

GAELOIDEACHAS

SUBMISSION TO THE JOINT COMMITTEE ON EDUCATION AND SKILLS

The Challenges facing Island Schools

June 2017

1.1 Introduction

Gaeloideachas wishes to make this submission to the Joint Committee on Education and Skills in response to an invitation for submissions in relation to the analysis to be undertaken by the Joint Committee regarding the Challenges facing Schools on the Islands.

Gaeloideachas welcomes the opportunity to have some input into that analysis as it pertains to Irish language schools and Gaeltacht schools.

1.2 The role of Gaeloideachas

Gaeloideachas was established in 1973 as the a coordinating and support organisation for Irish language schools at primary and secondary levels. Gaeloideachas is operating since July 2014 in the wider area of ***Gaeloideachas/Immersion Education and Irish language Preschool Education***, which includes support for primary and secondary Irish language schools in the Gaeltacht, for naíonraí outside of the Ghaeltacht, as well as support for and advocacy on behalf of primary and secondary Irish language schools outside of the Gaeltacht.

1.3 Specific Issues

As part of the submission preparation, Gaeloideachas contacted the island schools that operate through the medium of Irish. This amounts to 20 schools, both primary and secondary. In addition to that, feedback from consultation meetings held with the schools during 2016 was taken into consideration. Their opinions and recommendations form the basis of this submission.

This submission shall concentrate on the following specific issues, at the request of the Joint Committee. They shall be discussed according to the Primary sector and the Secondary sector, although there exists commonality and crossover in relation to the specific issues.

1. Teacher Allocation;
2. Access to and retention of Teaching Staff;
3. Budget Matters;
4. Enrollment and Scholarships;
5. Coláiste Naomh Eoin, Inis Meáin – Independent School Status,
6. DEIS status for schools on the Islands, and
7. Accessibility

PRIMARY SCHOOLS

1. Teacher Allocation

A new circular came into effect in 2017 (***Circular 0017/2017***) ***Island Primary Schools with One Teacher (i.e. One Principal Teacher)*** which specifies that where the primary school is the only school on the island a second mainstream teacher will be allocated to the school from September 2017.

Island Schools with Three Teachers (i.e. Principal + 2) *Where a third classroom post is lost in an island school as a result of a decrease in the number of students, the third post can be maintained, subject to the overall number of students in the school being over 45, and where the school is the only school on the island*

The island schools warmly welcomed this circular, and it was a source of relief to them on many levels, including in relation to safety, ability of the school to implement the curriculum and more effective day to day management of the school.

The following points were mentioned during the consultation process:-

- a) The teacher allocation is not satisfactory at present. There is a great imbalance between the number of classroom teachers and the number of children they are responsible for in different schools, which creates injustices for students. This sometimes can have to do with certain schools having DEIS status as against others but the reasons are not clear why a school was refused such recognition.
- b) Schools experience difficulties getting and retaining teachers. The panel doesn't pertain to them on an island.
- c) The grants that used to be available would greatly help as regards the recruitment and retention of teachers on the islands

2. Access to and retention of Teaching Staff

- a) Teachers who work on the island that are physically separated from the mainland experience a wide range of difficulties. They cannot travel across the sea every day – they must live there, which adds to their living costs as regards rent and keeping a car.
- b) The same options are not open to island schools. It is very difficult to get qualified replacement teachers. In a school with two classroom teachers (with a shared learning support teacher) there is no other adult in the school (some days) to keep an eye out or to give support if a teacher falls ill.
- c) Where part-time hours are permitted, it is very difficult to get someone from the mainland to travel regularly to carry out that work. Therefore it is often necessary to accumulate hours. Island schools do not enjoy the same flexibility as regards the use of their hours as normally the learning support/resource teacher is shared between schools, which puts a constraint on them

d) There are difficulties in getting a teacher. Often qualified teachers from the mainland will not apply for the jobs.

e) Some mainland teachers would be happy to spend a year on the island but they would lose their panel rights. At the end of the year, they couldn't return to the panel. The IPPN raised this question last year but got no response to it.

f) It is especially difficult to employ special needs assistants. There is no one with these skills on the island, which creates difficulties. The same challenges exist for learning support teachers. Where only a couple of hours per week are sanctioned it is difficult to get a teacher. Although it is recommended to accumulate the hours this is in no way satisfactory as a continuous support system.

3. Budget matters

- a) Island schools entail extra costs –travel costs for the teaching and support staff, freight costs, cost to attend professional development course, school tours, as well as many other costs.

4. Enrollment and Scholarships

a) The number of students on the islands is falling. As well as the grave implications in regard to jobs, there are children in classes on their own, which could have an impact on their social skills.

b) It is the nature of island life that people come and people go. This leaves the schools in a precarious situation as regards numbers and school planning.

5. DEIS Status for Island Schools:

a) DEIS status is a great help, it help the schools to supply things to the students they wouldn't otherwise have access to, such as dance classes and sports, etc.

b) If one island school gets status DEIS, all schools should get it.

c) There are schools to which the status was refused, without the reason for the refusal being clear.

7. Accessibility

a) The ferryboat timetable does not suit the school timetable with regard to people coming in to visit the school.

b) It is not possible to book a boat or a plane for exclusively school specific business – the service as it exists must be adhered to. This means that a trip that does not conform to the boat times cannot be organised.

c) Getting people in to the island to talk to the children or to provide courses to the teachers entails travel difficulties and extra costs. Teachers on an island school do not have the same opportunity to attend courses and to improve their professional skills, something which is not fair.

POST PRIMARY SCHOOLS

1. Teacher Allocation

There is no Dept of Education Circular that deals with the requirements of post primary schools on islands. Each year post primary schools on the islands make 'Curricular Concessions' applications or applications for Extra Teaching Support based on basic school requirements and in relation to basic curricular requirements (Curricular Allowances). 1.0 extra teachers are allowed to an island school. There is an ongoing campaign by the island schools under the ETBI to raise this figure to WTE.

a) The teacher allocation is based on the number of enrolled students. On an island the number of students is always low and thus the model does not recognise this challenge. It is impossible to provide a standard curriculum to the students. Students on the islands should have the same educational opportunities as those available to students on the mainland.

b) The schools will never have a chance if the allocation is always done based on enrolled numbers. If there is a vacancy in the teaching staff, schools are forced to offer a more limited curriculum as a result of a lack of teaching hours, something that lessens the school's outcomes.

c) Some of the schools do not have small school status and so these small schools do not benefit from the 1.0 WTE that is awarded to certain other small schools even though they are among the smallest schools in the country.

d) With the new Learning Support allocation model of 0.9 WTE, there is no certainty that the smaller schools won't experience a lessening in their allocation, which would have serious implications for the provision of learning support in the smaller island schools.

e) The Education and Training Board (ETB) has made an application that the school teacher allocation for island schools would be raised from the present level of 1.0 WTE to 2.5 WTE *ex quota*.

f) Where there is a stream in a school, there is a specific challenge as there are 2 educational services functioning in the school (the Irish language and the English language services). Schools do not get extra resources to run the Irish language stream in the school, which they should. There is a constant lack of funding in this regard and as a result not all subjects are available through the medium of Irish, for example, Woodwork, Home Economics, French and Computers.

g) It is impossible to get substitute teachers to come in and out each day. When teachers are sick the principal (for the most part) and the other class teachers have to cover the classes (much more than substitution and invigilation hours).

h) A teacher cannot share hours as they cannot travel to another school to make up the hours.

2. Availability of teaching staff and retention of teaching staff

a) It doesn't suit everyone to live on an island, and it is very difficult to attract teachers who are competent in Irish to an island, resulting in frequent changes among the staff.

b) Some sort of carrot is needed to help teachers to cope with the extra expense involved in living on an island.

c) It is not realistic to expect teachers to pay for boat or other travel out of their own pocket, without some recompense.

d) It is requested that the island allowance that is provided to teachers who were employed before 2011 be extended to those who took up employment since 2011. This involves around ten teachers. Those who have been in the system since 2011 are paid €1,600, which would mean €16,000 per annum would be needed to extend the island allowance to the new teachers in the system.

e) It is very difficult to attract qualified teachers, who can teach through Irish, to the island. Extra expense is involved, including travel, lodgings and living expenses. Generally the teacher would have a mortgage on the mainland and on top of that they would have to pay rent for their lodgings on the island.

f) It is difficult to find teachers who are happy to stay on the island throughout the week (and over the weekend if the weather is bad).

g) We have difficulties as each teacher has to teach more than one subject, and the teachers do not always have Irish.

h) It is almost impossible to attend courses, meetings etc. and as a result we miss out on a lot of opportunities (professional development, the New Junior Certificate, etc)

i) It is quite difficult to live in a small community and we must always be careful regarding our teachers' health.

j) There are highly skilled people on the island but because they are not teachers they are not permitted to work in the school (native French speakers, carpenters, artists, musicians, etc.)

k) In-service and support courses: From September to April, the weather effectively does not permit attendance at courses. Moreover, it is difficult to find substitutes. It would be more appropriate for the island's teachers if in-service courses were organised on a Friday or on a Monday.

3. Budgetary matters

a) The cost of everything has almost doubled by the time it reaches the island and the cost of travel and freight is a burden. Lodgings for one night or two are required for attendance at any national event and our numbers are too low to be able to share bus and hotel costs, with the result that the schools have to repay these costs, which is a weight on the school's budget.

b) Island schools' budgets need to be increased by a further €20,000 for the schools to be able to deal with the true costs of running a school on an island.

c) Island schools incur a great deal of extra costs. There are increased costs related to carriage and travel. For instance, when a copier needs to be serviced, it costs a full day's pay to bring an engineer to the island. He arrives at 9.00 in the morning agus because they are not able to leave when they are finished, they charge a full day's fee for two or three hours' work. As a result, an island school has costs that almost double those of a school on the mainland. Professional development is also very expensive. Many of these courses take place in the afternoon which means that the teacher has to stay overnight.

d) The extra budget that DEIS schools receive is of great help in providing extra resources and support to the pupils.

e) We propose that more money be invested in technology in island schools. This would allow videoconferences, on-line distant courses could be provided, and people could attend meetings etc this way.

f) When pupils and/or teachers travel to the mainland there are extra costs involved, as they require lodgings when they cannot travel out and back on the same day.

g) The Island Allowance – this should be re-introduced, it would allow young teachers to cover their costs on the island and on the mainland.

Island schools are carrying out a campaign, with the support of ETBI (Education and Training Boards Ireland).

Among their demands are the following:

- To reinstate the Island Teaching Allowance of €1658
- To increase the non-pay element by at least €10,000 per annum for each school

4. Enrollment and Scholarships

a) As a result of the islands being out of the way and at a distance from the mainland, there is a limit to the number of local children attending the schools. This led the Department of the Arts, Heritage and the Gaeltacht bringing in a Scholarship Scheme in 2003 to support numbers attending island schools. This is one of the most successful, beneficial measures for the Gaeltacht island communities, not only as regards language development but also in

relation to developing the schools and the sustainability of the islands. Families move to Inis Meáin to attend the school, and many pupils have come to us over the years on the Remote Areas Grant that the Department of Education and Skills pays for those who do not have Irish-language education available close to home.

b) The Department of the Arts, Heritage and the Gaeltacht pays over thirty scholarships at present for pupils from outside the Gaeltacht areas to attend island schools. This is one of the most beneficial schemes that was ever brought in for the islands, not only with regard to learning the language, but also in relation to ensuring the sustainability of the islands.

c) The Department of the Arts, Heritage and the Gaeltacht has been asked to double the number of scholarships to 60 scholarships per annum at a cost of €5,000 per scholarship.

d) No scholarships have yet been made available for Tory Island. The department was asked to do so on a number of occasions, but this has not yet happened. It would give pupils from the mainland a wonderful opportunity to spend time on the island; and this would greatly benefit the pupils' social life and their education.

e) We have no opportunity to run community courses, as educators are not willing to remain on the island, but if a good course was available people (who are on the dole) would be happy to do it provided funding was available while attending it.

f) Company funding is completely unavailable as we do not have any companies, and it is very difficult for young people to source an apprenticeship as they do not know people who would be able to give them work experience.

5.Coláiste Naomh Eoin, Inis Meáin – Independent School Status

Coláiste Naomh Eoin is officially under the management of Choláiste Cholm Cille in Indreabhán. It has been in existence since 2002, but has not yet received independent status separately from the main school. A long-term plan for the school was drawn up in 2007 and the Leaving Certificate Course was begun. Teachers who were willing to live full-time on the island were employed and travel to Coláiste Cholm Cille in Indreabhán was done away with. A Teacher in Charge was employed, and this post was upgraded to Assistant Principal in 2014. The management structure is very challenging to the school. A person with a post of responsibility is in charge of the school, who is working under the management and policies of a DEIS school on the mainland. This temporary arrangement which has been in place for fifteen years has great implications regarding health, safety and employment. Coláiste Eoin should be recognised as an independent school for the next school year. [An application has been made to the Department of Education and Skills].

This lack of official recognition as a school is a daily threat to the sustainability of the school. The school needs permanent, independent status. The Roll number is shared with Choláiste Cholm Cille in Indreabhán which means that the two schools are not differentiated. This makes the administration and daily working of the school most difficult. The current concept (management at a distance) is not at all suitable, and the difficulties are increasing as the school grows.

The following is a list of some of the recognised difficulties from a management perspective:

- The school has only got a single post of responsibility, that is the Assistant Principal, and the entire responsibility of the school rests on the Assistant Principal who has to act as Principal but without any recognition or allowance for their work. (It is not realistic to expect the management of Coláiste Cholm Cille to be available when there is thirty miles of sea between the two schools).
- As time goes by, the work relationship between the two schools has diminished as Coláiste Naomh Eoin has to act on its own account despite not having the resources at hand to carry out this work.
- It is difficult to provide a broad curriculum as there are not enough teaching hours available. Neither the 0.5 for a co-educational catchment nor the 0.25 for assistant principal are provided.
- The 1.0 WTE for a small school is not made available.
- Coláiste Naomh Eoin depends on the curriculum concession each year to receive teaching hours, resulting in an inability to plan.
- Coláiste Naomh Eoin is not included when State grants or funding are being allotted to schools.
- There is no link between the pupils of the two schools and the two schools function independently of one another on a day to day basis, for instance in national Competitions etc.
- Coláiste Naomh Eoin has no representative on the Student Council nor on the school's Management Board as geography precludes attendance at meetings.
- Coláiste Cholm Cille's policy and planning are not suitable for Coláiste Naomh Eoin.
- Pupils are not on the local electronic record, but on the motherschool's system. This means that the record of pupils' exam results is not kept on the island on the electronic system. The rolls relating to the school are kept in Coláiste Naomh Eoin, done by hand in the traditional way. This lack of recognition causes great difficulties for the State Examinations Commission as Coláiste Naomh Eoin is not included when examiners are being appointed and provision is only made for the school at the last minute on foot of a supplementary request. This arrangement is dangerous in relation to delivering exams from one school to the other, on occasion examination papers are delivered electronically or by aerolane.
- Difficulties arise in relation to official signatures; for instance school cheques are sent in and out to be signed, and there are implications relating to pre-signed cheques being left on the premises.

- Coláiste Naomh Eoin's teachers have limited professional development as there are no opportunities for professional development in the school.

6. DEIS Status

- a) Island schools would like recognition as DEIS schools, along with the advantages that arise from this status being provided to the islands.
- b) DEIS status should be granted to the schools as they suffer from disadvantages arising out of being located on an island. There are many challenges to be overcome, including the weather, teachers travelling, lack of services on the island.
- c) DEIS status would help improve the teacher/pupil ratio for some of the schools and would encourage pupils to continue to third level.

7. Accessibility

- a) Air and ferry services are required to meet the schools' requirements. Certainty is required about the services' long-term existence, so that the schools will not be left trying to keep services going every four or five years as recently happened with the air service.
- b) It is not usually possible to travel in and out every day. The ferry times do not match schools' timetables.
- c) Substitutes are very rarely available and availability depends on the weather.
- d) Two or three days travel are required to attend a meeting in Dublin.
- e) Technology – in general, the islands have poor connectivity. Houses need good connectivity if pupils are to be able to benefit from technology in the home.
- f) It is difficult to undertake professional development as a result of the weather and other events.
- g) We recommend developing a structure for continuing Professional Development that provides the option of on-line training.

Conclusions

It is very clear that island schools face many challenges, challenges that are common to both levels, as well as some that affect each level respectively.

It is very clear that location on an island creates extra difficulties, and that there is a need to investigate how to preserve and to develop the richness and the importance that arises from island schools through a more appropriate support structure such as independent school status; teacher supply; support staff; budget; scholarships and allowances.

We suggest that an appropriate allowance for island teachers be investigated, to help entice them to live and work on a remote island.

We suggest that the DEIS approach be investigated in order to ensure consistency and that this be automatically granted to island schools in recognition of the many disadvantages that arise out of their location.

Gaeloideachas thanks the Joint Committee for allowing us this opportunity to have an input into this critically important matter. We would welcome the opportunity to meet the Joint Committee to broaden the discussion on these matters and to reach a consensus on the most effective ways forward.