

Secondary Gaelic Medium Education in Edinburgh

Here are some questions about secondary Gaelic Medium Education provision that people ask us as parents, and the answers as we see things.

1. James Gillespie's High School (JGHS) is already oversubscribed. If numbers in primary GME continue to grow, they will need to be accommodated somewhere, so Tynecastle is the obvious answer.

JGHS is not currently oversubscribed, and senior staff in the school do not see any issues with its capacity. Indeed, as recently as 2006, the Council realigned the JGHS catchment boundaries in order to increase its roll. While Tynecastle currently has capacity, there is no certainty that it will do so in the long term, and there is every possibility that GME could be uprooted once more in the future. This solution is nothing more than a stop-gap, and lacks any strategy or vision for GME.

2. Children are already fluent in Gaelic by the time they leave primary GME, so why is GME necessary at secondary?

Children leaving primary GME are certainly fluent, but if they do not have the opportunity to continue their education in Gaelic in high school, they often lose this fluency, thus failing to achieve the key Government target of increasing the number of adult speakers of Gaelic. In addition, if they are not able to progress beyond primary level, their vocabulary at best remains frozen at the level of a 12-year-old – they do not develop the richness that develops when one becomes an adult speaker of a language.

There are many career opportunities within Scotland and beyond that are open to fluent Gaelic speakers. To take advantage of these career opportunities, pupils will need to have fluency at adult levels - the vocabulary used by an adult is significantly more advanced than that of a primary school leaver.

3. Is it not possible to just transplant the Gaelic unit, both pupils and their Gaelic teachers, to another location?

This might indeed be possible, but must be carefully planned and needs the support of parents, staff and the Gaelic community. It can only be successful if the unit being transplanted is strong enough to withstand the procedure, and there are clear educational benefits in making a move. Neither of these is the case at present.

For example, at secondary level, GME pupils in Edinburgh are currently offered only a small number of subjects through the medium of Gaelic, although this is a situation that is steadily improving at JGHS with additional extra-curricular activities on offer in addition to new school subjects. There are now six Gaelic-speaking teachers across a range of subjects but pupils take other subjects in mainstream English-medium classes - so it would be incredibly disruptive to their education for current GME secondary pupils to be relocated.

Once improvements are made and pupils are in a position of studying a significant number of subjects through the medium of Gaelic, a move as a unit becomes far less disruptive and a more realistic prospect.

4. Don't people just choose GME in order to get their children into JGHS?

GME is not an easy option for parents. Many have to transport their children a considerable distance every day in order for them to attend Gaelic nursery, and then have the children travel a long distance for primary GME. Often they have a good catchment primary school much closer to home, while at high school level, travelling to JGHS presents difficulties for some families.

Other problems encountered include a lack of easily available resources to support pupil learning, such as very limited public availability of children's books in Gaelic. Additionally, in many cases, GME children come from families where Gaelic is not the native language of parents. Many GME parents commit a lot of time and resource to learning the language in order to support their children's schoolwork. This commitment ought to be taken at face value rather than dismissed as having an ulterior motive without any evidence.

While JGHS is undeniably a good school, it is implausible to suggest that any significant number of families would choose such a logistically difficult path purely to get a place there, as there are many other good secondary schools in Edinburgh that are closer to home for many families. It should also be noted that in the earlier years of secondary GME when there was only a low level of Gaelic provision in JGHS, the transfer rate from primary GME to secondary GME was low.

The increased take-up of places at JGHS has come about only since there was an increased offering of subjects taught through the medium of Gaelic, so it is clear that the motivation is Gaelic and the support of an existing Gaelic-speaking peer group, and not a particular high school option.

5. Why don't you want to move to Tynecastle? It's a brand new school with great facilities.

We are not saying that we do not want to move to Tynecastle. What we are saying is that it is simply too early to be talking about any kind of move, and a decision to move to Tynecastle or *anywhere else* at this time would be ill-informed and highly controversial.

It is also crucial to recognise that in immersion language schooling, **facilities are irrelevant in comparison with the existence of a peer group of other fluent speakers**. Educationally our children need to be surrounded by other fluent speakers in order to use and enhance their language skills – this is far more important than the quality of the building.

6. The Head teacher at Tynecastle has welcomed the idea of hosting the GME children, and is keen to see GME develop at his school. Does that not make it a positive move for GME?

GME is a great asset to any school - any Head teacher of a High School in Edinburgh would welcome the addition of GME. It brings with it the opportunity for all pupils to participate in Gaelic cultural activities and enriches the educational experience for all at the school. It is for these reasons that the Head teacher and staff at JGHS wish to see GME retained there. It is important that we recognise that GME would enhance any high school, but we are not looking at the needs of potential host schools, but at the needs of GME. Any solution needs to be focussed on the requirements for GME.

7. Why delay a move? If a move is inevitable, it would be best to get it over with now.

A move is not inevitable, and there are many questions that need to be answered before any sensible decision can be made. Rushing through an ill-considered move now is unnecessary, as there is not expected to be any capacity issue at JGHS for 5 or 6 years at the earliest.

A move now would not offer any kind of long-term strategic future for secondary GME.

8. What will have changed in a few years' time, if there should then become a capacity issue at JGHS?

Many things! For a start, primary GME provision will be much better established in a long-term location. In terms of secondary, the current unit at JGHS will have grown in numbers, and we hope that the level of provision of GME will have increased.

With higher pupil numbers, time-tabling of GME becomes easier as the unit can be treated as a distinct cohort of pupils, which also makes it easier to re-establish provision at a potential new location. A strong secondary unit also makes it much more likely that a move could happen without **serious disruption and stretching of the current low numbers of staff in multiple directions**. There may be different options in terms of premises available and the potential to provide a strong link with primary GME. All of these considerations mean that a decision taken in a few years' time will be much more informed than one taken now.

9. What about costs?

Any move will inevitably incur costs, as transition arrangements will require additional resources. However, there is more likely to be Scottish Government funding available for a move that is clearly developing and enhancing GME provision, with parental support and in line with Government policy.