

To: Independent Strategic Review Education

From: BELTIE
Belfast Trust for Integrated Education

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Recommendations from BELTIE to the Independent Strategic Review of Education

1. Introduction & Background

BELTIE welcomes the opportunity to make recommendations to the *Independent Strategic Review of Education*, probably one of the most important, fundamental and far-reaching Government Reviews for some years.

The Belfast Trust for Integrated Education (BELTIE) was formed by parents in 1984 to support the opening of an integrated primary school and a second level College in North Belfast. The schools opened at temporary premises in York Street before transferring to the Whitewell Road as the Hazelwood Schools. The Trust then responded to requests to assist other parent groups create Integrated Charitable Trusts in other parts of Northern Ireland and open schools.

BELTIE opened the first Office to deal with requests about integrated education and employed full-time staff. The demand from parents in different parts of Northern Ireland created the need for an umbrella organisation, which led to the creation of Northern Ireland Council for Integrated Education (NICIE). The Department of Education refused to recognise the Council in its early days but much changed through the 1989 Education Reform Order. BELTIE differed from the All Children Together movement ACT, who engaged with Lagan College in that BELTIE assumed the financial risk on sites of some of the early Belfast schools in the time before Grant Maintained Integrated (GMI) status and before funding bodies such as the Integrated Education Fund (IEF) existed. BELTIE engaged the early support of the Nuffield and Rowntree Foundations in the absence of Government support.

BELTIE has been involved in the development of seven integrated schools in Belfast, the most recent being Millenium IPS at Carryduff and our last Annual General Meeting was held in Malone Integrated College.

Directors of BELTIE have been Foundation Governors of many of the Belfast Integrated Schools, played leading roles as Directors and as professional officers of NICIE, and continue to make funds available for the development of Integrated Education in Belfast

Recommendations

2. BELTIE View of Review purpose and outcomes

We welcome the fact the Review has a role in helping the Department of Education to deliver an effective allocation of resources as well as meet its statutory duty to “*encourage and facilitate integrated education*” and the objectives of the *Policy and Strategic Framework for Good Relations in Northern Ireland: A Shared Future* and hope this outcome is achieved. We agree that the schools estate is no longer fit for purpose.

We are concerned at reference to ‘integrating schools’ when there is a very distinct and established Grant maintained integrated school and sector that has been brought into being by the efforts and courage of parents both with and without the support of various governments of the day. The Integrated Trusts were created as the key vehicles to make integrated schools happen and to ensure that integration was present in not only pupil intake, but among teaching and support staff and in the Governing body. That is a standard against which we would seek to measure new policy initiatives with regard to ‘encourage and facilitate’ integrated education in the future.

3. BELTIE comments on the three headings used in the Terms of Reference

Financial issues

- When considering the overall deployment of resources across the NI education system, BELTIE urges the Review to **promote and protect the expansion** of the integrated sector; currently 4.6% of pupils attend an integrated school. The rate of growth of the sector has been hampered by the stop-go policies of various administrations, all of which professed to support integrated education.
- The history in the opening of each integrated school has represented significant struggle and in many cases a huge leap of faith on the part of parents and pupils. The Review should seek to remove those uncertainties without the mistakes of the past being repeated in treating a new integrated school as a Project joining the Capital List or making the enrolment profile so long that promoters are waiting for babies to be born.
- In funding of multi-sector provision the vast majority of funding goes into the existing segregated system. On the day before funding was denied to four integrated school projects earlier this year (2006), the Education Minister announced the capital funding of more than £300 million for the segregated system.

Strategic Planning of the School Estate

- BELTIE favours starting up new integrated schools with no links to pre-existing operations, as we believe that this provides the best chance of producing a school that fully respects all traditions.
- However BELTIE does not believe that the Government should impose integrated education against the wishes of any parents and agrees that parents should have a choice. But it is important that the Government acknowledge the educational and social benefits that integrated schools offer.
- **Surplus places:** The integrated sector has not contributed to the surplus places that have been allowed to develop without remedy.
- **Parental Choice:** Enabling new integrated schools to start would facilitate parents who want integrated education only to find that all the places in the existing local schools are oversubscribed

The nature of parental choice is a key underlying issue in any consideration of the development and future of integrated education in Northern Ireland. There are many parents who are forced to send their children to schools that are not their preferred choice. Spare places in local segregated schools must not be allowed to continue to veto parental choice where there is proven demand and no alternative local option.

NICIE reports that since 1999, integrated schools in Northern Ireland have had to turn away 5,772 children due to a lack of available places. Those pupils have been denied the opportunity of growing and learning in a planned integrated school environment.

- **Political Leadership:** Supportive rhetoric from some figures in authority is not followed up by practical support on the ground - both in terms of establishing new schools and expanding existing schools - perhaps due to the powerful vested interests of traditional politics and conservative religious institutions.
- **Funding criteria:** DENI has made increasingly rigorous demands about the criteria that has to be met before an integrated school could be approved for recurrent funding or considered eligible for capital grant, from opening day. As most of the schools have buildings which have been bought with bank loans the payment of grant is essential. These outdated and constraining rules need to change.
- **Transformation:** Transformation would go some way to addressing surplus capacity and retaining local educational provision, however 86%

(from the *Millward Brown Survey*) do not know that that is possible. DENI need to make this option more widely known in Northern Ireland. Greater rigour and support also needs provided if those schools are to achieve an integrating character. Ten per cent of an intake of 10 pupils has brought the current system into disrepute, regardless of the genuine motives of some of the proposers.

Integrating and Improving Collaboration

- BELTIE feels that the pursuit of cost-effective and cost-efficient use of capital funds can at the expense of real quality integration. The Review is focused too heavily on physical buildings and the estate, rather than the quality of the learning environment and fulfilling properly the ambitious and self-evidently necessary objectives of *A Shared Future*.
- **Shared Campuses:** Whilst welcoming any cross-sector collaboration as a method of reconciliation, BELTIE see this as a "soft option" and is not sufficient to constitute a meaningful level of cross-community sharing with the potential for creation and reinforcement of cultural and religious stereotypes. Any future system must be rigorously monitored in accordance with the *Policy and Strategic Framework for Good Relations: A Shared Future*.
- **Jointly Managed Schools:** A decision may be taken to amalgamate schools that have falling rolls. A requirement would be made to change the school's management structures. BELTIE feels potential structural difficulties may arise as it involves cross-sector collaboration with competing interests. For example with the issue of religion, disagreement over the teaching of religious studies may cause difficulties and falls short of implementing *A Shared Future*.

Lessons from the integrated sector

- While accepting the fact that schools may not be the main determinant of all social inter-relations, it cannot be denied that they could and should create a safe space. There exists a plethora of research that stresses the positive benefits of integrated schooling particularly in relation to cross-community relations.
- Not every child in NI will be educated in an integrated system. The experience of a child educated in segregated system is limited compared to experience in the integrated sector. BELTIE believes that by separating Catholic and Protestant children, the education system has exacerbated community divisions and contributed to ignorance about the other community. So how do we reform the segregated system? BELTIE urges

the Review team to look creatively and boldly at how the segregated system can be reformed.

4. For further information on BELTIE or any of the recommendations outlined in this report please contact: Brendan Heaney b.heaney@qub.ac.uk or Iain Foster ifoster@ntlworld.com