustained without Sustainability

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Schools in Northern Ireland: Sustained without Sustainability?

1. Purpose

The operation of education in Northern Ireland is often bewildering for those outside of the system (and possibly at times for many of those within it). This complexity lies at the heart of many of the issues that affect the structures and long-term sustainability of schools and schooling. Drive through virtually any village in Northern Ireland and you are almost guaranteed to see two schools - often only a few yards apart, often struggling to stay open. There is governmental recognition that this duplication is costly and unsustainable.¹

Many parents and local communities fear the loss of a school that serves not merely as a place of education but as a focus for community activity. The threat of school closures has led some communities to try to come together to find a common solution, only to discover that the planning authorities appear to be operating in silos, and that they are constrained by legislation, policy and convention that hinders the development of innovative, shared local solutions. This paper seeks to untangle these policies, in order to inform the debate around the future of education in NI. At the same time, it is also envisaged that this information will help those communities who might face school sustainability issues (and potential closure) to understand some of the forces that affect decision making and explore options around the educational estate.

2. Context

In order to be able to assess the options that may be available to ensure a sustainable estate across NI schools now and in the future, it is necessary to unpick and understand the way in which the education system in NI is constructed and operates.

2.1 Separation of Schools and Systems

The architects of both the National Schools model developed in Ireland following the Stanley Letter in 1831 and the Northern Ireland Education Act that was drafted by Lord Londonderry in the wake of the partition of the island in the 1920s, envisioned a common system that would educate Protestant and Catholic children together; sitting daily alongside one another in the same school building and classroom. A vision of universal, non-denominational education. These aspirations remain universally unfulfilled.

The Government classifies schools in NI into seven different categories:

Controlled - Primary and secondary Controlled schools are managed by voluntary Boards of Governors (BoGs) and funded through the Education Authority (EA) as the employing authority. The BoGs of these schools include reserved places for representatives of the 'Transferors' (i.e. the three Protestant denominations that handed over the running of their schools to the NI state in the 1920s and 1930s). Legislation also requires that the BoGs of these schools include a prescribed allocation of places for parents, teachers and representatives of EA. The Controlled sector also includes nursery schools, grammar schools (one of which houses a Controlled preparatory school) and special schools - the BoGs for these schools have reserved places for parents, teachers and the EA but not for Transferor governors. The Controlled school sector also includes a number of Controlled Integrated (CI) schools and Irish-Medium (IM) schools - the composition of their BoGs is different again e.g. CI schools include Catholic Trustees alongside Transferors and endeavour to have a balance between Catholic and Protestant governors. The Controlled Schools Support Council (CSSC) is funded to support and represent the interests of all of these various types of Controlled schools.

Catholic Maintained - Primary and secondary Catholic Maintained schools are managed by voluntary BoGs that include a proportion of governors who are nominated to represent the interest of Catholic Trustees alongside parents, teachers and governors assigned to the school by EA and Department of Education (DE). The Council for Catholic Maintained Schools (CCMS) is responsible for the effective management of the Catholic Maintained sector and is the employing authority for teachers in Catholic Maintained schools. The Catholic Schools' Trustee Service is funded to provide support and advice to Trustees on area planning.

¹ Government of the United Kingdom and the Government of Ireland (2020) *The New Decade, New Approach Deal* https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/856998/2020-01-08_a_new_decade_a_new_approach.pdf

Voluntary Grammar schools - Voluntary Grammars are managed by BoGs that are constituted in line with each school's scheme of management – these usually include representatives of the school's founders, parents, teachers, DE and, in most cases, EA representatives. Eleven non-denominational Voluntary Grammar schools have preparatory departments that provide education for primary aged pupils – these 'preps' are partially publicly funded but require parents to pay additional annual fees. For each Voluntary Grammar school the BoG is the employing authority and is responsible for all staff in its school. Voluntary Grammar schools vary in the rates of capital grant to which they are entitled, depending on the management structure that they have adopted. The Governing Bodies Association is funded to represent the interests of Voluntary Grammar schools.

Integrated - Since 1989 DE has been required to “encourage and facilitate” Integrated Education under Article 64:1 of the Education Reform (Northern Ireland) Order.² This duty was reiterated in the 1998 Agreement.³ Since the passing of the Integrated Education Act (Northern Ireland) 2022, DE also has a duty to “support” Integrated Education.⁴ Integrated schools aim to intentionally support, protect and advance an ethos of diversity, respect and understanding between those of different cultures and religious beliefs and of none, between those of different socio-economic backgrounds and between those of different abilities. There are two types of Integrated schools - Grant Maintained Integrated (GMI) and Controlled Integrated (CI). Both types can be established as a new school or come about when an existing school 'transforms' to Integrated status. To date, the vast majority of CI schools have transformed from a different management type to Integrated while the existing GMI schools have been brought into existence as new schools by a group of parents. GMI schools are managed by BoGs consisting of foundation governors working alongside parents, teacher representatives and DE representatives. In spite of having changed their legal status, transformed CI schools are still managed within the Controlled sector with EA remaining as the employing authority, although the composition of their BoG will have been revised to ensure that it contains a balance of Protestant and Catholic governors (including reserved places for both Transferors and Trustees and more parent representatives). The BoG of a GMI school is the employing authority for all staff in the school. The NI Council for Integrated Education (NICIE) is funded to promote the strategic development of Integrated schools and to provide advice and guidance to all Integrated schools, both CI and GMI.

Irish-medium - Irish-medium (IM) education is provided in an Irish speaking school or unit. Under the terms of Article 89 of the Education (Northern Ireland) Order 1998, DE has a statutory duty to “encourage and facilitate” the development of IM education.⁵ IM schools may be either Controlled or Maintained IM. Maintained IM schools are Voluntary schools owned by Trustees and managed by BoGs that are made up of members nominated by the Trustees along with representatives of parents, teachers and the EA. IM education is also provided at pre-school level. Comhairle na Gaelscolaíochta (CnaG) is funded to promote and support Irish-medium education.

Special - Special schools educate pupils with additional needs. These may educate pupils from four to 19 years old in the same institution. They are predominantly managed within the Controlled sector (a legacy of many special schools having originally been set up through the National Health Service). There is no publicly funded support body to represent the particular and unique interests of Special schools. Special schools have less control over their budgets than other school types and they are not required to include church representatives on their BoG.

Independent - Independent schools set their own curriculum and admissions policies. They receive no grant aid from DE. Instead, they are funded by fees paid by parents and through income from investments. They provide full-time education for pupils aged four to 16. There are currently 14 Independent schools in NI – 9 of these define themselves as Christian schools, four provide a specialist education for pupils with specific educational needs and one is roughly equivalent to an English public school.⁶ Each Independent school must be registered with DE and is inspected regularly by the Education and Training Inspectorate (ETI).

2.2 The Funding of Schools

Responsibility for education is one of the matters that has been devolved to the NI Assembly. The Assembly receives a Block Grant to cover all of its duties (including education) from the UK government. The NI Executive usually agrees a budget and the proportion of funding allocated for education within that budget is assigned to DE. It is, however, EA that has been designated the responsibility of distributing annual funds to all grant-aided schools in NI: Controlled and Maintained (including Integrated and IM); Voluntary Grammar and GMI. The scheme under which this funding is allocated has been in operation since 2005; it is known as the Common Funding Scheme. This scheme is based on the key principle that *sustainable* schools should be funded “according to the relative need of their pupils, and in a way that enables the effects of social disadvantage to be substantially reduced”, and that funding decisions should be made, “on a consistent and fair basis, taking full account of the needs of pupils”.⁷

The Scheme uses the Common Funding Formula (CFF) to determine how much each school will receive to “support schools in delivering the curriculum” and to “underpin and reinforce wider education policy and objectives”. To ensure that the CFF is “as transparent and comprehensible as possible and predictable in its outcome” it is reviewed annually and made available through the DE and EA websites.⁸

Thus, the BoGs of every grant-aided school receives a delegated budget to meet the costs of running their school, enabling them to plan and use resources in accordance with their school's needs and priorities. How much each school receives is calculated in respect of the size of their premises, and the numbers and ages of the pupils enrolled. An additional weighting is then applied in respect of relative social deprivation and the proportion of pupils that have been identified as requiring additional support. Special consideration is also given to the additional costs of keeping a small school operational.

² <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/nisi/1989/2406/contents>

³ The Agreement (1998) Agreement reached in the multi-party negotiations (Belfast/Good Friday Agreement)

⁴ <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/nia/2022/15/crossheading/statutory-duty-to-support/enacted>

⁵ <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/nisi/1998/1759/article/89>

⁶ Rockport School is Northern Ireland's only fully independent day and boarding school

⁷ Department of Education (2021) Common Funding Scheme 2021–22, p 3 <https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/publications/common-funding-scheme-2021-2022>

⁸ Department of Education (2021) Common Funding Scheme 2021–22, p 3 <https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/publications/common-funding-scheme-2021-2022>

For Controlled schools, EA employ and pay teaching and non-teaching staff directly through DE. In Maintained schools the responsibility for employing teaching staff is undertaken by CCMS, while EA is responsible for the employment of non-teaching staff.⁹ The budget assigned in both of these sectors is virtual – the schools do not operate their own bank accounts.

Voluntary Grammar and GMI schools are subject to different funding arrangements. In both of these school types it is the BoGs that is responsible for the employment of all staff (both teaching and non-teaching). Funding is transferred by EA to the school directly.

The Age-Weighted Pupil Unit accounts for around three quarters of the CFF. For every pupil that attends a school, the school is entitled to a sum of money. The cash value of this varies from year to year; it is calculated by taking the funding left in the funding stream once all other costs have been deducted and dividing it by the number of pupils in the system. These other costs are currently rising and the number of pupils in some sectors is falling, particularly in primary schools, consequently the amount that schools receive per pupil has been falling in recent years.

The operation of the NI Assembly in Stormont has, since its creation, been disrupted by a number of protracted suspensions during which responsibility for the education budget has passed to the Secretary of State for NI. In November 2022, during one such hiatus the incumbent in the post, Chris Heaton-Harris MP, instructed EA to make £110M of savings in the schools' budget. In January 2023 the Education Authority refused to implement the required cuts, stating that they would cause "highly unacceptable and detrimental risks" to children and young people.¹⁰ Further substantial and detrimental cuts have, however, been instructed throughout 2023 including cuts or abolition of funding for "holiday hunger" payments, funds for new school buildings, shared education, special educational needs coordinators, specialist nurture classes and sports coaching.¹¹

2.3 School Sustainability

The 2006 Independent Strategic Review of Education (the Bain Report) identified that some aspects of education in NI were more costly than they should be. The report advised that a policy should be developed to ensure the sustainability of all grant-aided schools.¹² In response, DE produced "Schools for the Future: a policy for sustainable schools" (also known as the 'Sustainable Schools Policy' – SSP) in 2009. SSP placed the quality of the educational experience firmly in the foreground:

"[The] aim is to have strong viable schools which provide our children with a high-quality education for their benefit, and for the benefit of society as a whole".¹³

NI has a higher proportion of small schools than England, Scotland or Wales. The SSP asserts that ensuring the effective delivery of the curriculum in such schools "presents particular challenges and difficulties".¹⁴ Economies of scale also mean that, when cost per pupil is calculated, smaller schools are generally more expensive to run than those with a larger number of pupils as shown in Figure 1: £5,805 is spent, on average, per pupil in those primary schools that have fewer than 60 pupils, while the comparable cost for pupils attending primaries with between 105 to 210 children is £3,533 and in primaries with more than 500 children the figure is £3,104.¹⁵ The trend is comparable in post-primary schools as shown in Figure 2.

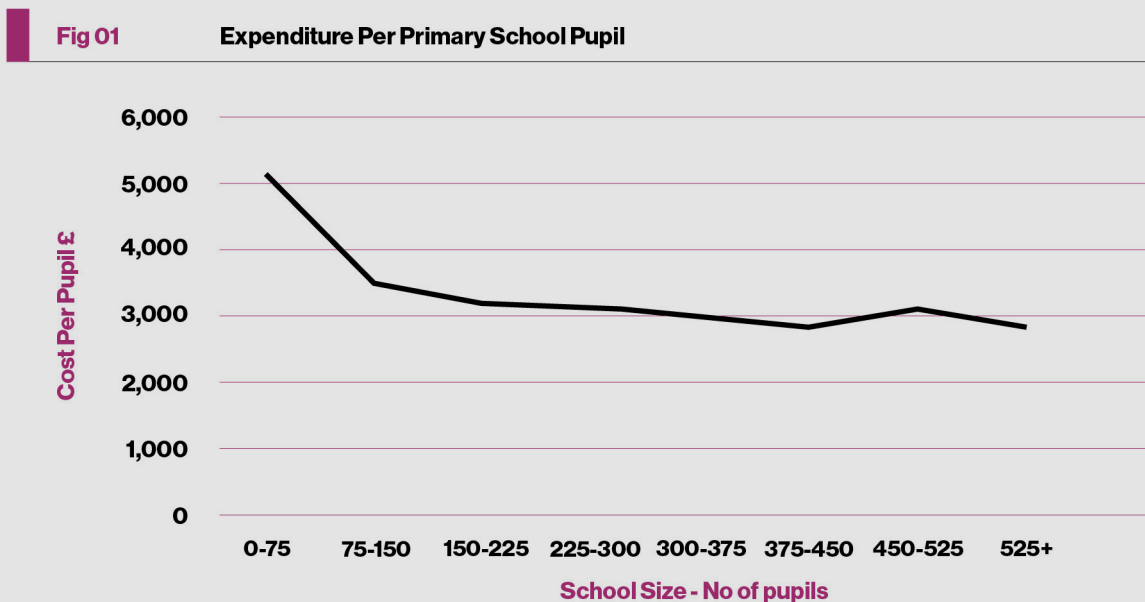


Figure 1. Cost per pupil (£) by School Size (Primary)¹⁶

⁹ NI Assembly (2016) Research and Information Service Paper 44/16 "Education System in Northern Ireland" <https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/articles/information-school-types-northern-ireland>

¹⁰ <https://www.belfasttelegraph.co.uk/news/education/education-authority-refusing-to-support-devastating-110m-saving-plan-proposed-by-ni-secretary/42296309.html#:~:text=In%20November%2C%20Chris%20Heaton%2DHarris,to%20children%20and%20young%20people>

¹¹ <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-northern-ireland-65934653>

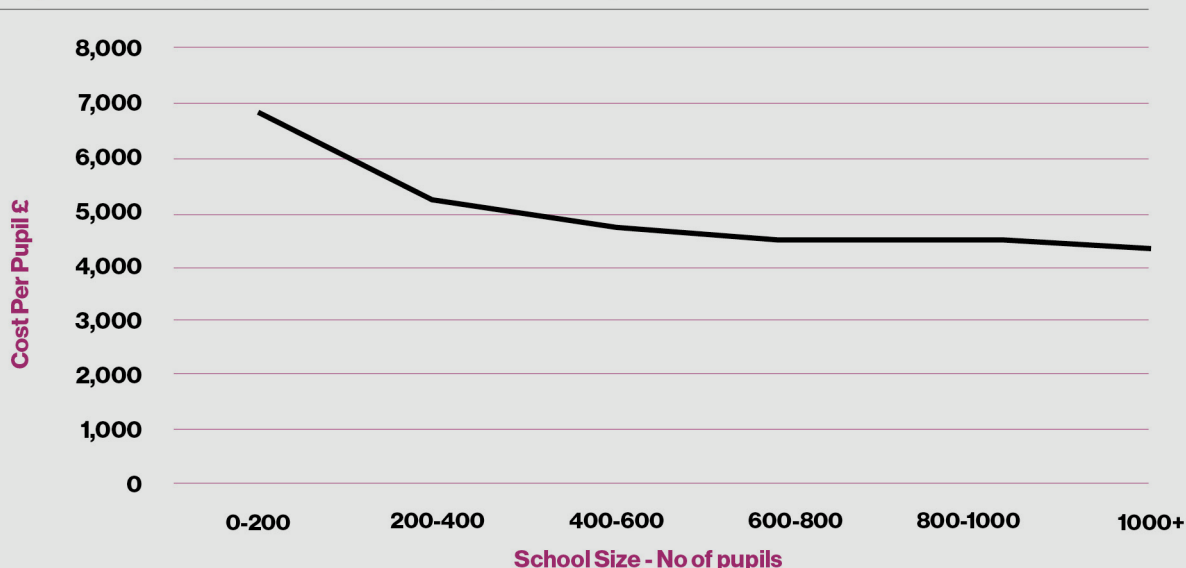
¹² Bain, G. et al (2006) *Schools for the Future: Funding, Strategy, Sharing* Report of the Independent Strategic Review of Education https://dera.ioe.ac.uk/9777/1/review_of_education.pdf

¹³ Department of Education (2009) *Schools for the Future: A Policy for Sustainable Schools*, P. 1 <https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/publications/chools-future-policy-sustainable-schools>

¹⁴ *ibid* P. 7

¹⁵ Education Authority NI (2022) Draft Strategic Area Plan 2 (2022-27): Planning for Sustainable Provision <https://www.eani.org.uk/sites/default/files/2022-01/draft%20Strategic%20Area%20Plan%202022-27.pdf>

¹⁶ Response by DE to personal email (2020)

Fig 02 Expenditure Per Post-Primary School Pupil**Figure 2. Cost per pupil (£) by School Size (Post-primary)¹⁷**

The SSP also proposed that, in order to be classified as being “fit for purpose”, schools need to ensure that education is provided in as cost effective a manner as possible. In order to be sustainable, rural primary schools (i.e. those located in settlements with fewer than 5,000 people) for example, require:

- A minimum of four teachers
- No more than two composite year groups
- A minimum of 105 pupils (140 for urban primaries). Note: For post-primaries the minimum enrolment threshold is 500 for years 8-12 and 100 for years 13-14^{18 19}

In the 2020-21 school year, one in twenty of NI's primary schools (43) had fewer than four teachers and nearly one-third of primary schools (233 of 803) and 69 post-primary schools did not meet the enrolment criteria.²⁰ DE considers that a school's sustainability is also dependent upon its capacity to operate within its allocated budget. In the 2019/20 year, 259 primary schools and 78 post-primary schools had a financial deficit that was greater than 5% of their annual budget.²¹

In addition, the SSP outlines six criteria (and associated indicators) against which DE should assess a school's sustainability.

1. Quality Educational Experience.
2. Stable Enrolment Trends.
3. Sound Financial Position.
4. Strong Leadership and Management by Board of Governors and Principals.
5. Accessibility.
6. Strong Links with the Community.

As has been outlined, deep-rooted historical factors have led to the development of separate systems in NI. The New Decade New Approach agreement in 2020 observed that, given current financial pressures, the patterns of diversity, division and duplication throughout education were “unsustainable”.²²

That division and duplication is most obviously evident in those villages and small towns throughout NI that are served by two schools – these schools generally reflect, represent and arguably sustain community division. Research conducted in 2020 suggests that there are 32 villages across NI with two primary schools serving different communities and that these schools are, on average, only 600 meters apart.²³

Rural populations have been in decline for many years. The NI Statistics and Research Agency projected that the number of school-age children in rural NI would fall by around 6% between 2018 and 2027.²⁴ The proportion of rural primaries that are below the enrolment threshold is therefore likely to increase.

It is wholly possible that, under current policies, neighbouring schools managed in different sectors may both be identified for closure by their respective management authorities, thereby leaving a village without any educational provision. There are clear benefits for all in exploring sustainable options, together.

¹⁷ Response by DE to personal email (2020)

¹⁸ Department of Education (2009) *Schools for the Future: A Policy for Sustainable Schools*, P. 15 <https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/publications/chools-future-policy-sustainable-schools>

¹⁹ Department of Education (2009) *Schools for the Future: A Policy for Sustainable Schools*, P. 15 <https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/publications/chools-future-policy-sustainable-schools> P. 10

²⁰ <https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/education/Sustainability%20Baseline%20Report%20-%20Part%201%20-%20Narrative%20and%20NI%20Level%20Analysis.pdf> <https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/education/Sustainability%20Baseline%20Report%20-%20Part%201%20-%20Narrative%20and%20NI%20Level%20Analysis.pdf>

²¹ <https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/education/Sustainability%20Baseline%20Report%20-%20Part%201%20-%20Narrative%20and%20NI%20Level%20Analysis.pdf> P. 20

²² UK and Irish Governments (2020) *New Decade, New Approach* - https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/856998/2020-01-08_a_new_decade_a_new_approach.pdf

²³ <https://www.ulster.ac.uk/research/topic/education/our-research/current-research-projects/transforming-education/isolated-together-pairs-of-primary-schools-duplicating-provision>

²⁴ NISRA Statistical Bulletin (2020) <https://www.nisra.gov.uk/sites/nisra.gov.uk/files/publications/SNPP18-Bulletin.pdf>

2.4 Area Planning

There is recognition that developments at one school (or in one sector) can impact on the sustainability of neighbouring schools. In order to co-ordinate and manage the priorities of the various sectors the process of Area Planning has been introduced. The aim of Area Planning is to:

“Establish a network of viable schools that are of the right type, the right size, located in the right place, and have a focus on raising standards”.²⁵

Through Area Planning the managing authorities (EA and CCMS) engage with all other school sectors to review education provision, on a whole system basis, in any given geographical area. EA and DE are legally obliged to facilitate, encourage and promote Shared Education. They are also legally obliged to facilitate, encourage and support Integrated Education.

If efforts to improve the efficiency and quality of education sufficiently prove to be unsuccessful then, ultimately, the SSP proposes a number of possible outcomes:

- Restructuring the governance, leadership and management within the school;
- Merging with a neighbouring school (managed within the same sector);
- Closing the school and re-opening after a period with a new management team; or
- Closing the school, with pupils transferring to other nearby suitable schools.

A number of options and pathways may be available for consideration:

Same Sector Merger/Amalgamation - The processes around school amalgamation are fully detailed in DE Circular 2018/15 – this circular also provided templates, plans and pro-forma to support the change.²⁶ Some research suggests that larger schools may be both more cost effective and demonstrate higher levels of pupils’ academic performance.²⁷ Other research suggests that smaller schools can offer advantages in respect of pastoral care, the quality of relationships fostered between staff and pupils, and in respect of the consociational role that schools can play in the divided communities of NI.²⁸ School mergers do inevitably cause disruption as pupils, teachers and other staff familiarise themselves with novel settings, and everyone seeks to become comfortable in an emerging, shared school culture. Furthermore, schools – particularly those with a long history - can inspire great loyalty from former pupils and the neighbouring community. Consequently, school mergers (even though they are taking place within the same sector) may prove to be very controversial.²⁹ Challenges persist with the limitations of current legislation or where no legislation exists, including that related to cross-sector mergers.

Jointly Managed Church School - In 2015 DE set out guidelines for the creation of a Jointly Managed Church School (JMCS); “a grant-aided school that provides shared education with a Christian ethos”.³⁰ A JMCS would be managed by a BoG that includes representatives from both the Transferors and Catholic Trustees, and balanced representation from the two main communities. Although a JMCS would have a distinctive model of practical operation and ethos, it is not envisaged that it would be managed outside of the seven sectors already in existence – it would, in all likelihood, be incorporated into a Voluntary Maintained or Controlled management arrangement.³¹ In 2016, two neighbouring primary schools in Desertmartin, with collective concerns around sustainability and closure, announced their intention to merge and become a JMCS. Their respective managing authorities (CCMS and the Church of Ireland³²) were, however, unable to reach agreement and the plans were abandoned resulting in the closure of Desertmartin Primary School.³³ There have been no subsequent known applications by any other schools to create a JMCS and, to date, no such schools have been established in NI.

Federation - A federation is where one school combines leadership and governance arrangements with one or more other schools. This approach has been widely used in a number of locations in England and Wales to increase capacity among schools facing closure. The Office for Standards in Education, Children’s Services and Skills (Ofsted) – the English counterpart to the Education and Training Inspectorate (ETI) in NI – found that school federations were successful in broadening and enriching the curriculum alongside evidence that they provided improved care, guidance and support, as well as supporting good educational outcomes.³⁴ The report found that federations created potential for economies of scale and allowed for the sharing of a greater pool of resources and expertise. They also increased opportunities for enhanced professional development for teaching staff.

School federations can be classified as being either ‘soft’ or ‘hard’. In a federation the school principal is shared. In a soft federation, a joint committee may be established to agree common goals, but each school retains its own BoG, has its own budget and determines its own priorities. In a hard federation all of the schools share common goals and are led by a single principal who is overseen by a common BoG. Within NI, legislation only exists for primary schools to form a federation and this option is limited only to schools that are managed within the same sector. There are very few instances of school federations in NI. The research undertaken for this paper was only able to unearth two examples.

²⁵ Education Authority NI (2020) *Area Planning* <https://www.eani.org.uk/school-management/area-planning>

²⁶ <https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/education/Guidance%20on%20Implementation%20of%20Approved%20Development%20Proposals%20for%20School%20Amalgamations%20%28Final%20Version%29.pdf>

²⁷ Barnett, R., Glass, J. C., Snowden, R., & Stringer, K. (2002). Size, performance, and effectiveness: Cost-constrained measures of best-practice performance and secondary-school size. *Education Economics*, 10 (3), 291-311.

²⁸ Fargas-Malet, M. and Bagley, C. (2022). Serving DIVIDED communities: Consociationalism and the experiences of principals of small rural primary schools in Northern Ireland. *British Journal of Educational Studies*, pp.1-22.

²⁹ https://www.irishnews.com/news/northernirelandnews/2023/01/13/news/protest_held_over_plans_to_merge_three_co_down_schools-2995050/

³⁰ DE (2015) Circular 2015/15 <https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/de/2015-15-jointly-managed-schools.pdf>

³¹ Ibid

³² The school in question had opted not to transfer to the Controlled sector when the Protestant church ceded the operation of their schools to the NI state in the 1930s – it is one of a very small number of such schools.

³³ <https://www.newsletter.co.uk/education/nis-first-joint-faith-school-catholic-church-directs-media-queries-to-church-of-ireland-over-delay-since-2016-1458148>

³⁴ Ofsted (2011) *Leadership of More than One School: An Evaluation of the Impact of Federated Schools* https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/518276/Leadership_of_more_than_one_school_-_summary.doc

Prior to coming together in a hard federation, both St Patrick's, Glenullin and St Joseph's, Garvagh had been managed as separate entities within the Maintained sector. Today, St Patrick's and St Joseph's Federated Primary School operates on a split-site basis. The two sites are approximately 2.5 miles apart; P1-P3 pupils are accommodated in the Glenullin buildings while the classrooms in Garvagh accommodate P4-P7 pupils. The school is managed by a single BoG and is inspected by ETI as a single entity.³⁵ The federation was established well over a decade ago and, to all intents and purposes, St Patrick's and St Joseph's is now one school.

Between 2012-13, a soft federation was formally established between Killyleagh Primary School and Glasswater Primary School, Crossgar – both Controlled schools. The schools are located in a rural area, approximately five miles apart. Both were struggling to meet sustainability criteria, and both had feared closure in the nervousness that followed the publication of the Bain Report and the first Area Plan – Glasswater had already been subject to a same-sector amalgamation in 2007. Notably, there are also CCMS primary schools in Killyleagh and Crossgar – current regulations rule out any possibility of cross-sectoral federation.

Even though both schools are managed within the Controlled sector, each school has its own, distinct ethos. In 2016, Killyleagh Primary School transformed to become Killyleagh Integrated Primary School – it has remained within the Controlled sector as a CI school. The experience of this soft federation is reported by the principal to be largely positive – there has been considerable sharing of resources, experience and expertise between the two schools. The model does however place a considerable additional burden on the principal with the reported duplication of administrative activities such as school development planning and parent-teacher engagement.

Transformation to Integrated Status - "Integrated Education" is defined in the Integrated Education Act (Northern Ireland) 2022 as the education together, in an integrated school, of:

- (a) those of different cultures and religious beliefs and of none, including reasonable numbers of both Protestant and Roman Catholic children or young persons;**
- (b) those who are experiencing socio-economic deprivation and those who are not; and**
- (c) those of different abilities.**

In addition, the Act states than an Integrated school:

"Intentionally supports, protects and advances an ethos of diversity, respect and understanding between those of different cultures and religious beliefs and of none, between those of different socio-economic backgrounds and between those of different abilities."³⁶

With the exception of special schools and those schools established in hospitals, schools of any management type are able to transform to Integrated status. Transformation is a legal process whereby a school that is already in existence changes its status to become Integrated. Schools can transform to become either Controlled Integrated or Grant Maintained Integrated – the path for each of these two types of school is similar but each has a different legal status and, accordingly, there are different implications for the role and composition of the school's BoG. No specific legislation or guidance exists to enable two schools under different types of management to merge to become a single Integrated educational institution. Under current policies, at least one of the schools would be required to close, and a new school would need to be established.

It may be difficult for a school that has been identified as being unsustainable to adequately demonstrate to the managing authorities that Transformation would ensure an increase in applications for enrolment. In any case, if it were to do so, drawing on a limited pool of potential pupils could be to the detriment of enrolments elsewhere. Those with an interest in retaining the existing provision might oppose the Transformation of one school on the grounds that it could ultimately have a negative impact on the long-term sustainability of neighbouring schools. As per the Integrated Education Act (Northern Ireland) 2022, DE and EA have to review each context on the basis of parental demand and subject to its duty to encourage, facilitate and support Integrated Education. Since 2019, 21 schools have held successful parental ballots in favour of becoming Integrated and six of these schools have now legally completed the Transformation process to Integrated status. Sixteen schools are currently in the process of submitting their Development Proposal or awaiting a decision on their submitted Development Proposal for transformation.

The Future Schools Toolkit has been developed by Ulster University, engaging with school representatives, parents, educational stakeholders and the sectoral management authorities, to help those school communities faced with the prospect of sustainability issues and potential school closure to prepare for such decisions; including identifying the evidence that they may need to obtain to support their preferred choices whether that be to maintain separate schools, or to explore joint-faith, federated or Integrated options.³⁷

³⁵ <https://www.etini.gov.uk/sites/etini.gov.uk/files/publications/%5Bcurrent-domain%3Amachine-name%5D/primary-inspection-st-patricks-and-st-josephs-federated-primary-school-garvagh-co-derry.pdf>

³⁶ <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ni/2022/15/contents/enacted>

³⁷ <https://www.ulster.ac.uk/research/topic/education/our-research/current-research-projects/future-schools>

3. Sustainable Systems, Sustainable Schools and Sustainable Communities

The proliferation in the number of publicly-funded institutions that support schools has created a costly blizzard of acronyms and initials. Advancing even the most apparently straightforward changes in a system that is so bureaucratically top-heavy has potential to be sluggish; held back by the necessity of involving multiple agencies, consuming time, paperwork and ultimately incurring further financial, social and environmental costs.

In 2007 a single Education and Skills Authority (ESA) was proposed. This new body was to combine the duties of all of the existing educational bodies into one organisation. Instead, after 7 years of debate and at an estimated cost of £17M, a compromise was reached that amounted to a merger of the bodies that had previously acted in the interests of the Controlled sector – the five Education and Library Boards.³⁸ Indeed, DE now funds more Arm's Length Bodies and supports more sectoral organisations than it did when the ESA was proposed in 2007 as a way of rationalising such organisations.

With the external, Independent Review of Education focusing on the ambitions outlined within The New Decade, New Approach Deal of “securing greater efficiencies...and the prospect of moving towards a single education system”,³⁹ there are obvious benefits to be garnered from timely and considered systemic restructure. Each educational organisation, whilst primarily prioritising the pupils within their own jurisdiction, is simultaneously focused on protecting the interests of the schools they represent, and in so doing, ensuring its own continuation. The potential for progression and innovation in the management of sustainable education in NI is held in a state of inertia – the product of the tension between competing sectoral interests and political neglect.

Duplication exists across the system and small schools that have been classified by their managing authorities as being unsustainable, are relatively powerless. Resources are available to assist primary school communities to come together to develop their own vision of what shared, sustainable educational provision in their community might look like if that is their preferred option.^{40 41} Some options, however, are not currently available: the legislation currently does not allow cross-sectoral mergers, for example, nor jointly managed shared schools, and there is no legislation to enable the creation of cross-sectoral school federations.

Some commentators may be quick to erroneously point out that the duplication in NI's school structure is universally responsible for the challenges faced in our schools. Our children's learning, however, remains chronically underfunded and, whilst comparable data remain elusive, NI has had the joint lowest expenditure per pupil on these islands.^{42 43} Whilst NI's provisional spending per pupil in 2022-23 was, however, comparable with that of England and Wales⁴⁴ and has reportedly grown by 11% since 2018-19,⁴⁵ our teachers are paying for this recent headline statistic. In reality, this “higher growth partly reflects delays in agreeing and funding salary rises for teachers”⁴⁶ Our teachers are woefully underpaid – a teacher with six years' experience in NI earns £36,277 per year compared to £40,479, £44,023, £48,516⁴⁷ and £42,337 (€48,955)⁴⁸ of their English, Welsh, Scottish and Irish counterparts respectively. With political rancour in NI often focusing towards Irish or British unity, it is clear that investment in our schools draws parallels from neither jurisdiction. Our schools can be united on one thing, there may be waste, but there is simultaneous underinvestment in NI schools, its children and the professionals who care for and educate them, whatever sector they may be within.

With community agreement, investment, and a little imagination there could be opportunities to create a landscape of genuinely sustainable community-based, shared, common schools that could at the same time address some of the underlying divisions that still plague NI. Such a future would require political will, legislative change and courage; and is impossible without a collective reimagining of the way that the school system is funded and managed. The future of educational provision must be sustainable and based on the expressed and agreed wishes of communities and the needs of wider society.

³⁸ <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-northern-ireland-27627932>

³⁹ https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/856998/2020-01-08_a_new_decade_a_new_approach.pdf p.7

⁴⁰ <https://www.ief.org.uk/our-work/future-schools-ni/>

⁴¹ <https://www.ief.org.uk/our-work/publications/community-conversation-toolkit/>

⁴² <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-northern-ireland-65353072>

⁴³ Eurostat (2020) Educational Expenditure https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/images/0/03/Educational_expenditure_ET2020_II.xlsx

⁴⁴ <https://ifs.org.uk/sites/default/files/2023-04/R256-How-does-school-spending-per-pupil-differ-across-the-UK.pdf>

⁴⁵ *ibid*

⁴⁶ <https://ifs.org.uk/sites/default/files/2023-04/R256-How-does-school-spending-per-pupil-differ-across-the-UK.pdf> p.7

⁴⁷ <https://www.nasuwat.org.uk/advice/pay-pensions/pay-scales.html>

⁴⁸ <https://www.tui.ie/salary-scales-second-level-/common-basic-scale-post-1111.5778.html>



transforming education

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**Schools in Northern Ireland:
Sustained without Sustainability?**



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