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IRISH NEWS 25/1/88
PROTECT IRISH LANGUAGE PLEA FROM GAEL-LINN
BY JOHN MCGURK

The TEACHING of the Irish language in Northern Ireland schools should be granted 'protected status', according to a development plan submitted to the Anglo-Irish Intergovernmental Conference.

In the study, Irish in the Northern Education System - A Plan for Development, published by Gael-Linn at the weekend, it recommended a wide ranging series of changes to shake up and improve the quality of teaching in both primary and secondary schools here.

The study which has just been presented to the Irish Joint Chairman of the Intergovernmental Conference, was released at a commemorative dinner to celebrate Gael-Linn's thirty-fifth year of youth work in the North at the weekend.

The document, formulated in consultation with a group of prominent Northern educationalists, has called for Irish to be granted special status within the educational system.

It said "Because of the demand for scientific subjects, only a small number of students take Irish at A-level as compared with biology, chemistry and physics. Consequently there is always the danger that a school cannot provide an Irish course because of the small number interested".

"This problem could be overcome if Irish were granted 'protected status', a position already enjoyed by music. We recommend that the language be granted that status."

The Gael-Linn report also warned that the teaching of the language was being hampered by lack of suitable texts or emphasis on oral teaching and Irish culture and proper inspection of methods.

It said that most students taking Irish in Northern Ireland were dependent on texts published in the South and added that there was consequently a "dire need" for a Northern based publishing enterprise to fill this void.

"Even at A-level, pupils are totally dependent on books published in the South. The two examinations systems are not the same at any level. Consequently texts must be produced specifically to MATCH pupil's requirements in the North."

"This is not a question of dialect but rather a need to provide texts for a system basically different from that in the South."

"Irish at post-primary level in the North is on a par with other European languages but teachers of Irish are at a great disadvantage as compared with teachers of the other languages in that the latter can select from a vast range of books published in England."

"We recommend that a few teachers be granted a sabbatical from school work to undertake this work under the direction of linguists of standing."

The Gael-Linn report added that the emphasis on oral testing at A-level is made more difficult by the number of teachers such as brothers and nuns whose Irish is not Northern.

The report said that the difficulty could be overcome by a system of 'assistants', who are fluent speakers in the Northern Irish dialect.

Gael-Linn also pointed out the difficulty of obtaining both the all-Irish speaking Radio na Gaeltachta and RTE television in Belfast. It added that although cross-border co-operation was necessary to provide such a service, an archive library of suitable programmes should be made available to Irish teachers here in the meantime.

They also called for stronger links to be forged between the education departments in the North and South at inspectorate level. They said that as Northern Ireland had only the inspector to offer advice to young teachers, a network of advisers should be set up.

More trips too to the Irish speaking region at the Gaeltacht should be encouraged to aid "the significant number of Northern students taking Irish as compared with other modern languages".

An overview of Irish history, geography and culture should also be introduced, Gael-Linn said, pointing out that the A-level curriculum only provided for British culture heritage in the present history course.

The report which was submitted to the Chairman of the Intergovernmental Conference earlier this month has also called for an investigation into the "common belief" that British universities do not recognise Irish as a modern language for admission purposes.

Gael-Linn also claimed that the teaching of Irish in primary schools had deteriorated since the introduction of the 11-plus examination.

They said that a syllabus for the language should be formulated together with the provision of suitable texts and other teaching materials such as records, tapes, videos and computer aids.

They warned that the recent escalation of pre-school Irish teaching must be met by professional teachers.

"Recent years have seen the growth of the Gaelic pre-school movement. As a result of this, many parents are now asking for Irish to be taught in primary schools."

"This demand should not be met, as happens in certain instances at present, through classes outside the school system which are run by persons who, in mostly all cases, are not trained teachers."

Also speaking at the commemorative dinner hosted by Gael-Linn founder, Dr. Donall O Morain, was Primate of All-Ireland Cardinal Thomas O Fiaich.

The Cardinal congratulated the work of Gael-Linn within the educational system and voiced his special delight at the recent successes of West Belfast Irish Language speakers in the annual Glor na nGael competitions.

He said: "I think that no-one could be but encouraged by the success of West Belfast especially as I was one of the founders of Glor na nGael when it started from Maynooth in 1961".

Cardinal O Fiaich added that many people were unknowingly using a lot of Irish in everyday speech through place names, Irish colours and descriptive adjectives. And he said that the language belonged to everyone both North and South, Catholic and Protestant.

He said: "The Irish language is the common heritage of the whole people of Ireland. No religious group and no political party have exclusive rights to it".

He said that we should never forget the close links the Irish language has had with Protestants in the past.

" Hundreds of Protestants today have Gaelic surnames such as McNeil, McDonnell, McCollum, McCallan, McMichael, McCrea and so on, those of us who are interested in Irish have no greater ambitions than to share this language with those whose ancestors came from Scotland at a time when it was partly Gaelic speaking.

" Many bridges still need to be built in the North and the Gaelic language could provide one of them by being shared by people whose ancestors lived on both sides of the North Channel.