



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Committee for Education

OFFICIAL REPORT (Hansard)

Integrated Education Bill: Ms Kellie
Armstrong MLA

6 October 2021

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

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Members present for all or part of the proceedings:

Mr Chris Lyttle (Chairperson)
Mr Pat Sheehan (Deputy Chairperson)
Ms Nicola Brogan
Mr Robbie Butler
Mrs Diane Dodds
Mr Harry Harvey
Mr Daniel McCrossan
Mr Justin McNulty
Mr Robin Newton
Ms Kellie Armstrong

Witnesses:

Ms Armstrong	MLA - Strangford
Ms Fiona McAteer	Alliance Party

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): I give a warm welcome to Kellie Armstrong, MLA for Strangford, and Fiona McAteer, a research officer for Ms Armstrong. You are very welcome, folks. I advise you that the Committee is able to give you no more than 10 minutes to make a short opening statement. That will be followed by questions from members. Thanks very much indeed, folks.

Ms Kellie Armstrong (Northern Ireland Assembly): Thank you very much, Chair. I want to check that my volume is OK. Behind us, we have open windows for ventilation, so, if it sounds as though there is a lot of noise, it is because noise is being made outside the Assembly.

First, Chair, I would like to thank you and the Committee. I know that I was due to be in front of you a few weeks ago, but, as many of you know, I had a terrible bereavement in my family. To be honest, I was not in a fit state to come and speak to you about the Bill at that stage, so thank you so much for your patience. Many of us know what losing a very close family member means, and I appreciate your patience with me.

We are disappointed that we are not with you in person, because we have cream buns for the Committee — I know that Mr McCrossan enjoys those — but perhaps next time.

Chair and Committee members, we are here to talk about the Integrated Education Bill. We got it through its Second Stage. As I said at the end of the Second Stage debate and before the vote, my and Fiona's baby is being handed over to you. It is now with you so that you can complete your investigations. We are delighted to be with you here today. The Committee will take lots of evidence.

We know that your consultation is due to complete on 10 October. We are really looking forward to seeing the results of that and the report, when it comes out.

I confirm again that we are more than happy to work with the Committee, with all of you, and with the Department. We met the Department following the Bill's Second Stage and reiterated that we want to keep that open communication, because we want to have good legislation. The Bill is not intended to cause difficulties for anyone. I know that issues have been raised, and I am sure that members will ask us for clarification on those. I hope that the Department will share with me the issues that it has already presented to the Committee, because, armed with that information, we can bring forward potential solutions to the Department. If or when the Bill goes forward, it will be for the Department to deliver on it, so we want to make sure that the Bill is as workable as possible for those officers. I would be grateful if the Department would share its paper with us.

We can take some of the issues to the Bill Office. Nobody else wrote this Bill; it has come about through years of work. However, more specifically, in this mandate, it has come through the Assembly's Bill Office; we have stuck to all those procedures. We are not opposed to meeting anyone to discuss any issues that they have. We actually appreciate the fact that any Bill going through the House will have amendments. We fully expect that individual Members and the Committee will propose amendments. I think that the Department said to you that there are amendments that it would like to see.

We have been talking to the Northern Ireland Council for Integrated Education (NICIE) and the Integrated Education Fund (IEF). There may be an amendment to help to explicitly explain a few things that they are concerned that there has been a little bit of misunderstanding about. I would like to thank NICIE and IEF. They have been so accommodating to Fiona and me. They have been brilliant about allowing us to come and torture their board members and speak to staff and, of course, members. They have also been very good for the Committee in encouraging people to respond to the call for evidence. I thank them very much for that.

I will be contacting each of the parties to have a discussion with each of you individually, and, of course, with the Committee. We are prepared to make ourselves available to the Committee at any stage. We want to keep communications open and keep that contact going. We have been through quite a bit. You will eventually look at each clause individually, but, rather than take up too much time today, I am open to questions now. We listened to what the Department said two weeks' ago, and we know that individual members will have questions. With your permission, Chair, rather than going through all the clauses again — we went through those at Second Stage, and we have had our informal meeting — it is over to the Committee for questions.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): Thanks for that, Kellie.

Mr Sheehan: Thanks, Kellie and Fiona, for coming in this morning. Kellie, did you hear the evidence given to the Committee a fortnight ago by departmental officials, which can only be described as a withering critique of the Bill? What is your reaction to that criticism?

Ms Armstrong: Nobody likes change; we all know that. I appreciate that the Department has its concerns. I go back to my statement that we are happy to work with anyone to make good legislation. The Department made some assertions. I do not agree with all of those. We had met the Department to ask what its issues were. It was a little bit surprising when officials came to the Committee with a long list of concerns that they had not previously shared with me, as the Bill sponsor.

Look, there are no closed doors with us. We will talk to the Department, go through its issues and clarify those. If there are clauses that can be improved on, I am happy to work with the Department on that because it will be delivering the outcomes of the Bill. I would really love it if the Department listed those issues for me — we have not got that from the Department yet — and what possible solutions it would like to see. We could then go back to the Bill Office, get legal opinion and bring forward amendments or whatever changes we can to help the Department.

Mr Sheehan: Thanks for that. It makes sense to work with everyone to try to bring forward the best legislation possible. It would be a very foolish person who brought forward draft legislation and said, "This is absolutely perfect. It doesn't even need scrutiny. Let's just nod it on through." That would be a bit daft.

You said that the departmental officials made assertions that you do not agree with. What exactly were those assertions?

Ms Armstrong: There were a few bits and pieces. One of them is on clause 7(1), which states:

"When planning for the establishment of a new school".

There seemed to be a misreading of the legislation a few times. It says that, upon the establishment of a new school by the Department, there will be "a presumption" that the school will be integrated unless there are "special circumstances". The Bill will not force integrated education to take over. On a number of occasions, the Department seemed to think that this would erode all other sectors. Actually, clause 7 encourages the Department to use the tools that it already has. We know that the Education Authority (EA), for instance, has been involved in community conversations. When the Department has established that there are enough children in an area for a new school, would it not be lovely for it to speak to that community? In fact, clause 7 has deliberately been left quite open so that the Department can define what those special circumstances are.

Clause 7(2) states:

"The following are not to be treated as special circumstances".

Those are the special circumstances at the moment. Think about Irish-medium schools, for instance, Pat. If there was a community conversation and parents said, "Do you know what? We could do with an Irish-medium school", that would open doors for the Department, as opposed to parents, to set that up. It is not as presumptive as people like to think.

At the moment, new schools are presumed, on the basis of demographics and spare places in schools, to either be maintained or controlled. All that we are saying is that, in that process, we flip it and it is presumed to be integrated first, but that there are special circumstances that the Department can define that can be brought into play. That could be the community conversation. The Department could say that it needs a special school. Nobody would argue about that. If the Department has identified that it needs the capacity for a special school, that is no problem. The community may say that it needs to be a controlled school, a maintained school, an Irish-medium school or an integrated school. This gives the community the responsibility to react. The Department is saying that all new schools will have to be integrated and that that will erode other sectors, but, actually, we are giving the community the opportunity to spell out what it wants in its area.

Mr Sheehan: Clause 7 is one of the clauses that has led to concerns in quite a number of quarters. I spoke to the Irish-medium sector in the last couple of weeks and it is certainly concerned, because the Bill lists a couple of issues that are not to be used as special circumstances but does not go on to list any others. The difficulty is in clause 7(1), which states:

"When planning for the establishment of a new school, education bodies must apply a presumption that it will be an integrated school unless that would be inappropriate by reason of special circumstances."

You only list two issues that should not be treated as special circumstances. It is not in the Bill, for example, that a community can opt for an Irish-medium school or a special school. There is a difficulty with legislation if it is not absolutely crystal clear what is meant. I accept entirely your intentions, Kellie, but having those intentions and incorporating them into legislation are two entirely different things. Those are the issues that we will need to tease out as this process goes on. It would be an abdication of our responsibility as elected representatives to just say, "Hands up. I support this legislation. I will vote for it", without listening to evidence from stakeholders, experts, you and others. I have said to you clearly that I support the principle of our kids being educated together, but work still has to be done on this draft legislation. Thanks anyway.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): Members, I can stretch to about five minutes max for questions. We will need to stick to that. I know that we are not used to sticking to that time limit, so I will try to give you a one-minute warning each time.

Mr Newton: Welcome, again, Kellie. We had the advantage of having an informal meeting with you and your researcher.

My concerns are similar to those of the Deputy Chairperson. Kellie, you used the expression "flip it". You indicated that, currently, there is a presumption that, if a new school is to be built in an area, it will be in the Catholic maintained or the state sector, but that you want to "flip it" to a presumption that it will be an integrated school. Is that not, in many ways, just elevating the views of those in one sector — I speak as someone who supports integrated education and whose children are practitioners of it — above the views of others, who may prefer a Catholic maintained or state school in the area?

Ms Armstrong: Thank you, Robin. You are right: I am looking for area planning to consider integrated education first. When was the last time that a brand-new school was created? It has been quite a while, so I do not expect any brand-new schools to pop up quickly. The fact that integrated schools are open to all is one thing. The "special circumstances" allow for any type of school to be proposed by the community. If we need to specify that a bit more tightly, as Pat suggested, we are prepared to do so. If the Committee would like that to be changed, we can certainly do that.

Ms Fiona McAteer (Alliance Party): Yes. We went back and forth, Robin, on whether to define the special circumstances. We did not want to hold the Department to something very strict that would not be able to change, so we left it quite open. As Kellie said, however, if there is a form of words or something else that we can put in there that will help the Department and the planning authorities, it will be no problem to do so.

Ms Armstrong: The other thing to note is that integrated education does not have a planning authority — unless the Department takes that development on board. We have, and are lucky to have, the Education Authority and the Council for Catholic Maintained Schools (CCMS) to look after controlled and maintained schools, but integrated education does not have a planning authority.

It is a change. A lot of people are concerned about the change, but it is a change that will help to bring children together to be educated together in classrooms every day. If it needs to be improved, Robin, I am open to solutions. I am sure that the Committee or I can propose an amendment. As I said, I want to work with you. I will not sit here and say that you cannot have anything.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): Thanks, Kellie. You have one more minute, Robin.

Mr Newton: Very quickly, Chair: as it stands, the Bill — I will not be able to find which clause it is — requires not just arm's-length bodies but the Department:

"to encourage, facilitate and promote integrated education".

No other sector gets that advantage. The state, Catholic maintained and Irish-language sectors do not get it. Why would we look for a duty on the Department to promote one sector above others?

Ms Armstrong: The Independent Review of Integrated Education mentioned "promote" as one of the key issues that it wanted to see brought forward. Clauses 5(1)(a) and (b) define what "promotion" means. The word "promotion" seems to be causing a few problems. I am happy to consider changing that word to "meeting parental preference for integrated education", for instance.

Ms McAteer: We had over 800 responses to our consultation. The majority of those people want to see a statutory duty on the Department to promote. As Kellie says, that has also come through in different recommendations in previous reports. It is grassroots-led, and it is what the movement would love to see.

Mr McCrossan: Thank you, Kellie. Good to see you, and thank you for your opening remarks. This is an important discussion. Going as far back as when Martin McGuinness was Minister, the SDLP was asking for an increase to the Education budget generally but also, in cooperation with Martin McGuinness, for specific provision for an uplift in resources for integrated education. We have been chipping away for a long, long time to ensure that sufficient support is given to the sector.

However, in looking at the Bill and listening to the presentation last week, we have some concerns. The concerns have been touched on by the Deputy Chair and Mr Newton, and I am sure that other members will do so, too. Your Bill is designed to put the integrated sector on a level playing field but the Department of Education [*Inaudible owing to poor sound quality.*]

Ms McAteer: Sorry, Daniel. You are breaking up.

Ms Armstrong: Sorry, Daniel. I am not able to hear you.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): Just a minute, Daniel. You were breaking up a bit there. I think your question is this: how will this give a level playing field? However, summarise briefly, if we can hear you. Go ahead.

Mr McCrossan: Can you explain how placing on the Department a duty to promote integrated education will create a level playing field and not place the integrated sector in a position of significant advantage, as some claim?

Ms Armstrong: I will not lie, Daniel: of course, I am looking to have integrated education promoted. The meaning of "promotion" is in clause 5(1)(a) and (b), where the Bill talks about:

"identifying, assessing, monitoring and aiming to increase the demand for the provision of integrated education".

The Department was concerned that that would mean that more schools might come forward to become integrated. What is wrong with that? It is not about advertising, which people have got into their head. It is not about TV ads and things like that. This is about assessing, monitoring and aiming to increase the demand.

There are about 70 integrated schools in the whole schools estate; it is not a significant number. If we talk about equity and giving a balance, integrated and Irish-medium schools, for instance, could be doing with a bit of help. How many hundreds of other types of school are there? Those sectors have planning authorities, but there is no planning authority for integrated education.

Ms McAteer: There has been an historical underdevelopment of integrated education. We are trying to bring that up to where it should be. That is why we have strategic promotion, the strategic action plan and strategic policies.

Ms Armstrong: That fits in with what the SDLP had, as you rightly said, been planning earlier. We are just trying to put it into legislation and to put a duty on the Department to do this.

Mr McCrossan: OK. How *[Inaudible owing to poor sound quality.]*

Ms Armstrong: Sorry, Daniel; your sound is breaking up a little bit.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): We will give it a chance, Daniel.

Mr McCrossan: How do you see placing a duty on CCMS to promote integrated education *[Inaudible owing to poor sound quality.]*

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): OK, Kellie. I think that the question is: how do you see placing a duty to promote integrated education on CCMS or EA as creating a level playing field?

Ms Armstrong: CCMS and EA are planning authorities. If they do not consider integrated education when they are considering their policies, particularly planning policies, how are we ever going to develop it?

Ms McAteer: They are already doing that with the maintained school that is transforming. They tick that box already. They also have a really good working relationship with NICIE as well, so they already have those important connections in place.

Mr McCrossan: What difference will placing a duty to promote integrated education on the Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment (CCEA) make to it and the way that it functions?

Ms McAteer: That is a really good question. CCEA already produces a lot of material that is used in integrated schools. It would not place any further burden on them. It would not add any more cost or burden, because they already have a really good sharing platform of materials for integrated schools, and, again, they work really closely with NICIE. The relationship is already there, and the work is already being done.

Mr McCrossan: OK. Thank you for that. Chair, please indulge me, slightly.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): Last question, Daniel. Thanks.

Mr McCrossan: Thank you, Chair. The Bill in its current state would require the development of an integrated education strategy. We discussed this, Kellie. What do you hope to achieve for the integrated sector with such a strategy? What effect might it have on other sectors?

Ms Armstrong: Clause 8(2) states:

"The integrated education strategy must, in particular—

(a)include provision for resources (including personnel) to encourage, facilitate and promote integrated education".

The clause also talks about facilitating:

"the maintenance and protection of the ethos",

finding funding commitments and:

"full access for integrated schools to training and resources provided by the Education Authority".

It has improved in recent times, but that sets it in legislation. It talks about including in that strategy an action plan. It is setting out a responsibility in the Department to provide a strategy. We learned from the renewable heat incentive (RHI) that we need to have strategies and action plans that are accountable. That is what that aims for. It means that we will not have another report or legislation that sits on the shelf, but that it will be an organic document that the Department has ownership of and can bring forward to each of us for scrutiny.

Mr McCrossan: Some have expressed concern about clause 10. I know that that will have been brought to your attention, Kellie. It was discussed at length with the Department. What are the implications of clause 10 legally, given that it creates a precedent that some have determined could present difficulties, particularly given that those issues would be resolved via negative resolution as opposed to through the Assembly by legislators?

Ms Armstrong: This is standard process, Daniel. I do not get why anybody has a problem with it. For instance, yesterday, we had the Adoption and Children Bill, which is bringing forward regulations by negative resolution. It is standard.

Ms McAteer: It is standard practice when drafting legislation to put in negative resolution; otherwise, it can be very onerous on the Department. It is bringing the accountability responsibility back to you, as Members.

Ms Armstrong: It would have been worse if we had said that it was affirmative resolution. That would have been a handling and a half; it would have been completely ridiculous. The Assembly should not be worried about negative resolution. The Department should not be concerned about it, either. It is a regular, standard occurrence in legislation.

Mr McCrossan: The Department went as far as saying that there is no precedent.

Ms Armstrong: I will provide the Bills from the past two weeks to the Department. There is quite a lot of negative resolution in Bills.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): Thanks, Daniel.

Mr Butler: Thank you, Kellie, for the work that you have done on the Bill. I look forward to meeting you guys privately, too. I hope that you do not mind me doing this — I am not being naughty — but, yesterday in the Chamber, on the Adoption and Children Bill, you gave negative resolution a bit of a rattling. You asked the Minister why a particular aspect of the Adoption and Children Bill could not be subject to affirmative resolution, but you are saying that it is OK here.

Ms Armstrong: I did not give negative resolution a rattling. What I said was that clause 42 of the Adoption and Children Bill should be by affirmative resolution because of the content of the regulation. If you guys, as the Committee, think that this should be affirmative, you will need to speak to the Department about the implications of that. We were told very clearly by the draftsman that negative resolution is standard for this. These are regulations that the Department must bring forward and that the Assembly must have sight of, but it will not prevent the regulations from happening because it is negative resolution; it is only if somebody says, "Hold on, I don't like this". The difference is that the Adoption and Children Bill has a number of clauses where it is asking for affirmative resolution to be taken, but most of it is negative. I have no problem with negative resolution; it is just when there are particular things. If you, as a Committee, feel that this should be subject to affirmative resolution, we can change that.

Mr Butler: Thank you. I am not sure that that clears it up for me.

The Department says that this is a significant departure from the ethos of integrated education because it omits terminology and stuff that reflect society; for instance, the percentages of pupils who make up an integrated school. I think that the Bill would remove all of that. If you do not think that, are you saying that those percentages would still stand? To have integrated status, would schools need to reach the bar for pupil percentages?

Ms Armstrong: In law, it is "reasonable numbers". There are no percentages. That is a policy position that is taken forward. As the Department has said, we have replicated the language that was used in the Shared Education Act, which has already been voted on by the House. We are not going to question the House on that. It talks about "reasonable numbers" of Catholics and Protestants. We have reflected and evolved that to include, as it states in clause 1:

"the education together, in an integrated school, of —

(a) those of different cultures and religious beliefs and of none".

That is taken as a direct response to parents who have said, "I'm not a Protestant or a Catholic, and my child doesn't seem to be counted in the same way". We will still have reasonable numbers of Protestants and Catholics. We have integrated schools across Northern Ireland that are achieving the 30/30 percentage of Protestants and Catholics, and we will have that. The other 30-odd per cent are "others". It allows schools to count those. Integrated schools will always have Protestants and Catholics in the classroom together, and we want those reasonable numbers. We have included Education and Training Inspectorate (ETI) inspections, because we listened to Mervyn Storey, for instance, from the DUP, who was worried about how integrated an integrated school was. The ETI can test that level of integration, mix and diversity within the school, and it can challenge it. We have gifted the Assembly and the ETI the opportunity to test integration, and, so far, all integrated schools have said that they have no issue with that.

Mr Butler: It will be underpinned by policy numbers and statements. There has to be a measure for it to be effective.

Ms Armstrong: In law, it is "reasonable numbers".

Mr Butler: What will the Bill presume reasonable numbers to be?

Ms Armstrong: I would have gone further, but I did not. We changed our original intention to say that it should reflect the make-up of society where that school is based, or its catchment area. Parkhall, for instance, a wonderful school in Antrim, has a terribly small number of Catholics — 6% or 7% — but it has 26% of "others". That is not reflected, so we want to bring that. The ETI can push that. I could say that we want a make-up of 40/40/20, but is that reasonable? Do we have any areas in Northern Ireland with that demographic split? We take parental preference into consideration. We want to maintain reasonable numbers. Putting figures on it does not reflect society.

Ms McAteer: The Department already looks at the community background and make-up of the area that the school is in. That is kind of moving away from those figures, and it is in policy.

Mr Butler: It is an interesting one, because we all want our children to be educated together, but, in reality, education is only one part of the problem. We still have a segregated society. In some areas,

we have places that are exclusively Protestant or Catholic, and we have schools in those areas in which there might be 99% of either religion. Would the reasonable numbers test fail with the Bill?

Ms Armstrong: No, there is no change on that. All we are saying is that we have replicated the words that it is Protestants and Catholics together in reasonable numbers, and we recognise that there are children of other faiths and none.

Ms McAteer: If that school with 99% of one religion wanted to transform, it would have to go through the proper legal process of transformation. It would work with NICIE to try to get its balance back and reflect the minority community. We also have to remember that it is about more than just numbers. It is about the integrated ethos and the reflection of the board of governors, which is different in an integrated school.

Mr Butler: I have one more question, Chair, if that is OK?

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): Last question. Thanks.

Mr Butler: NICIE talks about the current overriding Christian ethos in integrated education.

Ms Armstrong: It is in all schools.

Mr Butler: Yes. To be fair to the Bill, it also says that there will be parental choice for those children who do not want to partake in certain elements of that ethos. There is a humanist approach.

Ms Armstrong: It is not in the Bill, Robbie. I deliberately did not deal with secularism. All schools in Northern Ireland have a Christian ethos. All schools try to do this, but integrated schools recognise the make-up of the body of the pupils. In an integrated school, the celebration of who all the children are is there, but they still have a Christian ethos.

Ms McAteer: NICIE is coming up after us. That is a perfect question to ask it. Its representatives will be able to explain that in full and better detail.

Mr Butler: My last question is on the ETI. Has it given you any feedback, Kellie, on its ability or desire to take on the extra functions that could be conferred on it?

Ms McAteer: It already does it for shared education, and NICIE has a self-evaluation form that it can replicate. A lot of resources and toolkits are pre-made.

Ms Armstrong: We met the Department, as we said, and we asked whether there were any issues that it wanted to bring forward. We would be happy to discuss that. As legislators, we have had complaints about how integrated our integrated schools are. We have an option, through ETI, to use the self-evaluation forms or whatever else it might want to use to test integration. We do not do that with CCMS; we do not say, "How Catholic is a maintained school?" or, in controlled schools, "What is the make-up there?". It is a new one for integrated education but something that all the schools have no problem doing because they are already filling out the monitoring forms for NICIE.

Mr Butler: Thank you, guys.

Mrs Dodds: Thank you, Kellie. We have had an informal meeting about the Bill. I share the concerns about clause 7; I have spoken to you privately about it, because that gives a separate status to integrated education. To be fair, there should be a level playing field for schools, without placing one school over another.

When we last spoke, you had not had an up-to-date conversation with the other sectoral bodies. Have you had that conversation, and what difficulties or issues have they raised?

Ms Armstrong: We met the Controlled Schools' Support Council (CSSC) — Mark Orr — and CCMS, although we are due to go back to CCMS. The meeting was arranged at the time when I was off on bereavement leave. We are due to see CCMS with its trustees.

Ms McAteer: That will be our second meeting.

Ms Armstrong: We met the Department, and the EA was represented at that meeting with the Irish-medium and integrated education (IMIE) team. Others have said that, as the Bill moves through the process — we know that amendments will come forward — there have been concerns about clause 7 because it flips things, as I said. We have not had any feedback from the Department listing specific issues, so we look forward to that. We are due to see CCMS again, and we will get more detail from it then. A number of integrated schools are controlled integrated schools that come under the banner of CSSC anyway. It is fully on board and understands the requirements relating to controlled integrated schools, and it works closely with NICIE and the others.

The chief executives of the sectoral bodies meet regularly. The Bill is not a surprise to them; they knew that it was coming. The legislation has been discussed by those bodies since 2006.

Mrs Dodds: OK. I am slightly surprised by that, because I have met them and we as an Education Committee have met them, and they did raise a number of issues about the ability to promote integrated education and the statutory and legal duty that would be on the Department to promote an integrated education over, for example, a faith-based education. They raised some of those issues with me, so I am really surprised that there was not more of an issue.

Have you an estimate of what clause 8(2)(d) on funding would mean for the balance of funding in the Department? How do you see that working in terms of amounts etc?

Ms Armstrong: Have you received the Assembly Research and Information Service (RalSe) review of costs for the Integrated Education Bill and potential financial —

Mrs Dodds: I do not have it with me, but I would like to —

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): Kellie, before you come in on that, as a hopefully helpful point of information, all schools in Northern Ireland are, by law — unless and until someone changes that, which the Bill does not propose to do — non-denominationally Christian in ethos. A dichotomy does not exist between Christian and non-Christian or faith-based and integrated education. By law, all schools have a non-denominational Christian ethos. It is fair to record that point.

Mrs Dodds: Chair, I presume that I am going to get extra time?

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): Right, 30 seconds. *[Laughter.]*

Ms McAteer: I will come in, given that we were talking about money. Obviously, NICIE is funded through the Department, but its budget has been cut over the last number of years. Its uplift means that it has probably just gone back to what it used to get in comparison with some other sectoral bodies.

Mrs Dodds: In real terms, the education budget has been cut significantly over the last number of years. Therefore, that applies to all people and sectors equally, despite a growth in the school population. In real terms, the education budget has had quite a significant cut in recent years. I hope that, when the Committee looks at the spending review proposals, it will unite around the education budget. The Bill asks for dedicated funding specifically to promote one sector. Have you a sense of what that will be?

Ms Armstrong: The figures are in the report that you received that was passed by the Speaker's Office. The report determined that the funding be based on staffing, as opposed to other costs. That does not include non-staff costs, but it was £261,296 a year, and that funds a grade 7, a deputy principal, two staff officers and an executive officer grade 2.

At this stage, that does not take into account the amount of money a year that the Integrated Education Fund also provides for promotion. The Department and the IMIE team were asked for figures. The Speaker has said that that is as far as I can go with the figures. Unfortunately, we are not like Scotland where there is a lot of money to get financial wizards to look at those matters. However, that is the money that has been put forward. It is staffing costs more than anything else. The education strategy mentions securing resources, and we are looking at that level of funding for personnel for those resources.

Mrs Dodds: I tend to disagree with that way of accounting for funding because that is the principle and the initial cost. The actual roll-out cost may be significantly different.

May I direct you to clause 5(1)(a)?

Ms Armstrong: [*Inaudible owing to poor sound quality.*]

Mrs Dodds: I am aware that I have very limited time. Kellie, I am sorry. I will direct you to clause 5(1)(a), which states:

"identifying, assessing, monitoring and aiming to increase the demand for the provision of integrated education".

Therefore, the promotion of integrated education will be put on a statutory footing, and there is an aim to increase the demand for that. Has it been considered what that would look like across current area planning?

Ms Armstrong: As far as I am concerned, area planning does not have any plans for integrated education. NICIE has a voice at the table, but it is one voice. However, NICIE is not a planning authority, and it has no legal basis to be listened to. As I said, promotion seems to be causing a lot of issues for people. It is about meeting parental preferences. We have had surveys and reports that confirm that 69% to 70% of parents would like their children to be educated together. If we are to meet that parental preference, it will be by "identifying, assessing [and] monitoring". There is no point in increasing the number of places or telling people to apply for integrated education if places are not available. Therefore, clause 5(1)(a) has been put forward. Clause 5(1)(b) follows on from that, and it is about providing sufficient places in integrated schools to meet parental preference.

Mrs Dodds: I agree that people want their children to be educated together. Even back in the dark old days, when I was going to school, I went to a school that had people from both sections of the community and, indeed, wider afield. My children went to the same school, and they were very lucky to do that. However, children can be educated together in all sorts of schools. I was at a state school, and I was educated together with other people in that state school. There are all kinds of ways to do that. Shared schooling and shared education projects are another way, so I do not think that integrated education is the only way that children can be educated together, and it is worth making that point constantly. There are other situations in which children are educated together. I look forward to engaging further on the Bill. This is a big topic.

Ms Armstrong: I just want to confirm, Diane, that, under current legislation — the Education Reform (Northern Ireland) Order 1989 — a school can legally be called "integrated" only if it has gone through that process. You are right: if we are looking in future at how children are educated together, I would love all schools to be officially called "integrated", but, at this stage, they have to go through that Education Reform Order legislative process to get that stamp.

Mrs Dodds: Yes, but you are talking about a sector, Kellie. I am saying that children can be educated together across the different education sectors, which is slightly different.

Ms Brogan: Thanks, Kellie and Fiona, for coming along today. Kellie, we need to appreciate your open-mindedness in addressing the issues in the Bill. It is really good to have that kind of open discussion about it. We are supportive of integrated education and are happy to work with you on the Bill, but there are some things that we need to tease out.

You will be sick of talking about this, but I will go back to clause 7, because you have made a few points. Pat raised the issue of special circumstances and said that you have outlined what special circumstances cannot be. Whose responsibility is it to specify what special circumstances are, and do you have an idea what those special circumstances will be?

Ms Armstrong: Nicola, it is an interesting question. Under that clause, it would be for the Department to define that, because we have left it open. We have said that the existing circumstances cannot be considered, one of which is the "religious demographics of an area". As we know, you could say that a certain village or town is, we presume, majority Catholic, so a CCMS school will be built there, or that it is majority Protestant so we will put a controlled school there. That is not appropriate. Also, the

Drumragh ruling means that you cannot say that, because one type of school has empty places, another type of school cannot be built. To be honest, I would love to tease that out.

I take Pat's point. I have not included a definition of what the special circumstances will be, because the draftsman advised us that we want to give the Department the flexibility. If we put that in the Bill, what happens in five or 10 years' time? How can we future-proof this? If we feel, or if you feel, that the Committee should define special circumstances and state that, for instance, something like the community conversation that the Education Authority, Ulster University and others have trialled and tested should be part of the special circumstances, that would help to bring all the different types of parental preferences on to the table and help to decide on any new schools in the future.

The other point is on new schools. I may need to explain explicitly in an amendment — the Committee may want to do that — that a new school is a brand-new build where the Department has identified that there needs to be a new school to meet demand. It does not include amalgamations, because those schools are already existing entities. We may need to define that, because I know that the Department seems to have a concern about that. It is a presumption that it is an integrated school unless, by appropriate reason of special circumstance, it is not. That then throws it open to say, "Hold on. Do not presume that it is any other type". It is integrated unless the community says otherwise.

Ms Brogan: It would be worthwhile clarifying whether it is just for brand-new schools with the Bill Office.

I want to follow up on a point that you made a few times: that there are not many new schools being built in the North. We have to be very careful about putting that into legislation. Just because there are not many new schools being built in the North and we do not foresee it in the future does not mean that we can put that into legislation in the expectation that there will not be. We have to be very careful with that. Kellie, thanks for that.

The other point that I want to touch on is the independent review of education and the fact that the panel has recently been announced. I am questioning the timing of the Bill. Do you think that this is a good time to introduce it and for us to discuss it, or are we pre-empting the findings of the independent review?

Ms Armstrong: Thank you, Nicola. No, I do not believe that we are pre-empting, because all of us have seen how long it takes for something like Bengoa. We know that the panel for the independent review of education has been appointed. It will bring out its report in a year or 18 months' time, which will be in a new mandate. How long will it take for recommendations to come forward? How many of those will go forward? We do not know. In the meantime, we have integrated schools at which children are not able to access integrated places. You could view the Bill as an interim measure. To be honest, if the independent review of education comes forward with something with which all the political parties can agree, that may rewrite quite a lot of education legislation. At this stage, the Bill is to support and help integrated education.

Ms McAteer: We are taking our lead from the movement. It is still crying out for the Bill and would love to see it go through. You mentioned the Department's evidence about the Education Committee's inquiry into shared and integrated education in 2015. There were recommendations in that report that the Department did not do anything with. Then you had Colm Cavanagh's report, the recommendations from which the Department did not do anything with. We feel that it is unfortunate timing. As we have said to you so many times, we started this back in 2016 before the independent review had even been thought about. We understand the cause for concern, but we feel that now is the time to do this.

Ms Brogan: I understand those frustrations about the delays in acting on recommendations from other reviews. However, I wonder whether it is making two jobs out of one. That is just a thought. Kellie and Fiona, it has been really nice to speak to you about the Bill. I am sure that we will discuss it again in much more detail. Thanks very much.

Mr McNulty: Hi, Kellie and Fiona. Thanks for coming to the Committee today. Thank you for your determination and your great work in bringing forward the Bill. I have a couple of questions. I recognise Pat and Nicola's point. Our job as a Committee is to scrutinise. That is why we are here. We are trying to assist in delivering the Bill in the best possible format, in the interests of all. That is why we have a number of questions that we want to be answered. We are trying to move this forward in a positive sense.

The Bill, in its current form, seeks to bring about:

"a standardised and accredited diversity and all-inclusive module on how to teach in a truly inclusive and integrated classroom".

Do you see how combining the word "standardised" with the word "diversity" is a somewhat intellectual and philosophical problem? How do you standardise diversity? Is that a bit of an oxymoron?

Ms Armstrong: Justin, thank you very much for that. There are different teachers. Teachers who were employed as a new teacher 30 years ago will have received a certain level of training, and the teachers being trained today, no matter where they are being trained, will get a certain level of training. The training, however, is all different. We are not saying that diversity should be standardised. What we are saying is that we would love to see a standardised amount of time given to supporting our teachers, be it a training course for one hour, two hours, a week or whatever. It needs to be standardised so that everybody gets a fair level of diversity training.

Teachers are going into classrooms now that are much more diverse than they ever were. There is a range of different abilities, cultures and backgrounds, and teachers are faced with all of that. We are therefore looking for a standardised approach to training. We can have difference in the diversity training. We might, for example, say, "We need to cover off race, religion and family types", but it is about how long is spent on that. Think about coach training. You would want a standardised level of training. You might have some people who need a bit more help and some who are professionals and therefore do not need as much help, but they will all have a set number of courses or a level of support throughout those courses. That is what standardisation is about: a level playing field. It means that, whether the teachers are coming from St Mary's, Stranmillis, postgraduate courses or wherever else, the same percentage of their course, or the same percentage of what they are doing, is set out for them. It means that all teachers are provided with this tool that will help them in the classroom.

Mr McNulty: I still have a problem with the combination of the words "standardised" and "diversity". I have a problem with those words.

The Bill, in its current state, seeks to require the ETI to inspect integrated schools:

"to ensure they are upholding their integrated ethos."

Have you consulted the ETI to determine whether it believes that this is an appropriate way to use it?

Ms Armstrong: I have not consulted the ETI on this, but the resources already available, which were developed through NICIE, require schools themselves to look at whether they are, and can prove that they are, upholding the integrated ethos in, for instance, the diversity of their board and teaching staff as well as in the content of their courses. There is a ready-made platform. To be honest, unless the Bill goes forward and that requirement is definitely there, I do not want to ask the ETI to invest money in establishing something. Schools have said that they do not have an issue with it, and, if you want me to, I can get information from the ETI in response to that. I have asked the Department for any information or concerns that it has, and it has not yet produced a response.

Mr McNulty: Have you sought DE's views on requiring the independent inspectorate to function in that way?

Ms Armstrong: Yes, we have.

Ms McAteer: Yes, it did not bring up anything to us. We have had an open communication with the IMIE team the whole way through this process, and it has not flagged that as a particular concern as compared with all its other concerns.

Mr McNulty: Do you envisage the ETI being independent enough to decide what an integrated ethos is, or do you seek, through this legislation, to determine that for it?

Ms Armstrong: No, the ETI is staffed by professionals in this, Justin. They will know how much they can measure and what it is realistic to measure, so, to be honest, I would rather leave it with them.

Ms McAteer: Hopefully, that will apply in NICIE as well. As we said, NICIE has the toolkits. It has been doing this for decades and knows exactly how to help and what to look for. It already helps schools that may need a bit of extra help, especially transformed schools. It has the experts there as well.

Mr McNulty: The Bill seeks to provide resources to integrated schools to strengthen their ethos. I am sure that all schools would like additional resources towards that end. Tell us how that would work in practice.

Ms Armstrong: It is about looking at a school. For instance, if someone alleges that a school does not have the right mix, what is the school doing to ensure that it does have reasonable numbers of Catholics and Protestants? What is it doing to ensure that, for instance, its curriculum is fully inclusive and reflects the children who are in its classes? What is it doing to support teachers so that they can teach the entire range of diverse children who will appear in their classes? It looks to support board members on how to consider making policies on moving forward.

I agree with you, and I would love more money to be given to schools to support their ethos. No matter what the ethos is, that is what makes schools unique and strong, and it is what makes parents want to send their children there. I would love all schools to do it. I am putting it in the Bill, and, you never now, as a result of that, perhaps all schools will get help with their ethos. CSSC does this for controlled schools, and CCMS does it for maintained schools. I have not spoken to Comhairle na Gaelscolaíochta (CnaG) to see how it does it for the ethos of Irish-medium schools, but it is certainly being taken forward. Would we all not love to see lots more money going into our schools for that?

Mr McNulty: Kellie and Fiona, thank you, and well done on your determination to move this forward. As my colleague Daniel said, we have met you already on this. The SDLP is behind integrated education and believes in it passionately. The SDLP's *raison d'être* is equality, reconciliation and bringing communities together in a new Ireland, so we are very passionate about moving forward on this matter. Thank you very much.

Mr Harvey: Thank you, Kellie and Fiona. Kellie, I am sorry for your recent close bereavement. Be assured that our thoughts and prayers will continue with you at this time.

Ms Armstrong: Thank you.

Mr Harvey: Kellie, do you accept that the Bill has the potential to severely limit or remove parental choice in the future?

Ms Armstrong: I do not think so. There is parental choice, or "parental preference", which is the new term. I look at integrated education and ask, "Where is parental choice?". If your child is moving from primary school to a post-primary school and you put down as your first preference an integrated school in our constituency of Strangford, for instance, you will find that Strangford College is oversubscribed. The next nearest local integrated schools are Priory Integrated College and Lagan College, both of which are oversubscribed. There is no option there, so parental preference is not available. The Chair represents East Belfast, and there is no integrated school there. The Department says that children can cross boundaries. However, when you cross the boundary and your nearest integrated school is also full, that does not give you a preference. The Bill, rather than taking away parental preference, responds to the calls from parents in all those surveys who say that they would like their children to be educated together.

I support absolutely anyone's choice to send their child to a controlled, maintained, integrated or Irish-medium school. That choice is not unfettered; we know that. However, where we have parental preference, and if we are all committed to parental preference, we should be striving to help those parents to have their requests met.

Mr Harvey: Integration of young people in education settings occurs in many sectors outside the integrated sector. Integration happens naturally in many schools in the controlled sector, for example, often in a far better way than in many integrated schools. Does the Bill acknowledge that?

Ms Armstrong: The Bill does not talk about any other sectors, Harry. Under the legislation, a school can be legally defined as an integrated school only if it has met the process requirements through the Education Reform (Northern Ireland) Order 1989. Many schools have mixing and other practices that

are very welcome. I would love them to formally consider coming forward for transformation and adding "integrated" to what they are.

Ms McAteer: It is about more than just numbers; it is also about the make-up of the board and the ethos of the school.

Ms Armstrong: The board will have a mix that reflects the mix of children. Staff will be the same, and that is all staff, including classroom assistants and those who work in cleaning or in the dining hall. All those members of staff are reflective of the whole community.

Mr Harvey: Thank you.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): Kellie and Fiona, thank you very much indeed. Our next witnesses are waiting, and we want to make sure that we get as much response to the Bill as we possibly can so that Committee Stage is constructive. Thanks so much for your time today, and we look forward to working with you and staying in touch about the Committee Stage of your Bill.

Ms Armstrong: I appreciate that. Thank you, Chair.

Ms McAteer: Thank you, Chair.