

**Teachers’ Union of Ireland (TUI) response to the establishment of an interdepartmental committee for island development.**

**(August 2019)**

The TUI represents teachers, lecturers and staff in out of school services (18,000+) employed by Education and Training Boards (ETBs), voluntary secondary schools, Community and Comprehensive (C&C) schools, Youthreach, Technological Universities and the institutes of technology. All of the five post-primary schools located on islands off Ireland are staffed by TUI members.

**Background**

Ireland has an internationally acknowledged, high-performing education system and respected teaching profession (Teaching Council, 2010; OECD, 2013; DES, 2018a; OECD, 2015a; OECD, 2009; NAPD, 2016; Comhairle na nOg, 2017; Growing Up in Ireland, 2017; IPSOS MRBI Trust in the Professions Survey, 2017; Boyle, 2017; Scanlon & McKenna, 2018; EU Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2018; Kantar Millward Brown, 2018; Social Progress Initiative, 2018; EU Commission, 2018; EU Commission, 2019; United Nations Development Programme, 2018; Irish Survey of Student Engagement 2018; Growing Up in Ireland, 2018) despite spending relatively little on education (OECD, 2015b; SJI, 2018, NERI, 2018) and historic underinvestment (DES, 2018b). Indeed citizen satisfaction with the education system in Ireland is the highest of any of 22 European countries studied (Boyle, 2018).

**Interdepartmental Committee for Island Development**

The TUI would like to welcome the recent announcement by Minister Kyne of the above committee. We would also like to call on the Minister to ensure that education partners are included in the discussions and consultation processes as education is a vital part of island economics and development. Indeed island schools are an important employer as well as education being an important element of long-term development. It is very important that a suitable, sufficiently senior decision maker is nominated by each government department so that decisions can be made and implemented speedily.

**Suggested Priorities for the upcoming discussions of the Committee**

The TUI respectfully asks that the Interdepartmental Committee consider carefully the recommendations of the February 2018 Joint Oireachtas Committee on Education and Skills report on island schools. In particular the TUI would like to emphasise the importance of the following recommendations made by the Oireachtas Committee:

* restoration of the island allowance to teachers;
* additional funding to island schools to take account of higher running costs;
* additional teacher allocation above and beyond what is currently available, as to enable provision of as many subject options as possible;
* that all island post-primary schools be awarded DEIS status if they wish.

The TUI would also like to highlight the opening statement it made (TUI, 2018a), on August 29th 2018, to the Joint Oireachtas Committee on Education and Skills regarding ‘school costs, school facilities and related matters’. An important part of that opening statement made clear that there is an additional cost associated with building and renovating school premises in remote areas and that the national norms for building costs may not be applicable to island schools. In the context of costs, it is also important to note that ETB schools cannot avail of the Gaeltacht capitation rate of €103 per student, even though voluntary secondary schools in the same area do qualify for this important financial support to schools (DES circular 29/2016).

In addition to the above the TUI would ask that the Interdepartmental Committee examine whether all island schools currently qualify for small school status. At least two post-primary island schools with approximately thirty students each do not currently qualify for small school status. This is grossly unfair.

The TUI would also like to draw the attention of the Interdepartmental Committee to research carried out by The Bridge Group in the UK into the matter of geographical isolation. Bridge Group (2019: 5) stated that

“Students from lower socio-economic backgrounds living at a distance from higher education institutions, who do not have the option to commute, are faced with more complex decision-making around participation.

Deprivation indices have been consistently shown to be dominated by the characteristics of urban populations and are less able to describe rural deprivation.”

The same study also noted difficulties in recruiting and retaining teachers in isolated schools.

The TUI (2018b) has previously made a submission to the Joint Oireachtas Committee on Education and Skills, when it was studying teacher shortages, highlighting the difficulties of recruiting and retaining teachers throughout Ireland due to unfair and inadequate pay rates. These problems are even more acute in island communities where demography is often creating difficulties for the entire community. This also has an impact on schools as they may have an obligation to provide education to their students both through the medium of Irish and English. In this dual service situation, it is imperative that staffing be increased to allow for dual provision.

In the context of the Bridge Group study, it should also be noted that 56-61% of students from disadvantaged backgrounds attend non-DEIS schools (Barnardos, 2009) so the needs of those schools also must be recognised.

Many island schools are located in Gaeltacht regions. It is important to note that DES (2016: 15 clearly identified “the increasingly fragile status of Irish in Gaeltacht areas and schools”. DES (2016: 20) promised the “opportunity to avail of additional teaching resources through the placement, on an ex-quota basis, of newly-qualified graduates, for one year, from Irish-medium initial teacher education programmes in Gaeltacht primary and post-primary schools”. Despite repeated calls by the TUI, this recommendation appears unlikely to be fully implemented in the immediate future though there was partial implementation following a DES announcement in June 2018.

**Conclusion**

The TUI welcomes this initiative by the Minister. The TUI believes that education should be a key factor in deliberations of the committee and that the following factors are particularly important:

* teacher allocation;
* teacher pay rates;
* capitation rates;
* DEIS status;
* small school status.

**Ends**

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**Glossary**

C&C Community and Comprehensive

DES Department of Education and Skills

ETB Education and Training Board

TUI Teachers’ Union of Ireland

UK United Kingdom

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