

Gaeloideachas Policy on *Aonaid* lán-Ghaeilge

This is a translation of *Polasaí Gaeloideachas maidir le hAonaid lán-Ghaeilge*. The terms *aonad* (plural *aonaid*) and *Stiúrthóir* are used throughout. This document sets out Gaeloideachas' policy in relation to the appropriate structure for the development of Irish-medium *aonaid* and the growth of *aonad* into stand-alone Irish-medium schools. The input of the existing Irish-medium *aonaid*, through *Coiste Comhairleach na nAonad* (the *aonad* advisory committee) was sought in the development of this policy.

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Gaeloideachas' Role

Gaeloideachas is the national lead-organisation that supports the development of Irish-medium schools at primary and at post-primary level.

Gaeloideachas provides advice, assistance and support to people who wish to have their children educated through the medium of Irish, as well as support services for Irish-medium schools in Gaeltacht and non-Gaeltacht areas and naíonraí outside the Gaeltacht.

Gaeloideachas is funded by Foras na Gaeilge.

Gaeloideachas' Vision

Gaeloideachas' vision is that high-quality Irish-medium immersion education should be available to every parent and guardian who would choose it for their child.

Gaeloideachas' Mission

Gaeloideachas works to establish and sustain a high standard of Irish-medium education throughout the country as well as to develop and strengthen the Irish speaking community and culture.

Policy Context

This policy is an updated version of the policy on Irish-medium *aonaid* (units) developed by Gaeloideachas (registered at the time as Gaelscoileanna Teo.) more than 10 years ago. In the absence of any Department of Education and Skills policy for *aonaid*, Gaeloideachas has been using this policy as an advocacy tool in to seek proper recognition and appropriate support structures for *aonaid*.

This policy builds on the understanding that has developed over the years in the sector of the fundamental development needs of *aonaid* and, above all, the fundamental need for the Department of Education and Skills to recognise an official status and definition of the *aonad* model. It is Gaeloideachas' hope that the Department and the post-primary school patrons will adopt this policy, and that it will be implemented for the benefit of the Irish-medium *aonaid* both within and outside Gaeltacht areas.

Fundamental Principles

1. Gaeloideachas recognises the immersion education model as the most effective method to promote the acquisition of a target language. The immersion education model is where all subjects on the curriculum, except for English, are taught through Irish.
2. Gaeloideachas believes that a stand-alone Irish-medium school is preferable to an *aonad* to effectively implement the immersion education model.
3. Gaeloideachas believes that every *aonad* patron should aim to develop the *aonad* to become a stand-alone school, subject to meeting the criteria set out in this policy.
4. Gaeloideachas believes that the Department of Education and Skills should not sanction new *aonaid* if the prospective patron does not fulfil the criteria set out in this policy.
5. Gaeloideachas recognises the circumstances and conditions of the existing *aonaid* and the organisation supports them in effective implementation of the immersion education model.
6. Gaeloideachas believes that where Irish-medium education is available it should be actively promoted, and that patrons have a duty to develop *aonaid* under their patronage and to promote them.

Gaeloideachas' definition of an Irish-medium *aonad*

An Irish-medium *aonad* is a post-primary education unit in which a curriculum set by the Department of Education and Skills is followed and a model of immersion education is implemented. An Irish-medium *aonad* operates under the management and roll number of an English-medium parent school.

Policy Areas

Criteria for the establishment of a new *aonad*

Gaeloideachas recommends that patrons who wish to establish an *aonad* should apply to the Department of Education and Skills. The application should include:

1. Evidence of the estimated demand for the *aonad*, which includes an projection of the *aonad*'s growth over a four-year period. There should be at least 15 students for the first year.
2. A description of the range of provision planned, both curricular and extra-curricular. The subject range must be consistent with that outlined in this policy.
3. A description of the capacity of the parent school to provide adequate staff resources with fluency in Irish across all subjects.
4. Where there is a deficiency in language competence among teachers, a plan to enable and upskill them to implement immersion education in the *aonad*.
5. A description of the accommodation resources available to the patron and the plan to ensure discrete accommodation¹ for the *aonad*, in order to facilitate full immersion in the target language.
6. The development plan for the *aonad*, which includes identified targets for the growth of student numbers, curriculum provision, teacher recruitment, accommodation development, and an application for a roll number and status as a stand-alone Irish-medium school.

Criteria for the development of an *aonad* to a stand-alone school

Gaeloideachas recommends that, ahead of the establishment of a new *aonad*, a plan for the *aonad* to be granted status as a stand-alone Irish-medium school in the future should be agreed by the patron and the parent school.

A contract should be agreed between the patron and the board of management of the parent school which sets out the circumstances in which the patron will apply to the Department of Education and Skills for a roll number and status as a stand-alone Irish-medium school.

Gaeloideachas recommends the following circumstances be included in the contract:

- An indicator arising from an annual review of progress in relation to the development plan for the Irish-medium *aonad*.
- An agreed number of students in the *aonad*.
- The establishment of a new post-primary school in the area.
- Increased student numbers, eg. from a new Irish-medium primary school, or an increase in the number of classes coming out of primary schools. The demand for Irish-medium education at post-primary level from students coming from English-medium primary schools must also be taken into account.
- Significant change at school level which will impact on the unit, eg. change of ethos or patronage, amalgamation, change of accommodation or other.

¹ See 'Accommodation' on page 4

Where an *aonad* is already operating in a school but there are no agreed criteria for the development of the *aonad* into a stand-alone Irish-medium school, the *aonad's* performance should be assessed and a development plan agreed. A contract of the above type and a plan for the change of status as outlined in the section below should be included.

Planning for the change of status

Ba cheart plan a bheith aontaithe i bprionsabal leis an athrú stádais a bhainistiú.

Molann Gaeloideachas na nithe thíos a áireamh ann:

A plan should be agreed in principle to manage the change of status.

Gaeloideachas recommends the following be included:

- Interim management period.
- Appropriate accommodation.
- Staff working conditions; seniority, pay rights, etc.
- Allowances and resources to meet the needs of the students, eg. students with SEN.
- Curriculum planning and collaborative opportunities with the parent school if appropriate, eg. give students the opportunity to continue with subjects that they have started in English in the parent school if that subject is not available in the new Irish-medium school.
- The welfare of the parent school and any unintended consequences of the change in status.

Range of provision

The Junior Cycle

A full range of subjects should be available through the medium of Irish, from core subjects, optional subjects, short courses (if appropriate) and the co-curricular subjects required to meet the Statements of Learning for the Junior Cycle.

Transition Year

The full programme should be available through the medium of Irish.

The Senior Cycle

All subjects should be available through the medium of Irish, including European languages and the co-curricular subjects, and all students should have access to the same subjects available in the parent school.

The students from the *aonad* should be together for both school and state examinations and the exam invigilator should have Irish. The *aonad* should have its own examination reports.

Accommodation

In order to implement the model of immersion education, the *aonad's* accommodation should be independent of the parent school's accommodation.

Where it is not possible to locate the *aonad* in independent accommodation, a discrete and separate space should be defined for it and it should be reinforced that Irish is to be the language of communication in that space. It is essential that the *aonad* is preserved as a language sanctuary.

It is a fundamental requirement that discrete common areas and social spaces be made available to students and staff of the *aonad*, independent of the communal spaces for the parent-school community, to allow for Irish as the language of socialisation within the *aonad*.

Where the parent-school accommodation does not allow for this, a timetable to facilitate separate start, finish and break times for the parent school and the *aonad* should be implemented.

Management of the Irish-medium *aonad*

At board level

Gaeloideachas recommends that a sub-committee of the board of management of the parent school should be responsible for the *aonad*, and that Irish should be the language of communication for the sub-committee. Gaeloideachas recommends the following membership of the sub-committee:

- *Stiúrthóir*² (*aonad* director) (role of secretary)
- Parent-school Principal (attending)
- Two parents (one mother and one father) of children in the *aonad*
- Teacher from the *aonad* staff
- Representative of trustees (if applicable)
- Representative of the local community

The sub-committee should advise the board of management of the parent school on:

- Preserving the immersion education ethos of the *aonad*
- *Aonad* policies
- *Aonad* curriculum
- *Aonad* staff requirements
- *Aonad* requirements re resources, accommodation and maintenance
- *Aonad* budget

At staff level

Gaeloideachas recommends that the parent-school should adopt a policy to recruit staff with Irish for every vacancy, both in the parent school and in the *aonad*, from the time the *aonad* is established. This applies to both teaching and non-teaching staff.

It should be the duty of all staff, both in the parent school and in the *aonad*, to promote the language ethos of the *aonad*. All staff involved in the *aonad* - including support staff and non-teaching staff - must be willing and able to fulfil their role through the medium of Irish.

Role of the *Stiúrthóir*

An *aonad* should have a *Stiúrthóir* (director) appointed, ex-quota, at Assistant Principal level and with additional permitted weekly hours to allow her/him to perform the duties of the post. The *Stiúrthóir* should be the daily manager of the *aonad*, working under the direction of and in partnership with the Principal of the parent school.

The *Stiúrthóir* must be recognised as having senior management authority within the *aonad*. The *Stiúrthóir* should have formal input into the following aspects:

- Choice, range of subjects and timetable of the *aonad*.
- Recruitment and staffing requirements of the *aonad*, including continuing professional development.
- Accommodation and maintenance of the *aonad*.
- Management and distribution of *aonad* resources.
- Communication with the parents of *aonad* students.

² See 'Role of the *Stiúrthóir*' on page 6

- Senior management meetings at parent-school level, eg. Education and Training Board committees.

A Deputy *Stiúrthóir* should be appointed in *aonaid* with the same numbers as a Deputy Principal in a small school. The appointee to this post should have the same allowance as a special duties teacher.

Aonad teaching staff

It is essential that the *aonad* have a specific teaching allocation. The teaching allocation of the *aonad* should be in line with that for a small school, that is:

- An ex-quota *Stiúrthóir*
- An additional ex-quota teacher
- Additional ex-quota teaching hours

The *aonad* should have specific posts of responsibility and the number of posts should be in line with the number of students in the *aonad*.

Learning support and resource teaching should be available through Irish for the students in the *aonad*.

Aonad support staff and non-teaching staff

All staff involved in the *aonad* should be competent and willing to fulfil their roles through the medium of Irish.

A professional development program should be implemented for *aonad* staff on the implementation of immersion education models.

A secretarial service through Irish should be available to the *aonad*. The level of secretarial service would depend on the number of students in the *aonad*, but a minimum of 20 hours per week would be required. There should be a dedicated phone number and email address for the *aonad*.

Students and parents

The *aonad* should have a separate student council and a system of co-operation between it and the student council of the parent school.

The *aonad* should have a separate parents' committee of parents and there should be a system of co-operation between them and the parents' committee of the parent school. Any money raised by the parents' committee of the *aonad* should go directly to the *aonad*.

The identity of the aonad

Gaeiloideachas recommends that a strong, recognisable identity be created and promoted for the *aonad*, in order to promote the immersion education model. This should be done by way of:

- The *aonad* having its own constitution, setting out a vision, principles, approaches and strategies for development of the *aonad* as well as its structural mechanisms (official *aonad* status and authority).
- A distinct name, identity and motto for the *aonad*, or an Irish version of the name, identity and motto of the parent school.
- An online presence; its own website or a separate section on the parent-school website.
- A distinct school prospectus and diary for the *aonad*.
- A distinct school uniform or part thereof.

- An environment that reflects the immersion setting, eg. signage and notices in Irish and artwork featuring the language.
- Distinct channels of communication, eg. separate newsletter, separate social media accounts, stationery, etc. Communication with the staff and pupils of the *aonad* should always be in Irish, and bilingual with parents. Any correspondence with the State or education partners regarding the *aonad* should be conducted through Irish.
- Distinct events, eg. awards, open evenings, school assemblies, etc. Where it is not possible to have an event specifically for the *aonad*, Irish should be included in the activities of the parent school.
- The *aonad* should have its own Annual General Meeting together with its own annual meeting of the parents' committee.