

26 September 2014

Kathy O'Hanlon
Committee for the Office of First Minister and Deputy First Minister
Room 285, Parliament Buildings
Ballymiscaw
Stormont
BELFAST
BT4 3XX

Dear Kathy,

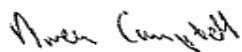
I am pleased to submit the response of the Northern Ireland Council for Education (NICIE) to the Inquiry into Building a United Community.

I would request also that NICIE be given the opportunity to present to the Committee of the First and Deputy First Minister on this important topic.

I would also extend an invitation to the Committee to visit the Hazelwood Integrated Schools, located on the interface in North Belfast to experience first-hand the important work that can be achieved in building a united community through educating children together.

I look forward to your response to these requests.

Yours sincerely



Noreen Campbell

Chief Executive Officer



**Submission from
NORTHERN IRELAND COUNCIL FOR INTEGRATED EDUCATION
to inquiry into building a united community**

No one is born hating one another because of the colour of his skin, or his background, or his religion. People must learn to hate, and if they can learn to hate, they can be taught to love, for love comes more naturally to the human heart than its opposite.

Nelson Mandela

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

submission to the inquiry into building a united community

NICIE welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the inquiry into building a united community. We hold that the system of education which prevails is a legacy which no longer reflects the multi-cultural and pluralist Northern Ireland of the twenty first century. Our voice is one of the few that has made a lasting impact in transforming the lives of people and communities away from the sterile politics of sectarian mistrust and division to a reality of acceptance of difference and a celebration of diversity.

NICIE believes that a key strategy in tackling sectarianism, racism and other forms of intolerance involves the education of children together, irrespective of social/cultural background, religion, ability and on a daily basis, in an all-inclusive and mutually respectful *shared space*. Our schools are as direct result of *communities* acting together.

Our founding principles articulate a vision of a ‘united community’, with peace and reconciliation at its core. Where our schools are working along interface areas they provide examples of good practice in challenging fear and ignorance and in bringing communities together.

The benefits of integrated education are recognised widely and our schools have become a model for other societies dealing with division and conflict. Significantly, support and demand for integrated schooling remains consistently high (at around eighty per cent from various polls) but provision of places is in shortage with no new schools being established within the last three years.

NICIE would respectfully ask that the following recommendations be considered when the committee reports on 'building a united inquiry'.

RECOMMENDATIONS

That the Northern Ireland Executive accepts its responsibilities as outlined in the Good Friday Agreement ‘...to facilitate and encourage Integrated Education... in the process of reconciliation and the creation of a culture of tolerance at every level of society.’

That the Department of Education be held accountable for the implementation of its statutory duty under Article 64 of the Education Reform (Northern Ireland) Order 1989 ‘to encourage and facilitate integrated education’, as reaffirmed in the recent judicial review.

That, having accepted this responsibility through acceptance of an assembly motion on placing article 64 at the heart of educational planning, the minister now ensures that the choice of parents — and the rights of children — to secure a place at an integrated school is realised.

That a target be adopted for at least one third of all school places to be integrated and for there to be an integrated choice in every area.

That all pre-school education be officially re-designated as integrated.

That the new single authority be responsible for planning for educational provision on an area basis in full consultation with parents.

NICIE welcomes the opportunity to inform the executive's approach in the actions it takes to tackle sectarianism, racism and other forms of intolerance; and to make recommendations in order to support and enhance policy in uniting communities and community integration, including how communities are involved in decision making.

Context

Sectarianism, racism and other forms of intolerance thrive in a society where 'others' are seen as the cause of inequality, lack of opportunities, and injustices, and crucially where ignorance of and about fellow citizens becomes immortalised as myth and history. Sectarianism kills. Society stagnates.

The founders of integrated education believed that by educating children together it would be possible to challenge the inevitability of another generation condemned to the violence and hopelessness which had become the norm for so many in Northern Ireland. With reconciliation as one of its core principles, integrated education encapsulated a vision of a 'united community' and courageously took those first faltering steps over thirty years ago. Pioneer schools such as Lagan and Hazelwood were a direct result of communities acting together to build a type of school that would foster good relations in shared spaces, and in some cases along interface areas. We in the Northern Ireland Council for Integrated Education (NICIE) feel well placed to contribute to ongoing discussions on building a united community.

Education a force for change

The role of education as a powerful force in transforming societies, not least those emerging from years of conflict, has been recognised and accepted globally. It is now equally understood that an education system that fails to deliver to all its participants the opportunities to develop to their full potential is a flawed system. Underachievement, where measured in terms of academic grades, is a major cause for concern among certain sections of Northern Irish society, most notably protestant working class boys. Latest findings highlight the widening gap in literacy and numeracy between the highest and lowest achievers in our schools, placing Northern Ireland even lower in international league tables of performance. The challenges presented by an increasingly diverse range of pupils demand more than ever

an inclusive system of education. We in NICIE believe that an integrated school offers the best means of dismantling the barriers and mitigating the marginalisation which contributes to intolerance and disunity in society. The multi-cultural Northern Ireland of the twenty-first century requires an educational system which reflects diversity and which aims to be a world leader in enabling every child to overcome disadvantage.

The educational status quo

Over ninety per cent of our children are divided in that they attend single identity schools; this sense of separateness is further exacerbated on returning home where similarly high numbers live in segregated housing resulting in limited exposure to other traditions and identities. While some progress has been made in developing the concept of shared education — and we in NICIE laud any progress in bringing our young people closer together — the collaboration involved and envisaged is based on a premise which ‘accepts a religiously divided school system but tries to make the walls more porous by encouraging practical cooperation... It delivers educational benefits to its learners, promotes the effective use of resources and promotes equality of opportunity, good relations, equality of identity, respect for diversity and community cohesion’ (Community Relations Commission, *Peace Monitoring Report 2013*). The integrated model is the optimum model of sharing where togetherness is the everyday norm and not the exception, where the entitlement to be educated together is the norm, not an added experience.

The NICIE model

There are sixty two integrated schools educating together 22,000 children of different backgrounds and beliefs.

The model of integrated education, with its emphasis on an all-ability, co-educational experience, has been developed as a contribution towards peace and reconciliation. As such, this model is much admired and sought after by many countries experiencing division and conflict. Educators from Bosnia, Croatia, Macedonia, Israel, Turkey and others have visited our schools, shared experiences and developed similar initiatives in their own societies.

Bringing children of all faiths and no faiths together in a school community in a planned way

where they learn to understand and respect each other's difference is a key characteristic. Each child's identity and religious and cultural background is recognized and valued. Children are encouraged to take pride in and celebrate their own cultural and religious identities and to learn about and respect the diverse identities of their classmates. The planned integrated experience ensures that every child is equipped to live and work in an increasingly diverse world. The impact that attending an integrated school can have on wider society has also been documented: 'individuals who attend integrated schools are significantly more likely to have friends and neighbours from across the divide and these friendship networks translate into a more optimistic view of future community relations' (B.C. Hayes and I. McAllister, 'Education as a Mechanism for Conflict Resolution).

Research

Other research supports the 'individual change' theory which suggests that peace comes through the transformative change of a critical mass of individuals and the 'healthy relationships and connections' theory which suggests that peace emerges out of a process of breaking down isolation, polarisation, division, prejudice and stereotypes between and among groups. Our experience of integrating catholic and protestant children together shows that education can impact positively on identity, out group attitudes and forgiveness, and promote a less sectarian outlook. There is also evidence that it moderates children's political attitudes and creates cross community group friendships that can be carried forward into the community (McGlynn).

The benefits of integrated education are clearly understood by academics and formal educators as well as international political leaders. As President Obama said on a recent visit to Northern Ireland: 'Because issues like segregated schools and housing, lack of jobs and opportunity — symbols of history that are a source of pride for some and pain for others — these are not tangential to peace; they are essential to it. If towns remain divided — if catholics have their schools and buildings and protestants have theirs — if we can't see ourselves in one another — if fear or resentment are allowed to harden — that encourages division. It discourages cooperation. Ultimately peace is not just about politics it is about attitudes, about a sense of empathy.'

Public opinion

Public opinion polls show consistently high levels of support. A *Belfast Telegraph/Lucid Poll* (February 2013) found that seventy seven per cent of parents would support a request for their child's school to become integrated and sixty nine per cent agreed an integrated school was the best preparation for living in a diverse society. Business leaders and world leaders also share the view that a major step forward in unlocking the potential for Northern Irish society involves the ending of our segregated system of education, our 'benign apartheid'.

A more recent poll (*Belfast Telegraph/Lucid Poll*, June 2013) found more than two thirds surveyed believed that our education system perpetuates division in society. A similar number believed Northern Ireland politicians must prioritise the ending of the segregated system with over fifty per cent stating that politicians should set clear target dates for the complete desegregation of the system. In 2013, 700 children (16.5% of those who applied) were refused a place in an integrated school of their choice.

Seventy seven per cent polled thought that Northern Ireland's international image would be improved by having a single education system while eighty two per cent thought the international community should encourage our politicians to desegregate the system.

Clearly political support for the segregated educational status quo is out of step not just with international opinion but with the views of the electorate. This inquiry into building a united community should play an important part in persuading OFM/DFM to implement the structural change necessary in our education system to build a united community.

Recent developments

We in NICIE have been heartened by the recent judicial review finding initiated by Drumragh Integrated College, Omagh, which clarified Article 64 of the Education Reform Act (Northern Ireland) 1989 in stating the responsibility of government to 'encourage and facilitate Integrated education' and we welcomed the minister of education's support in the assembly for a motion to place Article 64 at the heart of educational planning.

Opportunities have been missed to tackle head-on the segregated system through area based planning, while the process of transformation remains difficult. Despite a background of financial restraint and concern about the cost of duplication of provision, the pace of change is

slow. The Peace Monitoring Report for 2013 noted that on current trends it would take another 499 years for all Northern Ireland schools to become integrated.

It is recognised that many schools in Northern Ireland offer genuine opportunities to pupils to meet and share learning experiences with those of a different background and early evaluations have shown that there are some positive benefits for those involved. Similarly policy documents such as *Community Relations, Equality and Diversity* (CRED) are important resources for advancing a more inclusive curriculum within schools.

NICIE wants to build on such good practice and in doing so has developed the Positive Partnership for Integration Initiative (PPInt). This initiative will provide the opportunity for those schools who wish to further develop their capacity to build partnerships to explore and celebrate diversity; to share and deepen good practice; to share learning resources; to validate their commitment to recognising and celebrating the diversity of their school community — in order to ‘help children and young people to learn, understand and respect one and other and their different customs and traditions, and prepare them to live together in harmony in adult life’ (CRED 2.1). This initiative will allow increasing numbers of schools to be recognised as being integrated in ethos. This initiative has the potential to move Northern Ireland beyond a segregated system of education to an integrated system which allows for a plurality of school types committed to collaboration and sharing.

NICIE contends that the development of such a system with a focus on educational strategies in the area of diversity, equality and promotion of community relations is one pre-requisite for creating the conditions in which inward investment, business confidence, increased employment, training opportunities and entrepreneurship will be enhanced and sustained in the context of contributing to ‘Together, Building a United Community’.

NICIE would also call on courageous (decisive) action to follow the recommendations in the international review panel on teacher education in Northern Ireland, one of which is to establish an inclusive centre of excellence to train our young teachers to help build a united and prosperous community.

Good practice at the interface

The Hazelwood schools in North Belfast offer an example of how children can experience first class education against a background of community division and conflict and how the schools can reach out into the communities and contribute to better community relations for the benefit of all who live in them.

Over 450 children attend Hazelwood integrated primary, fifty per cent of whom are entitled to free school meals, thirty per cent being identified as special needs, eight per cent being registered as having a disability. Over ten per cent are newcomer children. As in all integrated schools, religious and cultural events of all children are celebrated not just at assemblies but through curricular activities within the classroom. Families are encouraged to participate and, when feasible, so too are others from the local community. Issues of identity and difference are explored and discussed. In 2013, whole school celebrations were held to mark the Queen's Jubilee. Gaelic sports are offered, pupils are involved in projects with Irish medium schools, and the history of the protestant community and its links with the Irish language is also studied. Over the years, the school has been the location for regular faith worship of the Bahai community, is a centre for sporting and leisure classes in the evenings and weekends, and has acted as a centre for mediation when tensions have developed among local groups. It is ironic that Hazelwood integrated primary school serving as it does the children of divided North Belfast remains the only school in the world to be scarred with a 'peace' wall in its grounds.

The inquiry of this committee presents an opportunity to promote positive change. The education system has a significant role to play in shaping such change. We need to ensure that the long term process of building a peaceful united community is served not hindered by our educational system. Our system must shape the future we wish to see.