



**Controlled Schools' Support Council**  
**2<sup>nd</sup> floor, Main Building**  
**Stranmillis University College**  
**Belfast, BT9 5DY**  
**T: 028 9531 3030**  
**E [info@csscni.org.uk](mailto:info@csscni.org.uk)**

8 October 2021

Dear sir/madam

**Re: Northern Ireland Assembly Committee for Education call for evidence – Integrated Education Bill Inquiry**

The Controlled School's Support Council (CSSC) is pleased to take this opportunity to respond to the Committee Stage of the Integrated Education Bill.

The controlled sector is the largest education sector in Northern Ireland, comprising of 49% of all schools, over 146,000 pupils and 8,600 teachers<sup>1</sup>.

The sector is open to all faiths and none, providing high quality education for children and young people to enable them to learn, develop and grow together, within the ethos of non-denominational Christian values and principles.

Please find below CSSC's comments on the various implications of the Bill.

**Definition of "integrated education"**

The definition of "integrated education" and an "integrated school" proposed in clause 1 of the draft Bill is not only a fundamental change to the existing definition of integrated education in legislation, but its inclusion of pupils with different abilities and experiences of socio-deprivation is a defining factor of the controlled sector. Controlled schools welcome pupils from all cultures and religious beliefs, including pupils from all backgrounds and abilities. In the controlled sector:

- 61% of pupils in controlled schools are Protestant, 10% are Catholic, 29% are 'other'.
- 39.5% of newcomer pupils in Northern Ireland attend controlled schools.
- 28% of controlled pupils are entitled to free school meals.

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<sup>1</sup> 2020/21

Controlled schools are often reflective of the communities they are located in, examples include controlled schools which have a higher proportion of Catholic compared to Protestant pupils or where the majority of pupils are newcomer pupils. Indeed in 55% of controlled primary and post primary schools there are more than 30% of pupils identifying as Catholic or “other”.

Controlled schools with their ethos of welcoming pupils from all backgrounds in an environment characterised by diversity and respect already meet the definition proposed in the Integrated Education Bill.

The current wording of the draft Bill also raises questions about the expected “reasonable numbers” of Protestant and Catholic children and young persons in integrated schools. In addition, a measure of how a school “intentionally promotes” integration must also be outlined, particularly in the context of the controlled schools’ ethos which welcomes pupils from all backgrounds and promotes integration.

### **The purpose of integrated education**

Clause 2 of the draft Bill outlines that the purpose of integrated education is:

- to deliver educational benefits to children and young persons;
- to promote the efficient and effective use of resources;
- to promote equality of opportunity;
- to promote good relations; and
- to promote respect for identity, diversity and community cohesion.

Again, CSSC would argue that the purposes outlined for integrated education in the Bill are the existing purposes of controlled education, and indeed should also be the purpose of all education in Northern Ireland.

### **Promotion of integrated education**

Clause 4 proposes to extend the existing statutory requirements on the Department of Education (DE) and the Education Authority (EA) from “encourage and facilitate integrated education”, to “encourage, facilitate and promote”.

The draft Bill is vague on the definition of “integrated education” and is vague on whether controlled schools are already integrated. Depending on the definition of “integrated” being used, clause 4 could potentially, put an unfair emphasis on one area of education and therefore compromise DE and EA’s roles to promote and provide education for all.

In addition, clause 5 calls for changes in the overall objective of the area planning process – placing the focus on the provision of integrated schools and the intention to increase the demand for integrated education.

This could have implications for area planning, the provision of new schools and open enrolment. It could give one type of education a higher position and priority over other types of education. This conflicts with the role of DE and EA, dilutes the role of advocacy bodies for the other sectors and impacts upon parental preference.

### **The role of education bodies**

In addition to the changes proposed for DE and EA in clause 4, clause 6 calls for other education bodies to include provision for integrated education in their strategies, plans and policies. This would appear to be an unreasonable and unworkable request for a number of the designated education bodies.

Once again the Controlled Schools’ Support Council, despite representing 49% of schools in Northern Ireland, is not listed here amongst the list of other education bodies.

### **New schools**

Clause 7 proposes that new schools which are intended to be established should be integrated schools.

Again this dramatically changes the objective of the area planning process in Northern Ireland. It also impacts on parental preference and appears to devalue all education which is not considered to meet a particular definition of integrated.

There is also a need for the definition of the “special circumstances” referenced in the clause as this is fundamental to the outworking of the proposal.

## **Integrated Education Strategy**

Clause 8 calls for an integrated education strategy and clause 9 requires DE to publish a biennial report on integrated education.

CSSC believes that time and resource would be better spent promoting and encouraging diversity in existing schools. The ethos of controlled schools is to welcome pupils from all faiths and none, all backgrounds and abilities. Diversity and integration can be achieved in existing schools, shared education plays a major role in this. This is an area which requires more promotion, support and investment. A significant amount of time and investment is currently being committed to the development of shared education campuses. The question needs to be asked on how this will align.

### **In summary**

The controlled sector is open to all faiths and none, providing high quality education for children and young people to enable them to learn, develop and grow together, within the ethos of non-denominational Christian values and principles. One of CSSC's main concerns regarding the Integrated Education Bill is that it would result in the secularisation of controlled schools and the removal of their Christian ethos.

In its current form the Bill does not take into account the diversity of the controlled sector and neither does it acknowledge that the ethos of the controlled sector is "open to all". The New Decade New Approach priority to support educating our children and young people of different backgrounds together in the classroom is delivered on a daily basis in controlled schools and in the shared education partnerships which they are a part of.

As outlined above, there are potentially wider implications in the Bill in relation to area planning, the provision of new schools and open enrolment. The result would be the creation and prioritisation of one sector over all others which would have an adverse effect on the quality of the education provision in all other schools.



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The intention that all new schools should be integrated is made on the false assumption that controlled schools are single-identity schools and would lead to the removal of parental preference in the education of children and young people – therefore conflicting the existing open enrolment legislation.

In addition, this Bill comes at a point when the education system in Northern Ireland is due to undergo an extensive review, therefore it seems inappropriate to examine and propose substantial changes to one aspect of the education system at this time.

We are happy to provide further information on this response as required.

Yours faithfully

Mark Baker  
Chief Executive