

Integrated Education Bill -Opening remarks Education Committee 10th November 2021

Introduction

Pleased to be here.

As Commissioner for Children and Young People I am obliged to take into account the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, which as you would expect says quite a lot about education. Specifically, Article 29 which says that:

1. States Parties agree that the education of the child shall be directed to:
 - (a) The development of the child's personality, talents and mental and physical abilities to their fullest potential;
 - (b) The development of respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms, [and for the principles enshrined in the Charter of the United Nations](#);
 - (c) The development of respect for the child's parents, his or her own cultural identity, language and values, for the national values of the country in which the child is living, the country from which he or she may originate, and for civilizations different from his or her own;
 - (d) The preparation of the child for responsible life in a free society, in the spirit of understanding, peace, tolerance, [equality of sexes, and friendship among all peoples, ethnic, national and religious groups and persons of indigenous origin](#);
 - and
 - (e) The development of respect for the natural environment.

Therefore, all developments within are education system should, in our view, bring us closer to achieving these aims, and that is the test that we have set for the Integrated Education Bill.

Integrated Education

An article in Scope Magazine this Sunday outlined how the history to introduce integrated education in NI dates back to 1831 – 190 years ago. As you know the first integrated school was established in 1981 by a group of determined and visionary parents and educators. 40 years later and in spite of legislative provision to encourage and facilitate, added to recommendations from local and international processes to promote and embed

integrated education, less than 7% of our primary and post primary schools are integrated.

The Cost of Division

The consequence of continued segregation is an inefficient system with various bodies and structures supporting the different sectors. There is still some uncertainty about the full cost of the current system, but studies including one undertaken by University of Ulster's Economic Policy Centre in 2016¹ noted the range of additional annual public sector costs incurred in NI in comparison to other jurisdictions across a range of areas of the UK. These reports estimate that the additional cost of our education system is more than £1 million per week.

At the same time, to counteract this segregation, the Education Authority's report on "Shared Education" records that in the years 2017 and 2018 some £285 million was spent on encouraging contact between Protestant and Catholic schools.

The Bill

You will see from our written evidence that we are supportive of the Bill and its intent to add "promote" to the duty of government towards integrated education. This Bill, simply, compels government to implement its duties from 1986 and 1998 by being explicit and introducing statutory responsibilities. We do recommend that Clause 2 is strengthened to include explicit reference to children's rights and Article 29 of the UNCRC.

If we agree that the aim of education system is to nurture all children, including a respect of each other's culture and identity, then of course it is right that integrated should be the first option as outlined in Clause 7. Bearing in mind that only 1 new school has been opened in the last 5 years.

Religion

Contrary to the song, our vision of integration is that it should not be one of a melting pot – in that scenario we all become the same – a brown grey sludge. Integration is about the fruit cake where you can see each piece of fruit and the sponge (ie the school) holds them together and helps them compliment each other. Children should be free to be themselves, celebrate their culture and to follow their religion if they have one.

¹ https://www.ulster.ac.uk/_data/assets/pdf_file/0007/86524/Cost-of-Division-Overview-Report.pdf ranged between £403.6m and £833.9m

Conclusion

We must move away from this idea that school sectors are better or worse than each other, or that they should compete. A single education system should bring together the best of all sectors and I am yet to be convinced that having so many sectors' benefits children. The Bill does not in my view favour one sector over another but instead tries to level the playing field.

As the Committee will be aware, the Bill does not operate in a vacuum. The Review of Education chaired by Sir Keir Bloomer should when it reports, outline the broad and long-term vision for Education in NI and we believe that the Integrated Education Bill will get us off the starting blocks.

Thank you for listening.