



## **Workers Party submission to the public consultation on the Integrated Education Bill (2021)**

While the Workers Party welcomes the opportunity to comment on the proposed Integrated Education Bill (2021), it is important that we note that it is an appalling indictment of our society, and of our political processes, that, 40 years after the opening of Northern Ireland's first integrated school and 23 years after the signing of the Good Friday Agreement, only 7% of our pupils are taught in an integrated setting, that we continue to maintain separate teacher training colleges and that the main political parties have denied their responsibilities and connived to set back the integrated education project through disingenuous schemes such as the 'shared education' ploy.

Many people's initial dismay and frustration with this Bill will be compounded by its semantic affrontery as it attempts to present, effectively, meaningless word play as a sign of progress and development. The Good Friday Agreement (1998) requires the Assembly to '*facilitate and encourage integrated education*'. More than two decades later, having studiously avoided any progress, the Integrated Education Bill seeks to add the word '*promote*' to the initial requirement and this is presented as one of the Bill's key objectives.

The stark reality is that, for as long as the Northern Ireland Executive is run by two major and competing sectarian power blocs, no progress will be made on integrating the education system, or indeed any other aspect of society.

Until the concept of integrated education becomes the accepted norm and default position, as opposed to a novel option for those who choose it, then fundamental progress will not and cannot be made.

Almost every aspect of life in Northern Ireland, political, social, cultural and educational, is viewed through a sectarian lens. In the case of education that has resulted in the inescapable fact that the implementation of an integrated education system has been deliberately side-lined to facilitate and secure the permanence of community divisions and the consolidation of sectarian power bases.

These are the realities against which this Bill has been drafted and the conditions in which it will operate should it come into law.

These realities are also the source of the Bill's torturous definitions of integrated schools and integrated education. Both are simply the process whereby Northern Ireland's children should be educated, but the political environment in which we live forces extended definitions in over-elaborated attempts to ensure perceived 'balance' while compounding the bogus mantra of 'different but equal'.

Our situation, and the continuing divisions in our society, require that only radical and meaningful change to our education systems will be sufficient to secure the necessary progress. There can be little optimism that the Integrated Education Bill provides that assurance. Comments made in recent debates in the Assembly chamber by representatives of both major parties do not auger well for the Bill's adoption, implementation or its effectiveness.

The draft Integrated Education Bill presents as a further attempt to hide the principle of integrated education in full sight. It is not equipped to drive the fundamental change required to radically alter the Northern Ireland educational landscape nor challenge the dominant mindsets which police it.

Only a statutory commitment to the timetabled implementation of an integrated, secular and co-educational school system can begin that process. That is one, but important, part of a process which also needs to challenge, overcome and replace the sectarianism and manufactured division deployed to hold on to political power and influence at any cost, even if that is at the expense of our children and the future of this society.

### **Lily Kerr**

Workers Party  
6 Springfield Road  
Belfast  
BT12 7AG

Email: [workerspartyeni@yahoo.co.uk](mailto:workerspartyeni@yahoo.co.uk)

Website: [www.workerspartyelection.wordpress.com](http://www.workerspartyelection.wordpress.com)