

EQUALITY COMMISSION FOR NORTHERN IRELAND

Submission to the Call for Evidence on Integrated Education by the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee

January 2024

Executive Summary

- 1.1 The Equality Commission considers mixing through education to be an essential component of making progress towards achieving a shared society.
- 1.2 The Commission emphasises the importance of a system of education which routinely teaches pupils together via a shared curriculum in shared classes, where sharing impacts meaningfully and substantively on every learner and is central to the education system as a whole.
- 1.3 We also note that studies over a number of years have pointed to a range of educational, economic and societal benefits to be derived from increased sharing in education.
- 1.4 The Commission remains of the view that the overall system of education provision in Northern Ireland has an important role to play, not only in the development of the child, but in advancing cohesion, sharing and integration across all equality grounds.

1 Introduction

- 1.1 The Equality Commission welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the Call for Evidence on Integrated Education by the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee¹.
- 1.2 The Equality Commission for Northern Ireland ('the Commission') is an independent public body established under the Northern Ireland Act 1998. Further information on our role and remit is available in annex A.
- 1.3 The Commission notes the purpose of the Call for Evidence is to aid the Committee to consider the potential implications of increased integrated education in Northern Ireland and provide policy recommendations for Northern Ireland's education system.
- 1.4 Our response does not consider all areas and questions raised by the Committee's Call for Evidence, but rather focusses on areas where the Commission has established key policy positions or advice.
- 1.5 The Commission has longstanding positions² emphasising the need to move to a system of education which routinely teaches pupils together via a shared curriculum in shared classes, where sharing impacts meaningfully and substantively on every learner and is central to the education system as a whole.
- 1.6 The Commission has previously responded to the Department of Education's Review of Integrated Education³ and provided input to the Independent Review of Education⁴ highlighting the Commission's position on the role of education in advancing good relations and equality of opportunity.

¹ NIAC (2023) [Call for Evidence - Committees - UK Parliament](#)

² See, for example, the Commission's full position Sharing in Education (2015) [ECNI Shared Education Policy Position](#), and the Commission's response to the Department of Education's Review of Integrated Education (2016) [ECNI Response Review of Integrated Education](#)

³ For further details, please see: [ECNI \(2016\) Consultation Response Review of Integrated Education](#)

⁴ For further details, please see: Independent Review of Education (2023) [Final Report | Independent Review of Education](#)

2 Context

- 2.1 Latest data suggests that 27,183 (7.6%) of students in Northern Ireland attend Integrated schools (year 2022-23).⁵ This is an increase from 14,140 students (4%) in 2000/01.
- 2.2 Aligned to our overarching recommendation, the Commission notes the recently published Independent Review of Education, which recommends that *“as soon as is practicable, all learners at all stages should have the opportunity to learn alongside individuals from other communities and backgrounds in the same classroom”*, and promotes the growth of integrated and jointly managed community schools in order to promote social cohesion within a multi-sectoral context, in which *“all sectors work together to provide a school that meets the needs of the local community”*⁶.
- 2.3 The Commission also notes the statutory duties outlined in the Integrated Education Act (Northern Ireland) 2022 *“to encourage, facilitate and support integrated education”*^{7, 8}. The Commission further notes the broad definition of integration, beyond integration solely on basis of Protestant/Catholic religion, to include educating pupils of different cultures/religions, socio-economic backgrounds, and abilities together^{9, 10}.
- 2.4 The Commission further notes the statutory duties outlined in the Shared Education Act (Northern Ireland) 2016 *“to encourage, facilitate and promote shared education”*¹¹.
- 2.5 In 2019, the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee in their report on Education funding in Northern Ireland, stated that *“We saw*

⁵ For further details, see: [School enrolments - Northern Ireland summary data | Department of Education](#)

⁶ For further details, please see: Independent Review of Education (2023) [Investing in a Better Future - Volume 1](#)

⁷ For further details, please see: [Integrated Education Act \(Northern Ireland\) 2022](#)

⁸ The Act further states, “A reference in any provision of Northern Ireland legislation to support for integrated education (including support for the development of integrated education) is a reference to—
(a) identifying, assessing, monitoring and aiming to meet the demand for the provision of integrated education within the context of area planning and the overall sustainability of the school estate (including, in particular, monitoring the number and success of applications for integrated education), and
(b) providing sufficient places in integrated schools to aim to meet the demand for integrated education within the context of area planning and the overall sustainability of the school estate (including examining evidence of expected future demand).”

⁹ For further details, please see: [Integrated Education Act \(Northern Ireland\) 2022](#)

¹⁰ For further details, see: NI Assembly (2021) [Research and Information Service Integrated Education](#)

¹¹ For further details, please see: [Shared Education Act \(Northern Ireland\) 2016](#)

*there is a clear need to reduce duplication across the education sector and for consolidation of the school estate. Witnesses were clear that alongside the immediate funding pressures on education, the complicated structure of education in Northern Ireland meant that money was not being spent in the most efficient way*¹².

- 2.6 Other statutory agencies have also highlighted their positions on the importance of community mixing in schools. For example, the Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People has stated: *“Academic selection and separated schooling continue to exacerbate inequalities, advantage children from more affluent families, and reinforce social and religious divides*”¹³.
- 2.7 Numerous attempts have been made to estimate the cost of duplication within the education system. An independent audit of the Cost of Division in 2016 by the Ulster University Economic Policy Centre, published by the Department of Finance, estimated the additional costs of division in the education system ranged from £16.5m-£95m per year¹⁴.
- 2.8 Previous research has also demonstrated educational, economic, and societal benefits of sharing in education. Research examining the effects of integrated and segregated schooling on Northern Irish children found *“that those attending separate schools were likely to hold more prejudiced attitudes towards the ‘out’ group than their peers attending integrated schools”*. The study also found that the mere fact that pupils are given an opportunity to engage with each other on a sustained basis is a key variable in the generation of more positive inter-group attitudes¹⁵.

3 Commission Recommendations

- 3.1 The Commission considers that sharing in education, across the full range of equality grounds, has the potential to improve

¹² NIAC (2019) [Funding priorities in the 2018-19 budget: Education](#)

¹³ For further details, see: NICCY Education Positions [NICCY Education](#), accessed January 2024.

¹⁴ For further details, see: [Independent Audit of the Cost of Division | Department of Finance](#)

¹⁵ For further details, please see: Hughes and Donnelly (2012): Chapter 4 Promoting Good Relations – the role of schools in Northern Ireland, page 59.

educational access and attainment for pupils from a diverse range of backgrounds and abilities.

- 3.2 The Commission remains of the view that the overall system of education provision in Northern Ireland has an important role to play, not only in the development of the child, but in advancing cohesion, sharing and integration across all equality grounds.
- 3.3 While it is neither the Commission's intent nor remit to advocate a specific model or models of education, we consider that any system must:
- Ensure that sharing impacts meaningfully and substantively on every learner.
 - Ensure that a shared experience should be central to the education system as a whole.
 - Encompass all stages of educational provision – pre-school; early years; primary; post-primary; special needs; and tertiary levels.
 - Routinely teach learners together via a shared curriculum in shared classes.
 - Better provide learners with shared awareness, understanding and experience of the value and range of diverse cultures, identities and backgrounds in Northern Ireland; while also enabling learners from different cultures/communities to experience a shared society.
- 3.4 We consider such a system as offering benefit in terms of promoting social cohesion and good relations, and as well as maximising equality of opportunity for children. The Commission's policy paper¹⁶ on sharing in education set out a range of sources highlighting the educational, economic and societal benefits of sharing in education. For example, sharing can facilitate pupils to access the full curriculum and a wider range of educational, sporting and cultural experiences; offer opportunities to improve standards and outcomes for all learners; maximise sustainability and reduce costs; and foster

¹⁶ For further details, see [ECNI \(2015\) Policy Position on Sharing in Education](#) and www.equalityni.org/sharededucation

good relations by providing an environment for longer term-sustained contact for both teachers and learners.

- 3.5 The Commission also recognises the crucial role that schools have in contributing to the reconciliation of our society. This is not solely a job for schools, but schools play a critical role. Sharing in education also needs to be considered in the context of wider sharing. Shared services, shared housing, and shared spaces have the potential to enhance and be enhanced by sharing and integration within the education system.
- 3.6 A shared approach to education can also result in the provision of education which is more suited to the needs of local communities and address any gaps in educational delivery.
- 3.7 Our positions on sharing in education are not to undermine the rights of parents to make choices regarding their child's attendance at specific schools, or for the provision of faith-based schools. However, such considerations cannot overshadow the importance of a system of education as a whole seeking to maximise equality of opportunity and good relations.

4 Conclusion

- 4.1 The Commission reiterates our view that the overall system of education provision in Northern Ireland has an important role to play, not only in the development of the child, but in advancing cohesion, sharing and integration across all equality grounds.
- 4.2 Alongside potential educational and economic benefits, a system that routinely teaches pupils together via a shared curriculum in shared classes; where sharing impacts meaningfully and substantively on every learner, is an essential component of making progress towards achieving a shared society.

5 Further Information

- 5.1 For further information on the Commission's positions on sharing in education, please see:
<https://www.equalityni.org/sharededucation>

5.2 For further information on the Commission's priorities for addressing inequalities in education, please see:
www.equalityni.org/Education/Policy

Equality Commission for Northern Ireland

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Annex A: Role and Remit of the Equality Commission for Northern Ireland

The Equality Commission for Northern Ireland ('the Equality Commission') is an independent public body established under the Northern Ireland Act 1998.

The Equality Commission is responsible for implementing the legislation on age, fair employment and treatment, sex discrimination and equal pay, race relations, sexual orientation and disability. The Commission's remit also includes overseeing the statutory duties on public authorities to promote equality of opportunity and good relations under Section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998, and the disability duties under the Disability Discrimination Act 1995.

The Equality Commission has been designated to act as an 'independent mechanism' jointly with the Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission, to promote awareness of, and monitor the implementation of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities with regard to Government's obligations in relation to Northern Ireland

Further, the EU (Withdrawal Agreement) Act 2020 empowers the Commission, along with the Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission, to monitor, advise and report on, and enforce the UK Government's adherence to its commitment as set out under Article 2 of Windsor Framework (formerly the Ireland/Northern Ireland Protocol). This commitment is to ensure that no diminution of rights, safeguards or equality of opportunity, as set out in that part of the 1998 Agreement entitled Rights, Safeguards and Equality of Opportunity results from the UK's withdrawal from the Union, including in the area of protection against discrimination.

In general terms, our statutory remit provides that we are to:

- promote equality of opportunity and affirmative action;
- work towards the elimination of unlawful discrimination and harassment;
- keep relevant legislation under review;
- promote good relations between persons of different racial groups and good disability practice;

- oversee the effectiveness of statutory equality duties on public authorities.

For further information see [Promoting Equality, Challenging Discrimination: A short guide to the role and services of the Equality Commission](#)