



COLAISTE FEIRSTE MARKS 21ST ANNIVERSARY:

Left, Colaiste Feirste overlooks the Falls Road in west Belfast. Clockwise from right, lower sixth student Lauren Ni Fhairchioich prepares for art class; Year 12 students Cora Donnelly and Nateesha Brown in biology class; Geography class gets under way; lower sixth students Mairead Burns, Padraig McGreevy, Nuala Maskey and Deaglan McConville chat in the Irish language during break time

PICTURES: Cliff Donaldson



School hopes to use 'eochair an dorais' to unlock new building

WITH so many schools celebrating significant, round anniversaries this year, there's always a danger that a 21st birthday will pass by unnoticed.

The north's first Irish-medium post-primary school has probably struggled more than others to receive 'eochair an dorais' for reaching such a milestone, however. Colaiste Feirste in Belfast is now firmly established as one of the north's top secondary schools, having achieved record exam results in the summer.

It has been a hard slog over the past two decades, and the school admits that there is a long way still to go.

The next key to the door the school hopes to receive will be the one that opens its long-overdue new accommodation.

At present about 550 pupils are crammed into space suitable for 330. Mobile classrooms are on site to handle the overflow.

More than 20 different subjects are taught through the medium of Irish, and the



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— Colaiste Feirste principal Micheal Mac Giolla Ghunna as he looks over the plans for the school's new sports facilities

school is in a position where it has teachers who are now both expert in specific subjects, and fluent in Irish.

As the only free-standing Irish-medium post-primary in the north, it often has to pioneer new subjects offered to pupils.

This year it has added A-level health and social care for the first time and senior teacher Padraig Mac Cathail says a lot of work has to be done to perfect the terminology.

In home economics class-

rooms, as well, new terminology will be printed on boards around the room.

Colaiste Feirste has to meet the demands of the 'entitlement framework', in which it must offer pupils a wide subject choice, without the help of any of its neighbouring schools.

Principal Micheal Mac Giolla Ghunna said being the sector's only standalone Irish secondary meant it was unable to collaborate with English-medium schools and it also faced difficulty sharing its

good work with others.

The school, he added, had a vibrant, young staff.

"We have generated our own people. Five or six former pupils are now back in the school as teachers, as specialists. We have become organic," he said.

"We came through a difficult development process in the mid-2000s when the school was expanding but did not have the resources to meet that expanding need. There has been a lot of trial and error but we got there.

"There is also a lack of staff development outside school for Irish-medium, therefore we have developed it ourselves. We continue to engage with the Department of Education on issues but we are not about fault-finding, we are about what our pupils need."

Colaiste Feirste is joined in the Irish-medium post-primary sector by units attached to English-language schools.

These include Scoil Iosaef at St Joseph's in Donaghmore, An Sruth Gaeilge at St Catherine's in Armagh and the fledgling Irish-medium stream at St

Malachy's in Castlewellan.

Mr Mac Giolla Ghunna said Colaiste Feirste was working to help others establish new Irish colleges, including supporting a proposal for Maghera.

"We can play a positive role in developing post-primary Irish-medium education in other areas because we have more resources and expertise. Others will not have to go through what we had to go through," he said.

Money is in place for work to begin on a new school building. The site of the former Beechmount leisure centre was purchased at a cost of £2.3 million.

Architects' plans show the new facility, in the heart of the west Belfast Gaeltacht quarter, will include a full-size GAA pitch, handball courts and an extension to the existing school building.

The new school facilities would benefit pupils and the wider community, the principal said.

"The governors and community had a vision of full immersion. It was difficult to achieve

but it has been achieved. They were not going to accept anything less," he said.

"Some schools are criticised for having too many empty desks, but here we have two pupils for every seat. We use every space available to use – store rooms, corridors, kitchens."

In the summer, 92 per cent of children achieved five or more GCSEs at grades A*-C, which was among the best results in the north for a non-grammar school.

"The grades that people are getting – A and A* in sciences, maths, history – they indicate that if they have the ability and teaching support is correct, they can achieve top grades in any subject," the principal said.

"Using DE benchmarks, we are in the top 5 per cent of schools in our category in terms of free meals. When you dig down into the stats, we are punching well above our weight.

"But we first look at what our pupils need.

"The statistics at the end of it are a by-product."