



Small Schools

IPPN Position Paper

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1. BACKGROUND

IPPN is the officially-recognised professional body for the leaders of Irish primary schools. It is an independent, not-for-profit voluntary association with a local, regional and national presence. Recognised by the Minister for Education as an official *Education Partner*, IPPN works with the DES, the National Parents' Council, management bodies, unions, education agencies, academic institutions and children's charities towards the advancement of primary education. IPPN articulates the collective knowledge and professional experience of over 6,600 Principals and Deputy Principals.

2. CONTEXT

To understand the reasons for the unusually large number of small schools in Ireland it is first of all necessary to understand their genesis. Ireland at the turn of the eighteenth century had a largely rural, peasant population with little to support them other than agriculture and fishing. Education, such as it was, was provided by completely unregulated and untrained schoolmasters in ‘hedge schools’.

By 1811, the Society for Promoting the Education of the Poor in Ireland, commonly known as the Kildare Place Society, had been founded as a non-denominational education society to provide grants for schools, textbooks and training for teachers in the monitorial system. It received substantial government grants for this purpose. Because it required the Bible to be read “without note or comment” in all its schools and this proved unacceptable to the Catholic Church authorities, Catholic children began to be withdrawn from its schools. As a result, when the national school system was set up in 1831, Catholic and Protestant children found themselves attending separate, though sometimes quite adjacent schools.

The transport system at the time was poor and most children had to walk to school. This necessitated a large number of small schools scattered everywhere, including quite sparsely populated areas throughout the country. Of course, before the Famine the population of Ireland was more than double the present number.

The historical legacy we have inherited accounts for the large number of small schools in Ireland. There are presently over 3,300 primary schools throughout the country, including a large number (approx 1,300) with less than 100 pupils. There are few other countries in the world, and certainly none in Europe, with as high a proportion of small schools.

3. THE ISSUE

Local communities are very attached to their small schools and are convinced of their value, both academically and socially. The Minister for Education and Skills, Jan O’Sullivan TD, in rejecting the Department of Education & Skills own *Value for Money Review of Small Primary Schools*, noted that “In many parts of our country, small schools play a central part of local communities.... I am particularly conscious of the importance of this social infrastructure to rural communities, and particularly the most isolated communities.”

In committing to preserving parental choice, she put in place a voluntary amalgamation protocol for the very smallest schools. “If any school which is within 8km of the next nearest school of the same type of patronage and language of instruction sees their pupil enrolment drop below 25, there will now be a series of voluntary local conversations about whether amalgamation of local schools would create more sustainable school communities into the future. I will provide capital funding to support such amalgamations from within the overall education budget if extensions or other work to schools are required. No small school will close under this amalgamation policy unless the patron and community choose so.”

The protocol contains the following elements:

- a. The Department will write to patrons of all one-teacher schools that are located within an 8km distance of a school of similar patronage and language of instruction. The letter will invite them to reflect on their future sustainability as a one-teacher school and engage with the Department of Education on the supports available if they decide to amalgamate. In future, similar letters will issue in the case of any such schools which fall below 25 pupils (therefore approaching one-teacher status).
- b. Patrons will lead local community discussions, and when they have considered potential future options, can contact a single point of contact in the Department.
- c. The Department will provide clarification to patrons on issues such as staffing, school transport, capital implications or grant funding.
- d. Patrons to use this information to re-engage with communities and identify possible courses of action. Patrons retain authority to make final decision and notify Department, which will seek to support decision as quickly as possible.

4. RECOMMENDATIONS

IPPN believes that there is a need to differentiate between small schools which are developing and whose enrolment is on the increase and those whose enrolment is in decline. For those small schools with declining enrolments, IPPN endorses the position of the Minister and commends the protocols proposed. However, IPPN is concerned about the stressful situations principals of these schools find themselves in, and recommend that the DES be more proactive in managing these situations to assist the principal who is often placed under severe pressure from the local community.

IPPN further suggests that, in examining options, consideration should be given to the following three possible levels of engagement between small schools. This is not a blueprint, rather it is a roadmap for potential engagement between small schools:

4.1. LEVEL 1 – COOPERATIVE LEADERSHIP

This level is a partnership approach which affords small schools an opportunity to experience some of the benefits of a larger school, while retaining complete independence. Schools would, for example, share teaching and learning resources, staff development and may also share administration and caretaking resources. Each school retains its own principal and Board of Management.

4.2. LEVEL 2 – CLUSTERED LEADERSHIP

This level is a clustered approach whereby two or more small schools cluster together to obtain the benefits of 'Cooperative Leadership' and, in addition, share certain leadership, management and teaching and learning functions, which retaining their autonomy and independence. Each school retains its own principal and Board of Management.

This clustered model would involve:

- a. Shared, full-time secretary and caretaker
- b. Shared school policy and curriculum planning
- c. Some joint staff meetings
- d. Some shared professional development events
- e. Shared procurement
- f. At least one joint Board of Management meeting per annum
- g. Possible joint preparation for community/liturgical/school sports events
- h. Shared extracurricular / extramural activities
- i. Teacher exchanges
- j. Team teaching – sharing expertise.

4.3. LEVEL 3 – FEDERATED LEADERSHIP

This federated approach would involve two or more small schools merging into one school for leadership, management and administrative purposes, while retaining existing school infrastructure. There would be one (administrative) principal and one Board of Management across multiple campuses. In this way, parents and children retain their school building in their own local community. A key advantage of federation over traditional amalgamation is that there is no additional accommodation or school transport required in most cases.

This federated model would involve:

- a. One budget to service multiple campuses
- b. One staffing schedule
- c. One (distributed) ISM team
- d. A Deputy Principal in each school in the federation
- e. One general allocation for SEN.

Clearly, federations in the Irish context would offer some advantages. Besides the major advantage of avoiding the closure of small schools, which enables communities to retain their local schools, federation offers a structure that allows the principal to engage more fully in leading learning as well as facilitating staff mobility. By reducing the number of Boards of Management, federations increase the possibility of finding the right skill-sets among members.

4.4. COMPARISON

The following table outlines the differences between the proposed models:

	Cooperative	Clustered	Federated
Roll Number	Separate	Separate	Shared
Campus	Separate	Separate	Separate
Principal	One Teaching Principal in each school	One Teaching Principal in each school	One Administrative Principal to lead all schools in the federation
BoM	Separate	Separate	Shared
Budget	Separate	Separate	Shared
Teaching Staff	Separate planning, shared CPD	Shared planning and CPD	Shared staffing schedule
Ancillary Staff	Possible shared	Shared	Shared
SNA	Possible shared	Shared	Shared
Procurement	Separate	Shared	Shared
Parent Association	Separate	Separate	Shared
Resources	Some shared	Some shared resources and facilities	Shared
Evaluation/ Standardised Testing	Separate	Separate	Joint

5. CONCLUSIONS

There is no empirical evidence to prove that pupils fare either better or worse academically in small schools. There are, however, social implications for children in the very smallest schools. Health and safety as well as child protection considerations need also to be examined. It is for these reasons that IPPN believes that the three models mentioned above are worthy of close examination.