

NI's education review is a golden chance to take a stand for inclusion

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Alastair Lichten says a review of education provision in Northern Ireland must be willing to challenge entrenched religious interests to deliver on ambitions for a more efficient and inclusive system.

Voters in Northern Ireland consistently rate education as a high priority. This was reflected in the prominence given to an independent review on education in the 2020 deal which restored devolution. Despite areas where NI schools perform extremely well, every challenge the system faces has its roots in, or is exacerbated by, the sectarian division.

The review will consider "the prospects of moving towards a single education system". That's quite an ambition in a country where over 90% of pupils attend religiously segregated schools. Religious sectoral bodies wield great power in Northern Ireland, dominating the planning and delivery of education, including through control of governing bodies and curricula, and acting as a barrier to reform.

On a recent episode of [the NSS podcast](#), I discussed the independent review and the [issues it should consider](#) with Sam Fitzsimmons, of the Integrated Education Fund (IEF), and Matthew Milliken, of Ulster University. The IEF has released [its own position](#) on the review and its [terms of reference](#) (ToR). The NSS has also received assurances from education minister Peter Weir that the issues that matter to secularists can fall within the ToR.

We will be engaging actively with the independent review, along with our friends and partners in NI, and helping our supporters to do the same. We will urge the panel to seize this opportunity to:

1. Roll back religious groups' control of schools

Last week a University of Ulster paper described Northern Ireland's education system as a "[bewildering alphabetical word-storm](#) of acronyms and initials". This is thanks largely to the vested interests of churches. If starting from scratch, no one would suggest such a bizarre and fragmented system.

The review should recommend putting control of education in the hands of accountable organisations, who prioritise the needs of school communities. Sectoral bodies, including religious groups which currently control schools, should transform into independent NGOs.

2. Tackle the inefficiencies caused by religious segregation

Religious bodies jealously protect 'their' schools, even when this creates [gross inefficiencies](#), while communities suffer. As a result there are close to 50,000 surplus school places across NI and almost £100m a year is wasted on duplication, not counting additional transport costs.

No one wants to see schools close. But in much of the country pairs of schools – one largely serving children from Catholic backgrounds, and one largely serving children from Protestant

backgrounds – are standing half empty. These need to be combined into single integrated schools to free up investment and better serve children. These decisions should put in the hands of communities.

3. Bring schools in line with equalities legislation

There is no good reason why teachers should be the only profession in NI to be [excluded](#) from anti-discrimination protections. Consistently large majorities tell pollsters they believe the Fair Employment and Treatment (Northern Ireland) Order 1998 should be extended to cover teachers.

4. Phase out religious governance of schools

Researchers have [warned that](#) continuing to embed overtly Christian denominational influence on governing bodies undermines schools' ability to meet the changing needs of their pupils. The review should also recommend gradually reducing the proportion of school governors appointed on religious grounds and moving to a fully inclusive governance model. Reducing sectoral bodies' control over governing bodies means their ethos would be more responsive to the needs of the school community, rather than the interests of the religious body.

5. Integrate more existing schools

Large majorities of parents in NI would like to send their children to integrated schools, which bring together children from different backgrounds. But [far too few](#) have this option. We want a fully integrated community ethos system. But in the short term the community led process of transformation is the best route to integrated status for most schools.

The review should look at ways to encourage this and reduce the scope for opposition from sectoral bodies. Areas with low levels of integrated provision, and where pupils are having to travel a disproportionate distance, should be prioritised.

6. Ensure all aspects of the school day are suitable for all pupils

Schools shouldn't be agents of faith formation, so the archaic requirement that pupils take part in a daily act collective worship should be abolished. It's not enough to make worship nondenominational Christian rather than distinctively Protestant or Catholic. That doesn't serve pupils who don't identify Christian or respect pupils' independent right to develop their own beliefs.

7. Modernise education about worldviews

[Religious education in NI schools](#) is controlled by religious bodies to a greater extent than anywhere else in the UK, and designed to "develop an awareness, knowledge, understanding and appreciation of the key Christian teachings... and develop an ability to interpret and relate the Bible to life". RE is not properly inspected and is often delivered partly by external evangelical organisations.

There should be a new worldviews curriculum suitable for all schools and developed by educational experts with educational, rather than confessional, aims.

8. Modernise RSE provision

Currently schools are required to develop a curriculum for relationships and sex education based on their religious ethos. Provision is extremely unequal and often organised to promote religious

interests and views, rather than provide a comprehensive, rights-based education for pupils. This needs to change.

Time for change

No challenge facing education in NI is unique, even within the UK. Wales needs to reorganise and modernise school provision in the face of changing populations. Scotland has a legacy of sectarianism and a divided education system to reflect it. In England the entrenched interests of faith bodies act as a barrier to reform.

But the extent of religious control in NI's schools and the damage that segregation has done are more substantial. There is now a golden opportunity to tackle this. Let's hope the review panel seizes it.

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