

25 March 2021

Ms Aoibhinn Treanor
Committee Clerk
Committee for Education
Room 205
Parliament Buildings
Ballymiscaw
Stormont
BT4 3XX

Dear Ms Treanor

FETO EXEMPTION & INTEGRATED EDUCATION

Thank you for your correspondence of 8 and 9 March 2021 to the Moderator of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in Ireland (PCI), Rt Rev Dr David Bruce, on matters relating to the teachers' exemption in FETO, the Certificate for Religious Education and Integrated Education. Please accept my apologies for the delay in responding to these requests.

Dr Bruce has asked me to outline PCI's position on his behalf in my role as Convener of PCI's State Education Committee. Representatives from PCI would welcome the opportunity to brief the NI Assembly Education Committee on some of the points made below, and other issues relevant to education in Northern Ireland.

FETO

PCI supports equality of opportunity in teacher recruitment and is opposed to unfair discrimination on the grounds of religion or belief. We recognise that, for historic reasons, the FETO teacher exemption has been regarded as important in attempting to maintain a balance in the religious composition of the teaching workforce. The FETO teacher exemption also allows for open conversations to take place within the framework of school ethos during recruitment.

School governors, including those representing the Transferor Churches, receive guidance and training from the Education Authority on the recruitment and selection of teachers to ensure adherence to all appropriate legislation and good practice.

Controlled schools have an open, inclusive non-denominational Christian ethos and this cannot be sustained without the support of staff who work hard to main that distinctive culture. It is not unreasonable to expect employees of controlled schools to uphold that ethos. Any discussion on the removal of the teacher exemption would need to clarify how school ethos can be protected.

Certificate in Religious Education

While not opposing the requirement for a Certificate in Religious Education, it is important that all students in initial teacher education courses have an opportunity to obtain the certificate. This requires appropriate funding to facilitate resources and course timetabling for teaching students. The recent provision made by Stranmillis University College to deliver the Certificate in RE to its undergraduate students in collaboration with St. Mary's University College has been welcomed by PCI.

Religious Education is an important subject at both primary and post-primary levels, giving pupils an opportunity to better understand their own faith background and explore other world religions within the context of the ethos of their school. PCI would welcome discussions on how the current certificate could be developed to make it an enriching resource for the teaching of religious education in all schools.

Integrated Education

PCI recognises the value of children and young people encountering differing views, opinions and cultures during their school experience. One of the best ways to ensure this happens is in providing opportunities for pupils to mix. PCI further recognises that this occurs naturally in numerous schools across all sectors of education. This integrating of education is to be welcomed and encouraged but should never be identified solely with one particular sector.

PCI has been strongly identified with the Controlled Sector since its formation. Indeed, it was out of former church schools that this sector came into existence. PCI firmly believes that the Controlled Sector in itself can be viewed as integrated, and statistics increasingly bear this out. PCI supports the further development of integration within the Controlled Sector and of the concept of Shared Education between schools and sectors.

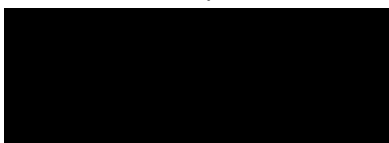
PCI recognises the many strengths inherent in the formal Integrated Education Sector. Many parents who choose to send their children to schools within that sector do so because of the stated principles of integration, tolerance and mutual respect at its heart. While these principles are clearly also present in most schools in other sectors it is acknowledged that schools in the Integrated Sector view these as particularly defining.

While the growth of the formal Integrated Sector has never reached the scale that many of its advocates would desire, its influence in promoting its core values across all sectors should be recognised. The significant development of the concept of Shared Education over recent years has further enabled all schools to develop in these areas.

In the view of PCI the further development of Shared Education across all schools continues to be important. All sectoral bodies should have this as a priority, and come to it as equal partners in the promotion of tolerance and mutual respect. It is counterproductive to view the promotion of these values as being the domain of just one formal sector.

Recognising that parental choice should always be to the fore, government must ensure that an unbalanced promotion of one sector does not result in the downgrading of other sectors. This is a particular reality when it comes to the sharing of limited resources for capital development and support programmes for schools.

Yours sincerely



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State Education Committee

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