

SCHOOLS PLANNING & PROVISION

FROM: ALAN McVEIGH

DATE: 28 February 1997

cc Secretary
Mr R D Hill
Dr M Browne
Mr B Hill
Mr M Whitten

To: PS/Minister

IRISH-MEDIUM SCHOOLS: REVISION OF VIABILITY CRITERIA

Purpose of Submission

1. This submission considers representations made to the Department during the consultation exercise on the viability tests to be applied to independent Irish-medium schools seeking grant-aided status; and recommends, for reasons of economy, effectiveness and consistency, that the viability criteria applied to Irish-medium schools should be increased as proposed in the consultation exercise, ie, to first year intakes of 25 and 100 respectively for primary and secondary schools.

Background

2. In February 1996, the Minister announced a review of the viability criteria for new integrated schools. The objective was to ensure that any new school seeking grant-maintained integrated status would be sufficiently robust in the longer term to provide effective education for its pupils and would not involve unreasonable public expenditure. Following the review, the viability criteria were revised upwards as follows:-

		PRE-REVIEW	POST-REVIEW
Primary Schools:	First year intake:	15 pupils	25 pupils
	Long-term enrolment target:	100 pupils	150-175 pupils
Secondary Schools:	First year intake:	60 pupils	100 pupils
	Long-term enrolment target:	300 pupils	500 pupils

The new viability criteria apply to schools in both an urban and rural setting. They were announced in July 1996.

Purpose of Review

3. On 16 July 1996 the Department wrote to those organisations involved in promoting Irish-medium education outlining proposals to bring the viability criteria applicable to new Irish-medium schools (which are the same as those previously applied to the integrated sector) into line with the new arrangements applying to integrated schools. Comments on the proposals were sought by 26 August. (See Annex A attached.) In the event the consultation period was extended to October to facilitate a number of organisations which wished to comment.

Responses to the Review

4. Written submissions were received from the Ultach Trust, Gaeloiliuint, the SDLP; and the Board of Governors of Bunscoil Cholmcille, Londonderry. In addition, officials met representatives of Conradh na Gaeilge on 29 October. A summary of the points made is attached at Annex B. A number of issues have emerged from the consultation exercise which require consideration.

Irish-medium/Integrated Comparison

5. A number of responses suggested that the Irish-medium and integrated sectors are different in character, and should therefore be treated differently. Irish language interests argue also that demand for integrated education is greater and as the Irish medium sector is dispersed and less mature it would be unreasonable to apply the same enrolment requirements for grant-aided status.

6. However, while Irish-medium and integrated schools are different, this does not make the case for different treatment in assessing their potential viability and affordability. Acceptance of this argument would open the door to claims for different treatment from other sectors which would be difficult to resist. From the Department's perspective the key issue is the statutory duty to ensure efficient education and avoid unreasonable public expenditure. This underlines the need for a consistent approach to viability criteria across all sectors.

7. A further consideration is that, under the Education Reform Order 1989, the Department has a duty to encourage and facilitate the development of integrated education. It has no similar duty in respect of Irish-medium schools. It would therefore be extremely difficult to defend arrangements which treated Irish-medium schools more favourably than integrated schools (or, indeed other school types).

The Revised Criteria

8. The Ultach Trust has suggested a slight variation in the proposed criteria. The Trust does not see an issue in the secondary sector where it feels it will probably be well into the next century before sufficient demand develops for a further Irish-medium secondary school. However, it regards the proposed first year P1 intake of 25 pupils in the primary sector as unreasonable. The Trust says that IM primary schools already have difficulty in meeting the existing figure of 14/15 pupils in P1, especially in rural areas; it has suggested that a long-term enrolment (LTE) of 150 and an annual intake of 21 pupils would be more appropriate. (It may not be a coincidence that this criterion would be in line with the existing viability criteria for Irish-medium primary schools in the Republic of Ireland.)

9. In the revised criteria announced for integrated primary schools the LTE was set "in the range 150-175 pupils". The lower end of the range is therefore acceptable as a viable enrolment. However, to be confident at the outset that schools are likely to achieve at least this figure, it is not unreasonable to set the initial intake test at 25 pupils. A failure to achieve this target in one or two years intake may not affect a school's ability to reach a long-term enrolment of at least 150, whereas failure to achieve the Trust's suggested intake of 21 pupils in one or two years could result in a school falling short of the required LTE.

Policy on Irish-medium Education

10. Irish-medium interests have complained that the Department does not have a policy on Irish-medium education and suggested that if it was to take the same supportive approach to Irish-medium schools as it does to integrated schools, there would be a much greater demand for Irish-medium education.

11. However, we can point to the fact that, as a general principle, the Department seeks to educate children in accordance with the wishes of their parents in so far as this is compatible with the provision of efficient instruction and training and the avoidance of unreasonable public expenditure (Article 44 of the 1986 Order). Our approach to both the integrated and Irish-medium sectors is to respond to parental demand. The review of viability criteria for both sectors is a reassessment of the minimum standards which must be met for payment of grant-aid to facilitate the development of Irish-medium and integrated schools, and also reflects the need to ensure effective use of the available financial resources.

12. There are alternative ways of enabling the development of Irish-medium education through, for example, Irish-medium streams in English-medium schools or satellite units of existing Irish-medium schools. We are reviewing existing practice in these areas and policy proposals will be brought forward within the next few months.

Summary

13. In considering proposals for new grant-aided schools the Department is statutorily bound to have regard to the provision of effective education and the avoidance of unreasonable public expenditure. These requirements underline the need for a consistent approach to viability criteria for the establishment of new schools in all sectors.

14. The Department does, of course, have a statutory duty to encourage and facilitate the development of integrated education (Article 64 of the 1989 Education Reform Order) which it does not have for Irish-medium education. This duty is discharged through grant-aid to NICIE and the first-day recurrent funding of integrated schools which satisfy the viability requirements in terms of numbers and balance. The viability criteria for new integrated schools have been revised recently to ensure that all such schools are robust at the outset and have the potential to reach minimum LTE's of 150 (primary) and 500 (secondary).

Recommendation

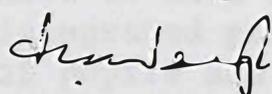
15. It is therefore recommended that to qualify for grant-aided status in future all Irish-medium schools should be required to meet the following enrolment criteria:-

	SECONDARY SCHOOLS	PRIMARY SCHOOLS
Minimum Annual intake (P1/Form 1)	25 pupils*	100 pupils*
Long-term enrolment	150-175 pupils	500 pupils

NB: grant-aided status for Irish-medium schools relates to recurrent and capital funding. It is therefore important that there is clear evidence that this intake will be sustained and it should therefore be achieved for at least 2 consecutive years before grant-aided status is granted.

16. Subject to the Minister's approval, we would propose to announce the revised criteria by letter - at official level - to the Irish language interests who responded to the consultation exercise. The Irish can be advised of the changes through Central Secretariat.

17. The Minister may wish to discuss.



A McVEIGH

Encs



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16 July 1996

IRISH MEDIUM SCHOOLS - VIABILITY CRITERIA

In considering development proposals from Irish-medium schools for grant-maintained status, the Department applies minimum enrolment criteria so that it can be satisfied about the potential long term viability of the school. In practice this has meant that primary schools are expected to be able to achieve a minimum first year intake of 15 pupils and demonstrate that they can sustain this intake to maintain a long-term enrolment of 100 pupils; and in the case of secondary schools the figures are 60 and 300 pupils respectively. This would normally require schools to achieve the first year intake target for 2 years before qualifying for grant-aided status.

As you may know, these enrolment targets are 50% less than the targets normally required for urban English-medium schools, in recognition of the dispersed catchment areas of Irish-medium schools. The same targets have been established for integrated schools for the same reason.

In light of the increasing pressures on the Department's budgets we have been reviewing whether special arrangements should continue to apply in the Irish-medium and integrated sectors. You will understand that we must have particular regard to the high per capita cost of pupils in the initial development years of a new school and the potential longer term costs of small primary and secondary schools.

Our view is that special arrangements continue to be appropriate in both sectors, but that the minimum enrolment criteria should be revised. You may know that in relation to the integrated sector the Minister has decided recently to change the viability criteria which new integrated schools will have to meet before they can be approved for grant aid. In future, new integrated primary schools will be required to achieve a first year intake of 25 pupils and a long-term enrolment within the range of 150-175 pupils; in the



ANNEX 1

case of secondary schools the viability requirements will be an opening enrolment of 100 pupils in Form 1 and a long-term enrolment of 500 pupils. In addition, consideration of any proposal to establish a new school must first have regard to the potential impact on existing integrated provision; to whether existing schools could be expanded to meet the projected demand; and to the possibility of the transformation to integrated status of existing controlled or maintained schools in the area. In determining these new criteria the Department has taken into account the distribution of existing integrated schools and their enrolment patterns, and the primary objective has been to ensure that any new school which seeks grant maintained status would be sufficiently robust to provide effective education for its pupils and would not involve unreasonable public expenditure.

We have also reviewed the minimum enrolment criteria for Irish medium schools, and it is the Department's view that the minimum targets for determining the potential viability of Irish-medium schools which seek approval for grant assisted status should also be raised. In future we propose that new Irish-medium primary schools will be expected to achieve a first year intake of 25 pupils and demonstrate that they can sustain a long-term enrolment within the range of 150-175 pupils. New secondary schools will be expected to achieve an opening enrolment of 100 pupils in Form 1 and demonstrate that they can sustain a long-term enrolment of 500 pupils. However, before final decisions are taken on the future arrangements the Department would welcome the views of your organisation. I would be grateful therefore if you could arrange to let me have any comments by 26 August 1996.

I have written in similar terms to Gaeloiliuint.

A McVEIGH



SUMMARY OF RESPONSES TO CONSULTATIONS ABOUT VIABILITY CRITERIA FOR IRISH-MEDIUM SCHOOLS

ULTACH TRUST

1. The Trust is strongly opposed to the proposals, except possibly where Irish-medium schools are well established, eg West Belfast. It suggests that the sector is still in its infancy and should be allowed to develop under the old viability criteria. A number of specific points are argued as follows.

Irish-Medium/Integrated Comparison

2. The Trust argues that these sectors are different, therefore different criteria should be applied to them. There is no network of Irish-medium schools similar to that which exists in the integrated sector. There is therefore no need to apply stiffer viability tests because alternative provision does not exist. In addition, the transformation option is not open to the Irish-medium sector in the same way that it is available to the integrated sector. The Trust also points out that integrated schools receive day-1 recurrent funding whereas Irish-medium schools do not.

Criteria

3. The Trust argues that, in the primary sector, an annual intake of 25 P1 pupils with an LTE in the range of 150 to 175 is unrealistic. An additional 3 pupils per year would give an LTE of almost 200 - the old urban viability figure. As the Irish-medium demand is now mostly in rural areas, the old rural criteria should apply. As a compromise, the Trust suggest an annual intake of 21 with an LTE of 150. The Trust suggests that the review is less relevant to the secondary sector because it is unlikely that there will be sufficient demand for another secondary school until well into the next decade.

Medium Streams

4. The Trust has difficulty with the concept of Irish-medium streams. It suggests these will be limited to the Catholic maintained sector which will concentrate development in the Roman Catholic population and thereby limit cross-community access.

GAELOILIUINT (GO)

5. GO's response to the proposals is less well argued than the Ultach Trust. Concern is expressed about the lack of an overall Irish-medium policy. It also argues that the Irish-medium and integrated sectors are different and should be treated differently. GO argues for a reduction rather than an increase in the criteria because of the dispersed demand for Irish-medium education. It suggests that "cultural" as well as economic factors should be taken into account in the Department's approach to the issue. It suggests that if a number of development officers were funded by DENI there would be a much greater demand for Irish-medium education.

SDLP

6. The SDLP is opposed to the proposals. It regards them as unrealistic and suggests that in the interests of cultural diversity and common justice the criteria should be such as to facilitate the establishment of Irish-medium schools.

GOVERNORS OF BUNSCOIL CHOLMCILLE, LONDONDERRY

7. The Governors are opposed to the proposals. The wishes of parents to express their culture should be respected.

CONRADH NA GAEILGE

8. Conragh na Gaeilge did not make written representations in response to the proposals. In discussion, similar concerns to those expressed by the Ultach Trust and Gaeloiliuint were voiced. Conradh na Gaeilge stated that it appeared to those involved with Irish-medium education that just when they felt they were about to make a breakthrough, Government placed more obstacles in their way. No matter

well-intentioned Government was, it was difficult to counter the perception that
was not well disposed to Irish-medium education.