
NSS response:

Integrated Education Act action plan consultation

October 2023

SUBMITTED VIA EMAIL: IntegratedEducationActImplementationTeam@education-ni.gov.uk

Introduction

This response is made on behalf of the National Secular Society (NSS). The NSS is a not-for-profit, non-governmental civil society 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 uphold the universality of individual human rights, which should never be overridden on the grounds of religion, tradition or culture.

We believe that a secular and inclusive education system is the best means to foster a fair, open and cohesive society, in which people of all religions and none can live together as equal citizens. It is also the surest guarantor of freedom of religion or belief for pupils and their families. We therefore want to see an inclusive education system, free from any form of religious privilege, discrimination, or control.

Northern Ireland's system of de facto religiously segregated schools is grossly inefficient and perpetuates sectarian division through the generations. Integrated schools are extremely popular and the best current hope for the ambition of inclusively educating children of all backgrounds together. However, progress towards a more integrated system remains far too slow, and access to an integrated school remains unobtainable for most families. **It is essential that the Department of Education ensures that every family who wants to send their child to an integrated school can do so.**

We have found the form to respond to this consultation on NI Direct difficult to use to express our views. The document *A Strategy for Integrated Education in Northern Ireland* also lacked sufficient information for us to assess whether or not we agreed or disagreed with specific points in the consultation.

We have sent this response in lieu of submitting an NI Direct form.

2. The vision of the strategy.

While the IE Strategy to create "A vibrant and supported network of sustainable integrated schools providing high-quality integrated education to children and young people" is in the right direction, we feel it lacks ambition or specifics.

We believe the DoE's vision should be to fully mainstream integrated education as the 'default' choice for families. It should not be a 'niche' form of education relegated to handfuls of communities: it should be a realistic choice for every family.

Such an ambition should be reflected in the IE Strategy. It should also include a target, based on demand, for how many pupils attend an integrated school within the next decade.

Key Area 1 – Effective Engagement and Consultation.

Regarding Point 2: Without further details on how it would be used, the proposed additional funding of £50,000 strikes us as too low to support the implementation of the Strategy.

Key Area 2 – Demand for Integrated Education.

The method for measuring demand for integrated education must be fair and accurate. Some methods will generate inaccurate figures. For example, assessing accurate demand cannot be based on parental preferences when they apply for schools, because parents are unable to express a preference for an integrated school if there are none available in their area.

As integrated schools are attractive to families from all religious backgrounds, as well as those of no religion, the religious demographics of an area also cannot be used as a proxy for measuring demand.

We have received concerns from parents who have faced difficulties in sending their children to integrated schools. One parent expressed a concern that if a child from a family who is, for example, historically Catholic but now has no religion, their child will still be labelled "Catholic" if they are placed in a Catholic nursery. This could affect their chances of successfully applying for an integrated school, which would be more appropriate and inclusive than a Catholic school for a child from a nonreligious family.

Issues like these must be resolved to ensure every family who wants their children to attend an integrated school can access one. **This should include making available a Department of Education grant to all schools wishing to become integrated.**

Regarding point 14: We strongly disagree with the plan for the Education Authority to work in partnership with Council for Catholic Maintained Schools (CCMS) to consider data relating to demand when developing and updating future Strategic Area Plans and associated Operational Plans. As it is ultimately controlled by the Catholic Church, CCMS is strongly motivated to ensure any child it considers Catholic goes to a Catholic school and receives a Catholic education, rather than a nondenominational education in an integrated school. It cannot be regarded as an unbiased party; it will be strongly motivated to oppose any plans that would mean historically Catholic families are more likely to choose an integrated school, or plans which it would otherwise consider a 'threat' to Catholic education. According to research from 2007–2008, just over a third of integrated schools experienced public opposition by clergy, mainly Catholic clergy making public statements discouraging Catholic parents from choosing an integrated school rather than a Catholic school.¹

¹ <https://cain.ulster.ac.uk/issues/education/docs/macaulay270109.pdf>

We therefore urge the DoE to minimise the involvement of CCMS in its strategy for integrated education.

Additional Comments

It is the Integrated Education Act (Northern Ireland) 2022, as passed by the Assembly, which defines Integrated Education and sets out a range of duties that the Department of Education (DE) must comply with.

19. Please make any additional comments you would like to add below.

While we support integrated schools as progressive step towards a more inclusive and cohesive education system in NI, we would like to draw attention to aspects of NI's education in need of reform to ensure all its schools are suitable for its increasingly diverse, and increasingly irreligious, population:

- Last year the High Court of Northern Ireland found the current arrangements for collective worship and religious education (RE) breach Article 2 of the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR) which provides that the state "must respect the right of parents' religious and philosophical convictions in respect of education and teaching".

The law in NI compels state-funded schools, including integrated schools, to "include collective worship whether in one or more than one assembly" every day. The right to withdraw children from collective worship is available to parents, but no independent right of withdrawal is available to pupils.

RE in NI schools is controlled by religious bodies to a greater extent than anywhere else in the UK, and aims 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".

The DoE should ensure education conforms to the ECHR and its obligations under the Convention on the Rights of the Child by abolishing the law requiring collective worship in schools, and by reforming RE to be broader, more balanced and more inclusive of other religions and beliefs.

- By law, integrated schools must uphold a Christian ethos (albeit nondenominational). As NI becomes more culturally diverse, and more families choose not to follow a religion, this Christian ethos will become increasingly inappropriate - particularly in integrated schools. Forty per cent of 16 year olds now have no religion.

We urge the DoE to work towards a secular school system which treats all families, whatever their religion or belief, equally.

In the meantime, the 40:40:20 ration of Protestants, Catholics and 'other' religion or belief places at integrated schools will need to be regularly re-evaluated and changed in line with demographic changes, with a view to phasing out all forms of religion-based selection at integrated schools in the future.