

Ceiliúradh na Gaelscolaíochta

Celebrating Irish Medium Education 2021

The Trust for Irish Medium Education



Iontaobhas na Gaelscolaíochta

Ó Neart
go Neart
From Strength
to Strength



20 Years supporting



Over half of Irish Medium Education (IME) schools are in inadequate accommodation.

And in many areas groups of parents can't progress plans to open an IME school.

These are two of the most visible results of the lack of financial support for the IME Trust Fund, Lontaobhas na Gaelscolaíochta.

Twenty years ago the Trust was given a one-off £3.4m grant.

Twenty years later that funding has not been renewed and Lontaobhas na Gaelscolaíochta has now no budget to continue to expand and enhance Irish medium schools.

Set up in 2001, the Trust invested the £3.4m and used the interest accrued to fund Irish medium schooling.

It had the improbable if not impossible task of trying to undo historical underinvestment and marginalisation of Irish medium schools.

A lack of investment underlined on day one when the Trust was faced with a backlog of eight IME schools which were unable to meet the criteria for funding by the department.

Eight schools which needed immediate and substantial ongoing financial help from Lontaobhas.

The Trust brought all eight over the line.

Also needing urgent help was a lengthening number of parent groups whose plans to open new schools in their areas had stalled due to a lack of funding.

The Lontaobhas came to their aid and continued to support the new schools until they reached viability.

In the 20 years since the Trust was set up, the number of IME nursery schools has nearly trebled, the number of primary schools has grown from 19 to 36 and post-primary provision has increased from one school to five.

Irish Medium Education became the fastest growing sector of our education system and has continued in that position for over a decade now.

Over the last 20 years the number of children in IME has increased more than fivefold, a period when the sector in general has been managing a significant drop in the number of pupils and schools.

"Evidently we are only one of the drivers in the tremendous growth of IME," says Pilib Ó Ruanaí, head of Lontaobhas.

"Even so, financial support has underpinned the success of a lot of IME schools.

"We couldn't have achieved what we did on the back of that one-off £3.4m grant.

"We had to generate further sources of finance and we did so by soliciting private donations and through our lottery fund, TACA.

"Those various sources of funding brought in over £1m extra.

"We also used our resources wisely. We came up with projects to facilitate match funding which brought extra investment to the sector and increased value for money.

"We kept our staff and administration costs to a minimum. And of course we were able to draw on a massive investment of time and energy by parents, teachers and others who have been unstinting in their commitment.

"Our board of trustees was also crucial.

"So a lot done, but a lot more to do.

"And we need further funding to do it."

While Lontaobhas has been making its case to politicians at the highest levels, it is still waiting for them to respond.

"Obviously, after 20 years, the original investment of £3.4m is gone – spent wisely and productively," says Pilib.

"However, there is still an evident demand for IME which isn't being met.

"I could easily list five or six areas where parents have organised to open Irish medium schools but in the absence of financial support they can't proceed at present.

"Alongside that we have over 50% of IME schools in temporary accommodation.

"Why should parents of children at IME schools be disadvantaged?

"We shouldn't be perpetuating that. We need a new funding arrangement for Lontaobhas na Gaelscolaíochta in order to develop the sector in a manner which addresses inequalities and realises the opportunities.

"At the root of a lot of the challenges facing the sector today is the marginalisation of Irish medium education.

"Irish medium isn't a 'bolt-on' to education here.

"It is a vital and vibrant part of our system. It is the fastest-growing sector of our education system.

"We require a bespoke policy that meets its unique needs.

"And we need a renewed commitment to funding IME that reflects government commitment to parents and to their educational choice."

Irish medium Education



Pilib Ó Ruanáí (InaG)

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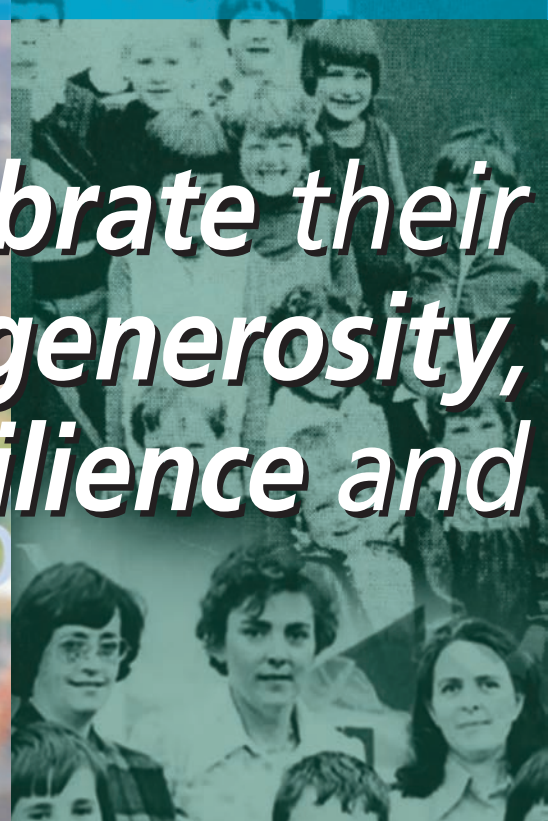
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*“Irish medium isn’t a ‘bolt-on’
to education here. It is a vital and
vibrant part of our system.”*



*“We celebrate their
their generosity,
their resilience and*



The news from Tyrone put a smile on his face the day that Ciarán Mac Giolla Bhéin took over as new head of Comhairle na Gaelscolaíochta.

“I spotted that Gaelscoil na gCrann in Omagh had just moved into their new school building. A new brick building.

“Not unusual you might think.

“But until last year not a single Irish medium school outside of Belfast had a new brick building.

“Think about that.

“Do we lament it took half a century from the setting up of the first IME school for us to have gotten a brick-built school outside of Belfast?

“Or just celebrate the fact that Gaelscoil na gCrann in Omagh is now in a fantastic new brick-built school?

“What encourages me is if you look and see what is happening throughout Tír Eoghain - there are three other brick-built schools on the way in Tyrone.

“Gaelscoil Uí Dhochartaigh in Strabane, Gaelscoil Aodha Rua in Dungannon and Gaelscoil Uí Néill in Coalisland are all being progressed. Four brick-built schools for IME in one county. That’s what a coordinated strategic approach to developing Irish medium education could and should look like.

“Unfortunately it’s a very rare example.

“My job is to try and ensure that coordination and strategic proactive planning for IME becomes the norm.”

Comhairle na Gaelscolaíochta represents the Irish Medium Education sector.

And Ciarán is intent on holding the

authorities to account for the way in which they fulfil or don’t fulfil their obligations.

“Under the Good Friday Agreement, the department has a statutory duty ‘to encourage and facilitate the development of Irish Medium Education.’

“Our rights are clear in that wording,” says Ciarán.

“There is a statutory duty.

“Unfortunately it has generally been fulfilled in a minimalist, reactive way which has held back the development of Irish medium schools.

“In 2009 a report drawn up for the department laid out the need for a creative, comprehensive and strategic way forward for IME.

“Thirteen years later, many of its recommendations have yet to be fully implemented.

“If they had been implemented, then we wouldn’t have the recurring problem of a lack of qualified teachers for some IME schools.

“Only last month the Council of Europe criticised the authorities for not dealing with this long-running problem. If the report’s recommendations had been implemented school governors and teachers wouldn’t need to lobby and campaign for permanent accommodation having spent decades in school buildings which are clearly inadequate.

“Take even what happened with Covid. There was a clear failure to provide online educational facilities in Irish that would be anywhere near equivalent to what was available in English.

“That is just the tip of the iceberg.

“Rather than a strategic planning

approach to proactively give effect to their statutory duty, these and numerous other examples suggest that the authorities often don’t consider Irish medium as a priority. Even though Irish medium education is our fastest growing educational sector - and has been for a decade.”

He is nonetheless optimistic.

“We need a change of culture.

“In terms of IME we need a recognition that there is not only an English language educational sector.

“Yes, that English language sector is long established and has lots of resources.

“But that sector is implementing a strategy to manage falling class numbers and reduce their number of schools.

“The Irish medium sector needs a different strategy.

“It is a young sector, with much fewer resources.

“But it is growing faster than any other sector, and indeed quite often we struggle to meet the demand for IME. The Irish medium sector needs a strategy which is tailored to manage and stimulate growth.

“What we need is for the stakeholders, whether it be the department or the Education Authority or CCEA or ourselves, to have a defined strategy by which progress or lack of progress in meeting the needs of IME can be measured.

“A strategy which lays out how they will fulfil their statutory duty in relation to teacher training or school accommodation or area planning or meeting the needs of post-primary provision or the many other issues facing our sector.

“That would be a significant step



*vision,
their sacrifices,
their success”*

She would support anything which promoted the language

The soundtrack of Íde Sionóid's life was the Irish language.



From her school days along the banks of the Shannon in Limerick to long nights of singing at Daonscoil na Mumhan in the Rinn Gaeltacht, from heading out to a feis in her old Volkswagen after a hard week of teaching until her last days in her home in the Kerry Gaeltacht Corca Dhuibhne, Íde spoke Irish and surrounded herself with those who spoke Irish.

And there was always a northern tinge to that soundtrack, says best friend Jacinta Sexton.

“Íde was very much inspired by what was happening with the Irish language in the North.

“She would always talk about it, how they were doing things in the North which were way ahead of the rest of the country. It was a great solace and a great inspiration to her.”

So much so that in the early 1970s when her sister, Carmel, a nun in the Little Sisters of the Assumption Order, had just moved to Belfast, Íde asked a favour.

“She gave me an envelope and asked me to bring it to Shaws Road Gaeltacht in Belfast. They had just set up the first Irish medium school there. That happened a few times. I never knew until years later that the envelopes contained donations for the school.

“That’s how Íde was. She was very charitable but you wouldn’t know it.

“She would be giving to Irish language schools and festivals, to Gaeltacht community groups, to Irish language magazines and to the daily newspaper Lá which was published in Belfast. She would support anything which promoted the language.

“She never talked about it much though.”

Pride of place in her house in Kerry was given to pieces of Belfast crystal.

“Some of the people from Shaws Road in Belfast sent her the crystal as thanks for her support for the school. That crystal was her pride and joy. She kept them on the dresser and would show them off to visitors.”

A talented writer, Íde wrote several books for children.

And in her later years she came to Belfast several times to visit her sister, Sister Carmel, to visit the Cultúrlann and to see for herself how the language she loved was flourishing.

“It was a great tonic to her to see how things were going so well here. Íde died in 2015. She had a full life. She was was a good singer, she was very well-read, she loved teaching, loved children and was really good with them.

“And she loved the language and surrounding herself with it.

“In her later years she moved to the Kerry Gaeltacht which was always her heaven.

“She had a good life, well lived.”

forward. As it is, we are far off that.”

In spite of the obstacles, IME schools continue to thrive.

“In the last 10 years, the Irish medium schools sector has grown 82%.

“We have had a 69% increase in numbers in our primary schools.

“Imagine if the department had been more proactive, as happens in Wales for example, how those growth rates would have been even more significant.

“Parents choose IME because they know of the cognitive and other advantages associated with bilingualism.

“They choose IME because they would like their children to be taught in one of the oldest indigenous languages in Europe.

“They choose IME because they want the best education possible for their children. Unfortunately, we are not in a position to be able to offer that choice to every single parent.

“That’s what we want to be able to do, and we are asking the department and other stakeholders to step up and help us achieve that.”

Comhairle is currently working on its own updated plan for developing the sector, focusing on the need for both short and long-term targets and strategies to build on the continuing appeal of IME.

“We are in an era of change, which is positive.

“More people than ever are aware of the Irish language and of bilingualism if only because of the discourse around the need for Irish language legislation.

“That’s a good thing.

“Maybe this ongoing discourse will help create a greater awareness at all

“In the last 10 years the Irish medium schools sector has grown 89%”

levels in society.

“There is no silver bullet, however. Progress will come incrementally and it will come in many different spheres.

“We see that in Wales, we see that in other societies which are learning to embrace bilingual education.

“We hope to play our role in that progression.

“But ultimately, the guarantee of change and progress is the fact that the Irish medium schools have been and continue to be a bottom-up story.

“It is a story of parents and supporters choosing IME for their children, setting up committees, going and finding sites for new schools, financing schools until they reach the criteria for department recognition; and continuing then to take an active role in the school community.

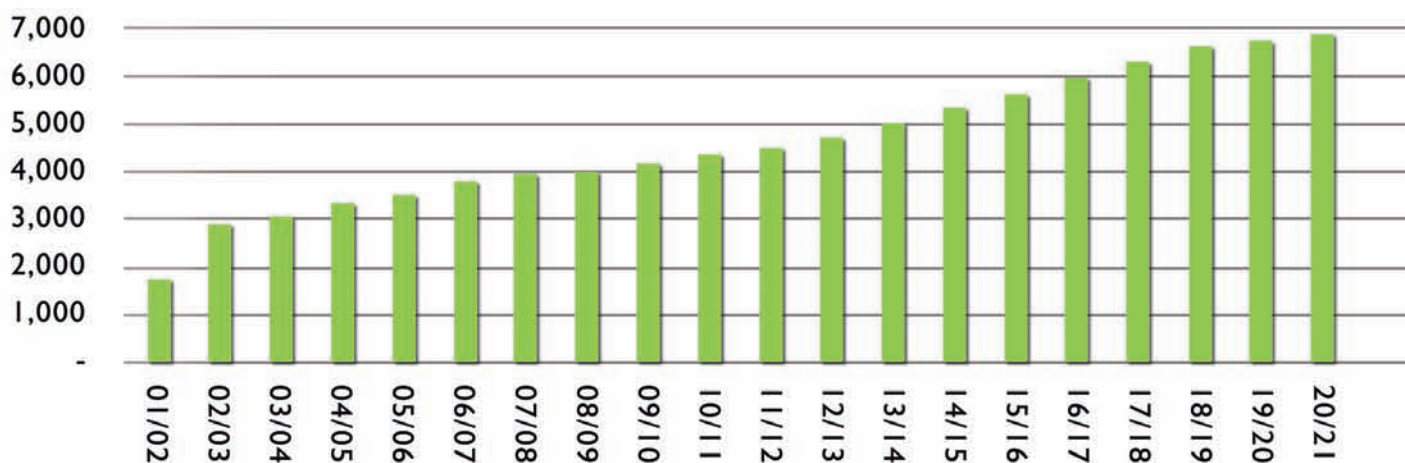
“They are the momentum that has created and sustained the náiscoileanna, the Gaelscoileanna and the meánscoileanna.

“And as we celebrate half a century of IME this year, above all we celebrate their vision, their generosity, their sacrifices, their resilience and their success.”

Fás na Gaelscolaíochta!

Growth of Irish Medium Education (IME)

Pupils in IME 2001/02 - 2020/21



From humble beginnings, growing out of an urban Gaeltacht on West Belfast's Shaws Road founded two years earlier, Irish Medium Education (IME) was established in the North in 1971 with just nine pupils. The outworkings of dedicated Irish language activists who sought to raise their children with Irish, the urban Gaeltacht thrived and soon began to inspire communities in other areas.

By the mid-1980s, there were four Gaelscoileanna, with pioneering Bunscoil Phobal Feirste being joined by a school in Derry city, Newry and a second West Belfast Gaelscoil in Gaelscoil na bhFál. With the establishment of Coláiste Feirste (then, Meánscoil Feirste) in 1991, children in Belfast could now attend school from ages of three to 18 all through the medium of Irish.

This trend continued in the next

decade with ten further schools being established and, ultimately, a duty to promote and facilitate IME was given to the Department of Education. With the establishment of Comhairle na Gaelscolaíochta (2000) and Iontaobhas na Gaelscolaíochta (2001), the IME sector began to thrive with additional support and over the subsequent 20 years has witnessed an astonishing rate of growth.

In the 2001/2 academic year, there were 1,602 attending either pre-school, primary or post-primary IME provision across 46 settings. By the year 2011, this number had grown by 175% to 4,400 children across 71 settings. This impressive rate of growth clearly marked the IME sector as the fastest-growing sector in an education system marked by shrinking enrolments.

The decade from 2011-21 has continued this strong growth with

enrolments rising a further 60% again, with more than 7,000 children receiving their daily education through the medium of Irish.

Importantly, the last decade has seen the growth and maturity of IME post-primary with Armagh city, Donaghmore and Castlewellan each boasting burgeoning IM post-primary communities. In 2015, Gaelcholáiste Dhoire was established in Dungiven to cater for the substantial Irish language community across County Derry and has grown into a living example of the benefits of Irish medium and bilingual education.

As the numbers of children and families availing of IME have grown from just nine to 7,000, a greater number of our young people are reaping the cognitive, social and economic benefits of a more comprehensive education. Surely, it is only a matter of time before we reach 10k!

Demand in Derry City for IME places hits new high as pressure for better facilities grows

Gaelscoil na Daróige



Bunscoil Cholmcille



Gaelscoil Éadain Mhóir.



Irish medium education in Derry has hit a new high with the city's three schools enjoying a record enrolment.

And it's not just in terms of numbers that they're thriving, but they're being recognised by parents as offering children an unrivalled bilingual education that's opening up new avenues of development and opportunity.

More than 400 children are now attending the three schools – Gaelscoil na Daróige, Bunscoil Cholmcille and Gaelscoil Éadain Mhóir. It's been an exciting story of growth and revival since Bunscoil Cholmcille opened its doors in 1992 and, with the three schools co-operating to offer children Irish language opportunities outside of school, it's also an exciting time in the city's cultural journey. Derry's Club Óige Setanta currently caters for 160 children, and recently moved into new premises of its own in the city centre, another sign of the growth and progress of the language.

"There's something special about the Gaelscoileanna, there's a strong, welcoming child-centred ethos, and we are seeing that more and more parents are recognising that," said Deaglán Ó Mocháin, who sits on the board of governors of Gaelscoil Éadain Mhóir.

"That ethos exists in all of the Gaelscoileanna," he said, "the teachers are called by their first names and that informality helps engender respect, kindness and friendship among the whole school community. Pupils and teachers are caring to each other and look out for each other and are encouraged to have strong links to their local communities."

All the schools put an extra emphasis on teaching traditional Irish music. "In our case every pupil learns an instrument and we work closely with An tAcadamh Ceoil in Cultúrlann Uí Chanáin to start them on their musical journey, encouraging them to attend classes outside of school hours, and hopefully instil a lifelong love for the music and culture," Deaglán said.

"As time passes, we're finding that our past pupils are turning up in all sorts of roles – from filmmaking to translators, to youth workers and artists, and of course there's always teaching as a lifelong vocation. It's clear that having Irish is an advantage in life, but at every Gaelscoil children are developing key life skills besides the language.

"From my own experience and what I've been seeing in recent years the appeal of Irish language education has spread out across the city. We're seeing more and more people inquiring about the school who may have missed out on the opportunity to learn Irish themselves, or are curious about Irish, and who really want their children to benefit from that experience.

"They understand that Irish gives their children something extra, a bilingualism that opens the door to multilingualism, and a broad cultural awareness that will benefit them their whole lives."

Deaglán's son Daire (13) now attends Gaelcholáiste Dhoire in Dungiven – but finds it's not as daunting a trip as might be thought.

"It takes him half-an-hour to get there – he gets the 8.20 bus in the morning and is home for four. There are plenty of pupils at schools in Derry who are home later!"

What makes the bus journey worthwhile is the incredible standard of the Gaelcholáiste itself, and how it builds on the all-embracing ethos of the many Gaelscoileanna that now serve it, from all across Derry and Tyrone

"There's some very strong English language schools in Derry, but in our experience, they struggle to support pupils coming from Irish medium schools," said Deaglán. "They don't always deal very well with the level of Irish they have, and the level of skill and talent they have developed can be lost as a result.

"That's not an issue in the Gaelcholáiste where they feel totally at home from day one, and their advanced language skills are appreciated and nurtured."

He added: "I can see that Irish medium education is reaching a new level in Derry in the past few years. Parents see it's delivering, they are sharing their positive experiences, and the sector is growing year on year."



Growth of Irish

Coláiste Feirste – celebrating 30 years of innovation

Coláiste Feirste is the fastest growing Gaelscoil in the whole of Ireland, with more than 800 pupils from a network of 11 bunscoil in the greater Belfast area. It is heavily over-subscribed every year and has just had a Development Proposal accepted by the Department of Education to increase numbers and facilities further to cope with the huge demand for places. Now it intends to branch out with a second campus in North Belfast.

It's hard to believe that Belfast's sole second-level Irish medium school opened its doors for the first time 30 years ago with just nine pupils. Since then several thousand pupils have come through Coláiste Feirste and are now sending their own children to the school. There are more than 60 teachers at present, including seven new highly-qualified and enthusiastic young teachers joining the team last year. Overall over 100 people work at the school.

That amazing growth reflects the confidence parents and the wider community have in the quality of education delivered by the Irish medium sector, from naiscoil to A-level.

"The Irish language creates a powerful learning environment for our pupils," says Principal Micheál Mac Giolla Ghunna. "Our strong Irish language ethos inspires young people to believe in themselves as proud young Gaels and to achieve accordingly."

This rapid success hasn't been without its challenges and occasional setbacks – it has taken huge effort, inspiration and an unshakeable belief in the transformational effects of Irish medium education. Any challenges have been overcome by a passionate belief in the benefits of Irish medium education and by the quality of

leadership in the school community - from parents and pupils to teachers and school governors. And that fight continues for the right of every parent to have their child educated in Irish and enjoy the same resources and opportunities as English medium schools.

One example of such success is that Coláiste Feirste's facilities are now second-to-none, in particular its state-of-the-art sports facility, Spórtlann na hÉireann, which opened in 2018 and has revitalised sport in the school and in the wider West Belfast area.

Both Coláiste Feirste and Spórtlann na hÉireann sit proudly at the heart of Belfast's Gaeltacht Quarter, as part of a wider Irish language community that is gradually mapping out a different type of future for Belfast. It takes a community to educate a child, and here is a vibrant, creative one that sees each and every child as important.

Pupils are stretched and challenged academically to achieve their best grades, while those with difficulties are supported through its Learning Support Centre to achieve beyond their potential. As a result, 80-90% of pupils go into sixth form, preparing for successful third-level study. That's why it consistently has been among the top performing non-selective schools.

Micheál continues: "But it's not just about exams. The pupils also excel in sport, drama, art and music. They grow into bright, successful young people, taking with them Coláiste Feirste qualities: self-belief, a sense of community and, of course, a fluency in Irish."

This year, even Covid could not stop the school. The challenges posed by the pandemic were tackled with imagination and ingenuity - as could be expected from a school community that exudes

commitment and self-confidence.

Vice-principal for Curriculum and Learning, Danielle Ní Riabhaigh, explains: "We're used to creating a curriculum and a pedagogy centred on the needs of the individual pupil. So we decided to create a new online approach, new learning strategies and new resources.

"Virtual classrooms were set up in all subjects for all year groups, including classroom assistants to continue individual support. We also created Coláiste Feirste-specific YouTube channels and subject-specific websites.

"But it was also about analysing and acting upon how young people can learn effectively online. Pupil and parental feedback were central to the new strategies for learning."

Emer Mhic an Fhailí, VP for Pastoral Care added: "School is not just about formal learning – it's a space where young people grow as individuals and have fun together.

"The challenge was to create this nurturing environment online. I'm so proud of our whole school community who stepped up and ensured that we kept our young people engaged, not just in learning but socially with each other.

"We're now using the lessons learnt from an adverse situation to develop further our practice and provision for pupil well-being."

So the foundations for success over the next 30 years are all in place at Coláiste Feirste, ingrained into its very being: treating each child as an individual, a dedicated and highly-qualified staff, excellent pastoral and support system, all under the nurturing umbrella of a language which unites and inspires. In short, a happy school community. Breithlá sona daoibh!



Medium Education Post-Primary

Gaelcholáiste Dhoire

Gaelcholáiste Dhoire shines like a burning comet amid the galaxy of radiant stars that make up the North's Irish language schools.

Set up six years ago with just 13 pupils, it's now got an incredible 226 students and, just like the other second-level school Belfast's Coláiste Feirste, its trajectory is stratospheric.

This year saw 56 pupils starting out on Year 8 - and the intake could be even bigger next year.

Principal Diarmaid Ua Bruadair says there's a palpable excitement in the school where both pupils and teachers know they're part of something special.

"The pupils made history back in 2015 and every new student who comes is adding to that history," he said.

The school has been called 'Hogwarts na Gaeilge' because it's actually in the grandeur of Dungiven Castle. And although Gaelcholáiste Dhoire is in the process of ambitious new accommodation plans which include two science labs, an arts suite, a full technology suite as well as a bold plan to purchase the adjacent leisure centre to provide sports facilities, the unique school building only adds to the feeling that this is a very special place indeed.

Gaelcholáiste Dhoire may be young but it's already made a name for itself in the fields of sport and traditional music. Its under-16 camogie team have won two of their last three Ulster finals while the Year 8 boys picked up two Ulster football titles last year.

Traditional music is, of course, in the DNA communities throughout Derry,

Antrim and Tyrone - and the school ensures that music is central in the lives of all its pupils, even offering individual tuition.

"Our students come from nine different primary schools from Limavady to Strabane and from Derry city to Magherafelt," said Diarmaid.

"The pupils recognise that something special is happening in this school - they fully embrace the vision that connects them with the Irish language. They come from so many bunscoileanna but when they attend Gaelcholáiste Dhoire, they become part of a new family.

"I see a deep sense of pride in the eyes of the students who attend Gaelcholáiste Dhoire as the school grows and develops.

"We need to provide for the future by ensuring that our young people are given the skills and knowledge and the confidence to take their places in 21st century Ireland as balanced bilinguals.

"Our aim is to develop well-rounded young adults who are confident in their own worth, independent and versatile and who are equipped with the skills and values to meet the challenges of a changing society.

"Like our Poet Laureate Seamas Heaney, we regard the Irish language as essential to self-understanding, mutual understanding, imaginative enhancement and cultural diversity."

Year 13 pupil Clíodhna Ní Mhiánáin echoed those sentiments, saying that high standards are seen throughout the school - including in the Irish spoken by the pupils amongst themselves.

"Teachers expect effort and

"...if you come here you will fall in love with Irish and Irish culture"

commitment from us and they get it because of the respect we all have for each other," she said.

"We have smaller class sizes - this means that no one is afraid to ask the teacher a question and this way everyone is more comfortable in class.

"The teaching is excellent here; I would say that it is on a par or better than grammar schools. We all understand that speaking Irish is a massive advantage and that was highlighted when we got great grades in our GCSEs.

"I got 10 A* grades in the exams and I aim to get grades like that in my A-levels as well.

"I'm very happy in this school and I love everything about it. There is a special atmosphere here and if you come here you will fall in love with Irish and Irish culture.

"We work towards a common goal - to create young, qualified and brave Gaels, and I would advise any Irish speaker in P7 to join us next year... tá fáilte mhór romhaibh!"

On the horizon...

There's wind in the sails of Naíscoil na Seolta – the ground-breaking East Belfast 'Nursery School of the Sails' which owes its name to the area's proud shipbuilding tradition.

2021 will go down in history as the year the school will open its doors for the first time.

Around 16 children are in the process of being enrolled for September and the project has given an almost unimaginable lift to the growing group of East Belfast Irish language lovers who have made great strides – sometimes, to use another maritime expression, against the tide.

There's a palpable sense of excitement among parents whose toddlers are about to set off on the lifelong journey of knowledge that is the Irish language, and a recent information evening for prospective parents was so well attended that it provided a final lift that will see the school organisers all the way through to September.

"There's a number of reasons it's unique, not only is it in East Belfast but it will be an integrated Irish medium naíscoil – we know Irish medium education is non-denominational, but we have actually linked up with NICIE (the Council for Integrated Education Northern Ireland)," said Linda Ervine, one of Naíscoil na Seolta's founders.

"Everyone is really excited about that.

"I'm thinking of one parent who has just joined our committee – she and her husband, both Protestants, had no knowledge of the Irish language until a few years ago when they started learning Irish and but they are so passionate that their child will go to this school. They're going to move mountains to make this happen.

"There are a lot of people willing this on.

"It shows how things are changing, attitudes are changing, demographics are changing, and it's great to see," Linda said.

Linda takes inspiration from her experience in setting up community initiative Turas almost a decade ago, which aims to connect people from Protestant communities with their own history with the Irish language.

She points out that even today, the Irish language can be viewed by some "as a threat, something from outside, something that was pushed on them".

"But we saw the same with Turas – 10 years ago there was talk of protests, people walking out of our building, to now being very much part of the community and being totally accepted. Some of the people who were going to protest against it are now going to classes," Linda said.

"There's so much support from people – now it's one of the biggest centres in Belfast because we're filling a massive gap."

Linda says the opening of Naíscoil na Seolta is a natural next step and it will be "a game-changer".

"Last year we started up a scholarship scheme and now we have eight people at university studying Irish – five doing degrees and three diplomas and we're helping them financially. We want to encourage more people from the Protestant community to get third-level education in Irish," she said.

"With getting children educated, it will feed back to families and it just changes the whole perception of who speaks Irish and what it's all about. We think it's very exciting.

"Our plan is eventually to have a bunscoil, and basically as soon as we set up the Naíscoil, we'll be working towards that.

"I feel that once we actually get going, it's going to open the floodgates."

Mum Natalie McDowell (above) has already enrolled daughter Méabh with Naíscoil na Seolta next September – she can't start this year because she's only 19 months old!

Natalie said: "I've only actually started learning Irish in January. In Northern Ireland if you're from a Protestant background you don't get the chance to learn it at school – and that wasn't the failing of our parents.

"We made friends who are Irish speakers through university and we always felt we missed out on something.

"So whenever we had our little Méabh, we felt it was really important that when she grew up that she knew some Irish. So I started a class back in January with Linda as a way for me to learn and maybe be able to teach her some.

"And then Linda said about the new school – we think it's going to be an amazing opportunity to let her learn Irish through her education.

"My husband Andrew and I are hoping to both start proper stage one classes in September and learn as she learns – although she'll probably outtalk us in no time once she starts the naíscoil!



“It will be an integrated Irish medium Naíscoil”

"Linda's been educating me about the benefits of bilingualism with children and how when Méabh starts learning Irish then it makes learning any language then much easier for her as she grows and develops.

"And it helps with her overall thinking and process skills so we're really excited about it and it's a fun route to go down."

The vice-chair of the committee behind Naíscoil na Seolta, Aodán Mac Séafraidh, brings years of experience of Irish language education from his previous work with schools body Comhairle na Gaelscolaíochta.

"We were actually ready to go a year ago but then Covid hit," he said. "But the recent information evening was a great success and so the school will open this year.

"We have good numbers at the minute. You need more pupils to set up a primary school than a nursery school, so we are hoping for more numbers for the nursery and looking to the future.

"When we actually start it will have a momentum of its own, and then it will be an example for other areas which aren't seen as traditional Irish language strongholds."

As any old East Belfast shipyard worker would say, a rising tide raises all boats!

Every dream counts

A sentiment usually addressed to the aspirations of pupils at Irish medium schools rather than the pragmatic adults who set up a school.

Pragmatic they may be but those adults are also enthused by their own dreams and aspirations.

People such as Medb Ní Dhúláin who is on the committee working to open an Irish medium náiscoil/nursery in Antrim town in September 2022 and a Gaelscoil the following year.

The Randalstown woman, who is in her early twenties and works in Irish language media, missed out on Irish medium education herself as there was no Gaelscoil nearby when she was growing up.

"I am really passionate about this," she explains. "If I have children I want them to have all the benefits of being educated in an Irish medium school."

"I know from working in the Irish language media how much being bilingual can enrich your mind, your life and your job opportunities."

"What we want to do is to offer IME to everyone in Antrim, from whatever background."

"Our committee has been working hard since last year and at present we're negotiating to acquire a site near the M2, which, of course, would be very convenient for a lot of folk."

"We are also talking with several bodies to source funding."

"Alongside all that, we already have over 20 expressions of interest in places at the school."

"So now we are formally inviting expressions of interest from any parent who would like to send their children to an Irish medium nursery in Antrim, opening in September 2022."

It's not surprising that there are plans to bring Irish medium schooling to Antrim.



Maria Devlin (chair)

Look north, south, east or west of Antrim town and it's clear that IME has taken off in Ballycastle, Glengormley, Crumlin and Maghera.

It is hoped the new school will attract pupils not only from Antrim town but from Randalstown and the wider area.

"For six years, when Bunscoil na Tamhnaí Móire near Randalstown became an Irish medium school, we saw that there was significant interest in IME in the greater Randalstown area," says Gearóid Mac Aoidh, vice-chair of the committee.

"So we hope to build on that familiarity with IME which some communities already have."

"For those to whom IME is new, we'd encourage them to contact us or to get in touch with Comhairle na Gaelscolaíochta to find out more."

"IME has for years now been the fastest growing sector in our education system."

"There are many reasons for that, but one really important reason is the cognitive advantages children have from being fluent at an early age in not one but two languages."

Picking the name for Antrim town's first IME nursery and primary was easy enough.

Gaelscoil Aontroma.



Choosing the logo wasn't too challenging either.

Prominent on that logo is the famous Round Tower at the Steeples.

The tower dates to a period of history when Antrim was known by its Irish name, Aon Tréibh, the Place of the One House - a reference to its famous monastic house.

It was a time when Irish was common in the area.

"We hope that Antrim will respond to this initiative," says Gearóid, "and that the Irish language will once again be part of the educational and linguistic landscape of the town."

Members of the committee are Maria Devlin (chair), Gerard Magee (vice chair), Kelly-Ann Mc Garry (secretary), Medb Ní Dhúláin (public relations).

Anyone wishing further information can contact the committee at gaelscoilaontroma@gmail.com



“It’s the children who star...”

It’s not hard to see how Gaelscoil na gCrann in Omagh has thrived.

Look at their brand new £3.4m brick building and you appreciate how far this school has come after 14 years in mobile classrooms.

Then there are the statistics.

20 staff.

190 children.

Healthy enrolment numbers for the coming years.

All good.

A cabinet choc-a-bloc with trophies and awards tells its own story of the achievements of pupils, individually or as a team.

Among them, a prestigious award from the STEM Formula 1 Jaguar Competition 2019 nestles between two All-Ireland School Drama awards.

There are lots of ways to measure the progress and success of Gaelscoil na gCrann but after 11 years at the helm principal Deirdre Nic Cionnaith still uses her own trusted measurement.

“Every day I see the children coming to school with enthusiasm, in the right frame of mind, wanting and open to education, that’s my measure of success. That shows me we are doing things well.”

The children are certainly in the right frame of mind these days as they settle into their new school building with its seven spacious, bright classrooms, a nursery unit, a fantastic multi-purpose hall, a computer room, a library and a kitchen area allowing for healthy meals at school. Not to mention three play areas, a large Polytunnel and a Sensory Room!

So proud are the children of Gaelscoil na gCrann of their new school that they now give their own virtual visit, six and a half minutes long.

Just pop in here

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_pD1gOBXc2A

The large Polytunnel is the starting point for the virtual visitor to Gaelscoil na gCrann.

A chance to follow the green-fingered children as they dance up and down on mulch or seed their new vegetables.

Sensory Rooms are not the norm in primary schools and visitors are always impressed by this room with its low lighting, fibre optics, mirrors, lighting projections, bubble tubes and an infinity tunnel.

It’s a private space where a child can go with the teacher and relax outside the classroom.

Sensory Rooms are particularly helpful in providing physical and mental stimulus for children with physical disabilities, developmental delays or sensory impairments.

It’s the children who star in the virtual visit to Gaelscoil na gCrann.

In Rang 5 they greet you with a cheery ‘Buenos Dias’ as they converse in Spanish.

In Rang 6 you can sing along with Téir Abhaile Riú, a song made popular by Clannad.

The children also give you a look at their collection of awards, crystal trophies, shiny cups, plaques and statuettes.

Taking part in the Formula 1 Jaguar STEM Competition in 2019 the school team, ‘The Venomous Vipers’, had to design a special model of a racing car, set up their own company and market their car.

The Vipers aced the regional heats and performed so well at the UK finals in Birmingham that they returned with an impressive award.

It sits in the cabinet alongside two spectacular statuettes.

In 2014, Gaelscoil na gCrann beat off competition from over 40 other schools to win the All-Ireland Schools Drama Competition, the first school from the North ever to win the competition.

In 2019, they bettered that when they scooped the prize for a second time!

The range of awards for everything from choral and literary competitions

to camogie and art prizes reflects the wide range of activities the school encourages.

“We had so much laughter, tears and tantrums in our old school building - all of them good” says principal Deirdre Nic Cionnaith.

“Our plan now is to create wonderful memories in this new school building and to maintain the high standard of the last 15 years.

“One of our great strengths is our wonderful and talented staff.

“They proved yet again during Covid that they will always go beyond what is asked of them for our pupils.

“Not only academically but holistically, emotionally and socially.

“We are an inclusive school, a school for all.

“A school which is very much committed to developing the whole child in line with our school motto ‘Ag oscailt dorais an tsaoil – opening the doors of life.’

The advantages of bilingual education are well documented and Deirdre says that immersion education is key.

“The children are completely immersed in Irish from nursery until primary three and they become fluent in both languages quickly.”

And she reassures parents who don’t speak Irish themselves.

“Don’t let that put you off. A majority of our parents don’t speak Irish fluently. All our homework is in English so that parents still play a vital role in their child’s education, both at home and at school.”

While the official school opening will have to wait for the complete lifting of Covid restrictions, their shared experience during Covid has had a positive impact on teachers and pupils.

“If there is any positive from Covid it’s that after lockdown we realise more than ever how immense a role the kids play in our lives and we play in theirs.”



“...a high academic standard in a school where a child learns to speak two languages fluently at a young age”

Julie Gallagher started with the question all parents ask. How do I get the best education possible for my children?

The Omagh woman wasn't an Irish speaker but the idea of bilingual education appealed to her.

"I took it as a given that there would be a high academic standard in a school where a child learns to speak two languages fluently at a young age," she says. "That attracted me.

"It wasn't however until I actually went into a classroom at a Gaelscoil that I realised the spin-off advantages that come with bilingualism.

"I saw for myself the self-esteem those children had; their social skills, their ability to communicate with great confidence with other children - it was just unreal.

"That opened my eyes to the fact that there is a lot more to IME than academic ability alone. And I realised that this was what I wanted for my children and for my community."

Omagh didn't have a Gaelscoil back then.

And it mightn't have one today if serendipity hadn't brought Julie Gallagher and IME together.

"I got involved in 2003 when I saw in an ad that an Irish medium nursery school needed somewhere to base themselves.

"In they landed, three children in the front foyer of the Dún Uladh centre in Omagh.

"After a while it was seven children. Then they needed a mobile classroom.

"Next thing we were setting up a Gaelscoil. A whole Gaelscoil!"

Gaelscoil na gCrann opened in Omagh in 2006.

The years after were a whirlwind of leafleting and knocking on doors, of organising fundraising events and

publicising the school, of trying to source mobile classrooms and keeping up with a changing curriculum, of dealing with issues in the classroom and outside of it.

And numerous meetings with funding bodies, the Education Board, department officials and many others.

"I was deluded about the amount of work required," says Julie. "It was immense. It just would have been impossible if it hadn't been for the commitment and ability of people like Brian McKenna and our Principal, Deirdre Nic Cionnaith.

"And the constant support of the two organisations who promote IME, Iontaobhas and Comhairle na Gaelscolaíochta.

"Whether it was dealing with the educational bodies, getting a mobile classroom, recruiting a teacher or just sharing the experiences of other schools in a similar situation to ourselves, they took us through it all by the hand. That was crucial."

In 2013 Minister John O'Dowd included Gaelscoil na gCrann in the Capital Expenditure Programme.

It was a seminal moment.

Even so, the school would spend another seven years in substandard accommodation before they moved to their new £3.8m school building in September 2020.

"Those years felt like forever.

"At times you needed to manage expectations.

"Yes, we did want a new school building.

"And yes, our new school is beautiful.

"But the key to a great school is not the building. A wonderful building helps but the key to it all is the quality of education in the school - the relationship between the child and the teacher.

"In Gaelscoil na gCrann that relationship is excellent and the quality of

education is excellent.

"That was true even in the old school where we had mice for company, where the teachers had no staff room, where we didn't have enough toilets or sinks.

"The magic our teachers and children made inside those mobile classrooms over many long years is the same magic they'll make now in a brand new £3.8m school."

And she adds: "We have been blessed in that we have attracted super staff.

"We've seen their talent and commitment on a daily basis over many years.

"And they have been exemplary yet again in going way above and beyond to ensure our children's welfare and education during Covid.

"We appreciate them so much."

A long-serving Chair of the Board of Governors, Julie looks back in pride at having both a daughter and son educated at Gaelscoil na gCrann.

She is trying to reduce her role in the school but it's hard to not be enthused as she sees on a daily basis the positives of Gaelscoil na gCrann.

"I see the smiles on the faces of the children and hear them just switching so fluidly from one language to another. How would you not be inspired?"

"The commitment by the staff, by the board of governors, by the parents and the wider school community has given us a wonderful school and opened up fantastic opportunities for young children here in Omagh.

"Whole generations of children will have the benefit of that.

"The Irish language is much stronger in Tyrone because of it.

"Education in Tyrone is richer because of it.

"What's not to like?"

Ahead of their time...

You might have seen the kids of Gaelscoil Éadain Mhóir in the newspapers a while back. Twenty pupils from the Irish medium primary school in Derry's Brandywell who did their GCSE Irish exams at age 10-11.

Five years ahead of most children.

Remarkably they all got grades between A-C. Clever kids!

Or maybe you noticed them on Facebook recently: skateboarding, rollerblading, cycling and scootering into school as part of Big Pedal Week 2021.

You might even have caught a glimpse of them on YouTube drumming, singing and dancing their way to fame in 'Gaelscoil's Got Talent!'

Cool dudes.

Where you didn't see the name Gaelscoil Éadain Mhóir was on the Department of Education's Capital Expenditure Programme. Not recently. Not ever.

For the school is now approaching a quarter of a century in 'temporary' accommodation. Last year there had been hopes that Gaelscoil Éadain Mhóir would finally feature in a £156m allocation of Capital Expenditure funding.

It didn't.

Nor did a single one of Derry's IME schools.

The decades spent in inadequate 'temporary' accommodation just keep on lengthening. Bunscoil Cholmcille: 30 years.

Gaelscoil Éadain Mhóir: 23 years.

Gaelscoil na Daróige: 16 years.

And counting.

In spite of the department's statutory duty to 'encourage and facilitate the development of Irish medium education', not a single child in IME in Derry has ever been educated in a permanent, brick building.

It's not that the Department of Education is unaware of their situation.

There have been regular campaigns highlighting the lack of investment in IME schools in Derry.

In 2019, senior officials of the department, including the Permanent Secretary, visited the three schools and saw the accommodation for themselves.

"...our numbers continue to grow because parents are aware of the quality of education at this school..."

In 2020, after widespread criticism of his decision not to include Gaelscoil Éadain Mhóir on the Capital Expenditure Programme, Minister for Education, Peter Weir, visited the three schools.

Yet nothing has changed.

"We shouldn't have to fight for fundamentals such as permanent, fit-for-purpose buildings," says Mary Nic Ailín, Principal of Gaelscoil Éadain Mhóir.

"The underinvestment in our school buildings is a significant disadvantage and it has certainly deterred some parents who would otherwise have chosen IME.

"In spite of that our numbers continue to grow because parents are aware of the quality of education at this school and of the advantages of bilingual education in general. Even so, imagine how much more we could have grown if we'd had a modern school building and site."

By any fair criteria Gaelscoil Éadain Mhóir can be judged a successful, indeed a model school.

It has a track record of 23-plus years providing high-quality bilingual education.

An increasing enrolment in the primary school and a nursery which is oversubscribed.

A teaching staff who have proven their ability time and time again.

A committed and engaged Board of Governors.

Parents and a wider school community who contribute daily to school life.

And the pupils of Gaelscoil Éadain Mhóir have a very visible profile in their local area and indeed citywide.

Mary adds: "I've no doubt that if the three IME schools in Derry were to get new, permanent accommodation it would

significantly enhance the status of IME in the city and would lead to more parents choosing IME.

"We have seen that in places like West Belfast.

"There, all but one of the Irish medium schools are in modern brick buildings and that visible investment in the school infrastructure has been an important driver in the growth of IME in West Belfast.

"In Derry, underinvestment in Irish medium schools has the opposite effect. It sends a negative message which is an impediment to realising the full potential of IME."

Mary has spent all her teaching life in Gaelscoil Éadain Mhóir.

"From the moment I applied for the job and came to the school I knew I wanted to be here," she says.

"I started in 2003 and became Principal in 2008. I love teaching here and in recent years I've actually enjoyed the management side too.

"We're so lucky to have such a wonderful staff who would do anything for the children. We have them spoiled!

"There's not a day here that you don't see something or hear something that makes you smile.

"The children have such a natural ability to learn so much.

"And that pride they have, even at such a young age, in being able to speak two languages.

"It's something priceless which they will take with them through their whole life."



“Our glass is always half full”

Irish medium schools teach the same curriculum as other schools.

Sometimes, however, you wonder if they haven't slipped an extra subject in. Resilience.

Because so many Irish medium schools seem to be adept and practised at dealing with challenge. Take Gaelscoil Uí Dhochartaigh in Strabane. Since it opened a quarter of a century ago the school has been housed in 'temporary' accommodation.

In 2013, Minister John O'Dowd announced that they had been approved for Capital Investment.

Happy days?

Not just yet.

Eight years later they are still waiting for that first sod to be turned.

The first brick to be laid.

Derry and Strabane Council District Planning Committee has greenlighted the development of a 1.1-hectare site on Strahans Road and it's hoped construction will start this year.

When finished, the new £3.4m Gaelscoil Uí Dhochartaigh will be a state-of-the-art building with seven classrooms, a staff room, a hall, a canteen, a unit for the nursery school, an abundance of hard and soft play space, car parking and other facilities.

The long wait and the delays would have fazed many but at Gaelscoil Uí Dhochartaigh - well, resilience comes to the fore.

They just cut out all the noise and focus on what is important. The quality of schooling - echoing a sentiment you often hear in Irish medium schools.

Good schools are not built. They are made. "You can design and construct the most fantastic buildings for schools," says Máire Uí Dhochartaigh (above), Principal at Gaelscoil Uí Dhochartaigh. "But good

schools are made by the people inside the buildings.

"The quality of education depends on the teachers and the pupils, on the relationship between them.

"It's also about the relationship between pupils themselves.

"It's about the extra skills and insight a child gets when he or she is gliding in and out of two languages and cultures at a very young age.

"And it's about the whole experience a child has while at school, not just the formal learning experience.

"Our emphasis is and will always be on the quality of education and on a positive experience irrespective of whether we are in temporary accommodation or in our shiny new brick building."

And she continues: "The new school will certainly be more comfortable, more spacious, and easier in many respects for the teachers and the pupils.

"It will also increase our profile. All good.

"But the truth is, every single day I see the effort that everyone here puts into making our school the best - and it would be hard to top that."

Máire has been at the school since 1999 and knows it will be a wrench to leave their neighbours in Ballycolman estate.

"The links will always be there," she says.

"We started in 1997 with a handful of children, one teacher and a glass-half-full spirit.

"Gaelscoil Uí Dhochartaigh is an Irish medium school but it's also a community school.

"So the image of the parents going door to door collecting to keep the school going or spreading the word about the merits of IME, says something about who we are, what we are about."

Conall Mc Glinchey, Zara Devenney, Nímhé Ní Bhrogáin, Aisling and Orla Nic Aodha, and Aaron Ó Feardhail were the first pupils to attend Gaelscoil Uí Dhochartaigh when it opened in St Anne's Pastoral Centre on Newtownkennedy Street in 1997.

Along with their teacher, Aisling Mhic Aodha, they were writing not just a brand new chapter in education in Strabane but kickstarting the revival of the Irish

language which is so evident today.

Fast forward to 2021 and Gaelscoil and Naiscoil together have over 170 pupils and an intake which has been increasing steadily year on year.

Máire is appreciative of how the Gaelscoil enriches what is already a vibrant educational sector in Strabane.

"We are lucky to have a lot of very good schools here in Strabane," she says.

"We have a really good relationship with other schools and we want to build even further on that when we move to our new site with its enhanced facilities and new buildings."

“...the new £3.4m Gaelscoil will be a state-of-the-art-building”

Nine former pupils have come back recently to Gaelscoil Uí Dhochartaigh, this time helping out as classroom assistants or in other roles.

"You see that constantly," says Maire, "the bond between the past pupils and the school, the pride that our past pupils have in the school even when they have moved on.

"We are very grateful and very proud of that." When she was President, Mary McAleese paid an official visit to Gaelscoil Uí Dhochartaigh.

She said: "You don't have a school like this unless people are passionate and have a love of language and of culture. And of education.

"It's a remarkable thing to have accomplished and a special thanks must go to everyone who has put their lives into creating this opportunity for the young people of an Srath Bán."

The new school building will be an affirmation of how quickly and wholly Strabane has taken to Irish medium education. And the new site will have ample space for extra classrooms if, as seems likely, Gaelscoil Uí Dhochartaigh continues to grow exponentially.

In Strabane, the glass is always half full.

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