

INTO CONFERENCE: 27 February 2009

There's a saying in Irish, "Tús maith, leath na hoibre".

"A good start is half the work".

The political agreement that saw the political institutions of the Good Friday Agreement restored was indeed a good start. In fact, it was a historic development. But that was two years ago. The challenge for the Executive is to turn that historic development into a process of positive change; of delivery for those we represent; of accountable, effective government.

I want to talk today about change, about delivery, and I want you to leave here feeling confident that the changes that are, and that will take place in education will provide a better system for our young people.

I want your help in delivering those changes.

Soláthraíonn ár gcóras cáilíochtaí den chéad scoth do na páistí is cumasaí.

Our system does provide top-end qualifications to our most able pupils.

I am proud of those achievements.

I am proud of the young people who achieve those results and I am proud of the staff across the education sector who help to deliver them.

BUT that is not enough. There are many, many more children who are leaving school without anything like adequate educational achievements.

Those who quote the high examination successes ignore the fact that the gap between those at the top end and those underachieving is widening. We need to narrow the gap by offering support to those who need it most.

I am determined to bring EQUALITY to the delivery of educational OUTCOMES for all children, in all settings, regardless of whether they are in urban or rural, socially advantaged or disadvantaged, living in Catholic or Protestant, communities, whether for new comers or well established groups.

When I speak about equality, it means focusing resources towards those who can't afford to have education provided (or bought) for them by wealthy parents. The correlation between social disadvantage and education is well established.

Tá na míchothromaíochtaí inár gcóras reatha do-ghlactha tríd is tríd. Ní mór athrú a bheith ann. Sin an fáth go bhfuil athbhreithniú cuimsitheach ar an bhFoirmle Chómhainithe coimisiúnaithe agam.

These inequalities in our current system are totally unacceptable. There must be change. That is why I am commissioning a comprehensive review of the common funding formula.

I welcome the work that the Irish National Teachers Union – the Ulster Teachers Union and Amnesty International are doing in the field of human rights. I have asked my officials to work with you to enable us to continue with this important work.

Mol an óige agus tiocfaidh sí!

Another Irish expression. “Praise the young and they will come!”

I believe in our young people. I believe that if we support them they will repay us many times over.

For that reason I will be focused on RAISING STANDARDS.

My Department and I have an intense programme of progressive reforms underway, not just in Post Primary Transfer. Strategies and reforms such as The School Improvement Policy, Special Education Review, the Literacy and Numeracy Strategy, the sustainable schools policy, the Irish Medium Review and the implementation of the Education and Skills Authority.

These strategies and policies are not separate, they are not independent of each other. All the initiatives are interlinked and form a jigsaw of policies, dedicated to helping every child achieve their potential, ensuring that every school can become a good school and that every child has equality of opportunity.

It is with your help and commitment that we can take these reforms forward to give every child and young person in the North of Ireland a start they deserve.

In the current system, almost half our young people (48%) come to the end of compulsory schooling without the basic qualifications to continue into further education or training, except with remedial support.

20% of our children transfer into post-primary without the literacy and numeracy skills we expect them to have.

When the Education Bill becomes law later this year, it will herald the arrival of the new Education and Skills Authority.

The Authority will come into operation on 1 January 2010.

Ar an gcéad lá de mhí Eanáir ar an mbliain seo chugainn, beidh deireadh leis an ndrochchóras teipe. Bhí moill ann. Ach NÍ LEANFAIDH an scéal mar atá anois.

On 1 January next year, the failed system will go.

There has been delay. But there will be NO further maintenance of the status quo.

The new Authority will be set challenging targets.

70% of pupils across the system will achieve 5 GCSEs at Grade C or better by 2011.

45% of pupils entitled to Free School Meals will achieve this in the same year.

There will be higher targets for subsequent years to ensure that those who have not been well served by the old failed system can expect to reap the same rewards that have been available to too few for too long.

Every School must be a Good School. Every child must have the opportunity to fulfil his or her potential.

There will be greater savings from the re-structuring that will develop when the new local ESA teams start to function. All these savings and freed up resources will be restored to frontline services. That's real money going to classrooms. Going to help pupils achieve their potential.

Agus is éard a bheidh mar thoradh air seo ná seirbhísí do dhaltaí a bheidh i bhfad níos fearr. Seirbhísí níos fearr dóibh siúd a bhíonn ag obair san earnáil oideachais. Agus fíorfheabhsuithe ar thorthaí oideachasúla.

That will mean enhanced services to pupils. Enhanced services to those who work in education. And real improvements to educational outcomes.

The current economic climate means that we will continue to face financial challenges and I will endeavour to manage these challenges realistically. But if we want to see progress in health, the economy or in community stability, I believe that we need to invest in the educational welfare of our young people.

I know that your union has also expressed concern about planned changes to the arrangements for compensating teachers who are retired prematurely on grounds of redundancy or in the interests of the efficient discharge of the employer's function.

The Premature Retirement Compensation Scheme has not been withdrawn and employers still have available to them all the options which previously existed to enable them to secure the early release of teachers. In addition, the new regulations will allow employers to make an enhanced severance payment of up to 104 weeks' salary as an alternative to granting premature retirement.

The circumstances under which premature retirement is granted or severance payments are made - and the level of such payments - will be a matter of policy on the part of the employer. There is funding in the 2009/10 financial year to assist employers in this regard.

Tabharfaidh ESA athruithe isteach ar an mbealach a dtabharfar tacaíocht daoibh. Tabharfaidh sé níos mó ceannasaíochta do mhúinteoirí agus do phríomhoidí.

The ESA will bring about changes to how you are supported. It will put greater control into the hands of teachers and principals.

Under the changes I am bringing through, teachers will determine the support they need. Principals will have greater authority over their budgets. Boards of Governors will have greater responsibility to deliver the needs of their pupils and their communities. The Education Bill will provide for these responsibilities. It will change the relationship between pupils and resources. It will enhance the ability of teachers to teach and governors to govern. It will improve the prospects of all children to earn rewards commensurate with their ability.

New structures in education administration will also signal a new culture.

In that new culture we won't accept bullying. We won't accept discrimination on the basis of where you're born or what you can afford. We won't subject our children to the label of failure.

Sin an fáth gur chuir mé deireadh leis an leithcheal státionscanta agus leis an gcinedheighilt acadúil. Ní bheidh aon 11+ ann a thuilleadh.

That is why I have brought an end to state-sponsored discrimination and academic apartheid. There will be no more 11+.

I welcome the decision of this Union to advise against supporting the old ways. Or supporting the continuance of even worse out-dated methodologies that served the old order.

There are those who think that the name above the school gate determines excellence in education. They are wrong. Excellence in education is delivered by committed professional teachers working across all sectors in education.

Our shared goal must be to offer all our children a real prospect of personal success and fulfilment.

Chuir mé tús leis an óráid seo trí aird a dhíriú ar an ngá le soláthar maith. San earnáil oideachais is ionann sin agus: Comhionannas. Caighdeáin a Ardú. Agus an úsáid is fearr a bhaint as na hacmhainní atá ar fáil dúinn.

I opened this speech by pointing to the need for delivery.  
In education that means: Equality. Raising Standards.  
Using our resources wisely.

That's the future of education. That's what I intend to  
deliver.

Go raibh míle maith agaibh! .