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COMHDHAIL EASPAG CAITLÍCEACH ÉIREANN

# Listening and learning

A report on the possible amalgamation of St Mary's School for Deaf Girls and St Joseph's School for Deaf Boys.

## SUMMARY

by

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## Introduction

*Listening and Learning* is a project examining the possibility of St Mary's and St Joseph's schools amalgamating to form a new model of educational provision for Deaf boys and girls in Ireland. Among the objectives of the project is to supply a written report to the CIDP Board indicating the advantages of an amalgamation of St. Joseph's and St. Mary's Schools for Deaf boys and girls and signalling any concerns. Additionally, the project is to review the current educational provision, the numbers of students, teachers, and special needs assistants and describe how the children can best be served in a future model of the school.

In November 2008, the Social Researcher of the Council for Research & Development (CRD) was asked to conduct a research project on behalf of the Catholic Institute for Deaf People (CIDP). The Council is a Commission of the Irish Catholic Bishops' Conference and is based in the Columba Centre, Maynooth. The Council undertakes specific research projects at the direct behest of members of the Bishops' Conference and acts as an information and resource centre for the Bishops' Conference, clergy and religious, as well as media personnel and the public. It employs a full time qualified social researcher.

The CIDP's mission is to promote its core values and to work with, enable and serve the Deaf people of Ireland by:

- recognising the distinctive needs of Deaf people
- promoting and representing the interests of Deaf people
- supporting the education, development and day-to-day living of Deaf people
- providing Deaf people with pastoral and religious care
- supporting Deaf people to achieve their full potential

St. Joseph's School for Deaf Boys and St. Mary's School for Deaf Girls are both under the trusteeship of CIDP. Each school has its own Principal and each is managed by its own Board of Management. The schools receive capitation and other grants from the Department of Education and Science and receive some additional funding from CIDP. While the schools operate independently of each other, there is formal and informal co-operation and communication with three Directors of Care and both School Principals.

This is a project about the possibility of the schools amalgamating to form a new model of educational provision for Deaf boys and girls in Ireland. The project covers a number of areas in the field of education including education policy, the history of the schools, school staffing, pupils' views on amalgamation and parental choice of integrated and other schools. A review of the schools' operations is within this project although this is done in the context of the possibility of amalgamation of the schools. Many other reports, both recent and in the past, have outlined in far greater detail the educational needs of Deaf people in Ireland. This report delineates the results of the data gathering project conducted during the period December 2008 to March 2009. This report suggests a series of actions for the schools to be carried out in the coming time. These are framed by the current educational context in Ireland and the consolidation of CIDP's educational and support activities as outlined in its own Strategic Review of 2006. Details of this latter process are available from the CIDP website.

The researcher wishes to extend his thanks to a number of people in compiling this report. The pupils of the schools provided some of the most valuable data for this project. Their trust and cooperation is very much appreciated. Thanks to the staff, teaching and non-teaching, of all of the

schools who were happy to speak confidentially and candidly. Particular appreciation is extended to the Principals of St Mary’s and St Joseph’s for their commitment to the quick turnaround time for the project. Appreciation is also extended to the parents of the pupils for responding to the questionnaire. Thanks to Elizabeth Mathews, Debbie Emerson, Mary Gilmartin, Teresa Devlin and Alison Flynn. Finally, many thanks are due to the sign interpreters for their patience and forbearance over the course of the fieldwork.

## Methodology

The data gathering methods used for this project were:

1. *A survey of parents of children attending the school using a questionnaire drafted by the researcher.* The questionnaire contained questions on their child, their views on the education being received and their views on school amalgamation both generally and particularly. It was devised with the intention of gathering information from a diverse group of people and across a number of related issues related to the schools and Deaf education more generally. The main issues under investigation using this research instrument were:
  - a. A small number of demographic variables
  - b. General orientations toward amalgamation
  - c. Views on class sizes
  - d. Views on choice of subjects
  - e. Co-educational issues
  - f. Methods of communication

The self-completed and anonymous questionnaire contains 33 questions, 24 of which are five point Likert scale questions on these issues. Respondents are asked to express their agreement and disagreement with a statement which expressed a specific orientation to an issue. A copy of the questionnaire is reproduced in Appendix B. 150 questionnaires were distributed to the parents of the schools. Most were addressed to both parents (where applicable) and intended to be completed by one or other parent / legal guardian. Each questionnaire also contained a stamped and addressed return envelope for ease of return. 53 were returned four weeks after their distribution, representing a 35% response rate. This is a reasonable response rate for a postal questionnaire of this nature.

2. *A number of focus groups with the pupils currently attending the schools.* These groups were voluntary, conducted during school hours and lasted no longer than 30 minutes. With the cooperation of the schools, consent forms for both parent and child were distributed and returned. No child was asked to take part in a focus group unless both parent and child forms for that child were returned to the researcher. In all, five groups were conducted with approximately 30 pupils drawn from the four schools as follows:

Marian school (girls, primary)	St Joseph’s school (boys, primary)
St Mary’s school (girls, post-primary)	St Joseph’s school (boys, post-primary)
St Mary’s and St Joseph’s (girls and boys, both post-primary)	

The topics under discussion included their experience of the school, interactions with other children and their likes and dislikes about the schools. For the researcher, there were considerable challenges when conducting the focus groups without any Irish Sign Language. The services of a sign interpreter were used in this case. Through the

interpreter, the discussion was recorded digitally, subsequently transcribed and analysed using mainstream sociological methods. The researcher received child protection clearance from *An Garda Síochána* with the assistance of the Dublin Archdiocese. It is important that all necessary child protection issues were adhered to during the conduct of the fieldwork. The Council for Research & Development is committed to maintaining the highest standards in this regard. A copy of the question schedule is provided in Appendix C of this report.

3. *The project conducted a large number of one-to-one interviews with a number of the schools' staff, including the Special Needs Assistants and the non-teaching staff.* While the pupils remain a central focus to this project, it should be remembered that these schools are also places of work for staff. As such, it was important to get a sense of how people talked about their own responsibilities within the school setting, their experiences and their views on amalgamation. The schools are workplaces for some non-teaching staff and it was important that their experiences and views on amalgamation were also recorded. The possibility of amalgamating schools is not an idea unique to St Mary's and St Joseph's schools. A smaller number of staff from other schools that have been amalgamated, or are currently undergoing such a process, was also spoken with. This included current and former Principals of amalgamated schools as well as a small number of parents of former pupils of the schools.
4. *A quantitative questionnaire distributed to the teaching and non-teaching staff of both schools.* To enhance the results from the qualitative interviews conducted with the staff, a short quantitative questionnaire was distributed to the staff. The questions arose from the topics that were evident in the one-to-one interviews. It was important to get an overall picture of the staff's views in preparing this report and so the quickest means by which to do this was through a quantitative questionnaire where respondents are asked to agree or disagree with statements presented to them. The self-completed questionnaire contained 22 questions in total including 5 demographic questions and one text box through which respondents could make any other remarks they deemed to be relevant to the project. A copy of the questionnaire is reproduced in Appendix C. 102 questionnaires were distributed to the staff of the schools. Each questionnaire was accompanied by a return envelope for ease of return. 75 were returned three weeks after their distribution, representing a 74% response rate. This is a very good response rate for a self-completed questionnaire.

Bringing these different elements together collected an array of data that informed this report. The collected and analysed data is not a decision in itself but represents an opportunity to assess a decision making process based on evidence.

## **The main points that arose from the data**

The questionnaires and question schedule as well as a number of related documents are presented in the appendices of the main report. The data gathered was analysed using mainstream social research methods; the conduct of the focus groups with the pupils involved a sign interpreter. In all, approximately 180 people were consulted individually and in groups over the course of the project's fieldwork. The themes that emerged from the various elements of the fieldwork include:

- Parents of current pupils believe that their child's education is about more than just exams and that amalgamation is about more than just buildings.

- Parents wish to see an amalgamation of the schools taking place over a short period.
- Small class sizes are favoured by parents but slightly larger class sizes than exist currently would not affect their child's education.
- The subjects currently offered to the pupils are favoured strongly by the parents, most particularly by those with children currently in post-primary school.
- Parents believe that a single sex school is not good for their child's development but acknowledge that coeducation in an amalgamated school does have its disadvantages.
- It is suggested that girls are not seen to suffer academically by parents but that distraction between the sexes might have a detrimental outcome on both boys and girls.
- Irish Sign Language is thought by primary parents to be taught to a satisfactory level in their child's school although post-primary parents are less likely to agree with this.
- How the staff talk about their jobs and the schools tends to be heavily influenced by the historical legacy and ethos of the schools.
- There is an awareness that Deaf education has changed in the last two decades and that the schools need to reflect these changes.
- Some staff believe that amalgamation is about saving money and not necessarily the best outcome for children.
- There is widespread concern about staffing and the future of posts in an amalgamated school environment.
- The possibility of the integration of the schools is as much about history and a perceived difference in ethos as it is about educational logistics.
- Any newly amalgamated school should have a clear sense of what it wants to achieve in a changed educational context. Primarily, any newly amalgamated school should be about education and its place in any village campus must be distinct.
- Some staff feel that the schools should be less isolated from hearing schools than they currently are.
- For staff, the location of any amalgamated school and the resources committed to it are as important as the decision whether or not to amalgamate.
- Pupils, particularly in the post-primary schools, believe that amalgamation would be a good thing for the schools as it would provide more subject choice for them.
- Primary pupils have some concerns about being with each other in a coeducational school and some of these relate to play patterns and different behaviour during play time.

- Many of the pupils are aware that larger class sizes will lead to more competition in classrooms and this is generally seen as a good thing. Some pupils fear that others might lose out in a larger classroom setting that may arise from any amalgamation.

Based on these data, compiled and analysed in April 2009, a number of proposals were put forward to the Amalgamation Review Committee. This body decides what is in the best interests of the children, now and in the future. What follows here is based on the evidence gathered by the research and presented above:

- Amalgamate the boys' and girls' schools, beginning with the primary level from the school year beginning September 2010 - 2011. An amalgamation of schools does not necessarily mean that individual classes will be amalgamated.
- The post-primary schools should be amalgamated although this may happen over a longer period than in the primary given the centrality of the examination process for Senior Cycle pupils.
- Both principals must be in agreement with an amalgamation before it occurs. Failure to create and communicate a shared understanding of a new school among staff, both teaching and non-teaching, will have serious implications in the medium term.
- The respective Boards of Management should be unified as soon as is practicable.
- St Mary's and St Joseph's schools have made a valuable contribution to the education of children for well over a century. It would assist the legitimacy of a new school were it to have a new name and this new name should be agreed by the trustees as soon as possible.
- The need to provide additional buildings or to alter existing buildings should not be an impediment to a decision to amalgamate the schools.
- The amalgamated schools must be physically distinct from the remaining campus development in order to maintain their function as an educational facility for children.
- Facilitate two forums for (primary and post-primary) staff to share their concerns and hopes for amalgamation. The forums will have some direct input into the amalgamation process. They should be facilitated by a trained and skilled facilitator who is independent of the schools and should be initiated as soon as possible.
- Staffing levels in the new schools should be maintained to existing levels in the immediate future to optimise the capacity of the schools.
- Agree an optimum teacher / pupil ratio policy based on the needs of the pupils and the skills and experience of the current staff.
- A transition year programme, a work experience programme and the Leaving Certificate Applied should be retained in the new post-primary school.

- The new schools should devise a stated and visible Respect and Diversity Policy in consultation with the current pupils.
- Amalgamation of the schools will not necessarily provide sufficient pupil numbers to make the schools viable. Devise a strategy for the promotion of the new schools as places that provide high quality education to Deaf children across Ireland. It is clear that the visiting teacher service is not a sufficient or adequate means of communicating the services that the schools provide to the parents of Deaf children.
- No one method of communication has an inherent superiority over the other and this is recognised by the staff of both schools. The new schools must provide high quality speech and language therapy consistent with pupils' needs together with the promotion and use of Irish Sign Language throughout the integrated educational system.
- Staff should be resourced with the latest knowledge in special needs education and Deaf education through either linking with an appropriate educational institution or resourcing a dedicated library. To this end, a staff resource person could be hired to facilitate staff keeping up to date with the latest research in special needs and Deaf education.

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