

EDUCATION BILL SECOND STAGE: 8 DECEMBER 2008

Is mian liom a thairiscint go gcomhaontaítear an dara céim den Bhille Oideachais 2008.

I beg to move that the second stage of the Education Bill 2008 be agreed.

Mr Speaker I welcome the opportunity to open the debate on the Education Bill today. This is the first of two Bills that, taken together, comprise the most significant legislative programme in education for many years. I know that the Assembly will take a keen interest in the proposals, and I look forward to a stimulating debate.

Before outlining the scope and general principles of the Bill, I would like to set it in context by reminding members of the underlying policy intentions.

No one could doubt the fundamental importance of our education system, but it is worth reminding ourselves of its core purpose, as set out in the Bill. Education is about more than schooling. Its aim is to contribute to the spiritual, moral, cultural, social, intellectual and physical development of children and young people, and of the community at large.

Our education system embraces children and young people from birth to age 19 and beyond; through the provision of services as diverse as Sure Start schemes, schools, and youth clubs. As I said in the house last week, it is this public service, more than any other, that has the potential to shape and guide the development and life chances of our young people; to build strong, cohesive communities; and to drive and fuel our economy.

Is í earnáil an oideachais an dara clár is mó caiteachais phoiblí atá againn anseo, le buiséad de bhreis agus £2 billiún gach uile bhliain. Soláthraítear é:

- *trí naoi n-eagraíocht reachtúil;*
- *trí bhreis agus 1250 scoil;*
- *trí bhreis agus 200 soláthróir luathbhlianta;*
- *trí bhreis agus 2000 eagraíocht óige;*
- *trí bhreis agus 50,000 ball foirne; agus*
- *trí na mílte oibrithe deonacha a bhíonn ag comhlíonadh réimse ról idir ghobharnóirí scoile agus chinnirí grúpaí óige.*

Education is the second largest public expenditure programme here, with a budget of over £2 billion each year. It is delivered by:

- nine statutory organisations;
- over 1250 schools;
- over 200 early years providers;
- over 2000 youth organisations;
- over 50,000 staff; and

- many thousands of volunteers who serve in a range of roles from school governors to youth group leaders.

The education system is not merely a significant public service, but a precious resource; so it is right that the proposed reforms will be scrutinised closely and debated thoroughly today.

Our starting point should be the purpose of those reforms. Mr Speaker my aim is not merely to streamline administration, nor to reduce bureaucracy.

My aim is to have a more effective education system, with effectiveness measured in the terms that matter most to children and parents: educational attainment; and the fulfilment of potential.

To achieve this we need:

- better planning of the education estate and the delivery of the curriculum;
- better support services for schools and other education providers;
- more local delivery of services, but within a consistent policy framework; and
- freedom for school leaders to manage and innovate, with clear accountability for outcomes.

There are two themes that are central to achieving this, and which run throughout the Bill: new structures; and new relationships.

In reforming the structures, let me make it clear that the deficiencies are in the current roles and arrangement of the organisations, not the people who work there.

Over the last 35 years, many thousands of staff have served with dedication and distinction in the various education organisations, often in very difficult circumstances. They deserve our recognition and appreciation for all that they have striven to achieve.

However, the structures have become obsolete. Organisations many of which were established as a temporary measure in the early 1970's have been allowed to linger on, far longer than they ought to have. New organisations have been grafted onto the system but not in a coherent way. The educational challenges that we face have changed out of all recognition since then; as have the needs of children and young people; but our education system is still largely based on a 35 year-old temporary solution.

Devolution presents us with the opportunity for a new approach; one that is fit for our needs and for these times.

Is léir go bhfuil géarghá le hathruithe san earnáil oideachais. Ar an 25^ú lá de mhí na Samhna leag mé béim ar an ngá práinneach le hathchóiriú, chun dul i ngleic le tearcghnóthachtáil oideachais agus neamhionannas, agus ba mhaith liom béim a leagan ar an bpointe sin arís eile.

The educational case for change is clear. On the 25th of November I emphasised the urgent need for reform, to tackle educational underachievement, and inequality, and I repeat that call today.

The current fragmented system of education has manifestly failed to tackle those issues, and cannot be allowed to continue. How can we justify 5 different approaches to education delivery, in everything from special education to fees for music tuition? How can we accept the complex variety of relationships between schools and support bodies? How can we go forward where there is no clear focus on planning the estate or on ensuring that every school is a good school? How can staff work in a system where accountability is confused and opaque?

How can there be equality, when the services that children and parents receive are determined by where they live, not what they need?

Mr speaker, when I spoke in the Assembly two weeks ago, I gave figures that show clearly that our education system is failing many of our most vulnerable young people: those from working class communities; travellers; ethnic minorities; children with disabilities; school age mothers and carers; looked after children; victims of violence – particularly young women; and victims of homophobic and other forms of bullying.

I won't repeat all of the figures today, but there is one that illustrates perhaps better than any other, the urgent need for reform.

The most common measure of schools' performance is the achievement by its pupils of 5 good GCSE's – the level of qualification that represents the gateway to higher education and, often, the gateway to employment.

Looking at the latest figures for non-grammar schools, the overall figure was 45%, or 6844 children. Whilst some improvement is evident, that figure shows just how far we still need to go. Too many young people don't get what they need from education, and every part of our education system needs to do better.

If we look within that headline figure, the variation in results across our fragmented system points up the need for change. In Catholic-managed non grammar schools, almost 49% of pupils, that is 3510 children, gained 5 good GCSEs. In controlled non grammar schools, the figure was just 41%, or 3334 children.

Mr Speaker, a gap of 8% is simply unacceptable. It is clear evidence that the current system cannot deal effectively with underperformance. Why are schools in one sector consistently outperforming schools in another sector? There can be only one possible conclusion - good practice doesn't cross organisational and sectoral boundaries. We need a single organisation with the responsibility for raising standards in every school in every sector;

and with clear accountability to me and to this Assembly for doing so. That is what I propose to do.

Make no mistake the educational case for change is paramount, but the financial case is also compelling and this is reflected in the business case for these reforms - I have asked for copies to be placed on my department's website, and in the Assembly Library.

The business case clearly shows that, by the third year, in the first phase of this reform, £20 million per year can be redirected from bureaucracy to front line services – that is no insignificant amount. In subsequent phases I believe we can radically improve service delivery in a way which will release even further savings to enhance the quality of services available to schools and youth services.

To put that this figure into context, the overall quantum of savings would :

- cover the cost of building 3 new primary schools and one new post primary school every single year! ;
- or cover the cost of around 700 newly qualified teachers every year; or
- cover the cost the youth services capital building programme four times over.

As I have said, our education system is a precious resource and it is incumbent, not just on me, but on all of us, to do everything we can to ensure the most effective use of every penny available to education for the benefit of all our children and young people.

I am confident that the job reductions to free up resources can be achieved through voluntary redundancy and early retirement in managerial and administrative posts. Every effort will be made to avoid compulsory redundancy. Front line services will not be cut, and the vast majority of staff who wish to play a role in the new organisation will be able to do so.

A Cheann Comhairle, cé go bhfuil athrú eagraíochtúil iontach tábhachtach, caithfear caidrimh nua agus modhanna nua oibre laistigh d'earnáil an oideachais bheith ann freisin.

Mr Speaker, whilst organisational change is very important, it must be accompanied by new relationships and ways of working within education.

Let me be absolutely clear the ESA will not be a bigger Education and Library Board. It will be a new and different type of organisation with a new and different role. Schools and other education providers will be at the heart of the new arrangements.

The ESA will be a single, decentralised organisation; fit for purpose; equipped to help, support and, where necessary, challenge schools in their pursuit of improved standards and closing the attainment gap.

As part of the consideration around the establishment of ESA, I will be taking into account the Bain Report on decentralisation of public sector jobs, and will be seeking to locate ESA Headquarters in line with Bain recommendations.

We already have plenty of evidence about the characteristics of a successful school: they tend to be schools that have:

- strong and effective leadership within their boards of governors and senior management teams;
- a strong sense of belonging to, and being accountable to, the pupils, parents and communities that they serve;
- an ethos which pupils, parents, staff and governors support; and
- the level of autonomy and support that they need to manage their own day to day affairs.

The Education and Skills Authority must foster and develop this approach for all schools - we must move away from the 'command and control' approach that is all too prevalent in education.

Instead, school leaders will be:

- empowered to lead, manage and innovate;
- supported to deliver;
- held to account for their performance; and
- challenged where necessary.

Is iad seo na tréithe a bhaineann le córas oideachais atá nua-aimseartha agus éifeachtach, agus creidim gurb iad na tréithe seo na tréithe ar ceart do thuismitheoirí agus do dhaoine óga bheith ag dúil leo.

Those are the characteristics of a modern, effective education system, and I believe that they are what parents and young people have the right to expect.

Mr Speaker, turning to the legislation itself, The Bill that is before the Assembly today contains a range of provisions to make the vision that I have described a reality. I will outline the principal provisions in broad terms.

Firstly, the Bill captures in legislation the vision and values for education, linking them directly with general duties for my Department and the ESA that are centred on the development of children and young people.

Secondly, the Bill will establish the ESA with the core functions of:

- planning education – introducing for the first time a co-ordinated approach to the education estate and curriculum across all sectors and providers;
- supporting education – with clear statutory duties on the ESA to support schools and boards of governors;
- challenging education – setting out clear statutory responsibilities on my Department, the ESA, and Boards of governors; and
- employing staff – establishing the ESA as the employer of all staff in all grant –aided schools, to allow for a better planned and better co-ordinated education workforce.

As an organisation, the ESA will be founded on democratic accountability. The majority of its members will be local councillors. The objective is effective, responsive local delivery of services within a consistent policy framework.

The ESA must be a regional organisation, but with a strong local presence and a real focus on local delivery. Local managers and delivery units will have the freedom to respond to specific local circumstances and need.

They will be sensitive to and receive input from local Committees comprising, amongst others, a number of elected representatives.

The Bill also contains provisions to dissolve the existing statutory organisations, and to transfer their staff, assets, and liabilities to the ESA.

These provisions are consistent with the guiding principles from the Public Services Commission, and consistent with the Review of Public Administration in other areas.

Tugann an Bille foráil d'aistriú réimse feidhmeanna ó eagraíochtaí atá ann faoi láthair chuig an Údarás um Oideachas agus Scileanna; lena n-áirítear ceapadh ghobharnóirí scoile, soláthar sheirbhís leabharlainne na scoileanna agus araile.

The Bill also provides for the transfer of a range of functions from current organisations to the ESA; including e.g. appointment of school governors, the provision of the schools library service.

Raising standards is at the heart of the Bill, with clear statutory duties on my Department, the ESA, and schools.

In addition, the Bill provides for more effective education inspection arrangements, to ensure that there will be a clear evidence base with which to celebrate success, and challenge underachievement.

The Bill also seeks to strengthen and underpin child protection arrangements within education, to ensure that we have consistency and clarity of roles and responsibilities across the entire education sector, and strong powers to intervene where necessary to protect children.

Further provisions will place the funding of early years services on a formal statutory footing for the first time within education.

The Bill aims to maximise the autonomy of schools by, for example, giving schools the authority to draw up the governance and employment arrangements that they will operate.

In relation to the curriculum, the Bill will make my Department responsible for accrediting qualifications, and approving courses of education.

A Cheann Comhairle, is é seo an chéad Bhille oideachais a cuireadh os comhair an Tionóil ó athbhunaíodh déabhlóid, agus an reachtaíocht oideachais is tábhachtaí le glúin anuas.

Mr Speaker, this is the first education Bill to come before the Assembly since the restoration of devolution, and the most important education legislation in a generation.

It will lay the foundations for a new approach to education:

- an approach that is based on the recognition of diversity, the promotion of equality, and the achievement of high standards;
 - an approach in which we aim to make every school a good school, and support every learner to achieve his or her full potential;
 - an approach in which every governor, principal, and member of staff feels valued for what they do, and empowered and supported to do it; and
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- a system in which leadership and innovation is encouraged, success is celebrated, and underperformance is challenged.

Molaim an Bille don Tionól.

I commend the Bill to the Assembly.