



Committee for Education
Room 205, Parliament Buildings,
Ballymiscaw,
Stormont,
Belfast,
BT4 3XX

Date: 6th October 2021

Ref: the Integrated Education Bill

Dear Ms Treanor,

The Methodist Church in Ireland has always enjoyed good relationships with all Christian churches on the island of Ireland and is committed to providing high quality education for pupils of all denominations, and indeed, of all faiths and of none. For this reason, our two post-primary schools, Methodist College in Belfast and Wesley College in Dublin have some of the most diverse, cross-community school populations of the cities in which they are situated.

Many Methodist ministers and churches enjoy close relationships with Integrated Schools in their communities and welcome pupils into their churches for inter-denominational services at significant times of the school year. Our church members also serve as school governors in many Controlled schools which are inclusive, welcoming pupils from all denominations and all faiths and none, and supporting them to provide the best education possible for every pupil.

The Northern Executive of the Board of Education of the Methodist Church in Ireland has considered the Integrated Education Bill and wishes to make the following points:

1. The Board is concerned that the Bill as proposed would place the Integrated Sector above all other sectors in terms of resources and funding which would unfairly impact schools in other sectors, especially those which are located within deprived areas of the city and would further disadvantage the pupils attending them.
2. In seeking to prioritise or mandate the establishment of integrated schools, this Bill will work against the diversity of school choice available to parents in certain areas. We believe that the best approach is for the Area Planning process to identify the best solutions for education provision within local communities, taking all sectoral options into account.
3. The Board questions the implicit suggestion of the Bill that school sectors other than the Integrated sector are not diverse in their makeup. We would draw the Committee's attention to the community background data on schools provided on the Department of Education's website which clearly shows that the Controlled schools

sector is no longer made up of pupils from the Protestant community and is, in fact, the most diverse sector in terms of numbers of pupils attending from all denominations of Christianity, as well as those of other faiths and of no faith.

4. We would question whether it is practical to suggest the building or establishment of an Integrated school which will have or even aspire to the recommended balance of religions within single religious identity communities.
5. We further question whether the intention of Clause 1 to have a mix of socio-economic groups in new Integrated schools can be delivered, considering that many of the most socially deprived children live in single religious identity communities.
6. We would ask the Committee to consider whether the promotion going forward of only one type of school would eventually limit the diversity of school types in Northern Ireland which is a hallmark of an inclusive and equitable society. In particular the provision of faith-based schools respects the rights of parents who wish their children to be educated within such an ethos as provided for in international Human Rights standards. Although NICIE declares that Integrated schools are 'Christian in character', this is not mentioned in the Bill.

In conclusion, we would maintain that schools within the Controlled sector are already providing inclusive and nurturing education to pupils from a wide variety of backgrounds in terms of religious identity and all protected identities under Section 75 of the Equality Act, as well as a mix of socio-economic groups within our society. We do not feel that only one sector of schools, badged as 'Integrated' should be considered as uniquely capable of educating pupils from different communities together and we feel that the prioritisation of such a sector in terms of resources and funding is inequitable and unfair and will ultimately result in more disadvantage for pupils in already socially deprived areas of Northern Ireland.

The Methodist Church in Ireland is committed to the provision of high quality, inclusive education that allows our children to experience the full range of cultural and religious expression that is present in Northern Ireland today.

We would welcome any further dialogue with the Education Committee on this issue.

Kind Regards,

Anita Gracie

General Secretary to the Board of Education
Methodist Church in Ireland

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