

Opening Statement by INTO
Joint Committee on Education and Skills
Challenges facing our island schools

19 December 2017

INTO welcomes this opportunity to address the Joint Committee on the challenges facing island schools. INTO will next year celebrate 150 years of representing teachers in Ireland. We represent the teachers in the 12 off-shore primary schools in the Republic. As a trade union, INTO's primary interest is in representing the interests of teachers, but we have a long history of seeking to support and develop the schools and communities in which they work. The INTO strongly argues that the local school has a key role in sustaining vibrant and viable local communities. Nowhere is this more important than on our islands. Island populations deserve high quality, fully-resourced primary education in their communities.

Our submission sets out the context of primary education in the 12 primary schools on off-shore islands. The numbers we have used are those for the 2016/17 school year. The number of pupils varies from 3 on Inishturk to 42 in Scoil Ronáin on Inis Mór, Arainn. Last year, 9 of the schools had 2 classroom teachers and the other 3 had one. Each school has an additional teaching allocation to provide for special education needs. 8 are Gaeltacht schools, and 8 are designated as disadvantaged and covered by the rural strand of DEIS.

In common with other small schools, island schools face particular challenges in relation to their staffing allocation. A budget decision in 2012 increased the appointment and retention figures for small schools. The number of pupils required to appoint a second teacher was increased from 12 to 20 in the period between 2012 and 2015. The number of pupils to appoint a 3rd teacher increased from 49 to 56 over the same period. We do acknowledge that these numbers were reduced by 1 for 2016/2017 and that the figures for retention were also reduced. However, INTO believes that the appointment and retention figures for all small schools should be restored to pre-2012 levels.

In addition, a specific staffing provision for island schools introduced in last year's budget means that, where a school is the only school on an island, they can appoint a second teacher, regardless of numbers. The measure has resulted in additional appointments to two schools - on Tory and Inishturk. This is very welcome. Teaching in a one-teacher school can leave teachers professionally and socially isolated, especially in a setting where the nearest school is on the mainland. All of the island schools have multi-class teaching - in other words, children of different ages are taught different programmes in the same classroom. Smaller class sizes are warranted in small schools to provide for this. In the largest island school, there are multi-classes of over 20 pupils.

Accessing and retaining teaching staff remains a key challenge for island schools. The challenges of living on an island, or commuting to work there, are well documented. Prior to 2012, this was recognised by the DES and an additional allowance was paid to teachers in island schools. However, this allowance was abolished for new beneficiaries from 1 February 2012. This allowance did provide some compensation for the increased costs involved in teaching on an island, and INTO calls for it to be restored. Recruiting substitute teachers is currently a challenge in all schools, but that challenge is increased in island schools, leading to a situation where absences are frequently not covered. This matter could be addressed through the setting up of supply panels to cover all schools.

All of the island schools are led by teaching principals who have to teach their multi-class group and carry out the administrative and management tasks required. Currently, there are 15 release days available for principals of 1 and 2 teacher schools, well short of the day per week which INTO believes is necessary to run a primary school. Principal teachers in primary schools are also still awaiting the outstanding pay award made to them in 2008 and which remains unpaid.

Enrolment and maintaining numbers remain key challenges for all island schools. The enrolment numbers in island primary schools fluctuate with the population, but island schools are more vulnerable than others as they cannot easily attract enrolment from a wider area, as other schools do. However, it is positive to see that seven of the island schools have had an increase in enrolments over the period since 2011/2012. Given the natural fluctuations in population and the contribution that primary schools make to the vitality of an island community, it is important that a long-term view is taken when deciding the viability of an island school. Enrolment in a given year is not necessarily indicative of the future enrolment potential of that school and consideration must be given to the broader picture and the community's needs.

Is scoileanna Gaeltachta iad formhór de na scoileanna ar na hoileáin. Tá sé an-tábhachtach go dtabharfaí gach tacaíocht do na scoileanna sa Ghaeltacht plé leis an gcomhthéacs casta teanga ina bhfuil siad ag feidhmiú. Tá cúram ar leith ar na scoileanna atá lonnaithe sa Ghaeltacht de réir An Achta Oideachais 1998 cuidiú chun an Ghaeilge a choinneáil mar phríomhtheanga an phobail. Aithníonn Acht na Gaeltachta 2012 gurb iad na scoileanna atá mar chroí chuid den tacaíocht atá de dhíth chun cur le húsáid na Gaeilge i measc an phobail Ghaeltachta. Tá cúram ar an Roinn Oideachais a chinntiú go bhfeidhmíonn an córas oideachais ar mhaithe leis an nGaeilge agus le pobal na Gaeltachta. Ní mór gach tacaíocht a chur ar fáil do na scoileanna sa Ghaeltacht chun a chur ar a gcumas ard chaighdeán oideachais a sholáthar don phobal.

In this opening statement I have not touched on other challenges we have identified in our submission, including funding challenges and the issue of the operation of the rural DEIS scheme, but we are happy to address these issues in the discussion.

Go raibh maith agaibh as bhur n-éisteacht, agus tá muid ag súil leis na níthe seo a phlé leis an gCoiste.