



**RESPONSE OF THE STATE EDUCATION COMMITTEE OF THE
PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH IN IRELAND TO THE COMMITTEE FOR
EDUCATION CALL FOR EVIDENCE ON THE INTEGRATED EDUCATION BILL
(NIA BILL 23/17-22)**

OCTOBER 2021

Background

1. The Presbyterian Church in Ireland (PCI) has over 200,000 members belonging to 530 congregations across 19 Presbyteries throughout Ireland, north and south. The Council for Public Affairs is authorised by the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in Ireland to speak on behalf of PCI on matters of public policy, with the Council's State Education Committee carrying specific responsibility for education matters in Northern Ireland. PCI is also represented on the Transferor Representatives' Council (TRC) with colleagues from the Boards of Education of the Church of Ireland the Methodist Church in Ireland.
2. Throughout the denomination many hundreds of PCI members work across a wide variety of roles within education including principals, teachers, classroom assistants and support staff. In addition, hundreds of others serve as transferor governors on boards of governors within the controlled sector, both at primary and post-primary levels.
3. PCI recognises the value of children and young people encountering differing views, opinions and cultures during their school experience. One of the best ways to ensure this happens is in providing opportunities for pupils to mix. PCI further recognises that this occurs naturally in numerous schools across all sectors of education. This integrating of education is to be welcomed and encouraged but should never be identified solely with one particular sector.
4. PCI recognises the positive contribution that many Integrated schools have made to our society, including the role played in enabling children to learn together and build good relations. Many parents who choose to send their children to schools within that sector do so because of the stated principles of integration, tolerance and mutual respect which are at its heart. While these principles are clearly also present in most schools in other sectors it is acknowledged that schools in the Integrated Sector view these as particularly defining.
5. While the growth of the formal Integrated Sector has never reached the scale that many of its advocates would desire, its influence in promoting its core values across all sectors should be

recognised. The significant development of the concept of Shared Education over recent years has further enabled all schools to develop in these areas.

6. In the view of PCI, the further development of Shared Education across all schools continues to be important. All sectoral bodies should have this as a priority, and come to it as equal partners in the promotion of tolerance and mutual respect. It is counterproductive to view the promotion of these values as being the domain of just one formal sector.

Integrated Education Bill

7. Turning to the specifics of the Integrated Education Bill under consideration by the Committee PCI would offer the following observations:
 - a. It is noted that a consultation on the proposed legislation was undertaken by the Bill Sponsor ahead of its initial intended introduction, which was delayed due to the suspension of the NI Assembly's normal activities for a significant period of time. However, it is disappointing that in seeking to bring forward the legislation before the end of the current mandate that the Bill Sponsor did not undertake any additional consultation or engage specifically with the TRC or the individual denominations.
 - b. Given the commitment within New Decade New Approach to undertake a comprehensive Independent Review of Education, and the (previous) Education Minister's subsequent announcement of the Review, including its terms of reference, it seems both premature and presumptive to bring forward legislation of this nature which seeks to effect significant reform to the education system.
 - c. The legislation carries with it a presumption that 'integration' does not occur with any other sector other than that which is formally 'Integrated'. Recent statistics demonstrate that the Controlled Schools' Sector incorporates more than 30% of pupils who do not necessarily identify as Protestant.
 - d. The suggested definition of Integrated Education borrows heavily from the wording used to define the purpose of Shared Education in the Shared Education Act 2016, and this appears to be unnecessary duplication.
 - e. Further, the suggested definition of Integrated Education removes any reference to Christian ethos or character, which continues to be part of the definition used by the NI Council for Integrated Education in its Statement of Principles document. This is a particularly surprising development given the lack of consultation and engagement with the Churches in advance of the Bill's introduction.
 - f. The Bill advocates additional funding and resources to be allocated to the Integrated Sector, over and above other sectors. Not only would this be discriminatory and unfair, with no equality impact assessment having been undertaken to understand the impact of such a change, it is the responsibility of government, as legislators and policy-makers to ensure that an unbalanced promotion of one sector does not result in the downgrading of other sectors. This is a particular reality when it comes to the sharing of limited resources for capital development and support programmes for schools. Further such an approach would have the effect of removing parental choice.

- g. The Bill suggests that the following should not be considered when determining whether a school should transform – religious demographics of the local community, and the number of unfilled places in neighbouring schools. We would suggest that both this proposal, and the proposal to designate any newly created school as “Integrated” would be an unwise approach for a number of reasons, including:
- i. Removes parental choice
 - ii. Has the potential to increase division within communities
 - iii. Removes the distinctiveness of the Integrated Sector
 - iv. Potentially creates a scenario whereby schools with very little mixing, as is reflected in their local community, could declare themselves as “Integrated” when the demographic of the school population would suggest otherwise

Conclusion

8. PCI wishes the Committee well in its deliberations on the Bill and would be happy to brief the Committee in person along with the other Churches if that was required.



**Rev Daniel Kane (Convener of the
Council for Public Affairs)**



**Rev Trevor D Gribben
(Clerk of the General Assembly)**