

**Chairperson and members of the Joint Committee**

I would like to thank you for inviting me to come here today before the Joint Committee on Education and Skills and present to you our concern regarding the allocation of teachers to island schools.

I am Bríd Ní Dhonncha, the nominee of Comhar na nOileán and Principal in Coláiste Ghobnait, Inis Oírr, the Aran Islands. At the AGM of Comhdháil Oileán na hÉireann which took place in Inis Bó Finne on the twenty-seventh of April 2017, the case of the islands was brought up and a motion was passed asserting that the second-level schools have an extremely important place in the life of the isolated islands and that any inattention to their specific needs or any move that would jeopardise the viability of the island schools in the future would in no way be accepted.

In my presentation today, I'll be concentrating on the allocation of teachers to island schools.

I congratulate you for the important developments in recent years in the provision of post-primary education for the Aran Islands.

I am presenting a fresh request to you today, that is, that the three schools are seeking an increase in the allotment from the current 1.0 to 2.5 whole time equivalent (WTE) ex-quota to enable us to go ahead with planning and serving the needs of the island schools. Island schools are struggling from year to year with many challenges regarding their teacher allocation.

The entire education system of the Republic of Ireland, and accordingly the education system of the Island schools, operates under the Education Act 1998. This Act makes 49 strong provisions for Gaeltacht education and Irish language education generally, and it has a significant number of provisions which refer directly to Gaeltacht education and to its role in the Gaeltacht community. Therefore, I implore the Minister for Education and Skills to look favourably and urgently at the allocation of teachers to island schools.

Schools are at the heart of every community, but especially on the islands. Without the schools, the islands would be in danger of being abandoned. A major challenge faced by Gaeltacht schools is to maintain an atmosphere where the language and educational needs of the pupils in that system can be served in parallel. I don't believe that the challenges of the island schools is the same as those of small schools, although they involve many of the same challenges regarding teacher allocation, and I believe the allocation of teachers regarding the island post-primary schools must be tackled. Unfortunately, the

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challenges and obstacles facing island schools regarding teacher allocation as it operates at present are not being recognised.

In the case of island post-primary schools, it is seen that not only the school context, but also the community context has a role in the promotion of education. Included are a different social, linguistic and cultural composition among the pupils, and indeed among the teachers of the Gaeltacht post-primary schools. A significant important and essential aspect that is necessary is an increase in the teacher allocation in order to create the development of comprehensive environments for the pupils of the Aran Islands.

**Examples:**

1. For example, at present, in Scoil Ghobnait, first year and second year Irish are in one classroom with one teacher teaching the class. First year are following the Irish specification for the Junior Cycle and second year are following the syllabus for the Junior Certificate. It is extremely challenging for one teacher to plan for this because it involves two different syllabi.

The Principal is responsible for allocating teachers to classes and years. The Principal must decide how best to put years together, which is impossible with the teacher allocation as it is at present. It is impossible to provide a wide curriculum for the pupils, a provision which is due to them. The allocation of teachers is a bone of contention day after day, year after year in the island schools.

2. This allocation of teachers has a negative influence on every aspect of the school's activities, including pupils' learning, policy implementation – the Framework for Junior Cycle, behaviour in the classroom and the language behaviour of the staff room. Therefore, the entire ethos of the school is endangered and low spirits are created and maintained in the school community because of the teacher allocation.
3. The Framework for Junior Cycle lays out 24 statements of learning for the education of the junior cycle. With the teacher allocation as it is for the school year 2017-2018, a learning experience cannot be provided to satisfactorily serve the statements of learning.
4. In the National Strategy to improve Literacy and Numeracy among Children and Young People 2011 – 2020 the importance of literacy at post-primary level and the central role of the teachers of all subjects in developing those skills are emphasized. (Department of Education and Skills, 2011). I implore the Minister therefore to increase the teacher allocation immediately.

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5. According to Hoyle & John (1995:16), the profession of teaching is an occupation which has specific unifying traits, including, a foundation of knowledge, autonomy and responsibility. A favourable teacher allocation is needed so that teachers can take on a foundation of knowledge, autonomy and responsibility.
6. Teacher allocation appertains to:
  - the ability of the teacher to approach planning and cooperative activities
  - the encouragement of pupils with new learning experiences
  - subject integration
  - curriculum and resource development
  - assesement

Therefore, every island school wishes to strengthen and deepen the learning process of the pupil, something which is extremely difficult at present with the teacher allocation which has been provided. It is extremely important that an effort be made to specify the development needs of island schools by increasing the teacher allocation. The greatest challenge regarding the allocation of teachers at it is is that the model does not recognise the specific needs and challenges of the island schools.

If all of these efforts to increase the teacher allocation are to have a worthwhile result, major substantial and brave action is required right now.

### **In conslucion**

My friends, it is extremely important therefore that teacher allocation be taken into account when the Department of Education and Skills is designing and delivering educational practices, so that island schools are able to fulfil their professional duties effectively so as to ensure a worthwhile learning and development experience for the pupils under their care.

Again and again, we are saying that the teacher allocation as it is at present does not suit the island schools. The same yardsticks cannot be used in the case of island schools – **low numbers!** Teacher allocation should not be the same and measured against numbers as in the rest of the country. We are asking that the teacher allocation ex-quota for every island school be raised from **1.0 to 2.5 Whole Time Equivalent/WTE.**

I ask and I implore now that teacher allocation be reviewed, urgently, and that it be ensured that they be proofed in favour of island schools.

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To finish up, it's in the nature of cats to kill mice. It's in the nature of island schools to always have a small number of pupils, which means that they have small teaching staffs and that a suitable, standard curriculum cannot be provided with the small apportionment of teachers that the allocation as it is provides.

There is a need for an approach which would strengthen the rights of pupils in island schools: that is, to increase the allotment from 1.0 WTE to 2.5 WTE.

It is for the benefit of the development and teaching of the pupils of our island schools that I am making this fresh request – that is that an increase is being sought in the allocation from 1.0WTE to 2.5 WTE.

It is extremely important that a standard post-primary education, that we owe to all our schoolchildren, be offered to the schoolchildren on the islands.

Castles are built gradually, but if the castles are not built on the islands soon there will be neither a school nor a community.

I hope I have presented you with precise, clear evidence regarding the fresh request being made by island schools regarding teacher allocation. I beg you to please take what I have said into account in your discussion as the Oireachtas Joint Committee on Education and Skills and to commend my proposition regarding increasing the allocation of teachers to our schools to the appropriate authorities in any report arising from the work of today.

Thank you very much for listening to me.

**Inis Oírr pier on Christmas eve 2013**



Photo taken by: Cormac Coyne

**Summary of main points:**

- Island schools' teacher allocation needs to be increased from 1 to 2.5 WTE ex-quota.
- Current model of teacher allocation does not recognise the unique challenges faced by island schools e.g The current model is based on pupil numbers, something island schools will never be able to compete with
- An increase in the teacher allocation would ensure that island schools could provide the required curriculum to pupils
- This would also enable provision of a broader range of subject options