

EIS Local Association Statement on Harmonised Timetables and Digitalisation of Teaching

Comhairle nan Eilean Siar are trying to use the pre-election period to implement sweeping changes to the learning and teaching practices in the authority's secondary schools without consulting staff, parents or pupils.

A letter is circulating addressed to parents/carers of pupils in secondary schools, authored by the Director of Education, Skills and Children's Services, Willie MacDonald, dated 28th March 2022 which outlines that pupils in S4-S6 will receive a subject option form which "gives pupils the opportunity to study a wider range of subjects" by harmonising the choice forms and timetables across all four secondary schools and providing the option to learn via e-Sgoil in each subject column. The letter goes on to outline that small class sizes are not financially sustainable.

A FAQ which accompanies the letter claims that 'pupils will benefit from digital and hybrid models of learning' with 'an adult' being present in the room whilst classes are taught online. This is entirely contrary to the position which the EIS believed had been agreed with remote learning platform provider, e-Sgoil, locally. The FAQ goes on "given that many Senior Phase pupils are old enough to get married, vote, drive etc. being able to engage in remote learning within the safe confines of a school is a skill and discipline which should not be beyond them." We believe this is a ludicrous statement which side-steps many of the Comhairle's statutory duties and responsibilities to our pupils.

The letter and FAQ show a severe lack of understanding of the job of teachers, appropriate pedagogy, and the education authority's agreed working practices for teachers. The Comhairle are claiming that Parent Council Chairs are supportive of the proposals but we understand Parent Council Chairs have not been presented with the proposals in full.

The EIS Western Isles Local Association wish to clarify the following points in relation to Harmonised Timetables and Digital Learning in the Western Isles:

- Whilst we agree with the seven-period proposal, having e-Sgoil available as an option in every subject column - with Castlebay, Sir E Scott and Sgoil Lionacleit harmonised to the Nicolson Institute's timetable - runs counter to the Empowered Schools agenda by **removing autonomy and all flexibility from the smaller secondary schools**. We will have the absurd situation where a class teacher will be sitting in an empty classroom whilst their subject is taught online by a teacher from another building, or from another local authority.
- As a Local Association we have always insisted that a registered teacher must be responsible in the receiving school for any online learning. This document suggests that 'an adult' (any adult?) will be responsible for junior classes and senior pupils can be completely unsupervised. **We have significant health and safety and child protection concerns about this aspect of the proposal**. There is an absolute disregard for statutory responsibilities and duties towards pupils as well as a serious undermining of the role of professional, registered teachers.
- **If the suggestion is that small groups of learners should be permanently online for certain classes, this is completely unreasonable**. Online learning can be set up as appropriate collaboration and according to the professional judgement of teachers of small classes without it having to be the de facto arrangement. Pedagogical approaches should be determined by teaching staff, not by staffing calculations. We have not been provided with the educational rationale for this proposal.

- On what evidence is the statement about the benefits of digital and hybrid models of learning based? OECD research suggests that digital learning needs to be carefully considered and balanced. Education Scotland states *'Whilst remote learning is not a substitute for full time classroom-based learning and teaching, effective remote learning can mitigate some of the adverse impact of a reduction in face-to-face learning'* but goes on to say *online learning is a tool which can be used to consolidate learning, provide opportunities for enhanced engagement and autonomy but **'remote learning should not replicate face to face in school teaching – in style, approach or hours of delivery and that teachers and practitioners retain responsibility for planning and organising children's and young people's learning...'***¹
- The fact is that there has been an 'adverse impact' caused by a reduction in face-to-face learning in Western Isles over the years. The Comhairle commissioned a report by Bruce Robertson, Headteacher of Berwickshire High School, in 2018 which stated *"the levels of overstaffing in all four secondary schools also gives rise in part, to a relatively broad set of curriculum options, and just how sustainable that is in the long term, given the financial pressure of the Council, is highly questionable."* It is questionable to us why the Comhairle based their education decisions over the past six years on a report commissioned from a Headteacher in another local authority. **Year on year we are told that our schools are 'overstaffed', which is why we have so many fixed-term teachers regardless of their years' service. For years we were told voluntary redundancy is always open to teachers. We are now being told the curriculum on offer is not broad enough to provide equitability. The EIS is clear that this is about cutting physical teachers in favour of online teaching:** the harmonised timetable/choice form will result in staff reductions and staff will be forced to teach online and in class at the same time.
- **What are the plans to gather the views of the young people affected by these proposals** and whether they are keen to spend large swathes of time within certain subjects learning online? The UNCRC adoption requires this.
- The FAQ states "learners will have to develop skills set and level of maturity which will enable them to undertake their schoolwork with a greater degree of maturity and independence than is currently the case". Pupils develop maturity at school, interacting with their peers and others, they don't arrive with maturity and independence. **It would be an abject failing on the part of the education department to simply tell learners that they will require maturity and independence from now on to learn online, without a registered teacher present. Educational attainment, covid recovery, and putting the learner at the centre of any changes should be the priority.**
- It is extremely disappointing and demoralising that this letter and FAQ was shared with parents prior to any discussion, least of all consultation or negotiation, with the teaching staff and trades unions. **The EIS represents the overwhelming majority of teaching staff across the Western Isles and we have a collective bargaining forum we would expect the Comhairle to present these proposals to as they relate to changes to working practices i.e. an expectation to carry out online learning or further reduce workforce.**

The EIS Local Association (the vast majority of teachers across the Western Isles) want to ensure there is an equitable choice on offer for all of our pupils. That means teachers, the education they provide, and the way they provide this education must be valued and respected. We seek the following:

- Status quo until agreement is reached on these proposals;
- Further clarity on these proposals. E-Sgoil is not a presenting centre, it is not a school. It is a remote learning platform provider and has a national role as such. It should not be used to undermine physical teaching and learning in the Western Isles;

¹<https://education.gov.scot/media/525drxw2/remote-learning-december-2021.pdf>

- Full and effective consultation on the proposals for harmonised timetables and digitalised teaching with parents, pupils, staff and their trade union representatives;
- Digital learning must always be supervised by GTCS registered teachers within the receiving school. Teachers online cannot be responsible for H&S in receiving schools, behaviour issues or other statutory duties and requirements; and
- The EIS Western Isles insist that statutory guidance is observed. Any undermining of the status, responsibility or integrity of the teaching profession will be robustly challenged by the EIS.