



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Committee for Education

OFFICIAL REPORT (Hansard)

Integrated Education Bill: Northern Ireland
Council for Integrated Education

6 October 2021

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

Committee for Education

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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

Witnesses:

Ms Maeve Marnell	Northern Ireland Council for Integrated Education
Mrs Roisin Marshall	Northern Ireland Council for Integrated Education
Ms Lorna McAlpine	Northern Ireland Council for Integrated Education
Mr Sean Pettis	Northern Ireland Council for Integrated Education

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): I welcome Roisin Marshall, chief executive of the Northern Ireland Council for Integrated Education (NICIE); Maeve Marnell, chair of NICIE; Lorna McAlpine, a senior development officer at NICIE; and Sean Pettis, also a senior development officer at NICIE. You are very welcome, folks. We are looking forward to engaging with you. You have up to 10 minutes for an opening statement, and then I will be glad to facilitate questions from members.

Mrs Roisin Marshall (Northern Ireland Council for Integrated Education): Thank you very much, Chair, and thank you for the opportunity to speak to you all today.

The Northern Ireland Council for Integrated Education is the organisation tasked by the Department of Education, as an arm's-length body, with supporting and growing integrated education by providing advice to parent groups and existing schools on its development and provision. NICIE, which was established in 1987, is a charitable body, limited by guarantee, and it has been funded by the Department of Education since 1989.

The Department of Education has a duty to encourage and facilitate the development of integrated education under the Education Reform (Northern Ireland) Order 1989. NICIE has 35 years of experience in this field, facilitating the growth of integrated education from 700 pupils in 1987 to over 25,000 in 2021.

Essentially, integrated education means the education together of Protestant and Roman Catholic children in reasonable numbers in one school. We want to outline the important contribution that

integrated education has made to peacebuilding in Northern Ireland over 40 years. NICIE believes that the aims of the Integrated Education Bill could support the growth of integrated education to meet parental demand. Integrated schools in Northern Ireland are established either as new schools by parent groups with the help of NICIE and the Integrated Education Fund (IEF) or through the transformation of an existing maintained or controlled school. They can be set up as a grant-maintained school limited company, with the board of governors as the managing or employing authority, or as a controlled integrated school, with the Education Authority (EA) as the managing employing authority. There are 38 grant-maintained integrated (GMI) schools and 29 controlled integrated schools, so, almost half of the integrated schools are managed by the Education Authority.

NICIE is not a managing authority, but it represents grant-maintained integrated schools on the teachers' negotiating committee, area planning, local management of schools and many other fora. We do that because we are the body that is tasked to do that by the Department of Education and the GMI schools.

Integrated education should be promoted as another option in our education system. NICIE needs support from educational partners, civic society and faith organisations. Integrated education has been named as a model to be promoted in numerous strategic documents over the years, including the 1998 Belfast/Good Friday Agreement, 'A Shared Future First Triennial Action Plan 2006 - 2009', the Stormont House Agreement in 2014 and, more recently, the independent review of integrated education, which was published on 3 March 2017, just before the collapse of the Assembly.

Paragraph 22 of chapter 2 of the independent review of integrated education says:

"Currently, the duty to encourage and facilitate integrated education lies only with DE. This means there is no clear legal duty on other key organisations. The panel believes it is imperative that this is extended to the EA, which is the key operational arm of the education system and has a crucial role in supporting transforming schools. A power should also be extended to all Arms Length Bodies."

Paragraph 23 states:

"The panel believes that such public and visible accountability would have significant benefits for the development of integrated education"

and help parents, communities and schools to realise integrated education as an option for them and their families. More recently, 'New Decade, New Approach' talked about educating children together in one classroom.

NICIE asks Committee members to consider the Integrated Education Bill and the aspects of it that might be helpful in further developing the model of integrated education so that it is as accessible an option as grammar schools, of which there are 67, Catholic maintained schools, of which there are 432, and controlled schools, of which there are 532. There are 68 integrated schools, which represent about 7.3% of the population and 6% of the schools in Northern Ireland.

NICIE is very conscious that the independent review of education may present yet another opportunity for integrated education to be available for more parents to access integrated schools for their children and young people. The implementation of the independent review of education may take considerable time, however. In the meantime, the Bill offers an opportunity to identify, assess and meet the demand in communities.

Integrated education is needed. The bigger question is why. Why should we promote integrated education? As we know, Northern Ireland remains a highly divided society when it comes to culture, religion, politics and historical identities. Integrated education schools are schools that deliberately and intentionally strive for a cultural and religious mix in their student population, as well as a cultural and religious mix amongst staff and on the board of governors. The ethos of such a school, built on a quality framework of excellence in integrated education and underpinned by the value of inclusivity, aims to reflect diversity and promote an anti-bias approach and inclusive practices.

That in no way diminishes what other schools are trying to do to be inclusive of difference, but we believe that it is important to ensure that parents are aware of the intentional mixing that integrated education promotes among staff, governors and students. We see value in adults, students and communities working together in the same school. Unless intentionally planned, the level of mixing of those from perceived Catholic and Protestant backgrounds is low. It is important to note that there are

996 primary and post-primary schools in Northern Ireland, and, of those, only 143 reach a base criterion of 10% mixing: that is 10% Catholics in a controlled school, and vice versa.

If we remove the integrated education schools from that list, 83 schools reached a fairly low level of mixing. Whilst natural mixing is very much to be applauded and welcomed, if that is the only mechanism to achieve mixing those from the two main communities religiously and culturally, it will be a very long time before there will be substantial mixing between the two communities in the same school.

NICIE believes that integrated education should be supported more to grow. It has taken 40 years to develop 68 integrated schools. Since 2012, it has taken the drafting of 58 development proposals by integrated schools, including transformations, to create almost 3,000 extra integrated places.

Integrated education needs to be supported to identify, assess and meet parental demand. That means creating new places. To grow integrated education by 1%, approximately 3,500 new integrated places would have to be created, which, for illustration purposes, would be equivalent to the opening of two large new or transforming post-primary schools and five or six new or transformed primary schools of average size — every year.

The development of integrated schools is challenging in the context of the rationalisation of the school estate. NICIE contends that we need better ways to identify, assess and meet demand through working together as sectors through area planning.

NICIE responds to requests from schools, parents and communities, and we see the Bill as enabling NICIE to move from a reactive to a more proactive identification and assessing of interest. NICIE is not a planning authority and would benefit from more support to plan for the further development of integrated schools. At present, in some areas of Northern Ireland, no integrated education provision exists.

There are three routes to increase available integrated education places: increase the available places in an existing school through a development proposal; transform an existing school; or work with a parent group to open a brand new school, which will proceed only after a test for transformation does not generate the potential for an existing school deciding to transform.

NICIE would like an Integrated Education Bill that helps our society to genuinely assess and meet the demand for integrated education. The model of integrated education, with a mix of Protestants and Catholics in the governing body, the staff and the pupil population, is deliberate and intentional. The reasons for the desire to do that over the past 40 years are very simple and clear: if children and adults work and learn together all day, every day, relationships will grow, as will the understanding of similarities and differences.

Parents having the right to have their children educated with those of other Christian faiths, beliefs, cultures and communities is a valid aspiration in 2021. That is not to invalidate what all good schools do; it is just to say that it is an aspiration that seems quite reasonable. NICIE greatly values parental preference, and it is precisely that that started integrated education and keeps it going and growing. The Bill will help to ensure greater accessibility for families to integrated education. I reiterate that diversity and choice in our education system are welcome and valued.

In the past few years, there have been eight parental ballots in existing schools in Northern Ireland on transforming to integrated status. NICIE and the IEF are working with 30 other schools interested in exploring transformation. Plans are well under way to establish a new grant-maintained integrated post-primary school in the mid Down area, and there is potential for a new controlled integrated school in the Coleraine area. That is an example of good collaborative working in area planning.

NICIE argues that the model for integrated education developed over the past 40 years is one that can be scaled up and planned for, if there is a will and the resources to match that development. There is no doubt that new pathfinders between sectors might emerge. Whilst NICIE can promote, encourage and facilitate integrated education, it is open to the development of other models of sharing and integrating, the common outcome or desired state being that children, young people, adults and school communities in Northern Ireland experience each other in a way that respects and embraces the multiple identities in Northern Ireland.

There are not enough integrated schools, and there are not enough in the areas of highest demand, which are usually where demographics have changed over time to create a more mixed community.

Although the open enrolment process in Northern Ireland is framed under the concept of parental preference, NICIE argues that there is no choice if parents do not have access to an integrated school in their area or if the school is oversubscribed. NICIE requires the support of the Integrated Education Fund and other funding streams to complement the Department of Education grant of £618,000 to carry out all the functions that are required of it. NICIE employs 10.3 full-time-equivalent staff members.

NICIE believes that integrated education has made a positive contribution to Northern Ireland's educational landscape. The development continues and is necessary to enable an alternative educational experience in Northern Ireland. Integrated education is not the only way in which to create a more shared society in Northern Ireland. However, as the past 40 years' growth has shown, it is possible. NICIE believes that the private Member's Bill will support further development. Despite the huge growth in integrated education over the past 40 years, it will require more than the efforts of parents and schools to encourage existing schools to transform to integrated status. Scaling up that change would benefit from political, sectoral and faith-based support from across society.

The Integrated Education Bill presents the best opportunity for integrated education to be a more accessible option for parents since the Education Reform (Northern Ireland) Order 1989. We would be very grateful if members considered it. Thank you.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): Thanks very much indeed, Roisin. I will go straight to members' questions to ensure that we get as many in as possible. I think that we have about four minutes per member.

Mr Sheehan: Thank you, Chair, and thank you, Roisin, for that presentation. Again, I will say at the outset that, without any doubt, I support the principle of integrated education. However, what we are dealing with here is draft legislation. As legislators, we all, irrespective of what party we belong to, have a responsibility to ensure that legislation that passes through the Assembly is good legislation. That is probably the most important job that we have. It is important that we scrutinise the Integrated Education Bill robustly.

You will be aware that departmental officials gave evidence to the Committee a couple of weeks ago, and they gave a withering critique of the draft legislation. What are your views on that?

Mrs Marshall: I do not have a view. As you said, it is entirely appropriate that, as a legislator and policymaker, the Department of Education scrutinise the Integrated Education Bill with the rigour that it should. Some of the officials' points were well made. They could work with the Bill sponsor to ensure that any amendments that need to be made could be made. I know that the officials said during their presentation that they would be happy to bring forward suggested amendments.

Mr Sheehan: Yes. I suppose that I wanted a more general view of how you received that criticism from the Department of the Bill.

Mrs Marshall: At the end of the day, the Department is tasked with ensuring that any legislation that goes through backs up any other legislation. I am happy for the Department to take time to do its due diligence around the Bill, absolutely.

Ms Lorna McAlpine (Northern Ireland Council for Integrated Education): May I come in?

Mr Sheehan: Certainly.

Mrs Marshall: Yes, go ahead, Lorna.

Ms McAlpine: *[Inaudible owing to poor sound quality]* For 24 years, my day job has been senior development officer at NICIE, but I am also an Alliance Party councillor on Ards and North Down Borough Council.

Scrutiny and due diligence are welcome, because they do exactly what you say: they produce better legislation. We are not afraid of scrutiny. If you think that you have answers, we can talk them through. We are very willing to talk to anybody, including the sponsor, the Department or the Committee, just to say, "What does that mean to you?" We all know that legislation can be interpreted differently. Kellie already made some of those points about some of the titles of the clauses and so on and how they

have been misconstrued or misunderstood. That is what the process is about; it is about getting decent legislation.

I will say that I have been led to the top of the hill on a few occasions, going back to the Good Friday Agreement in 1998 and then with 'A Shared Future' and so on. We were hoping that things would change for us. We went as far as the independent review of integrated education and so on. All those things maybe led us to a certain place, but we never really got what we thought we could have in terms of moving on and increasing the level of growth and so on.

This is a very important piece of legislation, and I totally agree with Pat: it needs to be scrutinised to the point where there is less chance of things being misunderstood.

Mr Sheehan: OK, thanks for that. Finally, on that point, do you agree that the criticism from the Department makes the passage of the Bill much more difficult than first envisaged?

Ms McAlpine: I do not think so, Pat. I am never afraid of somebody asking me a question. Questions lead to a greater understanding. We are in the position of saying, "We have understood this one way, and you have understood it another way, so that means that there maybe needs to be clarity here". That is what Kellie has been saying. She is happy enough to work on clarity. Does that answer your question?

Mr Sheehan: OK, thanks for that. We do not have much time, and there are a number of areas in the Bill that people from different sectors find challenging. The Bill seeks to require specified education bodies to include:

*"provision for integrated education when—
(a) developing, adopting, implementing or revising policies, strategies and plans; and
(b) designing and delivering public services."*

One of those specified bodies is the Council for Catholic Maintained Schools (CCMS), which has responsibility for the maintained sector. How can it carry out its statutory function for its sector if it also obliged to make provision for integrated education?

Mrs Marshall: CCMS is a planning authority, like the EA, and it is tasked with planning for Catholic education. That is right and proper. All the arm's-length bodies (ALBs) are required to show in their business plan how they are helping to encourage and facilitate integrated education and Irish-medium education. It will not be too much more for them to do to have to consider, if they need to, any aspects of integrated education that have an impact on their sector. I do not think that the spirit of the Bill is asking them to lay down what they are tasked to do in order to plan for integrated education. They would have to consider integrated education where anything was crossed over or where there was any aspect of integrated education that they needed to be involved in, which they are already, in some of our development proposals.

Mr Sheehan: That is problematic, Roisin. Do you think it is straightforward?

Mrs Marshall: I am sure it is problematic, Pat. I am not a legislator, so I will resist coming up with an answer to that one. Again, it is absolutely right and proper that the statutory authorities, the planning authorities and the organisations that are named in the Bill work with the sponsor to ensure that anything they are concerned about is considered and that they will be able to live with the outcome.

Mr Sheehan: Thank you.

Mr Newton: Thank you to Roisin and the other members of the panel. I want to explore something that we pursued with Kellie in her session. I will reiterate to you, as I did to Kellie, that I am a supporter of integrated education. In fact, I am a practitioner of integrated education with my own family.

We have seen some excellent work in Northern Ireland over the last number of years, where schools are much more open today to integrated education than they were 10 years ago. Indeed, the school that my children went to had the [*Inaudible owing to poor sound quality*] attitude of integrated education and approach and practice of it.

Clause 7 is very concerning, and we went over it with Kellie. I support parental choice and offering choice to parents. The requirement is for every new school to be integrated, and we are talking about that within quite strict budgets and circumstances at the moment. It would be worrying if the Bill in its present form went through.

At the most basic level, it would be, I imagine, subject to legal challenge after legal challenge. Given that you cannot consider any other aspect of an area, particularly its religious demographics or the availability of places in schools, when establishing another type of school, that requirement would impact on other proposals that may come forward for a new school from any of the other sectors. Therefore, one would be elevating the integrated sector and putting it above all others. How would you feel about that, given our circumstances?

Mrs Marshall: Sean, go ahead.

Mr Sean Pettis (Northern Ireland Council for Integrated Education): Robin, thanks very much for the question. The starting point is that our reading of that clause is similar to what Kellie described. Although the religious demographics of an area or the existence of spare places in schools are not to be treated as special circumstances, the basic underpinning principle is still parental preference. In a sense, our reading of that clause is that it asks a different question. It suggests, when a new school is opened, that the opening question is: this going to be an integrated school, is that OK with you? The community response might be, "Yes, it is" or "No, it is not". It is up to planning authorities to do the detailed community consultations to establish that.

It is not a particularly new idea. Going back to 'A Shared Future', its first action plan had a presumption clause saying that shared solutions should also be a focus. As Roisin mentioned, integrated education was built on parental choice, and we are not going to deny other parents their choice. That would not be right. Our reading of the situation is that, whatever happens, parental choice will still be the most important aspect of any school that is set up in an area.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): This is your last question, Robin, thanks.

Mr Newton: Where parental choice is concerned, I could be subject to error in what I say here, but my belief is that, in the most recent transfer situation, 85% of children got their first preference of school. So, whatever education parents sought, 85% of our children got into their first preference school.

Mr Pettis: Yes. I will ask a colleague to come in on that question. One of the challenges is that you cannot put your preference down for a school that does not exist. Measuring the preferred school that the child can go to is one way of measuring parental preference. However, it is only one way. If there is no intermediate option, it is not possible.

Ms McAlpine: The other thing that you have to think about, Robin, is that the 'Together: Building a United Community' (T:BUC) report came up with a figure three years ago that said that 20% of the children who applied to an integrated college did not get in. There just was not a place for them. I think that that figure has gone up; I think that it has increased to 22% or 24%. It is a worry for us.

We are looking at the likes of Lagan College, which has 400 or 500 applications every year for 200 places, and saying, "Gosh, we will have to do something about that". Three or four integrated colleges have been the most oversubscribed in Northern Ireland for three to four years on the trot. Last year, the situation with COVID and the transfer tests to grammar schools changed that slightly, but we have definitely seen that we have to do something about those schools that are very oversubscribed and where children are not getting into their first-preference schools. Does that make sense? It is about how we are seeing that in reverse. Yes, people get their choices, but the likes of Lagan College are saying, "We are turning away families time after time". Lagan is mortified by that because it gets more than twice the applications that would fill the school. That is not right, and there are other schools that, while not just as bad, are in a similar situation with children and families who really want an integrated education.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): OK, Robin?

Mr Newton: Is that me, Chair?

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): Yes, that is time. You can make a quick closing comment, Robin. Apologies. I am trying to get everyone in.

Mr Newton: Very quickly, if I could maybe get a reaction to this. If I was in a sector other than integrated education, how do you think that I would feel about the Bill going through?

Mr Pettis: It is up to them to —

Mrs Marshall: Ultimately, and I think that I tried to make this clear, there are almost 1,000 existing schools in Northern Ireland. The Bill reflects schools that either do not exist, may transform or that are brand new. We do not see it as having any negative impact on schools that already exist and that are doing a fantastic job out there across all the sectors. I suppose that we see it as an opportunity for integrated education to grow and develop through the different processes from the very small sector that it is at the moment.

Also, Robin, I think that there is an opportunity for new things to emerge. During area planning, we are always very willing to look at possibilities, as the Minister said, of new, creative and innovative ideas. That is what it is all about. There is no intention of denying anybody the choice of education as laid down in legislation made before now. We do not see the Bill as a huge threat to anyone else's preference.

Mr Newton: OK. Thank you.

Mr McCrossan: Thank you to you all for your presentation and for being with us and taking questions.

I will go straight to it. It was good to meet you recently. We have had a very open and honest discussion about where things are. In light of what has been said at today's Committee meeting, is there any aspect of the private Member's Bill that you would amend if you had the chance, and, if so, why?

Mrs Marshall: As I said to Pat, we are not legislators. As we know with all the debate around it, sometimes some of the language that is used can be very confusing. I take some of the points. We have spoken to Kellie, and we would be happy to work with her. There are obviously some areas of the Bill that need to be amended. I would not want to take the chance of being wrong or of saying the wrong thing, but there are certainly a number of issues that people in other sectors have with the Bill.

I reiterate the point about the due diligence that everyone has to do. From listening to Kellie this morning, I know that she is very willing to consider making amendments that would help with the understanding and, obviously, with the legislation. As we know, legislation is legislation, and, therefore, once it is written, it cannot be changed. It is important to take the time now to do that.

Mr McCrossan: I do not think there is any risk of you being wrong, particularly given the *[Inaudible owing to poor sound quality]* around the table and your experiences. The process is about shaping good legislation in order to get a positive outcome for integrated education and, in turn, our children. The best way of shaping it is with honest and open discussions about how we can critique the Bill to make it workable and, ultimately, able to be implemented or acceptable to the Assembly.

I understand, and I was interested in what you had to say because, from speaking to many others, I know that various wee things have been suggested as amendments. I will not put you on the spot any further.

Ms McAlpine: Kellie already said that the term "Meaning of promotion", which is the heading to clause 5, is not reflective of what is in the clause. The clause is more about assessing the need or parental preference and so on. That could be amended. People may have interpreted other clauses differently, too, so maybe there just needs to be some clarity on the wording. For example, does clause 7 mean only new schools, or does it cover amalgamated schools as well? Going back to what my colleague Sean said, 'A Shared Future: First Triennial Action Plan 2006-2009' talks about amalgamated schools, and it asked, "Is there anything that is going to be built from scratch or an amalgamation, or could there be an integrated or shared option?" That is the sort of thing to think about. Clarity is needed in two or three places. People have picked up different views from ours, so clarity is needed.

Mr McCrossan: It is almost as though you have read the notes in front of me. I was about to ask about the clarification needed specifically on amalgamations. They have been excluded. We need to know what the Bill means for them and for new builds. You touched on the need for clarification on that point, so I appreciate that.

We have been told that integrated schools deliver the curriculum to all their pupils on an all-ability and inclusive basis. Is that true of all integrated schools? Are there not some that use an element of academic selection in their admissions criteria?

Mrs Marshall: Yes. We often say that integrated education is about the mix of religion and culture, the socio-economic mix and the all-ability nature of integrated schools. In order for a school to truly reflect the all-ability nature of the normal distribution curve, if you like, some of our schools, particularly at our post-primary level of offer in Northern Ireland, ensure that they attract some pupils of high academic ability and so on. Some schools have what we call part selection, which has worked very well in enabling them to have an all-ability nature. There are various forms of selection. No integrated schools use only academic selection as the single point of entrance.

Mr Pettis: To provide some clarity, of year-8 entries to post-primary colleges, you are talking about 5% of places being allocated through of some form of academic selection, so it is a very small percentage of the intake.

Mr McCrossan: Lagan College, to name one. Would the Bill, if enacted, have the potential to remove that choice from integrated schools?

Mr Pettis: Sorry, will you repeat the question?

Mr McCrossan: Will the Bill, if passed, have the potential to remove that choice from integrated schools in future?

Ms McAlpine: I do not think so. Clause 1(1)(c) talks about "those of different abilities", so I do not know that it necessarily removes that choice. I have been talking to schools about it. They say that part selection is very helpful because it enables them to offer a very broad curriculum. Children of different abilities in a family can be accommodated, so they can come to school together and not be separated into different schools. That builds community very strongly, so there is something to be said for it. It may be a reaction to something. Many principals in our sector are not in favour of selection, but they are what one might call pragmatists: they know that selection is still there and features very largely on the education agenda. To go back to your point, I imagine that clause 1(1)(c), which talks about "those of different abilities", would probably cover that.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): Your time is up, Daniel. Do you want to make any closing remarks before I bring in Diane?

Mr McCrossan: Thank you very much for taking questions. I have one very brief point about NICIE's vision of a society in which children are educated together. I emphasise that, when a small group of parents from both sides of the divide in NI came together, the idea was to educate children together, regardless of religion. We had that conversation just last week. Is that not less likely to happen if references to "Catholic" and "Protestant" are removed as the Bill goes forward?

Ms McAlpine: It is still there.

Mrs Marshall: Are you saying, "If it were to be removed", Daniel? It is still there.

Mr McCrossan: It has been removed. In the Bill, there is the suggestion of removing it. We have already had that conversation with Kellie. The Bill puts a particular focus on "other". The whole point of integrated education in Northern Ireland at the time was to bring both communities together. Obviously, this place has changed massively for the good, but I am concerned that the core emphasis of integrated education was about bringing Catholics and Protestants together and removing those barriers in our society that have kept this place so divided for so long.

Mrs Marshall: Totally.

Ms McAlpine: Daniel, I am confused. I still see it in clause 1(1)(a), which says:

"reasonable numbers of both Protestant and Roman Catholic children or young persons".

I still see that in relation to the meaning of "integrated education". Maybe I am *[Inaudible owing to poor sound quality.]*

Mr McCrossan: It was further on in the Bill. Kellie and I have had conversations about it, and I have expressed concerns about it. The Bill definitely removes references to it.

Ms McAlpine: I think you are referring to the changes to the 1989 Order to give a broader definition that includes children from other backgrounds.

Mr McCrossan: Yes.

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

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): For the avoidance of any doubt, the Bill does not remove it.

Mrs Dodds: Thank you to everyone who has contributed so far. It has been a long morning, so I will not detain anybody. I outlined my issues about parts of the Bill to Kellie. I met her privately and in public session etc, and, of course, we will work to see what can be done with the Bill.

I will not beat about the bush. There are issues about the promotion of integrated education in the Bill. The clue is in the title; it is about integrated education. I am for choice in education. As I said this morning, I was educated at a school with people from both sections of the community, and my children were educated at the same school. I think that that is really important as we progress in Northern Ireland, but there is a presumption to promote integrated education ahead of other sectors. I am worried that that will not leave a level playing field across the other sectors. That is my first point.

There are issues around clause 7 and clause 5(1)(a), which places on a statutory footing the requirement for us to aim:

"to increase the demand for the provision of integrated education".

It is the ideology of integrated education. As I said in my remarks in the previous session, I believe that children are educated together in other sectors within the broader education sphere. I will leave that with you.

Do you see anything that can be done on clause 7(1), clause 5(1)(a) and even clause 8(2)(d) that would improve the Bill?

Mr Pettis: I will begin with clause 7(1), and I will largely be repeating my response to Mr Newton. Our reading of the Bill is that there would be an assumption for an integrated school in the first instance. If that is not what parents want, that is not what will happen. For us, it is about making an integrated school the first choice and then having the conversation at the community level where people can say, "That is what we want" or "No, we want something else. We want a Catholic maintained, a controlled or an Irish-medium school" or whatever they may want, and that is absolutely appropriate. The bottom line is that it will still come down to parental choice. That *[Inaudible owing to poor sound quality.]*

Mrs Dodds: I want to come back in so that we tease that out a little bit further. You say that it is a presumption, but it is more than a presumption: it is law. We are making law. It is not presumption; it is a presumption in law. We are making law that says that the Department "must" first consider that the new school would be an integrated school. It places that in law ahead of other sectors in education.

Ms Maeve Marnell (Northern Ireland Council for Integrated Education): It is a rebuttable presumption, and the Bill states that. As has been raised a few times, there needs to be clarity about what the special circumstances are. We accept that.

Mrs Dodds: Clause 7 will remain problematic as we get into it further.

Ms McAlpine: I have been round this for a long time. We looked at the triennial action plan, which said that if you are doing amalgamations or a new school, look at what you can do by way of shared or other options before you start to go down into the sectors. We do not see it as being significantly different from that. When people consider rationalisation, they go through the options with each of the schools, to an extent, on what they might do by way of rationalisation. Our interpretation of this is when you are looking at new schools or amalgamations, put integration on the agenda, or when you are starting, put shared education on the agenda. Do not just do more of the same.

Mrs Dodds: That is not what the Bill says. The Bill says that the statutory duty in law on the Department would be to presume that it would be an integrated school.

Ms McAlpine: As an area planner, I am going back to Michelle McIlveen's statement of 9 August when she talked about "shared solutions coming forward", and spoke of how important it is to "bring forward innovative, creative" solutions and support the growth of integrated education and the growth of Irish-medium education. Perhaps the clarity that we are looking for is between all those things. I am not a legislator or a proposer. I am just saying that there are things that could be considered to bring clarity, if that makes sense.

Mrs Dodds: I am all for innovative solutions. The way forward for Northern Ireland is for children to be educated together, but there are two issues. First, that is not what the Bill says, and, secondly, there is the issue of parental choice. If almost 90% of parents got their first choice of school, as, I think, Robin quoted, parents' choice is clearly important, and it is important with regard to the legislation. We need to be careful. Interpretation is one thing, but the actual legal duty is an entirely different matter.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): We need to keep this moving, Diane.

Mrs Dodds: Can anyone come back to me on clauses 5(1)(a) and 8(2)(d)?

Ms McAlpine: I am the area planner. My job is often to say, "We think that we need more". In a previous answer, we mentioned Lagan, which has between two and two and a half times more applications than it can accommodate. I see clause 5(1)(a) as helping us to do that. I am the one who identifies that. It is not the EA or CCMS as the planning authorities. I am doing that for us on behalf of the GMI schools. I am saying that I feel that we could do with some help. That would be supportive of what we are trying to do: meet need.

I refer you to what we said earlier about the T:BUC report stating that 20% of children do not get the post-primary place for which they applied. That has gone up to about 24%. I take your point about their first choice, but maybe their first choice would have been for an integrated school, but the integrated school was not there. There is an unrealistic proposition. A number of people tell us that they do not apply to x or y integrated school, because there is no point, as they would not get in. We are trying to deal with that preference and, hopefully [*Inaudible owing to poor sound quality.*] Clause 5(1)(a) is about looking at the growth and the potential and seeing what we can do. Clause 5(1)(b) is helpful in that area, too. Is that helpful, Diane? [*Inaudible owing to poor sound quality.*]

Mrs Dodds: I am just concerned that we are not using facts to meet an identified need, but we are placing an onus on the Department in law to do something that may or may not be an issue or may or may not be a demand from parents. I am sure that we will take that up again.

Mrs Marshall: Your point is well made, Diane, but what we are trying to say is that no one is assessing and identifying the real demand out there. NICIE is an organisation that usually reacts to people coming to us or to a group of parents who make contact and register through the Integrate my School website. That is what we do, but we are talking about it being much more strategic. That is why it has to come from the top. It has to be something that is tasked by DE and then delegated to others. That is totally fine. That is the point that we are trying to make. No one is assessing the actual demand.

Mrs Dodds: There is one last thing. I wish you well. I genuinely do. I know many people who have gone through Lagan College and who teach there even, and it is a really good school. However, the provisions in clause 5(1)(a) and 5(1)(b), which is bigger-picture stuff, could be dealt with in the review of education and probably sit more appropriately in the review of education.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): OK. Thanks, Diane.

Ms Brogan: Hello everybody. It is nice to see you all here today. Following on from Diane's question, and from my discussions with Kellie Armstrong earlier, I think that clause 7 will be problematic; every MLA has raised it here today. It is just about opening up discussion about exactly what it means. Kellie said that her interpretation now of a new school is literally just a new school and not an amalgamation, but that needs to be clarified and stated clearly.

As Diane said, this will be law, so we need to be very careful. It is our job to scrutinise the Bill because if it is to become law, we need to make sure that we see the detail, we understand it and we know the implications of it.

In that same thread, can you say what you think special circumstances should be when a new school is not presumed to be an integrated school? In the Bill, there are two examples of what is not to be accepted as special circumstances, but what should be accepted as special circumstances?

Mr Pettis: First and foremost, parental choice in a community would be the main thing. If parents say that that is what they want or they say that they want something else, that is fine. For us, that is the kind of *[Inaudible owing to poor sound quality.]*

Ms Marnell: Special schools *[Inaudible owing to poor sound quality.]*

Mr Pettis: Yes. Special schools have a different criteria for entry altogether would also be *[Inaudible owing to poor sound quality.]*

Mrs Marshall: It is probably important to say that we are in a context of rationalisation of the schools estate. We know that there are too many schools, and somebody said earlier that we have to future-proof this and think about the future. If there is an increase in numbers, perhaps we will need more brand-new schools. Some existing schools will not be impacted. This is only future-proofing. This is looking at what the community or geographical area will want in the future. That is all part of the area-planning conversations. There will be a range of options, and, at the minute, to bring forward a new integrated school, we have to make the point and the case for wanting a new integrated school. As Kellie said earlier, this would turn it slightly on its head in that if you wanted a different type of school, you would have to bring forward the case for change for that. It is a slightly different emphasis, but this in no way would negate parental preference. The type of education is up to the community, but it is for brand new schools in the future.

Ms Brogan: We need clarity on "special circumstances". There are good examples, but we need to have them defined. I take your point, Roisin, about the struggles of integrated schools without that type of help. However, as I said to Kellie, you cannot just work off the assumption that new schools are not going to be built, so it is not going to have much of an effect. We need to be careful about that.

The other point that I want to raise, which has already been discussed at length, is the promotion of integrated schools and the statutory duty on the Department to promote it. Do you understand how other sectors would be concerned by that? I am thinking specifically about the Irish-medium sector. In the last briefing, Kellie said she would be willing to change the wording. Lorna, you mentioned changing the wording from "promotion". Would NICIE be happy with changing the word "promote"?

Ms McAlpine: We would have to look at what it might be to get closest to the meaning. That may be the issue. To me, it is more about assessing parental preference than meeting parental preference. The two subsections are more about that. I am no legislator, but that is maybe where the confusion has come. To some people, "promote" means marketing or something like that, whereas this is more about saying, "What do people want, and how can we meet it?" *[Inaudible owing to poor sound quality.]*

Ms Brogan: My understanding is that it is elevated above all our sectors, which is beyond marketing or advertising. Do you know what I mean?

Ms McAlpine: We talked about this before. We work closely with our colleagues in the Irish-medium sector. Maybe that is what you are referring to. There is a possibility that the Bill could become a model for what they might want to do, or it may be that the Bill is amendable to include Irish medium.

You talked about new schools. Would it be a question, going back to what Sean said, of parental preference being expressed in an area for an Irish-medium school? I do not know; I am not a legislator. I do not know what the implications might be, but is that a possibility? I am throwing out possibilities; I am not saying that that is what should be done.

I do not know whether you are aware of it, but we were also working to try to bring forward an integrated Irish-medium sector. It is not the be-all and end-all and will not work everywhere. What we are trying to say, and what the Minister was trying to say, is let us look at new ideas. If we are trying to rationalise the provision thereby giving children better opportunities and the best start in life, we have to look at this differently and look at life differently.

I understand [*Inaudible owing to poor sound quality*] new legislation, but, at the same time, the legislation is an enabler for new things and new thinking to be brought forward, and saying, "Let's look at other opportunities here. What else could we do in a particular area?" Going back to Sean's point, would you use [*Inaudible owing to poor sound quality*] conversations [*Inaudible owing to poor sound quality*]. Ulster University has brought forward [*Inaudible owing to poor sound quality*] to identify what a community wants. That brings you to parental preference, which may be for an Irish-medium integrated school, and we would certainly not stand in the way of any specialist provision that any community would need.

Ms Brogan: I appreciate your views. I understand your point about bringing in everyone's views and opinions and coming to a decision together, but this has moved beyond that. We have a Bill before us that you are asking us to support. I am asking you whether you are willing to make those changes. Otherwise, it will become legislation just as it is. It goes beyond just having ideas.

Ms McAlpine: Maybe there is a way of putting it in the same way as the 'A Shared Future' strategy, which talks about it being beholden on the proposer to demonstrate that they had considered other options before they brought something forward. Does that make sense?

Ms Brogan: My point is that needs to be clear in the Bill.

Ms McAlpine: Absolutely.

Ms Brogan: I am afraid that that might not be the case.

Mrs Marshall: Thanks for that, Nicola. However, it is between the proposer and everyone else. The Bill does not belong to NICIE.

Ms Brogan: I understand that, but I want to hear your point of view. You are a contributor to our scrutiny of the Bill; therefore, it is important to get your point of view.

The Chair wants me to be swift. My last point is about the independent review of education. Again, I am not sure about the timing of the Bill. The panel has just been announced, and should we wait on the findings of the review before making any massive changes? I will leave that point. Thank you for your time.

Mr McNulty: Thanks, folks. I will go back to a point that was raised earlier. We have been told that NICIE's vision is for a society where children are educated together and you emphasise that when a small group of parents, from both sides of the divide in the North come together, the idea is to educate children together, regardless of religion. Is that not less likely to happen if the reference to Catholic and Protestant is removed from the Bill?

Mrs Marshall: That is the second time that that has been mentioned. I have no knowledge of that reference being removed from the Bill.

Ms McAlpine: The reference is definitely still in clause 1(a).

Mr McNulty: Check clause 12.

Ms McAlpine: Clause 12 is about taking the narrower definition out of the Education Reform (Northern Ireland) Order 1989. Whereas, the definition is still present in clause 1(a). The broader definition is in clause 1(a). Maybe I am reading it wrongly. I am no legislator.

Mr Pettis: Clause 12 is the edit of the Education Reform (Northern Ireland) Order 1989. Whereas, Clause 1(a) states:

"reasonable numbers of both Protestant and Roman Catholic children".

Therefore, it is still in clause 1(a). We are content that the reference features in the Bill.

Mr McNulty: OK. Thanks for the clarification. Are parents aware that the Department of Education believes that the Bill substantially changes the definition of integrated education?

Mr Pettis: Sorry, are parents aware?

Mr McNulty: Parents.

Mr Pettis: I am not sure that we can answer that, as it would require considerable survey work. The definition in the Bill, largely, takes elements of what we call the NICIE statement of principles that has existed since 1991 and puts them on a statutory footing. The idea of socio-economic deprivation is important. The idea of those with different abilities are already principles that integrated education adheres to. The 1989 Order was very minimalist in its definition. It states:

"education together at school of Protestant and Roman Catholic pupils."

The Bill expands on that definition, but the principles have been there for quite some time.

Ms McAlpine: I worked with a Muslim group that told me, "Your legislation does not acknowledge that there are people from other religious backgrounds, faiths and none." I said, "Yes, that is because, at that time, the problem integrated education was trying to solve was about Catholics and Protestants. We wanted to become a post-reconciliation society." The Bill, in some ways, recognises our increasing diversity. There are people from other religious backgrounds, and more people are choosing to designate as "other".

For many years, my mantra has been that others do not count, as far as the legislation is concerned, and that is not fair or right. An old movie talked about 'Children of a Lesser God' because they do not believe in one or come from a different background. The Bill is trying to update that definition to reflect the change that has happened in Northern Ireland, as, fortunately, over time, people from different backgrounds have come here. Maybe some people have decided that they do not want to be labelled as one or the other.

We know that there are issues between the census carried out by the Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency (NISRA) and the school census that will happen this week. What is the definition of "other"? There are different definitions used in the NISRA census and the school census. The school census counts other Christians as "other", while that is counted differently in the NISRA census, where they are generally counted as Protestant. I think that Kellie is trying to be reflective the changing population in Northern Ireland by broadening it out a bit. There is nothing — I hope that I am reading it correctly — there that takes away from the requirement to have "reasonable numbers" of Protestant and Catholic children. It is more encompassing because it takes in the "others and none", as we talked about.

Mr McNulty: OK. I am a big believer in diversity; our society is enriched through it.

Ms McAlpine: Absolutely.

Mr McNulty: There are geographical areas where significant numbers of children do not get into the integrated school that was the first choice. That is particularly true in the post-primary sector. Do you have any data on how many of those children subsequently do not get into an integrated school at all?

Ms McAlpine: It is quite hard to follow, although I have been following it for Lagan. We have data about where children who applied to Lagan ended up, and it might not have been their first or second choice. About 40% of them get a place in another integrated school. Do not quote me on the numbers, but it is around 40%. The problem is that the schools that they try to get in to are also oversubscribed.

In the areas that I have looked at, Lagan is oversubscribed, as are Hazelwood on the north shore, Ulidia in Carrickfergus, Priory in Holywood and Strangford College.

The problem is that they are trying to get in to an oversubscribed post-primary school, and the other schools beside them are oversubscribed. Do they get in? I do not think that that is the case. I do not think that you can say, "Oh, they weren't interested because they didn't follow through". It is just where they could get a place in the end, if that makes sense. Those half-dozen schools that I mentioned are all oversubscribed.

Mr McNulty: How do the numbers compare with children who do not get into the school of their first choice in any other sector?

Ms McAlpine: Oh, gosh. I do not know. I would need to go into that *[Inaudible owing to poor sound quality]* to find that out. It is a tricky thing. It is quite hard to follow it through because you are following through with individual children, and, obviously, nobody shares that sort of data about individual children. We then have to go back and try to get what would be a cumulative *[Inaudible owing to poor sound quality.]* It is tricky.

Mr McNulty: I have one final question: where has Donegal gone?

Ms McAlpine: In what sense, Justin?

Mr McNulty: On the map behind you there. *[Laughter.]* Is there any particular reason why Donegal has been cut out?

Mrs Marshall: That is our challenge for today, Justin, find Donegal.

Mr McNulty: Is there any particular reason why Donegal has been cut out?

Ms McAlpine: *[Inaudible owing to poor sound quality]* weekend in Donegal.

Mrs Marshall: Brilliant. Well spotted.

Mr McNulty: On a serious note, is there any particular reason why Donegal has been cut out?

Ms McAlpine: I think that there was something else there. It was a fire safety notice or something.

Mrs Marshall: Given that we have not been in the office for about 18 months, it has all been forgotten about. There were cobwebs as we were walking in.

Ms McAlpine: People go on about cream buns. I was wondering whether I was going to be able to get in to the suit this morning, never mind anything else.

Mr McNulty: I am going to lead a campaign to bring back Donegal. *[Laughter.]*

Mrs Marshall: I would support you.

Mr Pettis: *[Inaudible owing to poor sound quality.] [Laughter.]*

Mr Harvey: Thank you, Roisin and team. I want to go back to basics. We talked about growth and 68 schools over the past 40 years. How do you target an area? How do you sense the need in a certain area? Does it come from parental requests, area plans or political recommendations? I wonder how the seed is actually sown.

Ms McAlpine: I am the area planner. My job over the past 20-odd years has been to lift the phone when, for instance, somebody says, "Do you know that only siblings got into Lough View this year?". That was the start of Millennium. It came from a parental enquiry in that case. Spires Integrated Primary School was a primary school that we got in Magherafelt, and it got to the stage where they were saying, "We would need to get a post-primary going here". It is mostly about parental enquiry,

with parents saying, "We would like". We were able to respond to that as opposed to going out and engendering interest. That brings us on to the whole issue of what "promote" means.

Generally, someone would ring up and say, "I would like an integrated school for my child in this area." We say, "Right, OK. Do you have any friends who are interested in that?" If the answer is yes, we might hold a public meeting. NICIE would arrange for someone from the charitable sector to support the public meeting because it could not use its money for that. The next thing that you do is the test for transformation. So, if we got a wee group together that was interested in that, the first thing that it would have to do is write to the schools in the area, using a list from the Department, to say, "Would any of you be interested in transforming to integrated status?" If none of the schools was interested, we would try to see whether there is interest in the area and, if so, how we can gather that information.

The Department will accept expression of interest forms from us that we gather to record expressions of interest from parents who would like an integrate school in their area. That is how it starts. The only transformation that we have been involved in recently is in mid-Down. I will not count how many times I have done it over the years, but it is a significant number. That is how it starts generally: with a phone call.

In the case of an existing school transforming, again, that would involve a phone call from the principal. In the case of the IEF-run project, Integrate My School, it might come through parents, but generally it is a phone call.

Mrs Marshall: Harry, that is an excellent point. The Integrated Education Bill will be a game changer in the sense that it will not be about Lorna or me getting a phone call or meeting somebody in a shop; it will mean a strategic look at how you identify and assess what people want from our education provision. I do not think that anybody would be against that, because it is important.

Going back to the issue of parental preference, you can only make a parental preference for schools that exist; you cannot make a preference for a school that does not exist or one that might exist in the future. We are trying to say that it is not about elevating integrated education over other forms of education; we know that everybody, including yourselves, says that they agree with educating children together. We have to strategically assess, identify and meet that demand. That is what the Bill will do as opposed to what we do day and daily.

Mr Harvey: Excellent answer. I appreciate that. To "identify" and "assess" are very good words. Any school could transform if it so wished and if parents and teachers wanted to proceed in that direction. How many schools have submitted requests to transform? How many have transformed in the past 40 years? I would appreciate it if you could give us an idea.

Mrs Marshall: Good question, Harry. To date, 29 schools have transformed. In the past three to four years, eight schools have gone forward to parental ballot. So, once a board of governors decides that it wants to move to a parental ballot, it will ask the school's parental body whether it would like to transform to integrated status. It is a democratic process. In all eight cases, a majority of parents wanted to transform to integrated status. Out of those, four transformed on 1 September, two were not approved, and we are waiting to hear about two. It is important to say that we are working with about 30 schools, along with the Integrated Education Fund, that are at different stages of exploration and transformation. So, there is a demand.

Mr Harvey: Excellent answers. I appreciate that, Roisin; it is good information for all. Thank you all very much.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): Thanks very much to all our witnesses. There were some really good conversations there, and I can see some ways through some of the issues starting to emerge. Sorry we are so short of time, but I look forward to staying in contact with you as the Committee Stage progresses.