

Labour Party in Northern Ireland (LPNI) submission to the consultation on the Integrated Education Bill.

We in the LPNI have always supported the principle of Integrated Education and we believe that this Integrated Education Bill when enacted can deliver a range of social and educational benefits, but also financial benefits.

Building a system of education that better reflects a society in which more and more people are defining themselves differently, considering the growing number of ethnic minority families and an increased number of mixed marriages and mixed relationships. Enabling children and young people to experience a wider mix of relationships and friendships both inside and outside school. Allowing children to develop their own identity as opposed to developing an identity because of their schooling.

Creating more opportunities for integrated education, with a view to a single overarching education system in Northern Ireland, is a crucial part of improving good relations amongst and for our young people, breaking the cycle of sectarianism and ensuring that the environment of our schools reflects the increasing diversity of our society.

Making it easier to standardise the quality of education and therefore to address inequalities. Protecting local provision, especially where separate schools are under pressure. Allowing for stabilisation of enrolment numbers. Making it easier for a wider choice of subjects to be sustained. Providing a wider choice for pupils in terms of leisure, cultural and sporting activities.

Reducing the cost of maintaining around 70,000 empty school places thereby enabling funding to be directed toward pupils rather than sustaining a divided school estate. This improving sustainability making it easier to fund the modernisation of the school estate. Achieving financial savings because of mainstreaming community relations work in schools. Establishing better opportunities for local interaction with the community and business.

However, we agree the current legislative framework for the provision of integrated education is insufficient for delivering the significant increase that we would like to see. As a result, we are still stuck with too few pupils attending integrated schools (currently around 7%), even though parental demand is much higher.

This Bill has a policy objective of substantially increasing provision of integrated education.

According to most opinion polls over the last twenty years a clear majority of parents support increasing the number of integrated places in Belfast, believe integrated education is a vital part of creating a shared future in Northern Ireland

There is also clear support from parents that funding for integrated education should be prioritised, with enough places available for those who wish to send their children to an integrated school and most parents would prefer that new schools resulting from consolidation of smaller schools be integrated

The Bill stipulates that where new schools are being built, for example, to service new housing developments, the Department should survey residents regarding a presumption that they will be integrated or mixed. As far as possible, new schools should be sited to service mixed catchment areas.

This Bill provides for reform and expansion of the provision of integrated education. To ensure this, this legislation also contains the following supporting clauses to increase the number of integrated places available:

We fully support that there should be a duty on the Department of Education and the Education Authority to encourage, not merely to promote and facilitate, the development of integrated education. There should be minimum targets for children being educated in integrated schools within the next ten years.

The Bill requires the development of an Integrated Education Strategy to ensure the implementation of the Act, along with regular reporting on the implementation of this strategy. Audit demand for integrated education and require the Department and Education Authority to report back on this and take account of it in budget and planning decisions.

The Bill will reform the criteria for the creation and maintenance of integrated schools, giving recognition to those children of mixed, other, or no religious background. Require dedicated funding to be available for the facilitation of integrated education. This must include the facilitation of new schools but also the transformation of current schools into integrated schools. We support a complete review of transformation process