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Dear Mr McCallion

### **Shared and Integrated Education Inquiry**

I am Chair of Governors at Phoenix Integrated PS in Cookstown, and was a member of the founding group in 2003/4 which set up the school. Previously I was involved in the formation and development of Mill Strand Integrated PS in Portrush and Windmill Integrated PS in Dungannon. I worked for many years in teacher education at the (integrated) school of education at the University of Ulster.

You have already received a response to the inquiry from Philip Reid of Mill Strand PS, and I hope the committee will both take his remarks seriously, and invite him to attend one of their future meetings. Philip speaks eloquently for many of us who are increasingly frustrated by the apparent attempt to develop shared education as a valid alternative to integrated education. There is nothing wrong in principle with forms of shared education, and many schools have worked hard to develop co-operative projects which are often useful and certainly better than nothing. But even at their best they always take place within a context of schools that are fundamentally representative of one tradition or another. None come close to being an adequate substitute for a school experience in which children (and, equally crucially, their parents) work together, all day, every day, for many years.

The stubbornly persistent sectarian divisions in our society have huge social and economic costs. Schools and teachers did not cause these divisions, nor can they solve them alone, but neither can education be absolved of all responsibility. We have a system in which children are separated at the age of four or five, sometimes even earlier, and separated again at the age of eleven. It is difficult to understand how, in the world of the mid to late 21<sup>st</sup> century that our children will inhabit, this could continue to be regarded as tolerable, let alone attractive. We do not need the tinkering about at the edges of our system that shared education represents but a recognition that we need an entirely new structure. It is not only the Stormont machine that is 'no longer fit for purpose'.

Even our teachers are mostly trained separately, which is particularly iniquitous. The very people who we expect to recognise and celebrate diversity in our schools have often never experienced it for themselves. I met a young classroom assistant in one integrated school only recently who said 'I never met a Protestant until I was twenty two'. Until such a time when it is impossible to say that and until the boundaries of religious background which currently inhibit our children and young people begin to be dissolved by the experience of living and working together, we will not make much progress towards a diverse yet inclusive society.

The integrated sector is more than thirty years old and within it there is vast experience of making it work. We have the astonishing achievements of hundreds of ordinary local citizens who set the schools up, often in a context of little external support (and certainly none from ELBs or DE). We have more than sixty flourishing schools; we have polls which demonstrate that more than 40% of parents actively wish their children to attend integrated schools; we have substantial research evidence of success; we have two useful representative bodies. We even have a statutory duty placed on the Department to 'encourage and facilitate the development of integrated education'. In these circumstances one might have expected that integrated education would be developed and cherished and celebrated as an example to the world of a splintered society on a journey towards reconciliation

Yet recent headlines appearing in NI newspapers tell a different story:

Blow for John O'Dowd's education policy after court rules expansion of integrated schools cannot be stifled

Clintyclay Primary School: arguments for closure that don't stand up

DUP blocks education body role for integrated sector

Children in Phoenix IPS taught in grossly inadequate accommodation due to three year Departmental delay

The fourth of these is fictional, but it expresses our local frustration that the blindingly obvious fact that a school which expands from nothing to around 190 children and 20 staff needs buildings within which education can take place. Obvious, that is, to everyone except the Department of Education who far from encouraging and facilitating have delayed endlessly (and still are).

I don't know what is holding us back: is it just Departmental incompetence? Vested interests as expressed in the depressingly negative response of CCMS to the committee? Lack of political will? Whatever the cause we are missing the opportunity for a proper appraisal of our education system, looking at the current structure and the ways in which the integrated alternative could provide a sustainable way to bring our young people together to build a diverse yet united community. I hope that the committee's report will, at last, mark the beginnings of a change in our direction of travel.

Yours sincerely

*Stuart Marriott*

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