

8 October 2021

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Room 205, Parliament Buildings,  
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Belfast  
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**By email only** [committee.education@niassembly.gov.uk](mailto:committee.education@niassembly.gov.uk)

Dear Ms Treanor

### **Integrated Education Bill – Committee for Education: Call for Evidence**

We welcome the opportunity to respond to the Committee for Education's call for evidence on the Integrated Education Bill. We had the opportunity to discuss the initial proposal with Ms. Armstrong MLA last year.

This response provides some general comments, specific comments and queries relating to the content of the Bill, and links to a number of Equality Commission policy recommendations.

1. We welcome the call for evidence, which will provide a wide range of stakeholders, particularly those which would have new duties should the Bill be passed, with the opportunity to set out their views. In particular, views on the impact of Clause 8 – Integrated Education Strategy, from representatives of other education sectors, are an important consideration. In general terms, the Commission has highlighted the need to engage with pupils, parents, education providers and wider stakeholders.
2. The Commission recognises the important role that education can play in cultural development - providing exposure to literature, language, sport, activities, art, music etc. The Commission also recognises the crucial role that schools have in contributing to the reconciliation of our society. This is not solely a job for schools, but schools do play a critical role.
3. The Commission's long standing view is that societal mixing and social cohesion is limited by separation, including in education provision. It is the Commission's view that an education system, where sharing impacts meaningfully and substantively on every learner, has a key role to play in advancing a shared society. In the context of a shared society, we believe that shared services, shared housing and shared spaces have the potential to enhance and be enhanced by sharing and integration within the education system.

4. It is neither the Commission's intent nor remit to advocate a specific model or models of education. However, we welcome any contribution that the Bill would make to creating a system of education that would:
  - Ensure that sharing **impacts meaningfully and substantively on every learner**
  - Ensure that a shared experience should be **central to the education system as a whole**,
  - Encompass **all stages of educational provision** – pre-school; early years; primary; post-primary; special needs; and tertiary levels.
  - Routinely teach learners together via **a shared curriculum in shared classes**.
  - Better provide learners with **shared awareness**, understanding and experience of the **value and range of diverse cultures, identities and backgrounds** in Northern Ireland; while also enabling learners from different cultures/communities to **experience a shared society**.
5. That said, ensuring sharing is central to the education system as a whole should not be seen to undermine the rights of parents to make choices regarding their child's attendance at specific *schools*, nor for the provision of faith-based schools. However such considerations cannot overshadow the importance of a *system* of education as a whole seeking to maximise equality of opportunity and good relations.
6. The Commission considers that sharing in education not only has the potential to provide meaningful and sustainable relations between pupils of different cultures and backgrounds, but also to advance equality of opportunity. This includes the need for a particular focus on the steps required to facilitate improved educational attainment for those groups identified as being at particular disadvantage.
7. There are clear opportunities to learn lessons from experiences of Integrated and shared education to date; and to enhance existing mechanisms. The Commission has long standing positions<sup>1 2 3</sup> on the range of steps that could be taken to progress sharing and good relations in education. We have also highlighted the opportunity to better overcome known barriers, recommending that the Department of Education use lessons drawn from the research<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> The Good Relations Forum (2010): Ensuring the Good Relations Work in our Schools Counts – A Strategy to meet our needs for the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Available at <http://www.equalityni.org/ECNI/media/ECNI/Publications/Delivering%20Equality/EnsuringGoodRelationsWorkinourSchoolsCountsApr2010.pdf>

<sup>2</sup> ECNI (2012), [Submission to the Ministerial Advisory Group on Advancing Shared Education, November 2012](#)

<sup>3</sup> ECNI (2104) Written Evidence to NI Assembly Education Committee 'Inquiry into Shared Education and Integrated Education', October 2014

<sup>4</sup> Our 2012 Submission to the Ministerial Advisory Group on Shared Education summarises a range of research regarding integrated education and the QUB Shared Education Programme.

regarding sharing in education – including, for example, that relating to Integrated Education Model and the QUB Shared Education Programme<sup>5</sup>.

8. It is currently unclear how it is envisaged this Bill, if enacted, would impact upon the work and recommendations of the recently established Independent Review of Education.
9. We note the broad definition of integrated education at Clause 1, as ‘the education together, in an integrated school of:
  - (a) those of different cultures and religious beliefs and of none, including reasonable numbers of both Protestant and Roman Catholic children or young persons;
  - (b) those who are experiencing socio-economic deprivation and those who are not; and
  - (c) those of different abilities.’
10. The Commission is on record that we consider that the core focus of sharing in education should be on ensuring meaningful and sustained sharing between learners of different community backgrounds; while also incentivising sharing across all equality grounds, including to address the socio-economic issues which are experienced by a number of equality groups.
11. We note in Clause 2 that the purpose of integrated education includes:
  - (a) to deliver educational benefits to children and young persons;
  - (b) to promote the efficient and effective use of resources;
  - (c) to promote equality of opportunity;
  - (d) to promote good relations; and
  - (e) to promote respect for identity, diversity and community cohesion.
12. The Commission has highlighted that research has identified educational, economic and societal benefits of sharing in education. Sharing can facilitate pupils to access the full curriculum and a wider range of educational, sporting and cultural experiences; offer opportunities to improve standards and outcomes for all learners; maximise sustainability and reduce costs; and foster good relations by providing an environment for longer term-sustained contact for both teachers and learners.
13. The Commission considers that sharing in education, across the full range of equality grounds has the potential to advance equality of opportunity - improving educational access and attainment for pupils from a diverse range of backgrounds and abilities. This will however necessitate a particular focus in practice on the steps required to facilitate improved educational attainment

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<sup>5</sup> The SEP encourages schools to make cross-sectoral collaborations an integral part of school life, creating enhanced educational and personal development opportunities for everyone involved. The SEP has, since 2007, involved over 100 schools at Post-Primary and Primary level in cross-sectoral collaboration concentrating on substantive, curriculum based activities. In the year beginning Sep 2010, SEP2 partnerships involved over 4,000 students across Northern Ireland. See <http://www.schoolsworkingtogether.co.uk/>

for those groups identified as being at particular disadvantage.

14. The Commission also considers that sharing in education has an important role to play in advancing good relations. The Commission remains of the view that the overall system of education provision in Northern Ireland has an important role to play, not only in the development of the child, but in advancing cohesion, sharing and integration across all equality grounds.
15. At Clause 5(1)(b) the Bill states: '*A reference to the promotion of integrated education is a reference to providing sufficient places in integrated schools to meet the demand for integrated education (including expected future demand, and without treating the religious demographics of an area or spare places in existing schools as evidence of lack of demand for integrated education)*'.
16. While recognising the overall focus of this clause on *promoting* integrated education, and the importance of seeking to meet expected future demand, consideration should be given to how the existence of spare places in existing schools can be reconciled with ensuring an efficient and cost effective school estate.
17. Clause 7 provides for a presumption that any new school will be integrated, unless inappropriate due to 'special circumstances'. While the text sets out the criteria not to be taken into account, it would be beneficial to convey the criteria that might constitute special circumstances and/or the situations in which they might apply.
18. We note provisions for the creation of a Strategy, resourced action plan, and provisions for review and reporting. In general terms, we consider that the allocation of responsibilities needs to be explicit and welcome where this is the case.
19. We also consider that clear outcome goals should be established to direct and measure progress. We highlight the importance of establishing clear measures and goals, linking actions, outputs, outcomes and impacts, and ensuring that such measures move beyond simply describing policy outputs to measure the outcomes and impacts that we would expect to see in society, for example - shared awareness, understanding and experience of the value and range of diverse cultures, identities and backgrounds in Northern Ireland.
20. More broadly, we reiterate that action is needed to address wider issues in education – academic selection; teacher training and employment; and patterns of enrolment. We reiterate our concern about academic selection at age 11; our recommendations for the removal of the teacher's exception under FETO; our calls for greater sharing and collaboration in teacher training; and for actions to better understanding the reasons for, and impacts of, any differential patterns of enrolment to education providers.
21. Finally, we note that queries regarding potential equality impacts of the Bill were raised during the second reading of the Bill. The Section 75 duties apply

to designated public authorities, requiring them to pay an appropriate level of regard to the duties (the need to promote equality of opportunity and the desirability of promoting good relations) when developing new and reviewing existing policies. The duty to screen/carry out an EQIA would fall to the relevant department/public authority should the Private Members Bill become legislation and require implementation by that public authority.

### **ECNI policy recommendations and consultation response**

22. The Committee may find the following of wider assistance.

[ECNI - Sharing in Education](#)

[ECNI - Equality in Education Policy Positions](#)

[ECNI, 2016, Response to the DENI Review of Integrated Education](#)

We trust that the input is helpful and are happy to provide further input should that be beneficial to the Committee.

Yours sincerely



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