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Education and Training
Boards Ireland
*Boird Oideachais agus
Oiliúna Éireann*

Submission to Interdepartmental Committee for Island Development

Prepared by **Education and Training Boards Ireland**

February 2020

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Introduction

Education & Training Boards Ireland (ETBI) is the national representative body for Ireland's sixteen Education and Training Boards. Education & Training Boards (ETBs) were established 1 July 2013 to provide education and training provision in communities throughout Ireland. ETBs have a particular responsibility to support and provide for Gaeltacht schools/colleges under their care. The number of these schools has increased in recent years.

Five of those schools are located on Islands and operate under the Gaeltacht Recognition Scheme.

Education & Training Board	School	Island
Galway & Roscommon	Coláiste Ghobnait	Inis Oírr
	Coláiste Naomh Eoin	Inis Meáin
	Coláiste Naomh Éinne	Inis Mór
Donegal	Coláiste Phobail Cholmille	Oileán Thóraí
	Gairmscoil Mhic Dhiarmada	Árainn Mhór

Schools' Context

Island schools are at the heart of Ireland's Island communities. Without schools, primary and post-primary, island communities would not survive. After years of depopulation and community decline, it has been recognised that schools are at the core of new growth and development. Schools not only have an educational purpose, but it is understood that the viability of these islands cannot be assured without strong schools to nurture the youth. Without them, the isolated community would decline.

The challenges faced by island schools are not the same as those faced by 'small' schools, even though many are inevitably the same. Certain challenges (e.g. teacher allocation, access, school status etc.) must be faced in post-primary island schools to provide an appropriate and fair education to students in these schools.

Discussion Paper – Island Policy

Education and Training Boards Ireland very much welcomes this consultation process. It has long since been recognised that there is a huge need for Island policy that would serve every aspect of island life, education in particular. ETBI is concerned that there was a focus on the following topics during the consultation workshops – Depopulation, Economic development, Climate change, Health and wellbeing, An Ghaeilge, Community empowerment, Transport, Digital connectivity, Fuel/Energy supply – and no mention of Education. ETBI believes that island schools and education are at the heart of island life and a starting point of the next generation's journey. The Department of Education and

Skills recognised how important and central island schools are when the Joint-Committee on Education and Skills was commissioned to prepare a report of *The Challenges Facing Island Schools*, published February 2018. ETBI recommends that the recommendations made in that report would be taken on board as a policy is being drafted. The Inter-departmental Committee should include Education as a priority during this process.

In the discussion paper itself, ETBI recognises that many aspects relating to education were referenced and we commend that.

- Reference was made to possibilities in relation to technology as a tool for learning and teaching. ETBI very much supports the E-Hub Pilot Project and there is a great need that this project would be extended to include further subjects. ETBI recommends that the Inter-Departmental Committee would work with the the Department of Education & Skills to undertake this.
- Reference was made to the Report regarding The Challenges facing Island Schools, February 2018. ETBI requests that the Inter-Departmental Committee appreciates and implements the recommendations without delay.
- Reference was made to the Policy on Gaeltacht Education and ETBI commends the efforts being made by the Gaeltacht Education Unit to support Gaeltacht schools, and island schools in particular.
- Reference was made to the role of Údarás na Gaeltachta and its responsibility to supporting island communities in relation to certain matters, for example, education. ETBI hopes that the Inter-Departmental Committee and Údarás na Gaeltachta will work together to support island schools in the future.
- Reference was made to educational facilities and the national broadband plan. Currently, some of our schools are struggling with facilities, or lack thereof, for example, a sports' hall. Equally, weak broadband connections are interfering with the progress of students on the islands. ETBI requests that these challenges will be resolved imminently.
- Reference was made to teacher allocation and budgets. It is recognised that progress has been made, with thanks to the Policy for Gaeltacht Education. The schools are grateful for this support but it is not enough. ETBI requests that the Inter-Departmental Committee recognises the exceptional context of these schools. Further supports are needed to ensure that the same equal opportunities are being provided to all students in the country.

Action Plan for Education 2019

The Department of Education & Skills published The Action Plan for Education 2019 - ***Cumasú – Empowering through Learning*** to set out a plan and goals for the education of students in Ireland for the period 2019 - 2021. Students from the Islands are a central part of that cohort and ETBI recommends that the Interdepartmental Committee does not ignore these goals as they set to work. One of the values outlined in this document is **'We place the learner at the centre of education**

strategy and policy development and value learning as a public good, in light of its core role in the development, cohesion and wellbeing of an inclusive society.’

Goals - Cumasú – Empowering through Learning	
<p>GOAL 1 We will shape a responsive education and training system that meets the needs and raises the aspirations of all learners.</p>	<p>ETBI requests that students from the Islands to be prioritised as the future of the Islands.</p>
<p>GOAL 2 We will advance the progress of learners at risk of educational disadvantage and learners with special educational needs in order to support them to achieve their potential.</p>	<p>ETBI requests that the obstacles and challenges facing students in island schools to be recognised and the necessary supports be provided.</p>
<p>GOAL 3 We will equip education and training providers with the skills and support to provide a quality learning experience.</p>	<p>ETBI proposes that necessary supports will be given to GRETB and Donegal ETB to appropriately address the needs of the Island schools.</p>
<p>GOAL 4 We will intensify the relationships between education and the wider community, society and the economy.</p>	<p>ETBI wishes that the central place of schools on the islands would be recognised.</p>
<p>GOAL 5 We will lead in the delivery of strategic direction and supportive systems in partnership with key stakeholders in education and training.</p>	<p>ETBI wishes to acknowledge that we and the ETBs are willing to work in partnership with the Interdepartmental Committee in order to support their efforts for the benefit of students.</p>

The Greatest Challenges

The 5 island schools provide high-quality education for their students despite facing challenges and constraints every day. All the schools have an ambitious vision and plans that they would like to implement, but with the current situation, they cannot achieve all of their goals. The Schools’

Management recognise that without resolving these challenges and putting extra supports in place, they cannot offer the same opportunities for their students as for those operating on the mainland.

The Greatest Challenges for Island Schools

Teacher Supply

It does not suit everyone to live on an island and to be segregated from life on the mainland. It is very difficult to attract teachers who are competent in Irish. As a result, very often there is regular change in teaching staff. There needs to be some sort of incentive to assist teachers with the extra costs associated with living on an island. Therefore, we ask that the **island allowance** that was available to teachers employed pre-2011 be restored. There is a recommendation in the report that this allowance be restored (Joint Committee for Education & Skills 2018) but this has yet to happen.

Finding **substitute teachers** to cover sick leave or general absences is a major problem. Generally, the principal and the other teachers must step in to cover classes (very often, this means much more than just subbing or supervising).

Even though every effort is made to recruit and attract teachers who are competent in Irish to the islands, it is very difficult to find teachers who can teach through the medium of Irish. The **teaching through Irish allowance** should be restored to tackle this.

Choice of Subjects

It is almost impossible to provide a **full curriculum (through Irish)** for students in this context. Students are entitled to the same provisions that are available on the mainland.

As a result of changing staff from year to year on the island schools, problems arise in relation to planning and **subject choice** for students. The schools should be in a position where they can provide effective subject choice for students so that they can enjoy a rich learning experience. The extension of the E-Hub Pilot Project is fundamental to this.

Teacher Allocation

There is no DES circular in relation to the needs of post-primary schools on the islands. The island schools apply for Curricular Concessions or Supplementary Teaching Support every year for general school needs. An extra allocation of 1.5 teacher is permitted for post-primary island schools but that should be increased to 2.5 WTE (as recommended by 2018 report).

Teacher allocation is based on student enrolment. On an island, student numbers are significantly low. This model does not recognise the challenges. It is impossible to provide a broad curriculum for students based on this model. Students on the islands should be afforded the same opportunities as those on the mainland.

These schools will never progress if allocation is based on numbers alone. If there is a deficit in teaching staff, the school has no choice but to offer a limited curriculum, which only limits the success of the school.

Many schools do not have 'small school' status and therefore these small schools do not receive the 1.5WTE allocation for small schools, even though they are among the smallest schools in the country.

With the new allocation model of 0.9WTE for **Special Educational Needs**, there is no certainty that there won't be a reduction for smaller schools. This potentially poses serious implications for the provision of learning supports for schools on the islands, based solely on their size.

Education & Training Boards have made applications to that teacher allocations in the islands be increased from 1.5 WTE, 2.5 ex quota.

In the case of one school with has an Aonad, there are particular challenges in so far as the schools is **providing two services** (All-Irish education and All-English education). They do not have enough resources to support the Aonad and can result in deficits. Currently, the school is unable to offer all subjects through the medium of Irish.

In the case of island schools, **sharing teachers** between schools is near to impossible as it is impractical to travel between schools to make up further hours.

Irish/Bilingual Grant

It would greatly assist island schools if the bilingual grant @€103/student was made available. It is unfair that this grant is unavailable to ETB schools while it is granted to voluntary secondary schools.

Budget

Financial matters torment schools all around the country but there is an extra headache for island schools. Services coming to the islands cost almost double. Very often, travel or an overnight stay is included in the cost. When attending national events, at least one overnight, if not two, is required, and because student numbers are so low, it is unfair to burden them with the extra costs and therefore the school makes up the shortfall. This erodes school budgets.

Budgets for island schools need to be increased in order to handle the true costs associated with their context.

Scholarships

The islands are at a geographical disadvantage, which means that the number of student sin the catchment area will never be enough to sustain the school and create an atmosphere conducive to teenage life. For years, island schools have operated at a national level, offering opportunities to students from the mainland to avail of education through Irish on the island.

There are currently thirty scholarships paid by the Department for Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht for students who are not from Gaeltacht areas to attend schools on the islands. The three schools on the Aran islands currently participate in the scheme. This is one of the most beneficial schemes ever brought to the islands, not just for language acquisition but also to ensure the viability of the islands.

Applications have been made by schools to the Department of Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht to double the number of scholarships to 60 at a cost of €5,000 per scholarship. This was also recommended in the 2018 report also. There has been no further development on this matter.

Supports are also needed for the other islands in terms of scholarships. Take, for example, there are no scholarships available on Tory Island because of accommodation difficulties etc. The DCHG was asked to assist in order to start the scholarship scheme on the island. ETBI recommends that this position be reviewed. It would be a great opportunity for students from the mainland to spend a while on these islands; and it would greatly benefit the island in terms of socialisation and students' learning, one of the great benefits of the scheme.

DEIS status

It is difficult not to notice the disadvantages associated with island schools, schools situated on rocks, miles out from the coast, in the middle of the Atlantic, to tend to the needs of a unique community. The daily operation of these schools relies on access and weather. Extra efforts must be made to access the islands and often the schools are left behind in terms of services. Island schools want to be recognised as DEIS schools and avail of the advantages associated with that status. ETBI recommends that island schools be granted DEIS status immediately.

Depopulation

Island population is decreasing rapidly, and this is very much affecting schools now. Along with that, the number of students coming from the mainland has also decreased as a result of a belief that schools cannot provide for a broad curriculum. All the schools report that this problem is affecting them.

Technology

There generally isn't a good broadband service available on the islands. A good broadband service is needed in the schools and the houses for students to benefit from the use of technology both at school and at home. In the 21st century, there is a great need to address the needs of this generation who are ahead of the game in terms of technology. It is unfair that island students would be neglected in this regard. ETBI recommends that the islands be prioritised for roll-out of Broadband plan.

Small School Status

In all five island schools, school leaders are teaching above and beyond the required hours as set out in Circular 0081/2007. In small schools, most of the planning etc. falls to the school management (DEIS plan/Gaeltacht education plan/HSC/SCP/ICT/Health & Safety etc). Small schools have the same duties as big schools except they don't have the same level of human resources available to them.

Many of the island schools are not recognised as 'small schools' and therefore these small schools don't receive the 1.5WTE that is granted to small schools, even though they are among the smallest schools in the country. ETBI request that all island schools be granted 'small school' status.

Conclusion

It is very clear that there are many challenges facing island schools and that the island setting requires greater effort. There is a need to evaluate how to preserve the richness and importance of island schools and how to develop the most appropriate supports; including teacher supply, support team, budget, scholarships and allowances.

It is recommended that the appropriate allowances for island teachers are reviewed in order to attract them to live and work on remote islands. It is recommended that the DEIS model be assessed to ensure that there would be consistency and automatically awarded DEIS status to island schools in recognition of their many disadvantages

Education & Training Boards Ireland thank the Department of Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht and the Inter-departmental Committee on Island Development for giving us the opportunity to participate in this important consultation. We hope that this submission will be considered and that every effort is made to support the island schools and their students.

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