



Date: 4th October 2021

Committee for Education
Room 205, Parliament Buildings,
Ballymiscaw,
Stormont,
Belfast,
BT4 3XX

Dear Ms Treanor,

The Transferor Representatives' Council (TRC) has considered the Integrated Education Bill and would wish to make the following comments:

1. The TRC believes in fairness and openness to all pupils. The TRC is concerned that the policy objectives of this Bill are not fair and have the potential to create an imbalance amongst sectors within education in Northern Ireland. By placing one sector, in this case the Integrated Sector, above all others, the TRC is concerned that this will conversely mitigate against diversity and fully inclusive education. The TRC believes that the best approach is for the Area Planning process to identify the best solutions for education provision within local communities, taking all sectoral options into account. Integration occurs naturally within the education system where demographics lend themselves to mixing in schools. Controlled Schools in particular include a wide range of religious and socio- economic backgrounds.
2. The TRC is concerned that the provisions of this Bill will channel and skew resources to one sector, with a potential negative impact on children and young people educated in other sectors, for example on those schools awaiting new buildings or significant redevelopment of existing infrastructure.
3. The TRC consider the objectives of the Bill to be ineffective for the following reasons:
 - a. Concern that the Department will be compelled to channel resources to one sector, to the detriment of the educational outcomes for children and young people in other sectors.
 - b. To ensure an effective Area Planning process an audit of demand incorporating all sectors would be more appropriate

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- c. As above, any reporting relating to demand should encompass all sectors. This would be part of effective and efficient Area Planning taking account of demographic changes across Northern Ireland
 - d. The underlying assumptions of the Bill remove choice from parents and local communities.
 - e. All sectors should be reported on equally.
 - f. To have a strategy for just one sector would create an imbalance, and focus valuable and scarce resources on one aspect of education, to the potential detriment of other children and young people in other sectors. Funding should be fair for all sectors and not be dedicated to only one sector. Funding might be better directed to targeting educational underachievement and seeking better educational outcomes across the school system, rather than focusing on one sector in particular.
 - g. The TRC regrets the perception created by this policy objective that sectors, other than the integrated sector, are not inclusive. The TRC would be interested to learn more about the engagement the Bill sponsor has had with the Initial Teacher Training providers on this specific proposal, and evidence which suggests that student teachers are not receiving instruction on how to be inclusive.
 - h. All schools should be supported equally in strengthening their ethos. The TRC welcome the definition of ethos as described by NICIE of an integrated school being essentially Christian in character, welcoming those of all faiths and none.
 - i. The TRC supports inspection of ethos in all schools within agreed parameters.
4. This Bill has the potential to create an uneven playing field, be detrimental to the educational outcomes for children and young people in other sectors, and begin to remove parental choice from educational choices. The TRC believes a diverse system produces a more inclusive education.
5. Aside from 1(c) the “meaning of integrated education” within Clause 1 simply replicates what is included section 2 of the Shared Education Act 2016. It is unclear how this appropriation of what already exists elsewhere in legislation is helpful. Additionally Clause 7(2) suggests that religious demographics of an area are not to be treated as a special circumstance for the purpose of rebutting the presumption that a new school will be an integrated school. This would appear to be in contradiction to the meaning of integrated education that reasonable numbers of Protestants and Catholics are educated together. Finally this definition ignores the fact that many other schools which are not formally labelled as ‘integrated’ have pupils from different backgrounds being taught together

every day. The TRC notes that NICIE include 'Christian in character' as part of its own definition of an integrated school. This important foundation appears to have been omitted by the Bill sponsor.

6. The definition proposed for an "integrated school" could be applied to many schools in other sectors. This definition is not unique to one sector of education within Northern Ireland. Controlled Schools for example are 'open to all faiths and none... providing high quality education for children and young people to enable them to learn, develop and grow together'. All schools aspire to each of the identified purposes.
7. The Department of Education oversees Area Planning – the process of strategic planning of primary and post-primary provision. In fulfilling its role as a fair arbitrator and deliverer of area planning the Department should not be promoting one form of education provision over another. The Education Authority supports all schools equally and should not be promoting any sector over another to ensure fairness of provision and equality of opportunity for all children and young people. The Northern Ireland Council for Integrated Education already has duty to promote integrated education. To bring this function into the Department would result in duplication of effort and resources.
8. Section (b) of Clause 5 does not seem viable in terms of current Area Planning policy, particularly around sustainability. There is no rationale for the caveats for meeting demand which seem to create an unbalanced system that does not allow for the choice of both students and parents.
9. The TRC is concerned that Clause 6 unworkable. Each of the education bodies has its own ethos and it would be unreasonable to expect those bodies to be compelled to include provision for integrated education. If this clause was to remain part of the legislation the TRC suggests that the phrase "must include provision for integrated education" could be amended to read "should give consideration to provision for integrated education".
10. At the most basic level the presumption that a new school, (as proposed by clause 7 of the draft Bill), will be an 'integrated' school removes parental choice. It also denies the reality that schools outside of the integrated sector may also be naturally integrated but associated with a different sectoral body. The type of school is only a small element in the overall educational experience and outcomes for pupils. There is a need to seek clarification as to the definition of "special circumstances" given that the examples of what are not to be regarded as "special circumstances" raise concerns of waste and duplication with the education sector as a whole.

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11. Northern Ireland has a diverse education system and it would be to the detriment of other sectors if the Department were to be compelled to publish a strategy concerning only one of those sectors. While the education system here may need to be reformed, it seems premature to be introducing this legislation in advance of the anticipated Independent Review of Education. The Department should be reporting on all aspects of education in Northern Ireland equally.
12. Clause 10 appears to be a catch-all for a range of issues some of which would be better suited as policy and guidance from the Department rather than as legislative proposals. The TRC supports the provision for inclusion and diversity training for all teachers, school governors, non-teaching school staff and education bodies. We re-iterate that prioritising one sector above the others does not seem to promote the equity and diversity professed to be a consequence of the introduction of this legislation.
13. Should this legislation be passed it would be important for the Department of Education to give clear guidance to other education bodies on its operation and implications. However we would reiterate earlier comments that each education body has its own ethos, and it would be unreasonable to expect those bodies to be compelled to act in ways which would mitigate against that ethos, or give precedence to an ethos other than its own.
14. It is disingenuous to describe the provisions within Clause 12 as minor and technical. In fact this proposal completely re-defines the meaning of an “integrated” school diluting the definition of such that all schools could be called integrated schools overnight.
15. Some clarity is required regarding the list of bodies included in Clause 13. The Youth Council for Northern Ireland was stood down in 2019 and even when in operation had no jurisdiction in any school. NICCEA acts as both an examining body and curriculum support body. Therefore its role would need to be further defined in relation to this legislation so as not to impact on their impartial status. There is no mention of the Irish Medium Sector, should they not be included?

The TRC would be delighted to engage with the Education Committee in person if required during the Committee’s deliberations on the Bill.

Please contact me if you require any further clarification of these points.

Yours sincerely

Dr Peter Hamill Secretary to the TRC

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