

Written submission to the
**INDEPENDENT REVIEW
OF EDUCATION**

Presented by
**Board of Trustees
Integrated AlumNI**

July 2022



Foreword from our Chair

We are pleased to submit this written evidence to the Independent Review of Education.

Next year, Northern Ireland will mark the 25th Anniversary of the Good Friday Agreement. The Agreement set out the provision "to facilitate and encourage integrated education". However, the establishment of all 69 integrated schools in Northern Ireland has been community-led, with limited or no support from the Department of Education. In 2022, the reality is that only 7% of our school age population attend an integrated school.

Existing barriers to integrated education mean that past pupils from the sector are proportionally smaller than other sectors. This submission seeks to centre those voices in the discussion around the future terrain of education in Northern Ireland. Not doing so provides an integral risk to the fabric of our educational future.

The educational experience of our members has equipped us individually to be advocates and supporters of integrated education, in the work we do at home and in various locations around the globe. 71% of parents in Northern Ireland would like to send their children to an integrated school, and we believe they should be afforded that opportunity. The provision does not exist to meet that parental demand.

We are a charitable network of volunteers formed of past pupils from integrated schools, alongside campaigners and supporters of the integrated movement. We advocate that the furtherance of integrated education in Northern Ireland will directly impact on our journey to fostering true peace and reconciliation in Northern Ireland. We will only achieve this ambition with political will. Many other facets of the Agreement remain fragile, including the very political structures that govern us. As of June 2022, we remain in a very politically volatile environment.

In March 2022, the Northern Ireland Assembly passed legislation to increase the provision of integrated education. The Integrated Education Act became legislation in May 2022 which mandates the Department of Education to support integrated education. There is an increasing wave of interest in how education is the key to unlocking true peace and reconciliation in Northern Ireland.

This document aims to set out:

- Our response to the asks set out from the Independent Review of Education*
- The work of the Integrated AlumNI in building a more prosperous and reconciled Northern Ireland*
- Testimonies of those who have experienced integrated education and why this should be a policy area of focus*

We would welcome the opportunity to engage the review Committee further to be able to expand on our written submission document. We believe that our group can add an additional perspective. Thank you for your interest in our work.



Michael Lynch
Chair of Trustees
Integrated AlumNI

Written submission to the Independent Review of Education

About Integrated AlumNI

Integrated AlumNI is a charitable network of past pupils and supporters of integrated education. We are passionate about the fantastic experiences we had at school and give our time to promote and support the expansion of integrated education to meet parental demand. We campaign for further integration and promote the positive benefits of integrated education.

Integrated education has been under-funded and under-prioritised for decades. And yet, this sector provides a blueprint for a single education system that will prepare children and young people for successful engagement in the future of Northern Ireland, as well as cementing a peaceful and reconciled Northern Ireland..

A vision for a single system in Northern Ireland

- Integrated education is the ideal model for a single education system, where children of all faiths and none, and from all traditions can learn together.
- A single education system modelled on the integrated sector would be one where teachers are supported to understand cultural and religious differences, to help build lasting reconciliation in Northern Ireland. Anti-racism should be a baseline professional value for teachers.
- Teaching staff and Boards of Governors would be mixed and representative of all faiths and none. Language and sport would be demand-led, ensuring pupils and parents are included in planning for all traditions in Northern Ireland.
- Schools would be safe communities for pupils in which they can be their authentic selves.

Weaknesses of the current system:

Educational segregation is draining the public purse:

Two professional studies have estimated the cost of maintaining a divided education system in Northern Ireland, where the Government funds separate teacher training colleges for Catholic and Protestant schools, separate educational governance bodies, and so on.

[The Ulster University Economic Policy Centre](#) estimates an upper bound of £95 million per year wasted. [Deloitte research](#) notes that “there is evidence that the divide has perpetuated the existence of a multi-sector system which is costly to administer and train for, and ineffective at managing supply of pupil places.” Each report gives a median estimate of division costing around £50 million per year – that’s more than £1 million per week.

To this cost of division we must also add the cost of “Shared Education” programmes to encourage contact between Protestant and Catholic schools. [A report laid before the Assembly](#) lists around £229.75 million spent on “Shared Education” in the 2020-22 reporting period, a huge cost that would be totally unnecessary in a fully-integrated system.¹

Despite the gigantic sums of money spent on division and on a pale imitation of integrated education (“Shared Education”), funding for integrated education is largely left to individual parents and charitable fund-raising. (The Integrated Education Fund has raised £25 million to support parents who want their children to attend an integrated school - a tiny fraction of the amount of money spent on Shared Education in a few short years).

¹ See “3.7: Funding to advance Shared Education”: <https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/education/Advancing%20Shared%20Education%203rd%20Report%20to%20Assembly%20-%20MARCH%202022.PDF>

Educational segregation is entrenching division

Mitchell B. Reiss, US Special Envoy to Northern Ireland, [said in 2004](#):

“After taking on this assignment, I was astonished to learn that roughly 95% of Northern Ireland schoolchildren are educated in segregated schools. As Americans, we have first-hand experience with segregation, not so long ago. And we know it doesn't work. Segregation short-changes the students by denying them exposure to one half their society. And it weakens the country by embedding misunderstanding and distrust”.

The damage caused by many young people not meeting a member of the opposite community until they leave school are incalculable. Recent statistics from the Department of Education show that in controlled (de facto Protestant) schools, 7.6% of the school population is Catholic. In maintained schools, 1.2% of the school population is Protestant. [Analysis of school census figures](#) shows that only 143 out of about 1,000 schools in Northern Ireland have at least 10% of pupils from a Protestant background and 10% from a Catholic background. There are no Catholic or no Protestant pupils at all in 287 schools - about 30% of schools. 70% of pupils attend schools where there is less than a one in 20 chance of meeting a pupil from the other main religious tradition.

It's clear this is a massive barrier to creating a post-conflict society.

Conversely, a study from the [University of Ulster](#)'s 'Transforming Education in NI' project notes that “integrated schooling has a significant and positive social influence on the lives of those who experience it, most notably in terms of fostering cross-community friendships, reducing prejudicial attitudes and promoting a sense of security in religious, racial, or ethnically diverse environments.” Another paper by Stringer et al.,(2009, 2000) has found that the intergroup contact of integrated or mixed schools influences social attitudes, with pupils adopting more positive positions on issues such as politics, religion, identity, mixed marriages and integrated education. (A link to a full literature review is available [here](#)).

Demand for integrated education is not being met

Around 8% of pupils in Northern Ireland attend integrated schools. And yet a series of polls reveal the majority of families would like to send their children to integrated schools and would support their school transforming to integrated status. As such, this submission will also centre the experiences of those who cannot access integrated education.

According to Department of Education statistics, in 2020 21% of pupils who selected integrated schools for their post-primary selection were not successful in securing a place. Danielle Robinson's son, Lucas, went to an integrated primary school in Belfast but wasn't initially successful in getting a place at an integrated school in his post-primary selection when they applied in 2020.

"It was so stressful. We hadn't realised the level of demand for places so it came as a huge shock when he didn't get accepted. So many other families were in the same boat as us. There definitely needs to be more integrated schools and to have them more geographically spread out to avoid this anxiety on families."

Lucas eventually got into his integrated school of choice after his case and criteria was reviewed. In 2022, Hazelwood Integrated College received over 230 applications for 160 post-primary spaces.

Why has the progress in the establishment of integrated schools been so painfully slow? The first integrated schools were set up by parent founders and teachers in the early 1980s. Despite the obvious success of the approach, the establishment of all 69 integrated schools has been community-led, with limited or no support from the Department of Education. In fact, founders of some integrated schools would say that their school was established *in spite of* the Department.

Voices of Integrated Education

Integrated AlumNI recently asked current students of integrated schools - why does integrated education matter to you? What are the benefits that you have seen from attending an integrated school?

"Everyone is equal, learning together despite what cultures or religion they identify with,"

"It has brought communities together when people thought it was not possible."

"It has created togetherness rather than division."

"Being a student at an integrated school has allowed me to express my own identity and increased my confidence."

"I have made so many lifelong friends from different religious and cultural backgrounds."

"I have developed a greater awareness which is important for reconciliation and for Northern Ireland to continue to move forward."

Pupil testimonials, March 2022

Many calls for change, little action

Integrated Education, whilst being community-driven, has also been a recommendation of the following reports:

- 1998 Belfast / Good Friday Agreement;
- 2005 (Westminster) Northern Ireland Affairs Committee examining Hate Crime
- 2009 Consultative Group on the Past;
- 2020 New Decade New Approach Agreement
- 2020 Review of Hate Crime Legislation
- 2021 Executive Action Plan for Tackling Paramilitary Activity.

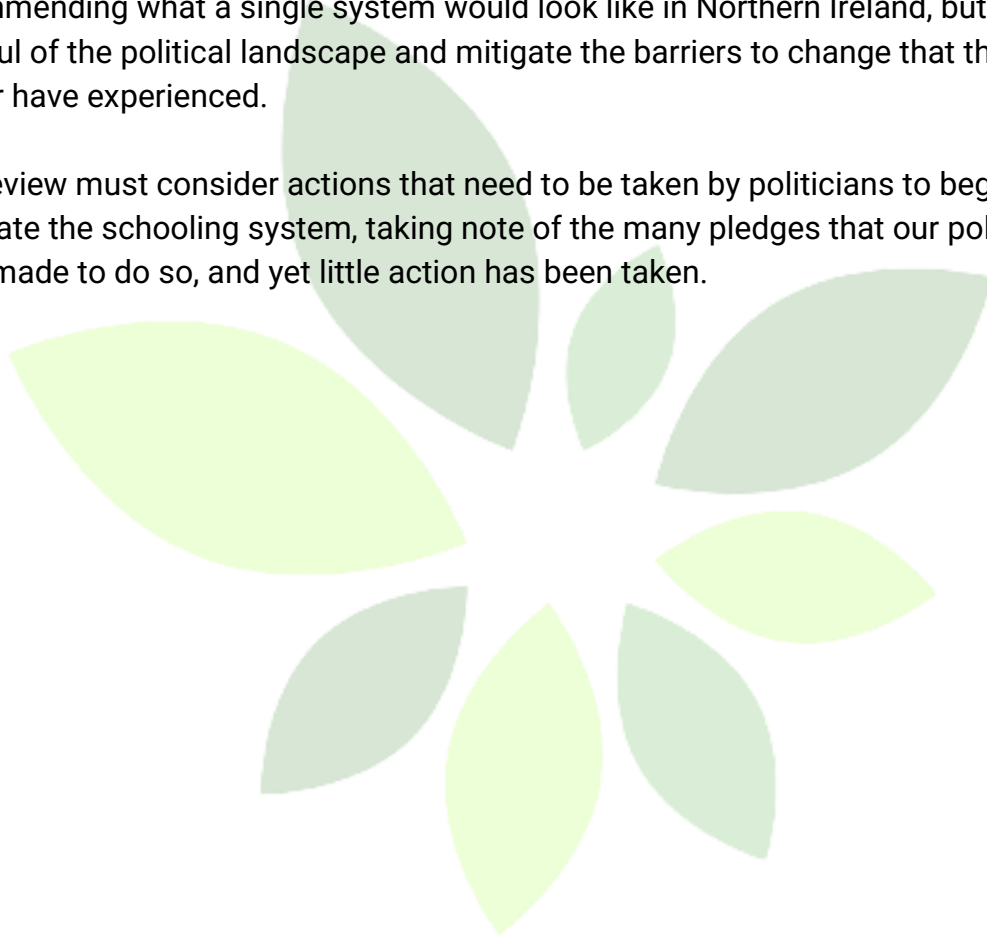
The Integrated Education Bill passed by the Northern Ireland assembly in March 2022 will create a clear definition of integrated education, establish a strategy to help develop integrated education and put parental choice at the forefront when planning to open new schools. It places greater accountability on the Department of Education to do all of these things. Whilst Integrated AlumNI celebrated the success of the Bill, it should be noted many of the steps forward were already part of the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement and yet never delivered. There is a sense of disappointment and frustration amongst past pupils of integrated schools that we have needed to legislate for the changes in education that Northern Ireland was promised 24 years ago.

The barriers to integrated education have been systemic, structural and political. [Just £37m of a £500m funding pot for Integrated Education](#) (part of the 2014 Stormont House Agreement) has been spent.

Priority issues to be considered during the Review

With this history, with our current educational landscape and with our lived experiences in mind, the Integrated AlumNI encourage the panel to be bold in not only recommending what a single system would look like in Northern Ireland, but to also be mindful of the political landscape and mitigate the barriers to change that the integrated sector have experienced.

The review must consider actions that need to be taken by politicians to begin to integrate the schooling system, taking note of the many pledges that our politicians have made to do so, and yet little action has been taken.



THE VOICES OF OUR MEMBERS

Without integrated education my parents wouldn't have been able to raise me in their mixed marriage the way they wanted to, outside the world of religion. It allowed me to be educated without having to attend conventional RE classes in a state/CCMS school and left me in a position to make an educated decision for myself when I was old enough on if I wanted to follow a religion after being taught about acceptance and understanding.

*Stephen Mackessy
formerly Hazelwood Integrated College*

Integrated education is a practice, and at its core translates into listening to and learning from diverse groups outside of Northern Ireland's institutionalized segregated system. Integrated education isn't the only answer, but it is the start of working towards the common good within Northern Irish civil society.

*Matt O'Neill
formerly Hazelwood Integrated College
and North Coast Integrated College*

Integrated education is vital to the progression in Northern Ireland. Firstly, from a segregation point of view, it educates young people together teaching them mutual respect, tolerance and respect. They become friends, learn and grow from each other. Secondly, integrated education creates a collaborative and supportive environment where all can reach their academic potential and all skills and talents are developed. Confidence and self belief is at its core - and to summarize it's both a fair and societally advantageous system which counteracts the alternative - a selective, segregated - and outdated school system - which polarizes society along both ethical and economic lines.

*Treasa Harkin,
formerly Oakgrove Integrated College*

I care deeply about Integrated Education because, without it, our hugely and multiply traumatized society hasn't a chance at healing and thriving, let alone surviving. There are no other circumstances where a friendship group can include someone with an immediate family member killed on Bloody Sunday, another whose relative works for the police, another who is a native Irish speaker, another who has moved here from their native English home. These organic threads intertwine and are guided skillfully by an ethos that directly acknowledges and challenges sectarianism and looks beyond simple tolerance to an active celebration of diversity. We must leave fear and bitterness behind. We - all of us: those here now, those who have left, and those who are no longer with us - deserve better. Integrated education is a fundamental and non-negotiable element of a successful, peaceful future.

*Nora Murray-Cavanagh
formerly Oakgrove Integrated College*

I care about integrated education because it allows children from different backgrounds to interact and socialize with each other and helps to break down the barriers of prejudice and intolerance between different communities. Also, integrated education represents normal society, in no other environment are we segregated based upon religion or identity and the fact people get to 18 and have never interacted with people from other communities until they go to University or enter the workforce is a sad indictment of this society.

*Keir Herink
formerly Lagan College*

<p>Schools are at the heart of all communities and their role in peacebuilding is vital. In providing a safe space for children & families of all backgrounds to come together, they allow relationships to build and grow. Integrating our education system is crucial to changing the dynamics of our segregated society and building strong foundations of friendship instead of barriers of division.</p>	<p>I am a believer that integrated education is the foundation for lasting peace in Northern Ireland. Celebrating our cultures and traditions, from childhood years, will nurture understanding and respect in future generations. It is our responsibility to continue to champion a hopeful and peaceful path as we seek to make integrated education widely available to all children.</p>	<p>Integrated education plays a fundamental role in bringing a divided society together through the classroom and learning together. For many, it represents the first-time young people from different backgrounds will see themselves and others as part of one community.</p>
<p>Neidin Hendron formerly Drumragh Integrated College</p>	<p>Emma Butler Teacher, Priory Integrated College</p>	<p>Christopher Millar formerly Priory Integrated College</p>
<p>Integrated Education provides an inclusive teaching environment for every child in our communities. Currently it is not accessible to all yet remains an imperative step for Northern Ireland to move forward. Integrated education reflects society, nurtures tolerance and facilitates the development of young people as individuals with unique abilities, backgrounds and cultures - a system that should only be celebrated.</p>	<p>I care about integrated education because it enables us to celebrate rather than fear difference. It taught me that you did not have to agree with everyone else's opinions or views but that you did need to respect them. It values the individual and their aspirations whatever they may be. To me integrated education is key to the development of an inclusive Northern Ireland. Now is the time to make integrated education the norm.</p>	<p>Integrated education shaped my education by allowing me the chance to feel safe, welcomed and respected in a school environment. The education broadened my horizons and enabled me to meet others I would not have had the opportunity to meet or interact with.</p>
<p>Tara Curran formerly New-Bridge Integrated College</p>	<p>Laura Mullin formerly North Coast Integrated College</p>	<p>Nicholas Emery formerly Lagan College</p>
<p>Northern Ireland is made up of so many distinct communities, not just Protestants and Catholics, they need to be educated together or we won't ever see our full potential as a people. For my future children to grow up in a better place we need integrated education.</p>	<p>I support integrated education because I believe that educating children from diverse backgrounds is a positive step toward a more inclusive society.</p>	<p>Integrated education is the next step in the peacebuilding process. It's a vaccine to prevent future conflict and a steppingstone to tracking even trickier issues - like integrated housing. We've reached in impasse. Further peacebuilding is impossible without further integrated education.</p>
<p>Mark Francos Supporter</p>	<p>Morgan Murphy Supporter</p>	<p>Adam McGibbon formerly Lagan College</p>

**INTEGRATED
ALUMN**

