



Northern Ireland  
Assembly

Committee for Education

# OFFICIAL REPORT (Hansard)

Inquiry into Shared and Integrated  
Education: Methodist College Belfast

10 December 2014

# NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

## Committee for Education

Inquiry into Shared and Integrated Education: Methodist College Belfast

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**Members present for all or part of the proceedings:**

Miss Michelle McIlveen (Chairperson)  
Mr Danny Kinahan (Deputy Chairperson)  
Mr Jonathan Craig  
Mr Trevor Lunn  
Mr Robin Newton  
Mrs Sandra Overend  
Mr Seán Rogers

**Witnesses:**

|                           |                   |
|---------------------------|-------------------|
| Mr Mark Humphreys         | Methodist College |
| Mr Neill Jackson          | Methodist College |
| Mr Scott Naismith         | Methodist College |
| Professor Sir Desmond Rea | Methodist College |
| Rev Dr Janet Unsworth     | Methodist College |

**The Chairperson (Miss M McIlveen):** Thank you for hosting us today. It is a pleasure for me to be back, and I will declare an interest as a former pupil. I ask you to make your opening statement, and members will follow up with questions. Thank you.

**Mr Scott Naismith (Methodist College):** Thank you very much indeed. I will begin by introducing the members of the board of governors who are here with me today. On my right is Rev Dr Janet Unsworth; to my left is the chair of the board of governors, Mr Neill Jackson; beside him is Sir Desmond Rea; and, at the end, is Mr Michael Humphreys QC. I thank the Education Committee for giving us the opportunity to host its meeting and for the chance to present on the ethos of the college and the level of mixing that there is here in the school.

I will start by saying a wee bit about the ethos of the college. We have a very clear statement of values and aims that we adhere to in everything that we do in and out of the classroom. In those aims and values, inclusion and diversity feature in a very significant manner. We talk about appreciating, nurturing and celebrating the diverse talents of the pupils. We talk about preparing pupils to be responsible citizens and leaders who respect and value cultural diversity and a common humanity. We also talk about promoting social justice and countering prejudice and intolerance by encouraging mutual respect and understanding. That is at the heart of the values-based educational experience that the pupils, staff and families who engage with the college get while they are. It is based on tolerance, respect, integrity and equality. We want and encourage our pupils to develop compassion, self-awareness, independence of thought and independence of spirit.

Because that is who we are and what we are about, we attract a diverse mix of pupils into the college. At present, we have 23 religious groupings represented. We have a very diverse ethnic mix. Almost 88% of our pupil population is white, but the remaining 12% come from a range of backgrounds: European, Caribbean, African, Middle Eastern and Far Eastern. There is a fantastic cultural diversity here in the college. As well as that, there is a diverse geographical mix in Methody, with 43 postcodes represented. The majority of our pupils come from the Belfast area, but half of our pupils come from greater Belfast and beyond. We provide that mix of pupils from town and country and different social backgrounds and give them an opportunity to live with each other and learn from each other.

As I have said, our aims and values are lived out on a daily basis. We talked to the student council about this when the governors were working on their inclusion and diversity report. We asked the pupils how they felt about inclusion and diversity in the school. One of the pupils said:

*"Although issues of respect and tolerance are covered in the curriculum, pupils treat each other with respect because it is just seen as the right thing to do. It is a natural thing."*

Certainly, there are opportunities in the classroom to share experiences and ideas. There is study focused on the factors that influence individual and group identity and how identity is expressed, and pupils get the chance to investigate how and why conflicts may arise, how it is managed, and how community relations and reconciliation can be promoted. That is across not just the Learning for Life and Work programme but all areas of the curriculum.

We are also committed to making a difference out of the classroom through our local and global community involvement. That is all about raising pupils' understanding of different cultures, religions and backgrounds. An example of that is the Salters Sterling Outreach Project, which we have been involved with for three years now with Royal Belfast Academical Institution (RBAI), Victoria College and Blythefield, Donegall Road and Fane Street primary schools.

This year, over 80 pupils from Methody are going out to those three primary schools to assist with literacy and numeracy support to help the schools in raising educational aspiration. Pupils from those primary schools visit the three post-primary schools to engage in a range of technology-, moving-image-arts- and sports-based activities to give them an understanding and experience of what education is like beyond the primary school. We are also working hard to engage with the parents in those schools to get them to encourage their children to think about coming to schools like Methody, Inst and Victoria.

We have also been running the Belfast inter-schools creative writing forum for a number of years. It was set up by one of our teachers and very successful children's novelist, Sheena Wilkinson. It is a cross-community creative writing forum that promotes the creative and personal development of youngsters from across the city. It meets monthly in the college, and there is a residential in England once a year. We have pupils from St Dominic's, Sullivan, St Mary's Christian Brothers and RBAI coming here and talking about their experiences. This year, with support from the Integrated Education Fund, they have been able to publish a book of poetry, short stories and photographs about how they feel about their identity and development in emerging post-conflict Belfast.

We are also the hub school for the University of Cambridge Higher Education Plus programme. This involves us working with Corpus Christi College, Cambridge, to project aims to improve the chances of sixth-form pupils in each of the participating schools to receive offers from Cambridge, Oxford and other top research-intensive UK universities. This goes beyond the curriculum. We have invited schools from across Belfast — north, south, east and west — to come along and participate with our staff, their staff and academics from Corpus Christi to push their understanding beyond the curriculum. Last year, we had pupils from St Dominic's, St Malachy's, St Mary's and Wellington College here with our pupils to learn about drama, English, chemistry, maths and physics and focus on pushing their learning to the limits together.

We, as a college, also have an input into the Community Relations Council, the sharing education programme and the work of OFMDFM on developing the United Youth policy. We have also contributed to the Commission on Religion and Belief in British Public Life. We do a lot of community work. Our sixth-formers are engaged in work in Glenveagh and Fleming Fulton special schools. Again, the idea is about learning from each other. Our pupils get as much out of those experiences as the pupils of Glenveagh and Fleming Fulton do. If you are interested, on both Glenveagh's school website and our college website, there is a video that the pupils made together that encapsulates how they have benefited from that experience.

For 24 years — it is coming up to the 25th anniversary — the college has been involved in School Aid Romania. Every year, a group of students and staff from Methody, St Patrick's College, Maghera and Ballyclare High School raise money together and then go out to Romania to work in orphanages, an old people's home, a TB hospital and a school for the deaf. They not only provide money but learn about the experiences of those people, young and old, the challenges that they face, how they are addressing them, and they then share the experiences with each other and with the pupils back in their own schools. They raise a significant sum of money, and the whole of the school community is engaged in that work.

The same can be said for our India Society, which, for a number of years, has been raising funds to provide opportunities for girls from the slums of Kalkaji to access second- and third-level education. Again, there is a direct benefit there. However, our pupils also benefit from the experience of finding out about what life is like in a slum and the different religious and cultural beliefs and social pressures on children their age in different communities. That learning then comes back and is shared with the community here in the college.

In the curriculum and beyond the curriculum, we encourage an understanding of different cultures through language study. French, German, Spanish and Russian are offered on the curriculum, and we have now extended that to include Mandarin and Arabic. We have worked with the open learning department at Queen's University to provide an after-school course in Irish language and literature, which ran in summer term of 2013 for junior pupils. Through engagement with the Confucius Institute at the University of Ulster, we are now in our second year of running a Chinese language and cultural enrichment course. This year, we have introduced an enrichment course in Arabic. We have linked up with the Ulster Museum for third-form classes to explore Arabian art and culture. A number of senior pupils will attend an Invest NI Arabian day to hear from those who have established or are involved in businesses in the Middle East. That Arabic project is also running in collaboration with Belfast Royal Academy (BRA), Antrim Grammar School and St Malachy's College, so, again, it is working collaboratively across the city to promote the understanding of different cultures beyond Northern Ireland.

I am delighted to see representatives of the parent-teacher association (PTA) here this morning. Our PTA organised a multicultural evening, which John O'Dowd very kindly attended. It was titled 'Our World, the Methodist College'. It was a celebration that showcased the talents and cultures of a range of the ethnic groups that are represented in the college. We do a lot to expose pupils to it, but the pupils themselves bring a rich cultural heritage when they attend the school. It was best summed up a couple of open evenings previously by the head girl, Lalana, who said that, to her and her family, the school's main selling point was its open ethos and diverse student population. It was important to her and her brother, as they came from a mixed-race background. She said that her family considered Methody to be very forward-thinking indeed in this area.

The governors also take it very seriously. It is something that we cherish and value. Because of that, we set up a working party on inclusion, diversity and equality to look at these issues across a range of curricular and extra-curricular activities in the school. Methody has always been diverse. It is part of the historic legacy of the college. Because we used to have a boarding department, we always had pupils coming from across Northern Ireland and beyond to the college. That is why we have such a diverse and valued religious and ethnic mix. This has been maintained.

In closing, I will refer to the speech that pupil Hannah Nelson made when she introduced President Obama and the First Lady at the Waterfront Hall. She talked about how to achieve enduring peace in Northern Ireland. What she said reflected the values and experience of the college. She talked about the need to have true respect for others, to express and celebrate our diverse cultures and to have an obligation to value each other as individuals. She hit the nail right on the head when she said that:

*"It is not my religion that is important, but my value as a person which is significant. It is important that we all have a unique identity."*

Never a truer word was spoken. That is what Methodist College is about. We seek to and succeed in providing a naturally integrated, cosmopolitan environment where pupils from all backgrounds and faiths learn together, play together and grow together and where we, most importantly, value each other.

**The Chairperson (Miss M McIlveen):** Thank you very much. As you will be aware, this is part of our inquiry into shared and integrated education. Methody seems to fall into the mix of being called a "super-mixed school". You mentioned the fact that it has always been diverse and that it has very

much become naturally mixed. I suppose that what I really want to know is what it is specifically about the ethos that has allowed it to be that?

**Mr Naismith:** Again, from talking to pupils and families, I think that fundamentally it is because we value them as individuals. As the pupil on the student council said, it does not matter what your religion or background is, you are accepted at Methodist College for what you bring to the college, what you put in and what you get out of it. That is because — again, using the words of the student — we do not make a fuss about that particular aspect. It is just a naturally integrated community. Therefore, people are not seen as Protestant, Catholic, Jewish, Hindu or whatever, but as who they are and what they can bring.

**The Chairperson (Miss M McIlveen):** Is the primary focus of parents the educational outcomes of their children as opposed to societal outcomes?

**Mr Naismith:** Both are important to them. We carried out a significant survey of parents during the last academic year in order to prepare for the next school development plan. Over 1,000 families responded, and two of the top-scoring reasons for sending their children to the college were the diverse mix of pupils and families, and the output, or what they gain from the academic and extra-curricular experience.

**The Chairperson (Miss M McIlveen):** You refer to Methody as an integrated school. How do you differ from the integrated model we are very familiar with?

**Mr Naismith:** There is a formula for the integrated sector, which is based initially on bringing together Protestant and Catholic children. The mix is 40% Protestant and 40% Catholic and the same for staff. There is that statistic and that formula. Methody does not apply that formula. We are not looking to achieve targets in a particular background. Neither are we focused simply on two major religious groups. We are looking at the whole range of ethnic and religious backgrounds represented by our pupils.

**The Chairperson (Miss M McIlveen):** You have achieved natural integration without the formula.

**Mr Naismith:** Correct.

**The Chairperson (Miss M McIlveen):** You have talked about different sharing models with primary schools. You mentioned Fane Street and Blythefield. What work do you do with non-grammar schools?

**Mr Naismith:** We work together through the south Belfast area learning community. We are involved in delivering the entitlement framework with a range of both grammar and non-grammar schools. The south Belfast area learning community does a lot of work sharing good practice and bringing together middle managers, SEN coordinators and careers teachers so that they can learn from one another. We reach out and offer opportunities to pupils from grammar and non-grammar schools through the Cambridge HE project and the creative writing project. We wrote out to every post-primary school in Belfast inviting them to the creative writing project.

**The Chairperson (Miss M McIlveen):** You went outside south Belfast?

**Mr Naismith:** Right across the city. The same thing happens every year with the major careers convention run by the college. Over 100 universities, colleges and businesses are in the college for two days, and we invite schools from across Northern Ireland, and even as far away as Donegal, to come to the college and access workshops, talks, presentations and information seminars. Throughout the year we run careers seminars as well, and, again, we invite schools from across the whole of Belfast and beyond to share. That is the work that we do.

**The Chairperson (Miss M McIlveen):** Have you and other schools seen a benefit from that experience?

**Mr Naismith:** They are accessing information about opportunities that are available to them, about tertiary level education in and beyond Northern Ireland and about the changing business and economic landscape. All these events include workshops and discussion sessions, where pupils from

the different schools that attend have the opportunity to discuss. Sitting behind me is my head of politics, John Foster. Last year he organised a politics conference. The school is very much into the Model United Nations. Schools were invited from across Belfast to engage in discussion about contemporary political issues. That is where you get pupils from different backgrounds coming together. There are different ideas, different experiences, and there is sharing and learning from each other.

**Mr Kinahan:** Thank you for a fantastically impressive résumé of the school. I want to follow up on what the Chair asked about the socio-economic mix. When you invite other schools, do they all respond, or are there schools that feel that you are maybe too elite or too difficult? Do you really get a good response from everybody?

**Mr Naismith:** That is a very good question. It depends on the nature of the activity. We get a very wide-ranging response to the careers conventions and talks. We estimated that, for the careers convention this year, somewhere in the region of 3,000 families were through the school over the two days, plus our Methodist community. To be honest, it is hard to get schools to come to some of the other activities, whether it is because of transport issues or because they are concerned about coming to Methodist. We offered, as well, to move the creative writing project around the city to make it more accessible for others and to get our pupils out. However, the response was that it is actually easier, once it has been set up, just to come to the same place once a month.

We also continue with the outreach project to the three primary schools in the Village. For the most recent activity we invited parents to come across and visit the three post-primary schools one morning. We are conscious that it is intimidating to walk up the driveway to a building that you have never been into before. There is the fear of the architecture and of the reputation. We have to get people over that hurdle, get them in and get them engaged.

**Mr Kinahan:** As a Committee, when we explore shared education most people look at it through religious differences. The Borooah and Knox report encouraged us to look at it from a socio-economic angle. Do you think that this is the right way of sharing education across the divide?

**Mr Naismith:** It is important to look at all aspects when sharing education if you are to be truly inclusive. You need to tackle all aspects simultaneously, not just the religious aspect, but the ethnic and socio-economic aspects too.

**Mr Michael Humphreys (Methodist College):** It is interesting that shared and integrated education, taken together, are often resolved into a simple sectarian headcount. That is completely against the ethos at Methodist. The statutory definition of integrated education speaks only to Protestants and Roman Catholics. Talking of natural integration, perhaps the most striking statistic is that 35% of our current enrolment falls into the category of neither Protestant nor Catholic. They profess to have no religion, or they profess to have up to 15 or 20 other world religions. Perhaps the defining feature of natural integration is the move away from the simple Protestant and Catholic approach and into something that is socially inclusive and does not depend on a formula to produce results.

Social inclusion is the most important driver for us as a board. It is sometimes difficult for us to reach out to other areas of Belfast and encourage pupils to come here because of our status and where we are. We try hard with those three primary schools in particular, but we often meet family and social resistance. It is difficult for a child whose family have all gone to the same local school or lived in the same area for three or four generations to make that break and move to a school like this. However, it is imperative that we continue to foster those links. It may take time. We may be sitting here in 10 years' time still making very slow progress, but it is imperative that we continue to try to do so.

**Mr Lunn:** Thank you for having us. It is lovely to be here. It is my first time in Methodist College. That is partly the fault of your predecessors, because they would not accept me in 1958 even though I just lived up the road. *[Laughter.]* I had to go to another equally mixed grammar school, Belfast Royal Academy (BRA), which was not a problem.

Before I ask you questions, I would like to mention the young lady who spoke at the Obama event. Having been there, I have to say that hers was the speech of the day. She made a better speech than the president or his wife. It was absolutely marvellous. I imagine that she has moved on now.

**Mr Naismith:** She is in upper sixth.

**Mr Lunn:** It was terrific. You have really answered all my questions in what was a spectacular presentation, Scott. The mix of your school would do credit to any formally integrated school. To what extent are you able to draw pupils from what I would call socially deprived backgrounds? You are located on the edge of a very affluent area on one side, and you only have to walk through the City Hospital grounds to enter a completely different circumstance. Do you have any success in drawing pupils from — let us be frank — Sandy Row and Donegall Road?

**Mr Naismith:** That is part of the reasoning behind the Salters Sterling Outreach Project, which is about raising aspiration. Over the past three years, we have been working with those schools and are seeing more pupils applying to the three post-primary schools involved. It is about overcoming their — to a certain extent — fear of education and their parents' fear of education, engaging with them and getting them into the buildings to realise the opportunities that are available to their children. It is about overcoming — I am sorry to say — the, "It's not for the likes of us" attitude, which we sometimes come up against.

In reaching out, not just to those particular schools, we have been working hard in our contacts with other primary schools, and at their open evenings, to say, "We want you to come here. We want you to apply here. We want you to avail of these opportunities, regardless of your background." We are seeing a rise in the number of pupils who are entitled to free school meals coming into the college. In 2012, 4% of our form 1 entry was entitled to free school meals. In the 2014 intake, that had risen to 14%. The governors and former pupils have been very active in encouraging this.

We have set up a discretionary fund to assist pupils who come from families that may have problems meeting the cost of uniforms. If they want assistance with school trips, or even if they want assistance later in their careers exploring university options, that help is there. One of our former pupils, Ian Ross, made an incredibly generous donation to the school recently so that pupils from deprived backgrounds should not be put off going to university because of the cost of fees. He is providing part funding for their fees to encourage them to go to university. So, we are working to find ways to make things financially easier but also to encourage them to come into Methody.

**Mr Lunn:** I do not want to divert from the main theme here, which is shared and integrated education. Others make the point that it is not shared versus integrated. I suggested the title, I think, so I claim credit. We are not trying to play one off against the other, but I want to move you on to a slightly different tack, and I do so sensitively. Is part of the reason why you do not manage to achieve an intake of pupils from the areas that I am talking about because they cannot pass the selection test?

**Mr Naismith:** Academic selection offers the opportunity for pupils and families to decide which school they would like to go to. If we moved to a postcode selection system, the school would not be as diverse as it is. We would be selecting from a much more — how do you put it — wealthy community. Pupils from a range of different backgrounds — as I said, 43 different postcodes are represented — would not have the chance to come here. So, this is actually offering them an opportunity to access Methody.

**Mr Lunn:** OK. I must say, I did not realise that there were 43 postcodes in Northern Ireland, but that is a good statistic.

**Mr Naismith:** There are 78, and we have one from Omagh.

**Mr Lunn:** You have achieved so much in the formats of mixing and so on, but is there any other way that a grammar school like yours could produce an intake that would be satisfactory to the school and to your local hinterland without the selection test, or is that just the absolute requirement?

**Mr Naismith:** Well, again, that has moved on to a different area of ethos; in terms of the value of academic selection, it is a whole different educational argument. The school and the governors are supportive of academic selection as a way within a system that is, in its entirety, comprehensive. I am not talking about a comprehensive school; I am talking about a comprehensive system that allows different pathways and different avenues for pupils — every pupil in the system — to excel and achieve their best. That is why we are still supportive of that.

**Mr Lunn:** I will move back to the subject. Do you think that there is any way that the ethos of Methody differs from the ethos that you would expect to be present in a formally integrated school?

**Mr Naismith:** Again, I suppose, and Michael made specific reference to it, the integrated schools are very much focused on the two major groups, Protestant and Catholic, whereas the ethos in Methodist is about taking inclusion in its broadest possible sense, and that is the difference. When you talk about ethos across all schools, I will be honest and say that, with regard to tolerance and respect and trying to get the best out of pupils, I have yet to meet a principal of a school who does not hold those values very much at heart and hopes to see them replicated in his or her school.

**Mr Lunn:** You have highlighted the difference between a formally integrated school and a school like this, in that the requirement for an integrated school — and it is a fault — is the fact that there has to be an initial balance between Protestant and Catholic. However, you have 35% declared as "others", and they do not count. That is a bit like the Alliance Party votes in the Assembly. *[Laughter.]*

**Mr Naismith:** I could not possibly comment. *[Laughter.]*

**Mr Lunn:** I am glad that I worked my way round to that one.

**Mr Newton:** I am going to quote him on that one, Chair, in the future.

**Mr Lunn:** It is in Hansard.

It is a fact that the basis for an integrated school — and by the sound of it, you agree with me — should be a majority and then a minority and "others" taken together.

**Mr M Humphreys:** The Committee is probably aware — to put my lawyer's hat on — of the judgement in Drumragh Integrated College and what Mr Justice Treacy said about the delivery of integrated education in that, which was that it was not possible, from a legal point of view, to deliver integrated education in a school that has a particular religious ethos.

Methodist College clearly is a faith school, to use a GB term; it has a religious ethos at its core and so, by definition, it cannot fulfil the integrated notion of education. However, that, again, is to try to shoehorn educational issues into legal boxes. In fact, outcomes for children such as, mutual respect, tolerance, character building, and all the things that schools do best should not be subject to legal definition. If it happens naturally, it is all the better than having to be forced into a particular category by virtue of what is a very complex web of different types of school that we have in Northern Ireland.

**Mr Lunn:** I would not want to cross swords with a barrister, but I do not think that Judge Treacy was quite as specific as that. He said that a school could not be considered integrated with what he called a partisan board, and I do not think for one minute that you have a partisan board; I would be very surprised if there is not a good mix across your board membership. Therefore, he was not actually criticising a school like this.

**Mr M Humphreys:** No, it certainly was not a criticism. I think that he was just applying the legislation as he understood it to mean, and that integrated education in the Northern Ireland context has a particular legal meaning that sets it apart from schools like this one.

**Professor Sir Desmond Rea (Methodist College):** I am substituting here today for Rotha Johnston, who comes from a different identity from Desmond Rea, and she is chair of our education committee. It is important that you are aware that, in recent times, we did an exercise on how effective our board of governors is with governance arrangements and the skills that governors bring to the board.

We also did a report on inclusion and diversity, which has been referred to here, stimulated by our concern about the range of things that you have already alluded to, including the disadvantaged and the social class. For example, this board of governors would be concerned to question the headmaster so that any pupil who comes from circumstances where there is relative impoverishment is not disadvantaged as and when they are at this school, and that that is monitored diplomatically as they go through.

The governors have recently been concerned that we should be looking at the whole question of ethos so that we are very clear that, in our understanding and the staff's understanding, our ethos is seen to embrace everyone: pupils and families within the ambit of the school. This board of governors is very aware of its obligations in those areas.

**Mr Lunn:** That does not surprise me at all. In terms of ethos, the social mix, your approach and the extent of sharing and outreach that you involve yourselves in, there is absolutely nothing to criticise. This is a marvellous school. If all our schools were on the same basis — and I do not necessarily mean based on academic selection, because we will not agree about that — as Methodist College, we would not be having this inquiry. I always say that integrated schools are where we would like to be. You are, effectively, an integrated school, but with no need to adopt the title. Thank you very much. I wish you well.

**Mr Newton:** Thank you for the opportunity to be in Methody. I have visited Methody on a number of occasions. My two children went to Methody. We chose Methody, hoping that they would get into Methody. We chose Methody because of the ethos and manner in which Methody goes about shared education or integrated education. You are the epitome of that and the benchmark to be aimed at. I think that it was summed up in a couple of phrases you used: you do not make a fuss about it, and that it is a natural thing. That is what attracted my wife and me to ensure that our two children went to Methody.

I do not really have a question. I was going to come from a similar angle in terms of the penetration into the less socially advantaged communities. I am meeting two people tomorrow night who come from the Village and went to Methody; one is a dentist and one is a teacher. It is good to see the exercise of the pupils in the school stretching out to primary education. That can only be a good thing.

To finish where Trevor left off, we would not be having this inquiry if all schools were the same as Methody.

**Mrs Overend:** Thank you for hosting us today. I look forward to having another look round afterwards.

Earlier, you referred to the mix that you have here. I imagine that that would change year on year. You talked about the 35% "others". That is an overall percentage, but the first year students coming in would make the number change year on year.

**Mr Naismith:** We return annual statistics to the Department of Education. As the principal, I monitor that and report to the board on it. This is the eighth year that I have been the principal of the college. We look every year at the background. There are minor variations and very small fluctuations, so the figure I quoted to you is, fundamentally, the make-up of the school and has been for a considerable time. Part of the reason why we monitor it so closely is that we want to maintain it and to reach out to any community that we feel is underrepresented. Shortly after I arrived here, regrettably, we had to close the boarding department, and there was concern at the time that the closure of the department might result in Methody being a less cosmopolitan school. The reverse happened because of the experience of the overseas boarders. As people from their communities moved into Belfast, given that Belfast has changed over the past 10 years, they had already heard about the college, and Methody was often their first port of call for education for their children. We still get that, so that has enhanced the ethnic diversity in the college.

**Mrs Overend:** That is interesting. The work that you do with other schools is admirable. When there was funding for private projects for shared education, I was involved with that in my area near Magherafelt. However, when the funding stops, you have to find other means to continue that sharing.

In times of austerity and budget cuts, how do you decide what projects continue with other schools? How do you prioritise those? Is it in the delivery of the curriculum or the extension of your ethos? How do you balance that out, and how are you going to make those decisions?

**Mr Naismith:** I am glad that you raised budgets and budget cuts. *[Laughter.]* That is the challenge that Methody and every single school in the country is going to face over the next year if the proposed budget cuts go ahead.

First and foremost, we are required to deliver the curriculum, so we have to cut our resources and allocation of funding to ensure that it is delivered. Most of the outreach projects that we talked about actually cost very little because they are run by staff, who give very freely and generously of their time and ability. Parents also support it, and sometimes private donors are prepared to put money in.

We seek external funding where it is available, but for some of the major projects, the pupils are raising the money that makes the projects happen. That is part of the learning process and of the

ethos. We see it as our duty to give back to the community and to create young citizens who have that idea of duty to others, not to just themselves.

We will have to look at what we are able to offer in the future, and we will do our utmost to try to continue with the things that we value, but the likelihood is that some of these projects will finish.

**Mrs Overend:** Do you think that it might be an idea to rethink the delivery of the curriculum so that you can find ways to work with other schools to deliver it?

**Mr Naismith:** Delivering the curriculum through the entitlement framework is probably one of the most expensive ways to do it. Schools that are working in collaboration are finding that the cost of transport between campuses far outweighs any cost benefit to the college in the staffing it releases, so it is not really an efficient way of delivering the entitlement framework.

I suggest that, if the cuts go ahead, the entitlement framework will suffer. Schools will have to balance their budgets, and putting pupils in a taxi and sending them across town is very expensive.

**Mr M Humphreys:** One reason why we have such a diverse pupil background is the amount of choice that the college is able to offer in the curriculum and in extracurricular activities. Parents are entitled to choice and to look for the best possible range of choice for their children. The budget cuts as proposed can only reduce the choice that is available in the curriculum and the extracurricular activities. There is no way to do otherwise.

That is a real concern for us as a board. Whilst we will always do our minimum, which is to balance the books and deliver what has to be delivered as a matter of law, everything we do over and above that is very much the reason why this school is a success. We foresee real problems in the next two or three financial years in trying to deliver what our parents, our pupils and our staff want and we as a board want to do.

**Mrs Overend:** I was trying to draw out the need for that financial capability for the shared projects. So many schools need that to be able to build on their shared education. Thank you very much for your answers.

**Mr Craig:** It is good to be here today. I appreciate that I am here because, unlike others, I have no interest to declare. I was not a pupil here, and my family did not go to this school. I also welcome Sir Desmond to the Committee. Being on the Policing Board, I have heard plenty about you, but I have never met you. So, it is good to meet you today.

I have been listening with great interest, because I know that the ministerial advisory group made recommendations on the social and economic mix of schools. You seem to have bought in to that ethos. You very clearly indicated that you have targeted schools that would get pupils from deprived backgrounds, and you have put a lot of work into that. I am assuming — I do not want to assume; I want you to tell me — that you have bought in to that ethos.

**Mr Naismith:** I agree with that. As we have said throughout, it is about the idea of opportunity for all and the recognised benefits of having as diverse a community as possible. We want the pupils who come here to have the chance to mix with different people from all sorts of backgrounds so that, based on those interactions, they can learn and improve. Therefore, there is an opportunity for pupils from challenging socio-economic backgrounds to access education and the opportunities that it offers them. The type of education that we offer here at the college is very important to us.

**Mr Craig:** I am going to play devil's advocate, because I do not know the answer to the question of your school ethos and what you count as being most important. Obviously, this is a grammar school, so academic selection is there and you use that tool. Is that the only criterion you use to select people? I noted with interest that you said that you get pupils from right across Northern Ireland and from all backgrounds. Has academic selection been a barrier, or has it assisted you in getting pupils from other places?

**Mr Naismith:** Again, it has assisted us in getting pupils, because it is our first means of selecting pupils for the school into form 1. If you have a grade that qualifies you to get in, you will get in as long as there is a space available for you. We have no selection criteria based on income or ability to pay; those do not exist. Where families may find challenging the costs that are associated with school and

the extras that schools offer, we offer support discreetly and directly where we can. I know that families who have availed themselves of the funding that former pupils have very generously provided are very appreciative of it.

**Mr Craig:** Thank you for mentioning that. One of the other criticisms that those who are against academic selection always bring up is the social inclusion factor and the embarrassment of not being able to afford some of the activities. Do you proactively tackle that in the school?

**Mr Naismith:** Yes. A fund is set aside, and parents are informed of it. The application for the funding comes directly to my office. As I say, it is done very discreetly, but it allows the pupils to access extracurricular activities and extramural educational activities. The idea is that no one will be excluded on the basis of ability to pay.

**Professor Sir Desmond Rea:** Coincidentally, one of your colleagues mentioned the Village. One of our former pupils, who is now a senior QC and an acting judge in England, is from the Village and gave us a sum of money. It is not large, but it is a sum of money. His mother continues to live there and facilitates that funding. We are very mindful of backing the headmaster and his team so that no child is disadvantaged in any way because of economic circumstances.

**Mr M Humphreys:** I think that it is fair to say that, when the current model of academic selection came into being with the two separate exams, the board was very concerned that adopting one of those exams as an entry path would reduce the inclusion and diversity of the school. Thankfully, that has not proved to be the case, and, statistically, we have maintained our levels. If academic selection is to continue, there is no doubt that one test would ensure a much wider range of choice for all children across Northern Ireland. Rather than having to sit what are now five separate papers to keep their options open, we believe that one test would preserve the best opportunity for all to enter the college.

**Mr Craig:** Chair, you will certainly find me in total agreement with that. I think that that needs to be sorted out. I thank you for those very frank answers. They exploded a lot of the myths about what is being said in the debate on academic selection. Thank you very much for that. You are an example not only of shared education, but, as Trevor said, you are integrated without the title.

**The Chairperson (Miss M McIlveen):** Mr Rogers, if you do not mind, Trevor has indicated that he would like to come in at this point.

**Mr Lunn:** On the back of that, I want to clarify something with you: are you able to take into the first year all the applicants who passed the test, or do you need to use selection criteria?

**Mr Naismith:** We do. We are oversubscribed in form 1 each year, so there is always further selection for a final place in the school. Thereafter, we have a waiting list, and, because of the size and nature of the college, we go back to the families on that waiting list to see whether they still want to apply in form 2, form 3 and form 4. We also have a significant intake into lower sixth.

**Mr Lunn:** You talked about the 43 postcodes. Do the criteria involve giving priority to children who live close to the school?

**Mr Naismith:** We do not use geographical priority in our selection.

**Mr Lunn:** None at all?

**Mr Naismith:** No.

**Mr Lunn:** I just wanted to make sure of that.

**Mr M Humphreys:** Free school meals is our number one criteria if there is a tiebreak situation in academic selection. That is for the very reason we talked about, as the board has set a target for social inclusion.

**Mr Lunn:** OK. I am glad that I asked you.

**The Chairperson (Miss M McIlveen):** OK. Thank you.

**Mr Rogers:** Thank you. There is very little for me to ask at this stage, but I will congratulate the school and its governors on the school that you have. As you walk to the gents and so on, you see that it is your pupils who walk the talk, and they need to be congratulated.

You mentioned that the school is faith-based. I suppose that the ethos has developed from the Methodist tradition. How are other faith traditions accommodated in the school?

**Mr Naismith:** Fundamentally, the school has a Christian ethos and Christian values, which are universal values of tolerance and respect. When we have assemblies, we make sure that we refer not just to Christian values but to those of other religions. We bring aspects of other religions into our assemblies and assemblies in the Whitla Hall. In the classroom, it is hugely valuable when pupils have opportunities to explore different ideas through the curriculum, to see things from different perspectives and different cultures and to hear from people who represent those religions and cultures. Again, there are the extracurricular activities that I mentioned, such as the India society, which looks at the religious values and ideals there that have created a set of circumstances that our pupils have to understand and address. So, there are opportunities to hear from representatives of those groupings.

**Mr Rogers:** And your Romanian trips.

**Mr Naismith:** Yes.

**Professor Sir Desmond Rea:** Could I just change your question, if you do not mind? It is a question that I would pose to Dr Unsworth. Are they adequate? That is the question that, as a member of the board, I ask of her, because she chairs the committee.

**Rev Dr Janet Unsworth (Methodist College):** Thank you, Sir Desmond — I think. On inclusion, diversity and equality, I would not want the Committee to think that we are resting on our laurels. Although the report that we worked on over the last year came out with an extremely positive picture of inclusion and thinking through the needs of pupils who come from different backgrounds, we want to keep that under review. We are looking at the board of governors reviewing it annually. It is quite a thing to review something annually and to put in to your governance arrangements that you will do that. We hope to do that through our education and extracurricular activities committee and to look at that each year.

We have a sense of making sure that each pupil is valued for the background from which they come, whether that is their social, ethnic or religious background, and we want to continue to do that. As the principal said, there is a mechanism to do that through the curriculum. We also hope that, through the range of extracurricular activities, which is phenomenal in this school, we provide opportunities for pupils to be able to experience difference.

There is an issue around self-identity and the importance of each child recognising their own identity, whether that is culturally, ethnically or religiously. There is also the importance of tolerance. The values that are associated with the school are exhibited up in different places around the school building. As pupils go about the school, they are able to see the college's values of tolerance and equality. There is a sense of valuing each other's religious experience as well as their own. I think that that is extremely important. However, as I said at the start, we do not want to rest on our laurels. Keeping a watching brief on issues of inclusion, diversity and equality is extremely important.

**Mr Naismith:** I will just add a couple of concrete examples of how that manifests itself on a very day-to-day, no-fuss basis. Where students are engaged in fasting for Ramadan, we take account of that and meet their needs. When we have our form 1 intake, the PTA organises a heritage tour of the school for all the form 1 parents so that they can meet parents informally and begin that integration process. As part of that, our canteen staff meet the parents and talk to them about any dietary requirements that the pupils have that are based on health issues or cultural and religious beliefs. Therefore, we have halal food available in the canteen. Fundamentally, we have a chapel in the college, which is called the Chapel of Unity. Pupils know that it is for pupils of all faiths and is a place of contemplation. It is the spiritual heart of the school.

**The Chairperson (Miss M McIlveen):** In conclusion, as part of our inquiry, we and the Department are going to look at a legal definition of shared education. I wonder whether you have given any consideration to what that should look like and what should be included.

**Mr M Humphreys:** Perhaps I should lead off on this one. I read some of the works from Messrs Knox and Borooah and Professor Gallagher, as well as some of the evidence that you have received already. There is a feeling in some of those papers that there should be quite a strong definition of shared education. That would involve high-level, sustained collaboration between schools from different sectors. That strikes me as something that may well have an important role in some parts of the educational landscape, but it is a long way from the experience that we have here, which is a shared, internal experience. The word "shared" does not necessarily have to mean that people who tend to be from different backgrounds meet and use the same facility. It is better, certainly in my opinion, to have those same people under the same roof being educated in the same way by the same people and enjoying the same experiences, and that is really where the qualities of tolerance and equality come into play.

I think that integrated education will always have a particular, separate legal definition. However, I think that, with shared education, the Committee might look at a much broader picture of models that can deliver it. One of them might be that high-end, sustained collaboration that we see examples of in Ballycastle and other places, but there are lots of ways of achieving it. The naturally integrated model, if one wants to call it that, might look something like what happens at Methody and how we try to preserve our inclusion and diversity internally by the models that we have and externally by reaching out to socially disadvantaged areas, to other religions and to backgrounds that might not automatically find their way here.

I hope that this talk has given you some idea of how that model might work, but I will perhaps leave it to the Committee to come up with a precise definition of what that is. *[Laughter.]*

**The Chairperson (Miss M McIlveen):** That is very kind of you. *[Laughter.]* That was incredibly broad. Thank you very much for your time and for hosting us here today. I look forward to further discussion.