

Independent Review of Education

- Initial request for views: NSS response

Submitted online, with email copy to: IndependentReview@education-ni.gov.uk

Are you answering these questions for yourself or on behalf of an organisation?

1. This submission is made by the National Secular Society (NSS). The NSS is a not-for-profit non-governmental organisation founded in 1866, funded by its members and by donations. We advocate for separation of religion and state and promote secularism as the best means of creating a society in which people of all religions and none can live together fairly and cohesively. We seek a diverse society where all are free to practise their faith, change it, or to have no faith at all. We campaign for an inclusive education system free from religious privilege, discrimination or control.

Are there any items in the description with which you disagree?

2. While “spiritual” can be interpreted in an inclusive sense, it is often interpreted as inculcating religiosity, which can create unfair or divisive expectations over the role of schools. We suggest an alternative focus on developing moral character, and offering a broad range of life experiences.

Are there any statements that you would wish to add to the description above?

3. In becoming ethical, informed citizens, we would like to focus on pupils’ understanding their individual rights and responsibilities. We believe a direct reference to inculcating understanding and respect for children’s rights as set out in the UNCRC – as has been suggested in Welsh curriculum reform – would demonstrate this commitment.

Is there anything else you want to say about this description?

4. These are strong ambitions that should be, and are, shared across the whole education system and all communities. Unfortunately, too often dealing with the practical problems of a divided system detracts from a focus on those ideals.

Are there any statements in the description with which you disagree?

5. Abstract agreement over these worthy aims can be undermined in their interpretation and implementation. Promoting respect for identity can morph into the idea that schools should inculcate specific identities. A narrow conception of parental choice can be used to justify continued divisions and segmentation that few parents want.

Are there any statements that you would wish to add to the description?

6. We would like to see a focus on schools acting as centres of cross community building and cohesion, rather than simply teaching about or promoting community cohesion in an abstract sense.

Is there anything else you want to say about this description?

7. At its best, Northern Irish education delivers on these ambitions that are across all communities. However, too often the divided and inefficient nature of education either detracts from or works against these ambitions.

What do you think are the three biggest weaknesses of education in Northern Ireland today?

8. Segregation reinforces divided communities, while driving huge inefficiencies which rob pupils of the full value invested in education.

9. Dominance of religious sectoral bodies means that ideology, rather than pupil needs can drive policy and/or opposition to reforms.

10. The lack of a unified system makes it difficult for teachers, resources, and best practice to move across settings.

Please tick the key issues (maximum 3) that you feel should be prioritised by the Panel.

11. The panel should prioritise addressing 'Educating children and young people from different communities separately', and the 'Structure and delivery of curriculum'.

12. Areas where institutional religious privilege conflicts with the state's human rights obligations. This includes the need to make religious education a genuinely academic, pluralistic, balanced and non-confessional subject, and reviewing the appropriateness of state mandated collective worship without the provision of meaningful alternatives and an independent right to withdraw.

Support for schools, colleges, etc.

Please tick the key issues (maximum 3) that you feel should be prioritised by the Panel.

13. Great teachers make great education. Addressing discrimination against teachers (by ending the FETO exemption) and cultural encapsulation (by addressing the segmented education system) will free more teachers to fulfil their full potential.

The system as a whole

Please tick the key issues (maximum 3) that you feel should be prioritised by the Panel.

14. The panel should prioritise 'The future of integrated education', considering 'The appropriateness of multiple sectors and managing authorities' and creating a "single education system".

15. A "single education system" of some form has been a long-standing ambition for many, pre-dating the 1831 Stanley Letter. There is no one model of a single education system.

16. Our vision for a single system would be one where there is a shared national curriculum and policy framework determined democratically. But "single" need not mean "uniform". Individual schools should have a lot of freedom in decision making, rather than serving sectoral interests.

17. All schools should have an integrated, inclusive community – rather than faith specific ethos – suitable and welcoming for families of all backgrounds.

Is there anything else you would like to say?

18. Despite areas where NI schools perform extremely well, the system faces extreme challenges and long all of which have their roots in, or are exacerbated by, sectarian division, and dominance of sectoral bodies acting as barriers to reform.

19. If starting from scratch, no one would design such a system. “(T)he prospects of moving towards a single education system” which this review must consider may seem ambitious in a nation where over 90% of pupils attend religiously divided schools. However, this should not be a time for small ambitions.

Consultation response prepared by Alastair Lichten, head of education, National Secular Society
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