

Post-Primary Transfer

Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Once again, I welcome the opportunity to address the Assembly on post-primary transfer. This is a welcome opportunity to further update Members on developments on this issue since my statement to the Education Committee on 31 January 2008.

As I have stated before, my focus is on building a consensus for new arrangements. By working together, I want to find the best way to meet the requirements of all our children based on a shared vision that places high-quality educational outcomes and equality for every child at its epicentre. Therefore, in December 2007, I held a series of meetings with groups that have a key role in the future of post-primary arrangements, including the Governing Bodies Association, the Association of Head Teachers in Secondary Schools, the Catholic Trustees, the controlled grammar schools, the Transferors' Representative Council, the trade unions, the chief executives of the education and library boards and the Association for Quality Education.

I sought, and have received, written responses to my vision from those groups. In January, my Department undertook a further round of meetings with the Council for Catholic Maintained Schools (CCMS); Comhairle na Gaelscolaíochta; the Council for Integrated Education; and representatives of controlled grammar schools. A third round of meetings commenced last week, on Friday 22 February.

The aim of those meetings is to seek consensus on the new arrangements. I appreciate the request from Education Committee members, and others, for clarification on the new arrangements for the 2010 transfer procedure. I am very aware of the opinions expressed by parents, pupils and teachers about the need to provide firm information on new transfer arrangements at the appropriate time. In that context, I will outline where we are in the process of securing those changes. From the outset, my approach has been to set the overall vision, and then to engage with those with a key role to play, in order to seek a set of proposals to which everyone can sign up and be committed.

The process that I have undertaken is the biggest reform ever of the education system here in the North of Ireland. Far from there being lack of clarity and delay, I am pleased at the progress made to date, in the necessary democratic process of consultation, to deliver such a progressive overhaul of the education system. I re-emphasise that the debate has moved on from the narrow one around academic selection. Nobody is now arguing for the retention of the 11-plus. We are engaging positively across the breadth of the education sector on the reform of the system.

Let us be honest: there are many Members, right across this House, who are opposed to change. They are afraid of change and of what it will bring. Some are

merely paying lip service to the notion that they are behind progressive change. At the same time, they have joined forces with those who are most opposed to change, and are playing narrow, opportunistic party politics. That is very regrettable. Others have difficulty with a Sinn Féin Minister leading change — particularly a female Minister — and have chosen to personalise the debate, rather than positively engage on the need for reform. Just listen to the language that was used this morning. It was the language of the scared. There is no need to fear change. Change is good, and it is going to happen.

Others, still, are opposed to educational reform, and wish to retain the antiquated system that we currently have — a system designed by successive unionist and direct rule Ministers. Sinn Féin chose the Education portfolio — and I am proud that it did. We chose that portfolio because we care about the education of our children. We are going to bring in a system in which every child gets the same chance. Other parties had the opportunity to choose the Education portfolio. They did not choose it, but Sinn Féin did, because we understand the need for change in a system that is decaying and is in free-fall. Members can shout at me, try to abuse and bully me, but that is what it is all about. They are afraid of the much-needed change that is going to occur. We are about reforming education in a progressive way.

We were under no illusions as to the challenges of delivering the biggest reform ever in the history of the North of Ireland. We make no apology for that. I repeat that no amount of shouting, sniping, bully tactics — whether it is in this Chamber, on the sidelines, or in the media — will stop the progressive reform process that is under way and moving forward. I will not be swayed, because I am not prepared to fail our children.

Dúirt mé ariamh go bhfuil mé ag lorg creatlach láidir reachtaíochta do mo chuid tograí. Má thig linn comhaontú oideachais a bhaint amach, is é mo chéad chéim eile tacaíocht an Choiste Feidhmiúcháin, an Choiste Oideachais agus an Tionóil a fháil do na tograí. Ina dhiaidh sin, cuirfidh mé dréacht-rialacháin ar chritéir iontrála faoi chomhairliúchán lena chinntiú go mbeidh bonn láidir reachtaíochta faoi na socrúithe úra.

That translates as: fortunately, the vast majority of the discussions that we have been engaged in have been productive. I am grateful to all concerned for the constructive spirit in which they have engaged in the process.

The issues discussed include an inclusive transfer process based on shared information about the applicant, but used in such a way that the information does not become the determinant of admission; matching appropriate teaching to the needs of children; the use of admissions criteria for oversubscribed schools; introducing greater flexibility and agility into our school structures so that we can offer expanded post-14 provision and choice to young people; the nature of election at 14 years of

age and the different routes through which young people's choices at that critical age can be facilitated; area-based planning and its links with the delivery of the entitlement framework and with the reorganising of the schools estate at a time of inefficiently utilised excess capacity; expanding the extent of school collaboration and the development of learning communities; and providing schools with time and assistance to adjust to new arrangements.

Again, I wish to emphasise the current state of play in our education system, with a significant proportion of children disengaging from the education system by the age of 16, and the stark statistic of more than half of our current student population leaving school without basic reading and writing skills. That amounts to 12,000 young people every year.

Twelve thousand young people are being failed because people are afraid of change. We need an education system that is reflective of society and capable of catering for the diverse needs of our children, whether they choose an academic or vocational course in life — be that a bricklayer, a tiler or an engineer, a childcare worker or a teacher, an electrician or a scientist, a carpenter or an accountant. We are capable of delivering that flexibility and choice to our education system.

We already have a broad consensus on the importance of 14 years of age as a key educational decision point. We also have broad educational consensus, supported by independent advice —the Costello and Bain Reports — on the need to deliver to young people the entitlement framework and expand educational choice from the age of 14 onwards. I understand that parents and schools want certainty, and I also understand that my pursuit of a consensus, which takes time, can be frustrating. However, let me make it clear why the pursuit of a consensus is so necessary.

Whatever system of transfer we finally agree on, that transfer will perform a critical function. The only proposals that can be produced by such processes are proposals commanding widespread support. That is why we are investing the time in engaging the necessary democratic process of consultation with education stakeholders, time that, so far, has been well spent on building and securing consensus regarding the system of transfer that our children and schools need. Yes, it will require difficult decisions, and I will show leadership on those difficult decisions, but it will also require leadership from all concerned.

I will present proposals very shortly, given that negotiations are at an advanced stage. When I do, I want everyone to understand that those detailed proposals will be wide ranging, will have been prepared in a careful and consultative manner, and will warrant serious consideration, rather than a knee-jerk reaction.

The debate has moved on. There is no going back. We cannot continue to fail our children. We can keep academic excellence in our system, but I repeat: we cannot

continue to fail all our children. It is simply not acceptable, and I will not allow it to happen. Join with me in transforming our education system into a dynamic educational model that reflects the world that we live in and that equips our children with the qualifications and skills that they need for the twenty-first century. I mean all our children, not just the selected few. Go raibh míle maith agat.