

SPECIALIST SCHOOLS CONFERENCE - 16 NOVEMBER 2004

Speech by Gerry McGinn, Permanent Secretary, Department of Education

Good morning ladies and gentlemen. Thank you all for coming to today's conference. I know you are all busy. However, the turnout today indicates the importance that you attach to the developments in post-primary education and about making it fit for purpose.

Government's Perspective

The new post-primary arrangements are only one element of a much larger package of closely related reforms. Running in parallel and closely inter-linked are the implementation of the new curriculum, the development and enhancement of the schools estate and the continuing development of ICT as a teaching and learning tool. These are being taken forward as a coordinated programme.

As the Minister has said many times in recent months, the focus must be on pupils rather than structures. The Minister's starting point is the principle that every child should be given the opportunity to succeed wherever their interests and aptitudes lie. To keep this constantly in our minds the co-ordinated programme will be known as "Entitled to Succeed", or the "e2s" programme, as a much more pronounceable acronym.

The title reflects the vision for the programme. The vision is to provide all pupils with a right of access to a much wider curricular entitlement, and to enable pupils to choose courses relevant to their educational needs, interests, aptitudes and aspirations. The vision is to raise standards for all pupils and to give them the opportunity to fulfil their potential. In other words, to realise success. The commitment is to ensuring that this will be in modern accommodation and making the best use of modern technology. In short, an education system that is fit for the needs of children, society and the economy in the 21st Century.

You will see the title and the associated logo on display panels today. You will see much more of it in the coming weeks and months as the implementation process moves forward.

Need for change

We have a system of post-primary education designed in the 1940s and our challenge is to ensure that we have one designed for this century ahead.

Performance

I fully acknowledge that many pupils do well in terms of academic success. However, others do less well. In overall terms, the average GCSE point score of 37.9 for NI pupils is less than the figure of 40.9 for England. And this is despite Northern Ireland getting more pupils to 5 GCSE standard. Doing so well at the top end but only managing an overall score similar to or less than England's indicates clearly that many of our pupils are underachieving. This position was borne out by the international PISA research which showed Northern Ireland's performance to be on a par with England yet the spread of performance in Northern Ireland was amongst the widest in the 32 participating countries.

Inequalities

There are major inequalities in performance. Those from less well-off backgrounds do less well than their better-off peers both in terms of the Transfer Tests and later examination attainment.

There are inequalities of access. The range of opportunities open to young people varies considerably from school to school with some pupils having a very limited choice of subjects in Key Stage 4 and post-16. Furthermore vocational courses are not widely available to all pupils.

Employment

As we all know the nature of employment is changing. We need to equip young people with the transferable skills to enable them to respond to the increasing pace of change in the nature of employment. Employers are constantly telling the Minister that when our young people leave school they are not equipped with the skills employers require.

Demography

We are facing a major decline in the post-primary school population. It will fall by 12,000 pupils by 2010 and by just over a quarter by 2040. This is impacting on all schools. Even without changes to the post-primary arrangements the grammar schools will see significant changes to their intake profiles. The impact of falling numbers is even greater for secondary schools. Many are finding their intakes haemorrhaging away to the grammar schools. They see pupil

numbers, budgets, teacher numbers and the range of subjects all in decline while the concentration of pupils with lower academic ability increases.

To simply let nature take its course and let schools wither on the vine is not acceptable as a way forward. It fails the pupils, it does little for morale and motivation among teachers, and it takes no account of the need to secure value for money for every pound we spend on education. An ad hoc approach to planning and to the schools estate simply will not work.

Impact on children

The current transfer arrangements are a high stakes, high stress, and high anxiety process for pupils, parents and teachers. Many pupils start post-primary education with a sense of failure, a loss of confidence and lacking self-esteem. We have a curriculum which offers the same diet irrespective of pupils' needs. Why are we surprised when some become disengaged or disaffected?

Future arrangements

Future post-primary arrangements in Northern Ireland must be focused on the needs of the child. They must be flexible enough to respond to children's changing interests and aspirations as they mature. They must open up opportunities rather than closing them down. They must give children the opportunity to realise their full potential rather than leaving schools with few or no qualifications. We must ensure our young people leave school with a positive attitude to education which will have a lasting impact on them and, just as importantly, influence their attitude to their own children's education.

The curriculum Entitlement Framework will provide a much wider range of courses **and** the flexibility to meet individual pupils' needs, with schools collaborating with each other and with FE colleges, using new technologies where appropriate.

The Minister has made it absolutely clear that the new arrangements are not about imposing a one-size fits all approach or a comprehensive system. Schools will offer their distinctive curricular strengths. This will range from a mainly academic approach, perhaps a mainly vocational approach, a balance between academic and vocational which will vary from school to school, and schools with specialisms. Education will increasingly be provided in modern school buildings with modern facilities and equipment.

The change process

Schools should be focused, and supported, to offer all children the best possible opportunities to fulfil their potential. The new arrangements provide us with that opportunity. By focusing on the needs of the child the Minister believes we should aim to replace divisive competition between schools and create a new era of collaboration and cooperation to benefit all children.

This will mean changing the way our education system operates. The Minister acknowledges that change can be difficult. However, the changes are not all being introduced at once. They are being phased in over several years to make them more manageable. The Minister has undertaken to ensure that the necessary support arrangements are put in place as implementation is taken forward.

Work to implement the "e2s" programme has already started.

There has been a major commitment to investing in the schools' estate. In the past 2 years alone there has been a capital investment committed of almost £500m benefiting over 80 schools. Given the levels of investment it is vital to have an efficient and effective procurement and delivery strategy which also takes account of falling rolls. Work is well underway to ensure that we have suitable arrangements to improve the delivery of new schools in the future.

We have also seen substantial investment in ICT in schools through the C2K project which has now provided 40,000 networked computers in over 1,200 schools. C2K represents a substantial investment in the future of education in Northern Ireland and opens new opportunities to enhance and enrich teaching and learning.

Progress towards new post-primary arrangements

There are some who think little has happened since the Government announced on 26 January that it had accepted the recommendations of the Post-Primary Review Working Group.

Government has accepted the recommendations and is in implementation mode. The recommendations pointed the way forward and the issues we are now dealing with are about "how" rather than "what". I will outline what has already happened.

Curriculum

On 23 June the Minister announced major changes to the curriculum in Northern Ireland. The new curriculum will prescribe only the minimum, rather than the totality, for each curricular area. This will give schools flexibility they have not had in over a decade to tailor their curriculum to the needs of their pupils. In short – trusting the professionalism of teachers to deliver maximum pupil opportunity with minimal central prescription. That is the right balance.

It will guarantee every pupil a good grounding in the essential elements. It will enable schools to provide a broad and varied curriculum, with greater emphasis on real-world skills and the specific element of Learning for Life and Work. It also provides the flexibility needed to give effect to the wider range of opportunities envisaged in the Entitlement Framework.

Entitlement Framework

The Entitlement Framework is fundamental to how we proceed. If we are serious about raising standards, pupils must be able to access courses that genuinely interest them and provide them with qualifications that will bring practical success in getting a job. The menu of choice must therefore be as rich and varied as we can reasonably make it.

But quality is essential. Courses should be taught by teachers with the relevant subject expertise, with the appropriate accommodation and equipment and with experience from business and industry if necessary. Anything less will not contribute to raising standards.

Collaboration

Schools will not be expected to provide the full range of the Entitlement Framework single-handed. This will be achieved through collaboration with their neighbouring schools and local FE colleges. There is a good deal of effective school to FE collaboration already in place and many Key Stage 4 pupils have benefited enormously from it. But we need to extend this into other subject and vocational areas and to all ability ranges. We made a good start on pilot arrangements in September in 6 Colleges and 35 schools.

Strategic Advisory Group

The decisions announced set out the way forward and a timetable to put new arrangements in place. There are many important decisions to be taken along the way and a Strategic Advisory Group has been established to provide the Minister with advice on implementation issues. The members of this group are drawn from all the key education interests. The members have a breadth of educational experience and expertise and their views on the range of issues referred to them will be carefully considered as the implementation process moves forward.

Skills strategy

Today the Minister is launching, for consultation, a Skills Strategy for Northern Ireland. This deals with the role of skills development in enhancing economic growth and addressing social inclusion. There are clear links between the role of schools in developing young people and their choices as they move towards the world of work:

- We need to better match labour demand with curricular provision.
- We need more people with strong vocational skills at all levels and we need better information from employers about current and future skills requirements to help young people make career decisions.
- We need to identify curriculum provision which meets the needs and aspirations of young people and their parents, and
- We need an improved information, advice and careers guidance system to help young people make appropriate choices.

The Strategy being launched will point to the need to address not just the occupational skills, but also the essential skills of numeracy, literacy and ICT as well as the generic skills such as problem solving, personal development and team building.

Action in the short-term

Today's conference is also evidence of ongoing work to explore further how the specialist schools model could contribute to the aims of the "e2s" programme.

Specialist Schools

Freeing up the curriculum and developing the Entitlement Framework are essential to creating flexibility and choice. But in order to raise standards, we need to go further. Schools must be able to develop their own distinctive approaches to the curriculum in ways that will be attractive to pupils and parents. But they must also continue to provide a broad and balanced curriculum for all their pupils, including access to the full range of courses available under the Entitlement Framework.

The specialist schools initiative, in its various developmental forms, has been in existence in England for some time. I understand its roots are in the magnet schools initiative in the USA where schools provide a general education with an emphasis on a specialist curricular area, often designed with local involvement, to meet the needs of the community.

Experience of magnet schools in the USA and of specialist schools in England and elsewhere has shown that they can be a major influence in raising standards. How has this been achieved? What have been the key decisions or actions that have brought this about?

Today's conference provides the opportunity to hear about what has worked and, just as importantly, what has been less successful in England. We will hear from those most closely involved in developing specialist schools there – the principals of a number of specialist schools who will be able to share their experiences with us.

However, I want to emphasise that the purpose of today's conference is not to promote a particular specialist schools model. Rather it is to explore how it could be adapted to meet NI needs and circumstances in the context of our work to implement the post-primary review recommendations.

Core objectives

The 3 core objectives of the specialist school concept are:

- The over-riding need to raise standards for all and realise performance improvements;
- Promoting cooperation and collaboration among schools and with further education colleges so that pupils benefit from the wider opportunities to learn;
- Providing parents greater choice among a range of schools which have differing strengths of focus but are seen as offering education of equal value.

In considering NI needs the key questions are:

- what do we mean by specialist schools? and
- how can they contribute to the aim of raising standards in Northern Ireland?

There are widely differing perceptions about what specialist schools are, or what they should be. We will be exploring those issues today, and in the process perhaps dispel some myths. The Minister believes that it is right in principle that all schools, specialist or otherwise, should teach the full breadth of the curriculum and should offer access to the curriculum Entitlement Framework. A school with a major focus on a single curricular area, to the exclusion or significant watering down of others, is not in the best interests of the pupils at the school or the community which the school serves. To illustrate the point, a specialist school in performing arts or drama will not be the type of establishment that might be regarded as a "fame academy".

Rather, a specialist school will have a strength in a particular area. What do we mean by this? A strength might include a school's teaching expertise and facilities. It might also include its ability to engage and motivate all pupils in the school in that curricular area by tailoring its teaching and learning to pupils' needs. But having that curricular strength is only part of the picture. The school needs to analyse what contributes to that strength and share the lessons with other departments in the school to ensure standards are raised right across the whole school.

It would also be a centre of excellence and contribute to wider provision by sharing its good practice with other schools and by making its teachers and other facilities available to children from other schools through collaborative arrangements. Schools working with others in this way will help to move us from a position where they are in competition, to one where they work in cooperation.

Education though cannot take place in a vacuum. Schools need to develop closer links with the communities they serve and also with the businesses in an area. A school which is a centre of excellence in a particular curricular area should also be a centre of excellence in its links with the community and business.

FE experience

The concept of focusing on a strength in a particular area is not new. By developing resources and expertise in an identified area of strength, 13 Centres of Excellence in 8 Further Education colleges have successfully shown that specialisation can be achieved without sacrificing or diluting other aspects of the curriculum.

FE Centres of Excellence also offer the possibility of enhancing even further the links between Further Education and the schools sector. There is the potential for specialist, and other, schools to access resources and expertise at a level that is simply unobtainable elsewhere.

Choice of specialism

In June when the Minister announced that this conference would take place he published a list of possible specialisms for illustrative purposes and invited comments. Perhaps the timing – towards the end of June- could have been better but the Department of Education has not received any comments on this. I'm sure you will be able to offer some advice on this today. The illustrative list is included in the conference materials. A key question is the way specialisms are selected. We could for example focus on areas which might reflect the needs of business and the economy.

I have already referred to limited opportunities for pupils to follow vocational type courses – presumably some vocational areas should be included. There will no doubt be a range of views on what specialisms might be recognised and I am equally sure the conference discussion will generate some interesting debates on this issue.

Funding

I am sure it has not escaped your notice that specialist schools status in England brings with it additional recurrent and capital resources. Should NI schools with recognised specialisms receive additional funding and how should that be provided?

In England there is a requirement for schools to raise £50k of business sponsorship and this triggers £100k giving schools a total of £150k to spend on capital development. The economic context may be different in that the public sector here is a larger proportion of the economy but nonetheless there may be a case for requiring some element of business sponsorship.

And what expectations or responsibilities should there be on schools, especially if additional resources were to be made available? What could we expect as outcomes from such an initiative?

Pilots

If we are to develop a specialist schools model for NI it would make sense to introduce it on a pilot basis initially. The Minister indicated as such in his speech in June. Piloting does of course raise its own issues and we would need to consider the numbers of schools, location and curricular areas to be included in the exercise.

By starting small, learning lessons, building and adapting as we move forward there is the potential to create an effective model for Northern Ireland. And I know that the Minister will be interested in your views.

Conclusion

I have posed a number of questions for us to consider and I am sure there are many more. But today is not just about finding questions; it is about suggesting answers as we work together across the education sector to improve standards and meet the needs of children.

No decisions have been made about introducing a specialist schools model in Northern Ireland. I referred earlier to the Strategic Advisory Group and this is one of the issues it has already considered. The Minister will be considering their comments and your views today before decisions are made on the way forward. This is an opportunity for you to contribute your views in an important area of policy development.

By listening to the experiences of our panel of visitors and by exploring the issues with them I hope you will be well positioned to provide constructive views on the important issues I have raised.

Unfortunately I will not be able to stay for the full conference but I am looking forward to receiving briefing on the work at this conference and this will be passed to the Minister. My colleague, Dr Eddie Rooney, will be summing up at the end of the Conference.

In concluding I would like to thank you all again for giving your time today and I would also like to thank Tom Hesketh and his team at the Regional Training Unit for organising the conference. I hope you find it stimulating, enjoyable and ultimately worthwhile.

Thank you.