



Department of
Education

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AN ROINN

Oideachais

MÁNNYSTRIE O

Lear

Rathgael House
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12 December 2006

Dear Principal

I have today released a statement on the findings of the Independent Strategic Review of Education that was conducted by Sir George Bain and which published its Report on 4 December, 2006. The Report is being distributed to all schools. The enclosed statement is the Government's initial response to the Report. A further, more detailed response will be presented in January.

My statement welcomes the Report. At this early stage it signals the Government's endorsement of the general direction of the recommendations. Overall, the Report has provided us with a thorough and searching examination of our school system and a set of recommendations that I believe will challenge and yet command a high level of consensus across the system. The Review indicates an estate of fewer, larger schools on average, better planned on an area basis, and characterised by sharing and collaboration. This is not simply to save money, but to improve the quality of our children's education and the well-being of Northern Ireland's community.

An important recommendation relates to enrolment minima which, the Review advises, should form the basis of the Government's policy to ensure that all schools are viable and provide all children with a satisfactory level of education and full access to the curriculum:



- *“The minimum (not optimal) enrolments for new primary schools, and for years 8-12 in new post-primary schools should be (i) Primary: 140 pupils in urban areas, and 105 pupils in rural areas, and (ii) Post-primary: 500 pupils. When the enrolment in an existing school falls below the relevant level, the future of the school should be reviewed.*
- *The minimum (not optimal) enrolment for a new six-form in an 11-18 school should be 100 pupils. When the enrolment falls below this level in an existing sixth form, the future of the sixth-form provision should be reviewed.”*

As my statement today makes clear, the Government accept these minima as a sound basis on which to develop an estate of “Schools for the Future”, to use Sir George’s phrase.

I want to be clear, however, that our adoption of the recommended minima does not mean a sudden drive to rationalisation. The enrolment minima represent a level of school size at which it becomes important to review a school to ensure that it is providing children with the education they need and would continue to do so in to the future. We envisage this process of review to be a careful and sensitive process that will require time to complete and will be characterised by engagement with the education authorities. The review will be centred on educational quality and the particular needs of local areas. It will be on a case-by-case basis and will not simply be about establishing continuation or closure as the future for a school. It will also explore the way provision can be improved through school collaboration and partnership and will take place within the development of a new area-based approach to school planning in which there will be a much greater emphasis on connectedness and coherence of provision at local level. I have asked the Department of Education to form a cross-sector working group to take forward area-based planning. The Department will also consult with the education authorities early in the New Year on a policy for sustainable schools, taking account of A Shared Future and the Review Report.

Whilst enrolment minima do signal change within our system, it must be a planned and careful change in the interests of Northern Ireland’s children.

I would be grateful if you would share this letter and the enclosed statement with the Chair of your Board of Governors.

Yours faithfully

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Maria Eagle". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large, looped "E" at the end.

Maria Eagle

**STATEMENT FROM EDUCATION MINISTER, MARIA EAGLE, IN
RESPONSE TO THE INDEPENDENT STRATEGIC REVIEW OF
EDUCATION**

Last week, Sir George Bain and his team published the Independent Strategic Review of Education. Their recommendations lay the foundation for a radical new future for Northern Ireland's education system, based on sharing and learning together, with quality education at its heart.

I am very grateful to Sir George for the considerable effort that went into this Review. I believe that future generations will recognise it as a huge milestone in Northern Ireland's journey to a peaceful and prosperous future.

The implementation of its recommendations will embed quality in Northern Ireland's education system. It will provide every child access to the full curriculum, taught in modern facilities, and give new opportunities for young people from different communities to learn together.

This is an ambitious target; it will require hard work over a number of years and some difficult decisions.

But Northern Ireland's parents should expect no less for their children, and the education sector has a duty and responsibility to make it a reality.

That is why the Government is accepting the broad direction of Sir George's recommendations. Some of the recommendations do require further detailed thought and consultation. Government will be publishing an implementation plan early in the New Year, setting out how we intend to take forward action on the report. However, there are several areas where work now needs to commence.

A central recommendation of the Review is that the education system should move quickly to a system of area based planning, so that we can tackle effectively the problems of over-provision and lack of co-ordination created by the current system. I have asked the Department of Education to establish a

working group consisting of the relevant sector groups to examine how best to progress the area based approach.

The Review explained clearly that Northern Ireland has too many schools. It was equally clear that the guiding principle in any school rationalisation programme should be the quality of education provided by any school, with which I fully concur. I am accepting the Review's recommended minimum enrolment thresholds at which schools should be reviewed. I have asked the Department of Education to consult with the education authorities early in the New Year on a policy for sustainable schools, taking account of A Shared Future and the Review report.

However, this is not an agenda to close small schools. I want to reassure all schools that the approach to new thresholds needs to be and will be planned carefully and with the educational interests of pupils remaining paramount.

It is clear from the Review that proposals for funding of future capital projects for the rebuilding of schools must be considered in the context of area-based planning.

We must also consider capital projects which have been previously announced for funding and for which planning is underway. It will be important to review the sizes of these projects. This exercise will be undertaken quickly: we do not wish to introduce unnecessary delays or uncertainty to projects, but we must take account of the new context through which there may be greater potential benefits from a different approach.

The Review recognises the distinctive contribution of integrated schools in the fostering of a shared future for Northern Ireland. It also highlights the broad range of other approaches to integrating education. It calls on Government to provide tangible support to schools that are actively engaged in sharing with other schools, or schools that are developing an inclusive environment in recognition of the diversity of their pupils' religious, cultural and ethnic backgrounds. The Government will be examining this issue carefully in the