

Northern Ireland Affairs Committee – Call for Evidence: Integrated Education

Background

Governing Bodies Association

The Governing Bodies Association NI (GBA) is the sectoral body representing all of Northern Ireland's voluntary grammar schools. The GBA provides advice and support for member schools as well as representing their views to politicians, policy makers, media and other education stakeholders. It also contributes to the education system in a variety of ways through representation on working groups and panels and well-considered responses to consultations and questionnaires.

Established over 75 years ago, the GBA has a proud tradition of building cross-community links in education, drawing governors and schools from every community in Northern Ireland.

The GBA works alongside the various sectoral and education bodies in Northern Ireland to collectively effect positive change in our education system and wider society. The Association also promotes the voluntary principle in education and the maintenance of high standards of governance in schools.

NIAC Inquiry

The GBA welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the NIAC's Integrated Education inquiry pending a hopefully early restoration of devolved government to manage local education provision. Ideally, we believe that a wider investigation should take place, to include integrated education as part of a broader suite of inquiries.

The voluntary grammar sector, along with all other sectors in the NI education system has worked extremely hard to foster positive cross-community relationships and instil a sense of togetherness in their pupils, and they continue to do so on an ongoing basis, supported by their sectoral representatives.

The Northern Ireland Curriculum requires all schools to work to develop young people as responsible citizens who show respect for others; understand different beliefs and cultures; and develop informed ethical views of complex issues. This duty and responsibility is taken very seriously by schools across all sectors, it is not in any sense unique or exclusive to schools that are formally classified as "integrated schools".

Voluntary Grammar Schools

Voluntary grammar schools are amongst the largest schools in Northern Ireland (NI) and collectively educate almost a third (33.1%; 51,008 pupils¹) of the NI post-primary cohort.

The relatively large size of voluntary grammar schools, their roots in local communities and their holistic approach to education contributes to their success in delivering a high quality, inclusive and value-for money educational experience.

¹ [School enrolment - school level data 2022/23 | Department of Education \(education-ni.gov.uk\)](#) – post-primary schools data 2022/23 – Revised 22nd March 2023.

They are noted for welcoming and educating together children from different communities and cultural backgrounds and working with the various school sectors to enhance and advance a more harmonious society.

Call For Evidence Questions

1. What is the current and anticipated demand for integrated school places?

The current and anticipated demand for places in schools formally designated as integrated has been much debated since the passing of the Integrated Education Act (Northern Ireland) 2022 (“the Act”). Section 6(3) of the Act requires the Education Authority to take steps to ascertain demand for integrated education for the purposes of strategic planning. This is defined in Section 6(3) as ascertaining “*the extent to which parents would prefer their children to be educated at grant-maintained or controlled integrated schools rather than as schools which are not grant-maintained integrated schools or controlled integrated schools*”. The GBA welcomes the emphasis in the legislation placed on the rights of parents/guardians to choose a school for their children. The Department has established Integrated Education Act Steering and Working Groups which have been examining for over a year how to measure demand within the context of the new legislation, but this is proving challenging, and work remains ongoing.

As noted above, the GBA is fully supportive of the rights of parents/guardians to choose a school for their child(ren), and that a place in a preferred school would be available to them. In the absence of alternatives, the best measure of demand is that expressed directly by parents in choosing schools for their children and as recorded by the Department of Education each year on an area by area basis.

There appears to be a misplaced assumption that there is widespread and unmet parental demand for integrated school places. In practice, there is unmet demand for all school types in particular areas, and demand will change over time, for example due to an increase or decline in the school age population in particular areas. The Area Planning structures, and statutory Development Proposal process we have in place in NI are designed to address any inconsistencies in provision in towns, villages and cities across NI, and across all education sectors, at nursery, primary and post-primary level.

The GBA is largely involved with the post-primary phase of education, hence our analysis of the current data is based on this phase.

When we look at the post-primary data, it shows that the demand for places at integrated schools is largely met. There is oversubscription in some areas (as there is also for schools in other sectors); however there is also a significant number of available places in post-primary integrated schools in other areas.

Of the 21 integrated post-primary schools in Northern Ireland, 14 have available places. Of these 14 undersubscribed schools, 57.1% have greater than 60 availability places². Furthermore, any oversubscribed integrated schools are within areas where there is high demand for post-primary places in general, regardless of sector, for example, Belfast, Greater Belfast, Ballymena and Lisburn areas.

² [School enrolment - school level data 2022/23 | Department of Education \(education-ni.gov.uk\)](https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/school-enrolment-school-level-data-2022/23)

Almost 30% of post-primary integrated schools have less than 500 pupils in years 8-12. This is deemed to be educationally and financially unsustainable according to the Department of Education's Sustainable Schools Policy³. Furthermore, approximately one third of post-primary integrated schools had an intake of less than 100 pupils into Year 8 in 2022/23, and almost 40% have financially and educationally unsustainable 6th forms. Sustainability is vital in education, and these issues are not unique to the integrated sector.

Our focus therefore should be on sustainability, school improvement and cohesion of the system, and its sectors working together to improve outcomes and advance society, rather than a focus on provision in any one sector.

2. Why has the supply of integrated education not matched demand; and what mechanisms might be used to do so?

There is no basis for this statement in terms of supply and demand. There are supply and demand issues across all sectors and phases of education, influenced by a range of complex factors.

The Department of Education is currently working on an operational definition of demand for integrated education that is measurable and valid, drawing on a range of appropriate data sources. While this has not yet been finalised, first preference data reflecting the actual choices expressed by parents for their children is the key data source.

For the 2023/24 post-primary intake, 2,698 first preference applications were received for integrated schools in comparison to 7,743 first preference applications for voluntary grammar schools which conveys the demand for voluntary grammar school places and emphasises the need to consider parental choice and the measurement of demand in the context of other sectors.

The table below shows the number of available Year 8 places by Local Government District, for the 2023/24 intake and the number of 1st preference applications received for the places, for both the integrated and voluntary grammar sectors, with under-application for available places highlighted. It is clear that parents/guardians across NI do not always prefer to send their child(ren) to an integrated school even when there are places available and the same is true for other sectors.

³ [A Policy for Sustainable Schools \(education-ni.gov.uk\)](https://www.education-ni.gov.uk)

Table 1: No. of Available Year 8 Places & No. of 1st Preference Applications - Integrated Post-Primary Schools & Voluntary Grammar Post-Primary Schools 2022/23

	No. of Available Year 8 Places – integrated schools	No. of 1 st Preference applications – integrated schools	No. of Available Year 8 Places – VG Schools	No of 1 st Preference applications – VG schools
Antrim & Newtownabbey	435	361	136	179
Ards & North Down	230	303	285	285
Armagh, Banbridge & Craigavon	190	149	560	500
Belfast	305	400	2206	2366
Causeway Coast & Glens	80	52	541	587
Derry City & Strabane	130	68	666	619
Fermanagh & Omagh	175	107	586	604
Lisburn & Castlereagh	380	473	310	438
Mid & East Antrim	270	425	425	500
Mid Ulster	230	206	662	805
Newry, Mourne & Down	180	154	846	860

After 1st preference applications are taken into consideration, 7 out of 11 Local District Council areas had a surplus of places in integrated post-primary schools for the 2023/24 Year 8 intake. In contrast, two of the Local District Council areas had a surplus of voluntary grammar places (see highlighted areas in table above). Again, this highlights the need to assess demand in the context of all sectors and areas to ensure parents/guardians have a say in the education of their child(ren).

Area Planning is the mechanism to ensure that as far as possible the right number of school places in the right sectors are available in the right locations, as opposed to arbitrarily increasing the number of places in one school sector over another. Integration exists across all sectors and focusing on the growth of one sector over another runs the risk of eroding the positive relationships that schools have developed with each other, and the subsequent benefits to a post-conflict society.

3. What does it cost to maintain two types of education provision, and what other areas of education could efficiency savings be spent on, for example SEN?

It is unclear what is meant by two types of education in this question, and it is inaccurate to state that this is the case without providing more detail and the evidence to support the assertion. What is

clear is that all schools in NI must follow a single system of education and operate subject to the same statutory, and regulatory framework. They all adhere to a common NI curriculum, common funding mechanisms, common standards, and a common inspection regime. As everywhere else in the UK, provision is made for schools to offer a variety of ethos and values to parents with variation in how they are managed and administered within the common statutory and regulatory framework.

The “dual system narrative” which exists in the public domain is both false and damaging and seeks unfairly to categorise children and their parents. For example, a non-peer reviewed paper published by Ulster University as part of the Transforming Education (TE) programme and funded by the Integrated Education Fund⁴, claimed that an additional £9.8 million of funding is absorbed by “duplication of services”, however, the bodies mentioned provide services to different groups of schools, rather than duplicating the services to the same schools.

The Department of Education also considered this paper to be a flawed and over simplified analysis of complex education issues that is misleading at a time when education for children and young people in Northern Ireland is seriously underfunded.

4. How do the costs and benefits of integrated education compare with those of other forms of education in NI?

Again, we would argue that there are no different “forms” of education in NI. What the system does accommodate is provision for schools with different and multiple ethos’ and values providing the choices that parents want – in the same way as applies everywhere else in the UK.

While there is no “dual” system, what does differ is the manner in which schools are administered and managed. For example, voluntary grammar schools are wholly managed by their Boards of Governors who are based in their communities and show an immense commitment to the running of their school. This sense of local ownership, control and pride has many benefits for the educational experience of their pupils. The GBA believes that all schools in Northern Ireland, regardless of sector, can draw from these benefits by enhancing the roles of locally based Governors in overseeing the effective governance of schools in collaboration with their leadership and management teams.

There is no single formula for a good school, but voluntary grammar schools have demonstrated that the devolution of power, responsibility and accountability to the individual schools combined with strong local community roots bring real excellence and opportunity to education. Appropriate autonomy paired with effective leadership and accountability processes, advantages learners and better prepares them for the unpredictability and complexity of the lives they will lead.

Despite the financial adversity of the last decade experienced by voluntary grammar schools no less than every other school, their autonomy and strong governance have enabled effective and efficient deployment of available resources, provided a pathway to continued successes and given a value for money return on the investment of public funds.

⁴ [TEUU Report 18 Divided Society Divided Education.pdf \(ulster.ac.uk\)](https://www.ulster.ac.uk/teuu-report-18-divided-society-divided-education.pdf)

5. What are the potential implications of increased integrated education for pupil outcomes and society generally in NI?

Pupil Outcomes

Regarding pupil outcomes, the Department of Education publishes “performance indicators”⁵, one of which is the percentage of pupils achieving 5 or more GCSEs (and equivalents) at grades A*-C including Mathematics and English. The table below shows the most recently available data by school management type for this indicator.

Table 2: 2018/19 GCSE Performance by School Management Type

School Management Type	5+ GCSEs (and Equivalents) inc. English and Maths at grades A*-C
Controlled non-grammar	47.9%
Controlled grammar	96.0%
Catholic Maintained	60.1%
Other Maintained	57.5%
Controlled Integrated	43.7%
Grant Maintained Integrated	58.5%
Voluntary Maintained*	94.9%
Voluntary Other*	92.8%

**This data relates to the 50 NI voluntary grammar schools. The GBA does not distinguish between “catholic” and “other” management types as all voluntary grammar schools are managed the in the same way.*

Based on this indicator data, if we are to increase integrated education provision, it is likely that Northern Ireland’s overall outcomes will be poorer, due to a lowered representation of other sectors.

Society

Integrated education is not unique to schools that have “integrated” in their name. Educating children together takes place in all forms of setting and advancing society should not be the sole responsibility of one sector.

Schools across Northern Ireland, regardless of sector, have worked extremely hard to instil openness and positive attitudes in their pupils, and this is reflected in the positive societal change in NI. Focusing solely on integrated schools diminishes the good work of all other schools and we should take a wider, more strategic approach to advancing our society.

One channel through which pupils have learned and developed a shared ethos is Shared Education. This has proved a powerful tool in bringing pupils together from different backgrounds, cultures and religions, to explicitly learn about each other, the ethos of their schools and the importance of respecting different beliefs and viewpoints. Shared Education delivers educational benefits, and promotes a culture of inclusivity, respect and mutual understanding, contributing to community cohesion and good relations.

Schools in Northern Ireland, regardless of sector, have worked tirelessly to develop Shared Education partnerships. To say that only integrated schools are contributing to societal cohesion and

⁵ [Statistical Bulletin 7/2019 Year 12 and Year 14 Examination Performance at Post-Primary Schools in Northern Ireland 2018/19 \(Revised June 2021\) | Department of Education \(education-ni.gov.uk\)](#)

the maintenance and enhancement of peaceful relations is potentially damaging and erodes the good work of all of our schools.

6. What effect has recent legislation had on the status of integrated education?

The legislation does not distinguish between integrated schools and integrated education and implies that only integrated schools offer those of different cultures and religious beliefs and of none, an opportunity to be educated together.

The definition of the meaning of integrated education in the legislation (Section 1 of the Act) embraces characteristics that apply to schools in all education sectors in Northern Ireland. They are not exclusive to schools that have been formally designated as integrated schools.

The recent legislation has implied an elevation of integrated schools above others in terms of “morals and values” and has the potential to perpetuate divisions. The work of other schools in breaking down barriers should be acknowledged and embraced as much as the good work of integrated schools.

Specifically, the wording of the definition of integrated education, *“those of different cultures and religious beliefs and of none, including reasonable numbers of both Protestant and Roman Catholic children or young persons”* implies an out-dated association and continued use of religious terms to assign perceived political affiliations and aspirations to children and their parents. In addition, the Department of Education has yet to define what is has determined as being “reasonable numbers” of children and young persons for the purposes of designating schools as being “integrated”.

Parents, children and young people today are increasingly identifying as “other” and refusing to be designated as belonging to one “side” or another. We also now live in an increasingly multicultural, multifaceted and secularised society which is certainly not in line with this definition or the designation of children, young people and their parents as being either and only Protestant or Roman Catholic. It is gravely disrespectful to categorise children and their parents as “other” if they do not identify with religions that were once directly linked to particular political ideologies or aspirations, or indeed cultural affiliations.

The points made above align with comments made in a recent paper on religion and diversity in Northern Ireland, which presents data on changes seen in recent years and states “It is worth asking whether the categorisations traditionally used in official statistics capture the growing diversity of society in Northern Ireland, particularly as the ‘Other’ category has grown so much over the past 20 years”⁶.

Governing Bodies Association NI

18th January 2024

⁶ This paper was received via email from the author on 17.01.24 and is not yet published on academic platforms to the best of our knowledge.