

Written Ministerial Statement

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Department of Education

DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION POSITION PAPER ON 'REASONABLE NUMBERS' – SEPTEMBER 2025

Published at 11am on Thursday 4 September 2025

Mr Givan (The Minister of Education): Today, I am setting out the Department of Education's position paper on 'reasonable numbers' in relation to the application of Article 71 and 92 of the Education Reform (Northern Ireland) Order 1989.

Legislative Position

1. The legal requirement for reasonable numbers is based in a requirement set out in the [Education Reform \(Northern Ireland\) Order 1989](#). The 1989 Order states that the Department will not approve a proposal unless it appears to the Department if the school were to become, or be established as, a Grant Maintained Integrated (*Article 71*) or Controlled Integrated school (*Article 92*), that the school would be likely to provide Integrated Education.
2. Integrated Education is defined in the [Integrated Education Act \(Northern Ireland\) 2022](#) as the education together, in an Integrated school, of —
 - those of different cultures and religious beliefs and of none, **including reasonable numbers of both Protestant and Roman Catholic children or young persons**;
 - those who are experiencing socio-economic deprivation and those who are not; and
 - those of different abilities.
3. There is a general requirement in the legislation that the school seeking to Transform is likely to provide Integrated Education to pupils of mixed backgrounds and abilities but a specific requirement that this includes reasonable numbers of both Protestant and Catholic pupils.

Considerations

4. In introducing the reasonable numbers of Protestant and Catholic children requirement as part of the 1989 Order, the then Minister, Dr Brian Mawhinney, accepted that a rigid definition should not be applied, however, he stated that, "it is axiomatic that an Integrated school should have a reasonably substantial representation of pupils from both backgrounds."ⁱ
5. Subsequently to the 1989 Order, the Department adopted a policy on reasonable numbers that a new Integrated school should attract 30% of its pupils from the minority community in the area where the school is situated. Existing schools, transforming to Integrated status, were to demonstrate the ability to achieve a minimum of 10% of their first-year intake drawn from the minority tradition (Protestant or Roman Catholic) within the school's enrolment and the potential to achieve a minimum of 30% in the longer term.

6. Such a position is unsurprising given that bringing together pupils from the two communities is a fundamental aim of Integrated Education. Newly established Integrated schools that did not originate from Transformation have generally exhibited a very good balance of pupils from both religious backgrounds,
7. There is also substantial evidence of the importance of balance to deliver on the aspirations of Integrated Education. “Contact theory” would emphasise the importance that groups should interact as equals preventing one group from dominating the other and ensuring no group feeling marginalised.ⁱⁱ
8. The [NICIE Statement of Principles for Integrated Education](#) sets out that to promote equality in sharing between and within the diverse groups that compose the school community, Integrated schools aspire to an annual intake of at least 40% pupils from a perceived Protestant background and at least 40% pupils from a perceived Catholic background.
9. The [Independent Review of Integrated Education \(2016\)](#) highlights that NICIE proposed this balance based on the experience of racial segregation in the United States of America where it was observed that if the participation rate of one community falls below 40%, that minority community begins, even unconsciously, ‘to keep its head down’ or not to participate at all. Likewise, where the participation rate of one community rises much above 60%, that larger community begins, even unconsciously, to adopt a hegemonic perspective and discourse i.e. to act as if everyone shares its viewpoint.
10. Educating reasonable numbers of Protestants and Catholics together is, therefore, the core defining feature of Integrated Education since inception. In 2016, the majority (71%) of responses to the Call for Evidence to the Review of Integrated Education agreed that Integrated Education should continue to be primarily about educating young people from Protestant and Catholic backgrounds. The [Integrated Education Act \(Northern Ireland\) 2022](#) added to the characteristics of Integrated Education but unsurprisingly did not remove this core pillar.
11. In “[Integration Works – Transforming your School](#)” it was stated, “the Department will not adopt a one-size-fits-all approach to what defines a reasonable number of Protestant and Catholic pupils for a successful Transformation. The religious balance of Transformed schools may vary depending on the local circumstances in an area. It is also important to recognise that some pupils might adopt multiple identities or choose or perceive themselves to have a shared or mixed identity.” On considered reflection this statement does not appear to fully reflect the statutory test. While flexibility might be afforded to local circumstances, the underlying rationale of Integrated Education is a reasonable balance to promote equality between pupils at the school.

Department of Education Position on ‘Reasonable Numbers’

12. While a rigid approach should not be taken to ‘reasonable numbers,’ what constitutes reasonable numbers should be considered having regard to, the intention of the 1989 Order, the NICIE Statement of Principles, and the underlying rationale of contact theory that there should be a reasonable balance between Protestant and Catholic children. The statement that follows in italics is the general principle that will be applied in the context of proposals to Transform to Integrated status.

General Principle

To ensure the process of Transformation is both well-grounded at the outset and capable of developing over time, the Department will expect, as a general principle, the proposer to provide evidence that the school is likely to be able to attract at least 10% of its total year 1 or year 8 from the minority religion, or in those schools seeking to transform to Integrated status, 15% of the combined number of Protestant and Catholic year 1 or year 8 pupils, in the first year of Transformation.

There may be exceptions to this general principle however, and each case will be considered in its own unique circumstances regardless of the percentage of Protestant and Catholics evidenced by the proposer.

Evidence is also required that this is likely to increase over the next 7 years to achieve reasonable numbers from the minority religion and an aspiration for the relative proportions of the two groups to be similar.

Analysis of 'reasonable numbers' of existing transformed schools.

1. One school has transformed from Catholic Maintained status to controlled integrated status. All the others have transformed from being Controlled schools.
2. There are six post primary schools that have transformed to integrated status.
3. One of these transformed in 2022 and the percentage of Catholic pupils at the school has increased by 2 percentage points from 4% to 6%. While the initial seven-year period referenced in the departmental policy has not concluded yet, the year one target of 10% has still not been met.
4. In four of the six transformations, one dating back as far as 1998, 20% minority pupils has not yet been achieved. One school which transformed over 25 years ago has not yet reached the year one target of 10% of Catholic pupils.
5. Two other transformed schools have seen the percentage of Protestant pupils drop precipitously since transformation. In one case from 72% to 24% and in another from 40% to 17%.
6. In five of the six schools the percentage of the minority community is less than 50% of the majority community at the school. In one school there are 10 times as many of the majority community at the school compared to the minority community and another has 5 times as many.
7. None of the schools come close to the 40:40:20 aspiration and nor seem likely to do so at any point in the foreseeable future.
8. There are 25 primary schools that have transformed to become Controlled integrated schools.
9. Six have transformed within the last seven years.
10. Two of these still have fewer than 10% of the minority community. At one of these the percentage of the minority Catholic pupils has more than halved in recent years. In one of these schools the majority community pupils exceeds the minority community pupils by a factor of more than 10:1. In none of these schools does the minority community have more than 50% of the majority community at the school. None of the schools come close to the 40:40:20 aspiration. One school has seen the number of Protestant pupils fall from 66% to 23% while the number of Catholic pupils has increased from 6% to 48%.
11. 19 other schools have transformed outside the seven-year period from as recently as 2016 to as far back as 1991. In 12 of the 19, the majority community outnumbers the minority community by at least 2:1. Of these, seven outnumber by more than 3:1. 10 of the 19 have fewer than 20% of the minority community at that school. Three schools that have

transformed – all more than seven years ago – have fewer than 5 (five) pupils from the minority community.

12. These figures reveal that the transformation of schools to integrated status has had limited success in achieving balanced religious demographics, particularly between Protestant and Catholic pupils. Despite the aspiration for a 40:40:20 balance (Protestant: Catholic: Other), few of the transformed schools—primary or post-primary—come close to this target, and many are less balanced now than when they first transformed. In several cases, the minority community (whether Protestant or Catholic) remains significantly underrepresented, sometimes by ratios as high as 10:1. Even in schools transformed decades ago, reasonable numbers of both communities are not present and some have seen declines in diversity. These patterns suggest that transformation unlike newly established integrated schools is not producing demographic integration and the reasonable numbers which define integrated education.

ⁱ Dr Brian Mawhinney (The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Northern Ireland) quoted from the UK Parliamentary [*Debate on the draft Education Reform \(Northern Ireland\) Order 1989*](#).

ⁱⁱ *The contact hypothesis, or intergroup contact theory, suggests that positive contact between different groups, under specific conditions, can reduce prejudice and improve intergroup relations. This theory, primarily developed by Gordon Allport (George Allport - The Nature of Prejudice 1954), proposes that certain types of contact, particularly those involving equal status, shared goals, cooperation, and institutional support, are most effective in fostering positive attitudes and behaviours between groups.*