



# ARK Policy Brief

## Understanding Integrated School Choice in a Changing Policy Landscape of Northern Ireland

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### Introduction

Lagan College, the first integrated school in Northern Ireland (NI), opened in 1981. Since then, integrated schools have steadily increased in number with 71 primary and post-primary integrated schools across NI in the academic year of 2024/25 (Department of Education, 2025a). In total, approximately eight and a half per cent of pupils in NI attended either an integrated primary school or post-primary school in 2024/25, a slight increase from previous years (Department of Education, 2025b).

Against the backdrop of a society that often remains segregated in areas such as housing, sport, leisure spaces and political parties, integrated education continually receives policy attention in NI due to its ethos of inclusivity. In recent months, this has been no different. At the beginning of 2025, Bangor Academy, one of the largest post-primary schools in NI, and Rathmore Primary School applied to transform to integrated status.

Both schools followed the required procedures outlined in The Education Reform (Northern Ireland) Order 1989, including a parental ballot, where a large majority of parents in Bangor Academy (79.4%) and Rathmore Primary (82.3%) expressed their support for the transformation to integrated status (Council for Integrated Education, 2023). However, the transformation requests were rejected by the Minister of Education, Paul Givan, on the basis that the schools would not attract the required number of pupils from a Catholic background that is necessary to become a formally integrated school. This decision has led to further policy discussions and debates on integrated education (for example, Northern Ireland Assembly Committee for Education [2025]). This brief is therefore a timely addition to an ever-present subject in education policy discussions in Northern Ireland.

## Context

Formally integrated schools consist of grant-maintained integrated schools (newly established schools) and controlled integrated schools (established through the transformation of an existing controlled school into an integrated status) (Early et al., 2024). Integrated education was originally defined as schools that educated pupils from Protestant and Catholic backgrounds together (The Education Reform (Northern Ireland) Order 1989). However, this definition has evolved over time to reflect the changing demography of NI, as recommended by an Independent Review of Integrated Education (Topping & Cavanagh, 2017). Most recently, the Integrated Education Act (Northern Ireland) 2022 expanded the definition of an integrated school as one that “intentionally supports, protects and advances an ethos of diversity, respect and understanding between those of different cultures and religious beliefs and of none, between those of different socio-economic backgrounds and between those of different abilities”. The definition of integrated education now includes three core elements: a pupil’s cultural or religious background; their socio-economic background; and their academic abilities. This updated definition provides a more inclusive approach to integration in education and reflects a shift from the predominant focus on religion, and its dichotomous identity profiles of pupils as either Catholic or Protestant. However, the Act maintains that integrated schools must include a “reasonable number” of both Catholic and Protestant pupils but does not state what proportion this number refers to.

In 2024 the Integrated Education Fund (IEF) funded a suite of questions in the Young Life and Times (YLT) survey which sought 16-year-olds’ views on the school and education system in NI. For the first time, these questions explored, in detail, the extent to which a school having formal integrated status influenced school preference when decisions were made about what post-primary setting to attend at age 11 years, and at

school leaving age (age 16 years). One question therefore asked about retrospective experiences/attitudes, and one considered attitudes at present. Understanding the importance placed upon a school having a formal integrated status in the choice of post-primary school is important under the Integrated Education Act (Northern Ireland) 2022, which emphasises the requirement of the Department of Education to assess and report the demand for integrated education, and the role of the Education Authority to ascertain demand for integrated education. However, there currently remains no agreed way to assess this demand (Department for Education, 2024). In previous work (Early et al., 2024), we explored how demand for integration could be measured more accurately and in greater depth, rather than simply asking whether or not people had a preference of mixed religion or integrated schools. The issue with a more generic measurement of attitudes to mixed-religion schooling is that it fails to acknowledge the complexity of school choice, which is often a decision based on a multitude of pragmatic, educational and attitudinal factors (see Early et al., 2024 for further discussion). This Policy Brief begins to bridge this gap by providing insights into the importance placed upon the integrated status of a school when selecting a post-primary setting in NI.

## Factors Influencing School Preference at Transition from Primary to Post-Primary School

In the 2024 YLT survey, 16-year-old respondents were presented with 12 separate factors that could influence parents’/carers’ post-primary school choice at the transition phase from primary to post-primary schools.

Table 1 indicates that integration-specific themes, such as mixed background attendance or the celebration of cultural diversity, were less important than logistical factors (such as the school being easy to get to) and the reputation of the school, both of which were deemed the most important factors in post-primary school choice (70% and 84% of respondents respectively stated these were ‘important’ or ‘very important’).

The subjects offered by the school were also regarded as more important (66%) than a mixed religious background or the celebration of different cultures. Overall, 19 per cent of respondents stated a school with a mixed background attendance was important and 26 per cent stated the celebration of different cultures was important for post-primary school choice.

**Table 1: Factors influencing parents/carers when choosing a post-primary school<sup>1</sup>**

	%		
	Very or quite important	Not very or not at all important	I don't know
<b>Easy to get to</b>	70	21	9
<b>Grammar school</b>	41	50	8
<b>Good pastoral care system</b>	56	27	17
<b>Good reputation</b>	84	9	7
<b>Religious ethos</b>	37	50	13
<b>Subjects taught</b>	66	26	7
<b>Other family members attending</b>	33	62	6
<b>Extra-curricular activities</b>	42	52	6
<b>Friends attending</b>	41	53	6
<b>Mixed background attendance</b>	19	67	14
<b>Celebrated lots of different cultures</b>	26	59	16
<b>Single sex</b>	7	84	9

When considering the transition from primary to post-primary school and the process of choosing a school, respondents were asked if they had input into the decision of which post-primary school to attend. A higher proportion of pupils who attended formally integrated schools stated that they were not asked what school they wanted to attend (14%), when compared to those pupils

attending grammar schools (4%) and secondary schools (10%). These findings reflect a wider issue of ensuring the voices of young people, who are ultimately affected by the choice of post-primary school, are central to the decision making process.

<sup>1</sup> Due to rounding, table columns and rows may not add up to 100%.

## Factors Influencing School Preference at School Leaving Age

Respondents were then presented with a similar list of school characteristics and were asked if they could choose their post-primary school again, knowing what they know now, how important were specific characteristics of the school (Table 2).

As with the earlier results (Table 1), ease of access to the school was still important to 16-year-olds (66%). However, at this stage, ‘subjects taught’ scored much higher than before (83% stated this was important compared to 66% when the school

was first chosen [Table 1]). This may reflect the educational stage of YLT respondents, as GCSE, AS and A Level choices begin to shape future study and career options. While integration-specific factors continued to score less than logistical and educational factors, more respondents at this stage stated mixed backgrounds and cultural diversity were important in school choice. This would suggest that as pupils mature, they increasingly value diversity in their school environment.

**Table 2: Factors influencing post-primary school choice if young person was given the opportunity to choose again**

	%		
	Very or quite important	Not very or not at all important	I don't know
Easy to get to	66	29	5
Grammar school	43	51	6
Good pastoral care system	61	27	12
Religious ethos	30	58	12
Subjects taught	83	13	4
Extra-curricular activities	54	42	4
Friends attending	60	36	4
Mixed background attendance	23	60	10
Celebrated lots of different cultures	40	50	10
Single sex	10	83	7

## School Enrolment Based on Pupil’s Religious Background

The Integrated Education Act (Northern Ireland) 2022 states that a reasonable number of Catholic and Protestant pupils must attend an integrated school. In practice, the admissions criteria of an integrated school can take into consideration the religious affiliation of a prospective pupil to allocate places, with many schools allocating 40 per cent

of places to those affiliating as Catholic, 40 per cent to those from a Protestant background and 20 per cent from other/no religious background (Council for Integrated Education, 2022). However, the 2022 Act does not specify what ratio of places should be allocated to different religious backgrounds.

In addition, the most recent definition of integrated education states that it should educate those of different cultures/religions, socio-economic backgrounds and abilities together. Despite the three dimensions included in this definition, religion remains the predominant focus of debates, as recently evidenced by the discussion of the Education Minister’s refusal to accept the transformation proposals of Bangor Academy and Rathmore Primary School. This was based on the argument that there was no prospect that the schools would attract the required number of pupils from Catholic backgrounds necessary for a formally integrated school (Northern Ireland Assembly Committee for Education, 2025). Such an argument omits the other two dimensions of the definition of integrated education: socio-economic background and ability.

YLT respondents’ were asked whether schools should be permitted to capture applicants’ religious background when offering places to pupils. Attitudes towards this varied very little by gender, attended school type or socio-economic background. However, there was a marked difference among respondents of differing religious backgrounds (Table 3). Catholic respondents were the most in favour, with 53 per cent choosing some form of ‘yes’ compared to 45 per cent of Protestant respondents. Respondents with other or no religious belonging were least likely to agree that schools should be allowed to consider pupils’ religious background as part of the admission process (34%).

**Table 3: Attitudes to religious background being considered during school admission process according to pupils’ religion**

	%			
	Catholic	Protestant	Other/ No Religion	Total
Yes, if they have a religious ethos	35	21	13	23
Yes, if they need to know the background of pupils to make sure they have a mixed intake	18	24	21	21
No, they should not ask	34	43	52	43
I don’t know	12	12	15	13

## Should Government Encourage and Support Integrated Education in Northern Ireland?

The Integrated Education Act (Northern Ireland) 2022 states that it is the responsibility of the Department of Education and Education Authority in NI to “encourage, facilitate and support integrated education”. In YLT 2024, respondents were asked their opinion on the government’s role in encouraging and supporting integrated education. Sixty per cent agreed that the government should encourage and support

integrated education in NI, while only seven per cent disagreed that this was the government’s role. The majority of respondents (80%) attending an integrated school agreed that government should encourage and support integrated education; the highest proportion among the different school types identified in the survey (grammar school pupils: 63%; secondary school pupils: 54%).

However, when considering young people's attitudes towards their current (or most recent) school becoming integrated, only one third (33%) were in favour of this, whilst one quarter (25%) stated they would not be in favour. Seventeen per cent attended an integrated school and would support the retention of this status but two per cent who attended an integrated school said they would prefer it was not integrated. When considering the influence of religious background in attitudes, 37 per cent of pupils from a Catholic background and 32 per cent from a Protestant background stated they would not be in favour of their school becoming integrated. In contrast, 41 per cent of those affiliating with no religion were in favour of their school becoming integrated.

## Conclusion

The 2024 YLT survey provided the first opportunity to examine school choice from the perspective of the young person, both retrospectively and in the present day. The survey continues to generate important insights into the attitudes and experiences of 16-year-olds in the education system in NI. Providing a voice to understand the perspective of young people in decisions that affect their lives is central to informing future social policies, especially in education. The results outlined that logistical, reputational and educational factors defined school choice for both pupils and their parents/carers, as opposed to integration-specific themes. Differences in attitudes were reflected according to respondents' characteristics, such as their religious background. The increasing secularisation of young people and the increase in affiliations with religions other than Catholic or Protestant may reflect broader and underlying shifts in Northern Irish society, which must be accounted for within our education system. The expanded definition of integrated education through the 2022 Act acknowledges such a shift but this must be considered when determining the religious composition of integrated schools and their associated admissions criteria.

## Policy Recommendations

- 1. Ensure the voices of young people are central to discussions on school choice.**

Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (United Nations, 1990) highlights that young people have the right to be included in all decisions affecting their lives, and school choice is arguably one of the main decisions (Early et al., 2024). Their voices must therefore be central to these discussions.

- 2. Ensure discussions on integrated education incorporate socio-economic background and abilities as well as cultural/religious background.**

The Integrated Education Act (Northern Ireland) 2022 defines integrated education according to three key areas: religious/cultural background, socio-economic background and ability. Future policy debates and decisions should account for each to align with the most recent definition of integrated education.

- 3. Continued data collection on understanding decisions of school choice to measure the importance of integration for young people and their parents/carers.**

Through future standardised data collection, insights into the factors influencing school choice in Northern Ireland can be provided. This presents an opportunity to ensure evidence informed strategies are developed. This will also assist policymakers in determining demand for different school types, such as integrated schools, therefore aligning with the Integrated Education Act (Northern Ireland) 2022 (Section 5 and 6).

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