



**COMHAIRLE
NA GAELSCOLAÍOCHTA**

**WRITTEN EVIDENCE TO THE SHARED/INTEGRATED
EDUCATION INQUIRY**

25/3/15

1.1. Comhairle na Gaelscolaíochta (CnaG) welcomes the opportunity to present written evidence to the Northern Ireland Assembly Education Committee on Shared/Integrated Education.

Introduction

1.2. CnaG is a Department of Education (DE) sponsored council responsible for the provision of advice pertaining to the development and provision of IME. CnaG was established as a direct consequence of the Good Friday Agreement (GFA), which placed a statutory duty on DE *“to encourage and facilitate the development IME”*. Article 89 of the 1998 Education Order that followed the GFA contained provision to allow DE to pay grants to any *“body appearing to the Department to have as an objective the encouragement or promotion of IME”*.

1.3. There are currently over 5,000 children in the IME sector from pre-school to post-primary level attending IME grant-maintained schools, IME Catholic maintained schools and units, IME controlled schools, IME voluntary grammar school (IME Stream) and IME voluntary non-maintained (IME Stream). In the IME sector, there are 32 voluntary pre-schools, 12 nursery units attached to IME provision, 29 stand-alone IME primary schools, 7 IME units attached to English-medium Primary schools, one stand-alone post-primary school and 3 IME streams attached to English-medium post-primary schools.

1.4. In 2011/12 there was a growth of 3.6% in the IME sector, in 2012/13 there was a 5.3% growth and the sector grew by 5.9% in 2013/14. CnaG calculates that the growth in 2014/15 will be 6.0%+. This would be greater if IME post-primary was available to IME primary pupils who lack easy access to this. Currently just above one third of IME pupils do not have easy access to IME post-primary provision.

1.5. IME schools cross a number of institutional school sectors. There are IME schools in the Controlled sector, in the Catholic Maintained sector and the Grant Maintained sector. The Irish-medium sector is co-educational, welcoming children from all religious backgrounds or none and all abilities. Although there are currently no IME schools within the Integrated sector C na G would welcome such a development in keeping with the wishes of parents and school communities.

1.6. It is CnaG’s role to represent the children, staff and schools in the IME sector as well as the wider IME community. We advise DE and others in relation to the specific needs of IME pupils, staff and schools. CnaG also lobbies on behalf of the sector and provides practical support and advice to parents wishing to establish IME provision in new areas, or those who wish to access IME.

Comments on Shared/Integrated Education

2.1. CnaG agrees with and supports the principles of inclusive shared education as a means of providing young people with opportunities to learn together and to reach their potential in educational achievements and as informed citizens and as a means of breaking down barriers arising from historic conflict.

2.2 CnaG coordinated a Shared Education project, *Together Through Culture*, funded by the International Fund for Ireland which involved pupils and teachers in schools learning about our shared Irish language heritage associated with surnames, placenames, songs, dance and the Irish language. The success of this project is evidence that the Irish-medium Education sector can contribute to the aims of Shared Education in a meaningful and productive way. Irish-medium Education could contribute to many issues associated with the principles of Shared Education including but not limited to the following: promoting greater understanding of and respect for the Irish language and other languages and cultures; wider cultural experience; a greater understanding of lifestyle differences and a greater understanding of the benefits of bilingualism and multilingualism.

2.3 CnaG advises the Department of Education that Irish-medium participation in Shared Education developments must acknowledge and respect the language dynamic of the school. It would be unfair to expect Irish-medium schools to engage in Shared Education experiences solely through the medium of English. Opportunities must be planned strategically to ensure that respect for the ethos and language dynamic of the pupils and teachers is secured.

The nature and definition of Shared Education and Integrated Education across all educational phases – including consideration of the need for a formal statutory definition and an obligation in statute to facilitate and encourage Shared Education;

3.1 CnaG advises that an agreed definition of Shared Education promoted by the Department of Education should be amended to reflect the fact that the education system in NI has both monolingual and bilingual settings and that the Department of Education in its statutory duty to facilitate and encourage Irish-medium Education must ensure that Shared Education is not delivered through one language, namely English.

Key barriers and enablers for Shared Education and Integrated Education;

Barriers

4.1. The majority of schools in Northern Ireland are monolingual English-medium schools. However, a creative approach which is sensitive to the Irish-medium ethos can mitigate this barrier in order to deliver authentic and respectful Shared Education opportunities for all pupils, schools and communities.

Enablers

4.2. A range of research on the benefits of bilingualism indicates that bilingual children are, on the whole, more open to cultural diversity, due to the cultural enrichment they experienced. Irish-medium Education facilitates greater tolerance and understanding of other cultures; a truly shared educational experience.

4.3. In the context of Shared Education, 72% of all IME primary schools are independent, outside of the controlled or catholic maintained sector and have pupils from Catholic,

Protestant and other backgrounds. Irish-medium Education is a choice for everyone in every community. Currently 6% of IME primary schools are within the controlled sector, 22% within the catholic maintained sector and 72% within the other maintained sector. Irish-medium Education is a linguistic choice for parents and pupils which can be catered for within all sectors. It actively encourages communities to avail of the advantages of bilingualism.

- 4.4. The system of immersion education which is used in Irish-medium Education is recognised globally for excellence. Not only does it deliver on Shared Education, but on shared heritage, language, traditions and history. It also delivers on the Department of Education's core vision, *"Every young person achieving to his or her full potential at each stage of his or her development."*
- 4.5. Immersion education is acknowledged as most effective way of developing second language fluency in children and young people. In the context of Shared Education, fluency in both English as a major global language and Irish as a minority and native language has potential to bring communities together in a shared future as outlined in the Programme for Government.

What priorities and actions need to be taken to improve sharing and integration.

- 5.1 Definition of Shared Education must be revised to reflect linguistic diversity and to deliver the Department of Education's statutory duties to encourage and facilitate Irish-medium Education;
- 5.2 Shared Education pilot projects should be initiated, funded and evaluated which take cognisance of the nature and the specific needs of the Irish-medium school sector.