



**BRITISH-IRISH
INTER-PARLIAMENTARY BODY**

**COMHLACHT IDIR-PHARLAIMINTEACH
NA BREATAINE AGUS NA hÉIREANN**

**FURTHER RESPONSES OF BOTH GOVERNMENTS
AND THE NORTHERN IRELAND EXECUTIVE**

to

**THE REPORT OF THE COMMITTEE ON CULTURE, EDUCATION
AND THE ENVIRONMENT**

on

EDUCATION AND INTER-COMMUNITY RELATIONS

Thank you for your letter of 26 October, about the Government's response to the Committee's report on Education and Inter-Community relations.

You asked for clarification of our reply where we indicated that it would not be feasible under current legislation for both Governments to develop a jointly-funded Irish-medium post-primary school. This is for the following reasons:

- Under Article 5 of the Education Reform (NI) Order 1989 it is the duty of each Education and Library Board to secure that efficient primary and secondary education are available to meet the needs of its area.
- The Department of Education (NI) cannot itself promote or establish a grant-aided school: proposals for new schools - by Boards or other persons - are the responsibility of the relevant Education and Library Board for the area in which the school is situated (Article 14 of the Education and Libraries (NI) Order 1986), and the statutory role of the Department is to respond to such proposals in the context of facilitating parental choice while avoiding unreasonable public expenditure (Article 44 of the Education and Libraries (NI) Order 1986). These arrangements preclude the establishment of a new grant-aided school in Northern Ireland directly by the Department of Education; or the establishment of a new school in the Republic of Ireland with the direct involvement of the Northern Ireland authorities.
- Current legislative provision for the recurrent funding of grant-aided schools is contained in the Education Reform (NI) Order 1989, where Education and Library Boards provide recurrent funding for controlled and voluntary maintained schools, including Irish-medium schools (and the Department of Education (NI) funds voluntary grammar and grant-maintained integrated schools). Board financial schemes relate specifically to the provision of education in each Board area, and not outside that area.
- Under open enrolment legislation (Article 16 of the Education (NI) Order 1997), priority in school admissions criteria for all schools must be given to Northern Ireland residents.

As you will appreciate the combined effect of these legislative arrangements would not allow the Department of Education to develop a jointly-funded Irish-medium school.

I should mention, however, that in the next few months the Department of Education plans to fund a body, which will have the aim of promoting the development of Irish-medium education in Northern Ireland. One of the objectives of the promotional body will involve the consolidation and development of support and guidance for both existing and new Irish-medium schools, as well as for parents' groups seeking Irish-medium education for their children. The promotional body will be expected to work closely with the Department of Education in developing a more strategic approach to the development of Irish-medium education, including the

potential for cross-border co-operation on matters of mutual interest and benefit. After devolution, any proposals requiring changes to primary legislation would of course be a matter for the NI Assembly and the North/South Ministerial Council.

You also asked what choice of post-primary education is available to parents of children currently at Irish-medium primary schools in the border regions. At present the only Irish-medium post-primary school outside the greater Belfast area is Meanscoil Dhoire, an independent secondary school in Londonderry. Although not grant-aided, the school has been awarded funding in excess of £300,000 from the EU Special Support Programme for Peace and Reconciliation to support its continuing development. In addition, the Department of Education has been involved in discussions with the school and other education interests with the objective of establishing the school as an Irish-medium unit attached to an existing grant-aided school in the area. This would ensure that the choice of grant-aided post-primary Irish-medium education would be available to children attending Irish-medium primary schools in the area.

In relation to the work of the Education for Mutual Understanding (EMU) Working party, I have recently forwarded to the Committee copies of the Report, "Education for Diversity", which was launched for consultation by the Minister for Education, John McFall in September. Consultation will end on 17 December. It is hoped that its recommendations will provide a catalyst for the development of a strategy, which firmly places mutual understanding and respect for diversity at the heart of the Northern Ireland education service. I shall ensure that the Committee is kept fully informed of progress.

Within this wider context we shall be taking account of the BIIPB's recommendation on community awards for schools and additional funding for holiday clubs. You may be interested to know that this summer, in response to pressing local need, the Department of Education made additional resources available to the Belfast Education and Library Board; this helped fund a scheme which took "at risk" young people out of interface inner-city areas to avoid them falling into trouble. This intervention proved successful and the Department will review the experience to see how it can be further developed for future years.

I hope that this information is useful. I would also like to take this opportunity to thank the Committee for its continuing contribution to the development of mutual understanding through education.

PETER MANDELSON

26 November 1999

FURTHER RESPONSE FROM THE DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION TO THE REPORT OF COMMITTEE D ON EDUCATION AND INTER-COMMUNITY RELATIONS

Irish Medium Education

The Committee proposed that consideration be given to the establishment in a North/South context of a jointly funded second level school in the border area.

The provision of an all-Irish second-level school in Co. Monaghan had been the subject of previous representations. The Department recognises that a demand for post-primary education through Irish is likely to arise in areas where gaelscoileanna have been established. This is particularly so in Co. Monaghan which has three gaelscoileanna operating.

There are normally two methods by which all-Irish post-primary demand can be catered for:-

Through the establishment of an independent all-Irish post-primary school

or

An all-Irish unit attached to an existing post-primary school.

The unit while part of an existing school operates in a semi-autonomous manner and has a "teacher in charge" who holds a grade A post allowance. The unit is favoured by the Department in areas where the demand for such a facility would be relatively small. However, the Department recognises that it is possible that a unit could grow sufficiently over a number of years to eventually justify recognition as an independent school.

In the normal way applications for the establishment of all-Irish schools / units are submitted by the relevant Vocational Education Committee to the Planning Section of the Department. The Department has previously indicated that any such applications submitted in respect of Co. Monaghan, in particular, will be considered and that while it would not be possible to confirm the outcome of an application prior to its submission, its prospects based on enrolment patterns would appear very positive.

The Department would in the context of an application for the provision of an all-Irish school serving the Monaghan area be prepared to examine a proposal which would involve provision of Irish medium education for children on each side of the border. This would of course have to be considered in conjunction with the Department of Education in Northern Ireland and could be a matter which would be considered in the context of the North/South Ministerial Council.

RESPONSE FROM THE DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION, NORTHERN IRELAND

Thank you for your letter of 8 December about the recommendation made by Committee D in relation to the joint funding of a crossborder school to educate children through the medium of Irish. Thank you also for your congratulations and kind wishes on my recent appointment. I look forward to serving the children and young people of all communities in my new role.

I have carefully noted your proposal and the details which you have provided. As you have indicated in your letter, there are a number of legislative difficulties involved in jointly establishing and funding an Irish-medium school in the border areas.

As you know, it is our intention to set up and fund a body for the promotion of Irish-medium education. I hope to make a decision on the way forward on this matter early in the new year and that the body will be established shortly thereafter. As the promotional role of the new body will include advice to my Department on the strategic planning, and development of Irish-medium education, it would be appropriate for your proposal to be discussed by the new body in the first instance, in the context of the wide range of strategic and support issues which I am sure it will wish to address. In particular, the new body may wish to undertake some research into the level of unmet demand for postprimary Irishmedium education in the border regions. At a later stage we can of course, and if appropriate, consider the need for legislative change in liaison with the Department of Education and Science in Dublin.

I hope that you find this helpful.

MARTIN McGUINNESS MP MLA
Minister for Education