

Comann nam Pàrant (Dùn Èideann) paper on secondary development October 2015

Introduction

This paper is intended to summarise the views of parents and carers of children in Gaelic-medium education in Edinburgh regarding the future direction of secondary education in the city, as expressed to Comann nam Pàrant Dùn Èideann & Lodainn (“CnP Dùn Èideann”).

CnP Dùn Èideann is a voluntary association which aims to promote and support Gaelic-medium education (“GME”) in Edinburgh and the Lothians. It is the representative body for parents with children in GME.

The views and opinions expressed within this paper are based upon:

- A number of open meetings where the future of secondary GME has been on the agenda, including a well-attended recent meeting held on 17th June 2015, which was convened specifically to discuss this subject.
- Verbal and written views of parents expressed to members of the committee.
- The experience gained in the years 2010 and 2011 when CnP Dùn Èideann campaigned simultaneously for a Gaelic-medium primary school and against the move of secondary GME to a new location.

The views expressed within this paper are not based upon survey results or a formal or statistical review of opinions. The views are those of parents and carers who have come forward to express their opinions and to attend meetings.

This paper primarily deals with the question of what parents would like to see delivered in an ideal situation at secondary level GME. Some of the views expressed are acknowledged to be aspirational.

Our goal is to gain consensus on a vision for the future of secondary GME. We will then take this vision and work with school staff, parents, and decision-makers locally and nationally, to plan its implementation.

The paper below reviews some of the background context to our discussions; the conclusions reached about how we define GME at secondary level and about the key things we find important; and how we can move on to develop a vision.

Background

James Gillespie's High School

Secondary GME has been delivered at James Gillespie's High School ("JGHS") since the 1990s.

The Gaelic-medium pupils at JGHS may currently receive the following subjects through the medium of Gaelic: Gàidhlig, Art, RME and PE. The senior team at JGHS is very supportive of Gaelic, but the delivery of subjects through Gaelic is and has been dependent upon the availability of teaching staff.

The number of pupils entering secondary GME in Edinburgh has increased steadily for the past few years, and will increase significantly in the next five years. This will result in challenges, but will also provide opportunities in terms of timetabling and classes. The vision for development should be seen within the context of increasing numbers of pupils.

Certificated Subjects

Currently, there is a curriculum and exams available for the following subjects through the medium of Gaelic: Gàidhlig (Gaelic for fluent speakers), History, Geography, Modern Studies, and Maths. These subjects are not delivered at all schools which provide GME.

Education Scotland: Advice on Gaelic Education

Further context is provided by the document, "*Advice on Gaelic Education*" ("the Advice") published in February 2015 by Education Scotland. This document provides a very useful examination of best practice in the delivery of GME. The secondary stages of GME are covered in section 9 of the Advice.

The key messages from the Advice relating specifically to secondary GME include the following points:

- The secondary level GME curriculum should remain one based on the principles of immersion.
- Schools need to aim to deliver a sufficient proportion of the curriculum through the medium of Gaelic.

It is helpful to the understanding of the current context of GME delivery to read the whole of the Advice.

How Do We Define Secondary GME?

This question was discussed at the meeting on 17th June 2015. The briefing notes for the workshop group discussion at this meeting can be found in Appendix 1. The meeting participants largely agreed that the following points were important in the definition of a Gaelic-medium secondary education:

- A Gaelic education should produce fluent, confident speakers of the language.
- A Gaelic education should aspire to a level of immersion in the language – Gaelic speakers should be kept together at high school.
- Gaelic should be spoken and heard every day at school.
- Some subjects should be delivered in Gaelic. Pupils should ideally have a choice of subjects in Gaelic.
- There should be the opportunity to take exams and gain qualifications in Gaelic.
- Learning support should be available in Gaelic.

What Are The Key Things We Care About?

This second question was also discussed at the meeting on 17th June 2015. This is a broad question, as parents care about many different aspects of the education of their children. We were looking at this question as it relates to the delivery of a Gaelic-medium education, both in itself and within a mainstream secondary school environment.

The meeting participants largely agreed that the following points were key things that they care about:

- We want our children to attain the best academic results they are able to achieve.
- We want our children to have wider social interactions in high school than they have at primary.
- We want our children to maintain and enhance their fluency in Gaelic, and have the ability to communicate confidently and comfortably through Gaelic. We want them to develop their language skills to be able to think about and debate more sophisticated issues than at primary.
- We want our children to feel positive about being involved in the Gaelic community.
- We want recognition of the difficulty that can be encountered when transitioning from Gaelic to English, and for that transition to be supported.
- We want access to arts and activities outside of the school environment, and Gaelic culture to be part of the school – e.g. through a choir.
- We want Gaelic-medium teachers who are fluent speakers of Gaelic.
- We want Gaelic-medium subjects to be attractive to our children at high school, and not forced upon them.
- We want proper resources for Gaelic-medium subjects.
- We want proper learning support for Gaelic-medium subjects.

- We want Gaelic to have status in the mainstream school, e.g. through Gaelic language signage.
- We want Gaelic education to be “normalized” so that it is a standard education which just happens to be delivered through Gaelic.

Our Vision for Secondary Gaelic-medium education

The above questions were designed to help parents to reach consensus on what we see as the vision for the future of secondary Gaelic-medium education in Edinburgh.

The goal is to gain consensus on a vision (which may be aspirational in nature), and then to plan steps to achieve the implementation of this vision in the medium to long term.

There are two key points on which it appears that parents show consensus at this stage:

1. Parents share the vision of a much enhanced and improved Gaelic-medium experience for our children at secondary school. This would include a greater percentage of the timetable to be delivered through the medium of Gaelic.
2. Parents share the vision of a growing Gaelic-medium community at secondary school, and the vision of this community staying together in one school.

The discussion has not yet been developed to cover the specific details of how this vision might be implemented. For example, there is not yet a consensus on whether parents prefer the idea of a full Gaelic-medium secondary school in the long term, or a growing “Gaelic campus” in a mainstream school.

Likewise, there is not yet a consensus about the best way to increase the percentage of the timetable delivered through Gaelic – for example this could be achieved through the delivery of additional academic subjects, and / or through non-certificated subjects, and / or through cultural activities.

Practical Issues / Implementation

Some more detailed issues have been raised by parents, and are included here because they may contribute to the discussion about delivery of GME. Some are questions around more practical issues, which may be useful to begin considering at this stage.

They can be broadly grouped under the headings below:

Timetabling

There is some concern over the “break up” of the group of GME pupils as they move from primary to secondary, and the effect this might have on their confidence in the language

and culture. Should the desire to “integrate” these children come second to the need to support their language fluency by keeping them together?

Could GME pupils be kept within the same “house” and be brought together for Gaelic assemblies?

Some parents have strong views that pupils should receive a foreign language from S1 onwards, in addition to their classes in English and Gàidhlig. Other parents have expressed the view that substituting Gàidhlig for a modern foreign language in S1 and S2 is a straightforward manner of incorporating Gàidhlig into the timetable, and is unlikely to affect achievement in modern foreign languages in S3 and beyond.

In order to address the question of timetabling Gàidhlig in S1 and S2, more information is required about the effect upon uptake of modern foreign languages in S3, and achievement in certificated exams in these subjects; where pupils have studied Gàidhlig rather than a modern foreign language in S1 and S2.

Some parents have indicated that they believe that there are many secondary schools where modern foreign languages are on offer, but only one secondary school delivering Gàidhlig (for fluent speakers). Gàidhlig should therefore be the priority at JGHS.

Staff at JGHS have indicated a willingness to investigate options for timetabling of Gàidhlig in S1 and S2.

Pupil Support

There are concerns about the transition from learning some subjects in Gaelic to learning them in English. This may happen during the clas 7 – S1 transition, or later in secondary school. There are questions over the level of support for this transition.

Learning support through the medium of Gaelic is needs to be delivered alongside the delivery of subjects through the medium of Gaelic.

Subject Delivery

The consensus view is that parents would like to see a significantly higher proportion of the timetable delivered through Gaelic.

In theory, most parents would like to see this include academic / certificated subjects (e.g. Maths, History etc) as well as non-certificated subjects in other areas of the curriculum (e.g. Personal and Social Education). Parents would like to see a sufficient range available so that pupils have a proper choice of subjects.

In practice, parents with children who have been through secondary schooling have indicated that pupils may be reluctant to make the choice of Gaelic-medium subjects. As they are less comfortable with the vocabulary, they can spend too much time discussing Gaelic vocabulary, leaving not enough time for teaching of the subject itself. This could be

more of an issue with pupils who are less academic and may struggle with Gaelic grammar and spelling (although they may be fluent Gaelic speakers).

Parents recognise that ideally secondary GME pupils would have a sufficient level of immersion in the years S1 and S2 to allow them to be comfortable with all the language they require for certificated subjects by S3. In practice, where this does not occur, other solutions may need to be found. For example, there could be focus on a limited number of certificated subjects, with a structured approach to embedding the required vocabulary for these subjects throughout primary school immersion.

The availability of teachers is a big challenge. The possibility of some teaching taking place online from a “Gaelic hub” is something that a number of parents have suggested.

It would be useful to understand how these challenges are addressed in other Gaelic-medium schools in Scotland, and in other minority language schools, e.g. Welsh-medium.

Parents express mixed opinions, particularly in relation to the delivery of certain certificated subjects through the medium of Gaelic. For example, experience has indicated that there can be a negative reaction to the proposal to deliver Maths through Gaelic. It appears that the majority of parents will generally prioritise academic achievement and good exam results above the desire to have a subject delivered through Gaelic.

Parents from Ireland have experience of Irish-medium schools which have not been successful (despite local support for the Irish language), because the quality of the education was not adequate.

It has been noted that in Ireland, extra credit can be given for exams taken through the medium of Irish, and this is indicated on exam certificates. The same is not true in Scotland for exams taken through the medium of Gaelic.

Connection with other Schools and Community

One of our workshop groups included in their vision the idea that we should better connect with other Gaelic schools and the Gaelic community in order to reinforce and consolidate Gaelic for children and parents.

Community and informal connections could be investigated as a method of increasing the usage of and confidence in Gaelic.

James Gillespie’s Capacity

JGHS is the only school in Edinburgh with the ability to deliver GME at secondary level, with a cohort of Gaelic speakers, and with an ethos that has developed over many years to support GME.

A number of parents have indicated that they believe that GME places at JGHS should be available for only those pupils who commit to a continuation of Gàidhlig study, and a

commitment to involvement in Gaelic activities. As places at JGHS are in such demand, the opinion has been expressed that a GME background at Bun-sgoil Taobh na Pàirce should not be considered a pass into mainstream secondary education at JGHS.

JGHS is currently in the process of a rebuild, as is the nearby Boroughmuir High School. The funding for both of these rebuilds was provided on a “like for like” basis – i.e. without allowing for any increases in pupil numbers. JGHS is likely in future to not only feel the effect of increasing numbers of GME pupils from Taobh na Pàirce, but also an increase in mainstream pupil numbers.

Some parents believe that it may be worth beginning to consider an extension to JGHS, for example by bringing into permanent use the Darroch building (Gilmore Place), which is often used by Edinburgh Council as a decant school during school rebuilds.

The maximum number of children that JGHS can currently intake annually is 200. As it currently stands, the lower year groups from Taobh na Pàirce (clas 3 and below) could not be accommodated.

Next Steps

A Comann nam Pàrant meeting will be held on 18th November 2015 to follow up from the meeting of 17th June 2015.

This follow up meeting will include input from senior staff from JGHS.

We plan that the meeting will agree upon the following statements:

1. Parents share the vision of a much enhanced and improved Gaelic-medium experience for our children at secondary school. This would include a greater percentage of the timetable to be delivered through the medium of Gaelic.
2. Parents share the vision of a growing Gaelic-medium community at secondary school, and the vision of this community staying together in one school.

These statements are the basis for developing a long term vision for secondary GME in Edinburgh.

We also plan to discuss with staff how the above can be put into practice. Items to be discussed include:

- The best plan for GME secondary to keep the community together in one location, in a school with an ethos supportive to GME.
- Plans to increase the percentage of the timetable delivered through Gaelic, and how parents can support these plans.
- Issues of timetabling Gaelic, particularly in S1 and S2.

17th June – Group Discussion

This group discussion is about **what** parents want to see delivered at secondary. Location and staffing will be discussed at a second meeting next term.

The fundamental questions we want to start trying to answer are:

- 1. How do we define secondary GME?**
- 2. What are the key things we care about?**

It may help to frame discussions around the following headings:

Academic subjects and exams

- *Currently there is a curriculum and exams available for Gàidhlig (Gaelic for fluent speakers), History, Geography, Modern Studies, and Maths, although these are not delivered in all schools.*

Other subjects

- *Some subjects are not examinable or certificated, such as Personal and Social Education.*

Fluency in Gaelic in the years s1-s3

Fluency in Gaelic in the years s4-s6

Other activities – in school and after school

The ethos of the school

Traditional arts

Community links