



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Committee for Education

OFFICIAL REPORT (Hansard)

Integrated Education Bill: Integrated AlumNI

21 October 2021

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

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Members present for all or part of the proceedings:

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

Witnesses:

Mr Michael Lynch	Integrated AlumNI
Ms Lise McCaffery	Integrated AlumNI
Mr Adam McGibbon	Integrated AlumNI

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): I give a warm welcome to Michael Lynch, chair of the board of trustees; Lise McCaffery, board trustee; Adam McGibbon, member of Integrated AlumNI. You are all very welcome, folks. The Committee will give you up to 10 minutes — you do not have to use the full 10 minutes — to make an opening statement. That will be followed by a short time for members' questions. Thank you very much for your time, and we look forward to hearing from you.

Ms Lise McCaffery (Integrated AlumNI): Many thanks for the opportunity to bring the lived experiences of those who have been through integrated education to be part of this consultation. Integrated AlumNI is a registered charity that was started by past pupils of integrated schools in Northern Ireland who are advocates of further integrated education. In the form of a timeline, we will share with you three accounts. Having attended integrated schools in the 1980s and 1990s, I will start with my experience. I will hand over to Adam, who attended in the 1990s and noughties. Finally, Adam will hand over to Michael, who left integrated education in 2014.

I count myself incredibly lucky to have started my compulsory schooling on day one of the brand-new Hazelwood Integrated Primary school in 1985, even if it was in a disused Co-op building in Belfast that had only recently been cleaned of pigeon droppings. My parents were founder parents of Hazelwood primary and secondary schools. My father is from a Protestant tradition, and my mother is a practising Catholic and active participant in the church. A photo was recently shared with me of that first day in P1 that I had not seen before, and it made me realise that the friends I have today, from both traditions, some living in Northern Ireland and others in Scotland and England, were with me on that first day. Of course, as young children in primary school, we did not know that there were any differences between our school and others. It was a warm, supportive environment with pioneering teachers and parents, with everyone learning what it meant to be integrated and to celebrate differences in order to bring lasting peace and reconciliation.

During that era, all pupils did the 11-plus as a class. I got a 1, the highest grade at the time, and had an interview at Belfast Royal Academy, where my father had taught. However, my decision, and my parents agreed, was that I wanted to remain in an integrated setting, with all the benefits that we saw went along with it.

At secondary school, as a teenager starting to build my self-identity, I became more aware that integrated education was different and not the norm. We were young people of all faiths and none growing up in north Belfast towards the end of the Troubles. There were some really challenging periods of violence and division all around us. There was a wide range of socio-economic backgrounds among the children, and, of course, division and difficulties sometimes encroached on our community. I can think of several instances of sectarianism — for example, paramilitary graffiti on walls or desks — that were dealt with by pupils in the class. We were living and breathing conflict resolution, and we then reported on the resolution to the school through the leadership team.

It was only when I got to university in Glasgow, having left Hazelwood in 1999, just as power-sharing was coming to Northern Ireland, that I realised just how different the school experience had been for the many other Northern Irish former pupils now at university with me. Some had never socialised with, and some believed that they had never even met, young people of different traditions. The learning that they had to undertake at university or in the world of work was learning that we had done simply by being educated together.

On arriving at university, I was so struck by this difference that I wrote to the then Minister of Education, Martin McGuinness, sharing with him my experience of integrated education. He wrote back to say that he was supportive of growing the number of integrated and Irish language schools to provide choice. However, that was 22 years ago, and, to this day, only 7.5% of children and young people in Northern Ireland attend integrated schools. Therefore, the Bill provides an opportunity to enact the promises and commitments of the Good Friday/Belfast Agreement and to build a lasting peace and reconciliation for future generations.

I will hand over to Adam.

Mr Adam McGibbon (Integrated AlumNI): Thanks, Lise. Hi, everyone. I attended Lagan College from 1999 to 2006. As soon as I was born, my parents wanted me to go to Lagan College. It was their hope that their children would live in a more peaceful and reconciled Northern Ireland than the one that they had grown up in. In east Belfast, there was no integrated primary-school option available at the time, so I attended a maintained primary school and then went to Lagan for secondary education. That means that I have experience of more than one educational sector in Northern Ireland.

With Lagan College being the first integrated school, it seemed that important people visited all the time. I remember, for example, the President of East Timor coming to visit. As a child, I did not even know where East Timor was. I remember our meeting Secretaries of State and Education Ministers, and I remember David Cameron arriving. He had just been made Leader of the Opposition, and it was his first ever visit to Northern Ireland. I was drafted into the choir to sing for him, despite not having a single musical note in my head. All these experiences of meeting politicians means that I can be a little bit challenging to the Committee, in a friendly way. Since the age of 11, I have heard lots of warm words from politicians over the years about supporting integrated education. Unfortunately, there has been very little action.

I had an amazing time at Lagan. I remember there being a great emphasis on tackling sectarianism, on respect and on conflict resolution. My best friend at Lagan was a Protestant, so he was from the opposite community to me. He lived in a majority unionist area. I know that we would not have met otherwise. We lost nothing of our own identity through being friends or attending Lagan, but we gained so much because of it. I have kept a lot of those lifelong friendships from school with people of all backgrounds. However, a little bit like Lise, it took me to leave education and meet people who had very different educational experiences to truly see the value of it. I went to Queen's after I left Lagan, and I was really shocked by people who said that, to their knowledge, they had not met a Protestant or a Catholic until entering the workplace or starting university or college. I want to live in a society where that friendly contact between both communities happens far earlier in life and is the norm.

As a society, we would all benefit hugely from more integrated education. As the Committee is no doubt aware, there is substantial academic evidence of the positive impact of integrated education. A review that Ulster University carried out a couple of years ago of 13 years of policy and research showed significant evidence that integrated education has a positive social influence by fostering cross-community friendships, reducing prejudicial attitudes and creating more positive attitudes on

issues such as politics, religion, identity and mixed marriages, all of which happen without any loss of community or social individuality.

I want everyone to have the choice of having an integrated education. That is exactly what the Bill is about: choice. It is not about saying, "This has to be the only way in which we educate our children"; it is about the massive demand for integrated education that is not being met. As the Committee probably knows, according to a recent LucidTalk poll, 71% of people in Northern Ireland believe that integrated education should be the norm, and 73% of people here would support their child's school becoming integrated. This is your opportunity to meet that demand and take that real step towards reconciliation. We need the Bill to provide that choice.

Thank you. I will hand over to Michael.

Mr Michael Lynch (Integrated AlumNI): Thanks, Adam. I begin my remarks by reiterating the statistic that you mentioned: 71% of people in Northern Ireland believe that integrated education should be the norm.

My experience echoes those of Adam and Lise. After attending a maintained primary school in Belfast, I attended Lagan College from 2007 to 2014. One of my most striking memories is of my very first day in year 8 and being welcomed into the assembly hall by the college chaplains. I was sitting in a new school environment beside someone who came from an area of Belfast that I had not heard of before. They had gone to a primary school that was different. I had a sense that that person had probably had a very different upbringing from mine, but I realised that we were very much the same: we were nervously starting a new school journey.

My school spoke of being one school community where we develop, grow and learn together. In year 8, every student learned the Irish language. Interestingly, those who continued post year 8 often did not come from a traditional nationalist background. I recall the yearly céilí that was held every March. Reflecting the real spirit of the school, it was hosted by parents, teachers and students collectively. I also remember observing the two-minute silence on Remembrance Day and attending Remembrance Day assemblies. Most importantly, I remember actively discussing the context of why we did that.

In 2014, we officially opened our new school building, in which I spent a year. I recall that, during the build, every meticulous detail went into the planning of the school, from the colour scheme in the classrooms and the corridors — the red, white and blue, and the green, white and gold, and where they were in the school — to the goalposts on the pitch that meant that all sports, including Gaelic sports and rugby, could be practised. Similarly, areas of the curriculum were taught with purpose, intention and planning. That allowed us — those from whom you are hearing today and every other young person in integrated education — to get the best value from their time in school. Parents should have the choice to send their child to an integrated school, and that is what the Bill is trying to achieve. There is an unmet demand for integrated schools, and, despite the Education Reform (Northern Ireland) Order 1989, which mandated the Department to "encourage and facilitate" the provision of integrated education, and further commitments in the Good Friday/Belfast Agreement and in last year's New Decade, New Approach, progress has, unfortunately, been stagnant.

I am immensely proud of the representatives of Integrated AlumNI. They are from every integrated secondary school in Northern Ireland, and they are part of the organisation because they see the value, uniqueness and privilege of attending an integrated school. Today, you have met just three of us — Adam, Lise and me — but behind us is a group of passionate ambassadors and campaigners. To have a group of young advocates who continually speak so proudly of their experience in their professional careers, committing time and effort to do so, is testament to the value of their school experience.

It is also worth noting that we have seen an increase in the volume of those in our organisation who do not come from an integrated background. Twenty per cent of our charity board did not go to an integrated school, and we have seen increasing interest from parents in becoming involved in the work that we do. Fundamentally, we believe that every parent should have the choice, and, more importantly, that every young person should have the opportunity to attend an integrated school.

That concludes our opening statements, so I will pass back to you, Chair.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): Thanks, Michael, Adam and Lise. Those were powerful witness statements, and they are sincerely appreciated. Given our short time, I will move promptly to members' questions. I accept the challenge, Adam, to ensure that warm words are followed up by

action. The Committee has engaged substantially in the Committee Stage of the Integrated Education Bill, which, I am proud to say, was introduced by Alliance Party MLA Kellie Armstrong. I will step back, rapidly, into my impartial role as Chairperson of the Education Committee and ask Deputy Chairperson, Pat Sheehan, to ask a question.

Mr Sheehan: Thanks to Adam, Lise and Michael for coming in this morning. This morning's conversation is in the context of the Integrated Education Bill. No one could dispute the intentions behind the Bill. I, for one, am supportive of integrated education, but saying that does not mean that the Bill is perfect. When it comes to legislation, we need to be absolutely clear, and the legislation needs to be absolutely clear and unambiguous. It is one thing for the sponsor of the Bill to have an intention to bring something about, but that has to be reflected in the legislation.

Adam, you talked about the desire for everyone to have a choice to attend an integrated school. I support that. One of the difficulties with the Bill is that it would give an elevated position to the integrated sector. Currently, the Minister has a statutory obligation to "encourage and facilitate" integrated education, and there is the same statutory obligation with regard to Irish-medium education. The Bill would add to and strengthen that statutory obligation regarding the integrated sector, because there would also be a statutory obligation to "promote", which strengthens. Every other sector would say that that duty would disadvantage its sector. That is one of the issues that I want to tease out with you. Where do you stand on integrated education being given that advantage over and above other sectors? Bear in mind that it would have financial and legal implications, implications for area planning and so on. I invite you to come in on that point.

Mr McGibbon: Thanks, Pat. That is a hugely important question. I will make a few opening remarks and then pass over to my colleagues.

For us, this is about facilitating choice, and that is what it comes down to. At the minute, if you live in an area where there is no integrated provision, when you go to the Department of Education and say, "I would like an integrated option for my child", its attitude is, "OK, well, go out there and do it yourself. Gauge the demand yourself. Gather other people who agree with you, and put in an application yourself".

The Bill is important to us because we are not on a level playing field. We need to level the playing field so that there is promotion and proper facilitation. At the moment, there is no managing authority for integrated education. A lot of this is being done by an underfunded charity. It is incredible to think that we have reached 7.5% of kids being educated in an integrated setting purely off the back of the work of parents and grassroots activists. If the Department can promote integrated education, that will put it on a level playing field with the comparatively much better resourced controlled and maintained sectors. That promotion element is important: it elevates integrated education to the point at which it can compete with other sectors on a level playing field.

Mr Lynch: I will piggyback on your sentiments, Adam. As I said in my opening remarks, since the 1989 Education Reform Order, the Department has had a mandate to "encourage and facilitate" the provision of integrated education. I can see very little evidence of that. In adding "promote", we are trying to elevate the need for and desire of the Department to take definitive action to help that provision to increase.

To date, the Department has not established any form of integrated school. As Adam said, that has all been done by grassroots activism and an underfunded charity. There is no managing authority for integrated education. Therefore, we need to have stipulations in place that allow us, as Adam said, to come on to that equal playing field.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): You have 30 seconds, Pat.

Mr Sheehan: All of you mentioned the fact that you came into contact with people who had never met anyone from the opposite or other community. That is not the case where I am concerned. I grew up in a unionist community until I was 15 years old. All my friends in the area where I lived came from a unionist/Protestant background, although I attended a Catholic school. There were never any issues until the conflict broke out. Then, when I was 15, people came to my door to try to kill me, and we had to leave our house as a result of that incident.

Instinctively, I agree that all our kids should be educated together. If you think about it, why should kids be segregated in school? There does not appear to be a reason, but that is the system that we

have. Actually, there was a reason why education was segregated. When the state system was established almost a century ago, there was not to be any acceptance of cultural diversity, and the Irish tradition was to be eliminated from our schools. The Catholic Church was afraid that the Catholic ethos would be eliminated. There are historical, political and, probably, educational reasons why that system emerged.

We live in different times now. However, there is still a fear, certainly in the republican/nationalist community, that the integrated system is not designed to cater for and allow complete cultural and political diversity in its schools and that, in some sense, it wants to provide a neutral environment and a neutral culture. Most of the integrated schools that I am aware of allow children to wear a poppy on their uniform around Remembrance Day. However, no integrated school that I am aware of would allow a child to wear, for example, an Easter lily to commemorate those who sacrificed their lives for Ireland. Although that is just a small point, for me, it is a sort of acid test. If republicanism cannot be accommodated in the integrated sector, all the talk of accommodating cultural diversity does not hold water. I invite you to comment on that. That is my last point.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): You are well over time, Pat. The other members will have me for that. However, nobody is better placed to give testimony on the cultural and political diversity of integrated education than Integrated AlumNI. I will sacrifice my time for you, Pat. Go ahead, folks.

Ms McCaffery: Thanks, Pat. You made some really good points. We want to put a spotlight on how integrated education does not dim your light; it makes it shine even more brightly. Whatever your political or cultural self-identity — I speak from experience — you are with others, and you do not diminish that identity. You do not change who you are because of others, but you learn more about others in a really natural way.

I remember that, when I was in sixth year, some Hazelwood sixth-formers were invited by Nigel Dodds MP and Ian Paisley senior to attend the European Parliament to receive the Flame of Peace. We went with sixth-form pupils from all across Northern Ireland, and it was a brilliant experience. The aspirations that we had were so similar to those other sixth-formers, who were from non-selective and selective schools. We had the chance to see how other sixth-formers felt about the world. We were all just about to go to university, further education or the world of work. The one thing that resonated with me — a few of us from Hazelwood identified this — was that we felt that we had better cultural literacy and better social awareness. We had our own beliefs and positions, largely, of course, informed by our families and the wider communities that we lived in, but we felt that we understood other people's perspectives, and, for me, that is the key bit. Integrated education does not change who you are; it helps you to understand better how others feel. I will let Adam or Michael add to that. That was my experience.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): We are almost out of time. Adam or Michael, if you have —

Mr McGibbon: One-liners?

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): Yes. Tell us about the cultural and political diversity that you guys experienced.

Mr McGibbon: Sure, absolutely. I am conscious of the lack of time, so I have a couple of one-liners. Pat, I appreciate the spirit of your question completely. This is anecdotal, but the strongest republican that I know was in my year at Lagan. I do not think that he necessarily came from a strong republican background, so his aspiration, his view of the world, was not dimmed in any way by his experience at Lagan.

I will make another point before I pass to Michael. I do not know whether any Committee members caught the Patrick Kilty documentary a couple of years ago. When he visited Shimna Integrated College, he was astonished to find pupils calmly discussing their different aspirations for Northern Ireland in an integrated setting. That is where we want to get to: a place where everyone has their own beliefs and ideals about the world but can discuss them calmly yet passionately.

Mr Lynch: The only point that I will add is that I fondly remember something that was often said in Lagan, "If it is important to one of us, it is important that everyone understands it, and it is important to all of us." Pat, you made some remarks on emblems, such as the poppy and the Easter lily, and significant events, such as St Patrick's Day to Remembrance Day. At Lagan, if one student felt

strongly about something, it was important that everyone understood the context of it, and that is all about learning together in one environment.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): Thanks, folks. OK, we will move swiftly on. Diane, you have five minutes.

Mrs Dodds: Good morning, everyone. Thank you, and it is nice to talk to you. I appreciate hearing your stories and your lived experiences. That is important. You feel that you were pioneers. I feel, in a way — everybody on the Committee is tired of hearing this from me, so they can all close their ears for a moment — that, coming from a small farming background in County Down, I was very fortunate that I grew up in a mixed community. In the early Troubles and my early childhood, I did not have a lot of money but I had a lovely childhood in a very mixed community, growing up among a lot of people. I was very lucky at that stage in my life. I did not encounter the segregation that other parts of Northern Ireland had. I still think that there are parts of Northern Ireland that have that and manage it very well.

I went to a mixed school back in the day. I went to Banbridge Academy, which, even then, was mixed and is now much more mixed. I am very pro children being educated together, but I want to help children and parents to have the choices that they want in education. I look at the integrated education movement, and that is completely fine. I was at St Patrick's School in Banbridge last week. Today I am going to Banbridge High School. Those young people are being educated together, particularly in sixth form, and they also share more practical classes in the school in the forms below that.

What do you see as the difference between the two? I was in the corridors of one school, seeing all sorts of uniforms on that day. It was very encouraging and very nice to see. I am a unionist, and there is no equivocation about that, but, like you, I want to respect and tolerate other folk as well. What do you see as the differences between the two?

Mr McGibbon: Thanks, Diane. I want to clarify your question. Do you mean the difference between a maintained school and a controlled school and an integrated school?

Mrs Dodds: A shared education site. I know the practical differences. What do you think are the differences in terms of the young people etc? That is the kind of thing that I want to hear.

Mr McGibbon: Maybe I will defer to others who are a bit more au fait with the policy stuff, but it is great that you did not experience that segregation in your schooling experience. It would be great if more people were able to have that experience. There are definitely schools out there that are more mixed, but, unfortunately, that is not the majority experience, and the stats from the Department of Education seem to bear that out. In controlled schools, 7.6% of the population is Catholic, and, in maintained schools, 1.2% of the population is Protestant. We still have that division.

There are amazing schools out there, and there are schools that are more mixed, but the majority experience is still one of that division. Would anyone like to speak to Diane's point?

Mrs Dodds: Sorry, Adam. Just to continue the conversation — I am not disputing your figures; I do not have them to hand, but I am not disputing them at all — but is that not a parental choice?

Mr McGibbon: That is a parental choice. I think —

Mrs Dodds: We should facilitate parental choice.

Mr McGibbon: Absolutely. People should have the choice to send their kids wherever they want to go. The question mark here is over how many of those parents are getting a true choice to send their children to other schools. Are there places where there is no integrated provision, for example? At the moment, most people send their kids to controlled schools or maintained schools. There is clear and consistent polling evidence of massive demand for integrated education, so it is hard to tell whether, if everyone had the opportunity to send their children to an integrated school, those statistics would be different.

I want to get to the nub of your question, so maybe one of my colleagues can talk about some of the differences between integrated and shared education and controlled and maintained.

Mr Lynch: On the point about parental choice and the evident demand, one of the latest sets of statistics — these come from the good relations report — stated that 21% of children who had put integrated education as their first preference were unable to get a place. Again, continual polling shows that over 70% of people in Northern Ireland now believe that integrated education should be the norm.

I also think that we need to make a keen differentiation between an inclusive school and an integrated school. Diane, you mentioned that there are many really good examples of inclusive schools in Northern Ireland. There is a distinct difference between naturally becoming inclusive and being integrated. Integrated is planned for. It is done with purpose and intention. From the moment you walk through the door of an integrated school, you see in the curriculum and in the way that the sporting facilities are laid out, which I referred to, that it is done with the concept of making sure that individuals and young people come together in that one environment. As my colleague said, the outputs of that are shown in evidence.

On your point about shared education, I agree that it is great now, considering where we were in the '80s and '90s, to see that schools like Our Lady and St Patrick's College, Knock, Grosvenor Grammar School and Lagan College are working together. We would not have seen that a long time ago. There are some merits in shared education. However, shared education is not really the remit of the Bill. If we are promoting shared education, we need to be careful that we do not just amplify close-proximity segregation where, when you are walking through the corridors, you see students wearing different uniforms. There are key differentiations between us, and we need to position our education system in a realm where we are, again, showcasing that there is much more that brings us together than divides us.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): Diane, that is almost seven minutes. Do you want a final remark?

Mrs Dodds: I could continue the conversation for quite a while because this is something that I am genuinely interested in.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): You could, but I definitely cannot allow you to in this context.

Mr Lynch: We will be happy to speak outside of this setting, Diane. If you want to continue the conversation, we will be happy to.

Mr McNulty: Thanks, folks. It has been a really interesting and thought-provoking conversation. Thank you all very much for your evidence today. Lise, you discussed your experience of living, breathing conflict resolution at your school. I went to the Abbey in Newry, the same school that a man called Seamus Mallon went to. He was living, breathing conflict resolution. He stepped up to the mark and delivered on that conflict resolution. When all of you were describing your educational experiences, I was thinking, "That's just my school". We did not have a Remembrance Day ceremony, and we did not have anybody wearing Easter lilies either. We were involved in reaching to the other side and reaching out to people of all different faiths. We had different faiths in our school. I sat beside a guy called Lawrence Wong from Malaysia, and in Mass, I sat beside Davy Lo from Hong Kong. So, I had that experience in my school. It is very important to recognise that it is not only integrated schools that have those very positive experiences.

On your proposition, Michael, that every child should have the opportunity to attend an integrated school, should every child have the opportunity to attend an Irish-medium school?

Mr Lynch: Thanks, Justin, for your sentiments. Your sentiments on Seamus Mallon are very well made. We come back to the key point that the Bill is about choice, and we believe that the fundamentals of the Bill allow parents to make that choice. I will come back to the fact that over 20% of first applications for students to attend integrated schools were, unfortunately, refused. There is overwhelming demand for integrated education, but the choice is not there for parents and for young people to attend those schools. Equally, again, I know there was a little bit of contention around the Bill's fundamental provision that any new school that sets up should be integrated, but we have to remember that the status quo of controlled and maintained schools is what exists in the landscape of education. We need to bring integrated education on so that there is an equal playing field. As and when parents wish to send their child to controlled, maintained and Irish-medium schools, parental choice is key, and, absolutely, that choice should be prevalent and should be there. It is unfortunate that integrated education is not on the same playing field.

Mr McNulty: Very good.

Ms McCaffrey: We also have exciting examples of integrated provision in Irish-medium schools. We have new nursery provision in that area. That helps you to see the evolution and growth of the sector. All parental choice should be accommodated, and that is a really interesting and exciting way for it to move forward.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): East Belfast is leading the way, Lise. Thank you.

Mr McNulty: You portrayed a very positive picture, guys, and that is important. We all fully support integrated education as a concept in the North. It is vital, and we are all behind it. However, where are the challenges with the Bill as you see it? As others said, we are legislators, and our job is to scrutinise legislation, otherwise, we would be failing in our roles. Where are the challenges and problems in the Bill as it stands?

Ms McCaffrey: The Committee has expressed some concerns about presumptions for future schools. When we look at the huge gap between supply and demand, however, we see that the presumption is, for us, a positive action to take in support of parental choice. Although the Committee has highlighted it, the presumption does not mean that new schools must be integrated; instead, it allows wider parental choice, because we know that there is demand for integrated education out there.

Mr McGibbon: I will jump in and turn the question on its head a little bit, Justin. What excites me about the Bill is the idea of the Department being obligated to promote integrated education. It seems that — Michael mentioned this as well — since 1989, we have not seen the Department step up to even facilitate or encourage integrated education. It is staggering that all those schools were founded by brave parents who basically had to take a risk with their kids' education if they wanted integrated education. I would like to see a situation where, if there is parental choice in an area, it is not just left to parents to sort it out for themselves but the Department will proactively encourage it.

Reviewing the Integrated Education Fund's (IEF) session, I think that it is really concerning that it and the Department seem to be so at odds on this. You would imagine the Department of Education would have a good relationship with other stakeholders, but that does not seem to be the case. The IEF seems to believe that, in its experience, the Department is not stepping up to the duty to facilitate and promote integrated education. The IEF has even had to go to the courts to sort it out. That is a really concerning situation, which the Bill tries to address.

The other, slightly different, challenge is this: if the Bill is not passed, what is the plan of the parties on the Committee to facilitate and encourage integrated education? Maybe that is more of a question to you when, of course, you are supposed to be questioning me. That is one of the things that I consider a challenge, however. What is the alternative plan to promote integrated education?

Mr McNulty: Your job is not to question us; our job is to question you. Regarding the disparity between the Integrated Education Fund's position and that of the Department, the Department tabled many grievances about the Bill. The Department needs to answer that question, not me. Is it the Department's role to promote all education sectors equally? What is your perspective on that and on how it fits into the Bill?

Mr McGibbon: I know that I am talking a lot, but I will stop in a second.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): I will have to stop all of you and Justin in a second. Go ahead, Adam.

Mr McGibbon: I will make an incredibly quick response, then. Given that the parties in the Assembly and the Executive have signed so many agreements over the years — A Fresh Start, the Good Friday Agreement etc — where they have said that integrated education is part of conflict resolution and part of the future, I believe that the Department should be promoting integrated education.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): OK. Thanks. Sorry, Justin, we are out of time. Thank you for those questions.

I do my best to be impartial as Chair, but, given that an Alliance Party colleague is sponsoring the Bill, I want to make sure that there is recognition that some of the Committee's concerns are not

necessarily my concerns. I think that that was a super question, by the way, Adam, about what everybody else's plans to encourage integrated education are.

I meant to raise this point earlier, but we have made a lot of stating that promoting integrated education would elevate integrated education. The Good Friday/Belfast Agreement isolates the encouragement and facilitation of integrated and Irish-medium education. I do not think that we refer to that as elevating integrated education, and most of us on the Committee signed up to that agreement. That is an interesting thought.

Ms Brogan: Thanks, everyone. That was a really interesting presentation. It was really good to hear from you. On the point about parental choice, I fully think that integrated education should have the right resources, in line with statutory duties, to support the demand and need that is there so that the sector can grow. However, with regard to choice and the Bill specifically, as we just talked about, the Bill intends to apply a presumption that all new schools will be integrated. If that came into effect, the fact that the integrated sector would be prioritised over other sectors would pose problems for the wider education system. There is concern about that.

In previous briefings, we talked about special circumstances and how a "new school" will be defined. The Bill sponsor, Kellie Armstrong, said that there had not been many new schools built, but we have to be very careful with that presumption because it is being put into legislation. We cannot work off the notion that there are not many new schools being built anyway, so they will not all be integrated schools. What are your views on that point, please?

Mr Lynch: Thanks, Nicola. You make good points on that. You are right that only one new school has been founded in the past five years, but, equally, you are right to be careful, in your role as legislators, to make sure that all ground is covered. I highlight that the presumption is there, but it does not necessarily immediately mean that no new schools can be founded that are not integrated. New schools that are controlled or maintained and Irish-medium schools, in particular, can absolutely be founded, and Chris alluded to the provision set out in the Good Friday/Belfast Agreement.

When establishing a new school, that new school can easily go ahead and be established as long as there is substantial evidence, whether it is from parents or other wider stakeholders from where the school is being founded, to suggest that the school is the need and demand of those who will be involved. The presumption is there because there is overwhelming evidence that integrated education is the preferred choice of most in Northern Ireland, but, if evidence is there to suggest otherwise, the Bill still has a provision that allows that to happen.

Ms Brogan: My understanding of it, Michael, is that all new schools would be presumed to be integrated schools unless there were special circumstances, which have not been defined yet. It would be the case that all new schools would be integrated. That is my point. We need to be careful with the language that we use in legislation, because that means that integrated schools would get priority. I am just pointing out that we need to be careful.

My other point relates to the independent review of education. We know that a panel was set up recently and that it will be doing the work on that review. In your opinion, is the Bill pre-empting the review panel's findings? Should we maybe wait until we get the results from the panel before we introduce such a substantial Bill?

Ms McCaffrey: Thanks, Nicola. That is a really good point about the independent review that is coming up. I will take that point, and then anyone else can jump in. Given the timescales for undertaking the independent review and carrying out the actions from it, I think that we are talking about a much longer period. The Bill is needed now. We have talked about supply and demand and parental choice. At the minute, as an adult with friends in Belfast who are looking for schools to send their children to — the children would like to go to integrated schools — I can see that anguish first-hand. Michael referenced the fact that 21% of first applications to integrated schools do not get their places. Parents are really upset and feel a wee bit disenfranchised when they do not get places. Any delay to the Bill or pause in the Bill process ahead of the independent review would stop that work. We are saying that people want to see change now.

The people who want that choice for their children are voters, constituents and citizens. They want to see that change, and it is on all of us to provide the choice. That is what we are talking about: the choice, if they would like it. At the minute, a lot of parents do not have that choice, and it is a challenging period for them.

Ms Brogan: Thanks for that, Lise. As I said at the start, the provisions need to be there so that people who want to send their children to integrated schools or children who want to go to integrated schools have that option — absolutely. We should be working towards that. I fully agree with that.

Thanks so much to the three of you. It is really interesting to hear from you about your experiences of integrated education. This conversation will continue for a while, but it was really good to hear from you. Thank you.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): Thank you to all our witnesses for their submission and oral briefing today. I found that to be a very helpful conversation, and we will be glad to keep in touch with you throughout the progression of the Bill. Thank you.

Ms McCaffrey: Thanks, Chair.