

Circular 0052/2019 on Exemptions from the Study of Irish is Flawed

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School principals will be aware that the Department of Education and Skills (DES) issued a new circular, 0052/2019, in September, with revised arrangements for the exemption of pupils from the study of Irish. Many will welcome the greater clarity which this circular brings, and the fact that psychological assessments and cognitive ability scores no longer form part of the criteria.

Circular 0052/2019 states that it “aims to support schools in addressing a wide diversity of needs” while “providing a differentiated learning experience for pupils in an inclusive school environment”. My interpretation of an inclusive approach to teaching Irish is that all children would have access to the curriculum in keeping with their individual ability. When a child has a specific reading difficulty such as dyslexia, for example, then s/he should be enabled to acquire the language mainly through listening and speaking.

International research evidence reassures us that there is no such thing as a foreign or second language learning disability. Children with a range of special education needs can successfully learn a second language. The fact that 67% of students with an exemption from the study of Irish in 2017 successfully studied another language for their Junior Certificate is evidence of this. Further evidence is the fact that, while over 9% of children attending all-Irish primary schools have special education needs, most commonly dyslexia, dyspraxia and autism spectrum disorder, the clear majority successfully learn all curriculum subjects through Irish.

In keeping with this inclusive approach to teaching Irish and other languages, exemptions from the study of Irish should only be granted in exceptional cases. Circular 0052/2019 attempts to reassure us that this will be the case under the new criteria. However, if we look closely at the criteria, it sets a standardised score on a discrete test in either Word Reading, Reading Comprehension or Spelling at or below the 10th percentile as the cut-off to qualify for an exemption. As percentile is a norm-referenced score, this means that 10% of all children will be identified at or below this score. A criterion-referenced score would be more suitable. In my view, exemptions in Irish for 10% of the school population can hardly be considered ‘exceptional’. In setting a cut-off point, the impression is created that there is scientific evidence to support the notion that these children cannot learn a second language. Nothing could be further from the truth. Learning Irish as a second language helps children learn another language at post-primary or third level. In setting the cut-off so high, children who are capable of learning Irish will be denied the opportunity.

The granting of an exemption based on a spelling test score at or below the 10th percentile is in my view extremely worrying and damaging to the integrity of our curriculum. I anticipate that the new criteria will lead parents to mistakenly believe that Irish cannot be taught to certain students. This will in turn lead to pressure from parents on principals to grant exemptions.

Principals will be tasked with advising parents and students of the consequences of not studying Irish. Career opportunities in primary teaching, an Garda Síochána, civil service ((up to 20% of new entrants will require Irish under proposed legislation), European Commission, Irish-language media and more will be denied to students who leave school without a basic competence in Irish.

DES has provided no guidance as to which tests (standardised for an Irish population) are to be utilised in this flawed process. Without adequate supports, principals will struggle to manage the applications.

I have called on the Minister for Education and Skills to withdraw Circular 0053/2019 and to put a system in place that is in keeping with current research and the inclusive approach to education the DES espouses elsewhere.

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