

**House Foreign Affairs Subcommittee on Europe, Energy, the Environment and Cyber**

# **THE ROLE OF YOUNG PEOPLE IN FOSTERING PEACE IN NORTHERN IRELAND**

**Submission from the Integrated AlumNI**

Presented by

**Michael Lynch**

Chair of Trustees

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# Foreword from our Chair



*We are very grateful for the opportunity to address members of the Sub-Committee at this important congressional hearing entitled: 'The Role of Young People in Fostering Peace in Northern Ireland'.*

*I watched with interest a hearing that took place to this Sub-Committee last year: "Reaffirming the Good Friday Agreement" with Monica McWilliams, Jane Morrice, and Amb. Mitchell Reiss. The sentiments from the hearing articulated how Northern Ireland is at such a crucial moment in our journey towards peace and reconciliation. The very roadmap that set out our journey in 1998, the Good Friday/Belfast Agreement, is still to be wholly implemented. We've been on this journey for 24 years.*

*The Agreement set out the provision "to facilitate and encourage integrated education". However, the establishment of all 69 integrated schools in Northern Ireland has been community-led, with limited or no support from the Department of Education. In 2022, the reality is that only 7% of our school age population attend an integrated school. 71% of parents in Northern Ireland would like to send their children to an integrated school, but the provision does not exist to meet that parental demand.*

*We are a charitable network of volunteers formed of past pupils from integrated schools, alongside campaigners and supporters of the integrated movement. We advocate that the furtherance of integrated education in Northern Ireland will directly impact on our journey to fostering true peace and reconciliation in Northern Ireland.*

*We will only achieve this ambition with political will. Many other facets of the Agreement remain fragile, including the very political structures that govern us. Whether by design or coincidence, we are all aware that this hearing happens one week to the day in which the people of Northern Ireland will take to the polls to decipher what the future of our political institutions look like.*

*Northern Ireland is not unfamiliar with volatility. At times of our most volatile, the United States has been a key broker to engaging with both communities in Northern Ireland. The US has shown commitment and dedication to Northern Ireland which is widely recognized. As we enter the next chapter, the opportunity is evident for the US to continue to offer their hand of support as we, once again, embark in somewhat uncharted territory.*

*This written submission aims to set out:*

- The work of the Integrated AlumNI in building a more prosperous and reconciled Northern Ireland*
- Testimonies of those who have experienced integrated education and why this should be a policy area of focus*
- How the United States can help us on that journey*

*We would once again like to thank you for the opportunity to address the Sub-Committee.*



**Michael Lynch**  
Chair of Trustees  
Integrated AlumNI

# Our work



We are a network of campaigners and supporters of integrated education in Northern Ireland. Formed in 2013 as a group of past pupils of integrated schools, the network has now morphed into a wider group that consists of current and past pupils of integrated schools, alongside teachers, academics, donors and wider supporters of the movement.

Now as a registered charity, the Integrated AlumNI and lobby and campaign for the furtherance of the integrated education movement.



## Our Purpose

*To the advancement, furtherance and promotion of integrated education and its benefits within Northern Ireland. We advocate for the advancement, education, assistance and promotion of both the current pupils and alumni of integrated education. We aim to contribute to peace and reconciliation in Northern Ireland through integrated education.*



## HOW DO WE DO THIS?

Lobbying and campaigning policymakers

School support and pupil development

Building capacity through the recruitment of new members

# Our message

The first integrated school, Lagan College, opened its doors in 1981 with 14 Catholic pupils and 14 Protestant pupils. Now with 69 integrated schools in Northern Ireland, these schools educate those of all faiths and none, and from all traditions, together. But being Integrated is much more than the makeup of the pupil population. It's an ethos and commitment, it's a curricular approach and it's inclusive in the make-up of teachers and the Board of Governors. The planning is supported by the Council for Integrated Education.

Integrated education, whilst being community-driven, has also been a recommendation of multiple reports and publications:

- 1998 Belfast / Good Friday Agreement;
- 2005 (Westminster) Northern Ireland Affairs Committee examining Hate Crime
- 2009 Consultative Group on the Past;
- 2020 New Decade New Approach Agreement
- 2020 Review of Hate Crime Legislation
- 2021 Executive Action Plan for Tackling Paramilitary Activity.

The Integrated Education Bill passed by the Northern Ireland assembly in March 2022 will create a clear definition of Integrated Education, establish a strategy to help develop Integrated Education and put parental choice at the forefront when planning to open new schools. It places greater accountability on the Department of Education to do all these things. Whilst the Integrated Alumni celebrated the success of the Bill, it should be noted many of the steps forward were already part of the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement and yet never delivered. There is a sense of disappointment and frustration amongst past pupils of integrated schools that we have needed to legislate for the changes in education that Northern Ireland was promised 24 years ago.



*The first day of Hazelwood Integrated Primary School, September 1985*



*Students from Hazelwood Integrated College lobbying elected representatives to support the Integrated Education Bill, 2022*

# THE VOICES OF OUR YOUNG PEOPLE

*Without integrated education my parents wouldn't have been able to raise me in their mixed marriage the way they wanted to, outside the world of religion. It allowed me to be educated without having to attend conventional RE classes in a state/CCMS school and left me in a position to make an educated decision for myself when I was old enough on if I wanted to follow a religion after being taught about acceptance and understanding.*

*Stephen Mackessy  
formerly Hazelwood Integrated College*

*Integrated education is a practice, and at its core translates into listening to and learning from diverse groups outside of Northern Ireland's institutionalized segregated system. Integrated education isn't the only answer, but it is the start of working towards the common good within Northern Irish civil society.*

*Matt O'Neill  
formerly Hazelwood Integrated College  
and North Coast Integrated College*

*Integrated education is vital to the progression in Northern Ireland. Firstly, from a segregation point of view, it educates young people together teaching them mutual respect, tolerance and respect. They become friends, learn and grow from each other. Secondly, integrated education creates a collaborative and supportive environment where all can reach their academic potential and all skills and talents are developed. Confidence and self belief is at its core - and to summarize it's both a fair and societally advantageous system which counteracts the alternative - a selective, segregated - and outdated school system - which polarizes society along both ethical and economic lines.*

*Treasa Harkin,  
formerly Oakgrove Integrated College*

*I care deeply about Integrated Education because, without it, our hugely and multiply traumatized society hasn't a chance at healing and thriving, let alone surviving. There are no other circumstances where a friendship group can include someone with an immediate family member killed on Bloody Sunday, another whose relative works for the police, another who is a native Irish speaker, another who has moved here from their native English home. These organic threads intertwine and are guided skillfully by an ethos that directly acknowledges and challenges sectarianism and looks beyond simple tolerance to an active celebration of diversity. We must leave fear and bitterness behind. We - all of us: those here now, those who have left, and those who are no longer with us - deserve better. Integrated education is a fundamental and non-negotiable element of a successful, peaceful future.*

*Nora Murray-Cavanagh  
formerly Oakgrove Integrated College*

*I care about integrated education because it allows children from different backgrounds to interact and socialize with each other and helps to break down the barriers of prejudice and intolerance between different communities. Also, integrated education represents normal society, in no other environment are we segregated based upon religion or identity and the fact people get to 18 and have never interacted with people from other communities until they go to University or enter the workforce is a sad indictment of this society.*

*Keir Herink  
formerly Lagan College*

<p>Schools are at the heart of all communities and their role in peacebuilding is vital. In providing a safe space for children &amp; families of all backgrounds to come together, they allow relationships to build and grow. Integrating our education system is crucial to changing the dynamics of our segregated society and building strong foundations of friendship instead of barriers of division.</p>	<p>I am a believer that integrated education is the foundation for lasting peace in Northern Ireland. Celebrating our cultures and traditions, from childhood years, will nurture understanding and respect in future generations. It is our responsibility to continue to champion a hopeful and peaceful path as we seek to make integrated education widely available to all children.</p>	<p>Integrated education plays a fundamental role in bringing a divided society together through the classroom and learning together. For many, it represents the first-time young people from different backgrounds will see themselves and others as part of one community.</p>
<p>Neidin Hendron formerly Drumragh Integrated College</p>	<p>Emma Butler Teacher, Priory Integrated College</p>	<p>Christopher Millar formerly Priory Integrated College</p>
<p>Integrated Education provides an inclusive teaching environment for every child in our communities. Currently it is not accessible to all yet remains an imperative step for Northern Ireland to move forward. Integrated education reflects society, nurtures tolerance and facilitates the development of young people as individuals with unique abilities, backgrounds and cultures - a system that should only be celebrated.</p>	<p>I care about integrated education because it enables us to celebrate rather than fear difference. It taught me that you did not have to agree with everyone else's opinions or views but that you did need to respect them. It values the individual and their aspirations whatever they may be. To me integrated education is key to the development of an inclusive Northern Ireland. Now is the time to make integrated education the norm.</p>	<p>Integrated education shaped my education by allowing me the chance to feel safe, welcomed and respected in a school environment. The education broadened my horizons and enabled me to meet others I would not have had the opportunity to meet or interact with.</p>
<p>Tara Curran formerly New-Bridge Integrated College</p>	<p>Laura Mullin formerly North Coast Integrated College</p>	<p>Nicholas Emery formerly Lagan College</p>
<p>Northern Ireland is made up of so many distinct communities, not just Protestants and Catholics, they need to be educated together or we won't ever see our full potential as a people. For my future children to grow up in a better place we need integrated education.</p>	<p>I support integrated education because I believe that educating children from diverse backgrounds is a positive step toward a more inclusive society.</p>	<p>Integrated education is the next step in the peacebuilding process. It's a vaccine to prevent future conflict and a steppingstone to tracking even trickier issues - like integrated housing. We've reached in impasse. Further peacebuilding is impossible without further integrated education.</p>
<p>Mark Francos Supporter</p>	<p>Morgan Murphy Supporter</p>	<p>Adam McGibbon formerly Lagan College</p>

# Our ask



We recognize the long-standing contribution that the United States has made to supporting, delivering and maintaining peace in Northern Ireland. There is an opportunity now to think wider than the political realm and improve chances for a lasting peace and reconciliation across all aspects of life in Northern Ireland.

We see this dialogue an opportunity to create **real impact**. Real impact for the betterment of the people of Northern Ireland. **How?**

## **1. The United States Administration should formally publish a position on integrated education in Northern Ireland to ensure it remains within the debate.**

On Thursday 17<sup>th</sup> February 2022, President of Ireland, Michael D Higgins spoke to the role of education in peace building in Northern Ireland. He commented:

*"To focus on education, a theme of your conference, 93 percent of schools in Northern Ireland remain segregated, meaning that most young people are educated in either a state-funded school that predominantly attracts Protestant families, or a state-funded school maintained by the Catholic Church. Young people in Northern Ireland are segregated not only by the schools they attend, but also by the languages they speak and the sports they play: where some schools offer Gaelic football and hurling, others provide rugby or cricket, usually exclusively."*

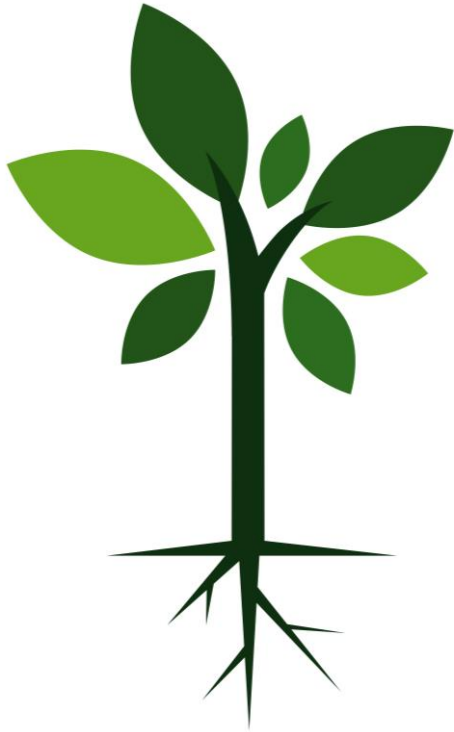
Furthermore, Richard Haass, in remarks to the American Ireland Fund on 19<sup>th</sup> March 2003 said: *"This reality explains much of my enthusiasm for integrated education in Northern Ireland. As an American, the concept of integration in education is a powerful one. As an American, I cannot help but believe that diversity brings great riches. We Americans cannot claim a fully integrated society. But we have made huge strides, and our country is better off for it. Integration doesn't erase prejudice in a society, but it does provide an environment where a child or adult can learn that "the other person" is very much like him or herself. If we expect children to work side by side later in life, a good starting point would be to let them sit side by side as they learn to read or grapple with geometry. Integrated education alone won't resolve all the challenges remaining in Northern Ireland. But it is one piece – a central piece – of a mosaic that is being created by countless dedicated individuals to form a new, inclusive society built on mutual respect and tolerance.*

The US taking a vocal position on this matter and contributing meaningful dialogue to the conversation adds legitimacy. It illustrates that integrated education is internationally regarded as one of the most important mechanisms to true reconciliation.

## **2. The United States Administration should continue to articulate the importance of the full implementation of the Good Friday/Belfast Agreement**

The United States should be vocal and actively oppose any attempts of bypassing some of the fundamental principles agreed as part of the Agreement.

# Further considerations



### **3. The United States should articulate the importance of a civic forum in Northern Ireland**

The concept of the Civic Forum, formed within the framework of the Agreement, was a consultative body that consisted of members of various civil bodies. It last met in 2002. In respect of integrated education, we understand that there is an overwhelming demand from parents for the further provision of integrated schooling. However, on this matter, alongside many others, there is a lack of a significant framework to encourage a culture of open dialogue on policy that moves away from legacy and division. Equally, the forum may act as a device to structure debate around identity, culture and symbolism. Reinstating the Northern Ireland Civic Forum, as per the conditions of the Good Friday Agreement, may also go some way to helping a degree of voter apathy.

### **4. A US Special Envoy to Northern Ireland should be appointed**

Given the wider circumstances and sensitivities around the forthcoming election, namely the protocol and the possibility of an extended period of negotiations, consideration should be given to furthering the dialogue between the United States and Northern Ireland, and channeling that through a new ambassadorial role in the form of a Special Envoy.

### **5. The US Administration should facilitate opportunities for those who have experienced integrated schooling in Northern Ireland to build links in the United States.**

Through the simple act of telling our stories in Northern Ireland, the Republic of Ireland and the rest of the UK, the past pupils of integrated education have been able to access further support and educate policymakers and opinion-formers about the burning need for further integration. We know that the integrated movement as a whole would benefit from more opportunities to tell our stories in the United States.

# WE THANK YOU FOR THE OPPORTUNITY.