

National Assembly for Wales Petitions Committee – Welsh-medium Primary Education

Summary

We are grateful to the Petitions Committee for seeking UCAC's opinion on a petition calling on the Welsh Government to ensure that every primary school in Wales teaches through the medium of Welsh.

UCAC is a union representing teachers, school leaders and lecturers in all education sectors across Wales.

The Welsh Government's Vision

The Welsh Government's vision in relation to the Welsh language is clearly set out.

The **Welsh-medium Education Strategy** (2010) notes the following vision:

“To have an education and training system that... enables an increase in the number of people of all ages and backgrounds who are fluent in Welsh and able to use the language with their families, in their communities and in the workplace.” (p.4)

The Welsh-language strategy, **A living language: a language for living** (2012), outlines the following vision:

“Our vision is to see the Welsh language thriving in Wales.... The purpose of this strategy is to move towards our long-term aim... to ‘strengthen the use of the Welsh language in everyday life’... To this end... we would want to see:

- an increase in the number of people who both speak and use the language
- an increase in people's confidence and fluency in the language
- an increase in people's awareness of the value of Welsh, both as part of our national heritage and as a useful skill in modern life
- the strengthening of the position of the Welsh language in our communities (p.14)

In addition to this general vision, the Welsh-medium Education Strategy explains the best mechanism for encouraging bilingualism and fluency in the Welsh language:

“2.11 Welsh-medium education from the early years, with robust linguistic progression through every phase of education, offers the best conditions for developing future bilingual citizens.” (p.7)

“2.13 It is generally accepted that at least around 70% of curricular time should be through the medium of Welsh if learners are to acquire a sufficiently sound command of the language to enable them to use it across a broad range of contexts with confidence and fluency.” (p.8)

UCAC agrees entirely with the Government's vision. We believe very strongly in giving every learner in Wales an equal opportunity to become fluent in the Welsh language. This, in turn, ensures that everyone has equality of opportunity when applying for posts where the Welsh language is required or desirable. However, the Government's own evidence, as well as the Census figures in 2011, shows that the steps that the Government is taking at present are not having a sufficient effect. According to the Welsh-medium Education Strategy: Annual Report 2012-13:

"...despite all this activity there has been little progress made against the strategy's targets. For instance, we are unlikely to see 25 per cent of seven-year-old children being taught through the medium of Welsh by 2015."

It appears to UCAC that the idea of ensuring that every primary school teaches through the medium of Welsh is a very direct way of reaching the Government's targets in relation to the Welsh language. After all, this is an age at which languages can be learnt almost effortlessly, given the right pedagogical environment.

Of course, there are practical matters that must be considered.

There are insufficient linguistic skills within the education workforce to achieve this at present.

The measures already in place, such as the Sabbatical scheme, language courses, courses aimed at increasing confidence in Welsh and support for staff from Teachers of Welsh in Education, would have to be intensified and expanded. Workforce planning methods would need to be improved and changes made to Initial Teacher Training.

Not all parents would be content for their children to receive Welsh-medium education.

Parents and governors would need to receive information about the value and importance of ensuring bilingualism, as well as certainty that learning Welsh does not impair the ability to develop skills in English.

One way of getting to grips with these practical problems would be a phased approach toward ensuring that:

□ **the Foundation Phase is provided through the medium of Welsh on every site;** a report by Carmarthenshire's Welsh Language Census Results Working Group, published this week, recommends that 'all English medium primary schools over a period of time, will deliver the curriculum in the Foundation Phase mainly through the medium of Welsh'.

□ **an increasing number of subjects are taught through the medium of Welsh,** beginning with one subject in schools that currently teach through the medium of English. Two clusters of English-medium primary schools have been piloting a similar model (one in the south east and the other in the north west); it is likely that the Department for Education and Skills could provide additional information about

these. Also, Ceredigion Country Council has a great deal of experience of moving schools 'along the language continuum'.

UCAC is more than willing to provide additional information should the Committee desire it.