



Lagan College Education Committee – Shared Education Response

This response is submitted on behalf of Lagan College. Lagan College is Northern Ireland's first integrated school. Lagan College is integrated, inclusive, co-educational, all ability and an 11-18 school.

Northern Ireland currently has 62 integrated schools whose agreed mission is to educate all children together irrespective of their faith background or none, ethnicity, nationality, ability or culture.

Lagan College was founded in 1981 by a small but committed group of parents who believed in a new integrated way of educating their children together - such was their conviction and passion that some even financed the project to enable the first integrated post primary school to open against a back drop of intense trouble and conflict.

Since then, the school has flourished. Our parents/ guardians believe that their children deserve the right to attend a good school, achieve their best, enjoy and have fun growing up and developing into young men and women. That belief system is also rooted in the knowledge that sending their children to an integrated school will more fully prepare them to live, travel and work anywhere in the world. Their belief is that university, further education or the workplace will not be the first time that their children have spent any meaningful time relating to, respecting and befriending children from different family backgrounds other than their own.

Within an integrated setting children learn, grow, develop, mature, laugh and cry together. Everything is shared over a meaningful period of time. Their entire educational experience is shared - not simply a part of it or for a part of the time. The whole time the child experiences being an important and valued part of an integrated school community that welcomes all children, celebrates diversity, addresses and discusses controversial issues and is committed to enabling children to grow and learn in harmony with each other.

We believe that integration should be the normal way of educating children in our society in order to build a meaningful and lasting peace.

Lagan College is a place where children and staff can confidently and proudly state their nationality, their faith tradition other or none and their cultural background, all the while, still showing respect, understanding and kindness towards each other.

As one school community, we do everything together, be that Remembrance Day, Ash Wednesday, celebrating Chinese New Year, enjoying a Ceili night, learning about the Irish and English languages or playing Gaelic or Rugby. We are committed to breaking down the walls, the divides, the pigeon holing the compartmentalising, the labelling, the second guessing and the assumption making that goes on in our society.

“Division”, “conflict”, “violence”, “them and us” and “segregation” must be words from our past not our present or our future. We need clear leadership to make decisions that challenge the status quo and legacy of the past. We need political leaders who know in their hearts and minds what is right, just and fair for all children.

We ask the question, “What is preventing the Government from doing more to support and further integrated education in 2014?”. It has been 16 years since the Good Friday Agreement. How do we make the peace process a reality on a day to day basis? In Lagan College we believe that educating children together is one step towards that goal.

World leaders, academics and visitors both locally and globally have visited Lagan College and held integrated education as exemplary practice for building peace. Many countries and academics have used Lagan College and integrated education as a model for their own societies in dealing with conflict. Years of research has demonstrated that integrated education is successful. We now have 33 years of integrated schooling at Lagan College and we know it makes a difference.

Shared education has its merits. Any sharing by children is a positive but in our opinion, it is not enough. We believe that all parents and children should have a right to integrated and inclusive education, if that is their choice and at present that is not possible for all families.

Lagan College students have enjoyed and benefitted from shared learning experiences through CRED, the Area Learning Community School events and shared learning courses. In recent years our students have also enjoyed and benefitted from the excellent Entwined Histories School Programme marking the centenary of anniversaries.

However, ask any child who has attended Lagan College or indeed speak to any adult associated to the school, be they a staff member or a parent/guardian and they will tell you that these shared opportunities have merit but do not go far enough in providing a meaningful opportunity or a long term solution for our children to get to know and understand one another better. We believe that integrated education will further the peace process more so than shared education.

Controlled, integrated or maintained schools, there is a place for all in society at present. Lagan College does not wish to be hypocritical or misquoted. Our school is founded on the premise of equality and everyone deserves the right to have their own opinion and their choice of education.

This is Lagan College's response to the issue of shared education. We believe that shared education is not an adequate step forward for children. If anything, some of what it offers, feels akin to the EMU programmes of the 1990s.

We are happy to speak to the academics and Government officials going forward to be of help in this matter. We welcome the debate and an opportunity to contribute to it.

We invite the Education Committee to visit Lagan College and speak to the important people who matter the most, namely the young people who will hopefully live, work and enjoy a more peaceful lifestyle than their parents and grandparents have in the past.

Lagan College
24 October 2014