



# **The Future of Small Schools and Teaching Principalship in Ireland**

**Interim Report February 2004**

**Mr. Tomás Ó Slatara**  
**Deputy President**  
**Irish Primary Principals' Network**

**Dr. Mark Morgan**  
**Head of Education Department**  
**St. Patrick's College, Drumcondra**

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### Members of Sub Committee

Catherine Mulryan-Kyne, Education Department, St. Patrick’s College, Drumcondra  
Dolores Corcoran, Education Department, St. Patrick’s College, Drumcondra  
Dominic O’Sullivan, Principal, Scoil Mhuire, Davidstown, Enniscorthy, Co. Wexford  
John White, Principal, St Finian’s NS, Garristown, Co. Meath & Educ Dept, St. Patrick’s College  
Kathleen Lynch, Príomhoide, Scoil Bhréannáin, Cahersiveen, Co. Kerry  
Mark Morgan, Head of Education Department, St. Patrick’s College, Drumcondra  
Pat Kavanagh, Principal, Barnstown NS, Barnstown, Co. Wexford  
Pat Meagher, Principal, Youghalarra NS, Newtown, Nenagh, Co. Tipperary  
Seán Cottrell, Director, IPPN, Glounthaune, Co. Cork  
Susan Frawley, Principal, St. Michael’s NS, Sexton Street, Limerick  
Tomás Ó Slatara, Príomhoide, Scoil na Gráinsí, Cluain Meala, Tiobraid Árann

## FOREWORD

The future of small schools and teaching principalship is of major importance to Irish Education. Rapid curriculum change in tandem with significant legislative demands has placed immense pressure on small schools and on teaching principals in particular.

Currently the only alternatives open to small schools that are experiencing declining numbers and lack of applications for Principalship are closure or amalgamation. Securing the future of small schools as a vital part of the rural community was central in IPPN's decision to establish a research study following IPPN Conference 2003.

The HayGroup report in 2003 also recommended that:

*“alternative structures should be explored, which may include clustering arrangements in order to provide a more effective approach to the maintenance and governance of small rural schools”*

A sub-committee was formed of members of IPPN all of whom have experience as teaching principals. They have given generously of their time, expertise and enthusiasm to advance this project. The work of this sub committee has been made possible through the dedication and team work of a large group of people.

The involvement of St. Patrick's College of Education, our Project Partners, under the leadership of Dr. Mark Morgan, Head of Education, has significantly enhanced the quality of the research project. IPPN looks forward to further co-operation with St. Patrick's College over the coming months in the preparation of the final report.

We are also very grateful to all those who provided research documents for our consideration, to the DES and LDS for statistical and research data, to Léargas for Comenius funding aiding international research and to all the teaching principals who participated in the focus groups, completed questionnaires and gave advice and encouragement.

This interim report is informative, thought provoking and challenging to all the education partners. It will facilitate discussion and exploration of a “menu of possibilities” for the future. The report is not to be interpreted as being prescriptive but rather as a process of moving from problem identification to problem solving which has always been a key focus of IPPN since its formation.

The future of small schools is an issue that has been addressed in creative and innovative ways worldwide. Models as varied as hub-schools, clusters - ZERS, (Rural Education Zones), “Rektorsomrade”, (Principal's Area), Reseau Rural d'Écoles, (Rural Networks of Schools) - and federations have evolved as solutions in other countries following much debate and discussion.

It is now time for us all as Education Partners to find our own creative and innovative Irish solutions to this worldwide challenge.

Tomás Ó Slatara,  
Deputy President IPPN,  
Chairperson of the Research Sub Committee

## INTRODUCTION

### **Research on the Future of Small Schools and Teaching Principalship**

As a result of an approach made by IPPN to the President of St. Patrick's College, Dr. Pauric Travers, a project involving discussion, planning and research on the future of small schools and teaching principalship was initiated. This involved IPPN together with my colleagues, Dr. Catherine Mulryan-Kyne, Dolores Corcoran and John White. Dolores, John and myself, three of the four college staff, were teaching principals at some time in our careers. We were also especially fortunate that Catherine's main area of research is in the area of multi-class teaching. Indeed, she has a number of very significant publications in this area in international literature as well as a review of the relevant research in a forthcoming edition of *Oideas*.

As is clear from the first paper in this Report by Catherine, the evidence on the achievement level in small schools suggests that by any standard they do very well. The indications from international research as well as from work carried out by the Educational Research Centre are that there are no differences in pupil achievement between schools of different sizes. Catherine also draws attention to the importance of smaller class sizes in small schools bringing with it the potential for innovative teaching strategies, higher teacher satisfaction and a stronger sense of teacher-efficacy i.e., a sense that the teacher can make a difference.

Thus, the widely held belief originating from some Government reports in the sixties that achievement levels in small schools were lower than in large schools is no longer true. Indeed it is not clear what the evidence was that indicated that this was ever the case, despite the widely held belief. In the context of the finding that Irish children do at least as well in international comparisons as countries with similar levels of economic development, small schools can be satisfied that there is no inherent reason why they should not turn out children on a par with their peers in large schools.

The papers here do not focus on the social and community reasons for the retention of small schools yet these reasons are very relevant to this research project and likely to become even more important in the future. We are all aware of the need to retain rural schools as part of the fabric of the life of communities especially where other services are currently in decline. Almost all Church of Ireland schools have teaching principals. Furthermore, with the increasing diversity in Ireland, small schools are likely to become an important feature of the urban areas.

We must also recognise that small schools have disadvantages for pupils, teachers and especially principal teachers. Even the improving economic climate of the late nineties was not enough to equip small schools to a level where children would have access to facilities that would normally be found in larger schools. The issue of professional isolation is a major one for principals and their staffs. Whether in the early or later years of one's teaching career, the value of peer support and discussion is critical. A sense of belonging to a community of professionals is a crucial component of continuing professional development.

The ideas put forward here are an initial attempt to get a serious debate started about the way small schools should develop. What is already clear is that no simple solution, even if well resourced, commands such a broad acceptance that it should be recommended at this stage. It is clear from the evidence of the focus groups of teaching principals that the particular circumstances of each school need to be taken into account. There are also strong indications that schools value many features of their present situation and especially the relative independence which they enjoy. However, they

are also looking to the Education Partners to recognise the particular difficulties associated with small schools and teaching principalship and want creative and innovative ways found to support and enhance the many positive aspects of small schools.

The views of IPPN Conference 2004 will advance this debate. In the next phase of the research, the views of other relevant stakeholders will be sought in addition to establishing further the views and concerns of teaching principals and their staffs.

We look forward to the next phase of this collaborative work.

Mark Morgan, Ph.D  
(Head of Education, St. Patrick's College)

## **Section 1**

### **The Future of Small Schools and Teaching Principalship**

#### **Rationale and Background Information by Dr. Catherine Mulryan-Kyne**

##### **1.1 Introduction**

Small schools (i.e., schools with less than 180 pupils and less than 8 teachers) are very much a feature of the Irish primary school system. Many of these schools are in rural areas. More than 56% of primary school teachers and principals in Ireland work in small schools and 53% of primary school pupils are taught in these schools (DES, 2003a). An important characteristic of small primary schools is that the school principal teaches a class as well as having responsibility for the leadership, management and administration of the school. Eighty percent of all principals in Irish primary schools are teaching principals (DES, 2003b) who are dealing with ‘the competing demands faced particularly by teaching principals to be firstly a principal and secondly a class teacher (HayGroup 2003). Most small schools have classes in which there are two or more grade levels. All primary teachers of multigrade classes, 92% of teachers who teach consecutive grade classes, and 28% of teachers who teach single-grade classes work in schools in which there is a teaching principal. Seventy-six percent of small schools are 2-, 3-, or 4-teacher schools.

We are not unique here in Ireland in the incidence of small schools and in the administrative structures pertaining to these schools. Small schools with consecutive and/or multi-grade classes are found in most countries throughout the world. Available data indicates that between 21% and 53% of classes in European countries are multigrade/consecutive grade classes in small schools (Mulryan-Kyne, 2004a; Veenman, 1995). Such schools are also found in other parts of the world, including Australia, New Zealand, Latin America, Asia and Africa (Gayfer, 1991; Hargreaves, Montero, Chau, Sibli, & Thanh, 2001; Little, 1996; King & Young, 1996).

##### **1.2 Challenges to the small school**

In many countries, including Ireland, small schools have been closed or amalgamated and the number of small schools has been reduced considerably (Hunt, 1987; Veenman, 1995; Wilson, 2003; Murray, 2001; OECD, 1991) over the last few decades. Reasons given for closures and amalgamations of small schools include concerns about inadequate curriculum provision, academic standards, and social development of pupils, and the lack of economic viability and (Hunt, 1987; Galton & Patrick, 1990; OECD, 1966). Other reasons have included the poor condition of school buildings and depopulation in remote areas (Murray, 2001). In Ireland in the school year 1924/25, the first year for which an annual report was produced by the Department of Education, there were 5,700 schools in the country, 4,560 (80%) of which were one- or two-teacher schools. By the 1999/2000 school year, the number of primary schools had dropped to 3,172 and only 764 (24%) of schools had only one- or two-teachers (Coolahan, J., 1981). In the school year 1999/2000 ten schools were amalgamated (Murray, 2001).

In recent official documents (e.g., OECD, 1991; Coolahan, 1994) concern has again been expressed about the viability of small schools. Many of the issues considered previously, including the quality of education being provided in small schools and economic viability have been raised anew. Recent discussions have also included professional isolation of teachers and principals in small schools and the difficulties being experienced by principals in performing the dual tasks of teaching and leadership/management.

### **1.3 The viability of the small school**

Research does not support many of the arguments on which policies of closure and amalgamation of small schools have been based and which form the basis of concerns about small schools being expressed currently.

#### *1.3.1. Curriculum provision and social contribution*

Study findings in the UK setting have shown that curriculum provision in small schools is similar to that which emerged in studies of large schools (Bennett, 1976; Galton et al., 1980; Barker-Lunn, 1984). Study findings have also shown that greater social cohesiveness exists among children in small schools than in larger schools. Children of different ages work and play together with the differentiation between age groups being not as pronounced as in large schools (Blyth & Derricott, 1977; Meyenn, 1980). Small schools have also been shown to make a very positive contribution to their communities (Nash, 1977, 1978; Forsythe, 1983).

#### *1.3.2. Economic viability*

Concerns about the economic viability of small schools can be somewhat allayed by research carried out in the UK which has shown that the costs incurred in closing small schools and organising for the transportation of pupils to larger schools can off set any economies that may be expected from the closure (e.g., Forsythe, 1983; Bell & Sigworth, 1987). When viewed from a unit cost perspective, some large schools can cost more than some small schools. Cooperation between small schools is suggested by Galton and Patrick (1990) as a way of reducing the cost of small schools.

#### *1.3.3 Small school and class size and pupil outcomes*

Research on class size and research on pupil outcomes in small versus large schools provides a further challenge to the critics of small schools. Classes in small schools are usually smaller than those that are found in large schools. Available evidence shows clearly that small schools and classes are associated with greater teacher satisfaction and sense of self-efficacy and more effective teaching and learning in the primary school. Research on the effects of class size (Finn, Pannozzo, & Achilles, 2003; Blatchford, in press; Finn, Fulton, Zaharias, & Nye, 1989; Molner, Smith, & Zahorik, 1999) has shown that pupils become more engaged academically and socially when class size is reduced, and this increased engagement in the classroom is likely to lead to increased learning. A longitudinal class-size study carried out in the UK (Blatchford et. al., in press) found a clear association between class size and pupils' attainment on standardised tests. Literacy scores decreased as class size increased. Lower achievers benefited most from class size reduction. Teachers tend to find classroom management easier in small classes, with fewer behaviour problems (Johnson, 1990; Stasz and Stecher, 2002). Teachers feel more proactive and less reactive in their approach to managing student behaviour in smaller classes. Achilles et al. (1995) argues that benefits are greatest in classes with fewer than 15 pupils.

More evidence on pupil outcomes in small schools comes from the work of Veenman (1995, 1996) and Mason and Burns (1997). In their reviews of the international literature comparing pupil outcomes in multigrade/consecutive grade and single-grade classes, Veenman and Mason and Burns found no significant difference in either cognitive or non-cognitive learning outcomes for multi-grade versus single-grade classes. Veenman (1996) suggests that the multigrade/consecutive grade setting provides teachers with opportunities to use innovative teaching approaches that are associated with enhanced pupil learning. Therefore, theoretically, with additional support and resources for teachers and teaching principals, the multigrade/consecutive grade learning setting could be more beneficial for pupils. A recent study by Mulryan-Kyne (2004a) in the Irish context

showed that Irish multigrade teachers reported using many of the innovative approaches suggested by Veenman.

There is little information available about pupil outcomes in multi-grade and single-grade classes in the Irish context. That which is available shows findings consistent with the international research. Martin and Kellaghan (1977) examined the relationship between school variables and reading attainment (in Irish and English) in grades 3 and 5 in a national sample of Irish primary schools. They conclude as follows.

*In general our school-based and class-based variables play only a minor role in determining attainment in either English or Irish. Insofar as such factors operate, our findings indicate that inferences from the Investment in Education (1966) report concerning the relationship between schools size and attainment are not correct—at least for the present population of schools and using objective test data.*

The 1999 National Assessment of Mathematics Achievement (Shiel & Kelly, 1999), which focused on the mathematics of fourth class children in the Republic of Ireland, found no significant differences between the achievement of pupils in single-grade and multigrade or consecutive grade classes in small schools.

#### **1.4 Attitudes and perceptions of principals and teachers to small schools**

Research on the attitudes and perceptions of teachers and principals in small schools show that teaching in these schools can be problematic and difficult. However, many positive features of teaching in this setting have also been highlighted. Teachers in several countries including Canada, Australia, Holland, USA, and Switzerland (Mulryan-Kyne, 2004b) report that multigrade and consecutive grade teaching involves more planning, preparation, and organisation, than single grade teaching. Insufficient time for the teaching of some subject areas, for reteaching, for the preparation of class materials, for the marking of work, for feedback, and for individual attention and remediation was reported by teachers. Difficulties associated with teaching several programmes in the same time that is available to single-grade teachers for the teaching of one programme were also reported. Lack of relevant professional training, inadequate supports and resources and feelings of neglect, isolation, and dissatisfaction with the quality of their work were expressed by teachers. Teachers, however, were generally positive about the affective dimension of school experience, including closer and more positive teacher-pupil and pupil-pupil relationships and interactions.

Findings of a recent study of two-teacher schools in Ireland (Mulryan-Kyne, 2004b) were similar to those of earlier studies. Class teachers and principals cited many positive effects of multigrade teaching and teaching and learning and indicated that they found teaching in this setting satisfying and fulfilling. However, significant problems were reported in trying to organise and manage their classes for teaching and learning. Both teachers and principals agreed that multigrade teaching requires more organisation and management than single-grade teaching. Resources and support were considered to be inadequate. Time constraints were also cited as being problematic. Principals felt that the quality of teaching and learning in their classrooms was compromised and that children are losing out due to the dual role of administration and teaching. Problems being experienced by principals of small schools in trying to perform their dual role of teaching and administration were also expressed by principals in a recent survey conducted by the IPPN (Irish Primary Principals' Network, 2003) and also in the conclusions of the HayGroup report.

*“We conclude that the significant proportion of small schools within the system places considerable pressures on the ability of teaching principals within these schools to effectively deliver the leadership aspects of their role” (HayGroup P35)*



The workload of principals was considered as “impossible” by some teachers with the juggling of administration, leadership, management and teaching tasks causing considerable frustration and stress. The Leadership Development for Schools (LDS) research, reports, mentoring and induction programmes for first time principals are welcome recent initiatives that are aimed at developing and supporting school leaders in dealing with this “daily challenge”.

### **1.5 The teaching principal in the small school**

Small schools in Ireland appear to suffer from serious neglect at official level. For example, in a report on educational disadvantage by the INTO (1994) small schools in rural areas were shown to be receiving a lower level of service than larger schools. Small rural schools, for example, were found to have less access to learning support and psychological services and to library facilities than larger schools. The fact that funding is provided on the basis of enrolment figures leaves small schools at a disadvantage compared with large schools. This is reflected in the facilities and resources that are available in these schools. Neglect of teaching principals in their efforts to play the dual role of teacher and administrator is another identifiable symptom of neglect of small schools at official level. For example, official policy statements do not distinguish between teaching principals and administrative principals (Ireland, 1995).

The White Paper (Ireland, 1995) suggests the development of “networks” as means of improving the lot of teaching principals and their staff and pupils. Some efforts have been made to facilitate or promote the development of such networks. The organisation of county networks by IPPN for Principals and Deputy Principals since 2000 has been a very significant development in addressing this need as also has the growth of various principals’ support groups facilitated by Education Centres.

As highlighted by Sugrue (1994):

“...there is a pressing and immediate need to provide appropriate clustering and networking of schools to overcome professional isolation, to pool resources and expertise and to address problems of common interest with resolve while harnessing community support also in this endeavour. This urgent requirement must not be postponed and, no doubt, lessons from elsewhere in this regard can provide important impetus (p.16)”

The necessity to cluster schools for in-service work on the new revised curriculum and school development planning has established the value of formal and informal networking of school staffs. This is proving beneficial in overcoming ‘professional isolation’ and allowing schools to ‘pool resources and expertise’ and establish best practice in curriculum and planning implementation.

The recent National Progress Report of the School Development Planning Initiative (P47) highlights this progress and states that:

“Consideration should be given to increasing the uses and effectiveness of clusters through expanding the range of activities involved. Such expansion might include the sharing of secretarial expertise, resources and other supports via clusters. The sharing of principals’ administrative time /workload and ways of addressing issues of teaching and learning could also be explored through clustering of appropriate personnel”

The HayGroup Report (Drea & O’Brien, 2001) commissioned by the IPPN draws attention to the significant fall off in the level of interest among teaching staff at primary level in applying for vacant principal posts (see Appendix 3).

The HayGroup Report highlights some of the particular difficulties encountered by teaching principals. These include the lack of back-up support and suggest that measures be taken to enable principals to collaborate with principals in other schools in adjacent geographical areas in order to provide more effective management and service. The development of alternative management structures is recommended and will be further explored as part of this research project.

*Alternative structures should be explored which may include the establishment of 'clustering' arrangements, in order to provide a more effective and consistent approach to the maintenance and governance of small rural schools (HayGroup Report p.6)*

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## Section 2

### International Research Study Visits

This section contains three reports from research visits to France, Sweden and Catalonia to study alternative models of governance and management for small schools.

We are very grateful to Léargas and to the Department of Education & Science for their encouragement and financial assistance in enabling this international research.

A special word of thanks to Mr. Pat Kavanagh, Principal, Barntown NS, Wexford, for his advice and assistance in planning the three research visits.

We are particularly grateful to the school leaders, staffs, School Inspectors and Education Centre personnel in France, Sweden and Catalonia who facilitated these research study visits, arranged key meetings and made us feel so welcome.

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#### 2.1 Rural Schools' Network in Loire Atlantique, France – January 2004

Kathleen Lynch and Susan Frawley

There are three schools involved in the Cluster

- 1 *Pouille Les Coteaux* - 5 teacher school (2 full time 7 half time, 1 principal release day per week for administration)
- 2 *Mesanger* - 4 teacher school (4 full time, 1 principal release day per week for Cluster co-ordination)
- 3 *Couffé* - (7 full time teachers and 2 visiting teachers for English and Music, 1 principal release day per week for administration)

School starts at 9am and finishes at 4.30pm for all children. There are two fifteen minute breaks where the teachers supervise the children and a mid-day break of one and a half hours. During this break the children are taken from the school by supervisors but not the teachers to a restaurant. The infant children have the option of sleeping in special soundproof rooms after their mid-day break.

The schools have similar breaks to the Irish schools during the year. They break for half term, Christmas, Easter and they finish towards the end of June.

The teachers have a lot of flexibility in their workweek in that they can opt to do part-time work -two and a half days each week. They do not have to have a partner in the school to do this part-time week.

##### 2.1.1 *Status of Schools Funding*

In the west of France a little over 50% are state schools while the remainder are private/Church owned.

In the State schools:

- The Academie provides teachers' salaries.
- The property i.e. the grounds and buildings are owned and maintained by a local authority the 'Mairie' which exists in every village and is responsible for all maintenance and up-keep e.g. heating, cleaning, painting, extra accommodation, care-taking etc.

- If the school needs an extra classroom or extra hours cleaning for example, the Principal (sometimes with parents) has to make a case to convince the local Authority of the necessity for same.
- If the Academie sanction an extra teacher due to an increase in numbers then the local Authority is obliged to provide the extra accommodation.
- The funding is provided by the General Council, which seems to be the equivalent of our County Council in Ireland to the Local Authority i.e. Town Hall.
- Teachers have access to an inspector of the Academie and two advisors. The advisors are available to any school or teacher who requests their support/advice. The inspector visits and carries out inspections.
- The schools have no secretarial service because the Local Authority covers most of the administration. School is considered a public service. The Principal is aware of, and works within the budget but does not handle cheques accounts etc. He/She just sends in the bill!

### 2.1.2 *Meetings during the week were held with:*

- Inspector, Principals, Teachers, Parents and Children

### 2.1.3 *Meeting with Inspector*

The inspector responsible for the clustering programme Mr Didier Gomes (now moved to another inspectorate position in Nantes) was very forthcoming and helpful and it was easy to see that he was very supportive of and passionate about the whole philosophy of clustering.

He informed us that in the 1960's in France many small schools had a shortage in pupil numbers because of population movement to towns and cities due to good economic development. Small schools unofficially organised themselves to try to counteract this.

In the 1970's an ad hoc system developed in various places, which was accepted by the Academie (Department of Education) but not officially organised. For example three schools decided to cluster and divide enrolment according to age i.e. all infants from the three school areas went to school A, all the middle classes went to school B and all the senior classes went to school C. The only advantage seemed to be that each village kept its own school, but there were many disadvantages e.g. parents not happy, too much travelling for children by bus. Teachers were not happy because they were now very isolated in their own schools with only one age group and no interaction with others. Also parent teacher meetings could involve parents going to three different schools. Despite these disadvantages this system is still in place in two areas in Loire Atlantique.

### 2.1.4 *Reseau Rural d'Écoles (Rural Network of Schools)*

At the end of the 1990's a new national system (pilot scheme) was introduced but very few counties took it up because it was expensive. Loire Atlantique took in on board. The main benefits of the pilot scheme were:

- From the Department of Education's point of view of breaking the isolation for both teachers and children in small rural schools.
- From a Community Development point of view, setting up a system to help keep rural areas alive, to prevent depopulation and to maintain the public service of education in small rural communities.

It is worth noting here that in France the pupil teacher ratio favours the rural school.

The pupil teacher ratio in urban areas e.g. Nantes is 28 : 1 while in the rural schools it is approximately 20 : 1. There appears to be very positive discrimination in favour of rural schools in order to maintain the population in rural areas.

### 2.1.5 *The Basic Requirements of R.R.E. (Reseau Rural d'Écoles)*

- Each community retains its own school from infants to eleven /twelve year olds
- A minimum of three schools are networked but could also be four or five depending on the size and location of the schools. Ideally all the children from the R.R.E. feed into the same second level school.
- Each network has a principal assigned as cluster co-ordinator who has one day off per week for co-ordination work.
- Each network has a three-year contract with the Academie/ local authority/ county council.
- For the duration of the contract, no teaching post will be lost should numbers of pupils be reduced. If numbers increase extra teachers will be employed as normal.
- When the three-year contract expires renewal is an option to be decided on by all the partners. Renewal is not enforced.
- Schools get some extra financial help e.g. to meet occasionally, to transport children between schools and for joint projects
- Teachers in R.R.E. have to meet and work together on various projects.

As a result of a national survey in 2002/2003 Loire Atlantique emerged as being very progressive in the pilot programme and the Ancenis district in Loire Atlantique had a particularly well developed system. Mr Gomes was very surprised that other counties in France had not taken this programme on board.

### 2.1.6 *Meetings with the Principals:*

Only one of the three principals in the cluster had a working knowledge of English. Following a lot of discussion with this principal, Vincent Beckman, and a little with the other two, Gregory and Delphine, the following was a clear consensus:

- All were in no doubt that collaborating with each other was very beneficial to them as principals.
- The R.R.E. definitely alleviated the sense of isolation and loneliness felt heretofore.
- Through formal and informal contact they learned a lot from each other.
- Problems were often solved through this contact.
- All felt that the R.R.E. programme created a more stable situation with staff as young teachers were far more likely to stay in a cluster school than a solitary rural school.
- The consolidation of staff numbers for the duration of the three-year contract was a big factor.
- The three principals collaborating together gave each a breadth of vision outside of their own situation.
- Despite having a much-reduced workload by comparison with an Irish teaching principal the French principal of a 5 teacher school has 1 day per week free from teaching duties for administration.

### 2.1.7 *Principal's Administration*

There would appear to be an enormous difference between the administrative workload of the French principal and that of the Irish principal. Vincent Beckman explained his administrative responsibilities to us as follows:

- Opening and distributing mail.
- Reading, studying and passing on, where appropriate, literature and instructions from the academie.
- Handling parents complaints.

- Special Needs.
- Liaising with the local Authority.
- Spending money raised by the parents' association.
- Dealing with problems re. Classroom assistants.
- Writing up annual projects in consultation with staff.
- European projects by choice.
- Keeping expenditure within the budget allocation from the Local Authority.

She/He does not have responsibility for:

- Paying bills
- School maintenance
- Cleaning
- Care taking
- Secretarial
- Paying any ancillary staff
- Allocation of classes unless a problem arises
- Professional performance of his teachers

### **2.1.8** *Meeting with Teachers*

In all three schools the teachers seemed to be unanimous in singing the praises of the R.R.E. programme. Again one of the biggest advantages mentioned was that it helped to address the isolation of the teacher in the rural school. In all our conversations the isolation prior to this was mentioned time and time again. Working with other teachers in the cluster, which greatly reduced this isolation, was the one big plus of the R.R.E. in all their minds. All felt that the R.R.E. generated more paper work but this was more that compensated for by the motivation created through their collaboration together.

For example on our first day there we visited Mesánger school, where the three to six year olds from all three schools gathered (the two outside schools by bus) for a theatrical experience. A group of four experts presented various ways of making puppets relevant to a story that was read from a book in the course of the day. Parents and teachers all assisted with group work in twenty-minute slots, which involved handling books, doing a puppet presentation, charades and mime games. The 'lunch picnic' was seen by all as a very important social element of the day where all the children (approx. 100) and the teachers (incl. the Irish delegation) ate together in picnic style in the general-purpose room.

The teachers explained to us that this project involved

- Meetings between the teachers of this age group in all three schools.
- The drawing up of a plan (project) to be submitted for funding which the academie may or may not grant.
- A lot of organisation to see the project through.

However all staff from all three schools were in full agreement that the exercise was well worth the effort. Similar projects are undertaken during the year by other classes in the three schools.

### **2.1.9** *Parents and Children*

We did not have a formal meeting with parents but those whom we met at the theatre experience above were very pleased with the clustering arrangement and were more than willing to help where possible. The children mixed well and it was impossible for us to identify the children from the various schools.



### **2.1.10 Conclusions:**

- The principals were happier as a result of their continuous collaboration.
- The workload of the teaching principal in France does not compare with that of the teaching principal in Ireland. It is greatly reduced because of the involvement of the Local Authority.
- The clustering system, R.R.E., is not intended to reduce the workload of the teaching principal. In fact it increases it.
- There is also more paper work for the teachers i.e. preparation, submitting projects etc.
- The greater flexibility regarding halftime and part-time work seems to make for a much happier work force.
- The regular day per week for administration with a regular fully appointed substitute removes the frustration of the release day substitution problem experienced in the Irish system.

## **2.2 Small Schools – The Catalan Experience - January 2004.**

Pat Meagher and Tomás O Slatara

### **2.2.1 Background**

Catalonia (Catalunya) is situated in the north east corner of Spain, bounded by the Mediterranean Sea and the Pyrenees Mountains. It covers an area of some 31,895 km. sq. and has a population of 6,133,992 (1998). The birth-rate has fallen sharply and is now the lowest in Europe. 400,000 of the population are immigrants. The capital city is Barcelona, population 1,505,581 (1998).

Catalonia is divided into 42 administrative regions, each of which is further divided into districts. Each region has a capital city and each district a main town.

Catalonia is different from the remainder of Spain because it has a specific culture and history. The language spoken is Catalan. Currently it is one of 17 autonomous regions which make up the Spanish state, and as such, possesses a Statute of Autonomy which regulates the organisational aspects of power attached to its position within the framework put in place by the Spanish constitution of 1978.

The Statute of Autonomy establishes that the Generalitat as the institution in which the government of Catalonia is organised politically. The administration of the Generalitat is structured in different departments and ministries responsible for the various areas of management and government. The Departament d'Ensenyament (Ministry of Education) is responsible for the administration of non-university education.

### **2.2.2 Education**

Since 1980, the year which saw the transfer of power in education, Catalonia has set about constructing its own model of education within the framework of the shared legal context common to the Spanish state as a whole. This model incorporates Catalan as the core language of the educational system. The legal framework for education in Catalonia is defined by the legislation applying to the state as a whole, which determines the general organisation of the education system and the minimum contents of the curriculum, and by the specifically Catalan legislation which outlines the curriculum for each stage of education and regulates the functioning of the education system i.e. organisation, schools, colleges, expenditure, inspections etc.

Schools are considered to be either public or private, depending on whether they are run by public or private entities. The majority of public schools are in the charge of the Departament d'Ensenyament. All public schools and ZERS (Rural Education Zones) must set up a school council to govern the school. This council is comprised of representatives of management, teachers, administrative and service staff, parents and the municipality in which the school is situated.

### **2.2.3 Primary Education**

The structure of the primary level is divided as follows:

Pre-primary education from 0 to 6 years is structured in two cycles, namely, nursery school (0 to 3 years) and kindergarten (3 to 6 years).

Primary education covers six academic years and is divided into three cycles of two years each, namely: the initial cycle (6 to 8 years), the middle cycle (8 to 10 years) and the higher cycle (10 to 12 years). Primary education is compulsory and children enter the initial cycle in September of the year in which they have their sixth birthday.

With regard to special education the aim is to provide the necessary resources to allow students with special educational needs, whether temporary or permanent, to work within the same education system and attain the general objectives set down for all students. Wherever possible, these students are taught in ordinary schools. They are only placed in special educational units where there are indications that they cannot be satisfactorily catered for by an ordinary school.

### **2.2.4 Teachers**

The teaching staff of a public school are selected by means of public examinations. The Departament d'Ensenyament appoints newly qualified teachers to positions in the rural schools. They then begin the process of accumulating points which allows them to transfer to other schools should they so wish. Points are awarded for undertaking certain duties and for attendance at education courses. This means that city and town schools are generally staffed by mature teachers. Teachers can specialise in the areas of language (English), Music, Physical Education, Special Education and Religion. These teachers are known as peripatetic teachers and travel between rural schools in the ZERS. Religion is taught only in those schools where the parents request it. School principals are appointed by the Department of Education from amongst the staff of each school. A teacher who wishes to take on the role of principal must have completed a special training course and must also produce a school plan which must be acceptable to the staff. The principal teacher holds the position for four years. He/she may continue longer in the role if no other teacher seeks it.

### **2.2.5 Finance**

Most public schools are the property of the Generalitat and are funded by the Departament d'Ensenyament, which also supplies all equipment. Each school receives a capitation grant once each term. The upkeep of the school is the responsibility of the Municipal Council which also provides a grant towards the cost of educational activities organised by each school. Schools may also look for a donation from parents for agreed activities.

Teachers' salaries are paid by the Departament d'Ensenyament. Salaries are increased annually in line with inflation. In June and December of each year all teachers receive a double salary payment. After every third year an allowance is added. Every six years an additional increase is available to those teachers who have completed various courses.

Principals receive an extra allowance while they retain the post. Peripatetic teachers receive a travel allowance. Other allowances are available to teachers who get extra qualifications in certain areas Tax rates are lower than in Ireland with teachers paying between 17% and 20%.

### **2.2.6 ZER (Rural Education Zone)**

The population of rural Catalonia is both dispersed and low. 75% of villages have a population of less than 1,000. There are a large number of small schools with low numbers of pupils. Over twenty five years ago, teachers began to come together from different schools to plan school activities and to take initiatives to end their sense of isolation. These became known as Rural School Groups. Such clustering was not recognised officially at first. The teachers involved had the support of their union and in 1984 the Departament D'Ensenyament saw the value of such activity and initiated a scheme of clustering which we now know as ZERs.

Catalonia now has 102 ZERs five of which are in the district we visited called L'Urgell. Each ZER is made up of between three to six schools. The furthest distance we became aware of between schools in the ZERS we visited was 35 Km.

We visited a total of 10 schools in three different ZERS

- Zer Riu d'Ondara (three schools, sixteen teachers, 146 pupils),
- Zer La Segarra (six schools, fifteen teachers, 146 pupils)
- Zer Guiciverri (four schools, nine teachers, 72 pupils).

Each ZER has 4/5 extra peripatetic teachers who teach English, Music, Physical Education, Special Education and Religion (if required).

#### *Management of ZERs*

Each ZER has a management structure. Taking ZER Riu Ondara as an example:

There are three schools in the ZER, Anglesola, Barbens and Tornabous. The staffs of the three schools chose three representatives to form a ZER co-ordinating committee. The agreed ZER director, ('principal of principals' was the term used to best describe this position) co-ordinates the running of the ZER with the other two teachers agreed by the joint staffs. The position of Director is awarded to the principal who submits the most effective plan, in the opinion of the teachers, for the future of the ZER. In reality, there is usually little competition for the role. The other two teacher members of the co-ordinating committee are the secretary and the head of pedagogical studies. This committee are automatically members of the School Council along with a further two teacher representatives, one parents' representative from each of the three schools and one representative from each of the three town/village councils. This gives a total of eleven members. The ZER council governs for four years.

#### *Planning*

The organisation of ZERS requires a considerable volume of planning. The full ZER Council meets each month. The ZER co-ordinating committee meet once each week but has the discretion to meet more frequently if required. All staffs in the ZER come together usually once each month. In ZER La Segarra, management meetings are held each Monday morning and Wednesday evening. Staff meetings are held twice each month, on the first Wednesday from 3pm to 7pm and on the third Wednesday from 5:30pm to 7:30pm.

Each ZER has the services of peripatetic teachers who teach English, Music, Physical Education, Special Education and Religion. A ZER may have more than one of each peripatetic teacher depending on the number of pupils and/or the number of immigrant children attending school. Within each ZER there are teacher clusters for different curricular areas such as infant education,

information technology etc. One of the teachers involved in the particular area acts as co-ordinator. There is no payment but the teacher in question receives credits. Planning is considered an essential part of the smooth and effective running of both the ZERS and the schools. The use of peripatetic teachers allows for greater flexibility each day. Teachers also spend one hour of “siesta” time (12:00 – 3pm) in school preparing lessons or in joint planning sessions. The first fortnight of September and one week in June are allocated for planning, preparation, school work and the co-ordination of the running of the ZER.

### **2.2.7** *Conclusions:*

1. Effective planning is essential to the good running of the ZERS.
2. This involves a lot of extra meetings but teachers and principals were in general agreement that the effort was very worthwhile for pupils and staff.
3. The involvement of the staff in preparing and agreeing the school plan to be implemented in the ZERS ensures that there is a great commitment to operating it successfully.
4. The allocation of credits to the teachers and principals who undertake extra work within the ZERS is a further incentive as extra credits allow for greater teacher mobility within Catalonia.
5. The role of the teaching principal is not as wide ranging as in Ireland as a lot of the responsibilities for appointments, maintenance, finance and other key areas are taken on by the Municipal Council and Department of Education
6. ZERs have advanced more pedagogically than large schools because of sharing, team work and smaller classes.
7. The development of ZERS to their present level in Catalonia has taken over 20 years and was brought about primarily by pressure from teachers and their unions to ensure that children and teachers in rural schools were not disadvantaged by comparison with larger schools.
8. Political acceptance of the importance of supporting, financing and sustaining the small rural schools was also a key factor in the development of ZERs.

### **2.2.8** *Acknowledgements*

Avel.lina Farre i Salvado, Principal, Tornabous and Project Visit Organiser

Barbara Torres, ZER Director, Riu Ondara

Education Service, Léargas, Dublin

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Magda Cortasa i Liados

Marcel Pane,

Miriam Utges,

Montse Rivera, ZER Director and the staff of ZER La Segarra

Victor, ZER Director and the staff of ZER Guicivervi

Nuriea Aragonés, Inspector, Departament d’Ensenyament, Lleida

Staff and pupils of the following schools:

Angelsole, Barbens, Biosca, Ivorra, Les Pallargues, Sanauja, Sant Antoli, Sant Ramon,

Tornabous, Villagrassa

## **2.3 Clustering of Small Schools in Sweden – January 2004.**

Dominic O’Sullivan and John White

### **2.3.1 Organisation of Schooling in Sweden:**

The management of schools differs notably in Sweden since education is essentially managed at local or “municipality” level. We visited one of the country’s 220 municipalities, Finspong, which covers an area of 1060 sq km, deep in Sweden’s Lake District, Ostergotlans.

Schools have been managed by the municipalities since the early 1990s when ownership and control was transferred from the state. With such devolved structures, the municipality has extensive independence and autonomy. The organisation of schooling in Finspong, the main town, is generally similar to that of urban Ireland. Rural schools are clustered under a “Rektorsomrade” translated as a “principal’s area.” There were two such clusters in the Finspong municipality, Hallestads and Remjre.

### **2.3.2 Organisation of Schooling at Local Level in Rural Areas:**

There were three schools in the Hallestads Rektorsomrade. These were

Hallestads (160 pupils), Gryhol (60 pupils) and Lynstfallshammer (46 pupils). The principal had overall responsibility for 33 teachers and 39 ancillary staff (an administrator, before and after school staff, school lunch personnel, caretakers, classroom assistants, nurses) catering for pre-school children (nursery and infants, ages 3-6 generally) and Grundskola 1-6 (i.e. primary, ages 7 to 13).

Management at school level is devolved. Each staff member is a member of a team lead by a team leader (similar to a deputy principal or assistant principal in Ireland). School teams take care of the day-to-day running of the school with the help of ancillary staff. Class teachers work a 20 hours week with an additional 15 hours of non-classroom duties on site.

Matters regarding school transport and buildings are dealt with by personnel in the municipality education office. Funding is generous enough to afford the appointment of the specialist teachers in such areas as languages, computers and woodwork.

### **2.3.3 The Role of the Principal**

The principal of the “Rektorsomade” has particular responsibility for supporting individual staff members and school team leaders, pursuing curricular development determined at central, municipality and school level, overall budgetary planning, staff appraisal, team-building, co-ordination of before/after school activities (“leisure centre” activities), child welfare services and the reporting of school self-reviews to the municipality.

The principal rarely if ever teaches. The teaching principal is an extinct species in Sweden, “maybe a few in Lapland!” The process of education reform initiated since the 1960s has meant that the principal’s work is primarily with staff, local government and various education and welfare organisations.

### **2.3.4 School Closure**

A number of schools have been closed during the past 20 years in the municipality. It is a current option justified on the basis of demographics and economics. Closure is imminent should numbers

fall below thirty, as this may result in pupils of a particular grade having insufficient peer contact. Closure also arises when the cost of keeping a school is considered prohibitive and resources would be better utilised in a larger unit. Transporting pupils 50km (30miles) in the morning is not uncommon, though 12 to 20 km (7.5 to 12.5 miles) is reported as the norm. Local interests and parents can exert their influence on a “closure” debate at municipality council level (local political representatives)

### **2.3.5** *Conclusions/Recommendations*

1. There are obvious educational benefits of the concept of the “Rektorsomrade.”
2. Issues of professional development, team-building, curriculum development and co-ordination of school services are afforded greater priority than in the Irish context.
3. From our visits to six schools, it is apparent that school management and leadership are both efficient and effective.
4. Other laudable features of the Swedish education system are the development of a seamless school curriculum, “Grundskola 7/16,” which caters for primary and junior secondary pupils and the provision of a holistic school service to Swedish parents.
5. In the light of present challenges facing small schools, it would be beneficial if serious consideration was given to examining the Swedish model and other European models with a view to establishing a pilot project

### **2.3.6** *Acknowledgements*

We owe a huge debt of gratitude to Marianne Antonnson of the Swedish School Leaders Association and principal of the Hallestads Rektorsomrade who organised our visit.

Thanks also to Robert, Kristel, Tony and Anna who were gracious hosts as we visited schools and classrooms.

## **Section 3**

### **Results of Focus Groups of Principals - January 2004**

Mark Morgan, Ph.D., Head of Education, St. Patrick's College of Education, in consultation with the joint St. Patrick's College and IPPN subcommittee on 'Future of Small Schools and Teaching Principalship'

#### **3.1 Overview**

Here we present the preliminary research findings of the views of Principals on the future of small schools. The background to the project is set out first, followed by the research methodology involving focus groups. The views of the participants emerging from the groups are then set out with reference to each option that was considered at these meetings. The main conclusions are set out together with recommendations on the next phase of this work.

#### **3.2 Background**

The preliminary results presented below are based on the collaborative work of the IPPN with St. Patrick's College. The work arose from a major recommendation of HayGroup report, commissioned by IPPN which was that 'Duplication of functions...between small schools should be examined to enable Principals to collaborate with each other and to provide for effective management and service provision. Alternatively structures should be explored, which may include clustering arrangements in order to provide a more effective approach...' This work, which began in November, 2003 involved a committee comprising of members of IPPN and four members of the staff of St. Patrick's College. The preliminary discussions centred on collating existing information, particularly the options for the future of 'small schools'. We discussed at some length what precisely is meant by a 'small school' and decided that while there are substantial differences between the issues confronting two-teacher as opposed to six-teacher schools, the research should focus on schools with a teaching Principal. A later phase of research and discussion might well refine this definition in the context of recommendations.

#### **3.3 Existing Research**

A substantial body of research is concerned with the related topics of multi-grade teaching and the management of small schools. The group was fortunate in having among its members, a person whose main area of research is multi-grade teaching (Mulryan-Kyne, in press) and whose work is the basis of the paper accompanying this report.

The related issue of the overall management and resourcing of small schools (the main focus of this report) has also been examined extensively in research in Northern Ireland, mainland UK, in Europe and Australia. Among the research reports examined were evaluation studies on the effectiveness of various sized small schools (OFSTED, 2000; the New Zealand Educational Review Office, 1999; the PRISM report, 1990), and research into the implementation of the National Curriculum and the value of clustering arrangements (Galton et al, 1998; Vulliamy and Webb, 1995). We also looked at research which has explored the management approach adopted by teaching principals (Wilson and McPake, 2000; Bell and Morrison, 1988) and papers which examined the professional development of teachers in small schools (Hargreaves et al., 1998; Merilainen and Pieterinen, 2002)

The essential problems which all of these initiatives address can be summarised as follows: (i) How can small schools be enabled to provide the full range of educational experiences to their children as is expected of all schools since the introduction of the Revised Curriculum in 1999? (ii) How can

small schools be administered effectively, taking into account the increased demands in this domain in schools over the last decade?

From this research, it was evident that most of these initiatives found a number of ways of tackling these issues. These were: (i) clustering of schools, (ii) federation of schools and (iii) hub schools. These were the focus of the research to be described below. (see Appendix 4 for definitions)

### **3.4 Research Methodology**

The group considered a number of ways in which the views of principals of small schools could be ascertained. We took the view that questionnaires would not be appropriate given that most people would not be familiar with ‘clustering’ ‘federation’ or ‘hubs’. Furthermore we were also eager to see if novel solutions might emerge from colleagues in debate and discussion. Individual interviews would have some merit but the time factor and the number who could be involved in one-to-one interviews precluded this option.

For these reasons we opted to make use of Focus Groups. A focus group involves a number of people (usually six – nine) who examine specific features of an issue under the guidance of a moderator. The general consensus is that focus groups are particularly suitable for issues that are at a preliminary stage of discussion, as is the case with issues surrounding the future of small schools. The present work operated within the guidelines of focus groups as set out by Stewart & Shamdasani (2001). An interview guide was devised consisting, as is normal for focus groups; of 8-10 open-ended questions (see Appendix 4).

The most common analysis of focus group results involves transcripts of the group discussion. However, as suggested Stewart & Shamdasani ‘...when decisions must be made quickly and the conclusions of the research are rather straightforward, a brief summary may be ...justifiable’. For this reason, and because of budgetary constraints, the analysis below is based on a summary of the focus group discussions gleaned from the detailed notes of each moderator.

There were six focus group meetings held in Mullingar, Navan, Enniscorthy, Limerick, Killarney and Tipperary. The meetings were attended by 40 Principals of small schools from these catchment areas. With regard to schools represented they ranged from two teacher schools to six teacher schools. In each focus group, the moderator was a member of the IPPN committee. Each of the focus groups was asked to consider the future of small schools and teaching principalship with reference to the following matters:

- What are the main advantages and drawbacks of the present situation (status quo)?
- What are the main advantages and drawbacks of amalgamation?
- What are the main advantages and drawback of hub schools?
- What are the main advantages and drawback of clustering?
- What are the main advantages and drawback of federation?

The results can be summarised under the headings that were the focus of the meetings.

### **3.5 The Present Situation**

Firstly, there was agreement that there was a need to change from the present situation. The main reason put forward centred on the immensely difficult dual role of the teaching principal in terms of demands of teaching and curriculum, administration and policy formation allied to the ever increasing leadership and management roles required of principals in recent years.



With regard to curriculum and teaching, the view was expressed that the revised curriculum was not 'devised with small schools in mind' and the fact that 'multi-grade class teaching was extremely difficult' and did not get the 'recognition that is deserved'. There are expectations and pressures and on some staff planning days, some principals have had '...to work into the night to be ready'. Related to this, quite a number expressed the view that the children in the principal's class were losing out.

There were particular complaints about the administration load, which seemed to get greater as years go by. 'There is far too much paperwork. ...which is often unnecessary'. Related to this the point was made that 'the multiplicity of tasks means that the workload is increased and the whole job is quite unpredictable'.

Generally, the view was taken that while the administrative time that was available to Principals helped to ease matters considerably, there were difficulties associated with this. It emerged from all meetings that the present release system was unsatisfactory in several respects. There was repeated mention of the difficulty of getting substitutes, of the fact that parents don't understand the concept of administrative days and the anxiety expressed by some that the children were losing out by having a teaching Principal as their teacher.

There was also a suggestion that the In-School Management personnel in small schools were not being fully utilised, as should be the case, and also that if Boards of Management functioned properly, it could ease the administrative burden. The other point that emerged is that there was a feeling of not being understood and that the standards were set 'by the big-school mentality'. Another made the point that 'there is a lack of understanding among larger schools for the plight of smaller schools'

Many principals talked about stress that results from the role and the danger to their own personal health and safety of such stress and burnout.

On the other hand, some advantages of the present situation were also talked about. These had to do with independence (broadly defined). 'We are aware of everything that is going on in the school'. 'We are effective decision makers and know that there will be a follow through on the decisions'. There was also a strong sense of small schools being effective: 'Small schools do a wonderful job, we are proud of our schools and the work that they do'

### **3.6 Amalgamation of small schools**

The majority of the Principals were against the idea of amalgamation. Even those who favoured the idea recognised that there is a great deal of local opposition from communities which makes it extremely difficult to close schools in the current circumstances 'Amalgamation is a big cost to the community...small schools are closer to family values'. The other point raised had to do with loss of identity resulting from amalgamation.

In two of the groups the idea of the optimum small school size was raised. There seemed to be a consensus that four-teacher schools were about right and that '...three- teacher schools are awkward'. Besides there was also a view that there were certain advantages to small schools. 'Children lose nothing...in fact they gain in a small school'. They also took the view that small schools provide for independent learners.....children 'get a chance at leadership'. The other issue was discipline '...if you have a very big school, as in most urban schools, discipline is often on the top of the agenda'.

### **3.7 Hub Schools**

There was some support for this idea from some of the groups (less than half) while in about half the groups this was considered a 'non-runner'. Those who expressed some support for the idea noted that it would make specialist facilities available in Art and IT.

Most people who were against this (the majority) were concerned about the practicalities of the idea. 'Children travelling to hub schools would present its own problems....how to timetable such activities'. Others commented that it would be much better to '...bring the resources to local schools rather than have children travel to the hub'.

Another point against hub schools was that there could be negative effects on the small schools that were supposed to be helped. There would be a '...downgrading of ones own school ...it would lead to morale problems for staff and pupils'. Similarly the point was made that it could lead to a loss of sense of identity for the school.

### **3.8 Clustering**

The first reaction to the concept of the clustering of schools was that this was taking place informally already with respect to a number of things. It frequently happens that school principals in an area take an administration day together and collaborate on school curricular, planning, administration leadership or management issues. At least in one area, there are schools that come together once a term to formulate policies and plans. There are other ways in which clusters already operate such as with learning support and resource teachers. (see Appendix 1)

There were some quite positive reactions to the concept of the clustering. 'The idea of sharing resource teachers, expertise and supporting each other.....seems worth going after'. 'This sharing of ideas and workload would abolish the isolation'.

There were some specific ideas put forward for discussion as to the way clustering might work. One suggestion that each cluster could have 'an administrative manager who would be answerable to a group of principals'. A fairly similar idea was that '....one full-time teacher could be clustered for covering principals' release days'. (see Appendix 2)

The idea that somehow a cluster would help sort out the difficulties with regard to administration release days emerged in a number of guises. Thus the suggestions were in some cases for the easing of the administrative load while in others they had to do with covering for Principals' administration days. In turn the specific ideas ranged from the sharing of secretarial support to having an administrative manager and the suggestion of having a shared teacher who would cover for Principals in a group.

On the other hand not all of the comments on clustering were positive. However, most of the comments had to do with implementation issues rather than with the principle of co-operation within a cluster. 'Compatibility of principals and teachers would be a big issue. Schools would need to have a shared vision otherwise it would not work'. It was pointed out that clustering had not worked well in some instances when organised by the PCSP. The point was made that there is a need to develop a 'collaborative culture which should not always be assumed to exist'.

Similarly the point was made that '...the needs of individual schools are different'...and 'there may be personality problems giving rise to competition between schools'. It would '...require active co-operation from staff who were like-minded and generous'.

At worst some felt it could become ‘...like a talking shop and would further increase workload’. There would be a particular problem where there was a dominant principal in the group...which could result in personality clashes. And perhaps the most negative comment ‘...it is an airy-fairy solution’.

### **3.9 Federation**

In general the idea of the federation of schools was not well received, although it was acknowledged that there were some positive features to the idea. One point that emerged was that this arrangement would pose particular problems in the relationship between the overall (administrative) ‘principal’ and the ‘principals’ in the small schools. Some took the view that the role of the junior principals would be so diminished that they would lose status while others thought that it would ‘enable them to get a life’.

On the positive side, there was a view that having someone with expertise in administration would help greatly. ‘An administrator for a federation of schools might be a help, since that person could become a fund of information on forms, circulars and procedures.....and would be available to me as principal when I need to contact him/her’.

However, the majority of views ran counter to the federation concept. One problem was that ‘the administrative principal would get to know teachers in the base school.....but would be seen as a visitor in the other schools’. Other concerns were with having another layer of authority. One view was that ‘The administrative principal would be seen as an inspector’. A particular concern was with the amount of travel that would be required. ‘Instead of having a walking principal, there would be a driving principal’.

The federation idea was perceived to be the most radical option considered. In this regard, the view was frequently expressed that the differences between schools in ethos, culture and traditions were just too great to make this a viable option. The issue of the loss of independence was also stressed. ‘The commitment and ownership of everything belongs to the school.....there is something ‘blessed’ about that’. This was expressed in a variety of ways including that the federation solution had ‘potential for conflict’. ‘Each school has individual needs and represents a very particular community. Therefore making decisions for the greater good of all schools in the federation would be impossible’.

There was also strong opposition to the suggestion that the federation principal need not be a teacher. ‘You have to be a teacher to know how to run a school’. The other point that was made was that the one Board of Management for the schools in a federation would be unwieldy and ineffective.

### **3.10 Other suggestions emerging**

Some of the groups were of the view that the options suggested could be extended to include others. One view was of a cluster of schools where ‘A qualified teacher would share teaching duties with the principals. Each day at a specified time, this shared teacher would relieve a principal from teaching duties to attend to administrative and leadership issues in the school’.

The view of the group who proposed this took the view that this would provide stability for children and their parents as the same teacher would provide daily release time. Furthermore the partners in education would be aware that a Principal was available at a particular time each day to deal with school management. They thought it would be cheaper than a federation and could provide release time for class teachers to liaise with special needs teachers on a regular basis.

One group came to the very specific conclusion that a combination of clustering with the principal as the resource teacher was the best option. They suggested that there should be no more than five schools in the cluster. They also thought that it would be very beneficial to have a shared substitute for Principals' release days. Each Principal would have one release day each week. Staff would have the opportunity to meet both in a working environment and socially. There should also be some pooling of funding to purchase educational resources and better equipment for the schools.

### **3.11 Discussion and recommendations**

In moving forward a number of considerations should be borne in mind regarding the traditions of small schools. These emerged at several times in the interviews and are of particular importance in making realistic plans for the future.

The first and perhaps the most important of these is the independence of schools (and indeed of the Principal of a small school) which is jealously treasured. This is likely to have had its origin in the way that catchment areas for small schools often coincided with parishes and with ways in which identities were formed. The tradition of independence gave Principals a uniquely important role in critical questions about the direction and mission of the school. It may be that the tradition of independence is also fostered by the historical context from which the primary education system evolved. Schools have been conscious of the national mission with which they were entrusted particularly in terms of the Irish language

With this independence goes a belief that small schools are doing a very good job and would do an even better job if the inordinate administrative, leadership and management burden on the teaching principal could be solved. Manifest in the present interviews in several ways is the view expressed that small schools are the rule not the exception. This is true in terms of the number of schools but not the number of children served by the school. It is also seen in the almost total rejection by Principals of the amalgamation option. There is recognition that this is yesterday's solution and that it is a non-runner in the future. The interviews indicate a strong sense of the link between the school and the local community. There is a sense in which many small schools believe that 'real education' is found in small schools.

The second tradition has to do with informality in procedures. This is a tradition, which is deeply rooted in the education system. It is worth remembering that only a generation ago, the only formal school record was the roll book. Schools, rightly, are concerned about the experiences they offer to children and teachers and less so about the formal statement and/or recording of policies/guidelines/mission statements. This results in a concern that any arrangement may create only an additional layer of bureaucracy and add to the administrative burden without improving educational experiences.

The experiences of other initiatives should also be borne in mind. For example, in Queensland, Australia in the late nineties the Government approved a project aimed at exploring a range of models through which the administrative and bureaucratic demands on teaching principals could be reduced (Gov. of Queensland). Fifty five trial schools were offered a choice of three school-based management models which were similar to those discussed above. It is particularly interesting that the results indicated no clear superiority of any single model. A great deal depended on the commitment, motivation and skill of the Principals and classroom teachers in question.

With these considerations in mind, any move forward will require to be guided by the following:

- Schools should not see any proposed solution as involving a major loss of independence. At the very least it will have to be clear that the gains are worth the lessening of independence

- An initiative should be flexible enough to take into account the very different circumstances of schools
- An effort should be made to take into account existing and any likely future arrangements between schools (e.g. in relation to resource and learning support teachers)
- There should be an opportunity to have different forms of co-operation from a modest level at the beginning of an arrangement to a relatively greater amount at a later stage
- Any initiative should minimise the amount of administration on existing school principals
- There should be an opportunity to review arrangements after a given time

### 3.12 Recommendations

In the first place there is a need for a serious debate on the matter of the future of small schools and teaching principalship. This debate should involve not only the Principals but also teachers and social partners. This debate should take place prior to the launch of a pilot initiative.

Secondly, there should be an examination of the administrative, leadership and management demands on principals in small schools with a view to seeing how Boards and Management and post-holders can assist in this area.

Thirdly, preparations should be made for a pilot project involving *clustering of small schools*. The advantages of clustering are that it is a flexible arrangement, it can accommodate to very different needs and it is a concept that schools are aware of to some extent. It is also an arrangement that has enough flexibility to be extended or diminished as local circumstances demand.

Fourthly following this discussion/consultation a pilot project should be launched which is duly informed by the debate on these issues and by the experience of other countries. However for a pilot project to have any chance of success, it is essential that there be debate/discussion and a greater shared understanding of the possibilities and difficulties of any initiative.

### 3.13 References

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## **Appendix 1**

### **Current Clustering arrangements in Ireland, formal and informal, include:**

1. PCSP Curriculum Clusters
2. School Development Planning clusters
3. Resource Teacher clusters
4. Learning support teacher clusters
5. Ancillary staff clusters –caretakers/secretaries
6. Support Group clusters for resource teachers
7. Support Group clusters for learning support teachers
8. Clusters of High Support Special Schools for children in care.
9. Infant teachers support groups clusters
10. Principal Support Group clusters
11. Principals release day clusters
12. SIP clustering (re IT)
13. Socrates/Comenius clustering
14. Clustering for religious occasions
15. School Sport/P.E. clusters e.g. Cumann na mBunscoil/Rugby/Soccer etc
16. Choral clustering e.g. National Children’s Choir
17. Specialised activities clusters e.g. chess
18. Social clusters for school and staff occasions

## **Appendix 2**

### **Menu of Clustering Possibilities which will be discussed over the coming months.**

1. More of the examples listed in Appendix 1.
2. School Cluster with one of the Teaching Principals from within the cluster as agreed Cluster Co-ordinator/Director.
3. School cluster with one of the teachers as agreed cluster co-ordinator.
4. School cluster where one of the principals in the cluster becomes full time Co-ordinator/Administrative Principal for an agreed period and is paid accordingly. The Deputy Principal in the administrative principal's/ co-ordinators school becomes acting principal. Post holders re-adjust accordingly.
5. School cluster with agreed external co-ordinator who may or may not be a teacher but has relevant management/administrative experience.
6. School cluster with full availability of substitute teachers to free teaching principals from teaching duties for agreed release days.
7. Rationalisation/amalgamation of smaller schools to an agreed size which allows for appointment of an administrative principal.
8. A principal acting in a role involving multi tasking which would include a guaranteed number of hours for administration along with fulfilling one or more roles within the school such as RT, LST, RTT or other such posts.

#### **NOTE:**

All of these clustering possibilities will be analysed in detail keeping in mind the

- recommendations in the interim report
- the advantages/disadvantages for all the Education Partners
- The level of financial support required.
- The level of human resources required.

## Appendix 3

### Declining interest amongst teachers towards the post of principal

Independent research conducted by Mercator Market Research on behalf of IPPN in 2000 found that:

- 67% of teachers do not intend to apply the post of principal teacher
- 56% of teachers were less likely to apply for the post of principal then, than five years previously
- Only 5% of teachers intend to apply for principalship

The five main reasons cited by teachers for not seeking the post of principal were:

- Unattractive Salary and Conditions \*
- Lack of Role Definition and Excessive Responsibility \*
- Impossible role of the Teaching Principal \*
- High Stress Levels
- Lack of Professional Development for Principals

\* *The first three reasons competed equally for the main reason against applying for principalship.*

The table below outlines the average number of applications for vacant principalship since 1996.

Year	No. of Applications	No. of Appointments / Vacancies	Ratio
1996	921	170	5.4 : 1
1998	1027	226	4.5 : 1
2000	799	204	3.9 : 1
2002	569	194	2.9 : 1

- The above figures present a dramatic downturn in the average number of applicants for each vacant post of principal during the last eight years.
- These figures represent averages. Anecdotal evidence suggests that administrative principal positions attract relatively higher numbers of applicants. Consequently vacancies for teaching principals attract even fewer applicants than the above statistics imply.
- A growing number of small schools have experienced situations where no application is received for a vacant teaching principalship. In 2003 alone, three such schools have had to advertise three times before receiving a single (successful) application.



## **Appendix 4**

### **Definitions of Future Options for Small Schools**

IPPN aims to gather the views of school leaders regarding the future governance and management of small schools and in the process ignite some discussion amongst the education partners. This will hopefully lead to a consensus for agreed change, resulting in a greater understanding of the needs of small schools and securing their future. In order to initiate a more dynamic and comprehensive debate, this document outlines five main options for small schools in the future.

These options range from maintaining the status quo to more radical structures being practiced in other countries.

#### **Option 1: Maintain the Status Quo**

This would involve keeping small schools broadly as they are and with some developments as resources become available. Schools would maintain their independence as at present. Principals would have release time arrangements as they currently exist.

#### **Option 2: Amalgamate Small Schools**

This would be a continuation of the policy begun in the 1960s. The arguments in favour of this remain those that were put forward at the time. Essentially, teachers and children would have access to a broad range of facilities and resources and the number of classes taught by a teacher would in any case be less than at the moment.

#### **Option 3: Development of existing small schools through the establishment of ‘Hub’ Schools**

The concept of hub schools comes from Queensland, Australia. Small schools have access to specialized facilities and to specialist teachers in the areas of physical education, ICT, the arts, etc. These resources may be located in a large town school, a ‘hub’ school. Such amenities benefit the large school but also ‘feeder’ schools. Pupils from small outlining ‘feeder’ schools are bussed into the hub schools on a timetabled basis in order to benefit from such facilities.

##### *Rationale:*

*One perceived weakness of small schools is that there are difficulties in the provision of curriculum areas such as dance, visual arts, physical education, IT and music. The sharing of facilities in the better equipped ‘hub’ schools would eradicate this.*

#### **Option 4: Clustering of Small Schools**

Clustering of schools is an arrangement whereby an agreed number of independent schools co-operate and collaborate to the maximum degree, without loss of identity, or individuality or independence.

##### *Rationale:*

*The ‘clustering’ of schools aims to mitigate the professional and social isolation commonly reported by personnel associated with small schools... It aims to facilitate interaction between principals of schools within a cluster in order to reduce workload e.g. administration, resource procurement, policy co-formulation. The idea is to maximize co-operation, discussion and*

*collaboration amongst teachers in the formulation of curriculum and organizational policies and in the process share best practice. However, within such an arrangement schools would maintain their independence.*

### **Option 5: The Creation of Federation Schools**

The creation of a 'federation' school occurs when a new school is created under the management of a single board of management with one principal from a number of existing schools. These schools continue to function catering for their respective catchment areas in their existing premises. This has the advantage of a number of schools being organized as one school and is similar to clustering except that the individual schools would not now function as independent units. Rather, the decisions would be taken for the federation as a whole rather than the individual schools within it.

Rationale:

*The creation of a 'federation' school would establish an administrative principal position which would enable that principal to concentrate on the management and leadership of the school in order to improve teaching and learning within the constituent schools. It incorporates much of the thinking underpinning clustering, discussed in Option 4.*