

Northern Ireland sets out roadmap to shared education

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The Northern Ireland Education Minister has released his plan to create "a more integrated education system" so that children "from different community backgrounds can be educated together."

Minister John O'Dowd has said that "education has a key role to play" in rebuilding a "strong and vibrant society".

The plan, "Sharing works: a policy for shared education", begins by stating that "for almost two decades, society here has been on a journey from conflict and division to peace", and notes that the education system still "reflects historical divisions in society."

Under the new set of policies, some schools will share campuses and education facilities, and teaching staff and governors from different schools will collaborate.

The plan stresses that the ideas are not to be an "optional enrichment activity" but a core part of learning. According to the plans set out, Shared Education should be "a normal and common experience for all young people firmly embedded within the ethos of each school."

The government of Northern Ireland says that the education system "reflects traditional divides in society" and that "Shared Education is a crucial way to break down barriers, nurture and improve community relations."

"The case for Shared Education has now been well established," the proposal states.

Over [90%](#) of pupils in Northern Ireland attend schools "mainly attended" by children from either a Catholic or Protestant background.

The number of pupils in near-exclusive schools fell significantly from 1997 to 2012 but [research in 2012 found](#) that almost half of children in Northern Ireland were being educated in schools where virtually all of the pupils were of the same religious background. Nearly two hundred schools had no Protestant children attending, and just over one hundred had no Catholic pupils.

National Secular Society campaigns manager, Stephen Evans, commented: "Northern Ireland, unlike the rest of the UK, appears to be moving in the right direction. In this day and age it is extraordinary that politicians across the political spectrum still defend separatist faith-based education. You need only look at Northern Ireland's past to see how religious segregation can fuel sectarianism.

"We hope to see an end to the proliferation of state-funded faith schools in all parts of the UK before more lasting damage is done to social cohesion."

'Sharing Works: A Policy for Shared Education' can be viewed [here](#).

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