

FROM: S PEOVER
POLICY DIVISION

DATE: 17 February 1994

Mr Jackson
Mr Leonard
Miss [unclear]
Miss Donnelly

cc Mr Canavan - CCRU
(w/o attachment)

Mr Barbour
Anglo-Irish Secretariat

1. As requested by the Irish side at yesterday afternoon's meeting, I enclose a copy of the Irish language version of the consultation document on the programme of study for Irish in Irish medium schools.
2. If there is anything further the Irish side wishes, please let me know.



S Peover

DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
INTEROFFICE MEMORANDUM

Mr Jackson
Ms Leonard
Miss Donnell (M)

Date: 08-Feb-1994 09:25am GMT
From: ELEANOR PLUNKETT
PLUNKETT
Dept: TYPING SERVICES
Tel No: 2325

TO: Co-ordination Branch (COORD)

Subject: BBC QUESTION TIME

IRISH MEDIUM EDUCATION

Line to Take

The Government already funds 3 Irish medium primary schools with almost 700 pupils. It remains prepared to respond to demand for Irish medium education where that demand is sufficient to sustain viable schools.

Bull Points

- The viability requirements for Irish medium schools were halved in 1992 (from enrolments of 200 to 100 for primary schools and 600 to 300 for secondary schools).
- Schools do not actually have to reach these figures to receive funding - rather all they have to show is that their annual intakes will eventually generate those levels of total enrolment.

CAUTION

- New Irish medium schools will take at least 2-3 years to prove their viability and receive funding whereas new integrated schools can be funded from the outset: this reflects the Government's policy of actively facilitating integrated education. Policy for Irish medium education is to respond to demand not to stimulate it.

IRISH MEDIUM EDUCATION

Policy and Legislation

1. The underlying policy of Government 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 Education (NI) Order).
2. 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. The desirable minimum enrolments for urban and rural primary schools are 200 and 100 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.
3. 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.

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 bhFal 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.

Other Developments

8. 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.

9. A primary school in Newry 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.

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.