

## **Comhchoiste Oireachtais um Oideachas agus Scileanna, 19/12/2017**

### **ETBI Opening Address:**

**Pat Gilmore, Iar- Uachtarán agus Cathaoirleach Bhord ETBI 2014-2017**

### **EDUCATION AND TRAINING BOARDS IRELAND (ETBI): Context**

ETBI and 16 ETBs were established by the Education and Training Boards Act (2013) and replaced, respectively, the Irish Vocational Education Association (IVEA) and 33 Vocational Education Committees (VECs).

Education and Training Boards Ireland (ETBI) is the national representative body for Ireland's sixteen regional Education and Training Boards (ETBs), and works to protect, promote and enhance the interests of its member ETBs and of vocational education and training within the wider education sector in Ireland and in Europe.

ETBI is a central resource for the ETB sector, providing, procuring and coordinating a range of support services which are most appropriately and efficiently delivered at national level.

ETBI provides a range of coordinated and cost-effective services that include:

- Representation for the sector
- Policy analysis, research and administrative support services
- Management services required by ETBs in the performance of their executive and reserved functions, with specific reference to schools,

further education and training (FET) and organisational development and support;

- Specialised supports to assist ETBs in promoting equality of opportunity in education and training, and in responding to the needs of disadvantaged communities and to enhance social and economic cohesion in the communities we serve.

### **ETBI engagement with DES re Islands**

It is in the aforementioned context that ETBI has long campaigned for appropriate resourcing for small schools and island schools which face the most challenging context of all small schools in Ireland. A significant section of ETBI Congress in 2015, focused on Island Schools' specific challenges. After the 2015 Congress, ETBI and ETBs with island schools, wrote to DES seeking engagement on the challenges identified by Island Schools. Pre-budget submissions from ETBI in 2016 and 2017 also emphasised the unique challenges of Island schools, and indeed this was the singular focus of ETBI's 2017 pre-budget submission. During Congress 2017, as President of ETBI, I shared my frustration with the Minister for Education and Skills, that notwithstanding ETBI having directly addressed matters with DES, no progress could be reported. The Minister did give an undertaking last September, to meet with a delegation from the two ETBs most directly affected, namely

GRETB and DETB, and ETBI looks forward to receiving notice of that meeting with Minister Bruton.

### **Supporting Small Schools and Island Schools**

Extensive research from the USA and European countries makes a sound educational case for supporting small schools. The Norwegian, Swedish and Icelandic governments also recognise that schools are the glue that binds communities together, and consequently governments in those countries take their national responsibility very seriously, giving their full support to small schools, many of which are located in rural areas, including on off-shore islands.

In Ireland, we need to take heed of the importance that governments of other nations place on the benefits of rural schools, not least in preventing rural decline and depopulation, and our government must also maintain focus on comprehensively supporting rural schools, many of which are small. DES research, commissioned and conducted in 2001 (The Allocation of Teachers to Second Level Schools Report) suggested how aspects of this might be achieved.

If we believe in supporting small schools generally, and specifically those on off-shore islands, it is imperative that we look at innovative ways of providing sufficient financial resources, appropriate management resources, an appropriate

curriculum underpinned by adequate teacher allocation, which affords a reasonable subject choice to students in these schools.

### **ETBs as main provider of post-primary education lán-Ghaeilge**

ETBI is proud that approximately 40 of Ireland's 60 post-primary schools delivering education through the medium of Irish, (Coláistí Gaeltachta agus Coláistí lán-Ghaeilge), are within the ETB sector, many of these being small schools, with only a handful having in excess of 500 pupils. These schools experience all the challenges previously referred to facing other small schools, but also face additional challenges unique to the lán-Ghaeilge sector. To address these challenges, ETBI has applied to DES to sanction a **Stiúrthóir** position to further develop ETBs' 40 Coláistí Gaeltachta agus lán-Ghaeilge which includes the vast majority of Ireland's Post-primary Gaeltacht schools. Support for this initiative would go some way to addressing Island Schools' challenges.

### **Island Schools' unique challenges**

There are only five small second-level schools located on offshore islands – Inis Mór, Inis Meáin, and Inis Oírr off Galway, and Arranmore and Tory Islands off Donegal, managed by GRETB and DETB respectively.

In this context, A Chathaoirligh, I again refer, as I have done at previous ETBI Congresses, to the specific and unique difficulties and challenges that face the communities of these small island schools. ETBI has joined with GRETB and Donegal ETB to campaign for recognition of the unique challenges facing these schools, which include:

- Requirement for DES to create an Island Education Policy
- DES sanction required for **Stiúrthóir** position in ETBI to support ETBI/ETBs 40 + Coláistí lán-Ghaeilge and Gaeltachta
- Island specific adjustment to Teaching Allocation
- Measures to assist Island schools in accessing and retaining Teaching Staff
- Island specific adjustment to Inadequate School budget
- Supports to encourage Enrolment and Scoláireachtaí
- Coláiste Naomh Eoin, Inis Meáin – grant independent school status

- Accessibility and improvement in transport links

My colleagues from GRETB and DETB and also from Island Schools will elaborate on these challenges and how the current situation negatively impacts on student wellbeing and student and island community development.

Island schools need specific supports that do not always fit easily within the DES one model fits all approach to resource allocation, because of their unique and often poorly understood challenges. ETBI has constantly campaigned for additional ring-fenced supports for these schools and the two relevant ETBs have actively engaged with DES senior officials on an ongoing basis since 2013 in this regard. It is of significant concern to ETBI, that Islands Schools' issues remain largely unaddressed, particularly as a Cabinet subcommittee considered these matters last February, and Joint Oireachtas Committee on Gaeilge and Gaeltacht considered these challenges last May 8<sup>th</sup>, and subsequently issued a report to Oireachtas Éireann which highlighted the urgency of action required by DES if Ireland's islands are to remain populated.

ETBI is at a loss to comprehend why a DES financial allocation (**Irish and Bilingual Grant**) of €103 per pupil which is allocated on an annual basis to privately owned Gaelcholáistí in the leafy suburbs of the capital and other cities, continues to be denied to publicly owned Gaelcholáistí and Coláistí Gaeltachta managed by ETBs, many of which are small rural schools, some with DEIS

(disadvantaged) status. This funding has also been denied to all 5 offshore island schools, for many years, further driving them to the limits of sustainability.

### **Depopulation of Ireland's islands and lack of DES Islands Education Policy**

A little over six decades ago, policy makers within a range of Government Departments considered it beneficial and appropriate to encourage and facilitate the migration of the indigenous population from the Blasket Islands, a people who were world famous from a linguistic and anthropological perspective, to the Kerry mainland. Looking back with the benefit of hindsight, few today would consider that this action was beneficial from a linguistic, heritage, rural development, tourism or educational perspective, as within one single generation the majority of those displaced had emigrated to Springfield, Massachusetts, where their descendants continue to live in Hungry Hill. One significant factor in driving out the healthy Blasket Islands' population which had existed in 1911, culminating in a full evacuation in 1953, was the lack of any second level schooling, employment or training prospects, and the forced closure of the only available primary school on the islands in 1941, due to officials' evaluation that insufficient pupils existed to continue with education provision.

ETBI, GRETB and DETB do not want future generations to look back on the depopulation of Galway's Aran Islands or Donegal's islands, and to trace the

common causal link as insufficient support for the islands' schools forcing the local community to seek educational opportunity in mainland schools. It is significant that in the period 2006 - 2011 when the national population increased, the population of the Aran Islands decreased by 6%, as did the population of other islands. The reference to the Blasket Islands, and the link between appropriate school provision and sustainability of island communities, is neither rhetoric nor hyperbole, as national headlines this autumn lament the flight of parents with young children from Sherkin Island, consequential to the closure of the only primary school on that island in 2016.

In the absence of the necessary administrative and policy decisions from DES, the Blasket and Sherkin Islands scenario as outlined, could become an unwelcome reality in the not too distant future for the 5 islands upon which ETBI and our member ETBs struggle to provide and maintain post-primary Education and Further Education & Training services on behalf of the State.

Would it not be a supreme irony if the Department of Education and Skills succeeded, however unintentionally, to give a whole new literal meaning to Blasket Islander, Tomás Ó Croimhthain's often quoted phrase "Ní bheidh ár leithéidí arís ann" when he described changes he foresaw, when the Blasket Islands were still a thriving community at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. We do not want the Blasket Islands experience to become the default position for



Ireland's islands in the absence of any education policy for our island communities.

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<http://www.independent.ie/irish-news/it-will-break-our-hearts-to-leave-island-family-forced-to-sell-up-home-after-school-closure-36111665.html>