



**Submission to the Northern Ireland Assembly
Committee for Education**

Integrated Education Bill

1. The Governing Bodies Association (GBA) is the sectoral body representing the 50 voluntary grammar schools who educate 49,887 (33.5%)ⁱ of the post-primary pupils in Northern Ireland. The GBA provides policy information, advice and support for members as well as representing their views with other educational stakeholders, policy makers, politicians and the media. The GBA welcomes the opportunity to provide this submission to assist the Committee for Education with its consideration of the Bill.

2. Established over 70 years ago, the GBA has a proud tradition of building cross-community links in education, drawing members from both the Catholic and non-denominational sectors. Voluntary grammar schools have many different characteristics. Our member schools are denominational, inter-denominational and non-denominational; many draw their pupils from all parts of the community and are open, welcoming and inclusive.

3. From the outset we would like to express our concern at the timing of this Bill. The GBA notes the commitment that the Northern Ireland Executive would *establish an external, independent review of education provision*ⁱⁱ. It is therefore extremely surprising to see a Private Member's Bill on Integrated Education at this time when the Terms of Reference of the Review have been published and a panel announced.

4. When the Independent Review was announced by Peter Weir MLA as Education Minister in December 2020, he stated that *it is important that we approach the review with an open mind and without our own predetermined views on what its findings will be*.ⁱⁱⁱ The draft legislation before the Committee, if enacted, means that we will not be starting from a level playing field. If passed, the legislation will give primacy to integrated schools over all other schools in Northern Ireland.

5. The GBA welcomed the establishment of the Independent Review panel trusting that it *provided a rare opportunity to take a holistic look at the delivery of education in Northern Ireland*. Indeed, the Integrated Education Fund at that time stated the review *provides a once-in-a lifetime opportunity to set out a roadmap to reform the education system and normalise the school experience for our children, their children and future generations*^{iv}. It is recognised that the Independent Review offers a unique opportunity to look at the wider education system rather than a focus on one sector in isolation. It is imperative that the

Review Panel is given the space to fulfil its remit which was jointly agreed by all political parties in the Northern Ireland Executive.

6. The GBA notes the consultation process underpinning the Bill which is outlined in the Explanatory Note and Financial Statements. Our first concern is that the consultation was conducted in 2016-17. We know that there was a three-year suspension of the Assembly which delayed the proposer submitting the Bill, but in intervening years there have been numerous developments in education. The Area Planning process has changed the education estate with sectoral stakeholders collectively engaging to develop innovative solutions to ensure high quality sustainable education provision. Schools have also been working together through shared education initiatives such the Signature Programme or Peace IV funded programmes.

7. The Explanatory Note also outlines the nature of the consultation exercise. It advises that *face to face discussions with educationalists* had taken place as part of this process. The GBA is disappointed that we were not engaged with as part of this consultation even though our member schools educate over one-third of post primary students in Northern Ireland. The GBA would favour a more inclusive consultation process with key stakeholders.

Language of the Bill

8. The language of the Bill is not specific and therefore could be open to wide interpretation, for example, the first clause refers to *reasonable* when referring to numbers of *Protestant and Roman Catholic children*.

9. The Bill does not distinguish between Integrated Schools and integrated education. The draft legislation implies that only Integrated Schools offer those of different cultures and religious beliefs and of none, an opportunity to be educated together - this is quite simply not the case.

10. If the Bill is to progress it will need to be clear in its definition of what an integrated school is and outline the specific characteristics that differentiate them. It is not simply enough to establish an integrated school based on undefined numbers. Integrated schools cannot be integrated in name only, parents and young people need to have confidence that there is genuine inclusivity and that schools will aim to improve on this year on year.

Clauses of the Bill

11. Clause 1 – Meaning of Integrated Education

The legislation defines an integrated school as being open to

(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

The GBA does not consider these characteristics to be unique to the integrated sector and the same definition could be applied to most schools across the education system. We would suggest that the final draft of the Bill contains a more specific definition of integrated education and what is an integrated school.

12. Clause 4 – Promotion of Integrated Education

Clause 4 proposes to change the statutory duty from to *encourage and facilitate to encourage, facilitate and promote*. If this legislation is enacted, it would amend the Education Act (Northern Ireland) Order 2014 and place a duty on the Education Authority to increase the demand for the provision of integrated education which could only be at the expense of Controlled Schools.

13. Clause 6 – Planning and Strategy General Duties

Places a duty on education bodies such as the Council for Catholic Maintained Schools to *include provision for integrated education when developing, adopting, implementing or revising policies, strategies and plans, and designing and implementing public services*.

The GBA believes that it would not be reasonable to expect organisations like CCMS to include provision for integrated schools at the expense of schools within the maintained sector.

14. Clause 7 – New Schools

(1) when planning for the establishment of a new school, education bodies must apply a presumption that it will be an integrated school unless that would be inappropriate by reasons of special circumstances. The clause specifies that special circumstance cannot be

(a) the religious demographics of an area;

(b) the existence of spare places in existing schools.

This clause causes particular concern for several reasons. The Bill directly conflicts with the right of parents to choose a particular school for their child by proposing that all new schools must be integrated.

Consultation and parental engagement have been key features of any proposal to transform a school to integrated status. This Bill, as presented, is completely contrary to these tenets. For example, under the proposed legislation, if two Controlled schools were to close and amalgamation created a new school, this would automatically become an integrated school without consultation with parents or pupils to identify if they preferred an alternative management type.

The special circumstance exclusions will enable the growth of the integrated sector but will do so by preventing the growth of any other sector.

The GBA would like to draw the Committee's attention to the exclusion of existence of spare places as a special circumstance. The Northern Ireland Audit Office report, Sustainability of Schools, published in 2015 was critical of the then 71,000 available places and the cost of this to the education system. In recent years the Area Planning process has tackled this issue. All sectors have worked together to reduce the number of spare places and delivering education in educationally and financially viable and sustainable schools. As the Education Minister^v noted in her statement to the Northern Ireland Assembly *the number of available places in primary and post-primary has fallen by 31,803 from 84,487 (2010/11) to 52,684 (2020/21) which is a reduction of 38%.*

By not acknowledging the existence of spare places as a special circumstance this legislation will create further duplication in the system, undermine over five years of area planning activity and create many more unsustainable schools.

Good legislation is clear and provides certainty. While the Bill identifies two instances that cannot be considered as a special circumstance it does not identify or make clear what can be regarded as a special circumstance.

15. Conclusion

If enacted, this legislation will have significant ramifications for the education system. It will undermine years of cross sectoral work to promote viable quality education provision for our children and young people. The approach adopted has the potential to create more available spaces and unsustainable schools. It would be preferable to give the Independent Review the opportunity to look at the wider education system rather than a myopic look at one sector.

ⁱ <https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/publications/school-enrolments-2020-21-statistical-bulletins>

ⁱⁱ New Decade New Approach

https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/856998/2020-01-08_a_new_decade__a_new_approach.pdf

ⁱⁱⁱ Statement to the Northern Ireland Assembly Independent Review Terms of Reference 15th December 2020

<http://aims.niassembly.gov.uk/officialreport/report.aspx?&eveDate=2020/12/15&docID=319622#3368400>

^{iv} <https://www.ief.org.uk/2021/01/13/ief-publish-position-paper-independent-review-education/>

^v <https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/education/Written%20Ministerial%20Statement%20-%20Setting%20the%20Priorities%20for%20the%20Next%20Regi...pdf>