

Opening Statement by the Integrated Education Fund and the Northern Ireland Council for Integrated Education to the Oireachtas Joint Committee on the Implementation of the Good Friday Agreement on the 26th September 2019

Attending

- Roisin Marshall, Chief Executive, Northern Ireland Council for Integrated Education
- Amanda McNamee, Principal, Lagan College
- Hilary Copeland, Chair of Trustees, Integrated AlumNI
- Sam Fitzsimmons, Head of Communications, Integrated Education Fund

Introductions and Thanks

We thank the Joint Committee for the invitation to brief them on Integrated Education and welcome this opportunity.

Members will be aware that the Integrated Education Fund and the Northern Ireland Council for Integrated Education have been nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize for 2019. We appreciate you seeing us in this context and for the support that TDs and Senators have given us over a long number of years – support which we hope will continue.

The Nobel Peace Prize nomination is, of course, not for our two organisations as much as for those courageous, resilient and visionary parents, pupils, staff and governors of integrated schools and, in particular, the first 28 pupils who attended Lagan College (the current Principal of that school is with us this afternoon). In the statement you make after this meeting, we would be very appreciative if you were to acknowledge the Nobel Peace Prize nomination and the recognition this bestows on all our pioneering families, staff and governors.

A brief overview of integrated education

Founded in 1981 by a group of parents in response to the challenge of community conflict and a religiously divided school system in Northern Ireland, Lagan College was the first integrated school in Northern Ireland. Beginning with just 28 pupils, Lagan College is the most oversubscribed school in Northern Ireland.

By 1987 there were seven newly established integrated schools and the Northern Ireland Council for Integrated Education (NICIE) was formed as a charitable organisation to:

- co-ordinate efforts to develop Integrated Education; and
- support parent groups through the process of opening new schools.

In 1992 the Integrated Education Fund (IEF) was established as a charity to provide a financial foundation for the development and growth of Integrated Education in Northern Ireland.

The IEF mandate is derived from the expressed demand of parents and individual schools who seek integrated education for their children and pupils.

In 2014 there was a landmark High Court judgment which compelled the Department of Education in Northern Ireland to fulfil their legal duty under Article 64 of the 1989 Education Reform Order and the commitment in the Good Friday Agreement “*to facilitate and encourage integrated education*”. And not only did the judgment rule that the Department needs to be alive to the A64 duty at all levels, including the strategic level, but it also outlined what an integrated school is striving for: “to achieve an equal balance in relation to worship, celebration and exposure to both faiths....reflected in its constitution....and the (school’s) board must strive in its ethos to achieve this.” For these reasons an integrated school seeks to achieve religious balance amongst its pupils and its Board of Governors.

Since then the Department of Education has recognised their legal duty and agreed over 25 school Development Proposals (DPs) providing over 1,500 additional places in integrated schools. This growth was further enhanced by the Stormont House/ Fresh Start Agreement capital commitment of £300m to 23 existing integrated schools of which three capital projects have been completed and one further project is underway, with the rest due to be completed by 2025.

Community and Parental Empowerment

No integrated school has ever been planned by government, yet despite this there are now over 24,000 pupils attending 65 integrated schools and demand for integrated school places continues to grow. The funding crisis in the overall education system means the focus for growing the number of integrated schools and school places is to support existing schools choosing to transform from non-integrated to integrated status, rather than to build new integrated schools.

To support and fulfil the wishes of parents for integrated education, the IEF has raised monies from a range of funders, including individual donors and trusts, to help empower parents seeking to transform their children’s schools. This ‘Parental Engagement Campaign’ was launched in 2017.

The IEF and NICIE wish to acknowledge and thank the Irish Department of Foreign Affairs for their support for this initiative and their ongoing commitment over the past fifteen years through their Reconciliation Fund in supporting integrated education.

The Parental Engagement Campaign uses a range of tools including a dedicated website (www.integratemyschool.com) to encourage parents to register their support for their school to transform to integrated status. This ‘bottom up’ approach is also supported through outreach and direct engagement with parents, communities and schools. The success of this campaign is highlighted in a survey by the polling company LucidTalk which shows that awareness of the process of transformation rose from 8% in 2012 to over 40% in 2018.

NICIE continues to provide practical support to encourage schools to take this step and then works with them through the process which can take up to 2 or 3 years. In the past 40 years we have had 25 schools transform and since the launch of the Parental Engagement Campaign we have had 6 more schools taking the first steps on the journey to integrated status by holding successful parental ballots on transformation.

Going forward

Northern Ireland remains a divided society and this is most notable in the largely separate nature of our education provision, which means that the majority of our children and young people of school age continue to be educated within a single-identity setting¹. Around 90% of pupils in Northern Ireland are educated in schools that identify with a single tradition or denomination. Only 7.2% of pupils in Controlled schools are Catholic and 1.1% of pupils in Catholic Maintained schools are Protestant².

The collapse of the Assembly has presented challenges in growing integrated education but it has also provided an opportunity for the integrated education movement to engage with politicians, educational stakeholders and academics to look at a way forward and seek an agreement for an independent commission to review education. The IEF's Alternative Manifesto sets out a road map for a more inclusive and integrated education system, and our collaboration with academics in the Ulster University School of Education provides robust evidence-based research which is helping cast a light on some of the areas of education that contribute to both school separation and additional costs - an example of their work can be seen in the *Employment Mobility of Teachers and the FETO Exception* Briefing Paper.

Integration in practice

Northern Ireland's first integrated post-primary school, Lagan College, was founded in 1981 with 28 students, 14 of Catholic faith and 14 of Protestant faith. Located in South Belfast, Lagan College has flourished over the years and now has 1,386 students and 191 staff working together in an integrated and united community spirit. The school was established by parents with the Mission Statement:

'To educate to the highest standards Catholics, Protestants and others of goodwill, of all abilities, together.'

The four central values that underpin learning at Lagan College are respect, reconciliation, service and equality. In Lagan College, children are educated together every day. Self-respect and respect for others are strongly encouraged. The integrated ethos is taught and shared to

¹ Together: Building A United Community

² Department of Education and Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency, Integrated Education infographic <https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/publications/education-data-infographics-201718>

ensure inclusion of children from different religions, cultures, genders, abilities and socio-economic backgrounds.

Lagan College serves to celebrate all that we have in common and appreciate the things that make us different and unique. The school's Chaplains state that, 'if it is important to one of us it is important to all of us.' Therefore, everything is done together as 'one community', holding prayer or reflection time together in assemblies, such as Remembrance Assembly and Ash Wednesday Assembly, and encouraging the children to discuss controversial issues rather than shy away from them.

Over 38 years Lagan College has built up a reputation for integrated practice, academic excellence and pastoral child-centred care. Lagan College is an all-ability school and offers 32 GCSE and equivalent courses and 25 A Level courses at post 16 level. The school teaches RE, Politics and History through a 'shared lens.' The learning environment is fun, innovative and challenging, so that every child can reach their potential.

Lagan College plays sport for enjoyment, to build team spirit and to win and has been the All Ireland Basketball Champions, won the O'Reilly Cup for Gaelic football last year and has a strong reputation in football, hockey and netball in Northern Ireland.

Lagan College has been Northern Ireland's most over-subscribed school for the past decade with over 554 applications for 220 places this year alone. Parental demand is greater than the school can meet at present but Lagan College continues to passionately call upon government to support integrated schools as the norm, as they are educating children, not simply to enable their future pathways but to be the peace leaders of all our futures.

Alumni

The Integrated AlumNI was founded in 2013 by former pupils of integrated schools now living and working in various locations throughout the UK and Ireland. The main purpose of the group is to support a social network of past pupils of integrated schools as well as actively working to support and encourage current pupils of integrated schools through mentoring and raising aspirations. The goal of the AlumNI ultimately is to spread the message about integrated education through raising awareness, campaigning and fundraising.

Conclusion

We share the vision, held by the overwhelming majority of citizens, of a united community and a shared future. We are confident that a more integrated education system should be at the heart of the reconciliation process as reflected in the Good Friday Agreement *"An essential aspect of the reconciliation process is the promotion of a culture of tolerance at every level of society, including initiatives to facilitate and encourage integrated education and mixed housing"*.