

# NI education conference shows cause for secularist hope

Posted: Wed, 25th May 2022 by [Alastair Lichten](#)

*The National Secular Society recently held an online conference on inclusive education in Northern Ireland. Here, Alastair Lichten shares the videos from the conference and thoughts on the speakers' key messages.*

Education in Northern Ireland features levels of religious privilege, discrimination, segregation, and control not seen anywhere else in the UK. Entrenched religious interests make reforms extremely difficult. However, we are continuing to see broad, cross-community and grassroots support for a more pluralistic, integrated approach.

Our online conference on Saturday - [Towards inclusive education in Northern Ireland](#) – was an opportunity to reflect on recent successes, current challenges, and causes for optimism, with our expert panel of academics, advocates and activists.

Our first speaker Kellie Armstrong MLA shared her experiences overcoming institutional opposition to passed her [Integrated Education Act](#), why this matters and what more needs to be done. The NSS has long supported similar legislation along with further moves towards a fully integrated system.

Human rights lawyer Darragh Mackin discussed his work on a [case](#) arguing that the legal requirement for school assemblies and RE to promote Christianity were incompatible with children's and parents' human rights. The NSS campaigns to end mandated collective worship in Northern Ireland, and across the UK, and for fundamental reform of education about religion and beliefs.

Dr Matthew Milliken is a researcher with the UNESCO Centre in Ulster University's School of Education. He discussed his work on the [Transforming Education series of papers](#), with a focus on religious discrimination against teachers in NI. The recently passed [Fair Employment \(School Teachers\) Act](#) has ended the exemption of teachers from equality laws, but Dr Milliken's talk covered some of the other barriers the NSS is campaigning to end.

Megan Turner is the training and development co-ordinator for Relationships and Sexuality Education (RSE) with sexual health charity Common Youth. Currently RSE is taught based on each school's faith ethos, meaning pupils suffer where quality is extremely variable, and where topics are restricted or distorted through faith-based approaches.

The individual talks were followed by a lively Q&A session.

NI remains far more religious than the rest of the UK, and the churches' entanglement in education is far more institutionalised. However, as NI becomes more diverse, as the links between political and partisan identity loosen, and separate education becomes ever more costly and unworkable, calls for reform will continue to grow.

[Learn more about, and add your support, to proposals to address religious privilege, discrimination, and control in Northern Ireland's education system.](#)

## **Alastair Lichten**

Alastair ([@AlastairLichten](#)) is a former head of education at the National Secular Society. The views expressed in our blogs are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the NSS.

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