



CSSC response to *The Cost of Division in Northern Ireland* paper published as part of the Transforming Education programme funded by the Integrated Education Fund

Overall funding for education has already been cut by £70m (2.5%) for the current financial year and the Education Authority has been instructed to identify a further £200m of savings, however the solution is not the “£226m” identified in the Cost of Division paper.

“At a time when our children and young people are being disadvantaged due to drastic education underfunding in comparison to other parts of the United Kingdom, it is imperative that any analysis of costs and potential savings is evidence based and accurate. Our concern is that the Transforming Education (TE) Cost of Division paper is being quoted by decision makers as definitive and being used to undermine the argument for fair funding for schools and education services in Northern Ireland.”

CSSC has significant concerns about the calculations, the assumptions and the methods used in the *‘The Cost of Division in Northern Ireland’* paper, published as part of the Transforming Education (TE) programme, funded by the Integrated Education Fund.

The TE paper sets out to demonstrate that “the costs of division” are evident in:

- surplus places in primary schools;
- the administration of schools;
- Shared Education / Youth programmes / EU Peace Programme;
- school travel; and
- initial teacher education.

For the reasons CSSC sets out, the conclusions, and the analysis on which they are based, are flawed, undermining their reliability, validity, and credibility.

As the TE paper does not provide any concrete conclusions from its analysis, CSSC offers both a critique and some constructive suggestions in the spirit of open dialogue based on our wish to engage in further discussion. Below are some comments on a number of the specific areas identified as being costs of division.

1. Surplus places in primary schools

The TE paper addresses two studies which have previously attempted to analyse a cost of having schools of different sectors. Despite caveats made within the paper, the original calculations appear to be questionable. The claimed £67.2m is related to a ‘cost’ of surplus places in primary schools. The reported calculations are made on the false assumption that schools are funded for the number of potential places they have available, whereas in fact

they are funded for the number of pupils actually enrolled at the date of the annual DE school census. For the paper to state that £67.2m is incurred funding surplus capacity, is at best misleading and incorrect.

“Schools are not funded for the number of potential places they have available, they are funded for the number of pupils actually enrolled”.

The TE paper also refers to potential savings from amalgamating 32 pairs of small rural primary schools identified in a previous TE report 3 – ‘Isolated Together: Pairs of Primary Schools Duplicating Provision’. The claimed saving from merging these schools is deemed by the TE paper to be ‘*considerable*’, whereas CSSC’s initial calculations suggest it would be only marginal. This is not to say that the action should not be taken in the interests of education outcomes, ensuring that local rural provision is sustained, and community cohesion is promoted.

2. Review of administration of schools in a complex system

The TE paper claims an additional cost of £9.8m from ‘duplication of services’ provided by sectoral bodies with management and support responsibilities in schools. CSSC believes that it is too simplistic to state that this comprises duplication, as the bodies identified provide services to different groups of schools, rather than duplicating services to the same schools, as implied. Whilst it is vital that all bodies look at how their services can be provided more effectively and efficiently, CSSC believes that the TE paper starts out with the premise that it is wasteful to have a number of bodies supporting schools and then looks for a cost to justify the conclusion.

It is also worth noting that Voluntary Grammars (VGs) and Grant Maintained Integrated schools (GMIs) are funded additionally through the LMS school funding formula as they are not directly supported by a managing authority. This is not drawn out in the TE paper.

3. Spending in Shared Education / Youth Programmes / EU Peace Programme.

Shared Education is the most significant element considered in the TE report, with an annual cost estimate of over £100m. The assumption on which the simple analysis is based is that Shared Education is community relations in nature and, if division did not exist, it would not be needed. This is a misrepresentation of the collaborative purpose of Shared Education and would have implications for the wider community relations strategy.

The most significant elements of the Shared Education funding come from external sources, which would not otherwise be available to Northern Ireland. The implication is again made that the funding is a cost to the NI education budget which could be saved and spent

elsewhere: this is not the case. Furthermore, much of the calculation conflates recurrent and capital costs which appear to have been significantly miscalculated. Rather than extrapolate from a limited report laid before the Assembly, as the TE report does, it may have been better to ask for accurate information directly from the Department of Education.

CSSC also questions how the costs of Shared Education campus programmes referred to have been identified as duplication. Costs would have been incurred if both schools, or groups of schools had received the necessary separate capital funding for their own facilities. By combining these costs into a shared facility, additional improved benefits are provided to all pupils.

The TE paper points to evidence showing the positive impact of Shared Education in reconciliation outcomes. The paper is premised on a simplistic assumption that integration, or a single school approach, is the preferred route, whereas, in the view of CSSC, the reality should be a more nuanced hybrid approach reflective of local communities.

4. Flaws in the calculations on which the paper is based.

While the TE paper caveats that accuracy in calculations is difficult, resulting in highly variable outcomes, unfortunately, it goes on to headline a final definitive figure, based on an estimate which has then been elevated further for inflationary pressures.

There are flaws in the analysis in the TE paper, for example:

- Is the TE paper maximising a claimed 'cost of division' for the basis of discussion or for dramatic effect in the public and policy arena?
- Is the rate linked to inflation specifically in education costs, or to general inflation as it appears? Education funding has not kept pace with pay and price pressures over the past decade, which is one of the contributory factors to the fall in the value of education funding.

Conclusion

1. CSSC believes that an academic paper should be careful in providing appropriate caveats on the reliability and validity of its analysis as a basis for its claims. The TE paper fails to achieve this: it simply states the caveats and proceeds to ignore them, while providing a maximalist estimate.

2. The TE paper provides headline figures which appear to be intended to become part of the public narrative without any peer-reviewed or collaborative evidence to substantiate that which is claimed, and extend constructive discussion.
3. The lack of any concrete recommended deliverables in the TE paper concerns CSSC. What could or should be done to make the claimed savings a reality? Furthermore, has there been any test of the willingness of the political parties to implement these recommendations? And if so, how realistic are they?