



Independent Review of Education Team  
Rathgael House  
Balloo Road  
Bangor  
Co Down  
BT19 7PR

8 February 2022

Dear Dr Bloomer et al,

We welcome the opportunity to contribute our views to the Independent Review of Education. We believe this review has the potential to radically re-shape education – and hope opportunity will be grasped to comprehensively reform the existing system, without fear or favour to existing interests.

By way of introduction, the National Secular Society promotes secularism as the best means of creating a society in which people of all religions and none can live together fairly and cohesively. Our members and supporters come from a diverse range of backgrounds from across the UK and NI, and all share our vision for an integrated, inclusive education system, free from religious privilege, discrimination or control.

We have long recognised the need to reform an education system that divides young people along harmful, obsolete sectarian lines. We believe all publicly funded schools should be equally welcoming to all children, regardless of their religious or nonreligious backgrounds. We hope independent education review will achieve this ambition.

Last year, the education minister Peter Weir MLA, confirmed to us that the issues we intended to raise fell within the terms of reference, including issues that were not specifically referenced by the terms, but which could fall within the more general provisions of the ToR. I believe that this correspondence was shared with the review secretariat but would be happy to forward copies.

We recently completed the online initial survey of views. We also want to take you up on your offer to provide more detailed comments on our specific concerns, particularly those that do not fit neatly into the format of the survey.

Your review is charged to consider “the prospects of moving towards a single education system”. This is quite an ambition in a country where educational control is fragmented, and more than nine in ten pupils attend schools divided along religious lines. However, the idea of a single education system is a powerful and unifying one. It is an ambition with a century of history – predating the 1831 Stanley Letter, and the ambition for “a system of education from which should be banished even the suspicion of proselytism, and which, admitting children of all religious persuasions, should not interfere with the peculiar tenets of any”.

There is no one model of a single education system, and single does not mean uniform or inflexible. But in the interests of a more efficient approach and a more inclusive, integrated NI, we hope that the panel will give serious consideration to these eight suggestions for reform.

## 1. Roll back religious groups' control of schools

We support the conclusion of a research paper from Ulster University Unesco Education Centre which argued that “vested interests of the churches” must be reformed. The NI education system has been [described as](#) a “bewildering alphabetical word-storm of acronyms and initials”. This fragmentation is largely a result of religious sectoral bodies’ control of education.

We urge the review to recommend putting control of education in the hands of accountable organisations, who prioritise the needs of school communities. Sectoral bodies, including religious groups which currently control schools, should transform into independent NGOs, but they should not govern schools or set binding policy.

## 2. Tackle the inefficiencies caused by religious segregation

Religious bodies self-interestedly protect 'their' schools, even when this creates [gross inefficiencies](#), while communities suffer. As a result there are close to 50,000 surplus school places across NI and almost £100m a year is wasted on duplication, not counting additional [transport costs](#). These additional costs are hard to quantify, a [2012 study](#) by the Department of Education estimated this additional cost at £16 million a year, and overall school transports costs are rising above inflation.

No one wants to see schools close. But in much of the country pairs of schools – one largely serving children from Catholic backgrounds, and one largely serving children from Protestant backgrounds – are standing half empty. These need to be combined into single integrated schools to free up investment and better serve children. These decisions should put in the hands of communities.

## 3. Bring schools in line with equalities legislation

There is no legitimate reason why teachers should be the only profession in NI to be [excluded](#) from anti-discrimination protections. Consistently large majorities tell pollsters they believe the Fair Employment and Treatment (Northern Ireland) Order 1998 should be extended to cover teachers. There is wide support for such a change across political parties, as well as the teaching profession and their unions.

Creating a more inclusive system, where teachers of all backgrounds can lend their talents to and be welcome in all schools, requires more than an end to the FETO exemption. Reforms such as increasing the availability of the Certificate in Catholic Education, may enable more teacher mobility. However, what is really needed is to develop standards of training, professional development and recruitment that enables teachers from all backgrounds to qualify to teach in any schools and to be selected based exclusively on their teaching ability.

## 4. Phase out religious governance of schools

Researchers have [warned that](#) continuing to embed overtly Christian denominational influence on governing bodies undermines schools' ability to meet the changing needs of their pupils. The review should also recommend gradually reducing the proportion of school governors appointed on religious grounds and moving to a fully inclusive governance model – accompanied by increased investment in recruiting and training school governors. Reducing sectoral bodies' control over governing bodies means their ethos would be more responsive to the needs of the school community, rather than the interests of the religious body.

## 5. Transition towards a fully integrated system

Large majorities of parents in NI would like to send their children to integrated schools, which bring together children from different backgrounds. But [far too few](#) have this option. We want to see a fully integrated community ethos system. This would build on but go beyond the current integrated ethos. Such schools would be secular in the sense that they respect everyone's freedom of belief and would not be organised around or promote any faith ethos – even a generic or non-denominational one.

A strategy should be developed to integrate all schools. But in the short term the community led process of transformation is the best route to integrated status for most schools. The review should look at ways to encourage this and reduce the scope for opposition from sectoral bodies. Areas with low levels of integrated provision, and where pupils are having to travel a disproportionate distance, should be prioritised. Suggestions could include requiring schools to actively consult on becoming integrated.

## 6. Modernise education about worldviews

[Religious education in NI schools](#) is controlled by religious bodies to a greater extent than anywhere else in the UK. It is designed to “develop an awareness, knowledge, understanding and appreciation of the key Christian teachings... and develop an ability to interpret and relate the Bible to life”. RE is not properly inspected and is often delivered partly by external evangelical organisations.

This raises serious questions about the educational appropriateness, and human rights compliance of RE. In 2019 the [European Court of Human Rights ruled](#) that states must ensure RE curricula are “conveyed in an objective, critical and pluralistic manner”. The court also ruled that states are “forbidden” from attempting to indoctrinate children in a way “that might be considered as not respecting parents' religious and philosophical convictions”.

In 2021, the High Court in Northern Ireland has granted permission for a legal challenge against laws requiring confessional RE focused on Christianity. Darragh Mackin of Phoenix Law, who is representing the claimants, [said](#): “It is our case that the state is not entitled to promote or privilege the Christian faith in this way. To do so only seeks to indoctrinate and entrenches segregation.”

There should be a new worldviews curriculum suitable for all schools and developed by educational experts with educational, rather than confessional, aims.

## 7. Ensure all aspects of the school day are suitable for all pupils

The law [states](#) that in Northern Ireland, “The school day in every grant-aided school must ‘include collective worship whether in one or more than one assembly”.

Schools shouldn't be agents of faith formation, so the archaic requirement that pupils take part in a daily act of collective worship should be abolished. The requirement has been subject to the same legal challenge mentioned above due to the lack of an independent right to withdrawal or a meaningful alternative.

The UN Committee on the Rights of the Child have [called](#) on the UK and devolved governments to “repeal legal provisions for compulsory attendance at collective worship in publicly funded schools and ensure that children can independently exercise the right to withdraw”.

It's not enough to make worship nondenominational Christian rather than distinctively Protestant or Catholic. That doesn't serve pupils who don't identify Christian or respect pupils' independent right to develop their own beliefs.

Inclusive assemblies where school communities come together for a shared purpose can play an important role in school life. Replacing collective worship will reform and revitalise school assemblies. This will enhance pupils' freedom of religion or belief, while enabling schools to foster a shared sense of belonging. Assemblies based on moral and ethical principles can also support pupils' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development. Acts of religious worship are neither necessary nor desirable to achieve these valid educational goals.

## 8. Modernise RSE provision

Currently schools are required to develop a curriculum for relationships and sex education based on their religious ethos. Provision is extremely unequal and often organised to promote religious interests and views, rather than provide a comprehensive, rights-based education for pupils. This needs to change.

In 2019, [research](#) by the Belfast Youth Forum found that only 66% of respondents said they had actually received RSE in school, and 60% of young people felt that the information they received was either 'not very useful' or 'not useful at all'. Research has consistently found extremely poor coverage of LGBTQ issues, contraception and reproductive options in schools.

The Department for Communities' expert panel on a gender equality [described](#) RSE in schools as "inconsistent and insufficient". The Department's expert panel on sexual orientation also [advised](#) that RSE should not be "dependent on school ethos". The children's commissioner, Koulla Yiasouma has [warned](#) of a "systemic failure" to address RSE, and called for a compulsory RSE curriculum similar to other school subjects.

## Conclusion

There is widespread consensus on the need for change. The antiquated and divisive education system must evolve to be fit for purpose for Northern Ireland's changing society. Many of the issues that need to be addressed have their roots in, or are exacerbated by, sectarian division, and dominance of sectoral bodies acting as barriers to reform. If starting from scratch, no one could possibly suggest such a system. We are not able to simply start from scratch, but the independent review is a unique opportunity to disrupt the status quo and challenge the inertia and entrenched interests. We hope this opportunity is seized.

Finally, we will be hosting a one day conference on "The future of inclusive education" in central Belfast on Saturday 21 May. I do hope that yourself, and, or other representatives of the independent education review will be able to attend. Further details will be sent to you in due course.

Yours sincerely,

Alastair Lichten  
Head of education