

PRIMARY HEADS CONFERENCE - 24 MAY 2007

'SHAPING THE FUTURE OF PRIMARY EDUCATION'

Introductory

- Delighted to have this opportunity to meet and talk to the second most important people in education. I think we would all agree that the most important people are the children. It is the children we all serve.
- Teachers and school leaders – and I know that many of you here fulfil both those roles – have a profound impact on the lives of young people, and especially in their early and formative years in primary school.
- Essential that we work together for their benefit.
- I have begun to appreciate more fully in the last couple of weeks just what the role of Minister of Education entails, and to say it is 'challenging' seems an understatement!
- But the real challenges are to be found in the classroom – where children from different backgrounds, with very different personalities and with different learning needs have to be

guided on their personal journey of educational discovery. Those are the challenges you face day and daily, and I want to support you in meeting them, in every way I can.

- Want to say a few things about my personal ambitions for all the young people in our care, and in this I will include the post-primary sector as well.
- I believe fundamentally that a good education is every child's birthright – and I mean every child;
- Where there is disadvantage, we work to counteract it; where there are special needs, we provide for them; where there is exceptional gift or talent, we ensure it can be developed to the full.
- To do this means that every school must be a good school – in the widest sense of that term. We simply can't stand still. We must be striving constantly to raise standards further. Schools must be self-evaluating and should be self-improving.
- The recent report from the Chief Inspector shows that we have much to congratulate teachers and pupils for. It also draws attention to areas for further improvement, particularly

in how we cater for those young people who find learning more difficult or who see little value in education.

- I see my role as providing the conditions to enable those improvements to happen. But ultimately raising standards depends on strong and visionary leadership at school level – which is why I am so pleased to see you all here today.

Wider Picture

- The biggest challenge facing all of us right now is managing change. Change if managed well can be very creative and dynamic.
- Tá níos mó athruithe ag teacht ar earnáil an Oideachais anois ná mar a tháinig ar earnáil ar bith eile, déarfainn. Tá titim sna huimhreacha ann agus achan rud eile a bhaineann leis sin maidir le ganntanas acmhainní agus áiteanna breise. Tá gá ann le teacht ar bhealaí níos fearr le heastát na scoile a phleanáil agus a bhainistiú. Tá gá ann le caoi a chur ar an riarachán a dhéantar ar an tseirbhís Oideachais sa dóigh is gur féidir le níos mó den airgead atá againne dul díreach isteach sa seomra ranga.
- The Education service is encountering more change at present than perhaps any other sector. Falling rolls, and all that they entail in terms of shrinking resources and surplus accommodation. The need to find better ways to plan and manage the school estate. The need to streamline how the Education service is administered, so that more of the money we have can go directly to the classroom.

- And of course, there is also the big question of what the future arrangements should be for transferring pupils from primary to post-primary schools. My position on academic selection is known to you all. I don't believe it has served our children well and it distorts the curriculum. I have been meeting with a range of groups in relation to this and have further groups to meet. I acknowledge the urgency but I am taking the time to ensure we get it right.

Revised Curriculum

- In the midst of all that, there is also the need to ensure that what pupils are taught is fit for purpose – not just for today, but for the world as it will be when they leave education. So I'm glad we're on the threshold of introducing the revised curriculum.
- It comes with high expectations – that it should be relevant and engaging for all young people; and less prescriptive for you so that it is more adaptable to the needs of your pupils.
- In essence, it is handing back to you, as educational professionals, the flexibility to tailor what you teach in the

way you see fit. So you have the ability to shape it to ensure that the revised curriculum lives up to those expectations – that it does what it says on the tin!

- We would all subscribe to the view that education is about developing the whole person, and that is right. But education isn't a walled garden. It can and must also contribute to economic prosperity and to building a more cohesive society.
- That means ensuring school leavers have the knowledge and skills they need for the workplace and for their wider role as citizens. We need confident, creative and articulate young people coming out of our schools.
- The revised curriculum is about all these things. It has been the subject of review and detailed consultation since 2000. It is important that we now start getting it in place in our schools – but in phased way that makes it manageable for you.

Changing the emphasis

- Whilst the basic shape of the curriculum remains familiar, it comes with some important changes, especially in the first two, and last two, years of compulsory schooling.
- The Foundation stage aims to give the very youngest children the best possible start by providing a smooth transition from their pre-school experiences to more formal learning.
- At Key Stage 4, the revised curriculum coupled with the Entitlement Framework widens the options for 15 and 16 year olds, and beyond, and opens access to professional and technical courses alongside the more traditional subjects.
- And, throughout, there is a stronger emphasis than ever before on those fundamental skills – literacy, numeracy and ICT. These are core to every young person's learning and to their future prospects.
- These elements of the revised curriculum will underpin the measures we will be taking in response to the recent PAC report on literacy and numeracy. They will also be the central focus of our work on raising standards. That is a

major topic in its own right and no doubt I'll return to it on another occasion. But for the moment, I just want to stress that these should not be seen as unconnected strands. In reality, they are all part of the same enterprise.

- But if the previous, over-prescriptive, curriculum robbed you of your professional flexibility, I believe it put pressure on teachers to get through the Programmes of Study and to concentrate on the "serious" subjects. This has meant that there has just not been the time there used to be for more enjoyable activities.
- With the flexibility that the revised curriculum now gives us, I'm determined to reverse that trend and to encourage schools – starting with primary schools – to give more emphasis to the creative and expressive areas like Art and Music; and to provide support that will enable them to enhance provision in sport and language learning.
- I am initiating a programme with Gaelic games and soccer to begin with. These are the two biggest sports and are for both boys and girls. This will in time be broadened to include other sports.

- Sport has an important role in fostering physical activity and healthy lifestyles. The emphasis will be on encouraging participation rather than just coaching those who are on the school team. I am meeting the IFA and GAA tomorrow to help take this forward in all sectors to include our special needs children and our new communities.
- In the case of language learning, we know that the level of linguistic competence across these islands is appalling low. We shouldn't really be surprised at that. We start language learning much too late compared to other European countries. So I want to build on what a number of primary schools already do in introducing pupils to a second language from an early age, and also to take account of the languages of new arrivals. And I would like to extend language opportunities for pupils, regardless for example of the type of school they attend, to learn Irish and other languages at primary level. This is extremely important in the modern world and we have a lot to learn from our immigrant communities in relation to languages.
- We have an opportunity to learn from the practice in Irish Medium schools where children begin learning at 3 and by 4 they are fluent.

- If you go to primary school classes in Holland or Germany you will find that children are learning 2 and 3 languages from an early age. We need to skill our young people up in languages.
- Clearly anything we do in these areas will be on a voluntary basis – with schools themselves deciding whether to opt in – otherwise I would be guilty of taking away the very flexibility the revised curriculum has just provided! I realise too that you have suffered in the past from 'initiative overload', and that is something I am keen to avoid in future.
- One option, taking account of available resources, would be to put peripatetic support in place in each Board area, which could provide a service in particular to the smaller schools. We will wish to consult with other agencies to avoid any overlap with existing provision, for example in the context of 'extended schools'.

Curriculum & Assessment – Implementation issues

- Even before officially taking up this job, I had a chance to listen to the views of a number of head teachers.

- It was evident that there is wide support for the revised curriculum, but also that schools have a number of concerns – partly about timescales and partly about resources.

Timescales

- I want to stress first of all that implementation is being phased, precisely to enable schools time to adapt. Indeed, the previous curriculum ceased to have effect from last summer but the Department deferred the introduction of the 'minimum requirements' for the revised curriculum until September of this year, in order to provide space for further training and the production of support materials. Even then, we do not expect to see the revised curriculum fully and perfectly in place from day one.
- We see this as a three year phased roll-out. In response to your concerns I have decided to have the first year as a transition year. The implementation of the revised curriculum will continue to be supported by guidance materials and appropriate training, for which we have budgeted another £4.5m this year. In addition I intend to continue with the 5 + 5 professional development days each year over the next three years to support the phasing. These issues will be touched on later by other speakers.

- Mar sin de, ná caithigí ar shiúil bhur gcuid cláracha staidéir nó ceachtanna staidéir atá agaibh faoi láthair. Amharc orthu siúd mar thúsphointe agus athraigh iad de réir mar is gá. Cuimhnigh air nach bhfuil an curaclam nua athcheartaithe leath chomh saintreoraithe maidir le hábhar, mar sin de is dócha go gclúdaíonn a bhfuil ar siúl agaibh faoi láthair níos mó ná mar is gá maidir le réimsí foghlama.
- So don't throw away your programmes of study or existing lesson plans. Take them as your starting point and adapt them as you go. Remember that the revised curriculum is much less prescriptive in terms of content, so it is likely that what you're doing at the moment will more than cover what is required in many of the areas of learning.

Resources

- A specific and major concern for primary heads is the general level of funding for the primary sector compared to secondary. That is a longstanding issue, and it can't be resolved simply by robbing Peter to pay Paul. This can be examined within the intended review of the common funding formula and CSR.
- There is the related question of creating sufficient time for teachers' planning and preparation, which also has

potentially significant cost implications. In the short term, the Department has sought to compensate by making available additional exceptional closure days that schools can use to take forward preparatory work on the revised curriculum and other issues.

- Those major resource issues can only be dealt with in the CSR context, but I want to assure you that I understand the strength of feeling they engender, and I recognise their importance. It will be my responsibility to present the strongest possible case for education funding when the Executive meets to consider budget allocations in the coming months.
- More immediately, and in the context of the curriculum implementation, I know that there is a particular need for enhanced classroom resources for the Foundation Stage and so I am making an extra £3m available to schools this year, to be distributed on the basis of the number of P1 classes in each school.

Assessment and Reporting

- The other main area of concern is about assessment and reporting, and there are several points I want to stress.

- First of all, the emphasis in the revised curriculum is on assessment for learning – in other words on diagnostic and formative assessment, not high stakes tests.
- Assessment outcomes will be reported to parents at the end of the school year in a standardised report – the Pupil Profile – which will replace (not be on top of) what schools currently provide. To further minimise the administrative burden, completion of the Pupil Profile will be supported by a computer-based report-writer that teachers can use.
- Teachers already use a range of standardised assessment instruments in aspects of literacy and numeracy, and we would encourage this to continue so that you have a range of indicators of each child's progress. In addition, the computer-based INCAS system is being made available across all primary schools. It too is diagnostic in purpose – which is why we see it being used near the start of the school year, so as to inform classroom practice and inform parent/teacher consultation.
- Training is already well under way on INCAS. There will be more in the autumn term, prior to the parent/teacher consultations, dealing specifically with how the INCAS scores

can be discussed with parents.

Transition

- We see the coming school year very much as a transitional year, not just in relation to the curriculum but also for assessment and reporting, while the new arrangements are bedded in. So what exactly do I mean by 'transitional'? Well,
 - Firstly, the INCAS outcomes will only be used internally by schools: data will not be collated centrally;
 - Secondly, the information from the INCAS assessment does not have to be reported formally to parents in this the first year of its use;
 - Thirdly, in relation to Levels of Progression, I have decided to provide time for consultation with you on the Level descriptors and for trialling. Even when the Levels of Progression are in place, we do not envisage them being used for reporting to parents until the 2009/10 school year.
 - Fourthly, it is clear that the use of the INCAS literacy module is not appropriate in the context of Irish-medium

schools, and we will use the coming year to develop more suitable assessment instruments through the medium of Irish for use in these schools;

- I believe that these measures will be welcome and will help make the changes more manageable for you and your staff.
- Some people have asked that we postpone implementation for another year. I believe this is not the right way to go for our young people – we do not have the luxury of standing still. I believe that the phased transitional approach is the way forward.

Parents

- The other key people we need to take with us as we move into the revised curriculum are, of course, parents. It is important that we provide regular information for parents, about the changes generally and about the assessment and reporting arrangements in particular. As a first step, a short information leaflet has been produced jointly by the education partners and this will issue at the start of next term. Advance copies of the leaflet are available today and can be obtained in [the foyer] Further information will be provided to parents later in the autumn in relation to INCAS, to coincide with the

proposed teacher/parent meetings for P5 pupils.

ICT Provision

- Finally, I would like to focus on ICT. I've referred earlier to this as one of the vital skills children in today's world must acquire, and also as a tool to help teachers in relation to assessment and reporting.
- Our education system is recognised world-wide as having one of the most fully developed ICT infrastructures in schools. But if ever there was an area where we can't rest on our laurels, it is ICT – because of the rapid rate at which the technology moves on. That means making sure that equipment is regularly refreshed.
- From primary schools, that is exactly what is happening at the moment – under what is known as the Lot 6 contract. This will provide a one-for-one replacement for existing equipment, together with an extended range of software provision and more powerful network capacity. I congratulate C2k for their work this; and Northgate for being successful in winning the contract.
- However, with the increasing ICT demands, I don't think a one-for-one replacement is enough. So I'm announcing

today that – for both primary and secondary schools – an extra 20,000 laptops will be rolled out to schools in the course of the coming school year. We will focus first on primary schools to ensure you have what is needed to support the new assessment and reporting arrangements.

Concluding

- My remarks today have necessarily been wide-ranging – but that is merely a reflection of the range of developments that are currently under way.
- Challenging though they may be for all of us, I am in no doubt that they will be of enormous benefit to the young people we seek to serve.
- I very much look forward to working closely with you as we address these issues and I'm confident that, together, we can deal with them successfully.
- Is é an ról atá agamsa soiléireacht cuspóirí a sholtáthar-chomh maith le hacmhainní!- ag leibhéal straitéiseach. Agus tá a fhios agam gur féidir liom brath oraibhse chun an

cheannaireacht agus an treoir is gá a chur ar fáil i bhiur gcuid scoileanna,

- My role will be to provide clarity of purpose – and resources! – at strategic level. And I know that I can look to you to provide the necessary leadership and direction in your schools.
- I would like to hear your views on this conference, particularly in relation to sport and languages though please feel free to e-mail me on any aspect of the conference. I have arranged for an e-mail address to be set up specifically for this purpose – you'll find details in your conference pack – so that you can input your comments directly.
- You are the leaders in your schools, you are creating opportunities for children in a safe, nurturing environment. We need to make poverty and disadvantage history in our society. Every child deserves a fair chance and every school can be a good school. Let's work together and bring about the changes we so desperately need in our education system.

Go raibh maith agaibh as éisteacht liom.

Thank you for listening.