

**Aighneacht ó
Chumann Múinteoirí Éireann
Chomhchoiste na Gaeilge, na
Gaeltachta agus Phobal Labhartha
na Gaeilge den Oireachtas
An Córas Díolúintí i leith Staidéar
an Gaeilge sa Mheánscolaíocht**

**Exemptions from the study of Irish at
Post-Primary Level**

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Réamhrá/Introduction

Is é Cumann Múinteoirí Éireann an cheardchumann is sinne agus is mó do mhúinteoirí in Éirinn. Tá sé ionadaíoch ar breis is 50,000 múinteoirí ag an mbunleibhéal i bPoblacht na hÉireann agus ag an mbunleibhéal agus an iarbhunleibhéal i dTuaisceart Éireann. Táimid thar a bheith buíoch as ucht an cuireadh labhairt os comhair Chomhchoiste na Gaeilge, na Gaeltachta agus Phobal Labhartha na Gaeilge ar an ábhar ‘An Córas Díolúintí i leith Staidéar na Gaeilge sa Mheánscolaíocht’.

In Ireland, students in English-medium primary and post-primary schools may access an exemption from studying the subject of Irish due to their Special Educational Need(s) (DES, 2019/ 2022). Prior to the implementation of these circulars, exemptions from studying Irish were granted in primary schools under *Circular 0012/1996* (DES 1996). We are the only European country to grant such an exemption, they do not exist in other jurisdictions.

The matter of exemptions from the study of Irish is complex and multifaceted. Irish has long been a core subject of the Primary School Curriculum and forms an integral part of the new integrated Primary Language Curriculum. The inclusion of English and Irish as core subjects in national curricula gives language learning and the advantages of bilingualism a particular status in the learning experience of students in Ireland.

Developments in understanding of language acquisition, of special educational needs and in neuroscience in education generally led to a Department of Education review of policy on exemptions from the study of Irish and the publication of *Circular 0052/2019* and more recently *Circular 0054/2022: Exemptions from the Study of Irish – Revising Circular 0052/2019*.

Both documents outline the Department of Education’s aspiration towards greater clarity, simplicity and transparency in the processes involved in granting an exemption from the study of Irish. *Circular 0054/2022* allows the granting of exemptions to pupils experiencing ongoing and persistent special educational needs and those entitled to places in special schools or special classes in addition to the grounds laid out in *Circular 0052/2019*.

Circular 0052/2019 stated that the Department of Education was committed to reviewing the operation of the revised circular after a period of two years to ensure that the new criteria are being implemented as intended and to review any issues or ambiguities which may arise during that timeframe.

Many stakeholder groups, including the INTO believe that while *Circular 0054/2022* revises *0052/2019*, an in-depth review and adequate consultation with stakeholders on the implementation of the 2019 Circular has not in fact taken place.



Teanga sa Churaclam Bunscoile /Language in the Irish Primary School Curriculum

It is a positive feature of primary education in Ireland that children experience language learning in at least two languages. Engagement with the Irish language throughout their primary education has many benefits for children as it extends their overall linguistic experience and enhances language acquisition skills and awareness. Moreover, exposure to and engagement with the Irish language in school daily - both formally and informally - serves to deepen the pupils' cultural awareness and contributes to their sense of national identity. This also promotes increased opportunities for social engagement, consistent with the key principles underpinning the effective teaching, learning and assessment of language and literacy as set out in our national curricula and reinforced in the *NCCA Draft Primary Curriculum Framework*.

The benefits of bilingualism and studying a language from a young age are now better understood and studies show a second language helps mental agility, makes it easier to learn a third or more languages and that it can help support a child's academic achievement in other curricular areas.

The Primary Language Curriculum (2019) is for children of all abilities in all school contexts and is based on an integrated language approach. It recognises and supports pupils' engagement with Irish and English at different stages and rates along their language-learning journey.

The Primary Language Curriculum provides a framework for teachers to identify the pupils' stage of language development and to plan interventions that support the development of language skills and competences in Irish and in English in an integrated manner, emphasising the transferability of language skills across languages.

It is an anomaly of the system for exemptions that a student can avail of an exemption from the study of Irish due to learning difficulties, yet this individual may study a modern foreign language. There is evidence from the Department of Education's review to support this view, as 67 per cent of Junior Certificate students in 2016 with an exemption from the study of Irish sat an examination in a foreign language (DES, 2018).

The Special Education Teaching Allocation model allows mainstream schools to provide additional teaching support for all pupils who require such support based on their identified learning needs in school, as opposed to being based primarily upon a diagnosis of a particular disability. It is important that the policy of granting exemptions from the study of Irish is congruent with overall policy for students with special educational needs which is no longer based on a point-in-time diagnosis of disability but, rather, seeks to respond to pupils' emerging (or diminishing) needs as they develop and progress through the curriculum.

As with most curricular areas, there is a continuum of strong to weak language learners but no unique disability in language learning. Sparks (2016: 255) states that "empirical evidence has shown that students classified as learning disabled do not regularly fail foreign language courses and shown that students classified as learning disabled do not regularly fail foreign language courses and that, in fact, most secondary and post-secondary students classified as learning disabled pass foreign language courses." Difficulty in reading and writing a language doesn't necessarily inhibit an individual in learning to speak and understand that language. For some children with significant learning difficulties learning Irish may not be suitable, but research evidence confirms that - given the right supports - children with additional learning needs can benefit from learning Irish.



There is no evidence internationally for the concept of a second-language learning disability and the notion that bilingualism is damaging for children with ASD is not supported by the limited research available. Furthermore, it is possible that bilingualism could improve communication and social skills in children with ASD (Valicenti-McDermott et al., 2013).

Dioliúntaí - Athrú sa Phatrún/Exemptions – change in pattern

Circulars 0054/2022 seeks to ensure that exemptions are only granted in exceptional circumstances and that all pupils have an opportunity to learn a second language at primary level. A decision to grant an exemption from the study of Irish should arise only when it is evident that a child is not benefiting from second language learning, and when alternative interventions, such as suitable differentiation, have been exhausted over a prolonged period.

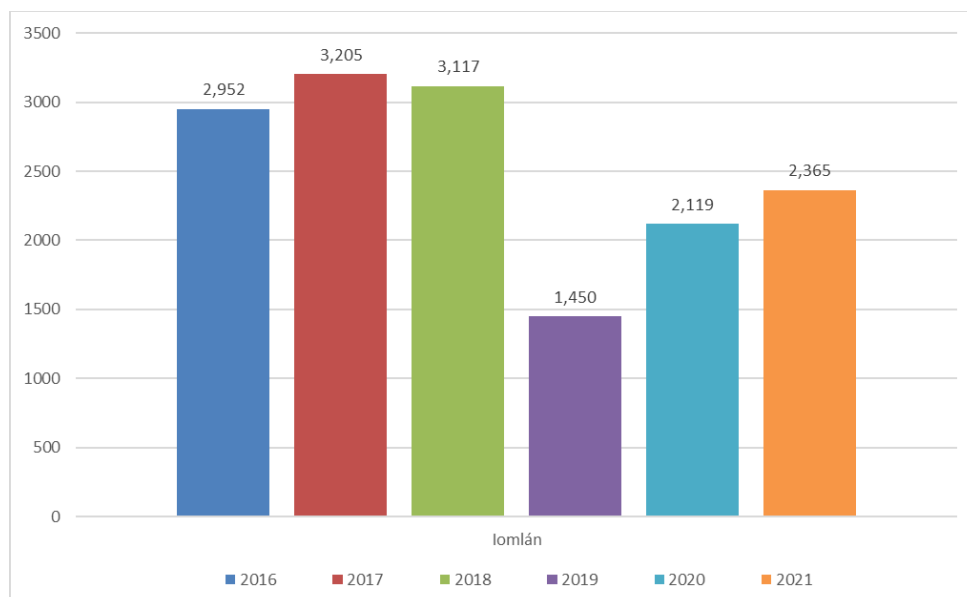
In 1999, 2.5 per cent of pupils were granted exemptions which would appear to correspond to “rare and exceptional” cases as set out in *Circular 0012/1996*.

Subsequent years saw a considerable increase in the percentage of pupils with exemptions, rising to almost 11 per cent in 2010 with a small decrease to 9.2 per cent in 2016. These are alarmingly high figures and can no longer be viewed as reflecting exemptions granted in rare and exceptional circumstances.

Since 2019, school principals can authorise exemptions without the requirement of a diagnosis from a qualified educational psychologist.

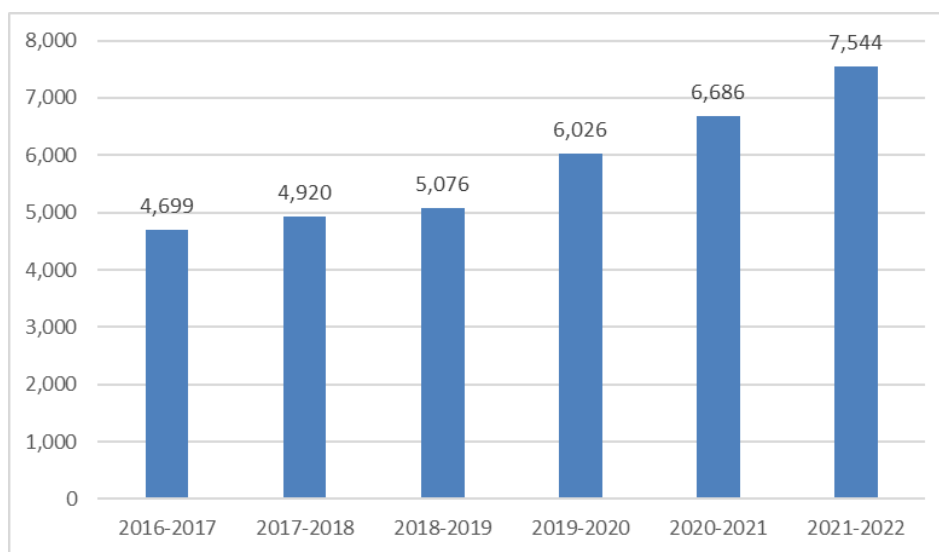
Under *Circular 0012/1996*, for the academic school year 2016/2017, there were 5,385 pupils enrolled in primary schools with an Irish exemption. The most common reason cited for this exemption being granted was a learning difficulty.

Tá anailís déanta maidir le líon na ndíolúintí ag an mbunleibhéal ar na figiúirí de dhaltaí a fuair díolúine de bharr mí-chumas foghlama ó 2016 (Ó Duibhir 2022). Feictear thíos go raibh titim ag an mbunleibhéal in 2019 ach go bhfuil an treocht ag dul in airde arís. Meastear go raibh baint ag na ciorcláin nua nó Covid leis sin.





Tá líon na n-iarratas ag an iar-bhunleibhéal de bharr mí-chumas foghlama ag dul in airde i gcónaí.



(An Roinn Oideachais 2022)

Comhairliúchán CMÉ le Príomhoidí / INTO Consultation with Principal Teachers

In anticipation of a review of *Circular 0052/2019* INTO engaged with principal teachers on the matter of Exemptions in Irish via Principals' Information Sessions between September 2021 and May 2022. This consultation took place in light of an anticipated a review of *Circular 0052/2019* after two years in operation. During six seminars which took place in Mullingar, Charleville, Laois, Donegal, Galway and Carlingford INTO engaged with approximately 300 principal teachers.

Principal teachers were asked to discuss their experience of operating the *Circular 0052/2019* since its commencement in 2019 and to consider the following questions.

- What has been your experience of granting Irish exemptions since 2019?
- What is your view of the criteria for granting exemptions?
- What concerns, if any, do you have regarding the granting of exemptions?
- Should exemptions be granted at all at primary level?

The following trends emerged:

- Principals felt that they are being asked to grant more exemptions and felt under pressure from both parents and post-primary schools to do so.
- The pressure from parents, stemmed from anxiety around access to supports at post- primary level and performance in state examinations. Principals felt that in many cases they were “doing the job” of (some) post-primary schools and asked for a review of how support is allocated in areas of the post-primary sector.
- When informed that DE figures show a decrease in exemptions granted since the commencement of the *Circular 0053/2019* several principals indicated that all exemptions granted may not have been entered into POD and that the DE figures



may not be entirely accurate. This reflects the DE view that many schools enter such data in POD only once per year in the October school census.

- Principals felt that the criteria were clear and that a pupil either qualified for an exemption under the terms of the Circular or they didn't.
- They also felt that there was a high level of dissatisfaction among parents who felt that a child should be granted an exemption but did not achieve a low enough score on the discrete test. There appears to be a relatively high level of requests for pupils to be retested, this development is worrying.
- Principals reported that they felt many parents may not fully understand longer term implications of the granting of an exemption, including the need to have two languages to take the Leaving Certificate Applied, reduced access to certain college courses and careers. A DE information leaflet outlining these and other implications would be helpful.
- Principals also reported that privately commissioned psychologists were often not aware of the terms of the new circular and were still advising the granting of exemptions. This leads to unrealistic expectations among parents and needs to be addressed.
- Principals expressed concern regarding the level of differentiation and support required at school level and raised questions regarding the onus on schools to provide Special Education Teaching support don Ghaeilge.
- There was a strong feeling that the concept of granting of exemptions should be re-examined in the light of an integrated language curriculum at primary level, in the light of consultation on Language in the *Draft Primary Curriculum Framework* and the possibility of the inclusion of a modern foreign language in the *Primary Curriculum Framework*.
- Principals also requested evidence-based research to support the benefit of granting exemptions from elements of curriculum.
- There was also as strong feeling among principals at the seminars that exemptions should not be granted at primary level, that pupils at primary level should experience all aspects of an integrated curriculum, albeit with appropriate differentiation. The granting of any exemptions, if necessary, should take place later in a pupil's school life.

We would also note that there were dissenting voices, they formed a small but vocal minority with at least one opposing opinion in each seminar.

It is also noteworthy that since we engaged with principals on this matter a significant number of children who were not born in Ireland including children fleeing from Ukraine have enrolled in Irish primary schools including Gaeltacht schools and that the majority of these children do not speak English on arrival here. Consideration should be given to providing additional teaching supports for Béarla ages Gaeilge to schools where newcomer children are enrolled.

Mar fhocal scor/In Conclusion

The INTO supports the view that students with additional and special educational needs are entitled to opportunities to experience and benefit from learning a second language at a level appropriate to their needs and abilities.

The INTO calls for

- a full consultation on and review of the Circulars on Exemptions from Irish.



- an examination of the concept of granting exemptions in the light of the integrated language curriculum and the potential introduction of a Modern Foreign Language in the forthcoming *Primary Curriculum Framework*.
- evidence-based research to support the benefit of granting exemptions from any element of curriculum.
- a full range of resources to allow primary schools to provide support to pupils experiencing difficulties with language learning.
- high quality professional development for teachers in the area of language teaching.

The INTO firmly believes that the Irish language is central to the purposes of education as set out in the Education Act 1998 and in the curriculum.

The principle of inclusivity must underpin policy for the Irish language and therefore exemptions should be exceptional and granted only in specific circumstances.

The review of the *Primary School Curriculum* and the development of policy advice on supporting students with Special Education Needs marks a critical juncture and provides an ideal opportunity to engage in meaningful consultation and robust research on the concept of exemptions for the study of Irish.

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