



Dear Minister for Education, Kirsty Williams MS,

We write to express our serious concern about the Curriculum Bill that is due to be published imminently. We understand that the Bill in its current form makes English a compulsory element of the curriculum, and includes a clause that will make English and Welsh compulsory by default, but enable individual governing bodies to 'opt out' of making English compulsory before the age of 7 in their own school.

At a meeting with the Minister for International Relations and the Welsh Language yesterday (1/06/2020), the Minister confirmed that this was the intention, telling us *"if English wasn't compulsory in the Bill, but Welsh was, the 80% of the population who don't speak Welsh would make a huge fuss."*

No other reason was given for the decision to make English compulsory, and we are stunned that this is the justification given. It shows a lack of understanding of minority language teaching methods, the status of Welsh compared to English and a patronising attitude towards the majority of people in Wales who do not speak Welsh but who wish to see our children leaving school fluent in the language. Such scaremongering is not a sensible basis for a policy that will affect the educational experiences of a generation.

As you know, we strongly oppose the proposal to make English compulsory through this Bill for several reasons. Firstly, in practice, there is no need for legislative enforcement to ensure that pupils are fluent in English. In reality, English is bound to be taught in our schools, and that is also ensured through the Languages, Literacy and Communication Area of Learning and Experience, without the need for a specific legislative proposal.

Secondly, in the current linguistic context, children in Wales will acquire English as it is such a powerful and ubiquitous language in the lives of everyone in the country. We share your aim of ensuring that all children in Wales become fluent in Welsh and English. However, in the current linguistic context, and for the coming decades, it is clear that it is Welsh, and specifically Welsh-medium education, that needs legislative support, not English.

The Government has not offered evidence to justify this proposal that was not included in Donaldson's recommendations. We know that not a single expert, stakeholder or organisation submitted evidence to support this during consultation. That is quite different from the rest of the new curriculum, which is based on the evidence of experts and others. The Government has also been unable to provide any legal reason for the proposal. It is unacceptable for the Government to bring forward such a proposal without evidence or justification.

Making English compulsory on the face of the legislation would have a negative impact on the ethos and practice of schools and other educational contexts where it is already a struggle to make Welsh the norm as a medium of learning and communication. Keeping English in the act as a general requirement but making an exception for the 'Welsh-medium sector' is not sufficient. Given the desire for schools to move up the linguistic continuum, it is not an exception for some schools that we need, but to remove English entirely from the legislation.

The proposal of 'opting in' to the immersion phase by individual schools presents a significant risk to Welsh-medium education. It demonstrates a lack of understanding of immersion methods, which are so vital to the success of Welsh-medium education, and endangers the use of those methods across the country. It means that it will be possible to change the language medium of a school at the whim of a governing body and deny pupils their right to Welsh-medium education. It will therefore hinder any strategic planning by local authorities and the Government to grow Welsh-medium education and implement the Welsh in Education Strategic Plans. If we are to reach the million Welsh speakers, we need a significant increase in Welsh-medium education, with a move to teaching Welsh across one continuum and increasing the amount of Welsh-medium teaching in all schools across the country. This proposal will prevent that from happening.

We were pleased to hear you say in a meeting with us last year that your intention with the Curriculum Bill was to raise the status of the Welsh language, and that you were open to dropping English as a compulsory element if there were good reasons for doing so. We were also pleased that, following that meeting, you confirmed in a letter to us (21/06/19):

*"The proposal as expressed in the White Paper, of placing a duty on all maintained schools and nursery settings to teach English, **does not** reflect our intent. Doing so would have unintended consequences for maintained Welsh-medium schools and nursery settings, such as the Cylchoedd Meithrin who immerse children in the Welsh language.*

So, to be absolutely clear: our proposal is that the new curriculum will continue to enable schools and settings such as the Cylchoedd Meithrin to immerse children in Welsh. I will ensure that any legislative proposals relating to English in the new curriculum reflect this."

We therefore do not understand why the Bill retains English as a compulsory element and includes the 'opt in' clause. Following the comments of the Welsh Language Minister, we are concerned that this is a purely political decision, without educational, strategic or legal justification.

The Bill in this form would undermine Welsh-medium education across the country. It runs counter to the Government's commitment to implement a single continuum of teaching Welsh and the target of a million Welsh speakers. The Cymraeg 2050 strategy commits the Government to ensuring that 70% of children will leave school fluent in Welsh – this will not be possible if the Bill is implemented as it is.

We know from our positive discussions with you that you are fully supportive of Welsh-medium education and the vision of a million speakers. The Curriculum for Wales is an historic opportunity to establish a curriculum that will for the first time meet Wales's needs and create an education system that ensures no child misses out on the inheritance that is their right – our unique national language. We urge you not to miss this opportunity.

We look forward to receiving your assurance that English will not be a compulsory element of the Bill, and that implementing immersion will not be a decision for individual schools.

Yours sincerely,

Mabli Siriol
Chair, Education Group, Cymdeithas yr Iaith