



Shared Education The First Ten Years

*Paper 2: Early Insights from
The Atlantic Philanthropies Experience*

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Introduction

The Social Change Initiative (SCI) is an international, not-for-profit organisation and its mission is to improve the effectiveness of activism for social change, particularly in divided societies and to influence the way this work is funded and supported. This paper has been written to capture and disseminate the story of the work supported by the Atlantic Philanthropies (Atlantic) to address the deep divisions in Northern Ireland's education system. The Atlantic Philanthropies is a limited life foundation which has ended its grant making after 23 years in Northern Ireland and part of the role SCI has is to extract and disseminate learning from this work, so as to encourage and enable actors in other divided societies to apply key lessons learnt along the way. The paper tells the story of shared education in Northern Ireland from the perspective of those who were actively involved in it both as funders, advocates and practitioners.

Context & Background

Northern Ireland (NI) is a society transitioning away from protracted conflict and many structural barriers still divide its communities. The education system is deeply divided – most pupils attend schools where the vast majority of their classmates are from the same community background. Formally integrated schools aim to have balanced Catholic and Protestant enrolments, but only account for 7% of Northern Ireland's pupils. The other 93% attend schools which tend to be either predominantly Catholic, or predominantly Protestant. Although Atlantic continually provided support through its twenty plus years of grant-making in NI, by 2003 growth in the formally integrated sector was still slow. The peace process may have firmly taken root, but many communities still clearly valued the identity and ethos of their existing schools. Atlantic therefore began to consider a twin track approach, supporting the creation of integrated schools where possible, but also tackling the barriers between NI's schools and pupils where it was not.

The second track of that approach evolved into ‘shared education’. Schools could retain their own identity and ethos, but they would also partner with local schools from the other community with pupils, teachers and resources moving between the schools day in, day out. Although there were practical challenges, it would provide better educational options, whilst Catholic and Protestant pupils and staff would regularly spend time learning side by side and building meaningful relationships.

Atlantic supported the development of the shared education concept through a range of pilot projects starting in 2006. Ten years later, tens of thousands of children in Northern Ireland schools now regularly take part in shared classes and learn alongside children of a different religion. Friendships have developed, strong relationships have grown between teaching teams, and there is strong consensus and a growing evidence base that it is improving education for all.

So how did we get to this point and where will the journey take us in future?



The Plan

Ten years ago, the time was right for sharing. Schools were coming under pressure to rationalise as a result of a falling school age population. A new entitlement curriculum also meant that post-primary schools had to provide access to a minimum number of subjects at GCSE and A-Level (vocational as well as academic) and most would need to collaborate to make this possible. Atlantic saw this as a window of opportunity for shared education.

The right kind of financial incentive might encourage schools to collaborate with schools from another sector. Discussions began to take place between Queen's University in Belfast and Atlantic on how this might work.

The Department of Education turned down the opportunity in 2005/6 to partner Atlantic in its first shared education project and instead continued to run other community relations projects, mainly based around extra-curricular events outside the normal school timetable. Atlantic felt that these small scale projects were not enough – peers need time and common interest to build relationships, so getting sharing taking place right at the core of schools – as part of teaching in the classroom – was crucial. The plan was then to make sharing the norm rather than the exception by embedding it within the policy and practice of the Department of Education. This wasn't going to be a short-term project.

Padraic Quirk from Atlantic said: “Our assessment was that integrated schools were not going to get the growth that we had hoped for. We felt it would be folly not to look or to try to do something with the 93% of the school population that were not in integrated schools.”

“We sensed that there was an opportunity on the ground when we were talking to schools, particularly schools that had not been involved in any sort of cross-community work before. With the peace process underway, they felt that they could take a risk and the time was now.”

His colleague Peter Boyd said: “There were dozens of examples of villages across NI with a Catholic primary school at one end of the street and a Protestant primary school at the other, both of them only half full. Everyone realised that there was a pressure here which could end up with the village only having one school, maybe with half of the community then having to bus into the next village. Shared education might allow them to retain their community identities and their schools and improve results if it was approached in the right way.”



The Key Players

Atlantic brought together key groups and individuals to work on and deliver the shared education concept. Key partners were:

- ▶ Professor Tony Gallagher (then Head of the School of Education at Queen's University in Belfast) and Mark Baker also from Queen's (and who now heads up the Shared Education Signature Project at Northern Ireland's Education Authority);
- ▶ Professor Colin Knox, Professor of Comparative Public Policy at Ulster University; Lauri McCusker and Catherine Ward at The Fermanagh Trust – a community foundation based in Enniskillen in County Fermanagh which had already been involved in cross community playgroup provision;
- ▶ The International Fund for Ireland (IFI) was a co-funder in all of the pilot shared education projects which Atlantic supported;
- ▶ Roisin Marshall, now Chief Executive of the Northern Ireland Council for Integrated Education (NICIE), was seconded to work on a North Eastern Education and Library Board integrating education project in 2007. That project then evolved into the Primary Integrating Enriching Education (PIEE) Project which secured IFI and then Atlantic funding in 2009;
- ▶ Working with school principals who were enthusiastic about participating in shared education was crucial from the beginning. For this paper, we have spoken to Emer Hughes (Moneynick Primary School), Marie Lindsay (St Mary's College, Derry) and Sharon Dobbin (St John Bosco Primary in Ballynease).

The Atlantic Projects and their Numbers

2007-2010

The first Shared Education Programme (SEP1) involved 65 schools in 12 collaborative partnerships and was run by Queen's University in Belfast independent of government. It was funded by Atlantic and the IFI. Around 3,700 pupils participated in shared classes.

2009-2013

SEP2 involved 80 schools in an additional 11 partnerships and one carry-over partnership. Atlantic and the IFI also funded two further parallel shared education projects, one run by the Fermanagh Trust and the other by the North Eastern Education and Library Board (the PIEE Project). A total of 158 schools formed 54 partnerships and approximately 35,800 pupils took part in around 28,300 hours of shared activity.

2011-14

The Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister (OFMDFM) and Atlantic co-funded a shared education project by QUB as part of a programme of work in interface areas. This involved collaborative work between three post-primaries and five primary schools in a disadvantaged urban area.

September 2014

The Shared Education Signature Project (SESP) is established by Atlantic, the Office of the First and Deputy First Minister and the Department of Education with a total budget of £25m to be spent over a four year period. The SESP aims to engage the majority of schools and pupils across Northern Ireland in substantive shared education.

The Challenges of Sharing

Around 2003/4, Atlantic approached Professor Tony Gallagher and he put forward the concept of cross-sectoral educational collaboration between Northern Ireland's schools. Atlantic was keen to pursue this.

Prof. Gallagher said: "At the start, the main challenges were that lots of people in the education system thought this was a very, very fine idea but a bonkers thing to try because it was far too dangerous. However, the schools themselves were very keen to try it."

Northern Ireland's 12 new specialist schools – which had to engage with other schools as part of that project – were enlisted to participate in the first shared education programme (SEP1).

Peter Boyd said: "Some schools had already been evolving in the direction of shared education naturally and were able to take big steps quite quickly. Places like Limavady and Ballycastle had a history beforehand but for others, this was brand new."

Prof. Gallagher: "As it turned out, the big issues by and large didn't prove to be problems at all.

"The problems that people ran into were very practical things. If you have two or three schools working together and pupils moving between the schools to take classes, how do you align the timetables? If you're working across sectors, Catholic and Protestant schools take different days off. What happens then? If a pupil is taking a class in another school and the pupil's school is off for the day, but the other school where they take the class is open, do they go or do they not? If you have a teacher taking a class with pupils from three different schools in it, which parents' night does the teacher go to? You also have the whole transportation issue".

“What we did in all those sort of contexts was to say to the teachers, look, you are the ones on the ground who know the issues here. You know the problems you come up against. Come up with solutions. And if you need a bit of resource to try and work them through, we’ll give you that resource. If you come up with something and it works, then that’s brilliant, we will tell everyone else about it. If you come up with something that doesn’t work, then that’s okay, we’ll learn from that too.”

Prof. Colin Knox: “The system has eventually absorbed shared education in a way in which was quite surprising to those of us that were around at its conception. The Department of Education was very, very nervous at the outset that this would cause a backlash and that you would see an outbreak of incidents that frankly were sectarian. They were much more risk averse than the external funders.”

Sectarian issues have been rare.

Prof. Gallagher: “One case involved local politicians putting a leaflet around schools claiming that the shared education programme was funded by someone who’d funded the IRA. This caused quite a bit of concern for the principals involved but we were able to deal with that straight forwardly enough by correcting the allegation.

And, in a separate case, sectarian comments were made by pupils in one school to some of the visiting pupils.

Prof. Gallagher: “The two principals and the two chairs of boards of governors put out a joint statement saying we have been working together, we have run into a problem, but we are dealing with it and we’re still working together and we will continue working together. This gave people the confidence to work their way through the issues.”

Meanwhile in Fermanagh, the Fermanagh Trust had been speaking to school principals, governors, parents, politicians, church leaders, politicians and the wider community about shared education.

Lauri McCusker: “Schools were used to projects where everything was provided for them. This was a very different experience. We were saying: ‘You go to your neighbouring school or schools, organise, plan together and come up with a schedule of activities. You need to identify why you want to do this, what’s the need? And if the project looks good enough, we’ll resource it’.

“In a number of cases there were parents who didn’t let their children participate. Principals and chairs of boards of governors had to make a call whether to get engaged and possibly lose some parents. Those very significant, very important conversations were taking place in some schools between some parents and school leaders and with ourselves as well.

“Our advocacy strategy was comprehensive both in County Fermanagh and across the wider political and statutory education sector in Northern Ireland, amongst NI church leaders and other key opinion formers. Locally we mailed a newsletter to the board of governors in all schools in Fermanagh. We sent it to anybody we thought had influence. By doing that and by sharing the message of who was doing what and where they were doing it, you all of a sudden were hearing: ‘Actually, this is okay. This is fine, you know’.”

Catherine Ward: “At the beginning, I had phone calls from church leaders asking what it was all about. I had phone calls from governors asking what it will mean and will their children have to go to the Catholic church? Will they have to do this, and this and this? There was a lot of questioning and querying at the beginning and schools had to take significant risks and step out of line.”

At Catholic maintained Moneynick Primary School in County Antrim, some parents thought sharing with controlled Duneane Primary School meant that the two schools would end up becoming formally integrated.

Emer Hughes principal of Moneynick Primary: “We had to reassure parents that there was no hidden agenda.”

“In the final year of the PIEE Project, we were provided with a shared teacher as a pilot for a year. This was a fabulous opportunity and became a resounding success, so when the money for this ended, we decided that we would pay one day a week each out of our own budgets to supplement a shared teacher. This was fully endorsed by the two boards of governors. However this put an increased strain on two very small school budgets. Fortunately, when we got involved with Queen’s University they were able to assist us financially through their shared education project.”

At St Mary’s College in Derry, the biggest barrier has been the distance to its partner school. There were also concerns at the beginning about pupils feeling safe travelling into the other community’s territory.

Marie Lindsay, principal of St Mary’s College: “Initially the very first classes were in neutral spaces. We didn’t take them into each other’s schools, which now sounds ridiculous because we are so used to it. There were all these worries about bringing them into the different environments so we treaded softly, I suppose.

“We, the adults, were all nervous about how the children from very different backgrounds and traditions would mix, but the biggest shock for our pupils (we are an all girls school) was that there were boys in their classes! Even finding the space to hold those bigger classes was challenging.

“Another challenge was how do you grow it? How do you make it part of your normal school life? We quickly saw that it needed to be a priority in the school development plan and we needed the governors on board.”

St John Bosco Primary School and Bellaghy Primary School are four miles apart in a rural area of County Derry/Londonderry. St John Bosco principal Sharon Dobbin said that finance and transport were the main challenges.

“It’s too far for our pupils to walk between the schools, so bringing them together for shared classes always requires the hiring of a bus. Even the shortest journey for regular, shared classes would run up a bill of £200-£300 a week minimum. In small, rural schools like ours that’s quite a commitment.

“And while we have never once had a parent or a governor who has said no to shared education, we have adjusted the pace at times to suit what was right for our community. We are very mindful that some people have had terrible personal experiences that we can’t brush aside as though they don’t matter just because it wasn’t the experience of the staff. I think that’s been one of our strengths, we’re always very conscious of the place that we’re in.

“We very rarely had major challenges and I feel that was because of the attention we gave to communication and building relationships. There was a very secure and safe environment created so that more awkward questions could be asked in a respectful environment in a way that nobody was going to be judging or thinking, why are they asking that?”

Mark Baker, then based at Queen’s University, recalls a major issue in the early stages.

“We faced challenges when the Department of Education stated that IFI funding couldn’t be used to support collaboration that should be happening under the entitlement framework. We had about six months where we thought the project was going to end because IFI money was going to be pulled.

“Eventually we managed to persuade the IFI to make a statement saying that it did not consider funding of the entitlement framework as double funding, and, therefore, was happy for Queen’s to work in that area as long as it didn’t duplicate funding already available. Atlantic also trusted us. We were quite happy to go and have the fight, because if it all went wrong, well, at least we were having the right fight.”

Mr Baker said other challenges were traditional things which crop up when schools do things together. Planning timetabling and transport was crucial and had to be tailored to each school.

Not all schools were keen to participate at the start, as Catherine Ward from The Fermanagh Trust explains.

She said: “There was one principal who said ‘No way, we can’t get involved. She said she had chatted to her parents and they said you wouldn’t be able to live in this community if you ever got involved in that type of thing. So over months I kept in touch with her and then she agreed to a meeting at night when no one would see me actually coming to the school. I met with her and she was interested. She took a big risk and got involved and now she is the strongest advocate and her parents have all bought in to shared education.

“Another principal at the beginning of the programme said that her parents would walk bare footed over broken glass to another controlled school, which would be about seven miles away, rather than have anything to do with the Catholic school in the village. Then during the area planning process, which was about three, four years into the programme, she said her governors’ vision was for a single education community in their village partnering with the Catholic maintained school. That shift occurred through shared education.”

Padraic Quirk: “I can only think of one occasion where there was a lobby not to do shared education. The focus was around Atlantic and what we had supported in the past. But what this resulted in was a mobilisation of the teachers, school leaders and of the community to say ‘why would we not do this?’. It strengthened their resolve.”

The Benefits

Marie Lindsay: “We have been involved in shared education since 2006. We’re now in a three-way partnership with Lisneal College and St Cecilia’s College. This is our 10th year of shared education and the link and the bond between the schools and the staff and pupils has continued to grow and real friendships have developed. We also engage really well with partners in the community like the The National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children (NSPCC), local businesses, the Police Service of Northern Ireland (PSNI) and Derry and Strabane District Council.

“Clearly the benefits to the pupils is that they get to know each other and build relationships. They don’t see them as “the other”. That sense of us and them is diminished and is becoming more blurred.”

“There is a warmth and an understanding that the schools are different, that we have different identities and we are comfortable with that. The teachers have also built up great friendships and the professional development of the staff is not to be under-estimated. Recent joint heads of department workshops have proved very successful.”

“I think when I look back on my job, when I finish, one of the things I will be most pleased about was the work that I have done with shared education.”

Sharon Dobbin was on secondment with the PIEE project for two years.

She said: “In Bellaghy there was a real history of trouble and division but there was a drive from both sets of governors that the blight of the past did not necessarily need to continue to impact on the children of the future. We wanted to acknowledge the past but also strengthen and open up a new future.

“I had the opportunity to work with all of the other PIEE schools and principals and to learn from the great work that was going on as well as share some of my experience. We were very aware of the investment in time and relationships we had given in our schools and the positive results of that.

“I came back to school with a greater sense of the potential of shared education, both educationally and economically. Sometimes after a secondment, people can be deflated about coming back to school, back to a former place, but I didn’t feel that. I felt I was well placed to motivate, inspire and work collaboratively with Bellaghy Primary School in making our partnership even stronger.

“It’s been a journey and I have nothing but respect for Mrs Richmond and her staff at Bellaghy Primary School and the work we do as a partnership.”

Emer Hughes: “When PLEE started we were coming together weekly for ‘softer’ subjects. We took children out of the two schools and over to Antrim Forum for a six week block of PE, offering a slice of rugby, gaelic, athletics etc. Then we moved into areas such as art, technology and drama and took lessons into our own schools, taking turns so as there was no criticism from parents as to one school being favoured over the other. We ran a joint drama production and were able to invite all parents to sit together and applaud their children as one audience. Then we realised that the sharing was having such a positive impact on working together and the children were collaborating so well that we decided to introduce more structured areas of literacy such as poetry into our weekly shared lessons. Over the next year or so we built up to teaching core subjects (English and Maths) and whatever else we decided we could collaborate on through our school development plans.”

Roisin Marshall was seconded from NICIE to the North Eastern Education Board’s PLEE project.

She said: “My remit was to go out and see if any schools would like to work together. I was seconded for seven months and ended up staying for five years. We put a call out to schools and were overwhelmed with the response. We ended up with 11 partnerships involving 28 schools.

“Teacher collaboration hadn’t really been a huge focus in the design of the programme but it was the thing that I think worked really well. I thought that was a really big bonus. We developed the Leadership Diversity and Partnership Programme for leaders of the schools and that was hugely significant.

“We also had a steering group made up of the Council for Catholic Maintained Schools, Comhairle na Gaelscolaíochta, the North Eastern Education and Library Board and the Northern Ireland Council for Integrated Education (NICIE). Unless we had all of those organisations represented, some of the schools might have felt they couldn’t do it. That was a real strength of the project.”

Prof. Gallagher: “Encouraging innovation and empowering teachers has proved to be one of the crucial aspects. We were asking teachers to come up with ideas and we discovered to our surprise that that appears never to have happened to teachers before. Any official interventions tend to be very top down, very prescriptive with very tightly defined success criteria, even very prescriptive details on how it’s supposed to be done and absolutely no tolerance of failure.

“What we did was to recognise the need to innovate and the only way you can do that is to empower teachers to be part of the process. Between broad parameters, we gave the schools a lot of freedom as to how they would do it. I hope it’s something that the system learns as this is all mainstreamed. There isn’t a single template that should be applied mechanically everywhere, as if there’s only one way to do this. There isn’t.

“The impression I get from the teachers is that they’re all proud of their own schools, proud of what their own schools are doing, proud of what their schools stand for and very proud of the values that their schools embody, but they’re also proud of the fact that they are working with other schools and collectively they are making a massive impact on local communities.”

Colin Knox said that there was strong parental support for collaboration between schools.

He said: “Where parents saw a common education good, they were more prepared to back that. What parent doesn’t want their child to have a good education? So by concentrating on that education offer, you could get buy in from parents and you could potentially break down those rigid boundaries between the sectors.

“The most obvious benefit for children is a wider curriculum offer and the big benefit for teachers is sharing resources and learning about different teaching styles and techniques. If we are to move truly to a post conflict society, then having shared education, a system of education where those boundaries are much more porous, has to be a good thing.

“The external funders worked directly with schools, so there was a kind of bottom up momentum that developed, where essentially the department and the education and library boards found it difficult to resist.”

Lauri McCusker: “We encouraged the schools in their project plans to build in things like community involvement and parental involvement. So all of a sudden parents were going into another school that they had never been in before and their kids were doing things together. When you get down to the very basic, local level, it’s about relationships and building relationships and people starting to see things through a different lens.”

Mark Baker: “I believe strongly that schools do not exist in an isolation. It can be very lonely being the principal of a school when your nearest similar school is quite a way away. If you take partnerships like Moneynick and Duneane, across the road and a couple of fields away from each other in Toomebridge, the two principals need each other, because they face the same challenges. Just linking them up, you don’t need to provide much else, that’s a value in itself. If you then feed that professional development and link them into a wider cluster, in terms of education that is huge.”

Advocacy

Prof. Tony Gallagher: “From the start, we were working on a number of different strands. We established an independent governing body to bring together representatives from all the different educational interests. That was deliberate in order to ensure that everyone was aware of what was happening and had an opportunity to influence or to shape the way the programme developed.

“We ran regular seminars so that academics and people generally were aware of the sort of things that were happening. We also built up relationships with all of the political parties, with their education spokespersons and with the key people on the education committees. We took a stand at each of the main party conferences so we could provide information to people about what shared education was.

“We hired public affairs specialists to monitor the media and AQs [Assembly questions] and various other things happening in the parties, so we could identify the politicians who were interested in it and the sort of questions and issues that were being raised. We wanted to make sure that we were addressing any problems that people were worried about and identifying people who were potentially supportive. “The public policy dimension was a hugely important part of the project. The system just doesn’t read an academic paper and then change, you’ve got to engage with the system on a day and daily basis, and that’s what we did.”

Prof. Colin Knox: “It was like a twin track approach. Atlantic and IFI funded these activities in schools and then, benignly, engaged in an advocacy campaign which targeted the department and politicians directly. They had tried to engage with the department and the boards but having been blocked, decided to go around them and straight to the politicians.”

He said there were three critical points – shared education being included in the Programme for Government (2012), the Department of Education’s Sharing Works policy (2015) and, finally, the new Shared Education Act (2016).

Prof. Knox: “In mid 2012, the Minister of Education decided that he would establish an advisory group on shared education, and the group’s subsequent report was hugely influential in terms of the evolution of the policy.

“Once we got political momentum behind it, civil servants, whether they liked it or not, had to fall in line. Once the Minister formally embraced shared education, it was like a complete change of mind set had happened within the department because their responsibility is to implement the Minister’s policy decisions. The whole language, and departmental commitment to shared education changed at that point.

“Again through the lobbying efforts of external bodies like IFI, Atlantic and others, the legislation also ended up being a stronger instrument than we first anticipated.”

Lauri McCusker: “The Fermanagh Trust actively engaged with politicians including working with key representatives from the political parties on including commitments to advance shared education in the Programme for Government. This active advocacy work by the Fermanagh Trust continued right up until the signing of the Shared Education Bill.

“During one of the Assembly Education Committee study visit to Fermanagh which included meeting school leaders and pupils, we discussed with the politicians that our ambition was for shared education to be an integral part of the DNA of the education system. An effective Shared Education Bill was critical in achieving this.”

Catherine Ward: “One of the clauses we got into the Bill which we were pleased with was share proofing. And that means every Departmental decision or policy has to be share proofed. The other thing we got into the Bill was efficient use of resources. In other words is it more efficient to do this on a shared basis than individually? Now, that’s massive, because that takes it beyond pure school collaboration into school transport, school meals, school infrastructure where sharing has to be considered now.”

Mark Baker: “We went from running pilot projects which were around seeing what can happen when we get schools together, to then working out whether there was political appetite for wider change. It then became about changing state policy. I think Atlantic’s influence in all of that was huge.

“At that point we brought in advocacy expertise and basically spent a year being introduced to the right people. By then it was 2010 and the political parties were beginning to start to think about their new manifestos. We attended every party conference. We made sure the local MLAs knew of every partnership activity happening in their area. We knew for shared education to truly work and to actually become policy, we needed every party to agree. It couldn’t become partisan. We started to have contacts in all of the parties and talked to all of them about shared education.

Padraic Quirk: “I think the important part of the advocacy work was the school leaders. They went to the Assembly committees, talked about their work and got politicians into their schools to articulate to them the benefits of shared education. We felt there was a need to push really hard to achieve mainstreaming and so resourced this advocacy work.

“The early strategy circumvented the Department of Education because that’s probably where most people felt the resistance was. Our funding strategy was to get shared education delivered on the ground but also to support anything else that the principals and grantees thought was needed in order to get the policy win. Our objective was to mainstream shared education.”

Peter Boyd: “The grantees had multi-level advocacy plans which included making sure that MLAs and councillors visited schools and saw the work in action - shared maths classes for example. I was also really impressed with how they worked it at the upper levels as well, particularly around the Education Committee at Stormont. That was well done, a lot of effort went into it and it paid dividends.

“When [Education Minister] John O’Dowd said that shared education was going to be part of the DNA of the education system, that quickly changed the departmental position and attitude. Suddenly, after what had been nearly ten years of uphill slog, because of that one statement, the department couldn’t do enough.”



Integrated Education

For some, the relationship between integrated and shared education is strained, but Atlantic feels strongly that there is a need for both.

Prof. Tony Gallagher: “The idea of more integrated schools I think is a very attractive one. I have no problem with that at all. But I’m not sure how it’s going to happen and for the foreseeable future, the level of growth in the integrated sector is going to remain very, very small. It’s currently 7%, so what about the other 93% of kids who aren’t in integrated schools? I’m not sure that you should defend the purity of one bit of a system and leave aside the interests of everyone else.”

Lauri McCusker: “The issue for me is that it’s not, never has been, about shared education versus integrated education. It’s about people working closer together in their communities. I think the education sector in Northern Ireland will look very, very different in 30, 40 years time.”

Marie Lindsay: “If you were starting over again you wouldn’t build our schools where they are or how they are. You have to start from where you are. If St Mary’s became an integrated school tomorrow, we would have nobody to integrate with. The community St Mary’s serves is predominantly Catholic and our school population reflects this.”

Prof. Colin Knox: “Perhaps over time some of those schools which are involved in shared education might choose to become integrated schools, but equally that may not be a choice that suits their communities and shared education allows flexibility in their journey.”

Mark Baker: “The people who make me the most angry are the people that pit integrated education against shared education. It’s an artificial battle. It’s not either or. It’s both. And as much as possible, please. It’s up to communities to decide, up to schools to decide, what they are and which option they choose. As long as you get high quality contact between the young people, that’s what we want.”

Rosin Marshall: “NICIE are unapologetically about educating Protestant and Catholic children together in the one school, and so that’s what we bring to the table. Shared education is quite unapologetically something else, which is about two or more schools sharing resources, and bringing children together for sustained, regular curriculum classes. And there are probably things that we can do together.”

Padraic Quirk: “I’ve always said there are very many ways in which we can make society and the education system that we have less divided and this includes both integrated and shared schools.”



The Signature Project

The Shared Education Signature Project is receiving funding from OFMdfM² (£10m), Atlantic Philanthropies (£10m) and the Department of Education (£5m) over a four year period (2015-19). However, Atlantic's support is conditioned on using those four years to broaden and deepen shared education right across our school system and also to embed mainstream departmental support that will continue long after Atlantic has gone.

Prof. Tony Gallagher: "Shared education being mainstreamed is absolutely huge. That was the target right from the word go and Atlantic were very clear on this. They didn't want this to be just a project, that would be funded for a certain amount of years, would do limited stuff and then end. They wanted to change the entire education system and change the way it worked.

"So right from the start there was a very strong commitment to try to find ways of mainstreaming it and making sure the politicians and the policy makers knew exactly what was happening and why it was happening.

"The Shared Education Act is important because it gives a legal definition and it puts a requirement on the department to encourage and support developments in shared education, and the Education Authority has that legal obligation as well.

"So in the space of just a little over a decade, I think those levels of impacts are pretty spectacular, never mind the international impact, which I think is pretty consequential as well."

Prof. Colin Knox: "I wouldn't for one moment claim 'job done, all sorted', not by a long shot. But the Shared Education Signature Project is the first time that the Department of Education has actually put money into shared education."

Mark Baker: "We spend a lot of our time saying to schools: This isn't about the next two or three years. This is about how you move this into the future."

Peter Boyd: “The Department originally wanted to use the signature project to reach every school and every child and thereby tick the box of their Programme for Government commitment. That is not what we wanted to do, because that would spread it so thin that you would necessarily be back into that territory of superficial contact, which cuts against exactly what we were trying to achieve. We didn’t want the resource to be diluted just to fulfil a departmental Programme for Government target. We wanted to focus on schools that already had that basic relationship, and see what they can do, how far they can take it. We wanted those partnerships to lead by example and the others would follow on behind.

“Getting the signature project up and running has been hugely problematic, not just because of the usual logistic hurdles, but also in terms of working out how a philanthropy can practically work in partnership with government. They had never, ever had major co-funders actually sitting at their table and taking an active role in decision-making – that has taken some getting used to, on all sides. There have been times when they disappear off and start implementing things without us even having been notified about it, and then we’ve had to pull it all back in again. I’m conscious that from the outside that can look like a lot of inactivity and very poor delivery in some senses. But just the practicalities of stopping or changing how a huge bureaucracy like that operates and shifting its inertia has been a huge task, a really, really big task. And there are lots of areas where we’re still pushing and dragging to get it into the shape and space that we wanted it. It’s hard work!”

Atlantic's Role

Prof. Tony Gallagher: “Atlantic were fantastic. They were primarily concerned with the long term outcome and they were prepared to be very flexible in how we went about doing it. They didn't mind if some things didn't work out as long as we used that as a learning opportunity so they were very flexible and very supportive. And they also were pushing us right from the start about the level of ambition that they had for the whole thing.

“In a relatively short period of time we have created hugely significant change in the education system in Northern Ireland, and that wouldn't have been possible if Atlantic hadn't been there to provide the support and the resource that they did.

“I think it's testament to the commitment of Atlantic that not only is this having an impact here in Northern Ireland but it has been picked up internationally as well. The approach that we have developed here is at its heart actually quite simple, but it solves a problem that people in many, many places have been grappling with for an awfully long time.”

Prof. Colin Knox: “Atlantic's role was pivotal, absolutely pivotal. Atlantic, and the International Fund for Ireland, took huge risks. They also stuck with it, despite the fact that officials in the department, in some cases pulled against them.”

Lauri McCusker: “The establishment of the Shared Education Learning Forum by Atlantic was very important. The forum members the North Eastern Education Library Board, Queen's University and the Fermanagh Trust met regularly from the start of 2010 to advance shared education. We worked together with the support of Atlantic and the IFI including organising a number of significant conferences.”

Marie Lindsay: “I was given an opportunity to do something in my role as principal that I never would have had otherwise. We are a very proud Catholic school but have moved a generation a step closer to living in harmony. If Atlantic hadn't taken that initiative way back in 2006, we wouldn't have had that opportunity and we would probably still be, as schools tend to be, very much working in isolation. I owe Atlantic a debt of gratitude.”

Mark Baker: “Atlantic were not about Atlantic. It was not about ‘tell everybody how well we’re spending our money’. In fact, half the time it was, don’t tell them you’re spending our money, it’s not important. Actually, what’s important is that you need to change something. So, first of all, let’s work it out, what we’re going to change, what are we going to put in its place, and now what tools do you need to do that?”

“Atlantic were never shy of saying what their goal was. We were never shy, therefore, of saying what our goal was. This wasn’t about a project. This was about changing education in Northern Ireland.”

Padraic Quirk: “That’s the value of the sort of philanthropy and the value of the message that we were delivering to people that were prepared to take risks - look, some of this will work, some of it won’t work.”



The Future

Prof. Tony Gallagher: “We’re now focusing on increasing shared Continuing Professional Development [for teachers], which I think is the next big step. I would like to see a situation where local collaborative networks of schools were given resource to run CPD activities. That could be the key network that sustains shared education into the future.

“In the meantime Queen’s are busy working internationally. We are working in Israel with some people out there and there are a couple of school partnerships already in place. We are also doing work in Los Angeles and other colleagues in Queen’s are working in Macedonia and South Africa.

“I’m confident that the concept of shared education is now here to stay. The idea of teachers engaging with each other across other schools is almost taken for granted as a sensible thing to do. As it’s mainstreamed it’s bound to get somewhat diluted but I’m confident that we’ve set on a course now which is going to help shape and influence things for quite a few years to come.”

Prof. Colin Knox: “My hope is that shared education becomes such an integral part of the way in which education is delivered here, that sectorial boundaries become much less important. So, where you’re registered to go to school is much less important than the mixture of classes that you attend.”

Peter Boyd: “There are still a lot of fundamental things that need to change for shared education to be properly mainstreamed - not least the area based planning system, the school funding formula [to incentivise sharing as opposed to punish it], even practical things like the school transport policy. None of those things actually reflect sharing as stands. So at the minute we’ve got the Signature Project, which is a massive step forward, but we still have a broader strategy than that, and we are progressing the Signature Project as part of that wider strategy.”

Padraic Quirk: “I think the power of change lies within the schools themselves and the school communities. We’re confident that resources will exist within the Department of Education for this beyond the life of the Signature Project. That’s part of the original commitment and we need to really push them hard on that and that’s what we intend to do.

“The challenge is to ensure that’s what’s being supported through the Signature Project are the right things. It is about sustained, regular contact and about building institutional capacity and the continual professional development amongst teachers.

“Atlantic are as aware as we are that you can have a policy and you can have legislation but essentially it is about effective implementation. We think it’s a great story so far but there’s more to be done. It’s not over. It’s not done yet.”



Timeline of Shared Education

2001

October 2001

The Burns report recommends that NI's post-primary schools are grouped into collegiates.

2002

2003

November 2003

The Costello report rejects collegiates but recommends a very broad and obligatory entitlement curriculum which will mean that most schools will have to collaborate in some way to deliver it.

2004

2005

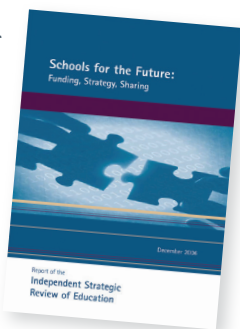
March 2005

Professor Tony Gallagher from Queen's University Belfast (QUB) advises the Atlantic Philanthropies on how reconciliation and educational benefits could be secured through collaboration between school sectors.

2006

December 2006

The Bain report recommends school collaboration to make more effective use of resources, provide fairer access to the curriculum and promote reconciliation. Education order passed, putting the entitlement curriculum into force.



2007

2007 - 2010

QUB delivers its first sharing education project (SEP1), independent of government and funded by AP and the International Fund for Ireland (IFI). SEP1 involves 65 schools in 12 collaborative partnerships with around 3,700 pupils participating in shared classes.



2008

2008

QUB publishes multiple reports on the effect of sustained pupil contact and the value of school collaboration.

2009

2009 - 2013

IFI funds the Department of Education to deliver the 'Sharing in Education' programme across 19 school partnerships.



INTERNATIONAL FUND FOR IRELAND

2010

October 2010

First Minister Peter Robinson describes Northern Ireland's education system as a "Benign form of apartheid which is fundamentally damaging to our society".



2010 - 2013

AP & IFI fund QUB to deliver SEP2, and also fund the Fermanagh Trust and North Eastern Education and Library Board to deliver geographically focused pilots. A total of 158 schools formed 54 partnerships and approximately 35,800 pupils took part in around 28,300 hours of shared activity.

2011

March 2011

AP establishes the Shared Education Learning Forum (SELF) across its pilot projects. SELF begins a programme of research and political advocacy work.



2012

2012

The new 2011-15 programme for Government contains specific shared education commitments and goals and targets for shared education, including all children having the opportunity to participate in shared education by 2015.

February 2012

NI Commission for catholic education's post-primary review strategic regional report is published and supports shared education initiatives.

Timeline of Shared Education

2013

July 2012

Education Minister John O'Dowd establishes an independent ministerial advisory group on advancing shared education.



April 2013

The Ministerial Advisory Group Report is published. It recommends further extension of shared education.

May 2013

NI's Shared Education Campus Programme is launched as part of The Executive's Together Building a United Community Programme.



October 2013

Minister O'Dowd makes a statement to The Assembly about advancing Shared Education. In this keynote speech, he says: "We need to ensure that sharing is in the DNA of our education system, in legislation, policy and the structure of the education and skills authority".

2014

September 2014

The Shared Education Signature Project is established by Atlantic, the office of the First and Deputy First Minister and the Department of Education with £25m. It has the aim of engaging the majority of schools and pupils across Northern Ireland in substantive sharing. The first call for applications is launched in December 2014.

The
ATLANTIC
Philanthropies

2015

July 2015

The assembly's education committee publishes the results of its inquiry into shared education and says it is "Greatly impressed by examples of sharing and co-operation in many schools in different sectors and phases across Northern Ireland". The members call for a statutory obligation on the department and its arm-length bodies to encourage the participation of all schools in shared education.

September 2015

Department of Education publishes its shared education policy - Sharing Works: A Policy for Shared Education. The education minister notes: "Shared education has the potential to impact on raising educational standards and reducing underachievement, and deliver societal and economic benefits".



November 2015

The Shared Education Bill is introduced into the assembly.

2016

January 2016

New European Peace Funding (Peace IV) Programme includes £35.29m for shared education.



Special EU Programmes Body
Foras Um Chláir Speisialta An AE
Boord O Owre Ocht UE Projects

May 2016

The Shared Education Bill is enacted, requiring that shared education is encouraged and facilitated as an integral part of the future education system.

Further Information and Resources

- ▶ **The Atlantic Philanthropies**
<http://www.atlanticphilanthropies.org/stories/sharededucation-improves-learning-northern-ireland>
- ▶ **The Social Change Initiative**
<http://www.thesocialchangeinitiative.org/>
- ▶ **Queen's University Belfast**
<http://www.schoolsworkingtogether.org/>
- ▶ **Fermanagh Trust**
<http://www.sharededucationcentre.org/>
- ▶ **NEELB PIEE Project**
<http://legacy1.neelb.org.uk/schools/piee/publications/>
- ▶ **Education Authority**
<http://www.sepni.org/>

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*This is the second in a series of papers drawing out lessons and observations
from The Atlantic Philanthropies partnership work with the NI Executive.*