

Irish Med Ed: Vol 2

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FROM: S PEOVER  
POLICY DIVISION

DATE: 13 September 1993

cc Secretary  
Mr Wallace  
Mr Hill  
Mr Jackson (o/r)  
Miss Donnelly

PS/MINISTER

**INTERVIEW WITH RTE: WEDNESDAY, 15 SEPTEMBER**

1. As you know, an interview with the RTE television programme *Cúrsaí* has been arranged for Wednesday, 15 September at 14.00 at Rathgael House. Attached are:

Annex A: General background brief

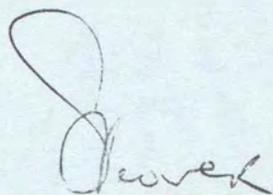
Annex B: Brief on current issues

2. The programme makers have conducted interviews with Irish language interests in both Derry and Belfast, though I understand it is the situation in Derry which has been the main focus of their interest. They have promised me a list of questions to be asked but as yet I have not received them. I do not, however, expect anything particularly difficult to arise and I will let the Minister have briefing on the specific questions to be asked as soon as possible. In the meantime the attached general briefing should give a reasonable flavour of the sorts of areas of concern which trouble those involved in Irish-medium education. Also attached is a bull-points brief which we supplied for Mr Hanley for an earlier discussion on this subject - it has been updated to take account of recent developments.
3. To give an overall flavour of the situation, I should say that relationships between the Department and those advocating Irish-medium education have not been easy over the last 30 years. The problem originated when those who originally proposed setting up the first Irish-medium school (in 1965) were informed that they would be prosecuted on the grounds that education through the medium of Irish could not be regarded as efficient or suitable instruction. It may seem strange that a view taken in 1965 could still influence attitudes today but, as the Minister will know, memories in Ireland are long and it can be difficult to re-establish relationships once they have been clouded by suspicion. I should say that the interest and indeed sympathy shown by Mr Hanley towards the Irish language when he met Newry and Mourne District Council and later the management committee of the Meanscoil were interpreted as signs of a changed official attitude. There is, therefore, some concern about the effect that the Ministerial change may have had on attitudes to Irish in the education system and this may surface in the form of

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questions on the Minister's own views on education through minority languages such as Welsh, Scots Gaelic and Irish. Mr Hanley was also known to have been attempting to learn some Irish and he used the opportunity of the meetings I have mentioned to practise the language on the two delegations. It is, therefore, also possible that the Minister will be asked whether he intends to learn the language but I will leave it to him how he answers that question.

4. Mr Hill will attend the interview in support of the Minister. Unfortunately I will not be available on Wednesday but would be happy to discuss the issues in more detail at the VCR pre-brief tomorrow.



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## IRISH MEDIUM EDUCATION

## BACKGROUND NOTE

Irish in Northern Ireland

1. Irish was spoken as a community language in parts of Northern Ireland such as the Glens of Antrim, Rathlin Island, areas of the Sperrins and South Down until the 1950s. The numbers of native speakers were, however, small and effectively the language ceased to be used as a means of everyday communication in the 1960s. The dialects spoken in Northern Ireland were elements of what is called East Ulster Irish which was distinct from that spoken in Donegal.

2. Parallel with the death of of Irish as a native language in Northern Ireland, interest in it as a second language was growing. Second language learners learn it not in its East Ulster dialect form but in the standardised version promulgated by the Dublin government from 1957 onwards, overlain by the dialectal features of Donegal (particularly those of Gweedore and the Rosses).

3. In the 1991 census 4.2% of the population claimed to have some knowledge of Irish and a further 5.3% claimed to be able to speak, read and write it. These figures need to be treated with some caution, however, and at most they represent an upper limit of interest in the language. The numbers of fluent and regular users of the language are undoubtedly much smaller.

History of Irish Medium Education

4. Irish has been taught as a school subject since 1900 but the history of Irish medium education in Northern Ireland dates from 1965 when a group of parents first sought a ruling from the then Ministry of Education on whether education through Irish would be regarded as "suitable instruction". They were advised that it would not be so regarded and the attempt to establish an Irish medium school was deferred until 1971.

5. In 1971 a school was established at Shaw's Road in Belfast to cater for the children of a number of families who had built themselves houses together on that road as a co-operative venture to establish a small all-Irish community. From 1971 until 1978 it existed as an independent school but in August 1978 it initiated an application for maintained status. This was refused in 1980 on the basis of an inadequate enrolment as was a second application in 1982 but in 1984 when the school had 123 pupils it was accepted as viable and accorded maintained status. It now has 390 pupils. Since the early 1980s the school has been accepting pupils from homes where Irish is not the family language but all such children are required to attend an Irish medium nursery (naiscoil) where linguistic immersion policies are practised.

6. The second initiative in Irish medium education came in Londonderry in early 1983 with a proposal to establish an Irish medium stream at the existing (English medium) Steelstown Primary School. This was approved and the stream began in September 1983 with 25 pupils. The stream grew steadily in size and from September 1993 it has separated from Steelstown to become a free-standing school, Bunscoil Cholm Cille. It now has 180 pupils.

7. The third development was the establishment of Gaelscoil na bhFál on the Falls Road. It occupied a variety of premises at different times but is now located in the premises of a former community centre near Broadway on the Falls Road. It applied for maintained status in February 1991 and this was granted from 1 August 1992. The school now has over 100 pupils.

8. The Newry school was opened in September 1989 with 7 pupils and was registered as an independent school on 5 December 1989. Its growth has been much slower than that of the other schools (and unit) and it still has only just over 20 pupils. It has not sought maintained status.

9. In 1991 a secondary school was established in Belfast and it applied for maintained status. As it had only 10 pupils (against a minimum viable total enrolment of 300 and minimum necessary intake of 60) the application was refused. In its second year the school admitted 17 pupils and in September 1993 a further 37 but it remains below the normal levels required to demonstrate viability and has recently been told that it will not be receiving grant-aid.

10. In September 1992 an Irish-medium primary school opened in the Belfast area in Twinbrook and in September 1993 two more primary schools opened - one in Ballymurphy in West Belfast and one in Maghera. All of these remain independent schools with 12 or fewer pupils but a development proposal has been published for the Twinbrook school to become a satellite unit of Bunscoil Phobal Feirste.

#### Policy and Legislation

11. The underlying policy is that children should be educated in accordance with their parents' wishes so far as is compatible with the provision of efficient instruction and training and the avoidance of unreasonable public expenditure (Article 44 of the 1986 Order).

12. The duty to respond to parental demand is not, therefore, an unqualified one and in practice the criteria established in a policy paper "Schools and Demographic Trends - A Backcloth to Planning" published in March 1981 are used to assess the case for new schools. A copy of the relevant section of that paper is attached and this explains the use of the figures of 200 and 100 pupils for the desirable minimum enrolments of urban and rural primary schools respectively. In the secondary sector the required figures are 300 and 600. A decision last year qualified this policy so that only the lower, rural figures are now being required of Irish-medium schools to prove their viability.

13. It is important to stress that a school does not actually have to achieve the relevant enrolment in order to prove its viability. Rather it has to demonstrate that it is likely to be able to achieve that enrolment in a reasonable period. In practice this means showing that its annual intake is such as to lead to the necessary long-term enrolment in due course.

Policy Issues

(i) Promoting Irish Medium Education

14. Thus far Government has not seen its role as being that of promoting Irish medium education but rather that of responding to proven demand where it exists. This does not satisfy Irish language organisations which look enviously at Wales, Scotland and the Republic of Ireland where they claim a more proactive policy is applied. This, however, ignores the fact that in those countries the relevant minority languages are in a very much stronger position than Irish is in Northern Ireland and that Wales and ROI are both officially bilingual.

15. A decision to seek to encourage or promote Irish medium education would represent a major policy change which would have implications not only for our treatment of other demands for specialist form of education but also for Government policy generally on the use of Irish in other public services. The issue, therefore, is not simply a minor one of adjusting criteria or slight policy modifications and it would need a detailed review.

(ii) Demand for Irish

16. The main Irish medium schools and unit have exceeded our (and probably their own) expectations for their enrolments. This fact is sometimes used as an argument that there is an extensive unmet demand for Irish medium education across Northern Ireland. However, while this may be true, it is by no means demonstrably so and in principle it is at least arguable that Belfast and Londonderry may be atypical. No other town offers anything approaching the population base of these two cities nor is there any evidence of the same level of interest in Irish elsewhere.

17. To sustain a viable primary school would require a continuing core of families sufficiently committed to Irish to want their children not only to be bilingual but to have all or much of their education through that language. This is a very major commitment. Over time at least 250-300 such families would need to exist in an area to guarantee a school's long-term viability.

18. With ordinary controlled or maintained schools the likely demand for places can be estimated from population data, baptismal records and so on. No such sources of information exist on likely demand for Irish and the establishment of a school is, therefore, essentially a speculative venture.

19. A further problem is that the growth in interest in Irish has coincided with the political upheaval in Northern Ireland and is likely to be at least partly a reflection of political beliefs. In these circumstances it is necessary to consider what might be the effect of any agreement on new political structures on the long-term demand for Irish medium education.

(iii) Seed-Funding

20. The concept of seed-funding raises a number of practical questions on the extent and coverage of such funding and the criteria which would be used for awarding it. There is also a fundamental statutory problem which would need to be resolved in that seed-funding would be funding to a school which remained an independent school. However, the statutory definition of an independent school is precisely that it is one which does not receive grant-aid.

21. These practical and definitional problems are not insuperable but in the case of integrated schools they were sufficient to dissuade us from adopting this approach. Instead we opted for a power to give grant-maintained integrated status to new schools on a conditional basis. Those conditions typically involve a minimum initial enrolment (25 at the very least), no capital funding, and an annual review of the school's status to ensure that it is growing in enrolment and continuing to be integrated. We also took specific powers to discontinue such schools if they failed to satisfy the conditions.

22. Some of these powers are paralleled in the provisions for granting ordinary maintained status to independent schools but they are incomplete and in particular we do not have specific discontinuance provisions for these types of situations. New statutory provisions would, therefore, be necessary.

(iv) Wider Effects

23. Special treatment for Irish medium education might well prompt similar requests for other specialist demands. In the past the most obvious such demand might have come from the Free Presbyterian Church which provides a number of independent schools. However, this is less likely now since if those schools were to become maintained they would have to follow the full Northern Ireland curriculum, including the RE core syllabus and the science curriculum, aspects of which the Free Presbyterian Church would reject.

24. It remains possible, however, that other small religious or ethnic groups might press the case for specialist schools and this needs to be considered in any policy review.

(v) Streams vs Free-Standing Schools

25. For all the reasons discussed above, a policy for Irish medium education based simply on the establishment of free-standing schools has been and remains problematical. The alternative is the approach adopted in Derry of attaching an Irish stream to an existing English medium school.

26. This worked well at Steelstown and ensures that the capital and revenue costs of Irish medium education do not fall on parents. Viability becomes much less of a problem and if interest in Irish declines, the children can more easily transfer across to the English part of the same school. In the Steelstown case this has not happened: rather the unit grew to a size where it was able to become a free-standing school in September 1993.

27. From the perspective of the Irish language organisations, however, streams are a poor second best because

- a. the children do not have a wholly Irish language environment at school; and
- b. the stream does not have its own governing body.

In addition, it is often suggested that only Catholic maintained schools are likely to be willing to accommodate Irish streams, and that this reinforces the link between Catholicism and Irish when the language ought to be seen as non-sectarian.

28. This last point, while theoretically valid, is in practice scarcely relevant. The vast majority of Protestants are either indifferent to or even hostile to Irish and are unlikely to be persuaded to change their views by any approach which might be adopted to the management structures for Irish medium schools. In contrast the other two points about streams have more substance but this does not mean that they are conclusive objections to a development strategy based on streams. Such a strategy might in fact be the only one offering any real prospect of an expansion in Irish medium education outside Belfast and Derry and in any review of policy it will need to be fully explored.

CURRENT ISSUES IN IRISH-MEDIUM EDUCATION

Secondary Education

1. The refusal of grant-aid to the secondary school in Belfast - Meanscoil Feirste - is probably the most contentious issue at present.
2. The school falls well below the normal viability criteria having taken in only 37 pupils this year against a requirement of around 60. However, the school authorities base their argument for funding on 3 points:
  - i. Grant-aid is inevitable in due course because the numbers of children in Irish-medium primary schools is increasing.
  - ii. The growth pattern of the school should be sufficient to demonstrate that the school is a serious and sustained venture by committed people rather than a speculative undertaking.
  - iii. Having sanctioned Irish-medium primary education, the Government has a moral obligation to provide facilities at secondary level too.
3. The recent restatement of current policy in the reply to Mr Stott and associated correspondence with the school has greatly disappointed the school authorities who had expected some easing of the criteria after what they interpreted as a sympathetic hearing from Mr Hanley. They had initiated a judicial review and an allegation of maladministration through the Ombudsman as a result of this decision, but have postponed action on both while the review of policy on Irish-medium education continues. Feelings on this issue are running very high.

## VIABILITY CRITERIA

### BULL POINT

- We have already announced that the viability criterion for Irish medium primary schools in urban areas will be a potential enrolment of 100 rather than the former figure of 200.
- In practical terms this means that a school has only to show that it can achieve an intake at Primary 1 of 15 or 16 pupils and that this is likely to be sustained.
- This is lower than the figure of 20 required in the Republic of Ireland (though it has to be acknowledged that they only require a single year's intake as evidence of viability)

## Primary Education

4. There are 3 issues current here. These are:

- i. **The Newry School:** The school in Newry is desperately short of funds and may have to close unless it can obtain grant-aid from some source. The proponents of the school would like the viability criterion reduced from 100 pupils to 40 but this is a very unlikely outcome and it seems that the only way forward for the school would be for it to become a unit at an existing English-medium school.
- ii. **Satellite Units:** Last week the Belfast Board published a development proposal from the trustees of Bunscoil Phobal Feirste that the school in Twinbrook should become an 'outlier' or satellite of the Bunscoil.

This is feasible in statutory and practical terms and would provide a transitional arrangement to allow the unit to become established without cost to the parents while it developed a sufficient intake to become a free-standing school. However, now that a formal development proposal has been made, we cannot comment on the proposal until the 2-month period for objections has elapsed.

- iii. **Streams:** There has only been one Irish-medium stream created so far in Northern Ireland and this was at Steelstown Primary School in Derry in 1983. That stream has just separated from its original parent school to become a free-standing school but this was possible only because the trustees of Steelstown were willing to allow the separation. There are no statutory mechanisms to underpin or guarantee the rights of parents to have a stream evolve into a separate school and this lack of effective mechanisms is a current cause of concern and inhibits the use of streams as an approach to developing Irish-medium education.

VIABILITY CRITERIA

FURTHER REDUCTION TO 60

LINE TO TAKE

- We would not normally deliberately create schools as small as this.
- An enrolment of 60 allows only 3 teachers which means all classes will have at least 2 age groups.
- Small schools of this type need support from peripatetic teachers from the Boards' support services and this is much less readily available in Irish than in English.
- There would be a potentially awkward contrast with the situation of small, rural English medium schools where there is strong pressure for rationalisation, partly created by the need for expensive protection arrangements under LMS.
- Comparisons with Scotland and Wales are misleading: small schools created there serve distinct local Gaelic or Welsh speaking communities and the case for providing them is effectively the same as that for providing small, rural English medium schools here rather than Irish medium ones.
- Responsiveness to parental demand for Irish medium education must be balanced against the educational interests of children: the lower the viability criterion, the greater the risk of the school failing with consequent disruption to the children's education.
- Failure of an Irish medium school would be more disruptive than that of an English medium one because it would in practice require the children to transfer to English medium schools.

- Lower viability criteria would emphasise free-standing schools as the legitimate aim for Irish medium education but this model may not be achievable or even desirable outside Belfast and Londonderry.
  
- The option of an Irish stream or unit at an existing school may be a better one for new projects in rural areas or the smaller towns such as Newry.

SEED-FUNDING

LINE TO TAKE

- Current policy is for Government to respond to the demand from parents for specialised forms of education.
- To provide seed-funding would imply a more active approach of promoting or at least encouraging specialist demands.
- Seed-funding raises difficult practical problems. How long are schools to be given to prove their viability? How much funding should they get? Should they receive both capital and revenue funding? and so on.
- New integrated schools do not get seed-funding: instead they become grant-maintained schools in the normal way but their acquisition of that status is made subject to certain conditions. This, therefore, provides a different approach to supporting speculative school development.
- With proposed new integrated schools we in practice have expected them to be able to demonstrate that they would open with an absolute minimum of 25 pupils: more often they have had 30-35. They also have to satisfy the normal long-term viability criteria.

REVIEW OF POLICY

LINE TO TAKE

- The Department has initiated discussions with all the interests in Irish-medium education - including representatives of all the schools - as part of an overall review of the policies which apply to Irish.
- This will provide an opportunity for the Minister to consider in detail the full range of key issues, including those of funding and viability.
- There have been contacts with the authorities and other interests in the Republic of Ireland as part of the review and it should be possible to bring the scrutiny of existing policies to a conclusion within the next 2 to 3 months.
- There can be no guarantee of any change in policy - it may be that the outcome of the review will be to reaffirm existing practice but we cannot at present forecast the outcome.