

5 February, 2021

Ad Hoc Committee on a Bill of Rights for N.I
Communications Office,
B4, Parliament Buildings,
Stormont Estate,
Belfast
BT4 3XX.

Dear Sir or Madam,

Thank you for the opportunity to respond to the Bill of Rights for Northern Ireland Consultation. We would have liked to have provided a more detailed response, however given the volume of consultations across the education sector at present, this has not been possible.

We have chosen to respond to those rights that are of particular relevance to our area of work. We note that in framing what might be included in a Bill of Rights for NI, the Committee outlines that these extra rights *'should reflect the 'particular circumstances' of Northern Ireland, and the 'principles of mutual respect for the identity and ethos of both communities and parity of esteem' - valuing both main communities in Northern Ireland equally'*.

The Northern Ireland Council for Integrated Education (NICIE) is supportive of this statement which aligns well with our vision:

A society where children are

- educated together;
- confident to express their own identity and culture; and
- respectful of, and prepared to engage with, the identity and culture of others.

We recognise the debate around what constitutes the 'particular circumstances' of Northern Ireland is complicated. In the outworking of our vision, NICIE affirms the Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission (NIHRC) proposals for the **right to education** which were provided to the Secretary of State in 2009. These included supplementing the ECHR Protocol 1, Article 2 with the following provisions:

1. Education in all its forms must be directed towards the promotion of human rights, equality, dignity of the person, respect for diversity and tolerance.
2. No child shall be denied the right to access the full Northern Ireland education curriculum.

Most children in Northern Ireland attend schools which are largely separated along religious lines. In October 2019 there were 806 primary and 193 post primary schools in Northern Ireland. Excluding the 65 Integrated schools, of the remaining schools only 86 have a mix of at least 10% of both Protestants and Catholics in them. Thus under 9% of the schools have that mix, 62 primary and 24 post-primary. Including the Integrated schools, the number with at least 10% Protestant and 10% Catholic increases to 147, under 15% of the total number of schools.

We would suggest that in order to reflect the particular circumstances of Northern Ireland, a parent's right to access and choose an Integrated Education for their child should be included as a specific right. In the 2018/19 school year, 21% of children who had listed an Integrated post-primary school as their first preference were not able to be accommodated.

We would contend that Integrated Education should constitute a 'philosophical conviction' for the purposes of Protocol 1 Article 2 of the ECHR. Whilst this has not been fully tested in domestic courts, inclusion in a Bill of Rights for Northern Ireland would provide the necessary protection. This should sit alongside protecting the right of parents who wish their child to attend a school aligned with other religions or philosophies and as such is consistent with the principles of mutual respect and parity of esteem.

We thank the Ad Hoc Committee for their important work and look forward to further progress.

Yours sincerely



Roisin Marshall
Chief Executive Officer
Northern Ireland Council for Integrated Education