

Teachers should be better supported to address issues of sectarianism and racism - that's one of the key messages of a Challenge Paper published recently by the Good Relations Forum.

The intention of the Challenge Paper is to promote and encourage real, meaningful and sustained contact amongst children and young people from diverse backgrounds and cultures. It examines the social and religious divisions in Northern Ireland schools and develops a series of suggestions aimed at improving school cooperation between schools and across the sectarian divide.

The Challenge Paper sets out a series of recommendations to the Department of Education, other educational policy-makers, schools and local communities. Key recommendations include:

- that good relations becomes a compulsory part of the school curriculum
- that local schools are encouraged to work together more, particularly on a cross-community basis, using existing educational reforms and programmes
- that schools engage with and work more with local communities, so that local community groups and people from all backgrounds and cultures are encouraged to use school facilities after hours

ensuring all student teachers get work experience in different sectors

Speaking at the launch event were the joint Good Relations Forum chairs - Bob Collins from the Equality Commission and Tony McCusker from the Community Relations Council, and Denis Rooney, Chairman of the International Fund for Ireland, which funds a number of good relations programmes in schools.

CRC chairman Tony McCusker said: "This is an important piece of work that we have been pleased to work with the Equality Commission to deliver."

"Opportunities exist resulting from the current restructuring and reform of education in Northern Ireland to ensure that good relations is embedded into schools. We hope that these recommendations will be used to ensure that the potential of our education system to support the delivery of a better, shared future is maximised."

Equality Commission Chief Commissioner Bob Collins commented: "Our society is still struggling to be free of the legacy of the past. We owe it to future generations not to return to those dark days. We all need to focus on what we can do to build a more cohesive, shared and integrated society. Schools have an important role to play. They can give our young people the skills to resist the sectarianism and racism that unfortunately still exists in our society. We therefore believe that teaching and practising good relations in all our schools is something that can no longer be avoided or seen as optional."

In his Foreword to the Challenge Paper, Sir George Bain wrote: "Schooling can help to counteract the negative views - hate, bigotry and prejudice - that exist in our

society, and promote the healing of community divisions. This paper challenges the public sector and the community to take a new look at how schools and the communities they serve can be supported to reach out across the community divide to make good relations a reality, to collaborate more, to share resources and to embed the teaching of good relations in schools."

Denis Rooney, Chairman of the International Fund for Ireland, said: "I was interested and happy to learn that many of the recommendations in the Good Relations Forum paper complement the goals of the Fund's own Sharing in Education Programme. It is an integral element of our current strategy to facilitate more sharing and to promote reconciliation and non-sectarianism in Northern Ireland and the southern border counties. We currently fund several cross-community and also some cross-border projects under the Programme, which provides strategic opportunities for young people from different community backgrounds to learn and work together, with the aim of delivering improved academic and personal development outcomes."

This Challenge Paper recommends to Government a way forward that focuses on improving all young people's educational outcomes, as well as promoting a schools sector that is more socially cohesive across its many boundaries. It comes at the right time, following the political parties reaching agreement at Hillsborough, to agree a way forward to secure a better future for all. It is also well timed to influence the development of a strong Cohesion, Sharing and Integration Strategy.

The full document is available at: <http://www.equalityni.org> or <http://www.nicrc.org.uk> or, in hard copy, from Equality Commission, Tel: 028 90 500 600 or the Community Relations Council, Tel: 028 9022 7500.

The Challenge Paper includes the following recommendations:

- Making good relations programmes a compulsory component in curriculum Citizenship programmes and ensuring good relations is mainstreamed across the school
- Ensuring good practice is shared and publicised, with schools that have been successful in cross-community initiatives acting as informal champions
- Building capacity in the skills and experience of teachers to address difficult issues such as sectarianism and racism
- The Minister and the Department of Education providing strategic leadership to ensure that the teaching and practice of good relations is successfully mainstreamed across all schools
- Identifying a long-term budget to support schools
- Targeted support for schools most in need
- Avoiding duplication of educational provision and encouraging greater collaboration, particularly on a cross-community basis - by using existing policies and practices that encourage collaboration

- Supporting communities and parents with good relations programmes in schools
- Keeping schools informed of possible options for collaboration, where schools are at risk of closure or new schools planned
- Providing incentives for greater collaboration across communities in terms of funding criteria and existing initiatives
- Setting targets and measuring outcomes to ensure greater collaboration takes place

Making compulsory good relations programmes in teacher training colleges and encouraging the colleges to collaborate more on a cross-community basis.

The Challenge Paper, itself, is available at:

<http://www.equalityni.org/archive/pdf/EnsuringGoodRelationsWorkinourSchoolsCounts.pdf>

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