



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Committee for Education

OFFICIAL REPORT (Hansard)

Integrated Education Bill:
Integrated Education Fund

7 October 2021

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

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Members present for all or part of the proceedings:

Mr Chris Lyttle (Chairperson)
Ms Nicola Brogan
Mr Robbie Butler
Mrs Diane Dodds
Mr Justin McNulty

Witnesses:

Mr Paul Collins	Integrated Education Fund
Mr Richard Lemon	Integrated Education Fund
Ms Tina Merron	Integrated Education Fund

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): I give a warm welcome to our witnesses from the Integrated Education Fund (IEF): Richard Lemon, chair; Tina Merron, chief executive officer; and Paul Collins, head of public affairs and advocacy. You are very welcome, folks. Apologies for the short delay this morning. I am delighted to be able to give up to 10 minutes to make an opening statement. We will then facilitate members' questions. Over to you.

Mr Richard Lemon (Integrated Education Fund): Good morning, Chair. Thanks very much. Before the presentation, I will make some quick introductions. There are only three of us, so it will not take long. I am Richard Lemon. I chair the IEF board of directors. The board is made up of 15 members who, like me, are voluntary, unpaid members. Some are in employment and some, like me, are retired. Board members come from a range of disciplines and professions, including education. We are united by one thing, which is our passion for integrated education.

The Integrated Education Fund is a registered charity with only 11 employees. It receives no government funding. All the salaries and grants paid out come from generous donors. I just wanted to make those points.

As you mentioned, with me are Tina Merron, chief executive, and Paul Collins, head of public affairs and advocacy. I will pass over to Tina to give the presentation.

Ms Tina Merron (Integrated Education Fund): The Integrated Education Fund has been working since 1992 towards a Northern Ireland where children from different traditions learn and play together in the same classrooms in the same schools and where there is respect for and celebration of religious and cultural diversity. The divisions in our society will be harder to overcome as long as the vast majority of young people are educated separately in a segregated system. The fund shares a vision held by the majority of citizens of a united community and shared future. We see the

development of more integrated education in response to parental demand as a crucial step in that direction.

Integrated education alone, of course, will not resolve all Northern Ireland's problems, but it will surely help to undermine the division that is continued by the current system. We want a normal education system where pupils of all religions and none are educated together in the same classrooms every day. However, it is nearly 25 years since the Good Friday/Belfast Agreement, and we genuinely struggle to find examples of proactive steps by the Northern Ireland Executive and Department of Education to encourage and facilitate integrated education.

This year marks the 40th anniversary of the setting up by parents of the first integrated school in Northern Ireland. Now, thanks to the actions of parents across Northern Ireland, there are 68 integrated schools. That includes four new integrated schools that, this September, transformed to become integrated through the democratic actions of parents. Two more schools await a decision from the Education Minister. We also work with approximately 30 schools that are exploring the transformation process; indeed, this week, we had another five schools request information and meetings to discuss transformation.

We believe in parental choice. If parents want a Catholic maintained, controlled, Irish-medium, independent, grammar or, indeed, integrated school, they should have that choice, where there is evidence-based demand and where possible. There is no lack of controlled and Catholic provision — in fact, there is an excess of those school places — but there is a genuine and clear demand for more integrated schooling that is not being met. That is evidenced by more than one in five first-preference applications to integrated colleges at post-primary level being turned down due to the lack of places, forcing children, who may have been educated in an integrated environment up until then, into a religiously and culturally divided system.

Whilst not all integrated schools are oversubscribed, many are, which leaves parents and children with no access to integrated provision. If there is no integrated school in your area, there is no realistic choice. The Department does not measure that; it measures demand only on the basis of existing schools. That system maintains the status quo, with only minor changes taking place. The Department of Education does not plan adequately for integrated education. It is the IEF and the Northern Ireland Council for Integrated Education (NICIE) that support parents to do that. Since 1992, the IEF has invested over £26 million in new and transformed schools. In that time, the Department has not funded the formation of any new integrated school.

First and foremost, parents want a good school for their child. Survey after survey shows that the majority of parents want those to be integrated schools. The most recent survey was a LucidTalk Northern Ireland-wide attitudinal poll in 2021, which showed that 71% of people in Northern Ireland believe that integrated education should be the main model in our education system. It also revealed that 73% of people here would support their child's school becoming integrated. The IEF funds the integratemyschool.com website, which enables parents to register their support for their child's school to transform. Recent results from that work have led to six parental ballots. The ballots are confidential and are carried out by the independent body Civica Election Services, formerly known as Electoral Reform Services. The results of the ballots range from 71% to 95% supporting transformation of the school.

The IEF supports the policy objectives of the Bill because the existing statutory duty on the Department, through the Education Reform Order 1989, to encourage and facilitate integrated education has not led to any strategic commitment or significant action by the Department to proactively support the growth and development of integrated schools; instead, the Department funds NICIE to encourage and facilitate integrated education and may consider that funding as its duty fulfilled.

Experience with the Department of Education has not been encouraging. In 2013, the Department turned down a development proposal from Drumragh Integrated College to increase its permitted enrolment number. The reason given was that it would have a negative impact on the enrolments of non-integrated schools in the area. The college challenged the decision through a judicial review that found that area planning for schools did not sufficiently take into account the demand for integrated schooling and ruled that integrated education should be recognised at all levels of strategic planning for education in Northern Ireland. However, in 2021, the former Education Minister, Peter Weir, again used the impact on other schools as a reason to turn down a development proposal from Strangford College. He reversed that decision after receiving a pre-action protocol letter advising that the school was considering a legal challenge. The Department's handling of the independent review of integrated

education from November 2016 has given us little comfort, as there were 39 recommendations but only eight have been delivered.

The current independent review of education, brought forward as part of the 'New Decade, New Approach' document, is important. We have been campaigning for that and are delighted to see it. However, the timeline for this work is already slipping. The report is likely to be published in early 2023. It will then be considered by our politicians. Who knows how long it might take for an agreement to emerge before implementation can begin? What is needed is a systemic change to our education system. That is not a small ask. Change on that scale will take time, but we believe that the independent review must set out a road map to normalise our education system — a road map that is focused on early childhood development and student achievement as well as on equity, inclusion and reconciliation.

Putting children first means addressing the segregated nature of education. The IEF, therefore, agrees with the policy objectives of the Bill, because integrated education needs to be effectively planned for. There is a significant gap between the clear public support for more integrated education and what is available. The Department has not acted in response to the clear aspiration of the wider community for more integrated education, which is endorsed by the Good Friday/Belfast Agreement. More than one in five first-preference applications to integrated colleges are being turned down due to a lack of places. Many communities in Northern Ireland do not have the choice of an integrated nursery, primary or post-primary. Parents are not asked which type of education provision they would prefer. It is assumed that what they have is what they want.

Widespread grassroots support for integrated education means that the time has come for the Department to promote that model of education, rather than leaving that to charities alone. The Bill would place a duty on the Department and other educational bodies to promote, rather than simply encourage and facilitate, integrated education. That would go a long way towards achieving the vision and aspiration that we all have for an integrated and inclusive system.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): Thanks very much indeed for those opening remarks, Tina. I will bring members in for questions. We have ample time for questions.

Ms Brogan: Thanks to the three of you for your interesting presentation. I will get straight into questions. First, did you get a chance to see the Committee meeting two weeks ago, when we had a briefing from Department of Education officials? You could describe the Department as giving a scathing review of the Integrated Education Bill. If you saw it, how do you respond to the Department's review of the Bill?

Mr Lemon: Yes, we did. Tina has already touched on the IEF's view of so-called help from the Department over the years. To say that the IEF was disappointed by the Department's remarks is a real understatement. The integrated movement has seen and heard negativity from the Department for nearly 40 years, so we should not be surprised. Yet, the Department's negative attitude and the "It's all too difficult" approach have been shocking to us. As you know, one member referred to the Department's approach as going "to war with the Bill", and another described it as a "withering critique of the Bill".

The Department has consistently done the absolute minimum on integrated education. Despite the resistance of the Department and others, the IEF has worked resolutely for almost 40 years to provide, encourage and promote integrated education. It is the IEF that has been doing that. It struggles to keep up with the demand in an environment where the calls for integrated education and Irish-medium education are growing faster than ever. As I said at the beginning, with 11 employees, it is a struggle. So, yes, that was a great disappointment.

Ms Brogan: I can understand that. I just wanted to give you an opportunity to respond.

Another point that the Committee discussed yesterday with the Bill sponsor, Kellie Armstrong, her policy adviser and NICIE was the duty to promote integrated education. Even Kellie said, "Do you know what? Maybe there's room to change this description or the wording of it". Essentially, having the word "promote" there means that integrated education is elevated above other sectors. Can you understand the concerns of other sectors? The Irish-medium sector, which was discussed yesterday, and the other sectors may have concerns about integrated education being elevated above them. Do you agree that there is room to remove the word "promote" from the Bill?

Mr Paul Collins (Integrated Education Fund): Nicola, what we are talking about and emphasising here is the fact that there is an overriding demand for integrated education. We feel that there is a duty on the Department to pick up on that. I will quote some statistics. Tina has already mentioned the Northern Ireland attitudinal poll that showed that 73% of parents wanted their children to go to integrated schools. That survey also showed that integrated education was supported by 58% of DUP supporters, 74% of Sinn Féin supporters, 77% of SDLP supporters, 78% of UUP supporters and 94% of Alliance supporters. I can quote other surveys. The ARK Northern Ireland life and times (NILT) survey 2020 found that 69% of parents would prefer their children to be in a mixed school environment. In 2019, the Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency (NISRA) found that 76% of young people wanted religion not to be an issue. That is backed up by a Sky News poll from March 2018 that found that 69% of people believed that every school in Northern Ireland should be integrated. Just this week, the Commission for Victims and Survivors said that 70% are against having a segregated education system in Northern Ireland.

I will continue, if I may. The four schools that became integrated this year held ballots, and they all supported their school becoming integrated. The evidence is that people want schools to become integrated. The reality, however, is that only 7.5% are integrated. Even with all those schools becoming integrated, you are still talking about only a tiny fraction — not even half a per cent — of an increase in the overall population. How long will it take to get to 10%? How long will it take to get to 20% and 50%? At the moment, the action is being taken by a charity with 11 staff.

Ms Brogan: There is that support for integrated education — I support integrated education — but the Bill asks us to put it into law that integrated education be elevated above all other sectors. That support is there, there is support from the political parties, and I believe that the integrated education sector should be supported and encouraged to flourish and grow. However, is it your opinion that it should be elevated above other sectors? Even Kellie Armstrong, the Bill sponsor, said yesterday that she would be willing to change the "duty to promote" wording. Would you agree with changing that?

Ms Merron: Nicola, the Department of Education does not plan for integrated education. There is no planning authority for integrated education. There is historical underfunding. We are really keen for the Department and others — not us — to assess demand, not just for existing schools, by going out and asking people. Take the word "promote". The most crucial thing is that the Department is charged with assessing demand. We have the evidence to prove that people want integrated education. For us, it is about assessing demand not on the basis of what you have but by going out and asking parents, "What sort of system do you want in the next five or 20 years?". If we do not do that, we will just have more of the same.

Ms Brogan: OK. Thank you for that. I will leave that point.

My other question is about the independent review of education, which you touched on in your presentation. I question the timing of the Bill. Nobody expects a quick turnaround from the appointment of the panel to its recommendations being implemented, but is it possible that we are making two jobs out of one thing? Would it be better to wait until we have the review's findings before bringing forward this type of Bill?

Mr Lemon: In our view, no. As you said, the review is likely to take some time. It may report in 2023, but then there will be all of the other procedures. It will have to be considered by the Department and brought to the Assembly for politicians to agree it and implement it in law. That will take some time. Given that it is an independent review, we do not know what it will say. We cannot anticipate that, although we certainly expect it to address in some way the needs of integrated education. That could take anything from five to 10 years, going by the experience of previous reviews, and this one will be complex. Given that and all the evidence that Paul mentioned and that we know that there is a great demand for integrated education now, we feel that it is not acceptable to wait until the outcome of the review. It will just take too long, and large sections of the public are crying out for more integrated education now.

Ms Brogan: Thanks for that. I got the same kind of response from Kellie yesterday, so you are definitely singing from the same hymn sheet.

Thanks very much for your presentation and for coming along. It is really important that we get the opportunity to discuss all this. It is an important Bill, and there is lots of detail in it, so we need to hear from everybody. I appreciate your coming here, and it is nice to have that open discussion about it.

Mrs Dodds: There is something a bit crazy going on with the internet here, so I was dropping in and out during the presentation. Apologies for that.

A bit like Nicola, I feel that we are covering pretty much the same points over and over again in many ways in this exercise. There is pretty much consensus across the Committee that there is an issue with clause 7(1), which states that education bodies:

"must apply a presumption that it will be an integrated school".

With any new school that is to be built, the Department will have a presumption in law that that school should be an integrated school unless something happens to say otherwise. That is a problem with the Bill, and it sets the integrated sector on a different course from other education sectors. That has become a theme running through the evidence and questioning. That is just to lay that out for you. It is my honest assessment of the evidence and the questions that we have heard so far.

Ms Merron: May I respond to that, Diane? You said that you were dipping in and out of the presentation because of your internet connection, so I do not know whether you heard this, but we believe in parental choice. We believe that, if parents want to send their children to a Catholic maintained school, a controlled school, an Irish-medium school, an independent school, a grammar school or, indeed, an integrated school, they should have that choice, wherever there is evidence-based demand and where it is possible. We believe in parental preference. If there is something wrong with that clause and everybody cannot agree, I strongly recommend that the Committee get behind Kellie and work with her to make sure that it fulfils whatever you require. For us, it is about parental choice.

Parental choice should be based on evidence. It should be evidence-based demand. I am not sure whether you are aware, but, if you want to start a new integrated school, you need to have expressions of interest. If you want a school to transform, you need a parental ballot. Evidence-based demand for all types of parental preference is important going forward, and we support all parental preferences.

Mrs Dodds: Do you understand that clause 7(1) does not do that? Clause 7(1) says that any new school for which we plan will have a presumption applied that it will be an integrated school. I have had informal discussions with Kellie and discussions online. She always comes back and says that there has never been a new school and there is not likely to be a new school in Northern Ireland. That is not the point: we are talking about the law. I have had discussions with all the other sectors, and this seems to be constantly emerging as a theme and an issue. I lay it out honestly and openly in open session that that seems to be a theme. That seems to be a theme across all parties.

Mr Collins: To reiterate my point around those statistics, it is the overwhelming opinion of people in Northern Ireland that they want their schools to be integrated, so it makes sense that, if we are opening a new school, the default setting should be integrated.

Backing up Tina's point, all four of those schools became integrated this year. They had to go through the development plan process and had a parental ballot. The vast majority of parents voted for their school to become integrated.

Mrs Dodds: Even in the dark old days that hardly anybody remembers any more, I went to a school where there were people from both communities. My children went to the same school, and there were people from both communities and from every community in Northern Ireland. The point that I am making, maybe incoherently, is that a school does not have to belong to the integrated movement to have children being educated together.

Mr Collins: I understand. If I —

Mrs Dodds: That is an issue.

Mr Collins: Diane, if I can cut across you, backing up your personal experience, I went to a Catholic maintained primary school and a Catholic grammar school. I did not have a conversation with someone of the opposite religion until I was 17 years of age. My two daughters went to integrated preschool, primary school and now secondary school. Their friends are from Mexico, Spain and Italy. The Protestant/Catholic thing is way down the list. The only way that we can guarantee that our

children have that type of education in the future is to have an integrated education available to all people in Northern Ireland. That is the only way forward, Diane, to be bluntly honest.

Mrs Dodds: I believe that, and I practised it in my family. My children went to a state grammar school that is very representative of the community where I live. My intention is not to promote a particular thing, but there is an issue with clause 7(1). That has emerged as a theme — I think that Chris would back me up — in all the evidence that we have taken so far.

There are issues with clause 4(1), where you ask for "to encourage and facilitate" to be replaced with "to encourage, facilitate and promote". I am not sure that the Department does that for any other sector. Nicola also made that point.

Ms Merron: Diane, we really would be delighted if the Department encouraged and facilitated. We do not think that it does that particularly well. That is why we think that promotion should be encouraged.

Mrs Dodds: That is where we should hold the Department to account. That is the duty on the Department, and it should fulfil its duty. I am just pointing out some issues. You will get issues with any Bill, and it is good to talk them through.

Clause 5(1)(a) is an issue. It tasks the Department in law with:

"aiming to increase the demand for the provision of integrated education",

but it is not tasked with aiming to increase the demand for education in the maintained sector or wherever. I go back to Nicola's point: we want a level playing field. We want parents to have the choice, but we have to make sure that that choice is not unbalanced.

Ms Merron: Yes, we would love a level playing field, but we do not have one now. We do not have a managing authority for integrated education. There is historical underfunding of integrated education. We in the IEF promote integrated education. We have to fund it now. We promote integrated education regularly through the Integrate My School website. We have outreach officers. We can just about cope with the demand from schools and parents who want integrated education: as I said, five more schools this week. There is a lot of demand for integrated education, and it is not being met, so the Department should be encouraged to promote integrated education.

Mrs Dodds: OK. Thank you very much. I have honestly set out some of the issues that I see with the Bill, and I think that there is some coalescing around those issues. I have listened to pretty much all the evidence sessions so far and have heard that from all the political parties, but I will allow them to talk for themselves, obviously. It is really good to talk to you. Thank you very much. I am sorry that I missed some of the session; the connection is so poor this morning for some reason.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): No problem. Thanks for that, Diane.

Mr Butler: I will have to take the blame for the delay this morning. That was my fault. You were very patient, and the Chair was gracious with me when I came back into the meeting.

Thanks for meeting us. It is good, and we need to talk to all the stakeholders, including those who are so passionate about integrated education. Please forgive us if we probe you here. There is a collective will to do something through the Bill, but some reasonable questions need to be asked. You have given some really good statistics from the surveys that have been done and from the feedback that you get from parents and so on. We are also parents, and we have had those experiences that you talk of in our education. We have been around the schools, and the schools are all excellent.

When I ask questions, guys, I do not mean to point the finger; they are genuinely to try to unpick some of the stuff that I struggle to get my head around at the moment. I asked the Bill sponsor this yesterday, and I am still not sure how it lands. The Bill sponsor talks about educating children together in reasonable numbers. Your submission states that it is about educating our children together in a diverse setting and educating our children together regardless of what background they are from. Let us drop the Protestant/Catholic thing, and let us just say that it is about reasonable numbers. I did not get an answer from the Bill sponsor about what reasonable numbers are. Kellie said that there is a policy underneath the strategic statements that says that the make-up might be 40/40/20 or whatever.

I would like to get to the bottom of this: if integrated education is specifically about integrating our children, what do you guys see as reasonable numbers?

Ms Merron: The Department defines reasonable numbers on the basis of the religious make-up of an area or a community. When a school transforms, the IEF specifically sets out to help that school to improve its religious balance. We encourage schools to market to our wider community and to promote themselves as integrated, and we encourage them to talk to parents so that they appeal to the wider community and, over time, can and do increase their religious balance. It is a process. None of this will happen overnight. At the end of the day, we and the schools aim for a target of somewhere in the region of 30%, but, if a school transforms, it can take up to 10 years to get to that target, and it depends on the community balance in the area. We try to support schools to get to that balance. Paul has some stats.

Mr Collins: I will leave this thought with you, Robbie and other Committee members. They are the Department of Education's 2020-21 figures. In controlled schools, 7.6% of the school population is Catholic. In Catholic maintained schools, 1.2% of the school population is Protestant. Those are not IEF figures and are not from a survey that some people are casting aspersions on; they are figures from the Department. That is the reality of the situation at the moment. By not pushing forward with the Bill in some form, as Tina said, the status quo shall remain, and, if we talk about the independent review of education and whatever else is out there, it *[Inaudible owing to poor sound quality.]*

Mr Butler: There is no doubt that there is a will to work with the Bill. The Department of Education receives the second-biggest fiscal budget from the block grant. We have empty desks and other issues across the service, and education probably costs too much at the moment. Another reason is that we have too many sectors. If we had one common sector and one education system — I am glad to see that you are nodding your heads — we could do away with a lot of this. Aspirationally, guys — trust me — I am with you, but I am still unsure, even after the answers today, what would constitute reasonable numbers. There is a strong statement in what you have given us today. That bristles with someone like me. This is 2021; it is not 1972, 1989 or 1998.

I have been thinking about it. If integrated education is successful and popular and has a 40-year track record to go on, what is the difference between pupils who come out of integrated education and those who come out of the maintained or controlled sectors? Genuinely, what would you give as evidence that integrated education tackles the divided society that we once had?

Mr Collins: Robbie, it is about more than the pupils: the governors, teaching make-up and pupils of an integrated school are mixed.

I go back to my experience. It is the experience of a lifetime of mixing and interacting with people of opposite religions, be they nationalist/republican, loyalist or whatever else. My children have had that experience. They come from the nationalist/republican background that I am from, and they mixed with pupils from a loyalist paramilitary background, from every background and every country around the world. That is the difference.

Mr Butler: You are absolutely right. My two kids went to Friends' School in Lisburn, which is in the statutory education sector.

Are we still talking about the same thing in 2021? Your experience and my experience are from a while ago. My kids went to a school that is obviously very mixed and diverse. The school that I went to — Lisnagarvey High School — is, again, a state school. Back in my day in the 80s, the figures would have been horrendous and, unfortunately, probably not one Roman Catholic pupil went to it. Now, in the region of 20% of its pupils are Roman Catholic.

To go back to the first point, I really want to get the purpose of the Bill into my head. I would absolutely like to see integrated education on the same playing field as the controlled and maintained sectors if that is what the review picks out. I also agree with you that we need to do something with the Bill in case we do not get the review or Stormont tumbles. I am not suggesting that we kick it into the weeds; I really am not. I suppose that there are some issues that I need to be convinced of in the totality of the Bill. We should educate our children together, but I do not think that that can be achieved by an ethos. If it were simply about having an ethos and changing the curriculum, that would not technically be integrated education.

I go back to the question of whether we are being ambitious enough. Tina, you gave a figure of 30%. I do not know what that relates to as far as a 10-year plan is concerned. If, at the end of the 10 years, that school had achieved integrated status or had carried it for 10 years and did not have the 30%, would it not then be integrated? If we are to educate our kids together, there has to be a benchmark.

Ms Merron: I agree, Robbie. Once a school starts an integrated education process, it is just that: a process. It will not be achieved overnight. If a school starts with a minimum of 10% from one background, it should aim towards a minimum of 30% within a set period. That is not always easily done, and, as you will be aware, some areas have a large percentage of "others" who do not want to be identified. Young people do not want to be put into a box any longer.

The aim is to get 30% in a set period. Ideally, it should be a lot higher than that, but that is the plan. Each school is different, and each school's journey will be different, depending on the background. However, when a school starts that journey, it is important to have a religious mix on its board of governors. They provide the strategic direction of the school.

Mr Butler: Thank you for that. I do not disagree about how we constitute boards of governors and stuff like that, and I declare an interest as a member of a board of governors. There is something that we can do across the board in how we might address that and shake it up.

In some ways, the Bill undersells the confidence that you guys have in integrated education. Diane talked about the need for parental choice, and that is absolutely the case. However, if parental choice is so strong, why does there need to be that presumption? If you have so much confidence that, when it is put to the public, 70% to 80% want integrated education, why would you need a negative clause in the Bill that places a presumption? There are also two negative clauses in the Bill that state that parents cannot choose to have a controlled or maintained school on the basis of either the demographics of an area or empty desks in other schools. I am trying to get my head around that. Genuinely, if there is so much confidence, surely there does not need to be a negative resolution.

Ms Merron: There is a lot of confidence in the demand, but the problem, at the end of the day, is that it is up to the IEF, which is an independent charity, to support those parents. NICIE has a role as well, but it is very small. I am not underestimating the demand out there. We struggle to cope with it. It is a long process for a school. If the Department were to be tasked with promotion, it would put more resources behind it. For example, it is tasked with the promotion of —

Mr Butler: I am sorry; this is not about promotion. This is about not looking at parental choice. Parental choice is littered throughout the Bill. To be fair, I believe Kellie when she says that she wants parental choice. What I cannot understand is that, if parental choice is at the centre of this, why there needs to be a presumption — not promotion, but a presumption.

Mr Collins: The statistics bear out what we have been saying all along. That is what the majority of people in Northern Ireland want.

Mr Butler: That is fine; I do not disagree with that.

Mr Collins: Why would we not presume, then, that the model that we start with for new schools is integrated education? It would be for other sectors to make a business case on the basis of parental preference in the community for whatever model — Irish-medium education or whatever it might be.

Mr Butler: The reality is that, as you know, this is nothing to do with schools: this is about how we live. That is the biggest problem. We live segregated, which is a bigger problem than being educated segregated. The pupils who come out of school today are not like we were, no matter what school they go to. Many young people who go to schools in any sector, including my kids, do not really know the difference between Catholic and Protestant. It is just the nature of the day.

In this instance, the presumption is counterproductive if the aim is to project confidence in what you have. It is the opposite of parental choice.

Mr Collins: Robbie, may I ask what would be your presumption? Would your presumption be a controlled school?

Mr Butler: I am for parental choice. If parental choice is how we do this, parental choice it is.

Ms Merron: We agree with that, Robbie. If parental choice were not there up front, we would agree that that clause may need to be looked at. There is not an issue for us because we support parental choice.

Mr Butler: That is why we need to tease the issues out. We should not see this as having a poke at each other. You guys will think that we are having a poke at you. I read this, and I think that you are having a poke at me and my kids. I know that you are not, but I will ask the question. Your statement says that the current system perpetuates division. Will you explain what that means? In 2021, what evidence do you have to substantiate that? I am not taking a poke at you; you have put it in black and white in your statement. What does that mean?

Ms Merron: We are talking about the religious division here. Paul has given you the stats from the Department of Education, which show that Catholic attendance in controlled schools is only 7.6% and Protestant attendance in Catholic maintained schools is only 1.2%. Those stats are there, and they have not improved over the years. That is the evidence that the segregated system continues separation.

Mr Butler: Do you think that any of the other sectors might bristle at your calling their sector a "segregated system"? It seems to be a broad brush. You picked out the Catholic maintained sector, and I know that those figures are stark. That is not so much the case in other sectors.

Ms Merron: I will let Richard come in on this as well. We do not see the integrated sector as a sector. For us, it is not a sector; it is a movement for change. We are trying to move the education system forward. Before I go any further, I will let Richard have his say.

Mr Lemon: It is good to talk about these things, Robbie. You have touched on the complexity of all of the arguments and the fact other societal issues are involved in a complex society such as ours. The division and segregation are maintained by the system, which has a governance system for Protestant and Catholic schools — it is almost exclusively one or the other — and we have touched on the percentages of pupils who go to each sector. It is all maintained by that system. It is incredible that we have the Department of Education, the Education Authority and eight other publicly funded education bodies to cater for the school population in such a small place as Northern Ireland, which has something like 335,000 pupils. That entire system — all of those blocs and organisations — reinforces the segregation. We have no issue in saying that we believe that it is segregated.

Mr Butler: I appreciate your answer. I did not do it deliberately, guys, but I have just read the sentence again, and, actually, it does not relate to segregation in education. The sentence is:

"Education alone will of course not solve all Northern Ireland's problems but it will surely help to undermine the division which is perpetuated by the current system."

It talks about "Northern Ireland's problems". In essence, therefore, integrated education is trying to affect wider societal problems. That is a great aspiration. However, my problem with that statement — it is quite strong — is that it suggests that other sectors feed into that division and are not helping at all. That is what I am saying. Some things make me bristle a little. You guys will bristle at some of the stuff that comes back and rightly so, because integrated education is fantastic, there is no doubt. However, essentially, that indicates that schools in other sectors, such as the schools that my kids went to, are not doing their job or pulling their weight.

Mr Lemon: Let me be clear: in Northern Ireland, there are fantastic schools in all sectors. This is not meant to be a criticism of any of those schools, their governors or the teachers. There are great standards throughout. That is not the point. We are talking about the system here and the fact that the bodies that are in place reinforce that system.

Mr Butler: I have no issue with that. However, a sentence like that might be read slightly differently. Education is not a place for playing any kind of politics. That goes for me and anybody else; it does not matter who you are. We need the best for our kids.

Guys, I will work really hard with Kellie and the team on the Bill, and I hope that we can do something that is absolutely fair and reasonable. Thank you for your time today. I really enjoyed that.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): Thanks, Robbie. I appreciate your questions. They are questions that people want to ask, and it takes a degree of openness and courage to ask them. Doing so moves us on. In that context, I have a question, and I will leave it out there. As you say, Robbie, this is not a challenge or a rebuttal. I appreciate the spirit in which you asked those questions today. My question is this: would we accept the separation of pupils to this extent on any other basis?

Mr Butler: I get that. If integrating our kids and educating them together is what is most important, we need those quotas. That is what I am saying, and that is why I opened up with that, Chris, to be fair. Every one of us has said, whether in closed or open session, that we aspire to educate our children together. However, if that is the case, the mechanics to do that should, rather than tinkering with ethos, get our children sitting in the same classrooms and so on. I am trying to get to the nub of that.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): OK. That is an important conversation as well. To be fair to the sponsor, the Bill has, at the very least, facilitated and prompted really good exchanges between us as MLAs and the witnesses who attend at Committee Stage. Earlier, Diane spoke helpfully and constructively about consensus building. That probably has to be tested, if I am being honest, but there may be an emerging consensus in favour of addressing the separation of pupils. I appreciate that terminology matters, so, if I ever use terminology that people do not find constructive, I will, of course, adjust it.

Mr Butler: You do not on this topic, to be fair, Chris. Maybe on other ones, like the transfer *[Inaudible]* *[Laughter.]*

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): If there is an emerging consensus on addressing the separation of pupils, getting into how we do that matters, and we should continue to have conversations about understanding how it is being proposed that we do it. Understanding the process of achieving reasonable integration is important, Robbie. Hopefully, we can bottom that out.

Sorry for the aside between Robbie and me. I had better move us on.

Mr Butler: It is not always that convivial, to be fair.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): We have Justin as well. First, as our time is short, I will ask my questions quickly.

Folks, you said that there is no managing or planning authority for integrated education. Obviously, that differs from controlled and maintained education. Do you think that we should have a managing or planning authority for integrated education?

Ms Merron: The review of education needs to look at all the existing educational structures. We were trying to make the point that NICIE is not a managing authority. It does not have the power, and it does not have the funding. We, along with other charities, are supporting some staff in NICIE to meet the demand. If it were a managing authority, it would probably get more funding. We want a body that is strong enough to meet the current demand from parents who want integrated education.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): That, in a sense, is not a level playing field.

Ms Merron: Yes.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): In the absence of a managing or planning authority, we could be forgiven for expecting more from the Department of Education to encourage and facilitate integrated education. You have touched on it already, but let me ask you specifically: what is your assessment of the work of the Department of Education and Ministers of Education to date to assess and meet the parental preference for integrated education?

Ms Merron: They do not know what the parental preference is. We bring it to them through our surveys. They do not assess parental demand. They look at existing schools and say, "Oh, only 7% are integrated". That is because parents may not have an integrated school in their area. If you do not have one, you do not have a choice. It is about assessing the real demand for integrated education. The Department does not do that; it never has. In working with NICIE, the Department, as Richard said, has only ever done the minimum. We have frequently had to challenge the Department through judicial reviews and such things. It is sometimes disingenuous. It said in its presentation that 58

development proposals had gone through since 2010. That happened only because we had judicial reviews and were able to challenge it on turning down some of those proposals because of the impact on other schools. We have had to challenge the Department. It has done the minimum. It could do a lot more to encourage, facilitate and promote, if that comes through the Bill.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): Legislation is one obvious vehicle through which to make that change.

Ms Merron: Yes. I get the feeling that the Department does not want to rock the boat and thinks, "The system is fine the way it is. We can tinker at the edges, and, if we get a few more schools and parents wanting to be integrated, that's fine". The bulk of that work is left to the IEF and NICIE to do. It is a lot of work, and there should be more resources to do it.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): If the Bill is to legislate for the identification, assessment and meeting of parental preference for integrated education in an improved and more robust way, are there existing effective and innovative ways in which that can be done? The Committee engaged recently with the Ulster University UNESCO centre on the community conversation toolkit. Are there effective and innovative ways out there to achieve that aim, and would it be useful to specify any of those in the Bill?

Ms Merron: The work that Ulster University is doing is really good. Earlier this year, it looked at 32 pairs of isolated schools in rural areas that had small numbers. It established the community conversation as a mechanism for schools to talk to each other. That could be two small schools in one small town — one maintained and one controlled — both with small enrolments. If those schools could come together to be one school — should that be an integrated school, a shared school or whatever — that would be much better for the children, and it would keep the school in that community. Many small schools in rural areas are closing because of insufficient numbers, and children are expected to move to a similar school further away. Looking to the future, it is important to look at the opportunities that exist for schools to come together in rural areas.

Mr Collins: I would just like to back up what Tina has just said. With the fortieth anniversary of Lagan College opening, we have now had 40 years of integrated education. Committee members have talked about the great demand for integrated education, but the bottom line is that only 7.5% of schools are integrated. In the integrated model, there are two ways in which those 6% to 8% of schools developed to become integrated: by children and their parents getting together to fundraise, build and develop the schools or schools that were not integrated becoming integrated by going through the transformation process. That is the model that we have worked on. To be bluntly honest, Chris — I hope that you do not take this the wrong way — parent action, not politicians or Departments, has led to the integration of those 6% to 8% schools and to the group demand and movement.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): I accept that. A few elected representatives have been closely involved in some of those community efforts over the years, but I absolutely take your point, and it is one that I put to the Department of Education. From the Department's evidence, I took it that, if I, as a resident of East Belfast, have a hope or aspiration that my children will attend integrated pre-schools, primary schools or post-primary schools in that constituency, it is, effectively, over to me to sort it out myself. That is what I took from that evidence. That cannot be an acceptable approach or system. The community conversation sounds to me like one of the innovative ways in which we can explore and enhance how parental preference is assessed and met, not only for the establishment of new provision but for transformation and amalgamation. It is interesting to broaden it out in that way.

I have a final question before bringing in Justin McNulty. Is it worth giving you an opportunity to constructively and positively say a little about the differences between an integrated school and a school that is open to all? Some members have discussed that today. You mentioned the board of governors of a school and its ethos. Without injury to any type of school but to help our understanding of some of those differences, is it worth giving you an opportunity to say a little about that?

Ms Merron: You mentioned the board of governors and teachers. We often hear about the de facto fair employment exemption, and it is important that that Bill goes through as well. It is then down to the pupils. It is not just about a mixing of pupils; it is about all elements. Every day in the classroom, they can talk to and challenge each other. They keep their political viewpoints, but they can have those discussions in an open forum where they feel that it is safe to have them. The other thing is that sensitive issues are brought into the open. Teachers are trained in how to handle controversial issues. They are taught how to deal with those difficult issues through the courses and training, such as the

anti-bias curriculum and so on, that NICIE runs. The children get the opportunity to express their views in an open forum. It is not swept under the carpet.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): OK. Thanks for that, folks. I really appreciate that evidence.

Mr McNulty: Good morning, folks. I am sorry that I was delayed in joining the meeting. I apologise for missing your presentation.

I have a couple of questions. Following establishment, what ongoing funding problems do integrated schools face that others do not? How will the Bill create a level playing field?

Ms Merron: I am not sure that individual integrated schools have problems that are any different from those facing other schools with individual funding. The problem is starting those schools off: the planning and formation of those schools. That is where more support from the Department would be beneficial. Once the schools are established, they are the same as any other school. I do not think that they have any funding issues. From that point of view, it is about getting the Department to help to plan those schools and to work with parents at the early stages to get those schools up and running.

Mr McNulty: DE has already expressed concerns about the Bill, and NICIE and Ms Armstrong have accepted that amendments are needed to clarify certain matters. Are there any matters that you would like to see clarified or rectified by amendment?

Ms Merron: It would be great to see the Education Committee members looking at the various clauses. We understand and have listened to some of the concerns about clause 7. We have made it clear that we support parental preference. If there has to be any change, we would certainly support that. We have not mentioned this to Kellie, but we suggest that, even if clause 7 is amended, all of the bodies should have to provide an evidence base for the demand for a particular type of school in an area, should that be through the community conversations that Chris talked about or a parental ballot. That should be standardised across all sectors of education.

Mr McNulty: Your only concern about the Bill in its current form is clause 7: is that correct?

Ms Merron: We have also spoken to Kellie about clause 1, and she will table an amendment to it. That is belt and braces stuff to ensure that all schools must go through the legal process to become an integrated school.

Mr McNulty: Thank you very much for your evidence today, folks. Apologies that I missed some of it. I am running between meetings. Well done on your continued passion and commitment to move towards an integrated education system.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): That covers all members. Folks, sincere thanks for your evidence today. As I mentioned, I have found this to be a really constructive, substantive engagement. Hopefully, it will be a productive Committee stage that you have contributed to. Obviously, we are glad to stay in contact with you as the Committee Stage progresses. Thank you for all the work that you do.