

# Two inclusive education bills progress in NI Assembly

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Two bills supported by the National Secular Society that would make education in Northern Ireland more inclusive have progressed in the assembly.

The [Integrated Education Bill](#), a private member's bill moved by Alliance MLA Kellie Armstrong, completed its [consideration of amendments stage](#) over Tuesday and Wednesday.

The Integrated Education Bill would introduce a new duty on the NI executive to support integrated schools.

In integrated schools, pupils from Protestant and Catholic backgrounds are educated together in an inclusive approach.

Currently over 90% of pupils in Northern Ireland attend schools which are effectively segregated along religious lines.

Supporters of the bill include People Before Profit Alliance MLA Gerry Carroll. During the bill's consideration stage, he said: "If we are to move away from being a society that is entrenched in division and sectarianism, surely one of the key pillars of that endeavour is to do away with the outdated practice that teaches people in separate and divided schools based on religion or perceived religion. The Bill attempts to do that."

But Kellie Armstrong denied the bill would "make integrated education secular in any way" and said the bill "does not try to remove the Christian-based approach to education".

The NSS has [supported](#) the bill throughout its development. Head of education Alastair Lichten said: "Integrated education is an important step. Ideally all schools in Northern Ireland would be integrated and secular, reflective of the balance of their communities and underpinned by an inclusive community ethos.

"But at the very least we need to begin addressing the terrible state of access to integrated education to combat the problems caused by the segregated education system."

Another private member's bill, the [Fair Employment \(School Teachers\) Bill](#), was introduced on Monday by Alliance MLA Chris Lyttle.

The bill would end an exemption for teaching posts in the Fair Employment and Treatment (NI) Order 1998 (FETO), which provides protection to workers against discrimination on religious grounds.

The NSS has [backed the legislation](#) in response a consultation on the draft bill, saying: "The exemption of teachers from the FETO sends a clear message of discrimination and separatism which contributes to the 'cultural encapsulation' and reduced employment mobility of teachers in NI."

But it warned: "Ultimately, creating a system where all teachers can be treated to equal dignity and opportunities regardless of their background, requires more fundamental reform of education in NI."

The bills are intended to place pressure on the NI executive to accelerate progress on integrated education and reduce discrimination against teachers ahead of the [Independent Review of Education](#).

The review is [currently accepting evidence](#) until Friday 4 February.

See also: [NI's education review is a golden chance to take a stand for inclusion](#)

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## What the NSS stands for

The Secular Charter outlines 10 principles that guide us as we campaign for a secular democracy which safeguards all citizens' rights to freedom of and from religion.

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