

Catholic Schools' Trustee Service

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Please find attached the CSTS response to the Integrated Education Bill.

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'Fintan Murphy', is shown on a light-colored background.

Fintan Murphy

Chief Executive

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CSTS Response to the Integrated Education Bill

1.0 The Catholic Schools' Trustee Service welcomes the opportunity to respond to the consultation on the Integrated Education Bill. CSTS is the sectoral body for the Catholic School sector. It provides the Trustees (Diocesan, Religious and Lay) of Catholic managed schools with a professional support body to assist them in carrying out their responsibilities within the network of Nursery Primary and Post-Primary Schools in Northern Ireland.

1.1 At the outset CSTS would like to note that Catholic schools, rooted in the person of Jesus Christ, offer welcome, care and the celebration of the unique identity of children and young people from all cultures, backgrounds, and faiths. In this context Catholic schools in Northern Ireland have, and continues to make, a valued contribution to the local communities in which they are located throughout Northern Ireland. In a growing secular and pluralist society Catholic schools continue to enjoy the support and confidence of the

communities in which they are located as demonstrated by the fact that the Catholic sector is the largest sector within Northern Ireland.

1.2 CSTS would also note that the Department have, as part of NDNA initiated an Independent review of Education. Indeed, the panel for the Review have now been appointed. CSTS would contend that all matters relating to education should be placed within the parameters of this review and that the review should focus on how to ensure that we have high quality educational provision for all our children and young people. It is therefore disappointing to note that the Bill does not consider the matter of high-quality educational provision.

1.3 CSTS would suggest that the wider review, in considering all aspects of educational provision, will also consider issues relating to the use of technology, as identified throughout the pandemic, as a way to enhance educational opportunities and increase collaboration and sharing across all our schools. CSTS would suggest that, within the context of the impending review it is inappropriate that a Bill is being proposed at this time and that any matters relating to Integrated education should be examined within the context of the review.

1.4 Northern Ireland boasts a range of education sectors, all of which operate within our single education system, and all have developed to meet with parental preferences. CSTS accept the rights of parents to choose the sector of their choice, and this includes the rights of parents to choose Catholic schools. In a pluralist society such choice should be encouraged and celebrated.

2.0 In proposing the Bill, Kellie Armstrong MLA provided a paper on the purposes of the Bill. Some of these points require examination. The paper contends that Integrated Education can:

2.1 Reduce the cost of maintaining around 79,000 empty school places.

It should be noted that the DE figure is in fact, closer to 53,000 empty places, it should also be noted that these places do not have any financial cost to the public purse as schools are only funded for pupils attending the school and not the number of pupils who could attend.

It is also identified good practice to have surplus capacity of around 10% within the system to allow for population movement and growth which requires available capacity of around 30,000 places across the system. Through Area Planning ,education partners working with the Department of Education, have already reduced capacity, as is evidenced by the fall from 79,000 to 53,000 surplus places and the Trustees, working through CCMS and CSTS have been part of this process.

It should be noted that the surplus capacity which does exist occurs within all education sectors; including the Integrated sector and there are some Integrated schools with enrolments of less than 50% capacity. DE statistics (2021) identify around 3,000 surplus places within the Integrated sector.

It is important to note that Area Planning is an ongoing process involving all education partners, including the Northern Ireland Council for Integrated Education. This forum actively seeks to equitably match the supply and demand for schools across all sectors .

It is unclear how adding additional Integrated schools would have any impact on addressing the surplus capacity in the system.

2.2 Enable funding to be directed towards pupils rather than sustaining a divided school estate.

Currently school funding is directed to schools largely based on pupil numbers attending. There are many very large and sustainable schools in all sectors and the current area planning process, in which Trustees participate is working to rationalise the school estate to ensure that the funding delivers the highest outcomes for all pupils. It is unclear how

adding additional Integrated schools would do anything to aid the rationalisation process and is likely in fact to impact on the sustainability of other schools.

2.3 Achieving financial savings as a result of mainstreaming community relations work

in schools. The Catholic sector strongly supports the development of community relations and has made a significant contribution to this work. As a sector we are open to all members of the wider community and operate with an ethos where inclusion and respect for all is central to our Mission.

2.4 Establishing better opportunities for local interaction with the community and

business. Catholic education is rooted in its community and outreach to the local and global community is part of the ethos of our schools and there are many examples of the work which goes on with the local business community. There is no evidence to support the assumption that Integrated schools increase such opportunities for pupils

2.5 Building a system of education that better reflects a society in which more and more people are defining themselves differently taking into account the growing number of ethnic minority families and an increased number of mixed marriages and mixed relationships.

In Northern Ireland we have a system of education where parents/ children and young people have a choice of the type of education they wish to choose as is befitting of a pluralist society. It is clear that some people have chosen Integrated Education and the Trustees respect the right of these parents to subscribe to this type of education.

However, to date only 7% of parents have made that choice while 44% continue their commitment to Catholic Education. Indeed, it has been shown that as society changes Catholic education has become the choice of many of the ethnic minority pupils in Northern Ireland where they have found a welcome and a high quality of pastoral and other support for their children (DE data 20/21 identifies 53 % of all newcomer pupils as attending Catholic Primary/Post Primary schools).

Integrated Education in Northern Ireland emerged as a specific response to a divided society. However, there is no evidence to suggest that Integrated Education can respond any more effectively than other educational sectors to contemporary changes in society, such as the changing ethnic make-up of NI society. Indeed, it is clear that newcomer families have in significant numbers identified Catholic education (as identified above) as best meeting their needs

2.6 Enabling children and young people to experience a wider mix of relationships and friendships both inside and outside school.

Catholic education has at its centre and outward looking ethos which encourages children and young people to fully participate in all aspects of school and community life and to reach out to those in other communities. Catholic education is open to and welcoming of pupils from all backgrounds and has worked in the development of many partnerships with other schools in projects such as Shared Education to maximise the development of relationships. While Catholic schools encourage this, it is also the case that out of school contact opportunities are restricted in some cases due to local demographics. But where opportunities exist Catholic school pupils fully participate in community wide activities out of school through for example participation in sporting and other activities.

2.7 Allowing children to develop their own identity as opposed to developing an identity as a result of their schooling.

Individual identity is the result of a wide range of factors such as culture, politics, social class, ethnicity, community etc. Within a Catholic school, pupils are encouraged to explore a wide range of issues all of which are designed to encourage them to find themselves as valued individuals made in God's image. Within Northern Ireland there are examples of Catholic schools with significant numbers of pupils who are not from a Catholic faith background and there is no evidence to suggest that this compromises their cultural, religious or any other aspects of their identity.

A cursory examination of NI sporting, cultural, business and third level academic institutions provides many examples of people from all school sectors who have developed highly distinctive individual identities.

2.8 Maximising contact between children from different backgrounds, which would help to address the wider pressure of a divided society in the future.

Catholic schools actively encourage inclusion of all pupils and engage, as previously referred to, in, for example, Shared Education or collaborative arrangements which provide significant opportunities for engagement. However, it is not possible for any type of schools to address the issues of divide which are the result of local community composition.

2.9 Making it easier to standardise the quality of education and therefore address inequalities.

There is no evidence that Integrated schools provide a ‘standardised’ education – indeed it is clear that, as with all sectors, there are significant variations in the quality of education provided within the Integrated school sector. CSTS would contend that what is important is not standardising the quality of education but enhancing the quality of education. To this end CSTS would wish to point out that many Catholic schools, in terms of GCSE and A ‘Level outcomes and ETI reports, provide a very high-quality educational experience for their students.

2.10 Protecting local provision, especially where separate schools are under pressure.

CSTS accept that there are some local areas where continued provision is under pressure but would also note that often in these areas sectors work together innovatively and collaboratively to provide for the local community. It is also the case, in some localities, that the addition of an Integrated school has added to, rather than reduced these local pressures and caused some otherwise sustainable schools to become unsustainable. In addition, CSTS

would note that there are many areas where there are a range of school types, all of which are sustainable and meet the varied needs of the local community. Potential initiatives to ensure sustainable local provision is retained where possible are regularly explored within the current Area Planning process.

2.11 Allowing for stabilisation of enrolment numbers.

CSTS understand that stability of enrolment numbers is impacted on by a range of factors, for example, local population change, transport links, school performance and quality. It is unclear how the provision of Integrated education would make this anymore controllable.

2.12 Making it easier for a wider choice of subjects to be sustained.

The sustainability of a wide choice of subjects is linked to a range of factors; pupil numbers, responsiveness of a school to pupil (rather than school) need, collaboration with other schools and collaboration with Further Education Colleges. One factor which encourages schools to broaden their provision and therefore their appeal to pupils is local competition and the availability of a range of schools and school sectors encourages this.

2.13 Providing a wider choice for pupils in term of leisure, culture, and sporting activities.

CSTS would again contend that access to wider choices is linked not to a specific sector but to the size of school, access to a range of on and off-site facilities, collaboration, and community facilities. Where these all exist schools within any sector can, and do, provide for a wide choice of opportunities for pupils.

3.0 Policy Objectives of the Bill.

3.1 Set minimum targets for children being educated in Integrated schools within the next 10 years. This objective sets aside the concept of parental preference.

Currently only 7% of the pupils in Northern Ireland are educated in Integrated schools and, while there may be some pockets of unmet demand for Integrated education, it is the case that parents, and pupils make decisions to attend other school sectors. Indeed, as referred to earlier there are some Integrated schools with significant capacity. The wishes of over 90% of parents and pupils would be ignored if such a policy was implemented.

The objective also implies positive discrimination and quotas which have negative connotations and potential to highlight rather than diminish any sectarianism.

3.2 Place a duty on the Department of Education and other education bodies to encourage, not merely to promote and facilitate, the development of Integrated education.

CSTS are of the view that parents have a right to choose and therefore the provision of an option of Integrated education should be available to those who wish to access it. However, this suggestion would set Integrated education above all other sectors and potentially lead to a whole range of equality issues. As the sectoral body for the trustees of Catholic schools it would be unimaginable that we would be charged with encouraging the growth of another sector in our decisions and actions.

3.3 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.

CSTS accept that in some areas there is demand for Integrated education and the right to access this should be provide in the same way as it is provided in other sectors. However, auditing this is complex and if this were to happen it needs to be undertaken in a manner which identifies actual demand. For example, the results of previous surveys have been impacted by the actual question being asked. The percentage results from such surveys are not consistent with application rates to Integrated schools in the area and indeed many applications received come as second or third preferences where pupils have not gained

admission to schools within other sectors. Similar issues have arisen when community conversations have been undertaken where surveys have identified options but when offered to communities' consensus could not be found on a specific option.

In addition, the current Area Planning process audits demand for all types of school education and depends on all sectors to articulate current and projected needs. NICIE, as the body responsible for advocating on behalf of IE, is an equal partner in the process and proactively identifies demand for IE where it has been voiced by a community.

3.4 Stipulate that where new schools are being built, for example , to service new housing developments, the Department should survey local 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.

CSTS agree with the proposal that local residents should be surveyed regarding school provision, but this must be on the basis of choice and schools provide should be in line with the school type chosen by the residents. This will ensure that parental rights are respected and prevent large numbers of pupils being transport out of an area to school of their choice. The siting of school in mixed catchment areas is dependent on local demography and therefore not something that the Department of Education can control.

3.5 Initiate a complete review of transformation legislation.

CSTS would contend that the current transformation legislation is clear and easily understood and requires only 10% of parental signatures to initiate the process. Despite the ease of this process only a minority of schools have sought to make this choice. CSTS experience within the Catholic sector has been that the only schools who have considered transformation have been schools which have been identified for closure. And these have not offered sustainable school options and have been turned down following consideration by relevant the Minister. To date only one formally Catholic school has transformed. One other Catholic school, which had initiated the process, has not proceeded with transformation as a result of the closure

plans being withdrawn. It seems clear therefore that within the Catholic sector there is no current appetite for transformation and indeed there appears to be a limited appetite in other sectors too. The rights of school communities to remain within their sectors should be respected.

3.6 Reform the criteria for the creation and maintenance of integrated schools' giving recognition to those children of mixed, other and no religious backgrounds.

CSTS are aware that in the original legislation the intention was that schools should adhere to an approximate 40:40:20 mix. This has already been amended and in practice schools are now only required to have a 'mix' which is consistent with their local catchment area.

3.7 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.

CSTS understand that NICIE are already funded to provide for the facilitation of integrated education. However, in relation to capital funding this needs to be provided to all sectors on the basis of need and not to any one sector to ensure that there is equity for all sectors and pupils.

3.8 Require the development of an Integrated Education Strategy to ensure implementation of the Act, along with regular reporting on the implementation of this strategy.

CSTS would contend that this would be the role of NICIE and that it would not be appropriate for DE to lead as the Department has responsibility for provision in all school sectors.

4.0 The document also references the Millard Brown poll in 2013. CSTS would wish to make a few comments in relation to this poll:

The poll was undertaken in the Belfast Education & Library Board area – it should not be assumed that its findings would be replicated across all of Northern Ireland.

The poll highlights that parents having varying understanding of what integrated education is and this is important when attributing value to any survey findings

The poll highlights that academic reputation and proximity to home are the top two parental considerations when selecting a primary school for their children. The provision of high- quality school provision should be the focus and not necessarily Integrated education.

The poll identifies that in total 17% of parents chose a school with some sharing/mixing. By implication this incorrectly determines that controlled and maintained schools do not include any sharing /mixing.

In relation to primary schools, the poll identifies 19% who might wish to choose integrated education (this figure includes those who see integrated as mixed as well as those referring to formally defined Integrated schools). By implication 81% wish to continue to send their children to sectors.

The poll asked a number of questions in relation to transformation of schools. It is unclear from the poll that parents were fully aware of the implications of transformation of a school from either controlled or maintained status to integrated status in terms of potential changes to ethos, culture, demographics etc. If parents were not fully aware of these implications, it is not appropriate to place weight on the views they expressed.

5.0 In relation to the specific clauses of the Bill, CSTS would wish to make some specific comments:

5.1 Purpose of integrated education.

CSTS would contend that the purposes as outlined in this clause are in fact equally attributable to Catholic education. Indeed, all sectors within Northern Ireland that they subscribe to these purposes.

5.2 Advisory Body.

CSTS would suggest that this function is largely carried out by the Northern Ireland Council for Integrated Education who are already funded by the Department with regard to the promotion of Integrated education.

5.3 Promotion of Integrated Education.

The Department of Education has, since 1989, had a duty to encourage and facilitate and has carried out this function, as demonstrated by the growth of Integrated education. However, the inclusion of a duty to promote, as defined, would, in effect, amount to discriminatory action against all other sectors. CSTS would strongly be of the view that such a duty therefore is inappropriate and should not be included in any legislative framework and that the promotion of Integrated education should continue to be a function of the Northern Ireland Council for Integrated Education.

5.4 General duty.

The Bill proposes that education bodies must include Integrated education in developing, adopting, implementing, or revising policies, strategies and plans and in designing and delivering public services. While all education partners, within the area planning processes, consider, and include, as demand requires, Integrated education, to place this duty on education bodies is inappropriate. CSTS would for example, highlight the impact this would have on CCMS should they be defined as an 'Education body'.

CCMS was set up following the 1989 Order. Among its statutory functions (Article 142 of the Order); the provision of advice to the Department on matters relating to Catholic maintained schools; Promote and Co-ordinate, in consultation with trustees, the planning of effective provision for Catholic maintained schools; Promote the effective management and control of Catholic maintained schools. It is clear that CCMS could not undertake its statutory functions were it to be required to promote Integrated education. A similar contradiction is likely to exist for the Education Authority.

5.5 New Schools.

As with the previous clause of the Bill this amounts to discrimination against all other sectors and, as such, ignores the rights of parents to have available to them an education that meet with their philosophy

5.6 Integrated education strategy and biennial reporting.

CSTS would again highlight that the requirements of the strategy in effect amount to discrimination against all other sectors of education which is unacceptable.

6.0 Conclusion

CSTS respects the rights of parents to have a choice for Integrated education and, through the area planning processes, all sectors work together to ensure that sectoral provision, including Integrated education, is made available where it can be shown that any developments can result in high quality sustainable provision. This process ensures that the needs of all communities can be addressed through the provision of education within the sector or sectors that the community wish to subscribe to and provides for an overall sustainable model of education.