



Committee for Education

OFFICIAL REPORT (Hansard)

Integrated Education Bill:
NICCY Youth Panel;
Northern Ireland Youth Forum

11 November 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

Witnesses:

Mr Adam Hamilton	Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People Youth Panel
Ms Catherine Lamont	Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People Youth Panel
Mr Eoin Millar	Northern Ireland Youth Forum
Mr Cohen Taylor	Northern Ireland Youth Forum
Mr Zac Taylor-Clarke	Northern Ireland Youth Forum

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): I give a warm welcome to Adam Hamilton and Catherine Lamont from the Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People (NICCY) Youth Panel, and Eoin Millar, Zac Taylor-Clarke and Cohen Taylor from the Northern Ireland Youth Forum (NIYF).

You are all welcome to this meeting of the Education Committee, and we are really looking forward to hearing your thoughts on the Integrated Education Bill. We will give you a maximum of 10 minutes to make opening remarks. We will then have questions from the MLAs. Thank you. [Long Pause.] Who wants to go first, folks?

Mr Cohen Taylor (Northern Ireland Youth Forum): I will go first. Thank you for the opportunity to respond on the Bill. The Northern Ireland Youth Forum has worked hard to promote the voice of young people on integrated education and to gain insights into what they feel about it. We prepared an organisational response and worked hard to make sure that it gave a balanced overview of people's opinions.

I am a member of the Northern Ireland Youth Forum's executive committee. I took part in that research as a member of the committee, but we also reached out to our members and asked them to take part. Through that research, we found that most young people see integrated education as a positive.

How young people define integrated education was one of the main issues that was highlighted. Some young people from other backgrounds struggle to define it, which speaks a lot about the fact that they struggle to understand exactly what integrated education is, what its ethos is and how it interacts and cooperates with other sectors. Obviously, only around 7% of young people go to integrated schools.

Interestingly, academic achievement was not something that young people spoke much about in our research. Building cross-community relations was seen as more important. Young people feel that provision needs to go beyond the traditional Catholic/Protestant narrative. Young people also discussed sectarianism and division and school uniforms as a way of identifying other young people's perceived backgrounds. From my perspective, as a young person in integrated education, I believe that it is the only way in which we can provide young people with an education system that celebrates our cultural diversity and teaches young people about our society and how we can achieve more together than apart.

Some young people spoke about how they feel that leaders are being hypocritical and need to invest more in integrated education. In my view, many politicians say that they want to move Northern Ireland forward, but they need to put their money where their mouth is, invest in peace and reconciliation and accept that integrated education is the most cost-effective, pragmatic and best way to move our society forward and build a shared future together.

Mr Eoin Millar (Northern Ireland Youth Forum): I am happy to continue the Northern Ireland Youth Forum statement.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): Feel free to introduce yourselves, folks. Was that Cohen?

Mr Taylor: Yes. Sorry, I am Cohen Taylor. I am a member of the executive committee of the Northern Ireland Youth Forum.

Mr Millar: No worries. I am Eoin. We sound alike. We are kind of attached at the hip here at the Youth Forum. You get us as a pair. Not separated. *[Laughter.]* Thank you, Cohen, and thank you, Chair and the Committee, for allowing young people to present to you. To follow on from what Cohen said, I am also a member of the Northern Ireland Youth Forum's executive committee.

The findings from the focus group illustrated that, for the most part, young people do not discuss integrated education; however, when the conversation presented itself, they had lots of views and thoughts on it and are passionate about the subject. On that, those who had first-hand experience of integrated education spoke about the importance of building relationships as a primary concern, with academic achievement perhaps a less important factor when choosing an integrated school. On the other hand, some young people in our focus groups highlighted the importance of choosing between schools and being able to choose between faith-based schools or other settings, depending on their values and beliefs and what best represents their faith.

Along with that, certain young people saw integrated education as an important component in reconciliation and peacebuilding in Northern Ireland. Recent figures from the Northern Ireland Council for Integrated Education (NICIE) show that 70% of students in schools have less than a one-in-20 chance of meeting students from a different faith. That is an astounding figure that young people who attended non-integrated schools drew on. A young person stated in the consultation that an integrated school was:

"an opportunity to meet young people from different backgrounds, especially in a place such as Northern Ireland where most people live separate lives depending on their religion".

Another young person, who has been in integrated education for the past 15 years, stated:

"integrated schools bring people together and create an environment where it does not matter who you are or where you are from".

That is our perspective, and it highlights the benefit of integrated education for all of Northern Ireland.

Alongside that, many young people knew little or nothing about integrated education, and those who did thought that the concept of integrated education was vague. They, sometimes, struggle to define what it is. It was agreed that more information needs to be shared on what integrated education is and highlighting its benefits. It was agreed among young people that, if information were easily attainable and accessed, it would assist them in choosing to learn in an integrated education environment.

I will finish off with a quote from a young person who stated:

"When you leave Belfast, there is a lack of options and choice for parents, and the onus is on the Department to fix that and create opportunities for young people."

That is exactly what the Bill aims to achieve. It will put the onus on DE to provide integrated education for young people and to actively promote it to give young people better chances for their future. I will pass to Zac, who will finish off the Youth Forum statement.

Mr Zac Taylor-Clarke (Northern Ireland Youth Forum): Thank you, members. I, too, am a member of the Northern Ireland Youth Forum executive committee.

Experiences and options are varied, and that relates to young people's experiences of education. For some involved in integrated education, it provided them with the first opportunity to experience young people and new friends on a cross-community basis. Other findings in our report include the fact that young people discuss integrated education as a way in which perceived fears about the other side of the community can be overcome. Young people also highlighted relationships and challenging the negative stereotypes of the past as things that are important to them. They also feel that there is a lack of political support for integrated education, and they spoke of the need for education to be beyond the traditional divisions of the past. I refer to my opinion of a former Education Minister who felt that there was little provision for GAA and Irish language in the Bill. Our report concludes that young people see integrated education as something that should, could and does include GAA and Irish language as part of embracing other cultural identities.

Young people feel that religion is becoming less important, suggesting that integrated schools should expand their remit and focus. I refer you to our report, which suggests that the top two words that people associate with integrated education are "Catholic" and "Protestant" and that we need to stop orange and green hate. Thank you for listening.

Mr Taylor: Before Adam comes in, I, as director, have something to say on behalf of the Northern Ireland Youth Forum. Chairperson, we are sorry that you are stepping down at the end of the mandate. You, Chris Lyttle, have served us and the NIYF well as a political youth champion for more than a decade and have brought us to the Committee on countless occasions. Thank you for your work. You will be missed.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): Thanks very much for those kind words. I was not expecting that; you have caught me on the hop. Thank you so much. I will hand over to Adam.

Mr Adam Hamilton (Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People Youth Panel): The obvious question is, "Why integration?". In 1921, Northern Ireland's first Education Minister, Lord Londonderry, wanted an education system that educated all young people together. However, 100 years since the creation of Northern Ireland, that aspiration has yet to be achieved. Today, we have only 67 integrated schools in primary and secondary education. That equates to only 7% of children in Northern Ireland. It is obvious that that number is far too low. That lack of integration is to the detriment of our society. It is clear in Northern Ireland that that segregated lifestyle can lead to people having positive views about themselves and negative views about others. Promoting integrated education for all in Northern Ireland is a positive step for society. We are a forward-thinking country, and segregation is an outdated system.

In the community, there is a clear demand for integration. The Northern Ireland Life and Times survey found that 69% of parents would prefer their children to be in a mixed environment, and, in 2019, the Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency (NISRA) found that 76% of young people wanted religion not to be an issue. I made Catholic friends only after joining the Secondary Students' Union of Northern Ireland (SSUNI), which helped me to develop views and to aspire to a more integrated society. However, without integrated education, distorted views of each other will continue. Segregation is never good, and we should all do more to promote the integration of education and society in general.

We should also remember that integration is about so much more than religion, with students from all backgrounds, regardless of race, gender, disability and sexuality all having an equal opportunity to learn in the same environment. I ask this: do you want an integrated or a segregated society? I know where I stand: what about you?

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): Thank you so much for your evidence today, folks. It has been a priority for the Education Committee to make sure that we give space and provide an audience for the voices

of children and young people in everything that we have been doing. It is also important that we give you influence as well. I look forward to reflecting your comments on the Integrated Education Bill in the Committee's final report, which will be considered by the Northern Ireland Assembly at the next stages of the Bill. I am really grateful for your contributions today. I will now bring in other members.

Mr Sheehan: Thanks to all for coming along this evening. We are going through the same question-and-answer session as we have gone through with other stakeholders. One of the first things that I try to point out is that most of us instinctively believe that our children and young people should be able to mix freely and should be educated together. All of the surveys that have been carried out show that 70% to 80% of people want children to be educated together in an integrated setting.

Let us set that to the side for a moment and talk about the Bill. We are talking about legislation where every "t" has to be crossed and every "i" dotted, because, if it is not done carefully, it can throw up unintended consequences. Most of the witnesses who have given evidence to the Committee would say that, were the Bill to be enacted in its current form, it would give a privileged position to the integrated sector above all the other sectors. I am sure that there are plenty of people in the Youth Forum who go to Catholic, Irish-medium or controlled schools and so on, and they would complain that they would be at a disadvantage.

I am asking you here not to speak in general principles about integrated education, because you will get no disagreement from me; I am asking you to focus on the Bill and the point that I have raised and to give me your reaction to that. How do you think your colleagues from other sectors would react to that? Who wants to take that?

Mr Taylor: I am happy to answer that. Perhaps the point is that all sectors need to be promoted and that young people like choice. Right now, we have a situation where only 7% of young people are educated in the integrated sector. However, as was said, as reflected in recent polling, there is much more room for the expansion of that sector. Why are young people who want to get a place in an integrated school not able to get one? That is what it is about here.

We need to do something to enable that. We need to move somehow to enable the expansion of integrated education, for which there is an appetite. Putting the onus on the Department of Education to promote — not just to facilitate — integrated education is exactly how we do that. That is my view.

Mr Sheehan: OK. Do you know, Cohen, that there are 3,000 spare places in the integrated sector?

Mr Taylor: Yes, I do. The integrated sector has the lowest number of empty desks across the board of any sector in the country. I know that.

Mr Sheehan: The point that I am making is that [*Inaudible*] it is not an issue of the sector being oversubscribed or not being able to meet the demand but, rather, some of the schools are in the wrong places. If there was proper area planning to meet demand, that issue could be resolved in that way.

Mr Taylor: Every sector is battling for prioritisation in area planning. We cannot expect the integrated sector to be able to facilitate demand if the Education Department is not promoting the integrated sector. I go to Lagan College, and I know for a fact that 500 pupils who wanted a place did not get one in the last academic year. I was left without a place when I was leaving P7 and going into year 8. I was one of those kids who received a letter from the Department of Education to say that I did not get a place because I went to a controlled primary school and my first three preferences were all integrated secondary schools. I was not able to get a place, and I am more than aware of the demand in the integrated sector. The integrated sector has the lowest number of empty desks in any sector. I would say that it is only 3,000.

Every sector will have schools in certain areas that are oversubscribed, but we have a situation where we leave many children and young people in our country without a place in an integrated school who want one. How else can we expect our society to move forward?

Mr Sheehan: OK. Fair enough. I have one other question about a point that Zac raised about religion becoming less important. In the integrated sector as it currently stands, even if the Bill were to become law, all integrated schools would still have a Christian ethos. Would you be happy if that were changed, Zac, so that all schools would not have that ethos and would become non-denominational or even secular?

Mr Taylor-Clarke: This is my opinion, and it is not the opinion of the Youth Forum because, obviously, all of us have our opinions on the issue. I come from a controlled school in east Belfast that has a Christian ethos. Would I be happy to see that taken away? I would still want schools across Northern Ireland to have religious studies as a component of their thing, but having an ethos put into their actual school diary or whatever is unnecessary.

School is a place of education. Religion is something that a lot of people have not just in their spare time but it is their life. Religion has a place in schools to be taught and to be learnt, but, as an ethos for school, it crosses the barrier by trying to integrate schools with religion when our society is becoming so much more diverse. I think that it is unnecessary, but we have to watch where the line goes on that.

Mr Sheehan: When you think of the make-up of the population here today, it is very different from that of 20 or 30 years ago. We have a lot of people coming from Muslim countries and a lot of people who are atheists, agnostic or whatever, so, if we talk about inclusivity and have a Christian ethos in our schools, it excludes those who are not Christians, I suppose. I am making a comment rather than asking a question. Thanks for that.

Mrs Dodds: Thank you to all who have taken part so far. It gives me great hope for Northern Ireland that we have so many articulate young people who are willing to come here and put forward their opinions. That is not an easy thing to do. I know that; I feel that every day of the week. Thank you very much. I really mean that. It gives me real hope.

I would like to ask some questions around what people meant or were talking about in the survey. I jotted down some notes while you were talking, and it was instructive for me. It might have been Cohen or Zac who said that some young people struggled to define integrated education. What do you think that means? Why would young people struggle to define integrated education? I do not mind who answers that.

Mr Taylor: I said that. Young people struggle to articulate and identify what integrated education is in its true sense. It is dependent on your experience of the education system. If you go to a controlled or maintained school and have never been to or even seen an integrated school, what is your reference point? At the end of the day, we are here to discuss whether there are enough spaces in integrated schools [*Inaudible owing to poor sound quality*] and access to integrated education. As I said, I do not think that there is. On that basis, it is no surprise that young people do not know much about integrated education, because we do not have enough integrated schools for them to know what that provision is. If you go to only one type of school in a specific sector, that is the only ethos that you will ever be exposed to. The only way to resolve that and to enable young people, children and parents to have the tools to make decisions about what integrated education is and whether they want to send their kids to integrated schools and to dissect that vague concept is through the Department of Education promoting the Bill. With regard to —.

Mrs Dodds: I will stop you there. I understand that you are a huge supporter of integrated education, but I am interested in trying to dissect what young people thought integrated education was. In your head, integrated education is — did you say that you went to Malone College?

Mr Taylor: No, Lagan College.

Mrs Dodds: Lagan College. I am back in the bad old days. You go to Lagan College, which has been on the go for a long time and is a fantastic school and so on, but that is your version and vision of integrated education. Did young people have a vision of integrated education that was outside a specific sector? That is what I am trying to get at.

Mr Millar: I will jump in here. The written submission has multiple quotes from young people that describe what some people thought integrated education was. I will quote what we wrote to the Chair and the Committee. Certain people thought that integrated education was about:

"bringing young people together from multiple genders, religions and ethnic backgrounds".

Some people said that words associated with and linked to integrated education were "mixed cultures", "inclusivity", "progress" and "unity", for example. Some people even went back and started to talk about our past and the Troubles. Our research found that the young people who went to an

integrated school deemed an integrated school to be generally for Catholics and Protestants and those who did not go to an integrated school took a wider approach to what integrated education was.

Mr Taylor: I will say that—.

Mrs Dodds: Cohen, can I just come back? This is the nub of the matter. We have been told today that clause 1 is legally problematic and would be open to legal review and interpretation. Even if we forget all the legal stuff that we dealt with this morning, the vision of integration is wider than the integrated sector. The two of you have just demonstrated that. For some people whose experience and reference point is that sector, that is what integrated education is; for other young people, if I pick you up right, Eoin, it is a much broader, wider thing that involves communities coming together, getting to know other people and maybe sharing lessons etc on some basis. The Chair is always harsh with me about time, guys. I have a couple more questions to ask, because this is really important.

Someone said that people generally do not discuss integrated education. Why is that?

Mr Millar: I said that in our opening statement. The reason why most people do not discuss integrated education is that the option of integrated education is not brought to them during the post-primary selection process. That was my personal experience. I go to a Council for Catholic Maintained Schools (CCMS) voluntary grammar school. All my options were under the CCMS umbrella. I was never pointed towards integrated education, for example. I was never told that there were options outside CCMS, and I think that there were —

Mrs Dodds: Sorry for jumping in here. You make superb points. Those are real, lived experiences that no one on the Committee can ignore. So that we understand: do you think that that was your school directing you or your family directing you or just that there was a general lack of knowledge and experience?

Mr Millar: I have family members who go to an integrated school. In my case, I do not think that it was promoted enough. The Youth Forum, in the research, makes the point that it should be promoted.

Mr Taylor: The research is not about the concept of "integration" as a word; it is about integrated education provision. The report consists of the views of 60 young people, 20 of whom live on the Shankill. I am not here to represent Lagan College; I am here to represent the Youth Forum, to which I have been elected as a member of the executive committee. I represent not my views but those of my organisation, and my organisation's views and the report's findings are that integrated education is a positive for our society.

At the end of the day, young people will not participate in, respond to or engage with consultations if they are not taken seriously. We are talking about integrated education provision and the views of the 60 young people who were represented in our report. Those young people have a positive view of integrated education. They want the Department to promote it, and they want access to it. It is important that integrated education — not the broad term; not just "shared education"; not two schools that are near each other cooperating; but fully integrated, comprehensive education that is run in an integrated school — is provided for young people. That is what young people want.

Mrs Dodds: OK. Cohen, I do not think that anyone on the Committee will disagree with you. I have never heard it. I have sat through hours of evidence on the Bill that has stated that educating young people together is a really important aim and objective in our society. Nobody is negating that fact. However, as Pat said, we have a Bill in front of us that we have to look at clause by clause.

May I ask Zac a question, or has he gone?

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): That would be great, Diane, because Zac had his hand raised. We are OK for time this evening, within reason.

Mrs Dodds: I will make this my last question.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): No problem.

Mrs Dodds: Zac, I was really interested when you talked about choice in education and how some young people — maybe that was Adam: I have written down notes but not names, which is very

amateur; I apologise — said that it is important to have choice in education, including the choice of a faith-based education if that is what you want to have. Zac, in response to another question, you were eloquent about why it is still important to have those options for people who might want them. I must say that I am absolutely in favour of choice in education.

Mr Taylor-Clarke: Thank you, Diane, for your question. Like Cohen and Eoin from the Northern Ireland Youth Forum, all of us on the committee are very pro integrated education, and I am sure that everyone on the Education Committee is as well.

On the point about religion, I responded to Pat by saying that it is important for schools, wherever they are, to be able to promote religious studies education for all children in that school. I highlighted that it is less important for all schools to have an ethos that they follow, as Northern Ireland is now a more multicultural society. The choice of integrated education is a way for people to engage in a more eloquent way than some of the language that we hear from any side of any community.

Our report highlights that key words that people associate with integrated education are religions like "Catholic" and "Protestant", which have divided our society for so long. From NIYF's perspective, if we introduced integrated education, it would eliminate the barriers of division and open the arms of inclusion. That is where I stand on it. Having a choice of integrated education schools that have not a religious ethos but religious studies on all sides and inclusive religious education would benefit society more than having a division of religions and a more divided society.

Mr Hamilton: I am a member of my school's Scripture Union group and speak about it in assemblies. Our assemblies are quite religious. In an integrated school, I, as a pupil, am still able to take an assembly on the Scripture Union and show my religion and then also be able to learn about other people's religions. That is what I want to see in integrated education: learning about each other.

Mrs Dodds: Guys, it has been a long, long time since I have been in school; I can hardly remember. I presumed that religious education in any school is a fairly broad subject: am I wrong?

Mr Taylor-Clarke: Every one of us — Cohen, Eoin, Adam and I — could give our own evidence about how we are taught. I go to a school in east Belfast. The religious education was broad, but it referred a lot to Christianity even though, when studying for GCSE, one of my best friends in the class was a practising Muslim and we had a couple of practising Catholics as well. The religious education focused heavily on specific parts of Christianity, especially Protestantism. There needs to be a little more inclusivity in that rather than a whole ethos behind it.

Mr Taylor: It is not always directly about the curriculum; it also falls into who is in that classroom. I finished my RE GCSE last year. I was in a very diverse class. There was a relatively equal number of Protestants and Catholics in the class. RE is also about debate, including with people of other faiths and none. That is what we are here to discuss: the fact that, regardless of what is in the curriculum, if we divide our children, you will have a group of young people in a room who are expected, under the guidelines that have been set by the Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment (CCEA), to discuss and debate abortion and other issues around religion. How are those young people expected to have a balanced debate and get a balanced religious education if they cannot debate actively in their classrooms with children and young people from all communities? How do we achieve that?

If those young people are not in the same classroom, how do they have a balanced religious education? If you have a class in which 90% of the children are from one community, what is the point in having a debate? Is it not more valuable to have a debate in a classroom where there is a broad range of views and children can work with each other to — I do not know — maybe make society better, debate issues and use the RE curriculum to its full potential? The curriculum sets out the need for children to debate, but my experience of debate will be different from that of a child who went to a school where their class was, as I said, 90% one faith.

Mrs Dodds: To be fair, Cohen, I suspect and fully expect in any school of young people there to be a wide range of views on a wide range of subjects.

Folks, thank you so much. I count it as a privilege to have met you and to hear you speak so passionately.

Mr Taylor: Thank you.

Mr Millar: Thank you.

Ms Brogan: Thanks, folks, for coming along and for your presentation. As Diane, Pat and Chris have said, it is really great to hear such passion. You put your points across so confidently and eloquently. Fair play to you. It is really important that we hear your voices and that they are listened to. As Chris said, the Committee, in the year that I have been on it anyway, has done a lot to listen to the voices of young people. It is so important, as you are the ones who are taking it on.

I come back to a point that you made, Cohen, about the word "promote" and the fact that the Bill, as Pat said, will elevate integrated education above other sectors including Irish-medium education, which comes in [*Inaudible owing to poor sound quality.*]

Mr Taylor: Yes.

Ms Brogan: I spoke to the Children's Commissioner, who was with the Committee yesterday. We discussed that, and she agreed that it is not fair to elevate integrated education over Irish-medium education, because it is struggling too. There is demand for Irish-medium education, and it is underfunded and under-resourced. Can you understand that point of view: that that is maybe why [*Inaudible owing to poor sound quality.*]

Mr Taylor: The Irish-medium sector needs to be promoted too. Judge Treacy ruled that the Irish-medium sector should be promoted. At the Northern Ireland Youth Forum, we support that. Young people have said that choice is important. The word "promote" is there for the Irish-medium sector under Judge Treacy's ruling. It is not there for the integrated sector.

Ms Brogan: It is not there as a statutory duty of the Department, though. That leads me to the independent review. There is, undoubtedly, unmet demand for integrated education. I, along with everyone else who has said so, fully support integrated education. I want the demand to be met. I want children and families to have the choice and to get the places that they want and deserve, but should it not be a case of waiting until the independent review of education has taken place? The review can see where the authorities are failing and say, "This is what you need to do so that we can meet that unmet demand".

Mr Taylor: I am sure that you, as MLAs, understand that there are only a few months of the mandate left. It is important that we recognise that there should be a duty to promote all sectors. My concern is that, rather than all sectors being promoted by the Department, it is decided by whomever gets the Ministry under d'Hondt. Is a Minister whose votes come from an area with a particular type of school more likely to promote that sector over others? I think that, maybe, they are.

Ms Brogan: I do not think that it is possible for all of them to be promoted equally; that is the thing. The word "promote" means that one sector will be given preference over another.

Mr Taylor: You talked about Irish-medium education, but Judge Treacy ruled that the Irish-medium sector needs to be promoted. Is the imbalance not that the integrated sector is not being promoted while, maybe, the Irish-medium sector is?

Ms Brogan: That is my point about the review. The review is needed to see exactly where the failings are and why the need for integrated education is not being met. I put that to a number of stakeholders by saying, "How come people are not satisfied with how integrated education has been encouraged and facilitated?"

Mr Taylor: There is a broad range of polling that indicates that young people, parents and other stakeholders support integrated education, but only 7% to 10% of young people are educated in integrated schools. I do not think that you need a report to tell you that there is more demand for the integrated sector than there is provision. Given that demand, it should be a priority for the Department to not just facilitate but promote integrated education. That is what young people and parents want. That is what our research shows, and it is what young people are saying every day.

Ms Brogan: Absolutely, Cohen. I know where you are coming from. What I mean is that the review needs to look at, first, how the demand is measured and, secondly, how the facilitation and encouragement is delivered.

Mr Hamilton: Maybe you could use the word "promotion" and amend it later, when the demand has been met. People could put it down as their first preference until the demand is met, and you could then amend the Act to remove that word.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): Zac, is your had raised, or is that a legacy hand? *[Laughter.]*

Mr Taylor-Clarke: I was going to jump in with a point, but my camera was buffering.

The entire point of the integrated education system is to promote a diverse range of education for people from all backgrounds. You highlighted the Irish-medium sector. I do not think that the Bill is a party thing, where we are trying to one-up anyone. Remember that only 7% of schools have that status. They are at the rock bottom of trying to bring people together rather than putting them apart. In a country that has had so much division, the Bill would bring more communities together and raise the bar for inclusion in the sector.

Ms Brogan: I agree with you: there is no intention of one-upmanship from the sponsor. I have spoken to the sponsor at length, and there certainly is not. There is a genuine attempt to make it a level playing field, but I do not believe that that will happen with the use of the word "promote". That will mean that it is elevated above others. That is my viewpoint.

Mr Taylor: Why should politicians not promote integrated education? Why should politicians not meet demand? I do not want to pit one sector against another. Maybe some politicians would rather that we got bogged down in details and arguments and did exactly what we have done for decades: pit one type of person against another. That is not what we need to do. We need to recognise the simple fact that, on the basis of the polling, 70% of parents want to send their children to integrated schools. We have to tackle that. We cannot get bogged down with the pedantry of what sector we should promote on the basis of our ideology; we need to promote on the basis of demand.

Adam raised a good point about amending the Act to remove the word "promote" when the demand has been met. That is exactly what we should do. We should not promote things on the basis of ideology and what is politically expedient for our base. I understand that we have an election in a few months, but we need to promote on the basis of need. The fact is that 70% of parents want to send their kids to integrated schools, so why should MLAs not help to make that possible by actively promoting the sector through legislation and meeting those needs?

Ms Brogan: OK. Thanks to all of you. It was really interesting to hear from you all.

Mr Sheehan: I want to clear up one point about the issue of promotion. Justice Treacy's judgement in a judicial review said that the Minister has a statutory duty to encourage and facilitate Irish-medium education; there was no mention of "promote" in it. That is exactly the same statutory obligation as the Minister has on integrated education. The issue that I, Nicola and others have raised is that the inclusion of the term "promote" for integrated education would give it a privileged and preferential position in the education system.

On the issue of where demand lies for the different sectors, you said that, in the survey that the Youth Forum carried out, academic qualifications were fairly far down the list when it came to picking a school or a sector. I tend to think that that is not the view of parents and that parents, when they choose a school for their children, have the quality of education at the top of their list.

Mr Millar: Can I come back in?

Mr Sheehan: Yes, I will let you in in a second. Do not worry; you will get back in.

Those are important issues. You can be in favour of integrated education and in favour of parental choice. Our issue is not even as simple as that; our issue is about what will happen on the other side of legislation being enacted. One of the consequences of the legislation, as it stands, would be that the integrated sector would have a preferential position. For example, one of the other clauses in the Bill states that there should be a "presumption" that any new school will be an integrated school. Let us take my area of West Belfast, where I live and represent. If it were decided that a new school were to be built in the middle of Ballymurphy or Andytown, for example, the presumption would be that that would be an integrated school. Let us say that the community did not want an integrated school but wanted an Irish-medium school, a Catholic school or whatever. Why should the community be

overruled in what it wants? Cohen, you have been clear in stating that, if the demand is there, the school should be integrated. However, if the demand is for something else, how do we cater for that?

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): Thanks, Pat. Do not worry, folks. Everyone will get in for certain. We have time.

Mr Millar: I want to clarify that it is not that academic qualifications were further down the list but that young people said more about reconciliation. When the question was posed about integrated education, what first came to mind when talking about an integrated school was reconciliation and a broad variety of cultures, religions and mixed environments. It just so happened that, in the context of integrated schools, academic qualifications were mentioned less.

Young people choose schools for a number of reasons. I go to a school in west Belfast, where you are an MLA. I chose my school for a variety of reasons, including A level choices and how close it is for me. We did not poll parents because that does not fall within our remit of 11-to-25-year-olds.

I am sure that Cohen will be able to touch more on your latter point.

Mr Taylor: Our report does not suggest that schools should be built against the will of a community; in fact, the Integrated Education Bill includes provision to create other types of schools too. An integrated school would not be imposed on a community that did not want it as a result of the Bill. Just as Diane Dodds said that she did not feel that there was anyone on the call or in the room who would not want integrated education in some form, I do not think that there is anyone on the call who would want any type of school to be imposed on a community against its will.

Mr Sheehan: Fair enough, Cohen, but, as the Bill stands — remember we are talking about the Bill —.

Mr Taylor: Yes.

Mr Sheehan: If the Bill, in its current form, became the law, any new school — it does not state where —

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

Mr Sheehan: No. No. It does not give parental choice. It does not give community choice. Any new school would be presumed to be an integrated school. I am not arguing with you on whether that is right or wrong; I am just explaining to you that that is how the Bill would work itself out: every new school would have to be an integrated school.

Mr Taylor: How many new schools have been created in the last 20 years?

Mr Sheehan: Quite a few.

Mr Taylor: No, I am not talking about amalgamations of existing schools; I am —

Mr Sheehan: But, you see *[Inaudible owing to poor sound quality.]*

Mr Taylor: I am talking about new build schools on new land with new pupils and new staff. How many schools like that have been built over the last 20 years?

Mr Sheehan: First, I only know of one recent one. That was Gaelcholáiste Dhoire, an Irish-medium post-primary school.

Under the current legislation an amalgamation of schools is a new school. You need to listen to what I am saying, Cohen: the Bill does not define a new school differently. Therefore, every amalgamation becomes a new school. A significant number of new schools have been established over recent years. That is something else that you and I probably agree on.

Mr Taylor: Clause 7(1) deals with new schools. It states that there will be:

"a presumption that it will be an integrated school unless that would be inappropriate by reason of special circumstances."

This is for you, as legislators, to decide, but I would say that a school being imposed against the will of a community — maybe it is not fit for that community — is a special circumstance. With respect, that is for you, as a legislator for your constituency, to argue. We are here to talk about a Bill, and the Bill makes provision for special circumstances. That provision is there.

Mr Sheehan: I agree with you, Cohen. The difficulty with the Bill in its current form is that it does not define those special circumstances. I agree with what you just said.

Mr Taylor: Is that not intentional? Is that not because every special circumstance is different and an exhaustive list of every special circumstance would be never-ending? I appreciate that that may not be the case. I am not an MLA; I am an executive committee member of the Youth Forum. It is your job, as legislators, to work out the pedantic language and technical details of Bills. What I want is the essence of the Bill to be kept. If any party in the Assembly or any MLA wants to propose an amendment that would change the wording of the Bill but keep the intent, essence and point of the Bill to expand integrated education provision, that would be fine.

My concern is that politicians in all kinds of parties are using those statements in the Bill as a way to stop the Bill in its tracks. You want to amend the Bill — some individuals want to amend the Bill — out of all meaning and purpose. Why? I sit here as a young person who does not have a law degree and is not a legislator. I am a young person, and all that I care about is that demand is met and that integrated education is accessible to young people. As long as that is protected and as long as integrated schools are expanded, with all due respect, the wording of the Bill is not really my problem. That is your problem, as legislators. The phrase "special circumstances" is in the Bill. If that is deemed to need to be extended, that can be done in your capacity as a Member of the Legislative Assembly elected by your constituents. What I do not want is the overall point of the Bill to be eroded in any way.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): OK.

Mr Sheehan: My final point is that we are here to listen to and to learn from you and to hear the views of young people. However, it is also important that you listen to us, the legislators. There is such a thing as bad legislation, and sometimes Bills are so bad that they cannot be amended to reflect the intention of the sponsor. We, as legislators, sometimes find ourselves in that quandary. I do not necessarily say that about this Bill. However, the difficulty is that, if we pass legislation and have not foreseen unintended consequences and it ends up as bad legislation, the Department and the Education Authority (EA) may end up in court, interminably fighting cases as a result of bad law. Who will you criticise then?

Mr Taylor: [Inaudible owing to poor sound quality.]

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): Can I come in at this point? Is that OK? Just to check with you, Pat: are you finished?

Mr Sheehan: Yes, I have finished, thanks.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): I will come in. I want to bring in Robbie as well.

Cohen, you make some really powerful points. We can propose amendments. We can propose that clause 7 specifies that a new school not be an amalgamation, for example. We could propose other types of amendment to that clause. In the Committee Stage, we are reaching that stage. It is a powerful and important point to make.

Thanks, Pat, for those additional questions, and thanks for the answers. Robbie Butler wants to ask some questions.

Mr Butler: Apologies to you, Chair, the rest of the members and the panel. I tried to join the meeting a few times, but I had some other commitments. I caught little bits of the meeting. You will not have seen when I was listening; I was on audio only.

It is incredibly powerful to hear you guys. It does not matter whether I think that I am right or that some of your stuff is right or you believe that you are completely right: I have been blown away by your passion. If we were to build the legislation on passion alone, you would drive the Bill through. However, the reality, as Pat probably outlined, is that there is the competence of the Bill and its legality to be taken into account.

My question is open to anybody. One of the intentions with the Bill is to be cost-neutral. You will know that the education budget is the second biggest in the Assembly. It is around £2.2 billion or £2.3 billion. This is about clause 7, Cohen, and the question is for anybody to answer. In the Bill, there are clauses — they are not negative clauses — that state that there are two instances that cannot be used for parental choice: one is the demographics of the area, and the other is empty seats in another school. We know that there are tens of thousands of empty seats in schools across Northern Ireland. How do you see the Bill keeping within the £2.2 billion or £2.3 billion budget, if we cannot use the instances of empty seats or the demographics of the area?

Mr Millar: From my point of view of the way in which the current system works, let us take, for example, greater Belfast as an area and say that two new schools are to be built and maintained: one by the CCMS and the other controlled. My reading of the Bill is that its aim is to create only one school, instead of two, and for that school to be deemed to be an integrated school. As a result, that will streamline schools.

There are multiple schools in my area — CCMS and other schools — but there is a lot of duplication in schools at the moment. The aim of the Bill is to not exceed the £2.2 billion budget by streamlining from this point onwards. If you have, for example, three schools in an area — one integrated, one CCMS and one controlled — you are paying for all the teachers, the heating, the maintenance of the buildings and the grounds and all of that. Were a new school to be set up or even if schools moved to join others in one building — three 500-pupil schools becoming a 1,500-pupil school — that would be much more economically sensible. That is what I gauge from the Bill.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): Does someone else want to come in there?

Mr Taylor: For me, the cost of division is a huge number in our society. The duplication of services is a huge problem in our society. I am sure that, as Committee members, you all know that we spend more per pupil than any other region in the UK. That is because we have to cater for such a wide variety of school types and to make a wide range of provision. That is necessary, but the public indicate that they are willing to buy in to a more cost-effective option. As Eoin outlined —.

Mr Butler: You said an important thing there, Cohen. I talked to the Children's Commissioner yesterday about this. I agree with you, OK? However, my worry about the Bill is that it does not streamline; it reinforces another sector in an already segmented system. I would love to see integrated education but on a level playing field. It should be treated equally.

There is something, however, that sticks in my craw a little. My two kids went to Friends' School, which is probably one of the schools in the controlled sector that has as much integration as an integrated school. We heard today, for instance, that between 32% and 38% of pupils in the controlled sector are from the minority community, which is a benchmark that integrated schools would seek to attain. I am not sure that you get a cost saving.

Clause 7 says that you cannot use empty seats. If you cannot use empty seats in a school as a reason to not build a school, you will add to the fiscal budget, and it will cost more. If we allow that as a genuine reason, we will not increase the burden on the taxpayer here, just to create a school in an already overcrowded sector. Does that make sense, Cohen?

Mr Taylor: A school like Friends' School, if I pick your words up correctly, has a demographic that is fit for an integrated school but is not an integrated school. It is schools like that, which are, perhaps, smaller than Friends' School but are not performing well and have that demographic and buy-in to be an integrated school, that the Bill can enable to become integrated schools to save money. If you have a new school that would be integrated on one site, that would save money by not having two schools. That is how the Bill saves money. Long term, it might cost the education sector a significantly lesser amount because there will be a decrease in the duplication of services.

Mr Butler: I agree, but that is not integrated education. That is being educated in your own community, and it is an ethos. It is not about doing what integrated education set out to do. Integrated

education set out to educate young people from different backgrounds together. One of my issues with this is that the Bill is probably not ambitious enough in what it wants to quantify as being integrated education.

I am not sure who it was who said that young people have moved away from talking about Protestant and Catholic and that it is about integrating. I get that. My issue with that is that all those other schools are already doing that other integration. To be fair, it is not happening in the maintained sector. You can quantify it in the maintained sector, and it is just not happening, for a multitude of reasons, I suppose. I would like to see more ambition there.

One of the things that the Controlled Schools' Support Council (CSSC) talked about was that the sectors needed to be part of the conversation. When talking about the Bill, it is about asking how they can collectively achieve what you guys want. Believe me, we all want the same thing, but, if we are not physically educating our kids together, for me, we are not integrating. If we are not having a certain mix of Protestant, Catholic, other and neither, how are you integrating?

Mr Taylor: The EA's failings should not affect whether the Bill passes. At the end of the day, the point remains: if you have a Catholic maintained school and a controlled school in a similar area, that is not cost-effective. The solution to bringing those schools together in a way that combines their ethos is integrated education. That will provide a more balanced education system that will be more cost-effective. The ethos of integrated education is about celebrating diversity and celebrating everyone. That is the ethos of the integrated sector by design. The integrated sector by design sets out to be a place for everyone.

Mr Butler: I hear what you say. I read a document from NICIE earlier that does not stack up with that, to be honest. It said that the purpose of integrated education recognises that we have problems in Northern Ireland historically and that it is still seen to be to educate Protestants and Catholics together in greater numbers. It is littered through that that there is a Christian ethos in integrated schools. This is still predominantly a Christian country.

There are things that all the sectors can do better. A more diverse community is a healthier community, and we can do that. The integrated sector probably does it well, but I am yet to be convinced that the maintained and controlled sectors cannot equally do that. There are great examples of —

Mr Taylor: This is about numbers —.

Mr Butler: — where natural integration is happening.

Mr Taylor: This is about numbers in schools. Other sectors are trying to move away from segregation, but you cannot effectively do that if 90% of your school population is of one religion.

Mr Butler: In controlled schools, it is no more than 68%, and some integrated schools —.

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

Mr Butler: Some integrated schools are not hitting that, so I agree with you, Cohen, that it is about numbers.

Mr Taylor: There are some schools that overlap. I am a past pupil of Priory College, and it is a controlled integrated school. There are all the nuances. Every school is different, but we need to look at a broad picture here of how we provide integrated education and cost-effective education for young people in an area. Across the board, we have duplication of services. The only way to resolve that is to create a school that different kinds of people, parents and pupils can buy in to and go to together. Other sectors do not have that ability.

Mr Millar: I will jump in on the economic side of things. In 2016, Ulster University found that the cost of division was between £16.5 million and £95 million per year. When you think about the economic hit of that, that money could be redirected in the Budget. It would obviously be up to the Minister of Finance to decide where he would want that to go, but the economics are that it is definitely not sustainable and it is not the most efficient way. If we have two schools and one is from one side of the street and one is from the other side of the street, that is two buildings and two sets of staff salaries and

maintenance costs. When you go into it, we are not going to say that the efforts of the other sectors are bad — that is not what we are saying — we are saying that, from a young person's perspective, as stated in our report, integrated education is beneficial.

Mr Taylor: There is one other element with regard to ability and schools being near each other. All integrated schools are by design and by ethos all-ability schools. As much as the controlled/maintained divide, there is the grammar/non-grammar divide between schools. Having a grammar school and a post-primary school beside each other is even more common. You have to look at the fact that it is a hell of a lot more cost-effective to merge those into an all-ability integrated school. That is simply more cost-effective. The numbers do not lie.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): Robbie, I am conscious that Zac is trying to get in as well. Can we let him come in on this, and then we will bring you back in, Robbie?

Mr Butler: Yes, absolutely.

Mr Taylor-Clarke: I just want to follow up on Eoin and Cohen's points by saying that we can talk about the economics and everything today, but it is mainly about what we want our society to look like in 10, 20 or 30 years' time. I was born after the Troubles, and, 20 years after the Good Friday Agreement was signed, we are still sitting here talking about the divisions that have completely divided our society for so long. From my point of view, the point of the Integrated Education Bill is that it wants not only to bring societies together but to show that there is more that we agree on than divides us and that we can have different opinions on certain things. As the Chair said, amendments can be made.

A divided society says, "We want this school, and we want that school", and the point of integrated education is to say, "OK, we want this school and that school to come together and for everyone outside that to feel that they are welcome in that school". When people talk about the economic and fiscal impact on the taxpayer, I revert that to being about having a society, over the next five, 10 or 15 years, that is more tolerant of people of Islamic, Protestant or Catholic faith. It is about having people come together to meet each other in an educational setting rather than having to go out of their way to see other opinions outside school.

As Adam rightfully said, he made Catholic friends through SSUNI and Scripture Union Northern Ireland (SUNI). I first met my Catholic friends through the Northern Ireland Youth Forum. It goes far past the politics and economics of the political parties here today, and it goes beyond to what we want the future to look like for the next generation. I want the next kids who sit at the Committee to be proposing things that will better their education, not things that aim to get them involved with people with whom they should already be involved.

Mr Butler: That is OK. I have a final question, if that is all right, Chris.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): Yes, go ahead, Robbie.

Mr Butler: Anybody can pick this up. I genuinely do not want you to take offence at this, guys. You guys already talk differently from my generation. I was 26 in 1998, when I voted for the Good Friday Agreement. Trust me when I say that, bad as it has been for the last couple of years, it is nothing like it was then. Young people are in a different paradigm. I accept that it is not as good as it should be, but, for me, schools were only at the point where you would hit maybe 5%. To be fair, the radicalisation — if I can use that term — of young people decades ago did not happen in schools; it happened in society, where we lived.

My biggest problem is not with schools; it is that we still live in a segregated way. That feeds into the most important point, which goes back, perhaps, to Pat discussing the schools in west Belfast, where he lives. That is a predominantly Catholic area, so it is a big catchment. What would your answer be to achieving integration if school populations in those areas are 99% or 95% Catholic? Are you in favour of bussing kids out to areas to make sure that we achieve the integrated ethos of educating young people from different backgrounds together, or is it about narrowing down on the ethos of what is taught and that type of stuff?

Mr Millar: As I said to Pat, I go to a school in the heart of west Belfast. If I was asked whether I have met any Protestants through that school, I cannot say that I have at this time. Maybe there are Protestants at that school, but all I am saying is that we do not want to kick people out of schools just

to move people. That is not the aim of the Bill. Thankfully, voters such as you voted for the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement in 1998. When that comes around, we want people — especially young people — to push back against the old rhetoric and to move on. We did not ask young people that question, so, as Youth Forum members, we cannot say what young people say about that, but I would not want anyone in my school to be removed just to facilitate this.

Mr Taylor: What is being insinuated is that young people in those areas would not be in favour of an integrated school. Our report is clear: the majority of young people whom we spoke to want to go to integrated schools. Given that only 7% of young people go to integrated schools, the first step is to get young people who want to go to integrated schools into those schools. Other steps follow that, but that is not the point of the Bill. The point of the Bill is to give the access for which there is already a need. It is not about forcing people [*Inaudible owing to poor sound quality.*]

Mr Butler: To be fair, that is not what I am talking about; I am talking about communities that do not have a community mix. This goes back to what integrated education is and what we are trying to achieve. If a school has an ethos but 99% of its pupils are Catholic or Protestant, where is the real integration? Everybody keeps saying to me — not your generation but the alumni of integrated education — that they did not meet a Protestant or a Catholic until they were a certain age. That is really important to them, and it is important to every one of us. People are saying that and that we need a physical mix, which is the most important part of integrated education. That is why I say that that is the most important thing to tackle. Tackling that in isolation hits something, but we still live in segregated communities and talk about Catholic housing and Protestant housing — whatever that is — which is nonsense. We still live segregated lives, which is part of the conversation.

Mr Taylor: We already spend ridiculous amounts of money on bussing children across the country to schools with all types of names from all types of sectors. Lagan College is on a National Trust site, and about 16 buses go to it every morning from all parts of the country. That is already being done in every sector, not just in the integrated sector. It is for legislators to figure it out, but that is already being done.

Mr Butler: As well as mental health, one of the things that are important to young people is the climate. We are talking about buses and moving the kids about, so one of the other things that we will be interested in is cutting down on those journeys until we can get more sustainable transport. It is a circular discussion; there is a lot of stuff to be taken into account.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): The pupil make-up of integrated schools can change; it does not stay fixed. An integrated school with an integrated ethos in a particular area that starts with a particular pupil make-up can change that make-up as a result of being an integrated school.

Mr Butler: I get that. That is what I am trying to say: are we going for an integrated ethos, which is one thing, or are we still trying to integrate pupils in numbers? NICIE states that the reason that integrated education was created was to tackle the problems of division in the community and that it saw educating our children together as the main method for doing that, which is noble, right and proper. That is OK. That is what I said today, Chris: is there a priority list of actions? We need to tease everything out and decide how we will go about it. I will positively engage with the Bill. I have made that commitment, and I will be positive, but we need to be honest about what we are trying to achieve with it and ask what physical attributes we need to put in place to do so. I appreciate that, Chris.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): I am conscious that Adam wants to come in.

Mr Hamilton: If there is an integrated ethos first, it will attract different people to the school. There may need to be some consideration about rural issues in the Bill. I go to school in Ballyclare, where both the schools are Protestant. It seems that the entire area is made up of Protestants, so there needs to be some thought on how integration could work there. Maybe there could be more shared education in some places. I know that that sounds a bit bad. Overall, in cities like Belfast, integrated education should, in theory, work.

Mr Butler: Adam, you raise a really important point about the urban/rural divide. It would be easier to do in high-density areas where people are living close together. That is the type of thing that we need to pick up on in the legislation. We cannot treat people who live in rural areas any different to those who do not. If we have something good to offer, the offering needs to be available to everyone. That is why we need to establish whether we are going to move people about. I do not mean forcibly, but,

if people want to be educated in the controlled, maintained or integrated sectors, we need to have the offering for them. That is where we need to get to in the Bill.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): I agree with you, Robbie, about rationalisation. If memory serves me correctly, one feeder primary school for a Lisburn post-primary school in the last year was in Fermanagh because of previous attendance there. That is what we are working with. Robbie, do you want to make a final point? Does someone else want to come in? Eoin, do you want to come in?

Mr Butler: Eoin has not said anything tonight. *[Laughter.]*

Mr Millar: Robbie, young people have found that as well. As I referenced in my opening statement, when young people were asked about educating people outside of Belfast, they said that there was not enough choice. They said that the onus is on the Department. That is not what Cohen or I said; that is what one of the people who were consulted said. Consultees were also asked how integrated education can be facilitated in areas that are exclusively Protestant or Catholic, such as the areas that Adam and I may live in. Several young people raised that point.

We are the young people feeding in, and you have asked for witnesses. That is what we are here for. We are not pushing those challenges away. Our written statement, which you, Chris, and members will have received, mentions the challenges. They are there. It is not for young people to give you opinions or solutions to that problem, because we could give you a litany of issues with the existing education system.

Mr Taylor: Bussing is an issue for the Department for Infrastructure. We have been invited here to the Education Committee to talk about the Integrated Education Bill. I am aware of work that other Departments and MLAs are doing to tackle the pollutants of bussing, but I also know that a significant number of children and young people travel to school by car. We should maybe tackle the fact that some young people are not even getting the bus before we say that bussing is too dangerous to the environment to implement. There is bussing to every type of school in every sector. The onus is on MLAs to work together interdepartmentally to solve that problem and, perhaps, make buses greener in the process to enable further integration of our schools.

Mr Butler: Transport was a big issue for the young people at the first sitting of the Youth Assembly on Saturday. There were issues with availability, for instance. These are circular things. If young people are to be more mobile around schools, there needs to be a conversation about buses. You are intelligent young people. This is the thing about being a politician: you have to take everything into consideration, such as the fiscal impact and the availability of drivers.

Mr Taylor: Buses already travel to schools across the country.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): I regret that I will have to bring us to some sort of a close. Cohen, Eoin, Adam, Zac, would you like to make any closing comments?

Mr Millar: On behalf of the Youth Forum, I thank you for being here and for being attentive. It is nice that there was rationalisation from your point of view, because it is nice to get your perspective on our point of view and the research that we have presented to you. It was a good conversation in that it was open and honest, and we were frank. Much as we have our differences on policy elements, the big aim is integrating education, one way or the other, as every member has said.

Mr Taylor: Hopefully, with that in mind, MLAs will act on that desire to further integration and to achieve the broad aim of integrating education, as Diane Dodds said. I hope that the opportunity of using the Bill to further the integrated education of our young people will be taken up by MLAs.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): Adam or Zac, do you have anything else to say?

Mr Hamilton: Thank you for listening to what we had to say. It is important.

Chairperson, I will be sorry to see you go at the end of this mandate. Overall, the Bill is good, but some areas could be worked on. Overall, I support it.

Mr Taylor-Clarke: Thanks to everyone on the Committee and to you, Chris, for your good work for my East Belfast constituency. It has been a great pleasure to have you representing us.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): Thanks, Zac. I think that East Belfast has a representative in the making there anyway. [Laughter.] The thing that has struck me, folks, is the issue of parental and pupil preference. We have taken a lot of evidence now. Parental preference has been referred to a lot in the debate. What struck me today are the hopes, aspirations, requests, voices and preferences of young people and pupils.

I have one last question before we finish. The other thing that struck me is whether the Department of Education actually informs young people about educational choices and pathways. We hear a lot about parental preference and choice. To what extent does the Department of Education inform young people about their educational choices?

Mr Millar: The information that I got when I was moving through the process of choosing a post-primary school came mainly from my school and family. Due to my background and the school that I went to, which was also run by the CCMS, I was not really told, for example, about the other sectors. That is where we would rely on the Department to give that information: collate all the information that it has in an easy read version for young people — they are 11 or 12 years old when they make those decisions — and provide a simple way to understand what each sector does. We have so many. Nicola Brogan touched on the education review. It will be good. However, we need to promote that now while we still can in the current political climate.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): Yes. I do not intend to be in any way patronising when I ask this question, but, I suppose, if there had been some kind of hub, given the weight that is given to parental preference, when you were transferring from primary school to post-primary school, were you in a position to have your opinions and ideas about the post-primary school that you wanted to go to, and would that additional information have helped you in making that decision?

Mr Millar: Thankfully, I did. I know many people who did not. I know people who put down their child's first and second preferences and gave the third preference to their child. Thankfully, my parents allowed me to go to open nights, for example, and choose the schools that I wanted to go to. I did not know that integrated education was an option. I was talking to Cohen about it last night. If I had known that integrated education was an option for me and other young people, I would have looked into it more. I cannot say that I would have chosen it — I do not know — but I would have looked into it more.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): OK. I see Cohen and Adam. I did not want to prolong this too much, but it really interests me. My experience is that a young person, even at that age, can have their own opinions and hopes and, if they get the information, can process that information to help with their decision.

I will go to Cohen and then Adam. I will get into trouble for running over time, guys. Sorry.

Mr Taylor: I will try to be as brief as possible. Young people — Eoin touched on this — are in a school at primary level, which is in a sector, regardless of which one. It is really important that the Department gives pupils the information that they need to make an informed decision and to empower young people to make those decisions, because a school that is in a specific sector cannot be expected to and simply cannot give a balanced, unbiased opinion on every type of school in the country. Schools believe in their own ethos. The only people who can and should provide that information — they are not providing it now — are the Department.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): Adam, you wanted to come in.

Mr Hamilton: You mentioned what it was like when you were in primary school. When I was in primary school, the emphasis was very much on going to a controlled selective school. It was just, "You have to do your test and go to a controlled selective school". I told them that I was not doing the test. They tried to get us to do it. Then, it was almost like, because I did not do it, I was a bit dumb. That was how I felt in some ways. When my brother got his score for his Association for Quality Education (AQE) test, he could have gone to a grammar school, but he chose to go to the same school as me. The teachers were like, "Oh, are you sure?". It was very much treated like that.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): As you may have heard me say previously, that transition needs serious consideration. The information that is available is an important part of that.

Pat, are you going to get me into real trouble by looking to come back in again?

Mr Sheehan: I just wanted to come in on the issue of a young person's choice versus a parent's choice. I have three children: one is now 22, and the other two are nine and five. All of them went to Irish-medium primary schools. When my son was leaving the Irish-medium primary school, I wanted him to go to a post-primary Irish-medium school. He, on the other hand, wanted to go to a school that had a certain sporting reputation; it promoted sport, and he wanted to go there, particularly for hurling and Gaelic football. As it so happens, that was also the school closest to where I live. In the end, he got his way. It was a discussion. I could have put my foot down and said, "No, you're going where I say". I hope that most young people would have that type of discussion with their parents.

My two daughters go to an Irish-medium primary school. This goes back to our earlier discussion: I support integrated education. The education system should be more integrated. If I were asked in a survey, "Do you support integrated education?", I would say yes, but I made a choice to send my kids to the Irish-medium sector. Just because you support one type of education does not mean that you do not also support others. Other parents might say, "Well, I want my child to go to such-and-such a school because we're Catholics and there's a Catholic ethos", and some might say, "I want my child to go to that school because it produces the best GCSE and A-level results consistently".

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): Those are important discussions. Zac, if your hand is up, you are really going to get me into trouble.

Mr Taylor-Clarke: Article 28 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) states that I have the right to an education. I know that some parents out there will say, "Well, no, you're going where I say you're going". Everyone knows that from being from Northern Ireland. I had that as well. We need to look at that. The Northern Ireland Youth Forum executive committee has opinions from people ranging in age from 11 to 25. Children's opinions should be respected. I know that everyone on the Committee does that. As Pat, Diane, Nicola, Robbie and you all said, every parent will have their opinion of what they want to do, but it is just as important that the child has a say in that.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): That is a great note to finish on, Zac. I really appreciate that wind-up.

Guys, this has been one of my favourite evidence sessions ever. I am maybe getting slightly emotional as I get closer to seeing out this term of office, but I mean it. The representation that you guys have given for the Northern Ireland Youth Forum and the Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People Youth Panel tonight has been exceptional. The voice and the influence that you have given to young people has been exceptional. I hope and trust that your written and oral evidence here tonight will form a really important part of the consideration of the Integrated Education Bill. I say a huge "Thank you" for it. I am excited to see what all of you continue to achieve. You are excellent representatives for young people. Thank you.