Written evidence submitted to the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee’s Inquiry into Integrated Education in Northern Ireland

Submitted by the Controlled Schools’ Support Council

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**Background**

* As the support body for 49% of schools in Northern Ireland (NI), the Controlled Schools’ Support Council (CSSC) welcomes this opportunity to provide written evidence to the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee inquiry into Integrated Education in Northern Ireland.
* The controlled sector is the largest, most diverse education sector in Northern Ireland. CSSC supports controlled schools which include 62 nursery schools, 37 special schools, 378 primary schools, 69 post-primary schools, 32 integrated schools and two Irish medium schools (Department of Education School Census 2022/23).
* CSSC is recognised by the Department of Education (DE) as a body that has as an objective the encouragement and promotion of integrated education. This is in line with section 3 of the Integrated Education Act (Northern Ireland) 20221.
* CSSC’s vision is to empower controlled schools to serve their communities by enriching the lives of their children and young people. Controlled schools are open to all, welcoming children and young people of all faiths and none, richly diverse and inclusive, reflective of and embedded in the communities they serve. CSSC firmly challenges those who represent the controlled sector as serving only one community group. CSSC also challenges controlled schools to understand what being open to all means in their own communities.
* CSSC promotes our children and young people being educated together and advocates for the need for transformation and investment in the education system. We need a vision and strategy for education that includes everyone working together and all voices being heard.
* This Inquiry follows the publication of the recent Independent Review of Education in Northern Ireland’s report, Investing in a Better Future,2 which DE will soon be consulting on.
* CSSC would welcome the opportunity to present oral evidence to the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee.

**Ensuring ALL children and young people in Northern Ireland are educated together**

* CSSC contends that there are a number of routes to educating our young people together including, inclusive open to all schools, shared education partnerships and campuses and formally integrated schools. No single option can be successful alone.
* Our “communities are often geographically divided. A school with a large majority of pupils from one background may reflect the community in which it is situated.”2 (Vol 1 8.31). These schools should not be valued any less than others, neither should the communities they serve.
* When asked which is the most important element in selecting schools for their children, parents and guardians consistently respond by stating high educational standards. It is therefore vital that all schools are supported to serve their local communities and be the best school they can be.
* Controlled schools are diverse and embedded in their local communities, reflecting those communities. To represent the controlled sector as being a single identity sector is incorrect and does the schools and their communities a disservice.
* CSSC supports the education of our children and young people together in inclusive and diverse schools. This is the vision of the controlled sector.
* CSSC recognises the legal definition of integrated schools as being only those that are formally integrated. 33% of all integrated schools are controlled integrated schools. These schools are valued and supported by CSSC alongside all schools in the controlled sector.
* 7% of children and young people are currently educated in formally integrated schools. It is critical that there is a strategic focus on how the remaining 93% are given the opportunity to be educated together. Hence the importance of a three-strand approach.
  + Inclusive schools.
  + Shared education.
  + Integrated schools.
* CSSC continues to support all controlled schools in their aspiration to be open to all. This includes schools whose communities want them to transform to formal integrated status and become a controlled integrated school.

**CSSC has addressed some of the specific questions outlined by the Inquiry below**

1. **What is the current and anticipated demand for integrated school places?**
2. **Why has the supply of integrated education not matched demand; and what mechanisms might be used to do so?**

Measuring demand has proved to be complex. It is vital that actual demand is measured rather than aspirational perceptions of demand. When asked aspirational questions such as should “Integrated schools, which intentionally educate together children every day in the same classrooms…. be the main model for our education system”, respondents frequently answer yes in significant numbers. However, when parents are asked about the most important aspects in choosing a school 82% rank good educational standards as very important, whereas a school being openly welcoming to all sections of the community has 48% stating it is very important3. Parents want good, local schools for their children.

Data provided by DE to the Northern Ireland Assembly Research and Information Servicedemonstrates that 11.5% of non-integrated primary schools were oversubscribed, compared to 17.8% of Integrated primary schools in 2020/214. 82% of Integrated primary schools were undersubscribed compared to 86.6% of non-integrated primary schools. In post primary schools there were similar levels of oversubscription between integrated and non-integrated schools. The data around unmet demand is not as simple as often presented and CSSC would contend that it confirms that parental preference is complex.

1. **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?**

The recent Investing in a Better Future2 report states that “the cost of funding the various sectoral bodies is often overstated, and if their functions were transferred into one organisation, a lot of the existing costs would remain” (Vol 2 10.96). Assumptions made around the significant costs of maintaining the current “divided” system have been refuted by the Department of Education and the Independent Review of Education in their report.

There are ways in which area planning can be used to ensure that high quality education remains locally provided, specifically in rural communities. As discussed in the Investing in a Better Future2 report this may involve the merging of two or more schools into one shared community school serving all in the local community. This will involve some initial investment but is important to both ensure the quality and sustainability of provision but also the education together of our children and young people. Searching for a “divided system” savings bonus is misguided.

It is also worth noting that Northern Ireland has more than two types of education provision. The question disregards voluntary grammar schools and the Irish medium sector amongst others. Northern Ireland has a single Department of Education, Education Authority, Inspectorate (ETI), common funding scheme and a common curriculum and examinations board (CCEA).

The question quite rightly identifies the need for investment in Northern Ireland and specifically in the area of special educational needs. However, linking further investment to savings from perceived division is fruitless. The children and young people of Northern Ireland need to be provided with the same level of investment as pupils in Great Britain.

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

CSSC is unaware of any substantive research that demonstrates that education in an integrated school has any lower cost than any other type of school. The main cost in a school is the cost of staff and these are employed through the same pay scales in all schools in Northern Ireland. The challenges of managing provision for young people in an underfunded system are the same regardless of management type or integration.

There are significant benefits from our children and young people being educated together. These benefits also flow from inclusive schools, shared education partnerships and shared education campuses. Ensuring that our children and young people are well prepared to work with all parts of our society has benefits for the economy, the criminal justice system and health.

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

CSSC continues to raise its significant concerns about the unintended consequences of the Integrated Education Act (NI) 20221 which it believes unfairly prioritises one group of schools over others.

The Investing in a Better Future2 report refers to the challenges faced by EA in its managing authority role for all controlled schools. It states that the Act makes it difficult for EA to properly represent the interests of controlled schools in the area planning process.

CSSC would contend that the legislation has resulted in development proposals relating to integrated schools being more likely to be approved.

The actual effect of the legislation on integrated schools and the subsequent impact on other schools is still to be seen. The legislation changes the definition of integrated education to include socio-economic diversity and mixed ability. This may place some integrated schools at variance with the new definition.

The Act also places a role for the inspectorate in relation to the potential provision of integrated education in school inspections.

CSSC is clear about its support for all children and young people being educated together. The issues Council has with the legislation are in relation to its content not its intent.

**7. How does support for integrated education map on to the demography of Northern Ireland?**

CSSC supports a three-strand approach to the education of our children and young people together. This supports schools in areas where our communities live apart. It promotes inclusion across all schools and values integration where communities clearly demonstrate the demand.

The 2021 Census clearly reflects the changing demography of Northern Ireland.

* A growing number of the population are now identifying as ‘Other’.
* 80% of pupils identifying as ‘Other’ of primary school age attend a controlled primary school.
* NISRA expects the number of pupils in Northern Ireland to reduce by 10% over the next 15 years.

CSSC believes that this brings opportunity as well as challenge. However, it is critical that the quality of education and wellbeing of all children and young people are central to a collaborative, inclusive approach to the future.

**References**

1. [Integrated Education Act (Northern Ireland) 2022 (legislation.gov.uk)](https://www.legislation.gov.uk/nia/2022/15/crossheading/integrated-education/enacted)
2. [Independent Review of Education - Final Report | Department of Education (education-ni.gov.uk)](https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/publications/independent-review-education-final-report)
3. [Integrated Education Fund - IEFNI Attitudinal Poll May Summary Report FINAL - Page 1 - Created with Publitas.com](https://view.publitas.com/integrated-education-fund/iefni-attitudinal-poll-may-summary-report-final/page/1)
4. <http://www.niassembly.gov.uk/globalassets/documents/raise/publications/2017-2022/2021/education/7521.pdf>