

Millennium Integrated Primary School
139 Belfast Road
Saintfield
BT24 7HF

22nd October 2014

Dear Mr Mc Callion,

Thank you for the opportunity to respond to the Shared/Integrated Education Inquiry. If there is any intention to meet with interested parties, I would be very happy to do so and also for some of our children to take part in the consultation process.

I am writing to you as the founding principal of Millennium Integrated Primary School and as a teacher who has worked in the controlled sector, is Chair of Governors of a CCMS Community Nursery and in the earlier part of my career worked in an international school and also at the Rudolf Steiner School in Holywood. In addition I have a long track record in innovative cross- community work. All of these enriching experiences have contributed massively to my understanding of the importance and richness of experience which is a real added bonus when there is diversity within a school community. By diversity I am talking about integration and inclusion in the widest possible sense, so that all are valued. A community which truly, actively and proactively welcomes all and ensures that this is alive within the school.

Millennium has had an incredible journey and owes everything to the parents in the Carryduff community who wanted integrated education for their children. I could write pages about the many hurdles and obstacles the founding parents and I had to overcome at every stage of the school's development, but I am fortunate to also be able to celebrate the achievements of our community and our integrated school.

If we analyse why Millennium exists, it is my firm belief that it exists in spite of the very organisations one might have expected to show support or even equity of treatment, and the politicians who did their very best to block the opening, building and development of the school particularly, in the first 12 years.

Why does Millennium exist?

- Parent Power- sheer hard work, perseverance and determination no matter what the set-backs were
- The demographics of this area which has possibly the highest percentage of mixed marriages in Northern Ireland

- The changing face of Northern Ireland – many of our younger parents really want integrated education and are voting with their feet. Unfortunately the big decisions are being made by an older generation who still carry the scars, hurt and baggage of the troubles (Only today I received notification of a Development Proposal from another integrated primary school – the statistics enclosed from DE are interesting and speak for themselves –enrolment patterns of 8 integrated primary schools for 2013/2014 intake are that there were 422 first preference applications for 347 places. In the controlled sector across the 7 schools listed there were 996 unfilled places and in the maintained sector 2 schools were listed with 196 unfilled places)
- Parents are voting with their feet and they do not send their children to integrated schools just because they are integrated – like all parents they want the very best, rounded and balanced educational outcomes for their children
- Support given to the school by voluntary organisations and philanthropic donors from around the world – without their assistance the school may never have started
- The outcome of the recent judicial review has already begun to make a difference – a greater sense of being treated more equally with the other sectors although there are still some procedural and legislative issues which have the potential to continue to stifle rather than facilitate integrated education

What hurdles/barriers has Millennium had to overcome?

- No government funding in the first year
- Not being allowed on site because of traffic concerns despite the fact that there had been a furniture showroom and a car showroom, as well as a private dwelling – far more traffic than 1 teacher, 1 assistant and 10 children in that first year!
- Delaying tactics in relation to the planning application in the early years
- Even when our temporary school had been built and we had 7 new classrooms our growth was being controlled to protect other sectors
- Having to fundraise and apply for grants and look for donors to establish pre-school education
- Having to source funding for basic accommodation which would have been provided to other sectors – accommodation for the Nursery, for classrooms, for special needs provision
- Operating in a relatively new building which had 30% less accommodation than stipulated in the DENI handbook
- Turning away children and their families, particularly poignant when the family is from a mixed marriage

In the opening paragraph of this letter I gave an outline of my varied educational posts. I have seen and experienced at first hand the reality of the wonderful things which happen in a good integrated school when the children have the opportunity to be together all day, every day, sharing experiences, exploring diversity, understanding fully what is important to all of the religions and cultures which are part of our school community. Celebrating together special events which in the context of Northern Ireland are perceived to belong to one tradition or another. Developing mutually respectful values on a day by day, moment by moment, practical and meaningful basis. Total immersion is the key for the best possible outcomes, just as it is, if you really want to learn a second language proficiently. Not only is there an impact on the children and the staff but also on many of our parents who have made friendships with the 'other side'

It is so much more difficult to achieve a tolerant and open society when children are kept apart throughout their educational lives and also through the lack of mixed housing and as a result their contact with each other is minimal.

Good quality shared education is, I believe, an important first step on the journey but not if it's just about the occasional time together, making the effort because there is funding available or a lovely state of the art campus, and not if it is developed at the expense or exclusion of integrated education.

If shared education is not, in the long term, to repeat the limited outcomes of the old EMU, then much work needs to be done to upskill the staff, change mindsets and develop meaningful, regular opportunities through the curriculum for children to engage in learning about each other and the country and world which they live in and are part of.

Shared education is not the same as integrated education. A mixed school is not the same as an integrated school. The ethos, the hidden curriculum, the vision, the day to day values, are the things which define any school. So many of the decision makers have no experience or understanding of integrated education as the majority will have come through the controlled or maintained sector and understandably this is what is familiar to them.

I believe that parental choice should be facilitated as much as possible so the choice to send a child to a maintained, controlled or Irish Medium should also be available

However we will know when there is a real commitment to integrated education by the powers that be, when the first integrated school is proposed and planned for by DE without the parents, the founding principal and staff having to jump over so many hurdles. Much is made of the recent lack of growth within the integrated sector. I know that this has been due to the lack of will to facilitate the growth of integrated education and the continuing situation that CCMS and the ELBs hold all the power. Just because the integrated sector and the Irish medium sector are smaller should not mean that they should be virtually excluded from the decision making processes. These two sectors should have as much right to be present from start to finish

throughout all decision making processes. Respect needs to be developed for all sectors from within the sectors themselves as well as from the decision makers.

Does Northern Ireland want a unified, diverse and peaceful society or not?

Why are the decision makers so reluctant to make the decisions which have the potential to allow Northern Ireland to move away from many of the entrenched views and to embrace a better future for the generations to come?

In ten years' time will this period be viewed as a time of missed opportunities?

Will there be disappointment that shared education hasn't managed to deliver all that is hoped for?

I would like to see equity for all four sectors, a willingness to listen to the voices of our families, a true facilitation of integrated education, the development of skilled and meaningful shared education so that the children of the future do not carry the baggage and burden of Northern Ireland's sectarian past.

Thank you for the opportunity to make this submission.

Yours sincerely

Mary Roulston