

# Schools participating in the Gaeltacht School Recognition Scheme:

## Key Messages from Inspectorate Advisory Visits

### Summary Report



September to December 2018

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## Introduction

This report presents an overview of the key messages from advisory visits carried out by the Inspectorate of the Department of Education and Skills to support primary and post-primary schools participating in the Gaeltacht School Recognition Scheme (*Scheme*) during the period September to December 2018.

A key commitment of the Policy on Gaeltacht Education 2017-2022 is to provide schools in Gaeltacht language-planning areas with the option to seek recognition as Gaeltacht schools on the basis of implementing specific language-based criteria<sup>1</sup> and on condition that they are participating in the language-planning processes provided for under the Gaeltacht Act 2012.

During the school year 2018/19, the 105 primary and 28 post-primary schools participating in the *Scheme* are implementing actions to meet the language-based criteria for immersion education<sup>2</sup> in order to obtain recognition as a Gaeltacht school. The six-step school self-evaluation (SSE) process in *School Self-Evaluation Guidelines 2016-2020: Primary* underpins the implementation process.

The purpose of the Inspectorate advisory visits is to support schools in the *Scheme* across differing sociolinguistic contexts to implement their action plans, to strengthen the quality of education through the medium of Irish, and to increase the use of Irish in the school community. The Inspectorate advisory visits took place alongside the professional development support provided by An Chomhairle um Oideachas Gaeltachta agus Gaelscolaíochta (COGG) and other support services.<sup>3</sup>

This report summarises the key messages conveyed by school personnel during the Inspectorate advisory visits on the first steps of implementation of immersion education, as required by the *Scheme*. Section one relates to the primary schools participating in the *Scheme* whilst section two provides an account of the key messages reported at post-primary level.

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<sup>1</sup> The language-based criteria required to obtain Gaeltacht school recognition are set out in Circular 0033/2017 (primary) and Circular 0034/2017 (post-primary).

<sup>2</sup> In the context of a Gaeltacht school, immersion education refers to the practice of teaching all curriculum areas entirely through the medium of Irish, apart from the English curriculum. Early-immersion refers to the practice of implementing a two-year total immersion programme through Irish in infant classes, where English is not taught during this period.

<sup>3</sup> Other national support services for schools:

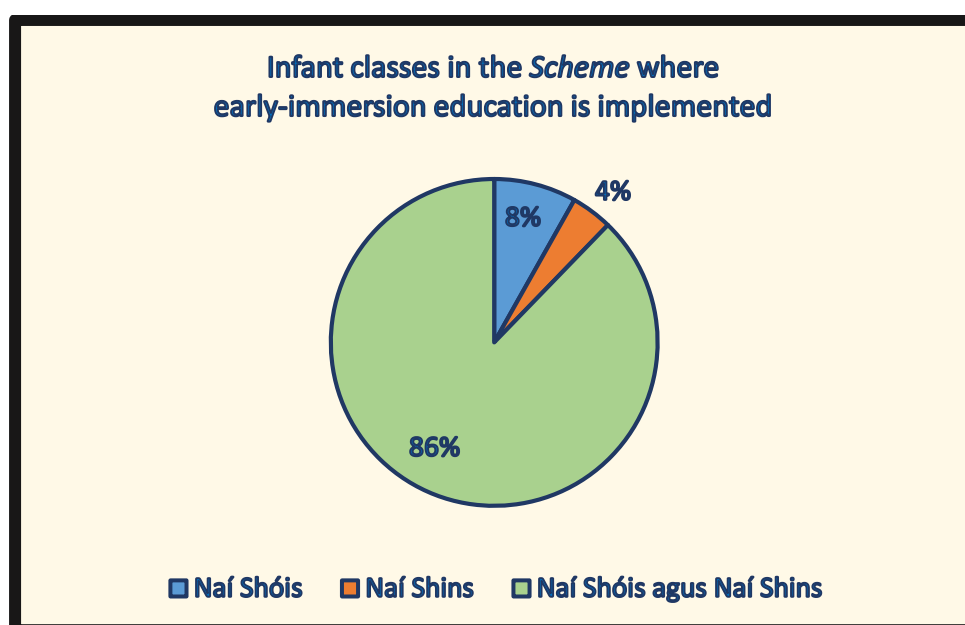
- Professional Development Service for Teachers ([www.pdst.ie](http://www.pdst.ie))
- Junior Cycle for Teachers ([www.jct.ie](http://www.jct.ie))
- Centre for School Leadership ([www.cslireland.ie](http://www.cslireland.ie))

## 1. The key messages from primary schools participating in the Scheme

The following are the key messages arising from the discussions inspectors had with principals and staff during the advisory visits to primary schools.

### 1.1 Early-immersion education in infant classes

It was reported that early-immersion education is being implemented in junior and senior infants in almost all primary schools participating in the *Scheme* (Table 1). It is praiseworthy that these primary schools had already initiated the implementation of immersion education from the beginning of the *Scheme* or earlier. In the small number of primary schools where there are no infant classes, these schools have begun to implement immersion education in the other classes. The progress that pupils in these classes are making in learning Irish is heartening and encouraging for the primary schools involved. Schools indicated that the success to date in the implementation of early immersion in Irish motivates other pupils to speak Irish and that, as a result, a very positive attitude towards the language is being fostered in the school.



**Table 1:** Infant classes in the Scheme where early-immersion education is reported to be implemented

The valuable strategies being used to promote early-immersion education in infant classes include:

- total immersion in Irish to provide listening and speaking opportunities for pupils of different abilities in the language<sup>4</sup>
- early intervention strategies focused on learning and using the language
- implementing *Aistear* (early childhood curriculum framework) with a strong language input from teachers and from language assistants
- collaborative teaching between the class teacher, the language support teacher for Irish and the special education teacher to develop pupils' early-literacy and early-numeracy skills, for example, interventions such as *Literacy Lift-off* and *Ready, Set, Go*.

<sup>4</sup> Language Assistants (*Cúntóirí Teanga*) are operating under the aegis of the Department of Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht.

## 1.2 Immersion education in other classes

School personnel indicated to inspectors that teachers are applying many strategies to promote immersion education in other classes in the primary school, for example:

- the development of various aspects of teaching and learning Irish in implementing immersion education on a whole-school basis
- teaching one subject or more through the medium of Irish, with a particular emphasis on teaching the specific Irish-language terminology of that subject
- promoting Irish reading on a whole-school basis, for example, real books in Irish available for each pupil to read at his/her own ability level; graded books for the teaching and learning of reading and parallel books for personal reading. Parents are informed of pupils' progress and this process enhances home/school communication. It was indicated that this was working well in small schools.
- where a bilingual approach or immersion education is already implemented, it was reported that teachers in these schools are directing their support towards Irish-language enrichment and fluency
- assessment strategies used that included: establishing a baseline for pupils' language level by recording their language/reading and using assessment profiles to design a language programme.

## 1.3 The language of communication amongst pupils

It was reported that there are many approaches being employed by primary schools participating in the *Scheme* to enable pupils interact with each other in class and in the playground through the medium of Irish. For example:

- identifying and teaching specific language structures required by pupils to communicate with each other through the medium of Irish
- supporting children in identifying common errors in the language, promoting pupils' self-correction and correct usage of the language, intensive teaching and continuing practice of the language
- senior pupils having leadership and ownership for promoting communicative Irish in the school
- incentive strategies being used to support pupils' use of the language, for example, individual and group rewards for speaking Irish
- promoting Irish in the playground, for example:
  - playground games and activities through Irish organised for pupils
  - a booklet compiled to support the recitation of playground rhymes
  - having a specific playground for infants and for other pupils willing to speak Irish
  - specific supervision of pupils' language behaviour in the playground
  - the language assistant having a specific role in the promotion of Irish in the playground.
- involving pupils in competitions, Irish festivals etc to promote pupils' awareness of Irish language and culture.

## 1.4 The use of human and material resources

### 1.4.1 Use of language-support hours for Irish

It was apparent from the advisory visits that almost all primary schools participating in the *Scheme* were very satisfied with the additional support hours for Irish. Primary schools reported to inspectors

that support teachers for Irish are working collaboratively with mainstream teachers in implementing immersion education and in promoting Irish in the schools.

Personnel in primary schools indicated that the support teachers for Irish facilitate differentiation in teaching and learning for learners, native speakers, pupils with high levels of Irish-language proficiency and pupils with various learning needs in the language including those with no Irish. In some schools, the support teachers for Irish teaches the specific language of other curriculum areas to support pupils in learning other subjects through the medium of Irish.

The following is an example of the best practice reported in relation to the use of the language support hours for Irish in primary schools:

- group teaching for pupils withdrawn from mainstream classes
- team teaching by the mainstream class teachers and special education teachers to implement various interventions in literacy and numeracy through the medium of Irish, especially in early-immersion
- facilitation of teaching and learning of Irish in small groups in mainstream classes
- assisting senior pupils in establishing Irish-language committees to support other pupils in practising the language
- supporting the promotion of Irish as the communicative language of the school.

#### 1.4.2 Teaching and learning resources to support immersion education

It was reported that the resources used to assist in the implementation of immersion education include reading books, library books, the *Séideán Sí* scheme, language games, Irish books for other curriculum subjects, phonic schemes, information and communication technology materials, curriculum support materials from the national support services for teachers, and teaching and learning resources designed by the teachers themselves.

#### 1.5 Supports from parents, community and other schools

In most of the primary schools visited, it was reported by teachers and school leaders that parents have a very good attitude towards immersion education and that their support had increased since the commencement of the *Scheme*. Irish classes for parents have been organised in some Gaeltacht areas and various efforts have been made to support parents in speaking Irish in the school environs. Many principals and teachers reported that they are members of the local Gaeltacht language-planning committee. This should facilitate a collaborative approach between the school and its community in implementing the language-based criteria of the *Scheme*.

Co-operation and support for primary schools is being provided from other sources also, for example:

- co-operation between primary schools in similar contexts with regard to resources and good practice
- teacher and principal networks are being established
- regular communication between principals of primary and post-primary schools in certain Gaeltacht areas
- native Irish speakers with the local dialect supporting Irish in the school, for example, facilitating discussion, conversation, reading, book reviews, language games and storytelling during the visit to the local library.

## 1.6 Looking ahead

It is apparent that a very positive attitude is being fostered in schools in relation to immersion education and that the majority of parents are providing very good support. To further enhance the good work already in place and to ensure the success of teaching and learning through the medium of Irish, the inspectors made a range of recommendations to primary schools in the *Scheme* during the advisory visits.

The recommendations most frequently made to support primary schools participating in the *Scheme* included:

- to regularly monitor the implementation of immersion education
- to assess and analyse pupils' learning outcomes
- to promote pupils' self-assessment and to give pupils ownership of their own learning
- to ensure that the additional language support hours for Irish are being used as effectively as possible to support the implementation of immersion education
- to develop and disseminate expertise in immersion education and in second-language teaching amongst teachers
- to keep parents informed of the school's progress in implementing immersion education
- to create a print-rich environment with Irish-language signage clearly displayed to reflect the school's commitment to immersion education
- to make greater use of the available resources, for example, *Draft Guide for Immersion Education in Primary Schools: Indicators of Good Practice*; *Primary Language Curriculum* and *Looking at Our School 2016: A Quality Framework for Primary Schools*
- to create school/principal/teacher networks in order to share good practice on the implementation of immersion education in schools.

## 2. The key messages from the advisory visits to post-primary schools participating in the Scheme

The following are the key messages arising from the discussions inspectors had with principals and staff during the advisory visits to post-primary schools.

### 2.1 Immersion education

Education is being provided completely through Irish, as had been the case to date, in a large number of post-primary schools in the Gaeltacht, particularly in the stronger Gaeltacht regions. In other post-primary schools, there has been a development in relation to the number of subjects being taught through the medium of Irish with first years being taught entirely through Irish, and a specific number of subjects being taught through the medium of Irish in the senior cycle of one post-primary school. It was reported that management in post-primary schools has succeeded in giving parents a greater understanding of Gaeltacht education and that parents are more receptive to the benefits of immersion education.

The following school approaches are supporting immersion education developments in post-primary schools since the beginning of the *Scheme*:

- post-primary teacher recruitment policy developed that focuses on the appointment of teachers with Irish

- specific support provided by the post-primary school to support teachers' in improving their the proficiency skills in Irish. In a number of post-primary schools, teachers, principals and deputy principals are accessing professional development and post-graduate courses in Higher Education Institutes on Irish-medium and Gaeltacht education. Teachers in other post-primary schools are attending Irish-language classes to improve their fluency, language accuracy and grammar skills.
- team teaching is being used to enhance, share and model good practice in immersion education in some post-primary schools.
- promotion and dissemination of information by post-primary schools on what is being implemented in terms of immersion and Gaeltacht education
- participation of post-primary schools in a comprehensive range of Gaeltacht and Irish-language competitions that enhance the Irish language and increase its use.

## 2.2 The language of communication amongst students

One of the greatest challenges identified in the post-primary schools visited is the use of Irish as the language of communication amongst students, even in the post-primary schools with a high number of native Irish speakers. There are significant challenges in encouraging teenagers to speak Irish amongst themselves in social situations in the school environment. Despite this, post-primary schools are eagerly and diligently addressing these challenges. It was reported that this was the first time for many post-primary schools to focus specifically on this issue as a priority. It was also reported that, in some post-primary schools, small changes have been noted in students' language behaviour, particularly as it pertains to the use of Irish in interactions between first-year students, transition-year students and, in a few schools, the interaction between students and teachers.

Amongst strategies identified in post-primary schools to encourage students, the following were noted:

- lunch-time Irish club, student common room for conversation and games through Irish
- a day for first-year students in an adventure centre outside of school where they converse with and get to know each other through the medium of Irish
- an allocated corner of the post-primary school where Irish only is spoken
- an Irish-language committee for students established to provide them with an active role in promoting the speaking and use of the language. This practice has been established in many post-primary schools where a strong emphasis is placed on students' own leadership role. They are given an opportunity to provide an input into the school's strategy to promote and strengthen the use of Irish.
- students' council given an opportunity in other post-primary schools to give their opinions on strategies to enhance the use of Irish in the school
- language and cultural awareness sessions conducted with the students. In one post-primary school, for example, a module on Gaeltacht citizenship was developed and a session was conducted with students on their cultural identity as Gaeltacht students
- mentoring system between transition year and first-year students with a particular emphasis on encouraging the use of Irish
- One post-primary school invited past-pupils to speak to the students about the importance of Irish and the benefits of being a native or fluent speaker of Irish drawing from their own experience of third level education
- a points' system linked, in the case of two post-primary schools, to the school's efforts to increase students' use of Irish



- after-school clubs with classes through the medium of Irish, for example, cookery classes, conversation groups and sports' classes
- additional emphasis on participation in Gaeltacht/Irish competitions such as Oireachtas na Gaeilge, Scléip, Gael Linn debates, radio and TG4 competitions, poetry workshops, drama, participation in local Gaeltacht celebrations through Irish
- links fostered with post-primary Gaeltacht schools and Gaelcholáistí to showcase other post-primary schools where Irish is spoken as the main language.

It was reported by teachers and school leaders that these strategies to strengthen and extend the use of Irish are working well in many post-primary schools. This work is ongoing and, although some schools understand that there are challenges, they are confident that they are gradually making small changes, changes that can be further developed.

## 2.3 The use of human and material resources

### 2.3.1 Use of language-support hours for Irish

At the start of the school year, there was a lack of understanding in a small number of post-primary schools in relation to how best to use the additional language support hours for Irish. During the advisory visits, it was indicated that the additional hours should be used primarily to support teaching and learning in line with the *Advisory Note for Schools* issued by the Gaeltacht Education Unit in early September 2018.

The following is an example of the best practice reported in relation to the use of the language support hours for Irish in post-primary schools:

- in-class support for learners and support by means of withdrawing groups from the mainstream class in many post-primary schools
- specific support in language enrichment for native language speakers and students with a very high level of proficiency in Irish in some post-primary schools
- additional support provided for students in developing their Irish-language accuracy skills
- a particular focus on local dialects, local heritage and tradition, for example, stories, songs and folklore
- targeted support for the implementation of the *Specification Junior Cycle Irish (2017)* for students with limited proficiency in Irish
- work begun on teaching another specific curricular area through the medium of Irish and on an expansion of the number of subjects available through the medium of Irish
- provision of additional Irish-language classes for students
- support for students in terms of developing their communication skills in Irish and facilitating those skills by organising games and social events
- supporting subject teachers through team teaching
- planning for the implementation and monitoring of the action plan for immersion education.

Some post-primary schools have established a core team who is primarily responsible for the *Scheme* and an update is included as an agenda item at staff meetings. In these post-primary schools, meetings are held regularly on the implementation and progress of the action plan. This is an area for development in other post-primary schools where the whole staff is not fully informed about the *Scheme*.

### 2.3.2 Teaching and learning resources to support immersion education

It was reported in some post-primary schools that the grant for additional Irish-language resources had been used to purchase Irish-reading books and language games to encourage communication in Irish amongst students. Other post-primary schools had not yet used the grant to purchase Irish-language resources. In other cases, inspectors gave advice to post-primary schools in relation to the correct use of the grants, as outlined in Circular 0022/2018.

### 2.4 Supports from parents, community and other schools

Similar to the feedback received from primary schools, it was reported that parental support towards immersion education had increased since the commencement of the *Scheme*. It was reported that a few post-primary schools organised meetings with first year parents to inform them of the *Scheme* and of the progress in the implementation of immersion education in the post-primary school.

It was apparent that post-primary schools in the *Scheme* are at different stages in relation to the development of links with Gaeltacht language-planning committees and the local community in fostering the extended use of Irish outside of the school. Some post-primary schools are organising Irish-language classes for parents, whilst in other cases, these classes are being organised locally.

### 2.5 Challenges to overcome

A number of post-primary schools indicated that they faced particular challenges regarding the recruitment of teachers who have high levels of Irish language proficiency, particularly for the teaching of minor subjects, such as Home Economics, Physics and Music. These challenges were reported to be more acute on island post-primary schools where, in some instances, there may be no other alternative but to recruit teachers who are not entirely competent in Irish.

### 2.6 Looking ahead

In general, the feedback from post-primary schools during advisory visits was very positive. Whilst some post-primary schools were concerned at the beginning of the *Scheme* that they would not have the full support of parents and students, more recent feedback reveals that the opposite is emerging in many Gaeltacht areas. Many post-primary schools were very satisfied with the positive attitude of parents, students and teachers regarding the use of Irish in classrooms and in communication throughout the school.

To extend the work already undertaken so that the implementation of immersion education will be as successful as possible, inspectors made various recommendations to support post-primary schools participating in the *Scheme*. The recommendations most frequently made included:

- establishing baseline information on students' Irish-language ability, particularly in first year and second year
- monitoring student progress in terms of language learning on an ongoing basis
- recording and celebrating good practice and achievements in terms of the use of Irish as a communicative language
- extending the number of strategies to promote Irish in the post-primary school
- ensuring that students have a key leadership role in terms of promoting and extending the use of Irish
- informing parents and students of the school's status in relation to the *Gaeltacht School Recognition Scheme*, by regularly stating the advantages that pertain to immersion education

- fostering an Irish environment in the post-primary school
- creating and fostering links with Gaeltacht primary schools in the area
- creating and fostering a link with the Gaeltacht language planning committee and with the local community particularly regarding their ability to provide additional opportunities for spoken Irish outside the school
- enhancing the link between the language-support teacher for Irish and the language assistant (*cúntóir teanga*) and improving the lines of communication so that the additional supports are used to best effect
- facilitating and promoting student participation in a range of competitions and celebrating their achievements in Irish
- using the available resources: *Draft-Guide for Immersion Education in Post-Primary Schools: Indicators of Good Practice; Specification for Junior Cycle Irish (L1)* and *Looking at Our School 2016: A Quality Framework for Post-Primary Schools*.