

SCHOOL GOVERNORS CONFERENCE on 21 APRIL 2009

“Working Together to make a Difference”

Minister’s Address

Introduction

I am delighted to be able to join you today to mark this school governors’ conference.

Role Of Governors

This is the one opportunity in the year that I get to meet and applaud the many public spirited individuals who give so freely of their time and talents to fulfil the role of school governor.

We know from many, many sources that good leadership is the key building block on which a successful school is built. And successful schools combine to give a successful education system, and a better society. I have seen leadership in many parts of the world. The best leaders inspire every member of their team. Every one. That already happens in schools here where we have best practice. We need it to happen in every school. You are

in a position to lead and inspire. Good leaders create a culture of democracy and respect in their teams. Effective leaders hold a vision and turn it into a reality and in this regard you as school governors have never been more important than you are now.

I know how you value and work tremendously hard to support your schools and I would like thank you personally for the work that you do.

It is a privilege for me to be here and I welcome the opportunity to explain to you my vision for education and my own education goals.

My Agenda

As Minister for Education, my agenda is to focus on three issues - delivering a high quality education, recognising diversity and promoting equality of provision for ALL our young people.

I accept that we have many very good schools and this is in no small part due to the contribution you make as school governors.

It is my sincere desire to work with you and with school teachers and education administrators to promote the education, the well being and the prosperity of all young people at school.

My vision is an education system that will provide the best education for all pupils.

At the heart of my education goals, I want to see greater fairness for pupils. I cannot accept a system which sees only 20% of our lowest achieving pupils in primary schools reaching their expected levels of attainment in English or Irish and mathematics.

Research suggests that two thirds of a child's learning happens outside the classroom – in the home and in the local community. It is clear to me that many, many young people face insurmountable hurdles of disadvantage and lack of opportunity because of where they were born or which family they belong to. That is unsustainable.

Is é an ról atá ag an rialtas ná dul i ngleic leis na míbhuntáistí seo.

The role of government is to tackle these disadvantages.

I have given the Department a mission. “To ensure that every learner fulfils his or her potential at each stage of development.”

I will target resources towards this achievement.

EDUCATION FUNDING

Last month I announced the budget allocations for schools for the current financial year. I announced record levels of funding for education services totalling £1.9 billion. That's £5 million we are spending on education every day of every week.

Over the past two years I have recognised the particular needs and importance of primary schools. I am fully committed, within available resources, to increasing the level of funding provided to primary schools in overall terms particularly in comparison with post-primary schools and ensuring that the funding distributed to primary schools better reflects the importance of early intervention and primary learning.

In last year's budget I announced an additional £32 million over a three year period for the foundation stage of the revised curriculum delivered in primary schools. This means that every p1 and p2 – infants and junior infants class have a classroom assistant. I also allocated £12million specifically to help primary school teaching Principals. Funding available to go directly to schools' budgets is up by £37.9million a 5.3% increase from 2008-09 to more than £1.1billion – that's an extra £266 per pupil at the primary level.

Just recently, I have introduced a new Primary School uniform allowance worth £35 per child. That's another million pounds targeted at the least well-off to ensure they can participate fully in school life.

I will continue to press for further reform. From January 2010, in the main, resources will be targeted through the new ESA directly to schools.

Local decisions will remain with school Boards of Governors and ESA will promote this.

I want to see schools reduce the inequalities that arise from the vagaries of where you're born or how wealthy

your family or community is. I will move the education sector to provide equality of opportunity to all pupils – an equality measured in their achievements and their prospects for a fulfilling life. There is no point in obtaining record levels of funding if we do not target it to improve educational outcomes.

That is why I would also like to mention my decisions on Transfer 2010. There are many important education issues but most are related to the Transfer Procedure in some way or other.

A key issue for all of us charged with responsibility for use of public funds is to ensure that those resources are used for the purposes for which they were intended and in a way that ensures best value in delivering public services. In discharging this responsibility we have a duty not only to deliver on this but to do so in a manner which is open and transparent and that provides assurance to the public and to the Assembly on the stewardship of those resources.

In a nutshell we are accountable to the taxpayer for how we spend their money and we need to secure their confidence in how we do this.

This is a responsibility that rests not just with me and the Department of Education but also with Education and Library Boards, Boards of Governors and schools to ensure that processes and systems are appropriate and sufficient to secure effective accountability.

When I was appointed as Minister of Education in the restored Assembly, I inherited a system that was built around and geared towards the needs of 40% of children.

Every year thousands of children were failed by the education system. For the most part, these were already disadvantaged children.

Ní raibh mé sásta cur suas le neamhionannas da leithéid.

I was not prepared to tolerate such inequality.

Last year's transfer test was the last 11 plus. It was a system designed 60 years ago and was clearly not fit for the modern world. Not only was it outdated, it was fundamentally wrong, based on academic apartheid and it condemned the majority of our children as failures. In my

opinion no child is a failure and for that reason alone there will be no further state sponsored testing at age 11.

We need an education system which meets the need of our modern world, which is child centred and which delivers for all our children and allows each of them to develop their individual strengths and talents.

Let us just look at how last year's 11-plus served us in this year's admissions process? For admissions into 2008/9 school year, 77 out of 135 children in Hollywood's 4 primary schools transferred into a grammar school. In the 7 primary schools serving the Malone Road area, 214 out of 235 transferred into a grammar school. In the 2 primary schools serving the Stranmillis area, 62 out of 93 transferred into a grammar school.

In the 3 schools largely serving the Sandy Row area, 11 out of 79 transferred into a grammar school. In the 3 primary schools largely serving the Shankill, it was 10 out of 104. In the 7 schools serving the Falls, it was 49 out of 284.

In Derry where there are 13 post primary schools, 4 are grammar and 9 are secondary schools. The 4 grammar schools educate 43% of post primary pupils attending in

the county. The other 9 non-grammar schools educate the remaining 57%. In the grammar schools in Derry, 13% of children are entitled to free school meals. This compares to 41% of the children in the secondary schools. In the grammar schools, 28 children have a statement of special educational needs. The secondary schools have 300 children with special educational needs.

What about Fermanagh? There are 14 post primary schools in Fermanagh. 4 grammar and 10 secondary schools. Enrolments in Fermanagh have fallen to such a degree that its 4 grammar schools now educate half of the country's post primary pupils. The 10 secondary schools educate the other half. As a result, one quarter of the desks in the secondary schools are empty. Contrast this with the grammar schools which are all full. The secondary schools are having to reduce their complements of teaching staff yet they have the highest numbers of children with special needs.

These appalling figures are clear indicators of profound and damaging inequality and I am not prepared to tolerate such inequality.

Over the last 22 months I made determined efforts to convince the defenders of selection of the logic and need for change. These efforts were dismissed in the

erroneous belief that a lack of political agreement would block change. That was a mistaken belief.

Last month, when it became clear that there was no prospect of political agreement on ending academic selection, I issued guidance on admission to post-primary schools in 2010. Schools will be obliged in law to “have regard” to this guidance. On equality grounds but also because of risks of dysfunction this guidance strongly recommends that schools do not use academic admissions criteria. If a school chooses to use academic admissions criteria it will have to provide for itself the robust assessment mechanism and procedures that such criteria require.

I have now set out the criteria which should be used to transfer children from primary to post-primary education from 2010 and beyond. The Department’s Transfer 2010 Guidance provides a set of admissions criteria already used widely and promising clarity and, for the first time, fairness.

Any entrance test operating outside of this Guidance is, I believe, a legal minefield, as those within some grammar schools who are proposing this approach are now finding out. If they adopt this approach – and I hope they don’t -

they will generate a degree of confusion for parents and pupils which can only be damaging so I would again urge them to consider carefully the consequences of breaking away from the system.

The Transfer 2010 Guidance has been issued for public consultation and I have written to all parents of P6 pupils to explain the content. The Guidance is not preferable to regulation but if the Guidance is followed it will deliver an effective and fair system of post-primary transfer.

It will also deliver a system of post-primary transfer that helps to answer the wider and desperately urgent reform agenda embracing demographic decline and school sustainability, the delivery of the Entitlement Framework and under-achievement.

Some people in the primary sector and in the post-primary sector have asked the Department what their duties are in relation to the revised curriculum. I know that some teachers in some schools are coming under pressure to prepare pupils for unregulated breakaway tests. The Guidance is clear on this: "primary schools should note that this cannot be required of them and that the Department strongly recommends against it. Indeed, all primary schools are covered by statutory obligations to

delivery the primary curriculum as defined in Articles 4-9 of the Education Order 2006. The Education and Training Inspectorate will also continue to monitor the quality of teaching and learning, in the context of, the revised curriculum in primary schools.

The 11-plus is gone forever. There will be no state sponsored test. The policy of the Department of Education is for a non-selective and inclusive process of transfer to post-primary education.

I call on those genuine people supporting change to grasp this opportunity and to once and for all put an end to the practice of forcing 10 year old children to sit tests in order that some of them can access the education to which all should be entitled.

Conclusion

I am grateful for the opportunity to address you, here, this morning and I would thank you for listening.

I have described very briefly my goals as Education Minister and I know that they are challenging. I am however passionate in my conviction to bring forward

policies that will work for the good of all our young people at and beyond school.

I regret that due to other business engagements, I am unable to join you for the rest of the conference.

I understand that the conference programme is designed to provide you with up to date information on a variety of education issues and to attend a choice of seminars focusing on practical governance skills. I hope that you find this day useful and informative.

Thank you.