

25<sup>th</sup> January 2013

Mr. Mervyn Storey MLA  
Chairman  
Committee For Education  
Northern Ireland Assembly  
Room 243  
Parliament Buildings  
Stormont  
Belfast  
BT4 3XX

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Mrs. J. Hughes  
Chairman  
Bridge Integrated Primary School  
70 Ballygowan Road  
Banbridge  
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Dear Mr. Storey

I write on behalf of the Board of Governors of Bridge Integrated Primary School in Banbridge which is a Grant-Maintained Integrated School in relation to the Education Bill which is currently being considered by your Committee.

Bridge Integrated Primary School is 25 years old. It has an enrolment figure of 412 and serves 328 families. For 2013/2014 P1 admissions, we have been oversubscribed by 22% (71 applications for 58 places). We have 12 full time and 8 part time teachers in addition to the Principal, and employ 28 further staff. As the fourth largest school in Banbridge (SELB figures), we can confidently state that there is substantial commitment within the area to integrated education. Many families travel a considerable distance to access the school.

**I am writing on behalf of the Board of Governors of the school to express our concern that the proposed Education Bill does not meet the needs of this population.**

1. Legal Framework

The Education Reform Order (1989) and Belfast Agreement (1998) place an obligation on the Department of Education to “encourage and facilitate the development of integrated education that is the education together of Catholic and Protestant children”.

Whereas the Education Bill would place a duty on ESA to encourage and facilitate the development of education in an Irish speaking school (clause 2(5)), there is no

corresponding duty regarding integrated education. This is at odds with the aforementioned legislation and risks unfair and unequal treatment of the sizable population within Northern Ireland whose cultures and values are indicated by their choice of integrated education.

**Bridge Integrated Primary School believes that the Education Bill must be amended to explicitly acknowledge and deliver upon the Department's statutory obligation to encourage and facilitate integrated education.**

## 2. ESA Board

The constitution of the ESA Board as currently proposed within the Bill would reinforce the religious and cultural segregation embodied by our educational system to date. It signals a disregard for the integrated movement and the families who have chosen integrated education.

In order to meet the statutory obligation referred to above, representation from the integrated movement is essential.

**Bridge Integrated Primary School requests an amendment to the constitution of the Board of ESA within the Education Bill to explicitly contain at least one representative of the integrated sector.**

## 3. Area Based Planning

Whereas the Education Bill provides ESA with responsibilities for the establishment of new Controlled and Catholic Maintained schools, it lacks a mechanism for the establishment of new integrated schools.

The annual and growing over-subscription of integrated schools in the Banbridge area at both primary and post-primary levels indicates growth in demand for integrated education; a demand that is not likely to be met by current constraints on enrolment figures or current levels of capital investment in integrated schools within the area.

As the integrated sector reinforced in its submission to the Education Committee, recent polls suggest that a majority of the population would, given the choice, choose integrated education. The Education Bill in its current form fails to acknowledge that demand or to provide for it in the future. Therefore, the people of Northern Ireland may, through lack of choice, be forced into segregated education that they do not want.

**Bridge Integrated Primary School argues that in order to ensure parity with and fair treatment to match the provision for the other sectors, there must be explicit provision within the Education Bill for the opening of new integrated schools.**

**Furthermore, there must be explicit provision to allow ESA to ensure the sustainability of existing schools through integration and amalgamation across the Controlled and Catholic Maintained sectors.**

4. NICIE Response

**Bridge Integrated Primary School understands that the Northern Ireland Council for Integrated Education has submitted a number of amendments which would write into the Bill an acknowledgement of the statutory obligation to facilitate and encourage Integrated Education and which would ensure representation for Integrated Education on the board. Bridge Integrated Primary School registers its support of these amendments.**

5. Conclusion

Finally, the Board of Bridge Integrated Primary School welcomes ESA but sees it as a once in a generation opportunity to shape a shared future, which we believe must be founded on the Principles of Integrated Education adopted by NICIE to support the Education (Northern Ireland) Order 1989.

**We submit that the Education Bill should enable ESA to play a positive role in shaping such a future and to deliver on this commitment.**

**Furthermore, we are very concerned that the needs and interests of such a large section of the population have been ignored through the omission of a serious commitment to integrated education within the Bill.**

We trust that our comments will be taken on board.

Yours sincerely

Joyce Hughes  
Chairman, Bridge Integrated Primary School

Cc:  
Members of the Education Committee  
Minister John O'Dowd  
Noreen Campbell, CEO, NICIE