

Proposed Irish language secondary school for Castlebar receives council support

Absence of Irish language secondary school described as madness



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By **Gallagher Michael**

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The continued absence of an Irish language secondary school in Castlebar was described as madness at a Municipal District meeting in the town recently. Frainc Ó Clochartaigh and Emer Mayock from Gaelcholáiste Mhaigh Eo addressed the meeting and outlined the support there is in the area for the establishment of an immersive Irish medium second level school in the town.

They left councillors in no doubt that no half measures will be accepted by the campaigners who have generated large support since hosting a public meeting in Castlebar in February. Currently, there is no second level Irish language secondary school in Mayo outside the Gaeltacht areas and the Castlebar group believe there is a huge need for one in the county town.

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The speakers explained how Castlebar is home to Gaelscoil Raifteirí, a highly successful Irish language primary school established in 1983 as the first Gaelscoil in the county, but there has never been a follow-on option for students to continue their immersive Irish language education at secondary school level.

Such is the case too for pupils of Gaelscoil na Cruaiche in Westport, Gaelscoil Uileog de Búrca, in Claremorris and Gaelscoil na gCeithre Maol in Ballina.

“Children receive a wonderful education through Irish at primary level but after two years in a regular secondary school all the language skills are lost. It's so sad to see and so hard to understand.

“We're very happy with Scoil Raifteirí,” Ms Mayock told the meeting. “It helps them become fluent speakers and they think in Irish as they're immersed in the language, but that all ends at 12. It's so hard to understand why that has been allowed continue to happen. The great work Scoil Raifeiri has been doing for 40 years falls to the ground after two years in secondary

school,” she added.

Mr Ó Clochartaigh said the need for a gaelcholáiste is great in Castlebar and the campaigners will not settle for a 'watered-down' offering.

“Sometimes the department looks to provide a half-way house where a gaelcholáiste exists in tandem with another secondary school. That's not for us because it's not a successful formula. We want a fully independent gaelcholáiste for Castlebar and there is great support in the community for it,” Ó Clochartaigh stated.

“We're looking for the school to be established in a visible location in the town centre initially and council support is crucial in this. Later, we would be looking to move to a greenfield on the outer limits of the town where access from Westport would be easier, but it's all about support from the community and the council.”

That support was clearly evident around the council chamber as all elected representatives passionately welcomed the presentation and pledged all support possible.

Cllr Martin McLoughlin said his family were past pupils of Scoil Raifteirí and he saw at first hand the huge benefits of an Irish medium education. Cllr Blackie Gavin said the gaelcholáiste would be a huge boost to Castlebar life and would add to the vibrancy of the town where the social infrastructure was second to none. Cllr Donna Sheridan said there was a school in Tourmakeady offering an all-Irish secondary school experience but Castlebar needed one of their own.

The impact a Castlebar Gaelcholáiste would have on the school in Tourmakeady would be a very positive one according to Emer Mayock. “We wouldn't threaten their funding or well-being. Instead we would enhance many of the things already happening in Tourmakeady through sharing of resources because that's the way we think and operate.”

Cllr Al McDonnell, cathaoirleach of the Municipal District, said the gaelcholáiste project had huge support in the community, even more than the campaigners realised and he pledged the council's support in the establishment of the school.