



**Northern Ireland Commission for Catholic  
Education.**

**Shared Education Inquiry.**

**Submission of Written Evidence to the Northern  
Ireland Assembly – Committee for Education.**

**October 2014**

1. This evidence is being submitted on behalf of the Northern Ireland Commission for Catholic Education (NICCE).

NICCE represents the Catholic Bishops and leaders of Religious Congregations in their role as Trustees of the family of 500+ Catholic Voluntary Maintained and Grammar Schools in Northern Ireland. These schools have been chosen by parents of almost half of the school-going population, of varied religious and ethnic backgrounds, as the preferred option for their children.

2. NICCE welcomes the opportunity to submit evidence to the Committee for Education with a view to assisting its inquiry into Shared Education and requests the opportunity to supplement this written submission with an oral presentation to the Committee.
3. The founding purpose and aim of all Catholic Schools in Northern Ireland is the same as for Catholic Schools throughout the world. They offer to parents the choice of a school inspired and directed in all of its activities by the message and spirit of Jesus Christ, a message that has at its very heart the commandment to love God, to love our neighbor and to live and celebrate a constructive and healthy love of self. Catholic schools throughout the world are therefore defined by a commitment to forming young people as active citizens who contribute constructively to the good of the society in which they live, as well as to the global community of the human family. This includes, as a founding and guiding principle, seeking to form young people into those values that are the very bedrock of a peaceful, reconciled, diverse

and flourishing human society such as respect for the inherent dignity of every person and working with all for the common good.

4. The Catholic Church provides schools that are welcomed and recognized for their educational excellence and positive contribution to peace and the common good in every imaginable social and political environment in the world. Even where Catholic schools do not have a majority of Catholic pupils attending, their distinctive ethos and capacity for forming pupils who make a positive contribution to the well-being of the society in which they live is acknowledged across the world.
5. In Ireland, Britain, Scotland and other European democracies, the long-standing right of parents to a faith based education for their children is formally recognised in legislation, including in the European Convention on Human Rights, and in various national policies. Indeed, diversity of school provision has long been one of the hallmarks of a truly diverse and pluralist society which respects the rights of individuals, of communities and, in the case of education in particular, of parents. This in turn is closely related to another hallmark of a truly free, diverse and pluralist society, respect for the fundamental human right to freedom of conscience and religion.
6. In this submission to the Education Committee, therefore, NICCE wishes to emphasise the following point: the diverse provision of schools in Northern Ireland, as elsewhere on these islands, is a matter of respect for the human rights of citizens. It not a matter of one policy choice among others, much less a regrettable remnant of historic ethno-political divisions in our society. Diversity of provision in education is the hallmark of, not an obstacle to a normal, diverse, pluralist society. NICCE calls on the Education Committee to publicly recognize this vital point and to affirm the right of parents to have access to a faith-based education for their children, where possible, as enshrined in the European Convention on Human Rights and elsewhere. NICCE calls on the Education Committee to acknowledge that diversity of provision in schools, in response to this right, is the mark of, and not the obstacle to, a diverse, tolerant and pluralist society. The Education Committee needs to decide if the Northern Ireland education system is appropriately diverse and pluralist, rooted in the human rights of citizens, as in other parts of these islands, or somehow uniquely and inappropriately 'segregated', a term which NICCE rejects as both offensive to those schools which uphold the right to a particular religious, cultural or linguistic ethos and inaccurate. In fact, as the Council for Catholic Maintained Schools (CCMS) pointed out in their submission, the term segregation to describe the education system in Northern Ireland is incorrect given that segregation, according to the Oxford English Dictionary means;

***“ enforced separation of racial groups in a community.”***

The principle of parental preference in the Northern Ireland Education system in no way implies and should not be understood as “enforced separation”.

7. Great care needs to be taken to avoid giving the impression that a peaceful, normalized future in Northern Ireland has to be built on the erosion of fundamental rights enjoyed by citizens and respected by government in other parts of these islands. The necessity to highlight this point is demonstrated by the not uncommon presumption that only one type of school and only one approach to sharing within educational structures can contribute effectively to a peaceful and reconciled society. It is unjust and inaccurate to perpetuate the impression that schools in the formally ‘integrated’ sector represent the best or even the most achievable, effective and appropriate way for schools to contribute to peace, tolerance and understanding in Northern Ireland. Research has consistently and repeatedly demonstrated that various other forms of sharing, from inter-school activities to appropriately negotiated shared campuses, provide meaningful and measurable outcomes in terms of extending the already positive contribution all school types make to the promotion of tolerant and welcoming attitudes to diversity. Catholic schools, and Catholic Trustees, have not only actively encouraged engagement in this full range of sharing opportunities in Northern Ireland, in many cases Catholic schools have actively led such initiatives. NICCE will continue to encourage such leadership in sharing by Catholic schools including, where appropriate, and where the rights of Trustees to ensure ethos is adequately respected, participation in shared campus arrangements.
8. This is to confirm a key finding of the Bain Report in 2006, when Sir George Bain observed that “all schools and, indeed, all educational interests need to, and wish to, play their part in the journey towards the goal of a shared future.” He then concluded: “We advocate, therefore, not a single approach to integration, but a more pervasive and inclusive strategy, focused on the dynamic process of integrating education across the school system”. NICCE supports the general principle underpinning this approach.
9. The value and realism of such an approach was also reflected in the findings and recommendations of the more recent report of the Ministerial Advisory Group on “Advancing Shared Education” (March 2013). Having considered the wide range of research available on the effectiveness of formally ‘integrated’ schools in promoting good relations, the Advisory Group concluded: “the vast majority of the evidence reported has not been able to demonstrate clearly that it is specifically because of the child or young person attending an integrated or mixed school that their attitudes are more positive. It could be that the reason why there is a relationship between school attended and attitudes is that integrated or mixed schools tend to attract parents, and thus children and young people, with more positive attitudes in the first place” (cf. ps.55-56).
10. The Advisory Group went on to say: “the Group does not agree that integrated schools should be viewed and actively promoted as the ‘preferred option’ in relation

to plans to advance shared education. Parents and children have the right to their religious, cultural and philosophical beliefs being respected.... promoting one particular school sector runs counter to the vision of a diverse and plural system outlined above and is not a model for advancing shared education. By definition, shared education involves schools and other educational institutions of different types and from different sectors collaborating together. Actively promoting one sector over other sectors will not only be divisive but it will not, in itself, lead to the educational benefits that accrue from schools sharing good practice and collaborating together; nor will it necessarily ensure that children and young people from a wider range of backgrounds learn together” (cf. ps. xx-xxi). NICCE fully supports this analysis and conclusion.

11. It also follows that the Education Committee should recommend an end to the long-standing statutory duty on the Department of Education to encourage and facilitate the development of formally Integrated education. This duty is not only unjust it also undermines the fundamental principles of equality, respect for difference and for the rights of others upon which a truly diverse, peaceful and tolerant society is based. It is also appropriate to question the effectiveness of this policy after such a prolonged period of time. Across Northern Ireland last year, for example, the formally integrated post-primary schools filled to only 85% of their potential intakes. Only seven integrated post-primary schools oversubscribed at first preference. At the same time increasing numbers of pupils from across the community spectrum are opting in to the Catholic sector. In towns like Bangor, Lisburn and Coleraine/Portstewart, pupils are passing the local “integrated” schools and choosing Catholic schools as the preferred schools for both academic standards and for integrating local populations. In this regard NICCE fully supports the position of CCMS when it states in its submission that: “If after 30 years the sector has grown to the point where it commands only 6.89% of the school age population in Northern Ireland, the Department should evaluate the public appetite for ‘Integrated Education’ as a sectoral entity, reconsider the ‘statutory duty’ and look to the promotion of other “initiatives” which have a greater chance of making more effective use of limited resources, promoting social cohesion and delivering on the general principles of TACOT:IT as outlined below;

- a. *It is a seminal purpose of the Northern Ireland Education Service to promote a culture of tolerance and reconciliation and, for schools, to do so in keeping with the particular ethos and circumstances within which they operate. These different approaches should be valued and all schools encouraged to provide further opportunities to promote a culture of tolerance.*
- b. *There should continue to be a pluralist approach to education, expressed in a plurality of structures (i.e. different types of school) and ethos.*
- c. *All schools should provide a pluralist curriculum promoting tolerance and mutual understanding.*
- d. *The present structure for schooling has been determined by parental wishes and, subject to the provision of efficient instruction and training and the avoidance of unreasonable public expenditure, pupils should continue to be educated in accordance with the wishes of their parents.*

- e. *education policy, administration, school funding and school support should be fair and equitable to all grant-aided schools, i.e. controlled, voluntary, integrated, Irish-medium maintained, denominational, non-denominational, etc. (TACOT:IT June 1998)*”.

12. To this end, NICCE supports the view of the Ministerial Advisory Group when it suggests that: “while the vision of a plurality of different schools is respected and encouraged, this must be within the context where strong efforts are made to ensure that these different types of school collaborate together in a sustained and meaningful manner to ensure that educational standards are enhanced for all children and young people and good relations are promoted.” The Trustees of Catholic Schools have consistently demonstrated their willingness to be part of such a shared and collaborative education system. From as far back as 2001, the Catholic Bishops of Northern Ireland (in *Building Peace Shaping the Future*) were actively promoting the message that Catholic schools, in living out their particular philosophy and ethos, are obliged to;

- Provide friendly contacts between pupils of different characters and backgrounds in order to encourage mutual understanding;
- Assist society to move beyond its deeply-ingrained divisions into a new coherence and openness to the world at large;
- Promote reconciliation and the common good;
- Recognize that the attendance at our schools of children from other denominations and none is an enrichment of the education experience offered by the school and is seen as a practical expression of the commitment to inclusivity.

13. NICCE remains fully committed to these principles and to their practical promotion in all Catholic schools in Northern Ireland. As in Britain, Catholic schools in Northern Ireland are among the most racially, ethnically and linguistically integrated. We are a much more diverse society than we were 20 years ago. This makes use of the hackneyed denominational language of the ‘Protestant vs. Catholic’ caricature to describe the fundamental fault lines of social division in Northern Ireland increasingly hackneyed and inappropriate. Some 15 years ago, the Good Friday Agreement showed that the core problem in Northern Ireland was political, not religious. It is also interesting to ask a more fundamental sociological question of those who point to the practical effectiveness of formally integrated schools in increasing community tolerance: “Have any pupils or parents of pupils from integrated schools been involved in interface rioting or other forms of sectarian civil disturbance over recent years?” In the interests of respect for the efforts and contribution to peace, reconciliation and stability made by all schools in Northern Ireland, NICCE encourages the Education Committee to recommend that when major international figures hosted by Government in Northern Ireland are invited to witness the important work of schools in the area of peace and reconciliation, this should always

include visiting the excellent initiatives being carried out by many controlled and Catholic maintained schools, as well as by those in the integrated sector.

14. An important point also needs to be made here about the popular misconception that pluralism in the provision of schooling in Northern Ireland involves huge extra costs and inefficiencies in public spending. This is simply not borne out by the evidence. The school system in Northern Ireland is very similar in its overall pro-rata cost to the school system in Wales. Both are slightly more expensive than in Britain and Scotland, largely because of the lower density and wider geographical spread of the population, not because of plurality of provision. The 2007 Deloitte '*Research into the financial cost of the Northern Ireland divide*' famously determined that £1.5 billion per annum 'could be considered to be the upper limit of the cost of the divide in NI' (para. 16.1). However, in terms of the proportion of this maximal figure that related to education, the research concluded that: 'quantification of conflict related costs within the education sector was particularly problematic. Those identified related to RPA related structural reorganisation which, together with community relations spend, totalled approximately £10 million' (para. 16.2). This represents approximately 0.6% of the maximum additional costs associated with community divisions in Northern Ireland, with security, health and lost business opportunities constituting by the far the largest proportion of the £1.5 billion figure. NICCE would encourage the Education Committee to publicly challenge the perception that pluralism in school provision in Northern Ireland involves substantially higher costs to the public purse than is the case in comparative parts of these islands.
15. NICCE also encourages the Education Committee, if it is to take the issue of schools and social division seriously, to prioritise addressing what actually causes most damage and division in the NI education system, namely, academic selection in post-primary transfer. Ensuring equality of access for all on the basis of agreed and enforceable criteria would go a long way to ensuring greater social balance and integration within and between all schools, for the greater good of all pupils and the whole educational enterprise.
16. Across modern diverse societies, the State has the duty to facilitate the citizen's right to choice in education. Those taxpayers and others who prefer Catholic education – whatever their religious belief, or non-belief – are entitled to have that choice respected, facilitated and held to account for the standards achieved. NICCE recognizes that there is also a corresponding duty on every citizen, and community of citizens, to actively contribute to the common good of our society, including to the search for greater understanding, tolerance and respect for difference and diversity. NICCE remains committed to supporting all Catholic schools in living up to this responsibility in a meaningful and appropriate way, and to working with representatives of other school sectors to continue to explore opportunities for greater collaboration.

**ENDS.**