

CONTENTS

<i>Section</i>		<i>Page</i>
1.	BACKGROUND	1
2.	INTRODUCTION	1
3.	CONTEXT	2
4.	STRENGTHS	3
5.	AREAS FOR DEVELOPMENT	4
6.	CONCLUSION	6

1 BACKGROUND

- 1.1 The Education and Training Inspectorate (the Inspectorate) was commissioned by the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure (DCAL) to carry out an external evaluation of the work of An tÁisaonad Lán-Ghaeilge (the Áisaonad), the Irish-Medium Resources Unit based at St Mary's University College (the College).
- 1.2 The Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure (DCAL) provides proportionate funding to Foras na Gaeilge, the body responsible for the promotion of the Irish language throughout the island of Ireland, and Foras na Gaeilge provides an annual grant to the Áisaonad. Last year, the Áisaonad received almost £400,000, a sum which includes the salaries of all the employees of the Áisaonad. The Department of Education (DE) also provides occasional funding for the production of Irish-Medium (IM) resources.
- 1.3 The Áisaonad formally became part of St Mary's University College in 1998. Since then, its overall management has resided with the College authorities and it is now an integral part of the College's structures. The College governors were concerned initially to seek clarification of the legal status of the Áisaonad. There were terms of reference and a financial memorandum between the College and Foras na Gaeilge, but certain issues lacked clarity from the College's point of view. The evaluation by the Education and Training Inspectorate (Inspectorate) has contributed to the further clarification of these issues.

2 INTRODUCTION

- 2.1 Between February and June of 2006, the Inspectorate undertook an evaluation of the quality, range and appropriateness of the teaching and learning materials provided by the Áisaonad for IM schools in Northern Ireland (NI) and undertook visits to ten primary and three post-primary schools (see Appendix 1) across the five Education and Library Boards (ELBs). Interviews were held also with the Assistant Chief Executive and Director of Education Services of Foras na Gaeilge, the Manager and the

Education Adviser of the Áisaonad, and senior managers in the College. This report is based on the findings of that evaluation.

- 2.2 A self-evaluative report produced by the Áisaonad, setting out its work and progress, formed a useful basis for discussion with the Inspectorate. The report outlined the Áisaonad's role, current priorities and management arrangements in relation to the provision of IM textbooks and materials.

3 CONTEXT

- 3.1 The Áisaonad was set up in 1998 with the clear remit to research existing material and develop new, high quality resources that could be used to teach the Northern Ireland Curriculum (NIC) through the medium of the Irish language. The Áisaonad was also charged with providing curricular advice and support on issues related to the teaching and learning resources which it produces.
- 3.2 The initial focus of the Áisaonad's work was on meeting the immediate needs the IM primary sector, although it was foreseen that the production of materials for post-primary would be undertaken at a future date. As the IM sector expanded, the Áisaonad's funding was increased to reflect its growing remit.
- 3.3 The Áisaonad plays a central role in producing resources for IM schools, with a specific remit for school children in NI. It is, however, not the sole provider. Schools can, and do access textbooks and other materials from a number of other sources.
- 3.4 There is a high degree of co-operation between the Áisaonad and An Gúm (its southern counterpart), in relation to the production of textbooks. In addition, the Senior Editor of An Gúm chairs the Áisaonad's Editorial Group (EdG), thus ensuring that there is no duplication of resources.
- 3.5 The Áisaonad has a distinctive ethos and rationale. In the College, there is a rich Irish language environment and IM teachers are trained on site. There is a thriving international dimension and the students of Irish have the opportunity to experience the education systems of other bilingual

societies through the Erasmus programme. College staff are available to offer a range of support and advice. Some of the projects undertaken by the Áisaonad were recommended by other College staff to the EdG; the literacy resources on the theme of international artists were undertaken with the encouragement of the College's art department and have proved very popular in IM schools in the north and beyond.

4 SUMMARY OF MAIN FINDINGS

- 4.1 Since the establishment of the unit, there has been improved production for the IM sector. Between 1998-2006, there has been a substantial output of 136 literacy titles supplied by the Áisaonad, including a number of 'Big Books'. The Áisaonad has also produced a complete mathematics series for all year groups in the primary phase.
- 4.2 The more recent publications have taken account of the requirements of the Revised Curriculum for NI, and are in line with aims of the NI literacy and numeracy strategies. For example, two major publications, have resulted: *Céim ar Chéim* is designed to promote independent and shared reading, and *Matamaitic Bhunscoile Collins* emphasises the importance of practical activities and the use of mathematical language.
- 4.3 A major achievement has been the move from black and white copies of worksheets to full colour, state of the art IM materials as versioned from English, and properly bound. This has coincided with a greater budget afforded to the unit in order to deal with established publishing bodies.
- 4.4 The quality of the resources produced by the Áisaonad is outstanding in terms of presentation; this meets the immediate needs of the IM sector and gives teachers confidence that the learning and teaching materials are attractive, and professionally produced to the same standards as those used in English-Medium (EM) schools.
- 4.5 In addition, the Áisaonad has produced many materials that are relevant for the end users, fit for purpose and appropriate to the learning context. They are logical in structure and their internal coherence is good. The textbooks

contain variety, some use interactive approaches as necessary and all are adaptable and reliable.

- 4.6 The translation and production of suitable materials is complex. Many factors are involved. The Áisaonad has managed and negotiated successfully the integration of language, subject and skills into many of its productions. The role played by language experts, translators and editors in establishing the right pitch and in using suitable, consistent and understood terminology has been facilitated to a high degree.
- 4.7 There is close co-operation between the Áisaonad and An Gúm, the publication branch of Foras na Gaeilge, in relation to the production of materials and resources suitable for Irish-medium schools.
- 4.8 The Áisaonad's Manager and Education Adviser have brought a thorough first-hand understanding of the needs of the IM primary sector to bear on the production of resources. Along with the Senior Editors, they have also had wide experience of translating and editing educational material in other contexts.
- 4.9 Most schools report that they find the Áisaonad accessible, and the quality of communication about their current resources to be good.

5 AREAS FOR DEVELOPMENT

- 5.1 In recent years, the Áisaonad has been under-staffed. The secondment of key personnel to other work has led to a lack of continuity in the production of important resources and has had an adverse effect on the needs of both teachers and learners in the IM schools sector. Greater harmonisation of procedures is required for the appointment and replacement of staff.
- 5.2 Many teachers and principals are unaware of the existence of the EdG. The role of the EdG is too vague and the arrangements pertaining to it are too informal. It does not meet on a sufficiently regular basis. It requires a stronger accountability role and needs to seek more actively the views of IM teachers.

- 5.3 There are important gaps in provision. The planning and co-ordination of the supply of resources needs to be more formalised and coherent. There are shortages in all areas of the primary curriculum. The teachers in IM schools spend an inordinate amount of time creating and, in many cases, duplicating basic resources. The Áisaonad should consider the establishment of a central bank to co-ordinate teacher-produced resources and to assist teachers in optimising their use.
- 5.4 Insufficient attention has been paid to the current and future resource needs of IM post-primary schools. Clearer targets to determine and prioritise needs, should be set. The Áisaonad needs to develop an effective strategy to fill gaps in demand, mapped against existing provision.
- 5.5 The quality assurance procedures employed by the Áisaonad for the writing and the trialling of materials, and for the greater involvement of teachers in proof-reading need to be reviewed and strengthened. The Áisaonad should establish more rigorous and systematic procedures for monitoring its work.
- 5.6 The Áisaonad should give greater profile and attention to its training role in order to ensure an improved impact on professional practice, and that the rationale behind the pedagogic tasks and learning strategies inherent in the texts are interpreted, shared and embedded more fully by the end users.
- 5.7 The issue of the level of Irish language used in a number of the Áisaonad's resources is problematical. The level of language and the readability of the texts need to be discussed and agreed more systematically with practising teachers.
- 5.8 The Áisaonad's website, accessed through the main website of St Mary's University College, is difficult to locate as there is no direct link from the College's homepage. Both teachers and learners would benefit from the production of more learning and support materials on line, easily facilitated with the growth of digital media. The Áisaonad does not record the number of hits to its website as part of its monitoring procedures. The website requires further development and needs to be updated more regularly.

- 5.9 As a matter of urgency, the Áisaonad should develop further links and partnerships with other key educational agencies, in particular, with the Inter-board IM Curriculum Advisory and Support Service team. In addition, there is a clear need for closer liaison between the Áisaonad and LNI, given the general shortage of curriculum support materials available on-line in Irish.
- 5.12 Working relationships are strained between the Áisaonad and Foras na Gaeilge and there is insufficient co-operation between them.

6 CONCLUSION

- 6.1 The Áisaonad has achieved much over the last eight years in fulfilling the needs of the IM sector through the production, to the highest international standards, of a considerable amount of high quality, IM materials. It has a vital role to play in curriculum access for IM schools and has focused rightly on raising the standard of resources. The substantial growth in IM education places a greater onus on the Áisaonad to increase its production of relevant curricular materials that support good teaching using effective immersion education pedagogy, and that influence positively learning in the IM classroom. Much work remains to be done if barriers to continued success are to be overcome. This report sets out a number of areas for development that will need to be addressed if the Áisaonad is to achieve a more effective service delivery to the ever changing demands of the sector and secure its position as the main source of IM materials and textbooks for schools in NI.

