



NORTHERN IRELAND Information Service

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GROWTH OF INTEGRATED EDUCATION

Education Minister, Dr Brian Mawhinney MP, tonight pledged the Government's continuing support for integrated education. Presenting the prizes at Lagan College, Northern Ireland's first integrated school, which now has an enrolment of around 500 pupils, divided roughly equally between Protestants and Roman Catholics, Dr Mawhinney said: "The Government's fundamental position has always been to encourage integrated education where there has been a demand for it. Now, under the education reforms, the Government will take a more positive supportive role. For the first time, there will be a statutory responsibility for my Department to foster the aims of integrated education.

In part this may be discharged via some sort of central body and there will be consultations with integrated education's interests regarding its possible role, structure, funding and responsibilities."

Dr Mawhinney said Lagan College was the pioneer of integrated education in Northern Ireland and its success, not only in the progressive growth of pupil numbers and committed parental support but also its broad-based academic achievements, had been a shining beacon for other integrated schools to follow. "I congratulate those who had the vision of establishing integrated schools and further congratulate them on their perseverance. They have a right to feel justified and satisfied," the Minister said.

He went on: "Lagan College has come a long way from its initial 28 pupils when you opened your doors as an independent integrated school in 1981. I recently approved plans for the further development of your school to cater for an expected enrolment of around 650 pupils.

There is no question of the Government forcing integrated education on anyone who does not want it. Nevertheless, the Government has a duty to provide a structure for integrated schools to which parents can send their children if they so wish. This, simply, is what the education reforms, as they relate to Protestant and Roman Catholic children being taught together, aim to achieve.

Lagan College has proved that people can hold different views but still respect each other and work and play together."

Dr Mawhinney added: "As well as viewing integrated education within an educational framework, it must also be seen against the larger backcloth of the need to improve community relations. I expect to be announcing further initiatives in this area, soon. None of us can rest from the task of fostering greater tolerance and understanding in a community divided by myth and mistrust."

Dr Mawhinney spelt out some of the thinking on Government policy towards the further development of integrated education and he reiterated the support contained in the Government's package of education reforms - provision for existing schools to become grant-maintained integrated schools, together with a series of further measures including financial assistance for new integrated schools in their early stages and the statutory requirement for Government to foster integrated education.