

# Two thirds 'support all-ability schooling'

By Simon Doyle  
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**T**WO thirds of parents support the idea of a comprehensive system of education in the north, a major study has found.

Parents said a system of all-ability schools, all providing the same wide curriculum was appealing, according to the north's first 'deliberative poll'.

There was also support for specialist schools, each developing at least one area of expertise, and joint campuses where schools share buildings while retaining distinct identities.

Deliberative polling combines small-group discussions involving large numbers of participants with random sampling of public opinion. Its purpose is to establish a base of informed public opinion on a specific issue.

Researchers from Newcastle University, Queen's University Belfast and Stanford University in the US conducted the poll.

Around 600 parents in the Omagh area were interviewed. Of these, 127 attended a deliberation session and were then polled again.

Half of the respondents favoured establishing jointly managed schools, with management shared between the Catholic Church and the education boards or other religious denominations.

While there was also widespread support for increasing the number of integrated schools, some parents said they wanted to retain schools in their existing sectors - Irish-medium and Catholic maintained.

More than 70 per cent also said that schools that needed to collaborate to deliver the new curriculum "should be required to

partner with their closest neighbouring school, even if it is not of the same religious composition".

Dr David Russell from the Queen's University School of Education said the poll allowed the voices of parents who had the opportunity to learn of the educational choices facing them and their children to be heard.

"In keeping with the recent recommendations of the Bain review, this process has shown that the vast majority of parents clearly envisage a shared future for their children," he said.

Professor James Fishkin, director of the Center for Deliberative Democracy at Stanford University, said this was the first time "delib-

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erative democracy has been applied in a deeply divided society".

"We put a scientific microcosm of the two communities in one room where they could think together about issues confronting their common future," he said.

"They became more informed, they changed their views and they found a greater basis for mutual understanding."

Michael Wardlow, head of the Northern Ireland Council for Integrated Education, welcomed the findings.

"This research proves that parents do not fear sharing and indeed are more than willing to share, regardless of their community background," he said.