



# Call for Evidence, Integrated Education Bill Inquiry 2021, NSS response

Submitted to: [committee.education@niassembly.gov.uk](mailto:committee.education@niassembly.gov.uk) and via [consult.nia-yourassembly.org.uk/education/integrated-education-bill](https://consult.nia-yourassembly.org.uk/education/integrated-education-bill)

1. This submission is made by the National Secular Society (NSS). The NSS is a not-for-profit non-governmental organisation founded in 1866, funded by its members and by donations. We advocate for separation of religion and state and promote secularism as the best means of creating a society in which people of all religions and none can live together fairly and cohesively. We seek a diverse society where all are free to practise their faith, change it, or to have no faith at all. We uphold the universality of individual Human Rights, which should never be overridden on the grounds of religion, tradition or culture.

## 6. Do you agree with the policy objectives of the Bill?

2. **Yes.**

3. We believe that a secular and inclusive education system is the best means to foster a fair, open, and cohesive society, in which people of all religions and none can live together as equal citizens. It is also the surest guarantor of freedom of religion or belief for pupils and their families. We therefore want to see an inclusive education system, free from any form of religious privilege, discrimination, or control.
4. Northern Ireland's system of de facto religiously segregated schools is grossly inefficient and perpetuates sectarian division through the generations. Integrated schools are extremely popular and the best current hope for the ambition of inclusively educating children of all backgrounds together. However, progress towards a more integrated system remains far too slow, and access to an integrated school remains unobtainable for most families.
5. The extent to which state education is religiously segregated in Northern Ireland is unique, both in the UK and among developed nations. Integrated education can be seen as a steppingstone towards true inclusion and equality, it is certainly the only route open in this direction under the current framework.
6. Citizens of Northern Ireland have long heard platitudes about integrated education and educating children together. The time has come for lawmakers to support tangible action to achieve that objective.

## 7. Do you think the provisions of the Bill will be effective in achieving the policy objectives?

7. **Yes.**

8. The policy provisions of the Bill reflect long held and widely supported aims of the integrated education movement.

9. Do you foresee any unintended consequences of any of the policy objectives of the Bill?

9. No.

10. The definition of “integrated education” comprises education together of pupils reflecting diversity in cultural and religious belief (including reasonable numbers of Protestant and Catholic pupils); socio-economic diversity; and diversity of ability. Do you feel this definition of “integrated education” is sufficient?

10. Yes

11. Please describe and explain any amendments you would propose to this definition of "integrated education".

11. The definition accords with public understanding. Though the public may associate many other positive characteristics with integrated education, the definition covers the heart of the matter, which should be supported by the DoE, while allowing integrated schools to build on this definition to create their individual inclusive ethos.

12. While the language is functional, and its intent worthy, minor amendments could make it more inclusive and accurate.

13. The phrase “those of different cultures and religious beliefs and of none”, would be better replaced with “those of different cultural, religious or belief backgrounds”. This is more accurate as demographic assessments are usually based on parents’ self-declaration rather than pupils, and it tends to focus on religious identity rather than belief. This language better respects children and young people’s rights to define their own religious identity and beliefs. Northern Ireland’s growing minority of non-religious families are also defined by positive belief backgrounds, rather than simply not having religious beliefs.

14. Under the same reasoning, the phrase “both Protestant and Roman Catholic children or young persons”, would be better replaced with “children or young persons from both Protestant and Roman Catholic backgrounds”.

12. An “integrated school” is defined as a school which promotes, protects, and improves an ethos of diversity, respect and understanding of culture, religious belief and non, socio-economic experience and all abilities. Do you feel the definition of an “integrated school” is sufficient?

15. Yes

13. Please describe and explain any amendments you would propose to this definition of an "integrated school".

16. While the language is functional and positively encapsulates the core definition of an integrated school, it could be improved with similar tweaks to those mentioned above.

17. The phrase “those of different cultures and religious beliefs and of none”, would be better replaced with “those of different cultural, religious or belief backgrounds”.

18. We also strongly recommend the inclusion of “, including” as in: “...respect and understanding\*, including\* between those of different...” This reflects the integrated ethos’ wider commitment to

inclusive education; they see educating pupils of different backgrounds as a key aspect of such inclusion.

15. Would you amend this list of purposes?

19. Yes.

16. Please describe and explain any amendments you would propose in the Clause 2 list of purposes. List any proposed amendments and why.

20. While we strongly support these core purposes of integrated education, we would amend (e) to include: “to promote respect for identity, diversity, equality and human rights, and community cohesion”

18. Do you consider this consultation to be a reasonable duty?

21. Yes.

21. Clause 4 extends the existing statutory requirements on the Department and the Education Authority to “encourage and facilitate integrated education”, to that to “encourage, facilitate and promote” it. Please give your comments on this and describe and explain any amendments on the proposed new requirements you would put forward.

22. Efforts to integrate Northern Ireland’s education system remain woefully slow, something for which the Department must take at least some responsibility. Strengthening the language in the Department’s statutory duty would help to prioritise integrated education. While the Department does need to be given flexibility in its approach, some prescription (including minimum targets) is needed to prevent institutional inertia.

23. Legislating to add the duty to “promote” integrated education is necessary to fulfil Northern Ireland’s obligations under the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, the UN committee for which has called on the government to: “actively promote a fully integrated education system and carefully monitor the provision of shared education, with the participation of children, in order to ensure that it facilitates social integration”.

23. As per Clause 5's definition of the term “promotion”, do you consider the duty to promote to be a reasonable duty?

24. Yes.

25. Please provide any other comments on Clause 5.

25. We support this definition of the term “promotion”, to be read alongside the subsequent clauses in the Bill.

26. Do you consider this to be a reasonable requirement?

26. Yes.

29. Do you consider this Clause 7 measure to be reasonable?

27. Yes.

31. Please provide any other comments on Clause 7.

28. The de facto segregation across the non-integrated sector in Northern Ireland’s education system creates the gross inefficiencies of dozens of [“isolated pairs”](#) (controlled and maintained schools in

close proximity but each unsustainably undersubscribed), tens of thousands of empty school places and tens of millions of pounds in additional costs that could otherwise improve schools.

29. Demand for additional integrated school places remains [high across the country](#), however the ability and need to supply new school places is highly constrained. Adding additional non-integrated schools exacerbates these problems. These problems were built up over decades of a presumption *against* integrated schools. If the ambition is to move towards a far more integrated system, this presumption must be reversed.

30. As integrated schools are attractive to families from all religious backgrounds, the religious demographics of an area are not a special circumstance which would make them unsuitable in particular settings.

31. The clause will not exclude any genuinely exceptional circumstances where a new school is needed, but an integrated school is not practicable.

32. Do you consider this to be a reasonable measure in attaining the policy objectives of the Bill?

**32. Yes.**

34. Please provide any other comments on Clause 8.

33. We have long supported a duty on the DoE to clearly set out what steps and tangible actions it is taking to promote integrated education. Such a strategy and action plan are necessary to restore public belief that integrated education is a genuine priority for the DoE.

35. Do you consider this to be a reasonable measure in monitoring implementation of the Bill?

**34. Yes.**

36. Please elaborate regarding Clause 9. Please tell us more about why you consider this to be a reasonable measure or not.

35. The two-year reporting period provides sufficient time for significant changes including transformation processes to take place. It also allows progress to be monitored and improved within the term of an assembly.

38. Do you agree with the power delegated to the Department to make regulations?

**36. Yes.**

39. Do you consider that the subsection 2 list of matters in Clause 10, on which regulations can be made, is sufficient?

**37. Yes.**

40. Do you consider that this level of Assembly control is appropriate for regulations about these matters?

**38. Yes.**

43. Do you consider this Clause 11 provision to be reasonable in supporting the policy objectives of the bill?

**39. Yes.**

46. Do you agree that this is a minor and technical provision?

40. Yes.

49. Do you agree that this is a minor and technical provision?

41. Yes.

52. Do you agree that six months is a reasonable period in which necessary regulations, guidance and other arrangements can be made to prepare for the provisions of the bill to be implemented?

42. Yes.

55. Do you agree that this is a reasonable title for the subject matter of the bill?

43. Yes.

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