

# Ep 21: Integrated Education Fund

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0:00:05.890,0:00:10.370  
(Emma Park - EP) You're listening to the National Secular society podcast hosted by Emma Park.

0:00:10.370,0:00:14.929  
Today I'm going to be talking to Maddie Bridgman (MB) and Sam Fitzsimmons (SF), two

0:00:14.929,0:00:19.279  
representatives from the Integrated Education Fund. This is a charity in

0:00:19.279,0:00:22.670  
Northern Ireland that promotes a school system which is not divided by

0:00:22.670,0:00:26.359  
denomination into Catholic and Protestant schools, but instead is

0:00:26.359,0:00:30.710  
inclusive, welcoming all religious and cultural backgrounds. I'll be discussing

0:00:30.710,0:00:34.159  
the particular problems which Northern Ireland is facing in reforming its

0:00:34.159,0:00:46.969  
education system, and why it matters. I'm joined now by Maddie Bridgman (MB) and Sam

0:00:46.969,0:00:49.699  
Fitzsimmons (SF)  
of the Integrated Education Fund in

0:00:49.699,0:00:56.329  
Northern Ireland. Maddie and Sam could you perhaps start by taking us through a bit

0:00:56.329,0:01:01.519  
of the background. What's the current situation with religious divisions in

0:01:01.519,0:01:06.079

Northern Ireland, just to remind us all of where we've got to, and how is it

0:01:06.079,0:01:11.800  
affecting education in particular?

0:01:11.800,0:01:15.229  
(SF) OK, the education system in Northern Ireland is fairly

0:01:15.229,0:01:20.600  
complex,  
both in a religiously segregated way, and

0:01:20.600,0:01:27.469  
also in a socio-economic segregation. When the state was founded

0:01:27.469,0:01:36.130  
in 1921, the then Education Minister wanted to establish a single

0:01:36.130,0:01:42.380  
nondenominational education system. That was opposed by the main churches

0:01:42.380,0:01:52.899  
within Northern Ireland and in 1922 the idea of a  
single system was dropped in favour of

0:01:52.899,0:01:58.340  
secular or segregated education with the Catholic churches taking responsibility

0:01:58.340,0:02:03.289  
for the teaching of Catholic children and the Protestant churches taken

0:02:03.289,0:02:08.330  
responsibility for the education of Protestants children . That has existed

0:02:08.330,0:02:21.930  
without change for a couple of hundred years now. The Integrated Education was established

by parents in 1975 when they decided

0:02:21.930,0:02:29.190

by parents in 1975 when they decided that that they wanted an education, a school model that would educate children of

0:02:29.190,0:02:46.200

both traditions and of others. It has been parents who have been driving this campaign and today the IEF supports parents and schools that want to integrate

0:02:46.200,0:02:51.120

a provision in their area. Figures are that 90 percent of those schools

0:02:51.120,0:02:56.880

are pretty much either one tradition or another with just under 8% of children going to integrated schools. (EP): So just under

0:02:56.880,0:03:01.260

8 percent of children at integrated schools at the moment

0:03:01.260,0:03:05.970

and so when was the Integrated Education

0:03:05.970,0:03:09.570

Fund founded? Was that immediately in 1975 or was that a bit later?

0:03:09.570,0:03:17.490

(SF): No that came much later. That came in 1992 as a result of parents literally

0:03:17.490,0:03:22.650

having to financially fund the establishment of integrated schools. A

0:03:22.650,0:03:27.780

number of Foundations felt that it was important to provide them with a

0:03:27.780,0:03:33.690

financial foundation. When we take away the responsibility of having to realise

0:03:33.690,0:03:37.020

the finance to establish a school. So that's why the Integrated Education

0:03:37.020,0:03:41.280

Fund was established. (EP): And do you receive government funding or any outside

0:03:41.280,0:03:45.990

funding. (MB): No, we're absolutely a charity and reliant on donations

0:03:45.990,0:03:49.590

I mean just to feel a little bit more of the background that when integrated

0:03:49.590,0:03:54.510

schools were set up from scratch they have to prove their viability and then

0:03:54.510,0:03:57.090

eventually the government would step in and fund them.

0:03:57.090,0:04:00.570

So I mean integrated schools are not private schools or anything in that

0:04:00.570,0:04:05.760

sense, but there was this gap of a year or two of having to prove that there was

0:04:05.760,0:04:09.540

demand in the area and the school was functioning well and meeting all the

0:04:09.540,0:04:13.470

requirements of being a government funded school. And that was when parents

0:04:13.470,0:04:17.220

I mean some of them remortgaged houses and took out huge loans and things like,

0:04:17.220,0:04:21.000

that just to see that their children could be in schools that met their

0:04:21.000,0:04:25.500

desire for cross community education. (EP): Sure, so what exactly is the purpose of

0:04:25.500,0:04:30.280

an integrated school?

Is it the desire to sort of

0:04:30.280,0:04:34.900

have the sort of common religious

teaching for different children of

0:04:34.900,0:04:38.050

different faiths or how exactly does it

work? (MB): Well I think a lot of people say

that it

0:04:38.050,0:04:40.990

is that very basically Catholics and

Protestants together in the classroom

0:04:40.990,0:04:46.000

and that was the the initial impetus if

you like. But it's more than just simply

0:04:46.000,0:04:49.600

mixing two people who go to

different churches or two groups of

0:04:49.600,0:04:54.340

people who go to different churches. It's

a lot more about an ethos and an

0:04:54.340,0:04:58.480

environment of respect and in some way

you can explore different views and

0:04:58.480,0:05:02.410

different histories and cultures and

certainly in the best practice it

0:05:02.410,0:05:06.040

would include

a range of sports, music, literature and

0:05:06.040,0:05:11.710

perspectives of all sorts. And Northern

Ireland is changing as well a lot in

0:05:11.710,0:05:17.650

terms of demographics. It was presumably

well obviously really because of the

0:05:17.650,0:05:20.920

history of The Troubles there wasn't a

great migration into Northern Ireland

0:05:20.920,0:05:25.900

for several decades but the culture is

becoming much more diverse, so it's much

0:05:25.900,0:05:29.170

more than just bringing Catholic and

Protestant children together. The

0:05:29.170,0:05:33.700

integrated schools are ideally placed to

to welcome people from all backgrounds

0:05:33.700,0:05:38.650

and traditions and all faiths and none. (EP):

So what sort of percentage of children

0:05:38.650,0:05:43.530

today would you say are neither Catholic

nor Protestant in Northern Ireland?

0:05:43.530,0:05:49.120

(MB): Well census figures would show that

that

section is growing; nearly a third people

0:05:49.120,0:05:53.380

would actually not want to identify

themselves as one culture or another,

0:05:53.380,0:05:57.370

however much they might see their

background privately is very much I

0:05:57.370,0:06:00.040

think a movement now of people saying

- you know we actually don't want to

0:06:00.040,0:06:03.160

declare for one side or another - we're

Northern Irish, we want to get on with

0:06:03.160,0:06:07.930

being together. And I think

integrated school is certainly not about

0:06:07.930,0:06:10.900

airbrushing out people's culture and

background but I think there is a

0:06:10.900,0:06:14.440  
section of the population who are saying  
- Can we deal with the here and now rather

0:06:14.440,0:06:18.520  
than you know the history or the church  
my parents went to or something like

0:06:18.520,0:06:24.010  
that. (EP): So people want to move on? SF):  
That  
would be the indication from successive

0:06:24.010,0:06:30.960  
opinion polls. Over the last 20  
years there has been an annual

0:06:30.960,0:06:35.950  
attitudinal survey carried out by  
independent polling companies and they

0:06:35.950,0:06:42.090  
consistently say that 70 to 80 percent  
more popularly of the population

0:06:42.090,0:06:49.599  
would support their school becoming  
integrated. Now, the challenge there

0:06:49.599,0:06:55.689  
for parents is, because government  
doesn't plan for integrated provision, it

0:06:55.689,0:07:04.469  
is left to parents to build or  
transform their school into an integrated  
school. And

0:07:04.469,0:07:11.560  
that's a challenge for parents because it really  
takes political will and political

0:07:11.560,0:07:19.150  
leadership to deliver on the  
aspirations of those parents who would

0:07:19.150,0:07:29.009  
like to see integrated education in their area,  
and the idea for working tirelessly to

0:07:29.009,0:07:36.159  
present the voices of young people  
and communities and parents to

0:07:36.159,0:07:42.639  
government's and the number of ways to  
get schools to transform but we still very

0:07:42.639,0:07:49.360  
much dependent on political  
leadership. (EP): So it is a bit of an uphill  
struggle for you at the moment.

0:07:49.360,0:07:54.729  
(SF): It is yes because there is an  
argument there that it serves vested

0:07:54.729,0:08:02.319  
interests well to maintain the status quo of  
separate education. Now, there are a

0:08:02.319,0:08:07.330  
number of vested interest  
involved in this. We have one of the most

0:08:07.330,0:08:12.250  
complex administrative systems in the  
delivery of education that there could

0:08:12.250,0:08:17.979  
possibly be. We have a planning  
authority for what is de facto

0:08:17.979,0:08:23.979  
Protestant schools. A planning authority  
for Catholic maintained schools and we have  
nine

0:08:23.979,0:08:30.069  
separate support bodies  
supporting various models of schools.

0:08:30.069,0:08:37.300  
We are clearly of the understanding of an  
acknowledgement by politicians that we

0:08:37.300,0:08:43.360  
need a more effective and efficient  
education system. Now but it has taken

0:08:43.360,0:08:48.190

quite a bit of time for them to reach that that conclusion. (EP): Well how does the

0:08:48.190,0:08:53.470  
law support the status quo and is segregated education favoured

0:08:53.470,0:09:07.390  
by the legal system as it stands at the moment, or as the law is currently in place? (SF): It is much more the case of the embedded structures within the structures within your system when our

0:09:07.390,0:09:11.550  
embedded structures within the system. The education system was established in 1921-22.

0:09:11.550,0:09:21.100  
We built in segregation into the institutions. And we haven't changed

0:09:21.100,0:09:27.340  
those institutions, or for that matter the way we deliver education in the last

0:09:27.340,0:09:32.140  
100 years . (MB): Yes it's more policy rather than law. In fact there is a

0:09:32.140,0:09:36.130  
statutory duty for the Department of Education to encourage and facilitate

0:09:36.130,0:09:40.570  
the development of integrated education but it's really having the

0:09:40.570,0:09:45.790  
policy structures and the ministers in place to actually promote that and make sure

0:09:45.790,0:09:54.100  
that that is being done. (SF): Just to add to what Maggie just said. The statutory duty has been in place since

0:09:54.100,0:10:04.410  
1989 and in 2014 an integrated school had to take a high court case

0:10:04.410,0:10:10.510  
because the Department of Education wouldn't let it expand its numbers so

0:10:10.510,0:10:15.670  
it was failing to encourage and facilitate integrated education. The department

0:10:15.670,0:10:24.460  
failed in challenging that, that court ruling, and I guess we are seeing some

0:10:24.460,0:10:31.440  
change in how the Department of Education is delivering on its

0:10:31.440,0:10:37.089  
integrated education but there is such a long way to go in terms of this, as Maggie pointed out,

0:10:37.089,0:10:40.330  
putting in policies, that will make

0:10:40.330,0:10:43.780  
that happen. (EP): Is there a worry that having more

0:10:43.780,0:10:49.450  
integrated education and less segregated education will be politically difficult

0:10:49.450,0:10:54.100  
or will stir up troubles among people of different religious

0:10:54.100,0:10:57.820  
backgrounds in Northern Ireland?(MB): I wouldn't necessarily go as far to say

0:10:57.820,0:11:01.420  
that people feel it will stir up trouble, but I think yes there are certainly

0:11:01.420,0:11:05.410  
political parties who look at who they perceive would be their

0:11:05.410,0:11:10.090  
supporters and start saying oh well

we'll be seen to be kind of in some way

0:11:10.090,0:11:14.180

urging them to abandon their loyalties and their backgrounds which as I said if

0:11:14.180,0:11:17.150

you if you're visiting integrated school and saw what happened in the classroom

0:11:17.150,0:11:20.839

that is absolutely not what it's about. But I think certainly for political

0:11:20.839,0:11:25.610

parties some of them see it as problematic. (EP): Maybe actually on that point

0:11:25.610,0:11:29.089

let's talk a bit more about what actually happens in integrated schools.

0:11:29.089,0:11:32.480

How is religion taught in integrated schools and how does that differ from

0:11:32.480,0:11:35.920

the way it's taught in segregated schools? (MB): Well there is a statutory

0:11:35.920,0:11:41.240

curriculum in Northern Ireland just as there is elsewhere in the UK, that is

0:11:41.240,0:11:44.540

actually drawn up by the four main churches - Protestants and Catholic but

0:11:44.540,0:11:49.700

Christian - and so all schools whether they're Irish medium, Protestant grammar

0:11:49.700,0:11:54.589

Catholic or integrated have to follow that curriculum with certain options

0:11:54.589,0:12:00.680

within it. The integrated primary schools would follow standards again - Christian

0:12:00.680,0:12:07.700

Bible based RE syllabus but they would also offer faith formation classes to

0:12:07.700,0:12:13.700

children of the Catholic faith who wish to avail of that. And post primary again

0:12:13.700,0:12:17.600

there is you know it's leading towards usually public exams so again there

0:12:17.600,0:12:23.780

would be that standard curriculum but what I would find in integrated schools

0:12:23.780,0:12:28.880

is that they would be open to discussion of different perspectives on that. (EP): And in

0:12:28.880,0:12:33.589

segregated schools is that not the case?(MB): I've been a governor of an

0:12:33.589,0:12:40.250

integrated school ... (SF): So perhaps maybe the

difference between a school which is

0:12:40.250,0:12:49.310

predominantly tradition or another and of integrated

schools is that within a single

0:12:49.310,0:12:54.680

tradition school there is only one narrative being heard but that's that narrative

0:12:54.680,0:13:03.110

dictated by the ethos of the school.

In integrated schools there are various

0:13:03.110,0:13:08.450

narratives they can guess not just in the classroom but also in staff rooms

0:13:08.450,0:13:14.300

and in playing grounds, where young children and young people are learning

0:13:14.300,0:13:16.290

about each other, learning about  
0:13:16.290,0:13:20.669  
their differences and also  
celebrating their differences. That just  
0:13:20.669,0:13:26.790  
doesn't happen within a single  
traditional school. (EP): How do  
0:13:26.790,0:13:31.470  
children find these different schools?  
Have you had feedback from children and  
0:13:31.470,0:13:35.910  
their parents as to the advantages  
of going to an integrated school? Does it  
0:13:35.910,0:13:39.569  
have a long-term benefit to them in  
terms of integrating with children from  
0:13:39.569,0:13:43.529  
different backgrounds? (SF): It's an  
interesting question because there is  
0:13:43.529,0:13:48.109  
the beginnings of some academic research  
0:13:48.319,0:13:56.729  
over this last couple of years which are  
showing evidence that  
children who go to integrated schools  
0:13:56.729,0:14:02.759  
are much more confident in their own  
culture and traditions and much more  
0:14:02.759,0:14:09.470  
confident in being able to engage with  
others of a different background.  
0:14:09.470,0:14:17.809  
One study by Professor Stringer at  
University of Ulster. He carried out a 10 year  
0:14:17.809,0:14:22.889  
longitudinal study which took the  
children who went to a controlled school,  
0:14:22.889,0:14:27.419

which is a de facto Protestant  
school, a maintained school and an integrated  
school. And the conclusions with  
0:14:27.419,0:14:33.839  
from  
that ten-year study was that children  
0:14:33.839,0:14:38.730  
who were at the integrated school were much  
better prepared for the outside world  
0:14:38.730,0:14:46.949  
and in particular for the growing and  
globalization of industry and commerce. (MB):  
I  
0:14:46.949,0:14:51.209  
think as well what we're seeing and  
at a slightly more anecdotal level is that  
0:14:51.209,0:14:54.809  
there is an organization of alumni of  
past pupils of integrated schools and  
0:14:54.809,0:14:58.769  
they're very vocal in saying how they  
felt that type of Education has  
0:14:58.769,0:15:01.049  
benefited them as they've gone out into  
the world.  
0:15:01.049,0:15:04.529  
One thing several of them have said is  
they didn't really realize it was just  
0:15:04.529,0:15:07.859  
where they went to school and it was  
only actually when they moved on other  
0:15:07.859,0:15:10.589  
people from other schools and other  
backgrounds they realized they were very  
0:15:10.589,0:15:14.399  
very fortunate to be in this  
unfortunately still a minority of people  
0:15:14.399,0:15:18.679  
but to have access to that interaction

and that sort of broad-minded

0:15:18.679,0:15:23.729

exploration of a variety of perspectives. (EP): Sure, and what about parents, are you

0:15:23.729,0:15:28.649

getting any anecdotal feedback from them? (MB): Again yes parents who probably went

0:15:28.649,0:15:31.740

through the system several years ago and now often

0:15:31.740,0:15:34.860

said well I didn't even know much about integrated education but I was

0:15:34.860,0:15:37.740

determined my children weren't going to go to the same sort of school I did.

0:15:37.740,0:15:42.150

Maybe I didn't meet somebody from a different denomination until I left

0:15:42.150,0:15:48.570

school at 18. And so that's a growing movement as well. (EP): And what about the

0:15:48.570,0:15:53.430

recruitment of teachers? How does that differ in a segregated from an

0:15:53.430,0:16:00.780

integrated school? (MB): Well all schools in Northern Ireland: there is an equality

0:16:00.780,0:16:04.590

legislation in Northern Ireland governing employment and services and all sorts of

0:16:04.590,0:16:07.920

aspects that doesn't apply to schools in any sense.

0:16:07.920,0:16:12.840

There's also fair employments legislation particularly targeting well

0:16:12.840,0:16:15.630

originally to target discrimination on religious grounds obviously it also

0:16:15.630,0:16:20.100

would cover race and sexuality and gender and things and teachers are exempt

0:16:20.100,0:16:23.970

from that and that would cover again all schools in Northern Ireland. (EP): And that is both

0:16:23.970,0:16:28.710

at primary and secondary level . (MB): Yes yes now in integrated schools they would

0:16:28.710,0:16:35.730

strive to have a balanced representation on their staff and their board and obviously

0:16:35.730,0:16:38.100

in their pupils from all sections of the community.

0:16:38.100,0:16:42.900

(EP): Sure so do you have to be a practising Protestant or Catholic to attend a

0:16:42.900,0:16:47.850

controlled or maintained school respectively? (MB): To attend or to - (EP): No sorry,

0:16:47.850,0:16:52.080

to be able to work there as a teacher. (MB): Well some of the research from Ulster

0:16:52.080,0:16:56.370

University who are carrying out a project looking at barriers to a more

0:16:56.370,0:17:01.980

unified integrated system has found that although it wasn't necessarily 100%

0:17:01.980,0:17:06.120

awareness of this exception to employment, the reality is that people

0:17:06.120,0:17:11.310

tend to stick within their own cultural



background when they're applying for  
0:17:11.310,0:17:14.939  
jobs and also when they're recruiting  
other people, that it's still very much  
0:17:14.939,0:17:22.680  
in the culture. Again you do hear stories  
of people who have maybe a local priest  
0:17:22.680,0:17:26.550  
or minister as a referee more likely to  
get a job than somebody who doesn't. That  
0:17:26.550,0:17:29.910  
would be very anecdotal and possibly  
you'd hope is certainly in the minority,  
0:17:29.910,0:17:34.860  
but I think there is still very much a  
culture on governing bodies in the  
0:17:34.860,0:17:38.310  
controlled and maintained schools that  
churches have a lot of influence in  
0:17:38.310,0:17:42.290  
every aspect to the school. (EP): Right so  
would members of the  
0:17:42.290,0:17:48.050  
the respective church sits on the  
governing body for example? (MB) and (SF):  
Yes, yeah. (SF): Just to add to  
0:17:48.050,0:17:52.640  
that, when we talk about the  
segregated nature of our education system  
0:17:52.640,0:18:03.350  
it is structural. We have in control  
schools we have representatives from the  
0:18:03.350,0:18:09.590  
Protestant churches on the boards and within  
Catholic schools we have clergy from the  
0:18:09.590,0:18:16.990  
Catholic Church on school boards. And  
that really is to to ensure that the

0:18:16.990,0:18:26.990  
various ethos are embedded within the  
system. (EP): Right, you said that about  
0:18:26.990,0:18:31.250  
a third of people in Northern  
Ireland probably don't want to see  
0:18:31.250,0:18:35.590  
themselves as being particularly  
identifying with one church or the other,  
0:18:35.590,0:18:40.730  
what happens to them do they still  
have to nonetheless go to a Protestant  
0:18:40.730,0:18:44.840  
or a Catholic school? (MB): Well certainly if  
there isn't an integrated school in the area  
0:18:44.840,0:18:50.030  
then yes they do. I think again  
Catholic / Protestant is an easy  
0:18:50.030,0:18:54.440  
shorthand for people. It's not necessary  
to do with what church you go to, it's a  
0:18:54.440,0:19:00.200  
lot more on how you see yourself culturally -  
British or Irish and from generations of  
0:19:00.200,0:19:03.290  
the culture and your family. But as I say  
although there are lots of people saying  
0:19:03.290,0:19:08.420  
we want to look beyond that I think  
you would tend to then, if you didn't  
0:19:08.420,0:19:11.300  
have the choice of an integrated school  
say well - where is my child going to  
0:19:11.300,0:19:17.330  
feel more comfortable? So it means that you  
are further segregated. (EP): So they're  
0:19:17.330,0:19:21.680  
being forced to go to a segregated  
school just because there's not really

0:19:21.680,0:19:35.030  
any alternative at the moment? (SF): I suppose "forced" is perhaps not a word we would use, what we would say is that there are left with no choice other

0:19:35.030,0:19:42.800  
that to go to a controlled department school because there is no planning for

0:19:42.800,0:19:47.240  
integrated education that has been established by parents. There are 65

0:19:47.240,0:19:53.060  
integrated schools. Therefore, the options and the choices are not there, so

0:19:53.060,0:19:58.720  
people so they will fall back into whether their

0:19:58.720,0:20:04.810  
community will send their children to that school. (EP): Okay,

0:20:04.810,0:20:08.650  
you've got about eight percent of schools integrated so far you said so

0:20:08.650,0:20:12.970  
what are you doing now to to increase that number, how's it going in terms of

0:20:12.970,0:20:18.670  
your view where the IEF is going at the moment? (MB): I think when we talked a bit

0:20:18.670,0:20:21.580  
about the history of the movement we talked about schools being started from

0:20:21.580,0:20:25.450  
scratch, but there is another way in the which parents can access integrated

0:20:25.450,0:20:30.580  
education. Again it's not a simple overnight process but you can go through

0:20:30.580,0:20:35.080  
there's a process called "transformation" where a school from a different sector a

0:20:35.080,0:20:38.410  
different model of governance and management becomes an integrated school.

0:20:38.410,0:20:43.030  
That can only happen with parental support; it has to have parental support

0:20:43.030,0:20:48.700  
and parents have to vote on whether they want to take that step. Now the

0:20:48.700,0:20:53.350  
Integrated Education Fund with our sister organization, which is an arm's length

0:20:53.350,0:20:58.990  
government body for integrated schools, and I see have been promoting a campaign

0:20:58.990,0:21:03.430  
for parents to register in confidence online their interest in bringing

0:21:03.430,0:21:10.090  
integration to their local school. And on the basis of that then reaching out to

0:21:10.090,0:21:14.320  
schools in areas which have shown a lot of interest in integrated education and

0:21:14.320,0:21:19.420  
talk to the governors, talked to principals and staff and parents about

0:21:19.420,0:21:25.060  
the possibility of taking this path. This year we've seen six successful ballots

0:21:25.060,0:21:28.750  
in primary and nursery schools where parents have said yes we want to start this

0:21:28.750,0:21:34.090  
process. Unfortunately it could be a year and a half before that process sees any

0:21:34.090,0:21:37.480  
results so obviously there will be some  
parents there that have moved on but

0:21:37.480,0:21:41.170  
they want to see integrated education in  
their area and I think that's a very

0:21:41.170,0:21:45.580  
strong message that's coming out from  
this campaign . (EP): So in terms of

0:21:45.580,0:21:49.600  
increasing that are you trying to raise  
awareness among parents at different

0:21:49.600,0:21:56.110  
schools for the importance of  
transforming a segregated school into an

0:21:56.110,0:21:59.860  
integrated school? (MB): It's not really  
telling them the importance, it's more as

0:21:59.860,0:22:05.650  
Sam has said, a series of surveys conducted  
by different organizations or different

0:22:05.650,0:22:08.200  
polling bodies  
has found overwhelming support for

0:22:08.200,0:22:13.690  
integrated education and we're raising  
awareness of people that if you haven't

0:22:13.690,0:22:18.040  
got access locally to an integrated  
school you can bring integration into

0:22:18.040,0:22:23.770  
the area into an existing school into  
your own school. Obviously a priority for

0:22:23.770,0:22:29.200  
parents is a good school,  
academically , pastorally, sports and

0:22:29.200,0:22:35.740  
cultural facilities and ideally local

accessible to them. And you know you

0:22:35.740,0:22:38.710  
totally endorse that but that could  
become a better school by being an

0:22:38.710,0:22:43.030  
integrated school offering all those  
aspects of quality education to the

0:22:43.030,0:22:48.160  
whole community and giving if you like  
the added value of a diverse classroom

0:22:48.160,0:22:53.140  
and that experience for young people. So the  
'Integrate my School' campaign which is an

0:22:53.140,0:22:57.010  
online website but with a lot of  
community engagement and outreach work,

0:22:57.010,0:23:00.610  
it's not telling parents that this is  
important; it's telling them - what we see

0:23:00.610,0:23:04.540  
as the benefits - but also saying: if this  
is something you would like for your school

0:23:04.540,0:23:09.160  
you can bring it, you can along with  
other parents start the push for this to

0:23:09.160,0:23:16.530  
happen. (EP): And are you getting a positive  
response to the campaign so far?

0:23:16.530,0:23:24.730  
(SF): Yes pretty much the six or seven schools  
balloted

0:23:24.730,0:23:33.100  
this year alone have generated through  
that IEF campaign both sort of  
community outreach and it's a gradual

0:23:33.100,0:23:38.500  
engagement, so yeah absolutely  
I think the challenge that we have is

0:23:38.500,0:23:45.100  
that we are a small charity and we're being asked or taking on the role of what the

0:23:45.100,0:23:51.220  
Department of Education should be doing. And you know obviously it's a case of we

0:23:51.220,0:23:56.770  
are an independent charity that has to raise the money to resource this

0:23:56.770,0:24:01.840  
campaign. What we would like to see is the Department of Education and the

0:24:01.840,0:24:07.270  
planning authorities, the education Authority and the Catholic counsel for

0:24:07.270,0:24:14.230  
the ten schools, doing this work rather than an independent charity. (EP): And what's been the Department for

0:24:14.230,0:24:19.660  
Education response so far, why have they been dragging their heels? (SF): They say

0:24:19.660,0:24:25.330  
their role is not to promote any particular sector. Their role is to encourage and

0:24:25.330,0:24:34.180  
facilitate and I would sort of go back to in 2014 how we had to take a high

0:24:34.180,0:24:39.220  
court case against the Department of Education for failing to encourage and

0:24:39.220,0:24:44.410  
facilitate. (EP): So in the future are you challenging the Department of Education

0:24:44.410,0:24:51.280  
again, are you trying to get them to change their mind? (SF): That is an ongoing engagement with the Department of

0:24:51.280,0:24:57.190

Educatio. Equally we are also engaging at high levels with our local

0:24:57.190,0:25:04.450  
politicians to make them aware of the demands that there is out there for

0:25:04.450,0:25:14.490  
integrated education and equally to make them aware of the economic and financial

0:25:14.490,0:25:20.710  
benefits of an education system. Because in essence what we do is we have

0:25:20.710,0:25:27.280  
approximately fifteen thousand empty school desks out there and you know many of

0:25:27.280,0:25:31.600  
the schools small schools could be merged and become integrated schools

0:25:31.600,0:25:39.880  
and it has the benefits of not just being economically advantageous but also

0:25:39.880,0:25:45.490  
in terms of social cohesion and reconciliation for children are being

0:25:45.490,0:25:50.890  
taught side by side in the same classroom. It diminishes their need for

0:25:50.890,0:25:57.220  
that 'them and us' narrative that we have currently the norm. (EP): And is that 'them and us' narrative

0:25:57.220,0:26:02.590  
still sort of a real fact of life in Northern Ireland even today? (MB): It

0:26:02.590,0:26:06.700  
is in the political arena as we're seeing in yet another election period.

0:26:06.700,0:26:11.260  
It's not necessarily part of everyday life. You just look after the window here

0:26:11.260,0:26:13.630  
and see the people going about their  
business. I don't think there is that

0:26:13.630,0:26:20.410  
sort of same 'them and us' mentality. I'm  
sure there would be some elements of it

0:26:20.410,0:26:23.680  
but I think they're very much the  
minority but we have a slight problem in

0:26:23.680,0:26:27.250  
that I think politicians like to  
kind of revive that because then they're

0:26:27.250,0:26:32.260  
marking out their own territory in terms  
of political party. The other issue we

0:26:32.260,0:26:35.320  
have here of course is  
The Assembly hasn't sat for several

0:26:35.320,0:26:39.519  
years and yet we haven't got direct rule  
from Westminster and education is a

0:26:39.519,0:26:43.539  
devolved matter. We don't have an  
education minister so while we can work

0:26:43.539,0:26:48.700  
with the politicians to suggest what  
their policy should be and how it would

0:26:48.700,0:26:52.389  
be quite acceptable to the majority of their  
voters and would not threaten anybody

0:26:52.389,0:26:57.159  
and would actually economic sense etc  
etc to actually start making structural

0:26:57.159,0:27:01.240  
changes we need a minister in place. (EP): So  
who is in fact in charge of education if

0:27:01.240,0:27:05.590  
there isn't a minister? (MB): Well civil

servants are but there's a limit to what

0:27:05.590,0:27:09.850  
powers they have. I said structural  
changes can't be; it's more statutory

0:27:09.850,0:27:13.120  
changes; you need an assembly to vote on  
them a minister to introduce them. (EP): And

0:27:13.120,0:27:16.630  
are you the only charity dealing with  
this issue in Northern Ireland at the

0:27:16.630,0:27:23.440  
moment or are there any others? (MB): Yes,  
no

0:27:23.440,0:27:27.820  
we are the only one. (EP): The only one wow,  
so where do you

0:27:27.820,0:27:33.159  
see this going in the future, how would  
you like to see your campaign developing?

0:27:33.159,0:27:40.360  
Obviously getting some more schools and  
undergoing the transformation process

0:27:40.360,0:27:46.360  
but where where do you want to go next?(SF):  
I guess there are two strands what we are  
doing and that is to

0:27:46.360,0:27:51.100  
support parents and schools who want to  
transform to integrated status; the

0:27:51.100,0:27:57.850  
other down the road is that we need a  
fundamental root and branch review

0:27:57.850,0:28:04.480  
of how we deliver education in Northern  
Ireland and  
we are working with the political

0:28:04.480,0:28:09.940  
parties to carry out or at least put in  
the ends of policy in the next programme

for government that they will carry out a root and branch review to address the

0:28:09.940,0:28:16.750

issues. For example the federal exception of teachers, the cost of division, the

0:28:16.750,0:28:22.019

amount of settled support bodies we have and an overly bloated

0:28:22.019,0:28:27.840

administrative system, the long tail of underachievement in our schools

0:28:27.840,0:28:32.440

because money is going to maintaining institutions rather than where it's

0:28:32.440,0:28:38.440

needed and that is in the classroom. And that will be the two key aims

0:28:38.440,0:28:44.580

for the Integrated Education Funds going forward. (EP): Do you think that

0:28:44.580,0:28:49.139

the religious division among the segregated education system has

0:28:49.139,0:28:54.509

an effect on academic achievement in schools? (SF): It's an interesting question

0:28:54.509,0:29:02.669

because there is some work that has been carried out in relation to

0:29:02.669,0:29:10.019

young Protestant boys underachieving but that long tail of underachievement I

0:29:10.019,0:29:19.919

think it is a broader issue because not only do you have segregation in terms of

0:29:19.919,0:29:26.609

religion but we also have a grammar system selection system in Northern Ireland

0:29:26.609,0:29:33.149

which segregates children at the age of eleven and send them to grammar schools

0:29:33.149,0:29:40.379

and non-selective schools so there's a whole host of elements which which are

0:29:40.379,0:29:48.419

feeding into the levels of underachievement but certainly like we maintain duplicating

0:29:48.419,0:29:56.869

resources and therefore finances being split in maintaining a dual system

0:29:56.869,0:30:01.859

it certain the money's not going where it's needed. (EP): So basically the idea is you

0:30:01.859,0:30:06.389

have more smaller schools to preserve the segregation rather than having

0:30:06.389,0:30:11.969

larger schools which could be integrated. (MB): Yes that's exactly right although I

0:30:11.969,0:30:16.289

would say it and point out that the latest briefing

paper from Ulster University shows even

0:30:16.289,0:30:19.559

merging some of these schools does not mean you're going to a huge school; you

0:30:19.559,0:30:24.119

would still have the advantage of a local kind of family feeling school in a

0:30:24.119,0:30:29.399

rural area, so we're not suggesting so everything merges into big monster kind

0:30:29.399,0:30:33.059

of exam factories or anything like that they would still very much be schools

0:30:33.059,0:30:37.469

where parents are involved as

part of the integrated ethos as well if

0:30:37.469,0:30:40.969  
parents have a lot of say in the  
governance and running of schools and

0:30:40.969,0:30:46.709  
that it could still meet local needs. (EP): In the  
integrated ethos which we've been

0:30:46.709,0:30:52.079  
talking a lot about is there is there  
still a religious element and if so how

0:30:52.079,0:30:56.279  
does it fit in? (MB): Well there has to be  
religious element because as we said

0:30:56.279,0:30:59.870  
there is the the statutory RE  
and the same as elsewhere in

0:30:59.870,0:31:05.570  
the UK statutory worship so and you have to  
say as well that the first integrated school was  
set up  
well the first integrator school was set

0:31:05.570,0:31:09.800  
by people listed of Christian impulse  
saying we don't like this image that the

0:31:09.800,0:31:13.100  
The Troubles are about Catholics versus  
Protestants. We actually want to show it

0:31:13.100,0:31:18.080  
can work together and that we do have a  
lot in common. I mean that was the first

0:31:18.080,0:31:24.410  
go back in 1981. There are other schools  
obviously that have come since then and so

0:31:24.410,0:31:28.750  
yes there has to be a religious element in  
it that way. (EP): Sure but it's just not

0:31:28.750,0:31:33.590  
solely one denomination. (MB): Yes I mean  
that

first integrated school which is still

0:31:33.590,0:31:37.790  
going they have two chaplains Catholic  
and Protestant . (EP): I see and just very

0:31:37.790,0:31:42.560  
finally and my last question is really  
about how does education provision in

0:31:42.560,0:31:46.160  
Northern Ireland compare with elsewhere  
in Europe? Is there anywhere that it has

0:31:46.160,0:31:50.180  
a similar issue? Are you looking to any  
other country as a model for what your

0:31:50.180,0:31:55.820  
education system should be like? (SF): We  
would  
suggest that that would be where an

0:31:55.820,0:32:02.690  
independent commission would you look at  
what's best by .....? ; we know

0:32:02.690,0:32:08.600  
there are systems like Finland  
and other Scandinavian companies which

0:32:08.600,0:32:17.120  
in terms of Pisa results tend to do far  
better than Northern Ireland and the rest of

0:32:17.120,0:32:22.760  
Britain but this was very much is why we  
need a root and branch review of our

0:32:22.760,0:32:29.570  
education system. So as we can  
create a vision and an education system

0:32:29.570,0:32:35.960  
which is fit for the 21st century.  
(EP): Sure are there any other countries in

0:32:35.960,0:32:39.200  
Europe which would you say which have  
similar problems with segregated

0:32:39.200,0:32:43.720  
education or is this very much specific to Northern Ireland?

0:32:49.090,0:32:56.710  
(SF): Absolutely if you look at the Balkans and Bosnia, of Cyprus there are many countries in Europe which are in a post conflict Europe which are in a post-conflict

0:32:56.710,0:33:04.090  
society and we're looking at education effort for ways of reconciliation and

0:33:04.090,0:33:09.380  
bringing communities together. So there are a number of examples out there that

0:33:09.380,0:33:15.140  
are probably more segregated than Northern Ireland and are less segregated than Northern Ireland.  
than they are in my mind and there are

0:33:15.140,0:33:21.470  
(EP): Sure but maybe Scandinavia would be a potential model in the

0:33:21.470,0:33:25.970  
long term. (MB): Perhaps yes but I think yeah we'd need a sort of an outside view of

0:33:25.970,0:33:29.840  
that or an independent view to look at the different possible models here and

0:33:29.840,0:33:33.770  
what would best suit Northern Ireland I think it might actually be a Northern

0:33:33.770,0:33:39.860  
Ireland's model. (EP): Right something to suit your particular character of the way the

0:33:39.860,0:33:44.450  
country is developed. (MB and SF): Yes absolutely. (EP): And so Maddie Bridgman and Sam Fitzsimmons

0:33:44.450,0:33:48.220  
thank you very much for your time thank you.

0:33:53.980,0:34:03.049  
That was episode 21 of the National Secular society podcast hosted by Emma Park. If you would like to help us to challenge religious privilege and

0:34:03.049,0:34:07.220  
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0:34:07.220,0:34:11.960  
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0:34:23.520,0:34:25.580

0:34:32.399,0:34:34.460