

BELB CONFERENCE FOR PRINCIPALS OF POST-
PRIMARY AND SPECIAL SCHOOL – HILTON HOTEL,
TEMPLEPATRICK 14 MAY 2008

Good morning and thank you all for coming along today. I am grateful for an opportunity to address such a complete gathering of educational professionals at this critical time for education.

Education policy is about much more than post-primary transfers but there is no point in ducking this key issue. As I am sure you are all aware, there has been a considerable level of criticism directed at the emerging policy on this recently and – let's be honest – a level of criticism of me personally.

I want to thank everyone who has contributed to this debate:

- whether the contribution has been from those who have contributed most publicly and been most widely reported;

- or been made in less public ways and been less widely reported;
- whether the contribution has supported a post-primary transfer test at age 11;
- or supported the abolition of a test at 11.

Despite the range of views I believe that we agree on a number of fundamental principles that should underpin a modern education system. I believe we want an education system which meets the needs of all our children. A system which promotes excellence, both academically and vocationally. A system which does not give up on any children.

Seans ann nach aontaíonn muid ar cad é mar a athríonn aistriú chun tacú leis na prionsabail seo ach creidim nach bhfuil duine ar bith ag iarraidh laithríd polaitiúil a dhéanamh as na prionsabail seo fosta agus cuirim mo chéilí comhraic san áireamh anseo.

We may not agree on exactly how Transfer needs to change to support these principles, but I believe that none of us wants to play politics with these principles – and I include my most vocal critics in that.

While some people want change to be gradual, I believe we can not afford to wait for change to happen to us. Change needs to be managed.

We can probably all agree that the system should ensure that every child fulfils his or her potential at every stage of development.

Education must seek to fulfil potential in order to create confident and caring citizens, with clear values and identities, proud of their own traditions while respectful of others, powering an economy and comprising a dynamic generation and an equal and coherent society.

In planning for this there are also clear trends which we cannot ignore. Specifically, we need to take into account the decline in the younger population, in 1996 we had an 11 to 16 pupil population of around 130, 000. In the preceding ten years that population has fallen to around 123,000 and is expected to fall to 112,000 by 2015.

This reduction in the number of our young people has been felt almost exclusively in our non-grammar schools and is therefore magnified by the fact that the numbers are falling disproportionately in 159 of our 228 post – primary schools.

Ag an am chéanna, tá leathnú de dhíth i sólathar iar-ceathar dhéag go mbeidh iar-bhunscoileanna ábalta an creatlach teidlíochta a thabhairt isteach dár bpáistí roimh dhá mhíle 's trí dhéag.

At the same time for post-primary schools to deliver the Entitlement Framework to all our young people by 2013, we need an expansion in post-14 provision.

From a practical perspective, we need to ask how we achieve this expansion in post-14 provision against a background of falling numbers – without incurring unsustainable in-efficiencies.

We need our schools to have a number of key characteristics.

- We need our schools to work together.
- We need our schools' boundaries to be more porous.
- We need schools to tailor their individual educational pathways.
- We need our schools to be complementary and collaborative. And collectively capable of providing young people with the range of post-14 choices they need.

We need our schools to provide high quality careers advice.

We need schools to form learning communities defined by their ability to offer all young people in their area access to the Entitlement Framework.

In support of this, we need the planning of the estate and provision to be conducted on an area-basis. That is why I announced the post-primary, area-based planning exercise on March 4 of this year.

This exercise is urgently needed – but it is also opportune. The Executive is already committed to a Schools Modernisation Programme, through which it will invest £3billion in our schools over the next ten years. This programme can to be designed and delivered to meet our existing needs and also remain flexible enough to cope with the inevitable changes which demographic trends and wider educational reform will bring.

I believe theses approach will give us the flexibility to introduce my proposals without the need for extensive structural changes, and with minimal cost implications.

Caithfidh an clár a bheith ábalta córas iar-bhunscoileanna inbhuanaithe chun comhionannas trí comhoibriú agus pobail foghlama a chur i bhfeidhm, le tríocha 's a haon pobail foghlama bunaithe chéanna féin agus pléanailte ag area level

The programme needs to deliver a post-primary school estate sustainable in its ability to meet both of these challenges and those of equality of access through collaboration and the establishment of Learning Communities, of which we already have 31, and planned at an area-level.

As I said earlier, there are plenty of examples of excellence and good standards across the system but overall the need for improvement is clear. To address this we have recently published our draft policy on school improvement, Every School a Good School. We must be open to the fact that every school, however good, can improve. Supported by targeted school improvement and investment.

Robust self-evaluation, an external challenge from both the Inspectorate and the new Education and Skills Authority, positive leadership and the more effective use of data are at the heart of the policy.

Hopefully I have set out why there are more reasons to agree than to disagree on the future of education. But there is no point in ducking the issue.

The decision to abolish the 11 Plus was first made some six years ago.

For the reasons I set out earlier I cannot see any option other than for Government to implement that decision in a way which is consistent with the post-primary reform agenda.

I set out the proposed approach in broad terms in my statement to the Assembly on December 4, 2007. The system will deliver a core curriculum up to the age of 14 and then offer expanded choice post-14. The key educational decision point in a child's life would therefore be 14 and not 11.

Children will still move from primary to post primary school at 11; but this will be based on the new non academic selection criteria.

The decisions that young people make at 14 will be within the context of flexible, sustainable, area-planned provision delivered by collaborating schools.

Decisions at 14 will, I proposed, be made by informed election. The application of admissions criteria would not be necessary for two reasons:

- First, collaborating schools will have a much greater ability to respond flexibly to subscription levels; and
- Second, 14 is an age where it is possible for educational choices to be determined consensually and maturely, with the aid of advice and guidance from educational and careers' professionals.

Furthermore, it is possible that many 14 year olds will wish to access provision which includes both academic and vocational elements, in recognition of the changing world of work.

My vision is of areas served by institutions of varying kinds of specialisms, working together and collaborating to offer the full Entitlement Framework to young people on an equal basis and mutually maintaining and raising standards.

I have already said that 2013 should be the key date. It should be the point for which area-based planning in the post-primary sector ensures the Entitlement Framework is available to all young people.

So how do we get from where we are now to a post-primary system reformed to deliver in 2013? What of transfer in 2010, 2011 and 2012?

This is a question I have been exploring exhaustively with stakeholders across our schools system. I have been doing this since taking up office – but the engagement became particularly concerted, at my invitation, after my speech of December 4, 2007.

I have been completely inclusive in this engagement, meeting with those with essentially different positions to myself as often as those with whom I share similar views.

I have listened and I have tried to find a way forward but would be the first to admit that I have not brought everyone with me. Nevertheless, my proposals command significant support.

I have accepted the need for transition – a point made to me by my several stakeholders and which I raised myself in December. Making 2013 the key date fundamentally accepts this point and presupposes a lead-in period.

I can envisage that post-primary transfer in these intervening years, Transfers 2010, 2011 and 2012, may include some particular provision to allow bilateral admissions in some limited cases, on a declining basis.

Bilateralism, if only as a transitional arrangement, requires an assessment mechanism to continue to be part of Transfer, I will work to ensure that this is an assessment will not disrupt the delivery of the primary curriculum. It will not be sat in primary schools.

Ba bhogadh deacair é seo dom le déanamh mar tá mo naimhdeas don aistriú measúnacht-bunaithe ag 11 fós agam go hiomlán. Ach, tá d'aisling agam córas atá bogtha ar aghaidh ón roghnú acadúil agus ta mé réidh chun obair le mo chomhoibrí chun na céimeanna a ghlacadh leis an aisling sin a bhaint amach.

This has been a difficult move for me to make as I maintain entirely my opposition to assessment-based transfer at 11. However, I have in sight a system which has moved beyond academic selection and I am prepared to work with colleagues to make the steps necessary to realise that vision.

Accompanying the partial use of academic admissions criteria I intend, as I have always said, that non-academic admissions criteria will consist of family, community, geography and tie-breaker criteria.

I am also looking at proposals to include criteria around Free School Meals.

Once transition is complete – for 2013, I anticipate that all schools will only use these criteria for Transfer at 11. Indeed, once transition is complete, I anticipate that all schools will have no need for academic admissions. Such a need will have given way to a system in which academic provision and specialist institutions flourish, a system where the young person is matched to the provision that they need through informed and mature election.

While respectfully acknowledging our differences in opinion where they exist, we owe it to our young people to work together to make this transition period a success. That can happen.

In practical terms, declining enrolments, the changing nature of many grammar schools, the need to raise standards and introduce curriculum and structural reform all provide the opportunity to reconsider the issue of selection from a practical perspective:

- How we organise provision?
- How we plan and organise schools? And,
- When do we need to offer young people individualised pathways.

I recognise that there are two key supporting policies – sustainable schools and area based planning. These are being progressed and I will be making a statement on them in the next two weeks.

There is broad agreement the Transfer Test must go but the logical consequence is that academic selection must go. We cannot have a system which effectively represents the Transfer Test Mark 2 and other forms of academic selection do not seem to be much better. We have tried a number of different approaches over the years.

We have had verbal reasoning and got rid of it; We have had the references of primary schools principals and teachers and found it unworkable; We have had the Transfer Test and the experience of this has taught us all it should go. It is difficult therefore to see what kind of academic selection system could ever replace the Transfer Test. Given this, I firmly believe that we are past the point of no return and that academic selection will soon be seen as a historical anomaly in our education system.

There is, however, one further feature of our current reality that demands change – namely the underpinning legislation.

Muna bhfuil mise agus mo chomhoibrí san fheidhmeannas ábalta aontaigh maidir le cur chuige le haghaidh aistriú iar-bhunscoile, don phaistí atá ag tosú iar-bhunscoileanna i Meán Fómhar, dhá mhíle 's a deich, tiocfadh le h-iontrálacha agus aistiú a bheith neamh-rialaithe.

If I and my colleagues in the Executive cannot agree a way forward on post-primary transfer then, there is the possibility that beginning with the transfer of those children starting post-primary school in September 2010, transfer and schools' use of admissions criteria could be un-regulated.

There are some who would depict this prospect of un-regulation as the continuation of the status quo but for the reasons set out above that can not be the case. The status quo operates according to a robust and highly specific legislative framework and through the state's provision of a Transfer Test.

I am referring to the threat of some schools to operate independent admissions arrangements. I have described this as a prospect fraught with administrative and litigious perils.

The logistical challenge of developing a robust and fair assessment mechanism, properly trialled, should also not be underestimated.

Each year, there are approximately 2500 instances, 1 in 6 of those sitting the test, where the Transfer Test grade is determined by means additional to the Transfer Test; 1100 by appeals for re-grade to CCEA, 1400 by claims of Special Circumstances considered by Boards of Governors. These are not peripheral or optional procedures.

A re-grade facility and an ability to offer adjustments where applicants' performance has exceptional considerations constitute a fair and robust testing regime.

The effectiveness of these two supporting functions is due entirely to the established nature of the current system. CCEA's delivery of the test and the testing and marking operation is so effective that it ensures that the 1100 appeals for re-grade result, each year, in only 2 re-grades on average.

How will a new test, developed independently and privately meet this standards?

Appeals Tribunals, whose remit is defined in primary legislation, will not be able in any way to absorb any of the pressures schools will face here.

Similarly with the Special Circumstances procedure. How can this work in the future? What of practice tests? Will primary schools be prepared to sit them?

The pressures and burdens of academic selection are only currently managed because of a well established test regime, because of the support of primary schools and because of the support of a dedicated, resourced, independent and professional body in the form of the CCEA.

Beidh mé soiléir, ní thig leis an roinn oideachais, de bharr na ceisteanna atá luaite agam sa chiste cainte seo, cuidiú nó tacaíocht i bhfoirm ar bith a thabhairt do scrúdú iontrála ceannairceach

Let me be clear, the Department of Education can not in light of the issues which I have raised in this speech fund, facilitate or in any way support a breakaway entrance test.

The greatest dangers of un-regulation, the greatest cost of not agreeing an alternative to academic selection would be the failure to address the wider reform agenda that I have set out here today.

I would like every school to join with us in delivering this wider programme of reform.

So much more than the future of post-primary transfer requires a collaborative and planned educational landscape. It is essential for school survival and sustainability and the intimately connected issue of school standards. I would also argue that it is essential for a secure and long-term future for the valuable and well established tradition of our academic schools.

Head teachers, teachers are at the forefront of delivering these wide ranging reforms and leading their schools into the brave new world. I know that many of you are impatient for change. I encourage you to voice your support for change.

Within the concepts of area-planned provision, school collaboration and informed election at 14, these schools, and all other schools, can flourish. Suitable provision can be matched to each and every child without failing and dividing 10 and 11-year-olds and without creating a divided and unequal school system.

In closing, I want to stress what I said at the beginning, that I respectfully acknowledge the concerns which people hold about the transition of the Transfer procedure. In a sense there would be something wrong if these concerns did not exist. Reform is often painful.

But I believe we agree on much more than we disagree. We agree that we want an education system which:

- meets the needs of all our children, and which responds to their individual needs and aspirations;
- promotes excellence, both academically and vocationally;
- has schools which work together and which have boundaries that are more porous;
- celebrates individual differences through our schools;
- encourages schools to be capable of providing young people with the range of post-14 choices they need;
- brings schools together in learning communities defined by their ability to offer all young people in their area access to the Entitlement Framework; and

- in support of this, planning of the estate and provision on an area-basis.

Given the range of issues which we agree on, I sincerely hope that we can find a way through the one difficult issue of transition; a way through which satisfies the needs of teachers and schools, of parents and advocates, and most importantly of the children who depend on the system to support them in creating a new society into the middle of the Twenty First Century.