

PRIVATE MEMBERS' BUSINESS

Integrated and Shared Education

23 November 2010

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Business Committee has agreed to allow up to one hour and 30 minutes for the debate. The proposer will have 10 minutes to propose the motion and 10 minutes to make a winding-up speech. One amendment has been selected and published on the Marshalled List. The proposer of the amendment will have 10 minutes to propose and five minutes to make a winding-up speech. All other Members who wish to speak will have five minutes.

Mr Lunn: I beg to move

That this Assembly notes the report by Oxford Economics, 'Developing the Case for Shared Education'; believes that the current education system is unsustainable; recognises the economic, educational and social benefits that can come from integrated and shared education; and calls on the Minister of Education to actively promote a system of integrated and shared education throughout Northern Ireland.

We are pleased to bring the motion to the House today. It can be broken down into four parts, which we will look at in some detail later. However, at the outset, I confirm that we will not accept the SDLP's amendment, which we see as a dilution of our original proposal.

I will start with a couple of quotations:

"I do not know of any measures which would prepare the way for a better feeling in Ireland than uniting children at an early age and bringing them up in the same school".

The second quotation is a bit more current and is slightly shortened:

"For me this is not just an economic but a moral question. We cannot hope to move beyond our present community divisions while our young people are educated separately...I believe that future generations will scarcely believe that such division and separation was common for so long...Future generations will not thank us if we fail to address this issue."

The second quotation was from Peter Robinson, as part of his now famous speech from a few weeks ago. The first was from the Roman Catholic Bishop of Kildare in 1825. I am making the link that there is a common cause that I was not aware of until now.

I could offer many more statements of support for shared education, some from surprising sources. Indeed, yesterday, we talked about Lord Craigavon, who is on

record as being a supporter of the shared education concept. However, as I speak, and despite all that support over the years, our schools are still over 90% segregated.

The maintained sector is pressing ahead with its own post-primary review, which appears to pay scant regard to the needs of our school population as a whole. It is no more than a reorganisation of the Catholic school system. The controlled sector insists that, as a state system, it is open to children of all faiths and none, as, indeed, does the maintained sector, but they both utterly fail, with a few honourable exceptions, to attract pupils from across the divide. There is a major conundrum. As far as I am aware, all the political parties are on record as supporting shared education. All three main sectors — I exclude the Irish-medium sector only for the obvious reason of its unique nature — support the concept. The Department of Education, under the terms of the Education Reform (Northern Ireland) Order 1989, has a duty to encourage and facilitate the development of integrated education, which means the education together at school of Protestant and Catholic pupils. Would an objective study of the Department's actions in that area conclude that it had tried to carry out that duty with anything approaching enthusiasm? The Department may have facilitated where it had little option, but it has fallen well short on encouragement.

Despite opposition, the integrated movement has made steady progress. It proved that parental choice is a potent force and that children who learn and play together in their early years carry forward attitudes and beliefs that benefit the child and society. Peter Robinson said:

"If one were to suggest that Protestants and Catholics would be educated at separate Universities it would be manifestly absurd; yet we continue to tolerate the idea that at primary and secondary level our children are educated separately."

Are those wise words from a surprising source? We should not be surprised at common sense from whatever source it comes. I continue to welcome the First Minister's statement.

The Oxford Economics report, as others before it, makes the financial and economic case for shared education. It does not come up with a definitive figure, but does anyone continue to doubt that the present arrangements cost hundreds of millions of pounds in duplicated expenditure and that the system is unsustainable? Do the statistics of empty desks, school building and maintenance programmes that are badly behind and the crumbling schools estate and morale not point the way towards an urgent need for cross-sectoral co-operation as an absolute imperative? Does anyone still doubt the economic, educational and social benefits? If so, they live in a different world from me.

What is the way forward? A complete change of mindset is required at all levels. The motion calls on the Minister actively to promote a system of integrated and shared education, which goes going beyond the encouragement and facilitation that is required by the Order. I do not refer solely to the establishment of new integrated schools or transformations. They have their place, which is an important one, but we will never get to where we want to be purely on that basis. We suggest a target, which is that 20% of children should be educated on an integrated basis by 2020.

Where new schools are planned, the Department should survey local residents on the presumption that they will be integrated or inter-Church. The Department should reform and relax the criteria for the creation and maintenance of integrated schools in a way that recognises those children who are of mixed or no religious background. It should review the transformation procedure and recognise the contribution that is being made by mixed schools, which are those with a mixed enrolment but no formal integrated status. I recommend Belfast Royal Academy, which is my old school, as a good example.

We must acknowledge and promote shared learning schemes, of which there are plenty. I know that the Minister favours those. Indeed, we spent most of today's Question Time on that topic. The Sharing Education programme, which is run by Professor Tony Gallagher's group, has just started its second three-year session. The feedback from the first three years from pupils and teachers is extremely positive. As some 60 schools and 5,000 pupils were involved, that is a good sample. Virtually none of the schools that were involved in that project and in others across the country has reported any difficulties, which perhaps proves that the younger generation has a bit more tolerance than the previous one.

Be that as it may, more radical actions are needed. What does area-based planning mean if decisions continue to be made on a sectoral basis? When will the Department obtain the powers to insist that a maintained school and a controlled school must come together as the only viable solution for a particular area? Are we going to continue to transport children in different directions in order to get to the nearest school in their sector, rather than to the nearest suitable school?

3.45 pm

Recently, I spent time in the Dominican College in Portstewart, which is a maintained school with a Presbyterian headmaster. It is absolutely unique, with 40% of its pupils being Protestant. It manages to maintain a Catholic ethos without causing offence to its Protestant pupils. Religious education is taught jointly and without a problem, and the

school co-operates fully with other local schools in a way in which Tony Gallagher would totally approve. It is the way forward and an excellent example of what can be achieved.

Mr Storey: Will the Member give way?

Mr O'Loan: Will the Member give way?

Mr Lunn: No. I am sorry, but I do not have time. You will both have time in which to speak.

Things cannot stay as they are; the situation is unsustainable, so I look forward to the Minister's response.

Having given the First Minister such praise, I will say that the cohesion, sharing and integration (CSI) document for which his Department is responsible was pretty sparse in acknowledging reality and the problems associated with segregation in the education system. We believe that increased sharing and integration in education to bring children together in their formative years is absolutely fundamental to creating a cohesive and integrated society, and we hope that the final CSI strategy will reflect that widely held view. This is not the first debate that we have had on the subject, and it probably will not be the last. Nevertheless, I hope that the change in mood in the country, along with the comments of Mr Robinson and others, may produce progress. I support the motion.

Mr D Bradley: I beg to move the following amendment: Leave out all after the first "Shared Education" and insert

“; upholds the principle of parental choice in education; recognises the contribution to education made by the various education sectors; and calls on the Minister of Education and the Executive to encourage continued integrating and sharing between the various education sectors to maximise the educational, societal and financial benefits and to protect the provision of local schooling.”

Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Éirím leis an leasú a mholadh.

I shall begin by outlining the SDLP's position on education provision. We believe in parental choice, whether that is in Irish-medium, maintained, controlled or integrated education, and I have proposed the amendment to recognise that choice. Therefore, I hope that the proposers of the motion will think again. Trevor Lunn extolled the virtues of parental choice in integrated education. If parents can have choice in integrated education, why can they not have it in the other sectors?

We respect the diversity in our system, and we uphold parents' rights. A sign of maturity in society will be people's ability to accept diversity as something that adds

richness to their lives, without attempting to colonise under one flag or another. Having said that, much can be done in education to encourage cohesion, sharing and integration without losing diversity. We do not believe that sectors should work in isolation, and there are compelling education, societal and economic reasons why that should not be the case. We encourage the maximum possible sharing in the delivery of the entitlement framework and throughout education phases, from early years to primary education and on to post-primary education.

In planning and provision of the schools estate and in all other aspects of education, there are clear economic reasons why we should share staff, facilities and buildings. Important as those reasons are in the present economic climate, they are not the only or even the most important reasons for doing so. It can only be good educationally for children from various backgrounds to get to know one another as individuals, to be taught and learn together, and to play games and sport together. It is good for social cohesion that that should happen, and I believe that most parents would welcome it. In a society with a history such as ours, we cannot continue to live in splendid isolation from one another. We must take positive steps to ensure that our education system becomes more integrated than it is at present, promoting sharing while respecting diversity. That can and should be done. Greater sharing in, and integrating of, education cannot and should not be forced on any sector but should be encouraged and fostered in every way possible. It should be done for the right reasons.

Mr Storey: Given the Member's comments about encouraging people to go in a particular direction, does he agree that that is one of the fundamental mistakes that has been made in the debate on academic assessment; that the bully tactics of the Minister of Education have not worked, because we still have academic assessment; and that the duplicity of the SDLP in not accepting the right of parents to choose academic selection has led us to the stalemate that we are in?

Mr D Bradley: I do not accept the particular point that the Member makes. Every attempt has been made to encourage people to come along the path of allowing all children to have access to all types of education, and I hope that we will get to a better place in the future.

As I said, encouragement to share and to integrate should be done for the right reasons and in the right way. The issue should not be used as a political football in an attempt to win votes, as has recently been the case. We should work with the various sectors and encourage them to work together. The various education providers are more aware than most of us of the challenges that are involved. We should listen to them when they tell us what they need to increase sharing, and we should provide them with the tools that they need.

Area-based planning is a useful tool in achieving greater sharing of staff, facilities and buildings for economic and curricular purposes. It is a good basis for greater sharing that goes beyond the mere functional. The professional expertise of teachers is such that the area-learning communities have made reasonable progress on meagre resources and in a short time. As 'Together Towards Entitlement' indicates, there is still much to be done in that area. Instead of reducing the resources available for that work, we should, in fact, be increasing them, and the Minister of Education should be championing that cause.

We do not underestimate the challenge that greater sharing in education presents, but we should not shy away from it. The work of the area-learning communities is encouraging, as is the work done by the Sharing Education programme managed by Queen's University. The co-operation that exists between the two primary schools in Stewartstown is exemplary, as is that between the two secondary schools in Ballycastle. I am interested in the sharing of sports facilities that has been developed between St Patrick's High School in Keady and Armagh City and District Council. There is a similar project in St Columba's College in Portaferry and an emerging project at St Colman's College in Newry. Those are examples of sharing that is beneficial to the community and the school population. We should build on existing good practice and learn from it.

It is also good that the Churches will consider shared-faith schools. As politicians, we should be working to remove any barriers that may prevent development in that area. Legislative changes are needed to enable the development of more innovative and creative solutions. Under current legislation, there is no mechanism to establish jointly managed schools between sectors or even between phases. As a first step, we must make changes to legislation that will allow greater sharing between and across the sectors. Without those legislative changes, progress will be very difficult to achieve.

The goal of achieving sharing in education may be a long-term one, but it needs to be fostered and encouraged. It is one of the pillars of the SDLP's policy on a shared society, and we will continue to champion it, not only in the weeks ahead but in the months and years to come. I believe that, if we adopt the right approach to the issue by working with the sectors and not attempting to browbeat any sector in any way, we will achieve progress. That is the way to progress. I hope that parties in the House will agree with and support the SDLP amendment. Tá mé buíoch díot, a LeasCheann Comhairle, agus sin a bhfuil uaim.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Education (Mr Storey): At the outset, I will make some comments as the Chairperson of the Education Committee and highlight some key information that the Committee has received on the subject. The Committee is sometimes accused, even by the Minister, of not producing any great amount of work

of substance. Therefore, I want to put on record what the Committee has done on the issue.

We received a presentation from Oxford Economics on its paper entitled 'Developing the Case for Shared Education'. At its meeting of 20 October, the Committee also received a presentation from the Integrated Education Fund, which highlighted the results of the 2009 Life and Times Survey. That showed that 62% of people would prefer to send their children to a mixed religion school in contrast to just under 7% of children who attended integrated schools. The Integrated Education Fund representatives also commented on the Department of Education's response to the Committee on the Integrated Education Fund's earlier position paper on segregated education. The Department stated:

"In law, all schools in Northern Ireland are open to all pupils regardless of religion. ... To date, Government has accepted this as an expression of parental wishes and has not attempted to impose integrated schools."

The Integrated Education Fund responded by saying that it believes that we should no longer settle for community segregation as a reason for segregation in schools. Schools that are in receipt of public money should be expected to demonstrate how they are actively seeking to be open to all pupils regardless of religion. From a Committee perspective, perhaps the Minister might explain to the House what her Department meant by:

"To date, Government has accepted this as an expression of parental wishes and has not attempted to impose integrated schools."

Does that imply that the Department's position may change in the near future and that shared education may be a way forward? We await a response from the Minister, who we are glad is in the House this afternoon. Given the Integrated Education Fund's point, what is the Department of Education doing to ensure that all schools are actively seeking to be open to all pupils regardless of religion?

(Mr Deputy Speaker [Mr Molloy] in the Chair)

Finally, the Committee noted the Queen's University report on options for sharing and collaboration, which concluded that, in the most successful models of school sharing, ethos and religious traditions are not only protected but strengthened. It would be worthwhile for the Minister and her Department to examine successful models of school sharing and to consider how to further implement those ideas.

I will now speak as a Member of the House. I welcome the opportunity to do so, and I commend the Alliance Party for bringing the motion to the House. I also commend the First Minister, my party leader, for kick-starting the debate. It has generated various responses. The responses that my party and its leader have received are interesting.

Sinn Féin has accused us of attacking Catholic schools. Nothing could be further from the truth. The bishops accused us of denying parental choice. However, it is interesting that the bishops who made that claim — Dominic Bradley referred to Dominican College in Portstewart — are the very same bishops who, in the commission's consultation paper on the review of post-primary education, included Dominican College as one school that will be a sacrificial lamb because of the plans that the bishops and the Council for Catholic Maintained Schools (CCMS) have for education in that part of the world.

Moreover, a few weeks ago, Loreto College told us that it had abandoned academic selection. That is not the case. It has rearranged the criteria to ensure that it has a bigger intake of children at the expense of St Joseph's High School in Coleraine and of Dominican College.

Whether the issue concerns a single education system or a single education and library board, people need to come to the debate with integrity, honesty and openness. They need to ensure that their arguments are put in a way that does not threaten, or, as Dominic Bradley said, bully any individual.

4.00 pm

Clarity is needed on what is meant by integrated education.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Draw your remarks to a close.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Education: We do not mean the current system of integrated education, because that was the creation of another sector. We mean a genuine, single system that respects rights, privileges and having a Christian ethos in schools, and we need to continue to work towards that. I support the motion.

Mrs O'Neill: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Sinn Féin will be supporting the SDLP amendment.

As the Chairperson of the Education Committee said, the Alliance Party's motion has brought a debate to the Chamber that has been rumbling in the media and in the education sector for some time, and I welcome the chance to be part of that debate. At

the outset, it is fair to say that everyone recognises the need to pursue collaboration between the various sectors in education where possible and to espouse that as much as possible.

I also put on record my recognition of all the sectors in education that work hard for the good of their students: the Irish-medium sector, the Catholic sector, the integrated sector and the controlled sector. Educating young people and assisting them to reach their full potential is most certainly a challenge, and we all aspire to, and recognise the need for, an education system that delivers for all the young people who go through it.

The motion appears to suggest that the Alliance Party is saying that the only way that children and young people can be educated is via integrated education, and that this will be the answer to ending sectarianism in our society. It also appears to suggest that the only factor that is making our schools unsustainable is that there are various education sectors. It needs to be recognised that the education system does not deliver for all our young people. It fails quite a number of them. I remind the House that 4.5% of young people leave school every year without any GCSEs or any equivalent qualifications, and 12.5% leave school with fewer than four GCSEs graded A to G. A 2006 Audit Office report was quite damning and stated that over half of 14-year-old boys who attended non-grammar schools across the North had not achieved basic standards in literacy and numeracy.

Those are some of the examples that make the current education system unsustainable. There is a need to continue to drive through the policies that the Minister has initiated and implemented, particularly Every School a Good School, area-based planning, transfer reforms and, most importantly, the establishment of ESA, which was to drive forward standards. The Chairperson can laugh all he wants, but, quite frankly, the education of young people is not a laughing matter.

The Oxford Economics paper is a scoping paper with the aim of stimulating debate, and that is why we are debating this issue. The paper gives three reasons why we should look at alternatives, the first of which is international competitiveness. It suggests that we are behind our international competitors, and I believe that no Member disagrees with the idea that we need to build a strong economy and that, to do so, we should work towards the needs of the economy. Young people should be encouraged towards pathways where there are jobs and where there are deficiencies, but, as has been said in many previous debates in the House on education and on the economy, this is not simply an education issue. We need to look at the issue on a cross-departmental basis, with DEL, the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (DETI), the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister (OFMDFM) and the business community becoming involved.

The second reason that the paper gives for the need to change is the financial situation. No one is taking away from the fact that there are obvious financial benefits to collaboration, and, as I said at the outset, I support fully collaboration between, and in, our sectors. They should all be encouraged to work together where possible. Examples were given of where that happens already, and that needs to be built upon. Area-based planning policy, which the Minister is taking forward, should also assist in that process, but we have to be realistic. To ensure sustainability in many schools, they need to work together, and collaboration is necessary, especially in rural areas where there are smaller schools.

The development of ESA is a further issue to be considered in light of financial considerations. It has been said many times in the Chamber that the realisation of ESA would allow the Department to reallocate £20 million to front line services, and it is not good enough that other parties have tried to block that and to play games.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Education: Will the Member give way?

Mrs O'Neill: I will come back to ESA in a few minutes' time, and I will let the Member in at that stage.

The third issue that the paper deals with is how our education system works and the fact that it is made up of various sectors. A point that was raised by the proposer of the amendment is that surely that is an issue of parental choice. People are entitled to have their children educated in a system that, in the first instance, promotes equality, but it must also be a system of choice. Again, the issue of ESA arises. The Assembly agreed a position on ESA. There was a Programme for Government commitment to ESA, and Members of the House — I am talking particularly about the Members opposite — voted for that position on the basis that we would streamline education.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Will the Member bring her remarks to a close?

Mrs O'Neill: Again, however, they have reneged on and shied away from that commitment.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Education: Will the Member give way?

Mrs O'Neill: My time has run out.

Mr B McCrea: That was particularly well timed. I must remember that one.

We keep having the same old debate, albeit in different guises. It is a different topic but the same old argument. There is something unedifying about people trying to play politics with our children. There is an issue, and I do not think that anybody can turn round and say that everyone else is playing party politics with it except them. There are some serious issues, and we need to find a way of getting consensus. Part of the problem is that we are trying to do an awful lot with one policy tool. We are trying to look after the rights of individuals to an education, but we also want to get the economy and the environment right. We do not want schoolchildren to travel too far, and some people want to deal with sectarianism in the community. We are trying to do everything with a single policy tool.

People talk about schooling and its problems, and they trot out statistics about how bad things are. However, it must be remembered that 70% of all education comes from outside the school. The issues come from the children's environment, whether they live in social disadvantage or otherwise and from their cultural background. We have to tackle those issues in a holistic way. I am a believer in integrated education, although, as Mervyn Storey pointed out, it depends on what is meant by "integrated", which is a debate worth having. We might find a common way forward if we were to define it slightly differently.

I have something of a problem with the Alliance Party's motion. I was at the Committee when the paper was put forward, and I understand why it was commissioned and brought forward by the Integrated Education Fund (IEF). As I said, I am a supporter of the IEF, but the motion is a rehash of past positions. We have moved forward. The IEF says that it wants to look at collaboration. Perhaps it is not about bricks and mortar, but about attitudes and minds and how to work together. Perhaps the idea was to generate debate. If so, it was probably overshadowed by the intervention of the First Minister. Whatever his particular motivation, it is worth exploring exactly what we mean by integrated education. Can we have a constructive debate about how we try to deal with such things?

Mr O'Loan: On that point, is the Member as bemused as I am by how the Alliance Party presented the motion? It refers to integrated and shared education, and I am sure that the party chose the two words separately to mean two different things. Yet its Members told us that they absolutely rejected the SDLP amendment, which, it seems to me, defines a broad range of sharing. It would be useful if, later, the Alliance Party would clarify what it means by "sharing". Although the Alliance Party chose to put that word in its motion, when we defined the many different models of sharing that are in place, and whose usage could be increased, its Members rejected that.

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Member has an extra minute in which to speak.

Mr B McCrea: Perhaps there was a certain looseness in the drafting of the motion. It seems to be a reiteration of age-old arguments, rather than bringing anything new to the debate. I share with the Member the notion that choice, particularly informed parental choice, is important. Although some people will favour integrated education, others will favour a faith-based education system, but one in which there is collaboration. Where possible, we should try to engage parents in the education of their children.

The Alliance Party's argument about why the system is non-sustainable is confusing. The real reason why it is unsustainable is the number of empty desks in schools. However, society must make the choice about whether to merge schools from a similar sector or from across sectors. Other models have been envisaged, and I am sure that the Member will be aware of the work of one of the pro-vice chancellors of Queen's University, Tony Gallagher, who has looked at the different models and ways of schools' working together. I do not dismiss existing ideas, but we can deal with the issue in that context.

The most important people in children's education are parents. They should be involved, informed and given the opportunity to do what they think is best for their children. We should, of course, take on board the views of children and others, but who knows better than parents? My party supports the fundamental right of choice, although unlimited choice is not economically viable. Nevertheless, where it is viable, we should give people choice. Where it is not, we must explain to them that we are working under financial constraints and we are trying to get them together.

We did not object to ESA's way of streamlining the administration of schools. Rather, we objected to changing the purpose of ESA to do something that it was not originally intended to do. If parties want us to work constructively together to find a way that satisfies most people's concerns, we will not be found wanting.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Bring your remarks to a close.

Mr B McCrea: We support the SDLP amendment.

Mr Hilditch: Like others, I welcome today's debate. Northern Ireland is going through significant changes, and we are trying to break down the barriers of segregation. We cannot expect to end divisions in society if we continue to educate our children separately. There is no doubt that continuing to do so will leave the doors wide open for the sort of problems that we have been trying to eradicate over the past few years. The benefits of a shared education system are not merely financial but will play a role in transforming society. We want Northern Ireland to aim for a shared future.

The first phase of the sharing education programme commenced in September 2007. In its first three years, more than 5,000 pupils from more than 60 schools benefited from additional educational opportunities across a wide range of curricular and extracurricular activities. The shared programme contributes practically to the role that education has to play in shaping the future of Northern Ireland through the continuing development of area learning communities. Schools involved in partnerships will be able to bring their experiences of partnership working to their communities.

Some pupils said that the project gave them the chance to do subjects that they would not have otherwise done, to meet other people and to learn new things. Others said that they got to see someone else's school and the differences between schools. It is not only pupils who gain from shared education, parents and teachers can form relationships across cultural and traditional barriers. Teachers said that many of our problems stem from ignorance and that children's going to school together can only broaden their education.

The programme has released the imagination and creativity of staff, pupils and parents, and their response has been astounding and inspirational. There is no doubt that the programme enables young people to gain academic and vocational qualifications as well as invaluable life-learning experiences that they can use in their journey into adulthood.

As has been mentioned, Queen's University set out on a mission to reveal the educational benefits of a shared education in 2007. It believes that a shared education will bring considerable and demonstrable educational and community benefits to Northern Ireland. The partnerships that majored in primary to secondary school partnership arrangements offered different kinds of impacts. The educational benefits to primary schools with limited resources were clear, and reference was made to the timeliness of intervention before attitudes hardened. They have demonstrated the enormously positive potential in collaborative learning.

4.15 pm

Let us not forget that there is more to shared education than education and social issues. There are also financial gains, with the Bain report suggesting that up to £75 million could be saved if schools work collaboratively. The shared education model should provide practical evidence that collaboration can work to the benefit of schools and pupils.

Mr Bell: On Monday, I had a group of students up here from Queen's University. They said that there was no way that they would ever allow a further education system in

which blacks were discriminated against compared to whites, in which Catholics were separated from Protestants, or in which Hindus were separated from Muslims. They asked me why, then, we do that at initial education. Does it not make economic sense to follow the model that Peter Robinson outlined and to go for shared education from day one?

Mr Hilditch: Mr Bell makes a valid point. I am glad that he interjected.

Much higher levels of collaboration, joined-up thinking, joined-up action and integrated working will shape the future of Northern Ireland. As a society, we do not want to persist with division. Future generations will not thank us if we fail to address the issue. At a time when public money and resources are extremely limited, schools should work together to maximise effectiveness.

It is hoped that shared education is adopted, taken on board and encouraged by schools. Our children deserve more during their education and aspire to an integrated future. We have the opportunity to transform the education experience. Therefore, I ask for a joined-up approach from all relevant Departments, as has been suggested, so that we can make that change sooner rather than later.

Mr O'Dowd: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. As my colleague Michelle O'Neill said, we support the SDLP amendment. However, it is our view that if no amendment had come forward, the Alliance Party motion was broad enough for us to offer it our support. The motion can be interpreted in a number of ways and, as this is politics, we interpreted it in the way that we chose.

Speaking as a DUP Member, the Chairperson of the Committee said that there has to be "integrity, honesty and openness" in the debate; three brave words for any politician to come out with in any debate. So, let us have a wee bit of openness around where the motion, and Peter Robinson's speech several weeks ago, came from.

I note the Oxford Economics report. However, it does not advance the debate. It relied largely on information that was available to Members, and perhaps elaborated on that, but that was its only value.

I have listened to the contributions, particularly those from the DUP Benches and DUP commentators, around Mr Robinson's speech on moving towards integrated education. It may be more open, honest and fair to say that it was more about closing down Catholic education than it was about integrated education. If someone is serious about any radical proposal, they choose carefully how they deliver it, where they deliver it and how the message is broadcast. I have said on several occasions, but it is worth

repeating, that Mr Robinson chose to deliver his speech at Castlereagh Borough Council, chose to speak to a largely unionist audience and chose to tell the audience that he wanted to close down Catholic education, to which he got a positive response.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Education: I know that the Member protects the Minister, but it is a pity that the he does not advise her. Yesterday, at St Dominic's Grammar School, the Education Minister was in front of a grammar school audience. What did she say?

A Member: Today.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Education: I got the day wrong.

She battered them over the head with academic selection. She did not have the decency to engage with that sector in an open, honest and fair way. Therefore, I will not take a lecture on behalf of my party leader as to when and how he conducts his business.

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Member has an extra minute.

Mr O'Dowd: Point taken. However, as someone who has worked closely with the Education Minister for several years, I assure the Member that she does not need protecting. She is more than capable of protecting herself.

The fact of the matter is that the DUP has not entered this issue from the path of righteousness. The DUP has not entered this with the genuine concern that it wants to see integrated education or tackle sectarianism. Rather, it entered it because it sees the Catholic education sector as a threat to its vision of society. That is, in my opinion, why the DUP raised the subject. It does not see it as threat because of Catholic religious teaching or theology, but because of the way in which the nationalist community is educated. The DUP wants to break that down to create a schooling system that produces a ceramic vision of each other as little Northern Irishers. That is a mistake in itself.

No one can argue against shared education or an integrated education system as part of our vision for the future. However, we are where we are. We have parental choice, and, as far as I am aware, all the parties around the Chamber support that. Parents have a right to decide where to send their children and, in the majority of cases, they send their children to their local school. That is particularly true of the primary-school sector. Parents do not look around and see a Catholic school or a state school. Rather, they see a good local primary school and make the decision to send their children there.

We live in a divided society, and, naturally, many in the Catholic community send their children to Catholic primary schools and secondary schools, and those in the unionist community send their children to controlled schools. That is a result of our society, and it is not the fault of the education system that we have a divided society. When sectarianism and the divisions in our society are debated, it is a mistake for us to point to the education system, claim that the blame lies there and feel that we would have a better society if only we were to educate our children together. That is part of the answer and solution, but it is not the answer in its totality. It is easy for someone to present the argument that they oppose sectarianism and will challenge it by challenging faith-based education or Catholic education. That is not a challenge to sectarianism, but, in fact, it raises its spectre.

Sinn Féin will not be found wanting when it comes to encouraging and moving towards shared education facilities. It will also not be found wanting in encouraging any sector to move in that direction.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Bring your remarks to a close.

Mr O'Dowd: However, we are where we are. I call on people not to point the finger at the education system and blame it for the sectarianism in our society.

Miss McIlveen: I support the motion as tabled. The venue in which my party leader chose to deliver his speech last month is totally irrelevant. However, I welcome the quotation that Trevor Lunn made from that speech when moving the motion. In that speech, Peter Robinson outlined his vision for an integrated education system, and although there are those in some quarters who believe it to be some form of Damascene moment, nothing could be further from the truth. Indeed, anyone who looks back over the debates in the Chamber during the past number of years will note the repeated position of DUP Members and their desire to have an integrated education system. However, what we mean by an integrated education system is not the same as that which exists in the integrated sector, a point that Mervyn Storey was starting to expound on when his time came to a close.

We have been steadfast in our belief that no sector should be favoured over others, which is the case when it comes to viability criteria and club banking for the integrated and Irish-medium sectors. Such favouritism costs money. Those issues have been debated on numerous occasions in the Chamber, and the usual silo-mentality based comments have been drawn from vested interests and their apologists from inside and outside of the Assembly, which is much like the reaction from the Catholic Church, the SDLP and Sinn Féin to Peter Robinson's statement. In his own very eloquent way, my colleague Mr Storey expounded on the responses received by my party leader.

There needs to be a reality check. Constant lip service is paid to a shared future by Members on the Benches opposite, and if that is truly what is wanted, one of the primary origins of division, the school system, needs to be addressed. I listened to Mr Bradley extolling why there needs to be sharing in education. He spoke of sectors not continuing to live in splendid isolation and cited many good examples of that working in practice. However, he objects to moving forward in a manner that is more than aspirational. What he is really looking to do is to reinforce the sectors.

There are numerous advantages to an integrated education system, and Mr Lunn has set them out. The motion refers to economic, educational and social benefits. I have already touched on the cost of sectoral favouritism. A Sinn Féin Member raised the matter of ESA, but clarity needs to be brought to that issue before we get lost in Sinn Féin spin. Sinn Féin knows rightly that it is the lack of equality in the Bill that was presented that made it unworkable. The DUP is not opposed to the idea of a single education board. However, we have difficulties with what is on offer, because it favours some sectors over others. The sector that would suffer most notably at the hands of the Education Bill would be the controlled sector.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Education: It is clear that Members, particularly those on the Benches opposite, were partial in the elements of Peter Robinson's speech that they listened to. In the very same speech where he referred to a single education system — a speech that he made at Castlereagh Borough Council offices — Peter Robinson also referred to a single education board. That seems to have been overlooked because it does not suit the party on the Benches opposite to hear that part.

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Member will have an extra minute.

Miss McIlveen: Just for clarity, the speech was made not in Castlereagh Borough Council offices but at the La Mon Hotel.

We will go back a bit and talk about parental choice, which was raised by Sinn Féin and the SDLP, particularly in its amendment. Both those parties wish to destroy parental choice in academic selection, and thus to destroy grammar schools. Therefore, there is a certain amount of hypocrisy around the idea of parental choice.

Turning to social benefits —

Mr McDevitt: Will the Member give way?

Miss McIlveen: No, I do not have time, but thank you anyway.

Peter Robinson referred to separate schooling in Northern Ireland as:

“a benign form of apartheid, which is fundamentally damaging to our society.”

As my colleague Mr Bell said before he left, we do not educate our young people in separate universities, so why do we teach them in different schools? By doing it, we become entrenched in our differences. Why wait until adulthood? Separate schooling normalises division. As you would expect, I support Peter Robinson’s call for a commission to be established to produce recommendations on a process of integration, as he outlined in his speech. That would be money well spent, not only because of the savings that could be made but to lay the foundations for what would be a truly shared future.

Although the Oxford Economics report does not set out the same vision, it does highlight the absurdities of the current position. It is a scoping paper and, therefore, throws up matters for debate. It is important that that debate should occur. There is no point in certain bodies retreating to their silos and refusing to contribute positively. Education is not about protecting vested interests. It is about teaching our children to best prepare for adulthood. It is about opening their minds, not inculcation. The debate has now begun. We know the cost of division, and it is not counted simply in monetary terms. It is now a matter of taking steps to address it.

Sir Reg Empey: I thank the Members for tabling the motion and the SDLP for its amendment. Reflecting on the debate, we are faced with four challenging issues. The first is the need to build a genuinely shared future in Northern Ireland that is based on respect, understanding and working together. That is crucial, not only for the good of our communities and future generations but for the future success of our economy. The education system has a crucial role to play in that.

The second issue is that we face significant fiscal constraints that will place serious strain on the Department of Education. That is coupled with a significant increase in the number of empty seats in our schools. There is, therefore, a genuine need to rationalise our schools estate. The 2006 Bain report suggested that it might be possible to save up to £75 million in the education budget if schools worked collaboratively.

The third issue facing us is an existing system that was developed over time and based on ethos education, which, although having its faults, is working in the main.

There is proof that faith-based schools provide better results than schools that do not have a defined ethos. The crucial element linked to that point is parental choice. The

Ulster Unionist Party strongly supports the principle of parental choice and recognises that it is a key element in any civilised society.

4.30 pm

The fourth element is the rural/urban split in provision and sustainability. There is no doubt that rural schools are under more pressure when it comes to sustainability than their urban counterparts. However, rural schools can form the backbone of local communities and, in many cases, keep them viable.

The motion reflects some of the changing thinking in the integrated education sector, which is welcome. That sector is beginning to recognise that there is a need for a more organic approach to sharing instead of just going down the Integrated — with a capital “i” — route, which could lead to new schools opening at the expense of existing schools or to a heavily centralised and top-down approach whereby our education system is essentially secularised by the state. However, the wording of the motion does not reflect adequately the need for community buy-in and commitment when it comes to any changes in our education system.

It is worth reflecting on some other recent developments. In a recent speech, the First Minister, who has been referred to, appeared to be advocating a secularisation of the education system. That would see a more centralised approach, which would remove the influence of the Roman Catholic Church in the maintained sector and the Protestant Churches in the controlled sector, thus creating a one-state system.

The true motives of that move can be debated another time. However, that approach ignores the right of parental choice and the needs of local communities. The Ulster Unionist Party strongly believes that we should be rationalising with a view to sharing. We should be promoting cross-sectoral collaborations, be they formal, through the entitlement framework, or informal. We must be looking towards future rationalisation, be that by exploring shared faith schools, community schools or shared facilities, predicated on community buy-in and support. Shared services and facilities might also be appropriate, if encouraged by area planning.

However attractive the rhetoric in support of a single state system for Northern Ireland might be, especially for financial reasons, it is unachievable until a consensus can be created to bring it about. Megaphone tactics simply will not work.

The proposers of the motion regularly draw attention to the costs of division. We all know that there are costs associated with division, but there is the same argument about the peace walls. We all want the peace walls to come down, but, if Mr Lunn lived

in Cluan Place, maybe he would be less enthusiastic about bringing the peace walls down. It is very good to bring them down as long as one does not live near them. We have to understand where our society is.

The way forward will not be more “commissionitis”, as the Member for Strangford thinks. The way ahead is for parties in the House to sit down and discuss the issues together. We do not need more commissioners. We can discuss the issues; that is what we are here for. I do not see the need for more commissions, but I do see the need for proper dialogue.

We have to be realistic and recognise the right of parents to choose as well as the economic realities. We have the capacity, if we put our minds to it, to bring a debate forward with proper inter-party dialogue so that we will be able to advance the case.

Mrs M Bradley: I have no intention of reiterating everything that my colleague Dominic Bradley said earlier in the debate. Therefore, I will keep my contribution short.

The SDLP supports integrated education because we support freedom of choice. That is why we chose to table an amendment to the motion.

Parents and children should be able to be educated in whichever medium they choose, and the same provision should be afforded to every child. It is because of our support for parental choice that we were disappointed by the First Minister’s remarks about faith-based schools. Echoing the CSI strategy, the First Minister’s stance on integrated education has further proved that the Executive is more about entrenchment than integration.

Each education sector has brought significant benefits to schooling in the North, and I want to make special mention of the work of my local schools and the very successful way in which they work with the learning communities.

The SDLP is deeply committed to protecting the provision of local schooling. For a number of years, the Department of Education has been closing down schools, especially in rural areas. As finances get tighter, we fear that that trend could accelerate. For that reason, integrating and sharing in education has become paramount. Few issues in government can truly be said to save money and provide societal good. If managed correctly, however, that could be one such area.

In addition to supporting integrated education, it is imperative that the Department of Education assist each sector in sharing resources to proceed towards better integration. The amendment standing in my party’s name offers a fair and cohesive way forward,

and it expands rather than negates the motion. I urge all Members with a view to fairness, integration and cohesion to support the amendment, as I do.

Some Members: Hear, hear.

The Minister of Education (Ms Ruane): Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I welcome the debate and the opportunity to discuss the many issues that the motion raises. I thank my colleague Trevor Lunn as one of those who brought the motion to the House.

Before getting into the detail of the Oxford Economics report, ‘Developing the case for shared education’, we need to confront all divisions, including segregation based on social status, rather than simply cherry-pick those that sit neatly with particular party political perspectives. I am for integrated and secular state education, but that cannot mean the imposition of the culture and ethos of one political perspective at the expense of another.

An inclusive education system with which everyone can feel affinity should be developed in partnership and agreement with all sectors of the education system. That cannot mean hockey instead of hurling, English instead of Irish or Oliver Cromwell instead of Pádraig Pearse. However, it would be a mistake for anyone — I agree with my colleague John O’Dowd on this — to lay the blame for segregation and sectarianism in our society at the doorstep of education, or on those who championed education during very dark days in the history of this state. Our current education system has evolved as a result of sectarianism; it is not the cause of that sectarianism.

Tá cuid mhór easamláirí ann den dea-chleachtas sa chóras oideachais, ach aontaím nach bhfuil an córas reatha inbhunaithe. There are many good examples of good practice in our education system, but I agree that the current education structure is unsustainable. The Assembly has already voted in favour of a single system: the Education and Skills Authority (ESA).

Let me remind Members what they voted to support. The ESA will be a single system of administration to support a diversity of schools; a system that will promote equality while preserving choice; a system that puts the needs of children and young people before the needs of institutions; and a system that empowers school leaders to drive change and improvement.

The educational case for change is clear. Our education system is failing many of our most vulnerable young people, and I will not rehearse those arguments. Michelle O’Neill spoke about them.

Mr Humphrey: Will the Minister give way?

The Minister of Education: No. The financial case is also compelling. Under the Education and Skills Authority, it will be possible to redirect £20 million a year from administration to front line services. The findings of the Oxford Economics report support a range of policies that I have already introduced. It could be said, however, that the report tells us merely what the Assembly has already concluded.

The case for the ESA is clear. The legislation for the ESA is ready, and it awaits the DUP living up to its public pronouncements that it wants to tackle bureaucracy, to invest in front line services and, most importantly, to improve standards, especially for young people from deprived areas.

We have some five working months left in the present Assembly mandate. That is five months to lead a once-in-a-generation reform, and five months to modernise and secure the future of our children's education, and, in turn, our economic potential to build out of recession. I am not standing still in the interim. I have progressed with convergence plans to secure savings in the confines of the current system.

Today must be my lucky day, because I am highlighting DUP wriggling on hooks. Get off the hooks. Get off the hooks on academic selection. You have abandoned your 1989 policy. I told you earlier, and I do not need to go into it again.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Education: Will the Minister give way?

The Minister of Education: No. The Minister will not give way.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Education: Will the Minister give way?

The Minister of Education: I will not give way, because we have listened to the Member. Now he is jumping up and down because he knows that he is wriggling on a hook again. The DUP offered up excuse after excuse for failing to progress the ESA. One minute it was one thing, the next minute it was something else, and now the party is looking for another reason.*[Interruption.]*

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order.

The Minister of Education: You can see that the party is getting jittery when its Members are jumping up and down. Can they explain to the front line why they are squandering the opportunity to save £80 million by establishing the ESA? I welcome change. I love change. People know that. I welcome debate.

I agree with Declan O'Loan that it is amusing to see the DUP change policy so quickly; however, it forgot to tell its Members that it had done so. Therefore they heard about it on TV or after their leader, Peter, talked at Castlerea council.

Mervyn gave a wonderful speech supporting the integrating of education. He is on the board of governors of a school that wants to transform. Parents voted for it — parental choice in action — but, lo and behold, who tried to block it but Mervyn and one of his councillors.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Education: Will the Minister give way?

The Minister of Education: No; I will not give way. The Member had his chance. The Member would do well to be polite and listen for a change. There were other comments on integrating from none other than Iris Robinson. She said, and I assure Members that these are not my words, that the philosophy of the integrated lobby:

“consists of nothing else other than self-righteous, pompous claims of reconciliation, no more amazing than claiming that they can fit 200 people into the back seat of a Mini.”

People are entitled to change, and I welcome that; however, the problem is that they do not get it all joined up. At today's Question Time, a Member of the DUP came out against one of the most innovative projects of sharing.

If we are to have this debate, Members cannot do 90-degree turns. As Reg Empey said in his very considered contribution, let us have real discussion not megaphone diplomacy, and let us do it on the basis of respect.

Calls are made for one system, only to be followed by attacks on the Irish-medium sector. Why would you do that if you wanted real debate? Let us have a real debate here. The way to go forward is on the basis of respect.

I was asked about integrated education. I take my statutory duty to encourage and facilitate the development of integrated education very seriously. Since I became Minister of Education, the number of children attending integrated schools has increased from 17,600 to more than 20,700; I have approved development proposals for a new grant-maintained integrated post-primary college; I have transformed three existing primary and one post-primary school to integrated status; I have established one integrated statutory nursery school; and I have approved 71 capital schemes in 28 schools in the sector to the value of more than £10 million.

Let us talk about post-primary transfer. Of course, as the integrated sector recognises, a fully integrated school does not just mean bringing together all communities; it means

a school that operates admissions that do not reject children on the grounds of ability. This morning, I spoke at St Dominic's with the President of Ireland, Uachtarán na hÉireann, and I was absolutely true to my principles.

My principles are that public money should be spent in areas of high social need. The week before last, I was in the Belfast Model School for Girls; today, I was on the lower Falls. However, I said clearly in St Dominic's that it must use public money wisely and it is important that it does not erect barriers for children. That is my party's position. Everyone knows that. Sinn Féin does not wriggle on hooks; Sinn Féin takes policy positions and speaks up for what it believes in.

Unfortunately, two of our integrated post-primary schools persist in partial academic selection, but, apart from that, I am pleased that the sector as a whole recognises that an ethos of welcoming and valuing all children is incompatible with academic selection at 11 years old, as reflected in the Department's transfer guidance. I hope that the two schools that operate partial selection will stop doing so.

4.45 pm

We must address social division — the class divide — which, like the academic selection of the past, is extremely damaging. It was a failed system, socially and educationally, which created and sustained injustice and inequality. It is fundamentally immoral and has no place in a modern, progressive and enlightened society.

I absolutely agree with Reg Empey about the importance of the entitlement framework and area-learning communities. As I said earlier, and as Trevor Lunn also mentioned, the entitlement framework provides new opportunities for pupils to achieve their full potential. There cannot be four A-level classes in the same town doing the same course over a two-year period when those classes have only four or five pupils.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Education: Will the Minister give way?

The Minister of Education: I do not know what part of the word no or níl the Cathaoirleach does not understand.

We need to use resources wisely. It stands to reason that allowing pupils access to a wider range of courses that interest them, which are relevant to their future career aspirations and which reflect the economy's needs, will give them the best possible chances. Some amazing work is being done. A few weeks ago, I was in north Belfast with 600 teachers from every sector. They came together on a day when schools were

off to discuss how they could timetable and work together. Area-based planning is needed.

Mr Humphrey: Will the Minister give way?

The Minister of Education: No. Everybody in the Chamber had an opportunity to be heard.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I have been fairly tolerant. First, the Minister indicated to a number of Members that she will not give way. Secondly, there must not be an ongoing commentary from a sedentary position. I ask Members to respect the House.

The Minister of Education: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Benefits are to be realised through greater sharing in education. A unique opportunity has arisen through the gifting of the Lisanelly site in Omagh for education purposes. That landmark project offers the opportunity to bring together a number of Omagh schools on the Lisanelly site and to plan the campus to include shared, state-of-the-art facilities, to which all young people in Omagh will have access. I will go there on 25 November 2010. I look forward to my visit very much.

Aithníonn mo dhréacht-pholasaí um chaidreamh pobail, comhionannas agus ilchineálacht san oideachas go bhfuil comhoibriú ar siúl cheana féin.

My draft policy for community relations, equality and diversity in education recognises that collaboration already exists and, more important, seeks to build on that greater sharing and collaboration. As I said, a great deal of collaboration is happening, and Dominic Bradley mentioned some of it. It does my heart good to see different uniforms in different schools in areas where one would not expect to see that.

When I visited the Belfast Model School for Girls, one teacher told me of how she works with Coláiste Feirste on the Falls Road. Teachers are way ahead of many politicians because they actively encourage and support collaboration. Indeed, the Integrated Education Fund has indicated that more than 1,000 schools — more than 80% of schools — are already engaged in some form of shared education. Is that enough? No. Can more be done? Yes. My Department encourages more to be done. Indeed, with any funding streams that are coming on board, whether for extended schools or shared education, we encourage clustering and schools to get together. Members would be genuinely amazed to see what goes on. Young people should be educated together. We must find ways to do that through the diversity of provision that exists at present.

The Oxford Economics report is simply a scoping exercise; the authors acknowledge that. I noted in the Hansard report that when the Integrated Education Fund presented its report to the Committee for Education, members expressed concerns, including the failure to address key economic issues; the fact that the financial argument did not stack up; the lack of depth; and the failure to address barriers to shared education. I agree with all those concerns. We need to deal with issues of parental choice, community readiness and political impetus. We will do that. It is noteworthy that the author acknowledged that there is little difference between the IEF's recommendations and those of the Bain report, in which my Department has been actively involved.

Representatives from the integrated education fund also acknowledged that cost savings will not be made through sharing at first, and that, initially, it will cost money. There was recognition that savings are most likely when schools come together on a single campus similar to the Lisanelly site, which I have already outlined.

This is a complex agenda, and has been seen in recent weeks, it is often viewed as a sensitive subject on which there are differing views. Greater integration and sharing is something to which we should all aspire. It will come about as a result of the comprehensive, robust and evidence-based approach in which my Department is actively engaged. Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle.

Mr McDevitt: I thank everyone who contributed to the debate. I think that we will all agree that this is a debate that needs to start: in fact, I guess that it has started. I rise to sum up and conclude the debate on the amendment that was tabled in order to frame the debate and put it in a better context, one that is rooted in a series of basic principles that have been echoed by colleagues in Sinn Féin and the Ulster Unionist Party and by my colleagues in the SDLP. There is the basic principle of choice, which acknowledges that parents have the right to pick and do what they believe is best for their children and that that right should not be fettered or undermined in any way in order to achieve a political outcome.

The second principle is one of reconciliation and the genuine sense and determination to try and build a better future for education based on respect for the diversity in our society.

Mr Humphrey: Is the Member aware that Queen's University in Belfast and Vanderbilt University in Nashville have a sister-city relationship? Recently, I met some academics from Vanderbilt. They were amazed that this city does not have an integrated education system and that due to the fact that we live in a divided city, people do not get the opportunity to meet people from other religions until they go to university or into the

world of work? How can we build the sort of society that the Member is talking about when we retain the status quo in education?

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Member has one extra minute.

Mr McDevitt: I thank Mr Humphrey for his intervention. I do not think that there is a single person in the House who is arguing for a segregated education system for ever and a day. I did not hear one single Member.

Mr Humphrey: They argued for the status quo.

Mr McDevitt: No. I heard no one argue for the status quo. In fact, I heard everyone argue for evolution.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Education: Declan O'Loan asked about clarity earlier in relation to the Alliance Party. However, the Member's party's amendment is not clear. It contains the word "sectors". Does that include grammar schools, or does it relate to institutions such as maintained schools and controlled schools? Will the Member clarify what he means by sectors? Will he give parental choice to parents who want to use grammar schools?

Mr McDevitt: Our policy on that matter is clear. We believe in the right to ethos-based education, but we also believe in the opportunity of shared ethos-based education. We do not believe that there is a cohesive or credible argument proven anywhere in the world for selecting children at 10 to 11 years of age. I do not know too many educators who believe it either. One either accepts or does not accept that argument.

The key issue at the heart of today's debate is about whether we are going to be capable of building on what we have achieved and whether we can take the best bits of faith-based and ethos-based education and make them better by building on shared facilities, as we are able to do. To some extent, that is the easy part. It is also about exploring ways in which we can remove the legislative barriers to shared-faith schools over time, as Dominic Bradley suggested.

The question for us is not whether we can look back to a solution that would have fitted well in an old multicultural analysis of Maggie Thatcher's Britain in the 1980s or whether we can reinvent education in this region that is not based on the notion that we have a shared allegiance to a particular outcome, but on our diversity and the need for intercultural dialogue. That is a principle that we could be seeing a lot more of in our debates. If we had more of that in our cohesion, sharing and integration strategy, we would have a much better situation in which to frame this debate.

Basil McCrea makes a very important point. Education cannot solve all of our problems. It cannot tackle the crisis in sustainability in our regions; it cannot deal with every division in our society; our children are not the pawns through which we will recast and deal with all of our problems.

However, I am quite clear when I say that we have a massive and shared duty to be able to acknowledge that, if we are to reframe and recast education in this century, we will have to do so by building on respect for the system that has evolved and for what has worked in the past, without in any sense being complacent about the fact that change is needed. The systems have evolved because of bad politics in the twentieth century. Indeed, those points emerged in our debate yesterday when we discussed Lord Craigavon's legacy.

As I said, again in response to Mr Humphrey, no one argued for the status quo. I did not hear anyone say in the House today that the way that we have done things in the past is the way that we will do them in the future. I do not know of a single state around the world with a faith-based or ethos-based system that has not outperformed the non-ethos-based system. That is not a personal opinion; I do not say that because I have a particularly strong ethos — it may or may not be the case that I do. It is a matter of fact. We have a very strong ethos in our education system, and we should not lose it.

We are very privileged to have some very fine schools in my constituency, and when I look at them, I see institutions that bring a very important mix of identity and commitment to educational excellence. The opportunity that we have in the months and years ahead is to take the conversation forward —

Mr Deputy Speaker: Will the Member bring his remarks to a close?

Mr McDevitt: It is also to understand that, in sharing, there is massive opportunity and that it should not be assumed that a single analysis or basic system will work.

Dr Farry: I welcome the debate, and it is important that we have it. In many respects, this issue is now at the top of the political agenda, and, as far as I am concerned, it is about time. Some of the contributions have been helpful and constructive, some have been realistic and, unfortunately, some have not. Every time that we talk about sharing and integrating education, there is a dangerous tendency for us to relapse into the same old tired debate on academic selection, which has been debated here many times.

We certainly cannot go on with our education system as we have been in Northern Ireland. Major financial, economic, social and human costs result from the segregation that exists in our education system, specifically the fact that we have 70,000 empty

school places. That situation is only set to get worse, notwithstanding the short-term demographic blip that we have had. We have inefficiencies in the schools estate, which means that there are excessive costs for things such as maintenance and running costs. There are also inefficiencies in school support services. Those are all costs that the public purse has to bear, bearing in mind that we are talking about a time of quite severe financial pressure.

We have perhaps the highest spending per capita on education of anywhere in the UK, but, at the same time, we are investing less directly in our pupils. That must point to the fact that something is going badly wrong with the way in which we are organising our system. We have a huge backlog of school maintenance projects and a lot of demands for new capital investment. We clearly have too many resources tied up in the existing inefficient schools estate. Therefore, things have to change for the better.

The Alliance Party reckons that the current inefficiencies in our system cost the public purse perhaps around £300 million a year. Obviously, we are not going to release all that in the near future, but we have to start on that journey. In the short to medium term we can perhaps realise £50 million, £60 million or £70 million if we are prepared to take the bold leaps and put in place the correct policies. It is quite right to observe, as Mr Humphrey did, that our system looks very strange to international visitors. It is not the norm internationally. It does not fit well with people who are looking at it from the point of view of other experiences. That applies particularly to those from the United States, where there is a very strong legacy of segregation.

Mr McDevitt: On the point of international visitors, will the Member not concede that it is not just our education system that looks a bit strange? To most people coming to this part of our little island for the first time, our society looks a little strange. This issue is about which way you want to argue. To argue that education is the cause of division and that if we were to fix it we would not look strange is to seriously simplify the real challenge that we have, which is to build reconciliation in our society.

5.00 pm

Dr Farry: That is also a reason not to do anything to fix the education system.

Mrs Foster: Is the Member aware of the excellent work that takes place in Fermanagh through shared future projects? Some 30% of primary-school children are involved in a shared project that gains international backing from Atlantic Philanthropies and from the International Fund for Ireland. It is an excellent project and one that should be looked at from a Northern Ireland context.

Dr Farry: I am happy to recognise that, and as someone who comes from a Fermanagh background, I am particularly pleased to do so.

The Member's point about funding from the international community is also relevant, in that the international community feels the need to invest in sharing in education. Elsewhere in the world, that would be funded through the taxation system. We should be very sober about that. The international community recognises that things need to change and the state has failed to respond to the situation.

I want to respond to Mr McDevitt, who said that evidence suggests that, internationally, faith schools are much more successful. I respect what faith schools have achieved in Northern Ireland. I went to a faith school, and I am here. I will let people draw their own conclusions from that. However, the evidence is not as clear-cut as Mr McDevitt seems to suggest. Look at what is happening in Scandinavia. Those countries do not have faith-based systems, but they have the best results throughout their entire system. Look at South Korea, which has made the biggest leap forward in educational standards in recent years, but does not have a faith-based system. Mr McDevitt claims that faith-based systems are the only ones, but cites no other evidence from throughout the world. He has not looked very far.

Mr McDevitt: I did not say that.

Dr Farry: The Hansard report will reflect what was said.

Let me be clear: the Alliance Party's motion is about integrated and shared schools. We do not necessarily argue for a single integrated system. That may well come some day in the future, and we may welcome it. For today, I acknowledge that we have different sectors and that those sectors will continue to exist for the foreseeable future. However, in that context, it is right that we continue to promote integrated schools as the most sustainable form of education. I must say that I am not impressed by how the Department has fulfilled its duty, which was imposed on it in 1989, to promote integrated education. Far too often, there is a sense that integrated schools are a further fragmentation of a fragmented system, rather than a solution to the problem.

It is important that we recognise that the debate is evolving. Beyond integrated schools, there are options for shared schools, shared campuses, joint-faith schools and simple co-operation and collaboration between schools through, for example, the entitlement framework, and we welcome all that. All that can be copper-fastened by policies such as sustainable schools, area planning and, at the top of the pile, the Education and Skills Authority. Major benefits are to be had from sharing in education: dealing with falling rolls; preserving the local option, rather than children having to be

bussed out of small communities because the sectors want to maintain separation; recognising the evolving identity of our society; and giving young people the full opportunity to mix and interact with people across the board.

The Alliance Party does not support the SDLP amendment. On its own, it is not that objectionable, but, in the context of the motion, it is a clear dilution of what we are saying. For some, the difference may be like dancing on the head of a pin. However, there are two important, subtle points that I want to stress. First, the SDLP amendment would remove our reference to the existing system as unsustainable, which Sinn Féin's Education Minister and spokespersons were prepared to accept. Anyone who looks objectively at our system has to recognise that the way in which we do things is unsustainable. I am disappointed that the SDLP amendment would remove that. The SDLP says that it is for progress, but its members' comments today came across as an attempt to defend an unsustainable status quo and to hold back the tide through rhetoric.

Mr McDevitt: Will the Member give way?

Dr Farry: I have given way already, and I still have a few comments to make.

My party and I fully support the notion of parental choice. However, there is a danger in using parental choice as a slogan in defence of the status quo. Let us not leave ourselves on the wrong side of the debate. Support for parental choice is important to parents, and we will not have a situation in which all schools are the same. There will be a whole range of different options in education. However, we do not have the luxury of turning choice into a fundamental right to separate sectors in our education system. European human rights instruments, which talk about the need to recognise faith and diversity in education, allow states the choice of doing that through a single system or through separate sectors that they choose to fund. However, there is no international human rights standard that states that people must have a separate schools system and must have choice in that way.

Parental choice is an important vehicle. Throughout the years, people in Northern Ireland have consistently said that they want more integrated, shared and mixed schools, but the system has not been flexible enough to meet the demands of parents. Parents are voting with their feet and saying that they want sharing, so let us go in that direction.

I want to address the comments made by Peter Robinson. The motion is not based on what he said. The Oxford Economics report has been very long in —

Mr D Bradley: Will the Member give way?

Dr Farry: I am sorry; I have no time.

I am prepared to take what was said at face value. Frankly, if we are going to be cynical about every remark made by senior figures in this society, we are not going to get terribly far. However, I understand why people can sometimes be a bit suspicious. We may disagree over the precise detail of where we are going, but that speech has sparked a debate and a sea change in the discussion on education, and that is important.

I am disappointed by the approach of the Ulster Unionists. Again, they come across as talking the talk by saying that they support integration, but every time they are asked to put their hands up to give their full support to a proper integrated system, they balk at it.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Bring your remarks to a close.

Dr Farry: They defend the status quo — segregation. I find that somewhat disappointing. My time is up, so I had better leave it there.

Question put, That the amendment be made.

The Assembly divided: Ayes 39; Noes 39.

AYES

Ms M Anderson, Mr Attwood, Mr Boylan, Mr D Bradley, Mrs M Bradley, Mr P J Bradley, Mr Burns, Mr Callaghan, Mr W Clarke, Mr Cobain, Rev Dr Robert Coulter, Mr Doherty, Mr Elliott, Sir Reg Empey, Mrs D Kelly, Mr G Kelly, Mr Kennedy, Mr Kinahan, Mr Leonard, Mr A Maginness, Mr P Maskey, Mr McCallister, Mr F McCann, Ms J McCann, Mr McCartney, Mr B McCrea, Mr McDevitt, Dr McDonnell, Mr McElduff, Mr M McGuinness, Mr McHugh, Mr McNarry, Mr Murphy, Mr O'Dowd, Mr O'Loan, Mrs O'Neill, Mr P Ramsey, Ms Ritchie, Ms Ruane.

Tellers for the Ayes: Mr P J Bradley and Mr Burns.

NOES

Mr S Anderson, Lord Bannside, Mr Bell, Mr Bresland, Lord Browne, Mr Buchanan, Mr T Clarke, Mr Craig, Mr Easton, Dr Farry, Mr Ford, Mrs Foster, Mr Frew, Mr Gibson, Mr Girvan, Mr Givan, Mr Hamilton, Mr Hilditch, Mr Humphrey, Mr Irwin, Ms Lo, Mr Lunn, Mr Lyttle, Mr McCarthy, Mr McCausland, Mr I McCrea, Miss McIlveen, Lord Morrow, Mr Moutray, Mr Neeson, Mr Poots, Mr G Robinson, Mr P Robinson, Mr Ross, Mr Spratt, Mr Storey, Mr Weir, Mr B Wilson, Mr S Wilson.

Tellers for the Noes: Mr Lyttle and Mr McCarthy.

Question accordingly negatived.

Main Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly notes the report by Oxford Economics, 'Developing the case for shared education'; believes that the current education system is unsustainable; recognises the economic, educational and social benefits that can come from integrated and shared education; and calls on the Minister of Education to actively promote a system of integrated and shared education throughout Northern Ireland.

Motion made:

That the Assembly do now adjourn. — [Mr Deputy Speaker.]