



## Opening Statement

**Title:** “Challenges Facing our Island Schools’  
**To:** Joint Committee on Education and Skills  
**Date:** 19th December 2017  
**Speaker:** Ms Anne McHugh, Chief Executive, Donegal ETB

I wish to thank you on behalf of Donegal Education and Training Board for the opportunity to address you in respect of the challenges facing our Island Schools. Donegal ETB operates two island schools, Gairmscoil Mhic Diarmada, Árann Mhór and Coláiste Phobail Cholmcille, Oileán Thoraí.

If one applies strict economic criteria, Island schools are not value for money, but their value must not be underestimated; they are the lifeline of a dying breed - islanders, and as such, the lifeline of an intrinsic part of our heritage, culture and individuality as Irish people and citizens. The Department has already acknowledged their importance and it is through the Department’s vision that these schools still exist – Bunscoileanna, and have come into existence – Meánscoileanna. Previously, whole generations of young people were denied their right to secondary education and islands ran the risk of losing a whole generation of their people, many of whom never returned to live permanently on the islands. Many of these islands are the last outposts of the Irish language and will play a vital role in the next few years while the Government tries to retain, preserve, strengthen and promote the Irish language before it dies out in the Gaeltacht areas.

I will refer separately to our schools as, despite being island schools, they both face very different challenges.

### Gairmscoil Mhic Diarmada, Árann Mhór

Gairmscoil Mhic Diarmada officially opened its doors with an initial enrolment of 28 on the 8<sup>th</sup> October 1990. The school operated through the medium of English from the outset and continued to do so until a High Court Determination in 2008 resulted in the establishment of a Sruth Gaeilge which currently provides a full curriculum to 19 students “trí mheán na Gaeilge”. Current enrolment is 103. 59 of these students are as a result of inward migration to the island from the mainland.

Additional teaching staff were appointed to facilitate the Sruth Gaeilge and it is the policy of Donegal ETB that each teacher appointed for Gairmscoil Mhic Diarmada in the future will be fully capable of teaching their respective subject(s) through Irish. Teacher supply and in particular teacher supply with competence “trí mheán na Gaeilge” is a national and very worrying issue for our schools.

Implementing the High Court decision has imposed an additional strain on resources in that the programmes offered through English have to be exactly replicated in the Irish stream.

The school also faces the longer term challenge of Gaeltacht Education as per Circular Letter 0034/2017. This requires Gaeltacht schools within a five year time frame to implement an education service wholly and exclusively through the medium of Irish. This will be particularly difficult to implement given the context of the High Court decision outlined above which gives rights and entitlements to parents who want their children to be educated through both languages.

The school enjoys DEIS status, however the lack of School Completion Personnel attached to the programme places an onerous burden of management and coordination on the Principal.

The Island is well serviced by two ferry companies, however there are days during the Winter time and particularly in the Spring when access cannot be guaranteed.

Services such as electricity, broadband, telephone, DEIS school lunches etc are regularly compromised by the Island location.

### **Coláiste Phobail Cholmcille, Oileán Thoráí**

In 1999 there were 28 pupils in the Bunscoil and the need for secondary education was critical. Coláiste Phobail Cholmcille had an initial enrolment of 10 and now has an enrolment of 6.

Prior to the establishment of the school the Island students were forced to relocate to the mainland and received their second level education at Pobalscoil Chloich Cheann Fhaola. This proved to be a harrowing experience for many young islanders and their families – resulting in very poor completion rates. As a consequence the vast majority of a cohort of Islanders had not completed upper secondary education.

It can be difficult to ensure all subjects are taught by a subject expert & substitute teachers are difficult to obtain. Staff end up covering and often teaching, as the S&S hours do not cover the amount of substitution needed. For example: If a teacher travels to the mainland with students, they may be away from school from 10.30 in the morning until 10.30 two days later, depending on ferries (and that is assuming the weather is favourable for any passage!)

A language assistant (given the policy for Gaeltacht Education) and a grant for technology to enable greater access is urgently required.

The concept of Pupil Teacher Ratio as applied to mainland schools does not compare favourably with that of a remote Island school such as Tory. However if the school is examined through the prism of the percentages the following applies: 100% of young people transfer from Primary to Secondary. 100% of students gain a Leaving Certificate. The student body represents 3.3% of the total population of the Island, i.e. the equivalent of 44398 students in a school in Dublin or 646 in Letterkenny.

The added benefits of DEIS status have not been afforded to Coláiste Phobail Cholmcille despite the local Bunscoil being designated as a DEIS school. This anomaly should be immediately addressed.

Coláiste Phobail Cholmcille is possibly the most remote school in the State. Teachers cannot commute to work. Often they are 'stuck in' at weekends or are reluctant to go out to the mainland during term time because they may get 'stuck out' leaving colleagues to cover classes.

The allowances to live and to travel on and off the Island have been discontinued, however the added expenses teachers have, such as rent on the island as well as their mortgage/rent on the mainland and travel expenses on and off the island still exist.

Because students cannot easily travel to and from the mainland, the school cannot attract mainland students and this restricts enrolment. Scholarships would help but the Department of Education and Skills scholarships are limited in number and because of a stipulation which states they may only be awarded to students outside the Gaeltacht, many of the students who would consider spending time on the Island cannot apply as they live in a local Gaeltacht area.

I wish to acknowledge the support of the Department of Education and Skills for these schools and that of our Principals for their outstanding work in this challenging area.

I finally wish to extend an invitation to the members of the Joint Committee on Education and Skills to visit both schools to see at first hand the excellent work being carried out to educate the students of both Islands.

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