

Speech by Education Minister Caitriona Ruane to ANIELB Conference – 17 October 2008

(Paragraphs in Irish are immediately repeated in English)

Thank you for the invitation to your Conference. I am delighted to be here. I am always glad to be in Derry.

I hope you have been having a good conference and I am sorry that I cannot spend longer with you.

Táimid ar fad anseo inniu mar gur mhaith linn ár ndícheall a dhéanamh do na páistí agus na daoine óga atá faoinár gcúram. Ár gcuid páistí féin – gach duine acu.

We are all here today because we want to do the very best we can for the children and young people in our care. Our children – all of them.

Being in charge of education is the greatest privilege and the greatest responsibility any Minister could have. Similarly being able to shape the education system and its outcomes is a privilege and responsibility for you all. Together we have the opportunity to enhance the life chances of a generation of children and provide equality of opportunity. That is a challenge we all must take on. And take on now.

What we have at present does not deliver that equality. My purpose in the next few minutes is to spell out why we need action, why we need it now and what needs to happen.

Our education system is a contradiction. At the top end, we outshine all the other education systems in these islands. That said, we no longer shine internationally. And remember our competition is international.

At the other end, we have a shocking level of under-achievement, with far too many of our young people leaving education without the basics they need to make their way in the world. I know you may have heard all that before. What worries me is that the more we say it the more it seems to be acceptable. But poverty of attainment feeds poverty of aspiration and lack of self-esteem.

No longer is it acceptable.

It is not acceptable to me;

It is not acceptable to the children affected;

It is not acceptable to their families;

and it should not be acceptable to anyone involved in the education system.

What is the scale of the problem we face?

Almost half our young people do not achieve the equivalent of 5 good GCSE passes including English and Maths. In other words, after 12 years of compulsory education almost 12,000 young people leave school every year without having achieved at this level. And this is the level of attainment that unlocks the door to opportunity and fulfilment.

Ag an bhunscoil baintear amach na leibhéil ionchais litearthachta agus uimhearthachta, i gcás thart ar 80 % de pháistí. Ach téann duine as gach cúigear páistí chuig an iarbhunscoil le droch-chaighdeán litearthachta agus uimhearthachta.

At primary level almost 80% of children reach the expected levels of literacy and numeracy for their ages. But 1 in 5 children move into post-primary with poor standards of literacy and numeracy. That is over 4,500 children every year move into post-primary education ill-equipped and probably destined to struggle.

Worse, in our 20 most disadvantaged primary schools only around half the pupils will be at the expected level in English and within this group there are several schools where only 1 child in 5 will be at the expected level.

Let us be clear: in failing these children, in many cases we are stealing their chances of breaking out of the cycle of disadvantage. This cannot continue.

We know that there is a correlation between social disadvantage and education outcomes. But that can no longer be allowed to cloak poor performance. Many schools with very low levels of social disadvantage are performing well below what might be expected. Yet some schools dealing with very high levels of social disadvantage are performing well above the average for the north as a whole.

How do we explain these variances? Are they acceptable? No. Are they avoidable? Yes I think they are.

Consider this. Two post-primary schools. Both non-selective. Both serving communities with low levels of disadvantage. At one, almost 70% of pupils leave with 5 good GCSEs including English and Maths. At the other, the figure is fewer than 20% - one in five. How can this be? And how can we tolerate such a wide disparity? What explanation do we give the parents of children in the second school? It's just the luck of the draw? I think not.

There is under-achievement in our selective schools too - also increasing signs of divergence between different school sectors. In Catholic managed schools, some 41% of pupils will progress to university compared to 36% in other schools. The differential is greater when we take social deprivation into account. A socially disadvantaged pupil in a Catholic school will have a 1 in 5 chance of going to University. In controlled or non-denominational schools, it is 1 in 10. Neither of these is acceptable. We need to understand why these differences exist. More importantly we need to raise standards across the board recognising the distance to travel is further in some sectors.

Differences in educational outcomes can't simply be put down to differences in the neighbourhood a school serves. Some schools confound predictions in the results they produce. Others ought to be capable of doing much better for their pupils than they currently do.

In short, we have a system where a child's chances of a good education depend largely on the school attended. Pot luck. Where is the equality? What we have is a lottery, a lottery of inequality. Our children, their parents, their communities deserve better, much better.

Tá mé tiomanta dona chinntiú do dtarlaíonn é seo. Ba mhaith liomsa córas ina mbíonn deis ag gach uile pháiste a gcumas iomlán a fhorbairt, beag beann ar an scoil a mbíonn siad ag freastal uirthi.

I intend to work to ensure that this happens. I want a system where every child can be sure they will have the opportunity to develop their full potential regardless of the school they go to. I cannot preside over a system where there is educational apartheid.

But we won't raise standards through missives from me or my Department – but through individual teachers in individual classrooms working with individual pupils. I have talked to many governors, principals and teachers. Most of them know what needs to be done to raise standards in their school. We know the features that characterise a good school:

- the quality of the teaching;
- high calibre leadership and management;
- close parental and community links;

and a positive ethos and culture where each and every child is valued and encouraged, motivated and supported to achieve their best. We need a culture of empowerment.

Many of our schools reflect all these. The challenge for us is to make them common to all schools.

We need to act now. We cannot allow another generation of children to leave the school system ill-equipped for life and work.

I want to set out now the key building blocks of my drive to raise standards, tackle under-achievement and promote equality.

They are:-

- change the mode of transfer at 11 and focus on informed election of learning pathways at 14;
- school improvement;
- literacy and numeracy strategy;
- empowering schools and leaders;
- improving the standard of teaching;
- support and challenge from ESA;
- partnership between schools and their communities;
- empowerment of parents.

My policy on transfer is clear and based on the fundamental view that all children should have access to a good school and to a high quality of outcomes. It is no longer acceptable to separate out the top 35/40 percent at the age of 11 into different

schools and to regard many of the rest as failures at such a young age.

I appreciate there are frustrations about the length of time it is taking to finalise the new arrangements. I, too, feel that frustration, particularly since the Executive meeting of 15 May when I brought my proposals but they refused to discuss them.

I then wrote to every Executive Minister offering a meeting to discuss the proposals. I am engaged in a series of meetings with Principals from right across the North and I regularly meet with educational stakeholders on a regular basis.

There is a growing realisation that tackling underachievement needs to be at the top of all our agendas alongside preserving academic excellence. More and more people are coming to accept that 14 is the key age to decide on educational pathways.

Féachann mo bheartas ar fheabhsúchán scoile lena chuidiú le scoileanna an rud a dhéanann siad go maith a dhéanamh níos fearr. Tá na scoileanna féin breá ábalta feabhsúchán a chothú agus is é an ról atá againn ná cuidiú agus tacaíocht a thabhairt dóibh agus an feabhsúchán sin a éascú.

My policy for school improvement is to help schools do what they do best. Schools themselves are best placed to drive improvement and our role is to help and support them in doing just that.

There will be times though when support will have to be accompanied by challenge. And there may be times when other interventions are needed. This ought to be a rare event. Our first priority always must be to promote the needs of our children, not protect or cosset institutions. We need a zero-tolerance approach to under-achievement.

Central to that is raising standards in literacy and numeracy. We are currently consulting on my strategy – including, I am pleased to say, with young people and parents – and I look forward to hearing views before the deadline of 30 November.

Schools are key to raising standards. It is critical therefore that they have freedom to manage their own affairs if they wish to and are capable of doing so. In the future schools will be the front line and the main role of ESA will be to help and support.

The governance and management arrangements for schools will be set by their owners or trustees, and the management authority will be the board of governors, not ESA. The key will be subsidiarity – schools will take decisions themselves wherever possible, on everything from employment and management of staff, setting and delivering the curriculum, through to the professional and organisational development of the school.

In return, each school will be accountable for its performance, and not just to my Department, but more importantly to the pupils, parents, and the community that it serves. These arrangements will not be on a one size fits all basis, nor will they mean cutting schools adrift from the support that they need. ESA will support boards of governors, and school leaders. As school leaders take on greater responsibilities it will be critical that they get the necessary expertise and support, for example in finance and human resources. Its primary purpose will be to provide the services that schools need, services that are regionally planned, but locally delivered; services that are sensitive to and shaped by the needs of the schools.

In driving up performance and raising standards the quality of the teaching workforce and the quality of teaching is critical. There is clear international evidence that teaching quality is the

key determinant of the outcomes of any school system. I want therefore to ensure that we invest in the workforce, in focussed continued professional development in line with schools' needs. Along with that I want to see a greater shared understanding of the utter criticality of high quality teaching to high standards. We need to ensure that professional development, performance management and classroom support is geared towards helping teachers to get the best out of their pupils. In this we need to remember that if time in the classroom does not add value to a child's learning, we are failing that child. In the future there will be a key role for the Inspectorate and ESA in addressing this.

But schools themselves and Boards of Governors must also accept and exercise accountability for their performance; the performance of their staff and their management of the staff. With power comes responsibility and that responsibility needs to be fully understood and exercised.

The establishment of ESA is a key component of the framework to raise standards I want to set in place. The existing arrangements need to be changed as they are not fit for purpose to guarantee for every child an acceptable education.

Caithfimid níos mó comhtháthaithe agus comhsheasmhachta a chothú chun tús áite a thabhairt do dhaltaí. Chun tacaíocht a

thabhairt do scoileanna agus chun dúshlán a chur rompu d'fhonn go soláthraíonn siad na torthaí is fearr dá ndaltaí.

We need to create greater cohesion and consistency to put pupils first. To help support and challenge schools to deliver for their pupils.

We need to streamline administration but promote strategic planning and management. Area based planning will provide the basis for that. We need professional regional management for support services and active creative utilisation of the schools estate. I have tasked Gavin Boyd with taking forward the preparatory work for all this.

I have also made clear that at the front line I want ESA to be accessible and responsive – to local communities, to schools, and to other key public services. I will want ESA to play its full part in community planning once it comes into operation.

Let no one doubt my commitment to putting ESA into place. There are wider political difficulties but the case for reform is now better understood and I believe accepted. The cost of delay in terms of its impact on the children we are here to serve is not perhaps fully understood. I will aim to remedy that in the days ahead.

The last ingredient I want to see is greater partnership between schools and the parents and communities they serve. The education system cannot do all this alone. Most of a child's learning experience takes place outside the classroom.

Parents and communities need therefore to be partners of the school system with the shared objective of ensuring every child fulfils their potential. Parents need to convey the same passion for learning, advancement and excellence that we want schools to exhibit. They need also to challenge schools and teachers if they take their eye off the ball.

Education is about the wider social development of children and young people. Schools need to be seen as wider community resources contributing to this. I have attached particular importance to the Extended School programme offering a wide range of provision before and beyond the school day. I want to see us build on this by engaging with the wider community. We have excellent staff and committed educationalists second to none. They have their own perspective and values. The wider community which has often to deal with the consequence of under-achievement and poor standards – whether anti-social behaviour, disaffected youth, unskilled school leavers, lack of employability – bring a different but no less valuable perspective. Similarly voluntary and community organisations

have a role to play in promoting and encouraging the development of our young people. The fusing of all these into a genuine working partnership is something I want to foster. There are many good examples across the North, particularly here in Derry. We need to build upon and expand these.

To secure that we need to pursue a collective agenda to raise standards, eliminate under-achievement and promote equality.

A dhaoine uaisle, tá córas againn a dhéanann freastal maith ar roinnt dár bpáistí. Ní mór dúinn ár ndualgas a aithint agus a chomhlíonadh le freastal a dhéanamh ar ár bpáistí ar fad. Agus ní mór dúinn tús a chur leis láithreach!

Ladies and gentlemen we have a system which serves some of our children well. We need to recognise and discharge our duty to serve all our children well. And we need to start now!

Thank you.