

'Outlining a Vision for our Education system'

Statement by

Caitriona Ruane (MLA),
Education Minister

Tuesday 4 December 2007

Northern Ireland Assembly, Stormont, Belfast

Outlining a Vision for our Education system

INTRODUCTION

When this administration came into being on May 8th, all of us in the Executive faced unique challenges and opportunities across the various government departments.

Local Ministers, accountable to local people would be taking decisions. Unlike under Direct Rule Ministers, local Ministers would be accessible, available and most importantly on the ground.

One of the principal challenges facing education has of course been the need to reform a system constructed over 60 years ago and still in place today.

For decades successive Education Ministers talked about dealing with the issue of the 11 plus. And for decades that is all we got – talk.

In 2002, Martin McGuinness, in his capacity as Education Minister, announced the end of the 11+.

We now have an opportunity to truly transform our system into a world class system fit for the 21st century. In the course of recent months I have spoken to teachers, parents, pupils and administrators. There is a real appetite out there to embrace change, to improve our system and to end the two tier culture which brands so many of our young people as failures at the age of 11.

I relish the challenge of transforming our outdated and unequal education system into a modern and flexible one that places equality of opportunity for each and every child at its core.

I believe such a system will not only continue to deliver academic excellence for the few but can deliver it for all.

This is what local decision making is all about. The previous lack of local accountability is I believe one of the reasons why no action was taken to change a system put in place in the late 1940s and still expected to deliver for our children in 2007.

This is an Executive with an agenda of change at its core. This is an Executive, which has been mandated to transform our society for the better.

As I proceed in carrying out these changes to our education system, Equality is my watchword.

Equality of access

Equality of educational opportunity

I plan to bring our education system into the 21st century and lay down a foundation, that will ensure educational excellence and greater participation in the future.

My proposals are ambitious, and require further work at a detailed level before a number of questions can be answered, but the direction of travel I wish to pursue is now clear, and the time is right to share that with you.

THE CONTEXT

Central to the 1947 education system, through which children in today's primary schools are still being processed, has been the 11-plus Transfer Test. As I said earlier, following consultation on the Burns Report, Martin McGuinness announced in 2002 the ending of the Transfer Test. Direct rule Minister Jane Kennedy announced, subsequently, that the last Transfer Test was to be held in 2008. This means that the last children to transfer under the existing system will commence post-primary school in September 2009. The 2006 Education Order causes the current admissions arrangements to lapse for September 2010 admissions.

This is the context in which I have been focused upon the creation and delivery of a fundamentally exciting new vision for the educational system in the North. The changes proposed will, with proper planning and effective implementation, have an immediate and positive effect. I have written to my Executive colleagues outlining my vision and have briefed the Education committee.

THE CURRENT STATE OF PLAY

I have reflected long and hard on what has been said to me over the past six months. Additionally I have taken detailed and considered account of the changing environment in which our educational system is actually expected to function. I am conscious that the debate on education has become narrowly focused on the contentious issue of academic selection as a basis for transferring to the post-primary sector. This narrow focus by sectoral interests has been a matter of considerable concern to me because the debate is really about delivering a vision for a world class education system reflecting the needs of all our children equally.

I am an advocate for dynamic and effective change in education. Today I am outlining a clear vision that moves us all beyond the outdated concept of two-tier education which has failed so many of our children.

Such a system will have to provide our children with the life skills in today's complex, rapidly transforming, socially-changing and globalised world. It will also have to provide them with the qualifications and skills needed in a modern, dynamic economy. The blue and white collar world has gone and with it the primary rationale for a two-gear post-primary system. It is imperative we develop a more flexible and agile post-primary system and surely in 2007 we can develop sophisticated models of school organisation.

The reformed post-primary system which I am outlining will, quite properly, have to take account of the full reform agenda that is already affecting the North's educational system.

The revised Curriculum is, for example, being introduced over the next three years.

The Entitlement Framework within the Curriculum will bring forward new and exciting opportunities for our young people. Pre and Post GCSE we envisage access to a broad range of courses academic and professional/technical.

The revised curriculum, which is being delivered in classrooms right across the north is beginning to work. Teachers are energised by it, children are stimulated and these combined are helping to ensure that our children will get the best education possible.

These changes will be supported by the significant reform of education administration and the establishment of the Education and Skills Authority. The development of area-based planning will play a key role in this.

MOVING AHEAD

Tá sé raite agam roimhe sa tionól seo go mbeinn sásta moltaí a thabhairt chun tosaigh atá dírithe ar chunú go mbíonn fáil cothrom ag gach páiste ar oideachas iarbhunscolaíochta is fearr. Tá sé léirithe agam freisin, go dtabharfaidh mé chun tosaigh moltaí chun an córas oideachas a mhúnlú thart ar leasa an pháiste in áit an páiste a mhúnlú thart ar leasa institiúid oideachais éigin

On a number of occasions I have stated in this Assembly that I would bring forward proposals aimed at ensuring that all of the children in this society have equal access to a quality post-primary education. I have also made it abundantly clear that I would bring forward proposals that will mould the system around the interests of the child, rather than matching the child to the interests of any particular educational institution.

This is the direction in which we will now be proceeding.

Children and parents must be able to have the confidence that their local post-primary schools will offer the quality and depth of educational provision they want, need and deserve. I am determined to ensure that my Department, in partnership with all educationalists, will ensure that every school is a good school that is sustainable and has a clear focus on high standards. That is why I have brought forward my revised school improvement policy, "Every School a Good School".

My intention is to mobilise and co-ordinate the resources at my disposal to build a modern and flexible education system: one that moves us away from the outdated 1947 institutional model which has divided children aged 11 years old into just two school types – either grammar or non-grammar.

A twenty-first century model will transform that unequal and outdated approach by matching children of all aptitudes to the full breadth of provision they want, need and deserve to fulfil their maximum potential as citizens and members of society.

But the key principle underpinning this new model of educational provision will be equality. No longer will any child be at a disadvantage because they cannot afford tuition or coaching. And no longer will the future potential of any citizen be

undermined because, as a small child of 11, they fall through the cracks of an unequal two-tier system which was borne sixty years ago.

Geallaim libh inniu go mbeidh cearta comhionanna gach páiste ag croílár an chórais úr.

My pledge today is that the equal rights of all children will be at the heart of the new system.

During the past six months, there are those who have said to me that "we have the best education system in the world". Undoubtedly our system has a widely and rightly celebrated capacity to deliver high quality academic excellence. However no matter how selectively the figures showing academic achievement of one section of our children are presented, the cold reality is that the system still fails a high proportion of our young people. And a system that does well for some and does not deliver for the rest is simply not acceptable

I am the Minister of Education for all of our children. I cannot - and will not - ignore the fact that every single year there are 4,000 young people leaving school after 12 years of compulsory education who do not have the appropriate basic literacy and numeracy skills.

I believe it is possible to develop a system, which will not only continue to deliver academic excellence for the few but can deliver it for all. To those who still believe that our system is not broken, particularly on the unionist benches then I ask that you to look at the situation on the ground in many working class areas. Unionist working class communities like the Lower Shankill, Mount Vernon or Tigers Bay have been left behind and are completely disconnected with the education system before they reach the age of 16. The same can be said for many working class nationalist communities whether in the Falls, Downpatrick, Strabane or Derry. This is the reality and it is a reality that I am not prepared to stand by and allow to continue.

MY VISION

In ionad, tá mé ag iarraidh córas oideachas a chumadh ina mbeidh fail ag páistí uile ar réimse cothrom roghanna ardchaighdeáin ag na pointí criticúla i bhforbairt oideachasúil s'acu. Creidimid gurb é an aois, ceithre bliain déag an aois is criticiúla.

Let me be very clear, I am not advocating a one size fits all system. Rather I am seeking to devise an education system whereby all children enjoy access to an equal range of high quality choices at the critical junction points in their educational development, the most significant of which is at age 14.

This will involve building a system which will sustain a range of different types of schools and provision and which values all of them equally. We want to retain everything that is good about our current system including academic excellence and

to improve on the performance of our system so that it will cater for the needs of all our young people.

Making fundamental educational determinations for children at 11 is wrong. Such decisions for most children become irreversible. By moving the point of transition to 14 and by introducing more flexibility and agility into structures, we will make it possible for the transformed educational system to facilitate the deserved and diverse needs of children –reversing the negative demand of slotting children into a system that has historically branded some as failures and others as, potentially, successes.

The key point is not simply that academic selection is unjust - but that it is unnecessary and unjust. I firmly believe that we can collectively deliver all the benefits of academic excellence without the trauma of academic selection at the age of 10 or 11.

In my vision, young people will enjoy equal access to their post-14 educational pathway in a number of ways - as determined by the planning of education in their local areas. There are a number of possible options and these include

- access within a 11-19 school:

- transfer to an alternative 11-19 school;

- access through an 11-19 school or a post-14 school which offers the Entitlement Framework in collaboration with other schools in a learning community;

- a local area may offer general provision in 11-14 schools followed by specialism and diversity in 14+ provision.

An academic pathway will remain, accessed by intelligent, well-informed and mature election and available through modern, organisational flexibility.

Testing is not the best way to inform admissions decisions at 14 about a young person's future educational and career pathway. Such decisions should be based on a process of formal, structured election: It will take account of the outcomes of three years of post– primary education, teacher and parental guidance, in addition to careers education, information, advice and guidance resulting in the matching of children to suitable provision.

Contrast this with the way our current system approaches “matching” pupils to provision – by using two one-hour tests sat by 10/11 year olds to determine entrance to one of two types of school.

Though the Entitlement Framework academic courses can be well integrated with challenging professional/technical courses, providing a much better base for many future third level entrants and more properly tailored to the requirements of a modern economy.

This framework will also ensure the capacity to deliver high quality professional/technical pathways, again accessed by choice and available through modern organisational flexibility, and above all enjoying parity of esteem.

Some may criticise the structural change, which my vision may entail. However the fact is that structural change will be required - regardless of my approach to the issue of post primary education. After 10 years of dramatically falling pupil numbers, we have an increasing problem around school sustainability and surplus places resulting in 50,000 empty school desks and this will increase over the coming years.. Structural reform is unavoidable - the Independent Review of George Bain is clear on this. Far from a question of unnecessary structural change, it is a matter of embracing the massive potential which this opportunity offers us to modernise our service provision and education system

And of course, structural change need not mean vast amounts of new capacity. By re-organising the existing capacity within the framework of my vision for education, I intend to deliver - not only effective education - but efficient education. For example, expanded access to professional/technical and general/academic courses could be achieved through the process of school and FE collaborations and the careful management of the schools estate at a time of falling pupil numbers.

THE FUTURE

Tá an Dréacht Clár Rialtais soiléir sa mhéid seo i ndearbhú go mbeidh na focail 'cothroime' 'cuimsiú' agus 'comhionannas' mar focail in ag an fheidhmeannas i solathrú polasaithe agus clár an fheidhmeannas

The draft Programme for Government is explicit in declaring that the watchwords of the Executive in delivering all its policies and programmes will be fairness, inclusion and equality.

The 1947 education system encompassing a post-primary transfer system which brands 11-year old children as failures is neither fair, inclusive nor equal.

In that context, it is now my intention, following a period of consultation, to bring forward regulations governing the operation of post-primary transfer for 2010, and for the subsequent interim period before the implementation of a 14+ system of election.

There will be no 11 + Transfer Test in the 2009/10 school year.

Pupils transferring to post-primary school in September 2010 will do so overwhelmingly on the basis of their preferences for schools - in much the same way that they choose their primary schools and pre-schools now. From 2010 the criteria will include;

Community, Geographical and Family criteria

I am conscious that many grammar schools have been admitting a wide ability range for some years now and will, receive all their pupils in September 2010 without regard to academic assessment.

Some grammar schools may need some time and assistance to adjust to the new system which I have outlined today. In my forthcoming discussions with them I hope to be able to reach an agreed way forward to facilitate the transition. I would hope that all grammar schools would see a positive future for the continuation of academic excellence in my vision for education. If any school, however, chooses to operate independent admissions arrangements that lie outside the new system of transfer, I want to make it clear that there is no obligation on my Department to assist with funding.

It is important that the transfer from primary to post-primary education is as seamless as possible. I am confident that we can find the best way forward to meet the needs of all our children, based on a vision that places quality educational outcomes and equality of educational opportunities for each and every child at its epicentre

Next year will be the last year of the 11-plus.

There will be no 11-plus in 2009 - nor will I be asking primary school educators to ever again disrupt or interfere with the teaching of the revised curriculum in furtherance of a transfer test.

Children in Year 5, their parents and their teachers can now focus on the job in hand - educating our young people and concentrating on the curriculum in a way that allows each and every child the equal opportunity to fulfil their full potential as citizens in the future.

I recognise the critical role that the Principals and teachers will play in implementing my proposals and I know that we will work together in the best interests of our children and young people.

Today I have outlined how we are to proceed in the years ahead. Let the construction of a new education system now begin. This is no longer a debate about the merits of academic selection. My focus is now on delivering a world class education system for all of our children. It is my belief that these proposals offer us the roadmap to get there.

Tosóidh muid anois ar an obair tábhachtach