



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Committee for Education

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Integrated Education Bill: RaISe Briefing

16 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
Mr Harry Harvey
Mr Justin McNulty

Witnesses:

Ms Niamh Devlin Northern Ireland Assembly

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): I welcome Niamh Devlin from the Assembly Research and Information Service (RaISe). Niamh, I invite you to brief Committee members on the research paper. Thank you.

Ms Niamh Devlin (Northern Ireland Assembly): Thank you, Chair. It is great to be here and to have the opportunity to brief members on the Bill paper from the Assembly Research and Information Service. By way of background, the paper was prepared to inform Committee consideration by drawing together detail on the proposals of the Bill; available perspectives from stakeholders at Committee Stage at the time of writing; empirical data; and issues for further consideration relative to the substantive Bill clauses.

In the light of the current stage of Committee consideration, this morning's briefing will focus on those areas that have received most scrutiny and attention, particularly in recent weeks. Those include some of the definitional components related to clauses 1 and 2, some of the considerations related to the duty to promote at clauses 4 and 5, and some of the issues raised about clause 7, which is about the presumption that a new school will be an integrated school.

I recognise that the Bill sponsor is to present amendments tomorrow and that those amendments may well supersede some of the information that I will provide this morning. Nonetheless, this briefing is intended to contextualise and provide a recap of some of the predominant issues raised to date, in advance of further consideration of the Bill this week. I have quite a bit of information to convey, but I will try my best not to exceed 20 minutes with my opening remarks, thus enabling time for questions.

I will commence with brief reference to clause 1 and the proposed definitions of "integrated education" and "integrated school". As you are aware, consideration to date has identified concerns that the definition of "integrated school" is too broad and incongruent with the existing legislative definition of "integrated school". It has been suggested that any school could propose that it meets the definition of an integrated school as provided for in the Bill and potentially redesignate as an integrated school

without undergoing any form of legislative process. The evidence therefore suggests that there is benefit in considering an amendment to clause 1 to clarify that an integrated school is one that has acquired its status as per the legislative procedure defined in the Education Reform (Northern Ireland) Order 1989.

Furthermore, there has been some discussion about the meaning of "integrated education", with emphasis on the education of pupils from different cultural and religious beliefs and backgrounds and on the extent to which the definition is exclusive to integrated schools. To contextualise some of the points that have been made to date, I will refer to the Department of Education's 2020-21 school census figures, which reflect the fact that 7.6% of the school population in controlled schools was from a Catholic background and 1.2% of the school population in Catholic maintained schools was from a Protestant background.

The school census data reflects a much greater balance in integrated schools. For instance, in controlled integrated settings, 42% of the school population came from a Protestant background and almost a quarter came from a Catholic background. In grant-maintained integrated schools, just over a third were from a Protestant background and just over two fifths were from a Catholic background. Around a third of pupils in controlled integrated schools designated as other, no religion or unknown religion, whilst around a quarter of pupils in grant-maintained integrated schools identified as being in the same category. It is notable that a similar proportion of pupils in controlled schools — around 28% — also designate as other, no religion or unknown religion. Beyond the integrated schools, and particularly in controlled schools, there is therefore a proportion of pupils coming from religious backgrounds other than the two main traditions.

Nonetheless, when we consider the figures further, we see that just 147 primary and post-primary schools in Northern Ireland, including integrated schools, have at least 10% of pupils from the minority tradition in the school's enrolment. When integrated schools are excluded, that number falls to 85 primary and post-primary schools, the majority of which are controlled schools, comprising 65% of schools that have at least 10% of pupils from the minority community. Just 10 non-integrated schools in total have at least 30% of pupils from the minority tradition in their enrolment.

When considering religious balance, there is benefit in reflecting on what is meant by "reasonable numbers", as has been the subject of some consideration to date. As members will be aware, clause 1 does not specify targets when referring to reasonable numbers of Protestant and Catholic pupils, and that is consistent with existing legislation. Although existing legislation refers only to reasonable numbers of Catholics and Protestants, the aim for new integrated schools and those schools wishing to transform to integrated status has been to attract at least 30% of pupils from the minority tradition in the school's enrolment. DE guidance for schools that wish to consider transforming to integrated status notes, however, that that target can:

"present challenges for individual schools, dependent on the demographics of the local area and also due to the increasing number of pupils designating as 'other' or 'no religion'."

Indeed, statistics from last year show that almost three quarters of integrated schools had a religious breakdown of pupils that fell below the threshold of 30% of pupils from the minority community. Over 40% of integrated schools, however, had at least 30% of pupils who designated as no religion, other religion or unknown religion. Stakeholder evidence to date has shown that it can take up to 10 years to get to the 30% target, even with the provision of support to improve the balance. Evidentially, there are challenges in meeting the religious balance criteria, and, in current considerations, it may be helpful to note that the existing DE guidance on transformation to integration states that it:

"will not adopt a one-size-fits-all approach to what defines a reasonable number of Catholic and Protestant pupils for a successful Transformation."

At this juncture, I will touch briefly on the purpose of integrated education, as defined in the Bill. Members will be aware the clause 2 uses the same definition of "purpose of integrated education" as that for "shared education" in the Shared Education Act 2016 and that that definition of its purpose refers to the delivery of:

"educational benefits to children and young persons"

and the promotion of:

"efficient and effective use of resources ... equality of opportunity ... good relations; and ... respect for identity, diversity and community cohesion."

Some stakeholders have suggested that the defined purpose of integrated education in clause 2 could be said for any school. It is worth noting, however, that there are synergies in the purpose as set out in clause 2 and other definitions that relate to the purpose of integrated education, particularly those definitional aspects that relate to fostering inclusion and respect for diversity and good relations. For instance, in its guidance for schools considering transformation, DE states:

"At its core, integrated education is about encouraging children and young people to recognise what they share in common, as well as understanding and respecting differences. This helps them to develop a positive attitude towards others and become aware of bias."

The Department also notes the role of integrated schools in aiming to:

"provide an environment where pupils from different community backgrounds can interact, formally and informally, on a daily basis."

It further notes:

"A large body of research data suggests that extended contact between children and young people from different community backgrounds, such as that provided in integrated schools, creates the conditions for generating mutual respect and understanding."

Indeed, a variety of studies have identified the positive impact of integrated education on intergroup relations and friendship formation, both of which have been noted by researchers as a way of helping to build peace and move towards social justice.

I am very conscious of time. I will therefore move on to clauses 4 and 5, which propose to extend DE and Education Authority (EA) statutory duties to the integrated education sector. As you are aware, delivering the duty set out in clauses 4 and 5 would require DE and EA to identify, assess and monitor demand for integrated education, including "expected future demand". The Bill proposes that that could be undertaken via:

"monitoring the number and success of applications for integrated education"

and *[Inaudible owing to poor sound quality]* an area-based audit of demand. Furthermore, the requirement to publish an integrated education strategy would necessitate the development of an action plan that is inclusive of targets and various other measurable benchmarks. Those have been proposed to include, under clause 8(3):

"(b) numbers of development proposals created and delivered for expansion of existing integrated schools;
(c) numbers of schools transforming into integrated schools;
(d) numbers of new integrated schools established;
(e) numbers of consultations issued in respect of transformed or new integrated schools".

The DE has stated that it does not promote any sector over another and that the education system supports the principle of parental preference. The collection of data related to demand, as proposed by the Bill, would require a shift in existing processes, as the Department does not assess demand for individual sectors for the purposes of long-term planning. Rather, it is noted that it is the role of the Integrated Education Fund (IEF), working with the Northern Ireland Council for Integrated Education (NICIE), to gather information on a community and parental basis about integrated education.

It has been suggested, however, by some stakeholders, including the Bill's sponsor, NICIE and the IEF, that integrated education needs to be better supported in order to identify and assess demand, moving to a more proactive identification and assessment of interest and the subsequent provisions required to address unmet demand. Those considerations have been made during the current Committee Stage and in studies related to integrated education more generally, which have noted that successive surveys and opinion polls demonstrate a high degree of support for integrated education but that that is not matched in enrolment figures and the growth of the sector.

The Committee will be familiar with the findings from the most recent surveys, which identified strong support for integrated education in Northern Ireland. That included the LucidTalk survey, which found that 71% of respondents believed that integrated education should be the main model of education in Northern Ireland. Data from the most recent Northern Ireland life and times survey revealed that 69% of respondents support their child attending a mixed-religion school, compared with 61% in the previous year. The most recent Northern Ireland young life and times survey found that 52% of young people would choose a mixed-religion school for any future children. Last week, young people from the Northern Ireland Youth Forum (NIYF) and the Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People (NICCY) Youth Panel provided the Committee with evidence that further testified to young people's support for integrated education.

Despite the expressed support, integrated school enrolments have remained fairly static over the past number of years. In 2020-21, just 7.5% of school enrolments were in an integrated setting. The literature suggests that the barrier preventing parents from exercising their choice for integrated education, as reflected in surveys but not necessarily applied to school enrolment, includes an insufficient provision to meet the demand for places and limited accessibility of integrated options.

As regards the latter, a recent study by Ulster University explored the travel distance between households in Northern Ireland and the nearest controlled, maintained and integrated schools. The study found that 28% of households are located in areas of Northern Ireland where access to integrated primary schools is limited and that 26% of households are remote from integrated post-primary schools.

On the other barriers proposed in the literature, it has been suggested that the mismatch between actual growth and support for and interest in integrated education can be explained by a lack of planning and development of the sector. In recent consideration of the Bill, some stakeholders have cited the absence of a dedicated planning authority for the integrated education sector and the subsequent impacts on promotion and growth as further impetus for the provisions in clauses 4 and 5 to be made.

The research suggests, however, that there are challenges to measuring the actual demand for integrated education, particularly when accounting for other drivers of school choice, such as the school's reputation, location, size, ethos and philosophy. Other literature suggests that, despite the high levels of support for integrated education reported in opinion polls and surveys, many parents and communities value particular school sectors.

There is therefore some uncertainty over the disparity between expressed support for integrated education and actual uptake, involving the complexities of parental choice, supply and demand. Data that RalSe requested from the Department, however, may help provide some further clarity on the extent of the demand for integrated education and the available provision to meet that demand.

I will refer to data on the success of applications to integrated and non-integrated settings in 2021. Of the year 8 pupils who applied as a first preference to an integrated post-primary school, 84.1% were admitted to that school in 2021. The corresponding figure across all schools was 84.5%. For the year 1 process, DE figures show that 96.6% of children who applied to an integrated primary school as a first preference got into that school in 2021. Across all schools, the figure was 98.3%. The success of first-preference applications for integrated primary and post-primary schools in 2021 was therefore fairly comparable to that for all schools.

In 2020-21, a higher proportion of integrated primary and post-primary schools were oversubscribed, with 17.8% of integrated primary schools being oversubscribed, compared with 11.5% of non-integrated primary schools. A total of 25% of integrated post-primary schools were oversubscribed, compared with 23.4% of non-integrated, non-grammar post-primary schools. In contrast, 82.2% of integrated primary schools were undersubscribed, compared with 86.6% of non-integrated primary schools. With the exclusion of grammar schools, a very similar proportion of integrated and non-integrated post-primary schools was undersubscribed, at 75% and 75.7%, respectively.

It is worth noting that data reveals a similar pattern in the levels of oversubscription and undersubscription in integrated and non-integrated settings over the past five years. Nonetheless, when consideration was given to the number of available places in undersubscribed schools, it is evident that integrated schools have fewer available places than non-integrated settings. Most recently, 12.4% of places in integrated primary schools were available, compared with 19.4% in non-integrated primary schools. In integrated post-primary schools, 10.3% of places were available last year, compared with 14.7% in non-integrated, non-grammar schools.

The data on subscription levels, available places and applications does not therefore provide us with a definitive picture of the levels of supply and demand for integrated education. Further consideration might be given to the practical implications of clause 5 in assessing, monitoring and ensuring that sufficient places are available to meet the demand, and the future demand, for integrated education. Those considerations might include the fact that clause 5 requires the religious demographics of an area and the available places in existing schools not to be treated as evidence of a lack of demand.

The final part of the briefing is on an aspect of the Bill that has received particular focus: clause 7. Clause 7 states that, for a new school, there will be:

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

Members will be familiar with the main concerns and issues raised about clause 7, so I will not labour the points. I will, however, provide a brief recap of some of the predominant concerns, based on stakeholder feedback to date.

First, evidence suggests that clarity needs to be provided on clause 7 on which schools fall under the category of a "new school", with the Bill sponsor having previously noted that reference to new schools does not include amalgamations. Secondly, consideration could be given to the development proposal procedure and how it is factored into clause 7, as is required by legislation in the case of the establishment of a new grant-aided school or a significant change to the character or size of an existing school. Thirdly, opportunities need to be enabled in order for communities to engage with and feed back on the presumption that a new school will be an integrated school and a mechanism to facilitate that engagement needs to be explicitly written into the Bill. You will be aware that there has been concern that the presumption in clause 7 prevents communities from having a say in the type of school that they would like in an area. The Bill sponsor has previously noted, however, that clause 7 allows for community perspectives on the presumption that a new school will be an integrated school. Community conversation is one mechanism that the Bill sponsor has suggested as a means of engaging with the community.

I will be brief in providing some background to that. Community conversation is a civic engagement tool that has been applied on different occasions in a Northern Ireland educational context. It emerged from research undertaken by Ulster University in 2017 on local education provision in the context of area planning. At that time, the Ulster University research team facilitated community conversation that centred around the best way forward for sustainable primary-school provision in two rural contexts, where there was an oversupply of school places. That exercise led to the development of the community conversation toolkit, which was launched in 2018.

The community conversation methodology has more latterly been applied in south Belfast to gather the views of parents affected or potentially affected by oversubscription of primary-school places. Community conversations are currently planned as part of the Future Schools project, which focuses on area planning and school sustainability. To date, community conversation work has been funded by the Integrated Education Fund. The community conversation methodology has been acknowledged by the EA for its potential to enable whole communities to engage meaningfully with education planning and, in particular, area planning. It should be noted that community conversation is just one model for engaging the community perspective. I simply refer to it in the briefing, given its previous application to education provision in Northern Ireland and the fact that it has been the focus of consideration to date. Other mechanisms to facilitate community engagement may include deliberative polling.

I am mindful of the time and how much of yours that I have taken up. I will close with some final points that are identified in the RaISe paper for further thought in the last stage of the Committee consideration of the Bill. Clause 3 relates to the appointment of an advisory body. As suggested in the paper, consideration could be given to the scope of the advisory body's role, the capacity and resource required to fulfil that role and the specific matters on which DE is required to consult that body. Clause 6 requires specified education bodies to include provision for integrated education in policies, strategies and plans and when designing and delivering public services. The RaISe paper presents information that suggests the need for further clarity on the type and range of education bodies that are within the scope of clause 6 and the implications for their existing statutory functions. Consideration might also be given to what is meant by a duty to "include provision for integrated education". On the requirement for an integrated education strategy, consideration might be given to some of the practical and resource implications associated with the delivery of the integrated education strategy and associated matters within the scope of the strategy.

I will refer to one final point for reflection. It has been subject to quite a bit of consideration so far: the independent review of education and how and where that sits alongside the Bill. Members will be aware that the terms of reference for the independent review of education identify 15 recommendations from the review of integrated education that are proposed to be considered in the upcoming review. It is evident that some tie in with the Bill's objectives. For instance, recommendation 1 is:

"DE reviews the existing legal definition of 'integrated' education ... in light of Northern Ireland's changing demographic and increasing diversity."

Recommendation 3 is that there should be a requirement on DE to report to the Assembly biennially on:

"the statutory duty to encourage, facilitate and promote integrated education."

Recommendation 7 is:

"the EA should pro-actively plan, set objectives for, and monitor progress towards, increasing the places available in the integrated sector."

Recommendations 8 to 10 relate to the undertaking of an audit of demand for places in existing integrated schools and using the outcome of the audit as a basis on which to plan for the growth of integrated education.

As we know, some have suggested that the Bill pre-empts the findings of the review. Others query when the review will be undertaken and the range of matters within its scope, suggesting that the objectives of the Bill are required to be fulfilled at pace. I am not in a position to comment either way. I thought, however, in the context of the Committee's final consideration, that there may be merit in highlighting some of the recommendations from the review of integrated education, which it is suggested that the upcoming independent review consider.

I thank you very much for your time. I have taken up quite a bit of it. I am happy to take questions on the briefing or on any part of the paper.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): Thanks, Niamh. That was incredibly comprehensive. It is a really helpful chart covering lots of the evidence that we have taken to date, some of the issues raised and some of the ways through some of those issues. It is really helpful data for setting the Bill in context. There are some really interesting figures for us to consider.

I will move straight to questions from members, in order to give us time to look at some of the matters raised. I have one quick question. Some querying of the veracity of polling has occurred during the evidence session. I ask this question, but I know the answer to it: is it correct that the Northern Ireland life and times survey is frequently used by the Executive Office when considering a number of policy issues, not least in its 'Good Relations Indicators' papers?

Ms Devlin: I cannot speak to how that evidence has been used, but it is certainly used for a variety of purposes and by a variety of sectors.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): OK. Thanks. We are going to move into closed session at this stage to take members' questions.