



INTEGRATED EDUCATION IN NORTHERN IRELAND

THE OPPORTUNITY TO BE EDUCATED TOGETHER

By Paul Caskey,

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Integrated Education Fund
in Northern Ireland



The Ireland Funds supported the establishment of Northern Ireland's first-ever planned integrated school, Lagan College in 1981, and has been a long-standing partner and friend for almost four decades. Here, Paul Caskey, Head of Campaign for the Integrated Education Fund in Northern Ireland, shares the journey of Integrated Education. Paul is also a parent of three young children experiencing an integrated primary and post primary education.

Northern Ireland has a proud history of quality schools, many continuing to deliver an excellent education for their pupils. We don't wish to change that proud tradition, we want to make it even better. To do that, we need to address another characteristic - religious and cultural division. Children traditionally attend schools that are mainly Catholic or Protestant in their enrolment, culture and ethos. This separation has served to make it more difficult for young people to create cross community friendships and limits their experience of people who may have different community backgrounds to their own.

A PARENT-LED MOVEMENT

Integrated education is a parent led and grassroots response to this division. Given Northern Ireland's history it is perhaps unsurprising that it has received little political support from mainstream parties in Northern Ireland. Moreover, government has never planned for, nor created any integrated school. It was parents who established the first ever planned integrated school, Lagan College, and each school since has been created by parents either setting up new schools themselves or more recently by parents voting to change their child's existing school into an integrated school.

The number of schools has risen steadily to 65, and from just 28 pupils in 1981 to over 24,000 today. Currently almost one in five first preference applications to integrated schools cannot be accommodated because so many of the schools are full to capacity.

THE CHALLENGES TO INTEGRATED EDUCATION

Independent surveys and research always demonstrate high public support for more integrated education but the gap between demand and supply remains vast. This is a great source of frustration but we must remember that there are significant barriers to growth. There is an absence of an education planning process that effectively takes into account the preference of parents and local communities when it comes to education provision and there are two separate statutory school planning authorities, one for Catholic schools and one for the rest. It took the use of litigation in 2014 by Drumragh Integrated College in Omagh, after it was denied approval to expand to meet demand, to highlight how the Department of Education was failing to implement its statutory duty to 'encourage and facilitate' integrated education properly. However, since the legal ruling, 30 school development proposals for growth and expansion have been approved, with 23 existing schools now also in line for major capital funding from the UK Treasury under the Fresh Start Agreement, totalling £295 million.



THE LEVERAGE OF THE IRELAND FUNDS' INVESTMENT

One such school to benefit is Drumlins Integrated Primary School in Ballynahinch, a school which was previously dependent on The Ireland Funds' support for additional classrooms and resources to enable it to grow and develop. Today Drumlins' dream has come true and its children enjoy a new £4 million government funded school building. Quite simply, donor investment in integrated schools has gone on to leverage hundreds of millions in rightful government funding.

Whilst helping with the successful expansion and development of existing integrated schools is a great source of pride for the IEF and our donors, we must always look to the future and the creation of more schools. We are encouraged that the majority of parents aspire to greater integration, however the challenge is that most are unaware they have a right, protected in law, to express their support for their child's school to become integrated. If parents representing 20% of pupils want integrated status for their school then they can ask their school to consider transformation to integrated status which must then be put to a ballot of all parents in the school.

INTEGRATE MY SCHOOL CAMPAIGN

The Ireland Funds were one of the first backers of our recent innovative 'Integrate My School' Campaign, launched by Liam Neeson, to empower parents. A Flagship Award in 2017 of £100,000 over 2 years from The Ireland Funds has helped to ensure there is now more interest in transformation than ever before. This was evidenced by parents at six schools across Northern Ireland voting overwhelmingly in favor of transforming to integrated status during 2019. Support from parents ranged between 85% to 100%. The democratic parental ballots include three Catholic schools; namely Seaview Primary School in Glenarm, Ballyhackett Primary School near Coleraine and St Mary's High School, Brollagh. Votes have also been held at Carrickfergus Central Primary and Harding Memorial Primary in East Belfast. Bangor Central Nursery School is the first ever Nursery School to have held such a vote. There is no guarantee that the Department of Education will approve all of these schools going forward but is clear evidence of growing demand. The 'Integrate My School' platform was enthusiastically embraced by parents in all these schools.

WHAT HAS BEEN ACHIEVED?

The Integrated Education Movement has a track record of success, winning changes in law, precedent and practice to lay foundations for the future.

SUCCESS: TRANSFORMATION

The first success was the 1978 Dunleath Act, which allowed Catholic and Protestant schools to transform to integrated status. Whilst there were no successful transformations at that time, today transformation has been accepted as a way forward and over 35% of all integrated schools have achieved this status through transformation. In 2019, parents at 6 more schools balloted in favour of transformation following the success of our 'Integrate My School' Campaign supported by the Ireland Funds.

SUCCESS: PUBLIC OPINION

The 2018 Northern Ireland wide opinion poll, carried out by Lucid Talk and commissioned by the Integrated Education Fund (IEF), reveals that almost 70% of parents interviewed said they would back a move to transform their child's school to integrated (Lucid Talk, 2018).

In the Independent Review of Integrated Education (2017) commissioned by the Department of Education, over 86% of respondents believe that integrated education is vital to breaking down barriers between Catholics and Protestants, and that there should be more integrated schools in Northern Ireland.

SUCCESS: LIFELONG INTER-RELIGIOUS CONTACT

Research shows that integrated schooling has a significant and positive social influence on the lives of those who experience it, most notably in terms of fostering cross-community friendships, reducing prejudicial attitudes and promoting a sense of security in religious, racial, or ethnically diverse environments (ARK Research Update Number 111, April 2017; Stringer, 2009, 2000; Montgomery et al., 2003; McGlynn, 2001; Irwin, 1991).

Other research (Stringer et al., 2009, 2000;) has found that the inter-group contact of integrated or mixed schools can influence social attitudes, with pupils adopting more positive positions on key social issues such as politics, religion, identity, mixed marriages and integrated education.

Attendance at formally integrated schools specifically, or schools which had generally a mixed religious intake, also had a significantly positive effect on the attitudes of young Protestants to young Catholics. Dirk Schubotz, 2017.

SUCCESS: GROWTH

The number of pupils, and schools, has grown from 28 children in one school in 1981 to 24,000 children in 65 schools at nursery, primary and second level in 2019: if there were more integrated schools, offering more integrated school places, then there would be more children benefiting from this kind of education.

Integrated education is the fastest growing form of education in Northern Ireland with 30 School Development Proposals for the growth and expansion of existing integrated schools having been approved by the Department of Education since 2014, creating around 1,700 new integrated school places and yet hundreds of first preferences still being denied due to the lack of available places.

SUCCESS: PUBLIC AND POLITICAL SUPPORT

There is a commitment to support integrated education in Article 13 of the Good Friday Agreement.

The Independent Review of Integrated Education published in 2017 contained 39 recommendations to the Minister of Education regarding the growth and development of integrated education.

The most positive Department of Education guidance ever on integrated education was published in January 2018 entitled 'Integration Works'.

SUCCESS: RECURRENT FUNDING

By proving demand and viability, integrated schools have won state funding of recurrent costs for new schools provided certain stringent viability criteria are met.

SUCCESS: CAPITAL FUNDING FOR EXISTING SCHOOLS

Just under £300 million in capital funding has been agreed for integrated schools by HM UK Treasury as part of the Fresh Start Agreement, benefiting 23 out of the 65 existing integrated schools.

In June of 2019, donors attending The Ireland Funds Worldwide Conference in Belfast visited Cliftonville Integrated Primary School, which became an integrated school in 2008. Located in North Belfast, the present enrollment is 351 children plus an additional 26 in the newly-opened Nursery. Donors learned about the challenges and complexities of the education system in Northern Ireland and how The Ireland Funds is continuing to help on this journey towards integration.



The Ireland Funds, through their support for the Integrated Education Fund, has been with us every step of the way. When we needed an extra classroom, an extra teacher or even outdoor play equipment for the children, they were there when we needed them. You believed in us. Look at us now – we have a wonderful new school to enjoy for generations to come. It might have been hard going at times but together we stuck at it and it was worth it. We couldn't have succeeded without such support.

— Janice Marshall, Principal of Drumlins IPS

GIVING BACK:

ALUMNI OF INTEGRATED EDUCATION

Many former integrated school students are keen to give something back. One such person is Stuart Irwin. Stuart is a proud alumnus of Hazelwood Integrated College, a working-class school on the North Belfast peace-line, which now educates over 1,000 pupils and has developed thanks to many supporters in The Ireland Funds.

He recently completed a PhD in history at Queen's University Belfast. In 2015, Stuart was selected to participate in the Washington Ireland Program for Service and Leadership; returning in 2017 to join the Management Team. Most recently, he has joined the Belfast Hub of the Global Shapers Community, which is an initiative set up by the World Economic Forum. Stuart is a leading member of the newly-established Integrated AlumNI and says: "Attending an integrated school opened my eyes to the world and allowed me the opportunity to grow in confidence and develop the skills required to fulfil my aspirations. I am passionate about Integrated AlumNI because I want to ensure that future generations of young people in Northern Ireland are able to avail of the wonderful opportunity I enjoyed in attending an integrated school."



Stuart Irwin

with fellow Integrated Education graduates