

“Deliberative Democracy” Experiment in Northern Ireland: Education Policy In Omagh

Northern Ireland is a deeply divided society. Protestants and Catholics are highly segregated. Their children attend separate school systems. Many streets have markers indicating whether they are for Protestants or Catholics. Militaristic murals decorate walls in Belfast. What would happen if the population actually discussed its common problems together?

Declining enrollment in the area’s schools has turned this from an academic question into a political necessity. To deal with this problem, Northern Ireland is considering new ways to combine Catholic and Protestant students – potentially a volatile policy area. So, on January 27, 2007, an unprecedented experiment will gather a scientific sample of parents to deliberate face to face about the future of education policy. It will take place in Omagh town, the site of the infamous bombing in 1998. Along with declining school enrolments, Northern Ireland is introducing a far-reaching new curriculum. To what degree, and in what specific ways, might a mixing of schools or children meet these challenges? This is the basic question that a scientific sample will grapple with on that day. More than 1,000 people will be involved in the experiment, including about 250 who will actually deliberate on the day (along with a control group that will not deliberate but answer the same questions at the end.)

Deliberative Polling takes scientific samples, gives them a survey of the conventional sort, and then brings them together for extended face to face discussions, both in small groups and in dialogue with panels of competing experts and policymakers. In projects conducted in various parts of the world—the US, Britain, Denmark, Australia, Bulgaria, China, Greece—such projects have shown how informed public opinion differs from the public’s first impressions of sound bites and headlines. Significantly, this is the first project of this kind in a deeply divided society. For many of those who will participate, these will be the first substantive discussions they have ever had with members of the other group. We believe substantial changes of opinion may result and these changes may have a major impact on education policy. The small group discussions, the plenary sessions and the results will be the subject of a broadcast on the

BBC Northern Ireland (*Hearts and Minds*) Feb 1. All the key stakeholder groups, Protestant and Catholic, have participated in the construction of the briefing materials and in the agenda for the deliberations. The Department for Education, the Western Education and Library Board, the Council for Catholic Maintained Schools, the Northern Ireland Council for Integrated Education and Comhairle Na Gaelscolaíochta have agreed to proceed with this project, along with a government commission, headed by Sir George Bain.

For more on Deliberative Polling[®] see <http://cdd.stanford.edu>. The research team includes David Russell, Queen's University, Belfast, Ian O'Flynn, Newcastle University, Tony Gallagher, Queen's University, Belfast, James Fishkin, Stanford University, and Robert Luskin, Stanford University and the University of Texas, Austin. The surveys will be conducted by Ipsos-Mori.

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