

Ed McCann, Submitted as feedback to the Working Group on Unification Referendums on the Island of Ireland Interim Report – update version 25 May 2021.

Dear Conor,

Hope you are keeping well, I have made some slight adjustments and if you can include the below vision:

Please see below my vision for a new educational system for N.Ireland(**which could be replicated in an agreed Post Unified Ireland**) for your consideration.

Parental Voice:

"My Vision - A New Interconnected Fully Integrated and Fully Inclusive Model of Education for N.Ireland, which could be replicated in an agreed Post Unified Ireland."

As a parent of a 4 year old pupil I would like to put forward my vision for a new interconnected fully integrated and fully inclusive education system for N.Ireland which could also be used for a new agreed All Island Education system in the event of reunification in the future, that gives every child an equal opportunity and offers the same amount of subject choice and strive towards tackling any underachievement issues of the past.

It is shocking given our history in N.Ireland that my 4 year old, who entered the education system in September 2020, 22 years after the Good Friday agreement, has entered the same segregated education system I entered in the 1970s, and it is unfortunate with relative peace and change in demographics and the breakdown of tribal areas in towns and cities, the increase in mix-marital relationships, that our education system now needs to reflect those changes and be more integrated and inclusive for the future. I remember studying at the *University of Ulster*, in the early 1990s before the troubles had ended and long before the *Good Friday Agreement* together with my fellow students from all different cultural backgrounds Protestants, Catholics and people of no faiths that were enjoying studying together and socialising together and thinking to myself these relationships could have been forged much earlier in my life which would have had so many benefits in developing greater friendships earlier with others of different religions, greater interests in different sports and cultural backgrounds. We all hope that our young children grow up with a good education, (**which I truly believe I did receive at my schools and my child will also receive and that results are good in N.Ireland**) and then continue their educational careers into these multicultural further and higher education institutions and then onwards into the multicultural world of work, but it has to be stated that it simply does not make any sense to segregate our young children at the age of 4, starving them of all the benefits of multiculturalism earlier in their lives and creating such division that can permeate throughout all levels of life and society. I was never once in all my school life both at primary and secondary level given the opportunity or even encouraged to play rugby or hockey at school while other children from a different religious background in a different school in my hometown again never given the opportunity or even encouraged to play Gaelic sports, and therefore I believe today playing these sports for one or two days or attending a cookery class with other schools under shared education, just really isn't suffice in my opinion. It is also so sad so many years after the Good Friday Agreement that a child could be attacked by other children just because of the school uniform they are wearing which signifies they are from a different school and perceived to belong to a different religion.

In light of the recent very serious problems in Belfast and elsewhere in N.Ireland, it is again highlighting the differences in our society along segregated lines, 100 years after the creation of N.Ireland and 23 years after the *Good Friday Agreement* not educating our young children from the age of 4 together is a long overdue problem that urgently needs addressed.

"Who in 2021 can justify the teaching of children separately on the basis of belief?"(President, Republic of Ireland)

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"In my opinion, all schools should be integrated and we do not need another tier of education in the country,"(Maurice Bradley, MLA)

"A secular education is where we all want to be but the problems of society cannot be hung on the education system," (Deputy First Minister, N.Ireland)

I am proposing a new fully integrated and fully inclusive interconnected educational model that would involve incorporating all present school types and existing structures and focus on developing new super school structures for major towns and cities in each county based on campuses similar to the new Strule Campus idea in County Tyrone(*in Strule's case I would change the name to Community instead of Shared - A Shared Campus still maintains a difference between the schools and pupils*) and be also similar to University Campus structures that would include all school types under the one name and wearing the same uniform from *Special schools, Irish Medium schools, Pre-schools, Nurseries, Secondary*, all on the one campus site therefore taking any difference out of the equation (*Physical, Religious, Cultural, Socio-Economic*) and Pupils would move from Primary into Secondary in their Counties on a smooth transition basis given the recent mess over the transfer testing offering parents a wider subject choice and open doors for all children to access more digital resources, with the one title for each county, for example *Armagh County Community Education Campus* or *Donegal County Community Education Campus*, and obviously important in the meantime to utilise existing school structures as satellite bases to cover the whole county where all students and staff in all the different campuses can use all facilities and intertwine as much as possible in all buildings, staff rooms, events and sports. Staff, Students and Parents should be encouraged to celebrate all flags, emblems, cultures, sports and events especially in communal areas and staff rooms creating more welcoming environments for all, ensuring that no one feels alienated.

I would suggest for large cities such as Dublin and Belfast, a new overall campus to cover the whole of the city. In the case of Belfast a new *Belfast Community Education Campus* that would be split into the four parts of the city, North, South, East and West all under the one title of *Belfast Community Education Campus*(*North or West Campus etc*) and all schools from pre-school, nurseries, primaries and secondary and grammars, special schools and Irish medium in their present state would then all fall under their new title above based on their location and all wear the same uniform and encourage staff and pupils to intertwine for subjects and sports and events in all locations, buildings and be able to be taught sessions in all the different buildings as much as possible, for example pupils from *Ashfield High School* being taught in *Campbell College* or *Strathearn Pupils into Ashfield High School* etc bringing the existing schools structures we see today under the one title and one uniform in their respective part of the city. The recent report from the NI Audit office states that nearly one billion pounds spent over the last 15 years has failed to narrow the education gap between NI's wealthy and poorer pupils, and therefore I feel greater interconnected campuses would open up greater access and resources for those pupils from poorer backgrounds and benefit those pupils from well-off backgrounds to be more aware of social and economic inequalities.

I feel very strongly that all faiths and none should be accommodated in any new system of education and perhaps a central *Multi-faith building/Prayer Room* and *Chaplain Service* for all faiths could be a way to encompass any issues around church and education in the future as a way forward, similar to the hospital system where the building is for treating sick people yet has a chaplain service and multi faith prayer rooms, the same also as you would see in University Campuses. I grew up in a society in the 1970s where people said that is a Protestant school, that is a Catholic school, this is the Protestant side of town and that is the Catholic side of town, and in country areas whole villages were either known as Protestant or Catholic, and young people could get to the age of 18 and not even come into contact with other religions unless being involved in sports and clubs. Although not as bad today it still exists and so we all must work to make that whole division in our wider society a thing of the past and integrating our whole school system would be a good starting point. We have come a long way but everyone now needs to push for this change to take place. There needs to be imagination and

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creative thinking and conversations on the way forward with all stakeholders to create a one system of education that is fully integrated and fully inclusive.

I also feel very strongly that both Education Ministers and Departments of Education in both jurisdictions should be encouraged now to start conversations and discussions sooner rather than later on developing strategies and plans should reunification happen and not leave everything to the last minute and therefore my vision would help with any smooth transition and I truly feel my idea could work across the island.

The money saved by having just one integrated and inclusive education system I feel would have so many benefits which potentially could go towards the following:

- New environmentally friendly and SEN designed school buildings with all the latest modern ICT and Sports facilities
- All necessary resources for SEN pupils as well as covering all training costs for all staff for SEN pupils
- Help towards reducing uniform costs for families by having one overall uniform design and neutral colour scheme, which will also give parents peace of mind that their children will not be attacked or abused because of the uniform they wear or the school they attend, especially children of mixed marriage families that live in areas that have a dominant majority of one culture and religion
- 30 hours free childcare a week to help parents
- A new electric powered fleet of school transport to carry staff and students free from the rural areas and towns between buildings and for events as well as many more ideas.

Bobby Kennedy said many times "I dream of things that never were and ask why not?"

Some people plant trees and never live to see them fully grown, and it is now time to sow the seeds of a new education system, which hopefully the independent review will recommend the changes necessary to make it fit for the 21st century, and that they will be fully implemented by the future NI Assembly/Executive.

Someday I truly hope we will see change for the better in education in the years ahead.

Kind regards,

E.McCann
Parent of 4 year old - N.Ireland