

Integrated Education Alumni Association Submission to Education Committee

To the Committee for Education,

I am writing on behalf of the Integrated Education Alumni Association in response to the request for written evidence in regards to shared and integrated education.

Sixteen years on from the signing of the Belfast Agreement, Northern Ireland is enjoying a period of relative peace and stability. Yet, despite efforts to promote integration in our political and policing institutions, our educational system remains largely segregated. Of Northern Ireland's total number of pupils, a mere 7% attend integrated schools. As alumni of integrated schools, we have benefitted from an education instilled with tolerance and understanding which has positively enabled us academically, professionally and socially. However, this option is not available to all children in Northern Ireland and we believe that this is a factor which continues to promote division in our province.

This response aims to propose the opinions of past pupils of the integrated education sector and address the key areas set out in the Committee's Inquiry.

- We believe that the nature of the education system in Northern Ireland fundamentally hinders the growth and development of integrated education. Only an approximate 6% of schools, both primary and post primary, are currently designated as integrated. This poses a number of important issues which should be addressed. Firstly, the sparse nature of integrated schools in Northern Ireland severely limits both the number of pupils these schools can individually enrol each year, and also geographically limits who can attend these schools. It is difficult to accurately judge the demand for integrated schools in Northern Ireland as it is largely based on public opinion, however numerous polls, such as those carried out by the Belfast Telegraph, and research undertaken by the Integrated Education Fund among others, has shown evidence of a strong demand for the sector. The small number of integrated schools in Northern Ireland also continues to complement the opinion that integrated schools are 'special/other' instead of promoting the sector as 'normal'. The implementation of a formal definition for integrated education may be of benefit in improving the understanding of the sector and help clearly designate other schools as integrated. For an example, Botanic Primary School in Belfast could be regarded as integrated due to the diverse demographic of its pupils however it is not designated as such.
- In recent years, the Executive has attempted to develop the shared education sector in Northern Ireland. However, the development of this sector should not act as a substitute to integrated education. The demographic of Northern Ireland is rapidly diversifying which in turn provides further reason to promote and develop the integrated sector. Encouraging a Protestant and Catholic school may reduce costs but it does not develop the relationships and tolerance that are integral parts of integrated teaching. If anything, shared education campuses crystalize the division within our education system. Shared education further instils the 'us and them' mentality, a botched solution to a deep problem. If we can teach

Protestant, Catholic and other faiths in the same campus, why can't we teach them in the same classes together? Within integrated education, all cultural and religious beliefs and identities are protected and championed – religious freedom is a core principle of integrated education. Not only does integrated education teach tolerance for other cultures and religions, it prepares pupils for full participation and understanding of the changing face of Northern Ireland's work place and broader society as a whole.

- To address the second area of the Committee's Inquiry regarding barriers and enablers of integrated and shared education, there are a number of important issues in regards to this. Firstly, as previously stated, there are a number of hindrances to the development of integrated education such as the small numbers of integrated schools in Northern Ireland and geographical issues. However these are just two of a number of issues. The image and perception, whether misconceived or not, of integrated schools is something that requires addressing. For example, Lagan College, despite having high quality teaching standards and some of the highest GCSE/A Levels in the country, did not have the best facilities prior to the opening of their new school, which may have led to prospective pupils attending different schools and not benefitting from the unique educational and social experience of attending an integrated school. Another substantial issue is breaking the status quo that is prevalent in many families across Northern Ireland. The influence of family members in the choice of which school a child should attend is arguably the most important factor in this decision-making process. It is of the highest importance that integrated education is promoted as risk-free and a pathway to post-educational success, and that parents are given an equal opportunity to send their children to an integrated school. The possible domino effect that this could have would be greatly beneficial to the development of integrated education. A more concerted effort from the Office of First and Deputy First Minister to promote the benefits of integrated education beyond academic results may help address some of the misconceptions around integrated education. Another issue that hinders the growth of integrated education is segregated housing. Integrated education produces great advocates of the sector, however many pupils return to divided communities. We believe that the development and expansion of integrated education would help in the future to break down barriers, including physical 'peace' walls, and in turn help the development of integrated housing.
- In terms of the Inquiry's third area of looking to other jurisdictions for possible ideas for the development of integrated and shared education, we believe that this is unnecessary. In Northern Ireland, we already have a successful integrated system, despite its small nature, which is producing students with impressive academic qualifications and debunking ill informed misconceptions amongst some of our population. Like our policing system, many jurisdictions have come to Northern Ireland to research our integrated education system in order to adopt some of its core values and apply them in their respective educational structures. If other countries are using our integrated system as an example of how to teach those from different religious backgrounds and divided communities together, why is it necessary that we look to other nations for a different solution? We should promote the successes of our integrated education sector and herald it as something to be proud of, an

example of the importance of teaching our youth together. Children born at the time of the ceasefires are now adults and their children will soon be entering the education system. It is of the utmost importance that the Executive promote integrated education – not as a distant solution or a possibility, but as a forward thinking, positive change in the now. As previously stated, Northern Ireland’s demographic is constantly changing with many people from around the world coming to live and work here. Conservation of an ineffective, duplicative binary system will continue to hinder our future generations in all aspects of life. Now is the time to change this system and prevent future generations from missing out on the invaluable benefits of integrated education. It is now beyond a question of having the option to change, there is a clear need for change in our education system to prepare our citizens for being vital members of an increasingly globalised stage.

Thank you, in advance, for your consideration of our views in relation to integrated and shared education.

Regards,

Robert Magee, on behalf of the Integrated Education Alumni Association.