

Written Statement to the Northern Ireland Assembly

**DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION POSITION PAPER ON ‘INTEGRATED
EDUCATION’**

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Introduction

Recent transformation applications, together with court judgments, have brought into sharp focus important legal and policy issues concerning the future development of Integrated Education. These issues go to the heart of how the statutory framework is to be interpreted and applied and can no longer remain unresolved.

Therefore today, I am setting out the Department's considered position on a number of these matters, including a new approach to the collection of information for assessing 'reasonable numbers of Protestant and Roman Catholic children' in schools seeking to transform to Integrated status.

This aims to clarify the legislative framework governing Integrated Education for schools and to outline a number of policy measures intended to support delivery within that framework.

I hope this will better reflect the spirit of the legislation by broadening the definition of Protestant and Roman Catholic to recognise community background, as well as religious affiliation, in determining whether this requirement has been met.

I am also suggesting that the tension between the duty to 'encourage' Integrated Education and the prohibition of approving a proposal to transform where the 'reasonable numbers' test has not been met, may be resolved by a process of changes being made by the school in advance of the application to transform to Integrated status.

This position reflects three important considerations:

- i. The Department must operate within the law, including legislation enacted by the Northern Ireland Assembly and other statutory obligations that apply in Northern Ireland.
- ii. Integrated Education was established to bring together children from Protestant and Roman Catholic backgrounds in a society historically marked by division.
- iii. Consistent with the legislative framework, public policy and public expenditure should be directed towards achieving meaningful and measurable integration in practice, not simply changes in school designation.

The legislative position

Members will be aware of the Department's duty under Article 64(1) of the Education Reform (Northern Ireland) Order 1989 which states,

"It shall be the duty of the Department to encourage, facilitate and support the development of integrated education and to provide support for integrated education."

However, in relation to schools that wish to transform, Article 92(6) must also be satisfied. It states,

"The Department shall not approve a proposal under this Article in relation to a school unless it appears to the Department that, if the school were to become, or be established as, a controlled integrated school, the school would be likely to provide integrated education."

Integrated education is defined in section 1 of the Integrated Education Act (Northern Ireland) 2022:

"Integrated education" means the education together, in an integrated school, of—

(a) those of different cultures and religious beliefs and of none, including reasonable numbers of both Protestant and Roman Catholic children or young persons;

(b) those who are experiencing socio-economic deprivation and those who are not; and

(c) those of different abilities."

Judicial consideration

The interplay between these two provisions was recently considered by the Court of Appeal in [JR 335 and JR 336](#) and that Court concluded that Article 92(6) remains a mandatory statutory test that must be satisfied.

It also observed, *"In short, if there is not a reasonable number of Catholic and Protestant pupils attending a school then it is not an integrated school as defined by the legislation."*

The Court of Appeal concluded,

“...we agree with Mr McGleenan when he argues that the court cannot escape the deliberate outworking of Article 92(6). It has the effect of disempowering the decision maker from approving a proposal if he or she is not satisfied that the reasonable numbers requirement will be met. In such a case he or she could not approve a proposal and is therefore obliged to refuse it”

In short, the requirement for reasonable numbers is not an administrative preference, a departmental policy choice or an aspiration. It is a legal requirement.

The Department's position

Clearly what constitutes 'reasonable numbers' is a key consideration. In September 2025, the Department set out its approach to this question in a position paper ([WMS Reasonable Numbers Sept 2025](#))

This highlighted the fact that 19 schools transformed from 1991-2016 – a period of time which allowed a reasonable opportunity for transformation to take place. In 12 of the 19, the majority community outnumbers the minority community by at least 2:1. Of these, seven outnumber by more than 3:1. 10 of the 19 have fewer than 20% of the minority religion at the school. Three schools that have transformed – all more than seven years ago – have fewer than five pupils from the minority community.

The Department's 'reasonable numbers' paper made clear that transformation proposals must demonstrate a credible pathway to achieving reasonable numbers over time. It also concluded that many transformed schools have struggled to achieve balanced religious representation in practice, highlighting the need for stronger evidence that transformation will deliver genuine integration on the ground.

Recent analysis also found that currently no Integrated school meets the NICIE aspiration, as set out in its Statement of Principles, for children from the minority Catholic or Protestant tradition to comprise 40% of the school's enrolment.

Of those schools which have transformed, 31 out of 33 (93.9%) have a minority population under 25% of the school community in 2025/26.

Of the 71 Integrated primary and post-primary schools, 48 (or 67.6%) saw a decrease in the percentage of pupils from the minority religion in 2025/26 from 2024/25, while 23 (or 32.4%) saw an increase.

While there is a mandatory requirement for 'reasonable numbers', the data demonstrates that often this has not been achieved even for schools which transformed many years ago.

What is Integrated Education?

This gives rise to important and fundamental questions about Integrated Education. Is the requirement for 'reasonable numbers' still to be regarded as an essential feature of Integrated Education and, if not, what is its defining characteristic?

Integrated education emerged as a response to the realities of a divided society. Its founding vision was straightforward and compelling: that children from Protestant and Roman Catholic backgrounds should learn together, build relationships, and develop mutual understanding from an early age.

That objective remains highly relevant today.

Northern Ireland is a more diverse place than it was when the original legislation was introduced. However, the Assembly in its 2022 legislation continued to recognise the importance of ensuring that young people from the two main traditions are educated together in meaningful numbers. The Assembly could have chosen to take a different approach: it did not do so.

The requirement for reasonable numbers is, therefore, not an incidental feature of the legislation. It reflects the fundamental principle that Integrated Education should create genuine and sustained interaction between children from different community backgrounds.

The Assembly might rightly ask itself, if not defined by 'reasonable numbers' of Protestant and Roman Catholic children, what is the defining feature of Integrated Education?

Whilst ostensibly operating within an explicitly Integrated ethos, in practice, the other distinctions between Integrated and other schools may appear relatively limited, resting principally on governance arrangements and different arrangements for

collective worship from those that apply in the controlled sector. The curriculum remains the same across all schools and, if community representation does not achieve an intended degree of balance, this naturally brings the purpose and impact of Integrated Education into question.

Is the purpose still to educate children of different backgrounds together (as, I must note, is a feature not unique to one sector) or has it evolved to something else?

Challenges in the Transformation Process

Recent Development Proposals and the Court of Appeal identified the apparent tension between the duty to encourage, facilitate and support Integrated Education and the requirement for reasonable numbers. They also indicated how it must be resolved.

Statistics highlight the challenges that are faced by transforming schools to achieve and retain 'reasonable numbers'.

This gives rise to the very real challenge of a school wishing to transform to satisfy the mandatory test that 'reasonable numbers' will be achieved. They face a range of hurdles:

- They often cannot demonstrate a track record of 'reasonable numbers' of the minority community.
- Where they have increased numbers of the minority community, the change is often modest.
- It is often the case that the wider demographic of the area from which most of the children are drawn is not conducive to attracting significant additional members of the minority community.
- There are often limited or no expressions of interest from prospective pupils from the minority community.
- Many transformed schools have faced significant challenges in achieving and sustaining reasonable numbers from the minority community.

None of these factors should be regarded as a criticism of the schools seeking to transform, rather they are a product of the statutory scheme and historic trends.

While it is true to say that even when the Department has taken a generous approach to 'reasonable numbers' in the past, (insofar as it addressed the issue at all), this has not resulted in improvements in community balance of a significant magnitude in many schools.

In the absence of an amendment to the legislation the hurdle to transformation is undoubtedly a high one. In the present statutory context, what is a school that wishes to transform to do to overcome the hurdle?

Supporting schools who wish to Transform

The Department believes that greater emphasis should be placed on actions undertaken before a school submits a transformation proposal. That is why I launched the Integrated Education Support Programme as a structured three-year programme designed to guide schools that wish to become Integrated ([IE Support Programme](#)). Schools should be encouraged to develop practices, relationships and community engagement activities that genuinely broaden participation and attract children from both traditions.

This approach is consistent with the spirit of the legislation and reflects the reality that lasting integration is achieved through cultural and demographic change rather than through designation alone.

Transformation should recognise and formalise progress that has already been achieved, rather than begin it. A recent submission from a school seeking transformation encapsulated the position,

"We have not waited for a formal decision before continuing to develop the principles of Integrated Education within [the school]. Our journey towards Integrated Status has influenced curriculum planning, assemblies, pupil leadership, policies, staff development, community engagement and the language we use across the school. We are becoming more intentional in how we reflect diversity, identity, culture, faith, belief, ability, rights and belonging in everyday school life.

Transformation would therefore formalise and strengthen a journey that is already underway. We are not arguing that [the school] will become inclusive or integrated only

if approval is granted. We are demonstrating that many of the principles of Integrated Education are already being lived in practice and that Controlled Integrated Status would provide the structure, accountability and recognition needed to sustain and develop this work further.”

I believe this programme represents a real, meaningful and appropriate mechanism to support, encourage and facilitate Integrated Education.

Clarifying community background information

In addition, today, I am announcing that my Department is reviewing the way information is collected for the purposes of assessing reasonable numbers to support schools wishing to transform and bring greater clarity to the process.

At present, available data does not always provide a sufficiently clear picture of community background and there has been some criticism of the approach.

Currently in the monitoring form under a section headed religion, parents are invited to select a religion applicable to their child. However, no advice is offered by the Department as to the basis on which such a selection is to be made, and it seems inevitable that similarly situated people will complete the form in a different way. The form also disaggregates Protestants into their respective denominations for no obvious present purpose.

In considering this issue, the regulations made in relation to fair employment legislation in Northern Ireland provide a clear framework (Fair Employment (Monitoring) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 1999).

They state that, *“Protestant” means belonging to the Protestant community in Northern Ireland; and “Roman Catholic” means belonging to the Roman Catholic community in Northern Ireland.”*

The relevant legislation on Integrated Education refers to Protestant and Roman Catholic children, but crucially it does not define those terms.

Having considered the legislative context and wider practice in Northern Ireland, the Department believes it is appropriate to explicitly take account of community background as well as declared religion.

Accordingly, my Department will develop proposals to amend its monitoring form to add a distinct community background question to assist in assessing the 'reasonable numbers' requirement. Community background will be recorded as Protestant, Roman Catholic or Other/None.

This is intended to provide greater clarity, consistency and transparency in future decision-making. It will also assist schools in understanding their starting position and measuring progress over time.

While this approach will not resolve all of the uncertainty in this area, it should provide more reliable information in relation to community background.

It will also avoid an inconsistent approach between schools to what constitutes a Protestant or Roman Catholic in cases of transformation.

Subject to the necessary preliminary arrangements being put in place, I would seek to introduce this change at the earliest possible opportunity. This will create a new baseline from which progress around community mixing across our schools could be benchmarked in the future.

A challenge for all sectors

If Integrated Education is to expand in a way that meets the statutory definition, all sectors must be prepared to engage in that conversation. To date, the overwhelming majority of transformations have come from the controlled sector, while very few maintained schools have entered the process – and only one has completed it.

A sustainable long-term approach requires participation from across the education system. In particular, the possibility of amalgamation between schools serving different traditions deserves serious consideration. Such approaches may offer one of the most effective means of creating schools with substantial representation from both communities.

Over the next decade demographic change will have profound implications for the school estate. While this may be seen as a threat to the viability of some schools, it may give rise to the potential for more schools in which those from a Protestant and Roman Catholic background can be educated together.

Amalgamations of schools from different sectors could guarantee that the 'reasonable numbers' envisaged by the pioneers of Integrated Education in Northern Ireland might be achieved.

Whether by way of Integrated Education or jointly managed schools, there is an opportunity for this to genuinely transform education in Northern Ireland.

For political parties and support bodies, we need real and frank conversations about the purpose and nature of Integrated Education. We need to be honest about what delivers real integration.

Too often, easy solutions are promoted as advancing integration when they do little to bring children from different backgrounds together in a meaningful way.

We have a duty to focus on results. The test in considering the future expansion of integrated education is simple: does it lead to greater and more meaningful integration between children from different backgrounds? If it does not, we should have the courage to say so and pursue approaches that do.

Conclusion

My Department remains fully committed to encouraging, facilitating and supporting Integrated Education. However, that support must be exercised within the framework established by the Assembly and interpreted by the courts.

The law requires schools seeking Integrated status to demonstrate that they are likely to provide Integrated Education, including 'reasonable numbers' of Protestant and Roman Catholic children.

That requirement cannot simply be disregarded. Equally, where schools are committed to broadening participation and strengthening integration, they should be supported to do so.

Looking ahead, there is an opportunity to refocus the debate on outcomes rather than labels, on substance rather than process and on genuine integration rather than designation alone.

In recent years it is hard to avoid the conclusion that those campaigning for Integrated Education have lost their way - failing to deliver schools which meet the legal

requirements and often making implausible claims regarding the likelihood of achieving 'reasonable numbers'.

This is the time to rediscover the original intent of this laudable movement.

If Northern Ireland is to fulfil the original vision of Integrated Education, the priority must be to create more opportunities for children from different traditions to learn together in meaningful numbers and in ways that have a lasting impact on communities across Northern Ireland.

I hope today's proposals will play a part in making this happen.