

# **COMHAIRLE NA GAELSCOLAÍOCHTA**

## **Our response to the Post-Primary Review Body**

We support the guiding principles underlying the Burns report that there should be equality of opportunity and equality of access to education for all young people.

### **1. Selection and Transfer:**

We agree that there should be an end to the Transfer Test as a means of selection to Grammar schools. The Transfer Test has not served children in Irish-medium education well as there have been problems inherent in the translations of questions which have added a layer of difficulty to the test. Children in IM education have been disadvantaged because of this. The transfer Test doesn't measure children's capabilities and in particular, no consideration is given to the skills and talents which are developed through bi-lingual education.

The Key Stage 2 curriculum at present is distorted with an over emphasis on Mathematics, Science and Irish in Irish-Medium because of the preparation for the Transfer test. The Transfer test has never acknowledged the fact that Key Stage 2 in Irish-medium has four core subjects and that only three subjects are tested in the Test. English being a core subject cannot be ignored by Irish-medium so only 75% of core subjects are tested in the Test in Irish-medium schools.

We agree that eleven should still be the age for transfer from primary to post-primary school

We agree that schools should not be allowed to select pupils for transfer to post-primary schools on the basis of academic ability. This runs counter to the philosophy of equality of access to education for all.

### **2. Pupil Profiles:**

We agree that a pupil profile be developed that illustrates the aptitudes, abilities and interests of the pupils. The pupil profile should give a more holistic picture of the child. We agree that a pupil profile should assist parents in choosing post-primary schools for their children.

To ensure that class teachers and school principals are not put under undue pressure by parents while compiling the pupil profiles we think that standardised assessment instruments should be an integral part of the pupil profile. Teachers in Irish-medium schools must not be placed under an additional administrative burden by the arrangements for pupil profiling.

**The ALTA project (Adaptive Learning Teaching and Assessment) project and any other assessment which is to be developed for pupil profiling must be developed in parallel for Irish-medium education. A translation of what is developed for English-medium education is neither educationally justifiable or valid as there are language specific issues that must be taken into consideration.**

**In addition to parallel development of assessment tasks for Irish-medium children; specific assessment tasks will be needed to assess their first language and second language skills.**

**The development of pupil profiles gives a unique opportunity to develop assessment instruments specific to bi-lingual education. The profile compilers must develop assessment that gauges linguistic competence in first and second language and that assesses skills specific to bi-lingual education.**

### **3. Admissions Criteria:**

We agree that all post-primary schools should be required to use the same entrance criteria to admit pupils when they have more applications than places.

Parental choice should have statutory priority and all schools should admit pupils in order of parental preference with first preference applications being admitted before second preference applications etc.

When schools are oversubscribed, we recommend that the following criteria are used in this order

1. Siblings already at the school, or the eldest child of a family.
2. Children of staff at the school providing that children of all staff employed by the school have equal status.
3. Compelling individual circumstances.
4. A lottery.

We do not agree with proximity to the school being on the list of criteria.

### **4. Curriculum:**

We agree that the Key Stage 3 curriculum should be as recommended in paras 8.10 and 8.11 to ensure access for all children to a broad, balanced and relevant curriculum. The common core and degree of flexibility recommended will benefit all children.

The proposed structure of the Key Stage 4 curriculum will allow for greater flexibility and individual needs being met but in the context of Irish-medium education this will not be possible unless there is a separate collegiate for Irish-medium education (see paragraph 5)

## **5. Collegiates:**

10.43 page 162

“The introduction of a Collegiate structure would not threaten the ethos, educational identity or character of any post-primary school; rather it would provide a strong statutory framework, status and resources for schools to develop and co-operate on the basis of interdependence and mutual respect, with the overriding objective of ensuring access to high quality education for all young people.”

We agree with the rationale behind the proposed Collegiate structure-

- That schools work in partnership with each other to provide the widest possible choice of opportunities for all pupils.
- That standards will improve under the new structures.
- That the special educational needs of the children will be met within the environment of mainstream schools.
- That learning support, professional development, ICT, curriculum provision and extra-curricular activities occur in the context of co-operation within the collegiate.

We have concerns that the proposed Collegiate Structure will **not** deliver the promised benefits to children in Irish-medium education.

These concerns arise because at present there is one independent free standing Irish-medium post-primary school and one unit within a CCMS post-primary school (there will be two units in September 2002) and the proposed Collegiate structure will attract children to EM education at post 14 and post 16 level.

- Few if any of the EM schools will be able to offer IM provision in any but the mainstream subjects.
- One of the main purposes of IME is to facilitate pupils to develop fluency in Irish. The collegiate system as described is not consistent with this objective. The collegiate system will attract IM pupils out of their Irish-medium environment lessening their opportunities to develop their language skills and depriving the younger pupils of the important and beneficial influence of more senior pupils in creating an Irish-speaking environment and ethos in the schools.

- It is unrealistic to expect that collegiate support, in-service training or the provision of resources would be bi-lingual for a single Irish-medium school within a collegiate.
- The proposed arrangements for collegiates would perpetuate the inequalities of the current system for IM teachers and pupils and place the sole school offering IME in the collegiate in direct competition for pupils with the EM system in the collegiate thereby recreating the difficulties the proposed system is attempting to eliminate in the EM sector.
- The special educational needs of children in IM education will not be fully met within the proposed Collegiate system as the numbers involved will not warrant the extra financial investment in a whole Collegiate context.
- Teachers' professional development as regards the specific skills training in bi-lingual education will not occur in the proposed Collegiate system.

## **Our proposal:**

Paragraph 10.10 page 146 states that:

“The development of provision in the Irish-medium sector would be dependant to a large degree on the extent of parental demand, and it would be for Comhairle na Gaelscolaíochta and others to consider how the changing needs of the sector might be addressed in the context of Collegiate structures.”

As a result of considering how the changing needs of the Irish-medium sector might be met:

### **We propose:**

That a separate collegiate be established for IM education which will replicate all envisaged advantages of the proposed system for the growing IM sector.

Schools with an Irish-medium unit and free standing Irish-medium schools would have membership of the IM collegiate whilst retaining membership of their geographical collegiate.

Meánscoil Feirste should have membership of the West Belfast geographical Collegiate as well as the Irish-Medium Collegiate.(Meánscoil Feirste is in the South West Belfast collegiate in the Burns report)

Comhairle na Gaelscolaíochta will seek representation on the Collegiate structure in each Geographical collegiate where an IM Bunscoil exists to ensure that the needs of Irish-medium children are met.

The range of IM subjects would be maximised and expertise and good practice could be shared among IM schools in a way that doesn't occur at present.

Best practice as regards bi-lingual language acquisition skills will be developed through an IM Collegiate.

The current problem of low availability of IM teachers would be lessened.

The proposed administrative system would enhance strategic planning for IM post-primary education as regards curriculum development and developing and resourcing special needs provision.

IM children with special needs could be taught in mainstream education with the added financial support and resources that an IM collegiate could provide.

This would ensure the development of IM special needs expertise.

The development of specialist areas in IM would be enhanced within an IM collegiate.

Collaborative projects would be facilitated between IM schools and EM and IM schools with the dual membership of Collegiates which we are proposing.

There is potential for cross-border development of the IM collegiate where expert specialist subject teachers could be available to children in the North through video conferencing etc. Links with schools in Scotland are not out of the question either. Teacher and pupil exchanges would be facilitated between all schools in the Collegiate.

The proposed IM collegiate would rely heavily on ICT and could in effect be a “Virtual Collegiate” with video conferencing etc.

We strongly recommend that IM schools have dual-membership of the proposed IM collegiate as well as membership of their nearest Geographical Collegiate. It is essential that relationships within Collegiates are developed for the benefit of the children. This would in fact ensure that IM children would indeed benefit from a wide and relevant curriculum and would ensure that IM post-primary schools could attract children at 11 years old and cater for their educational needs to the age of 18.

## **Factors that are important to the success of the Irish-Medium collegiate.**

The proposed IM Collegiate is the only proposal which will ensure the survival of IM post-primary education. The collegiate administrative structure is needed for IM education as it is for EM education. The dual membership of Collegiates will enhance the pupil’s experiences and children who received primary schooling through the medium of Irish and whose parents choose EM post-primary education have the potential opportunity to study one or two subjects through the medium of Irish at post-primary level.

The net result of providing an IM Collegiate will be to ensure that IM education is on an equal footing with EM education instead of being at a disadvantage as regards subject choice and teacher development.

