

Speech to Association of Education & Library Boards 2009

‘School Improvement through Effective School Governance’

Thank you for inviting me to speak to you today.

Thank you in particular for choosing as your final theme the key issue of ‘School Improvement through Effective School Governance’. In doing so, you have captured the key issue we need now to address, as we move forward together in education.

Seo comhdháil bhliantúil dheireanach na mBord Oideachais agus Leabharlainne. Le sé bliana is tríocha anuas, bhí ról lárnach ag na Boird i gcúrsaí oideachais. Ba mhaith liom aitheantas a thabhairt ón tús do dhíograis an iomad ball agus do dhíograis fhoireann na mBord i rith na mblianta. Is mar gheall ar an ndíograis sin a soláthraíodh a lán seirbhísí lárnacha, d’fhorbair an díograis sin a lán modhanna nua; agus chuidigh an díograis sin le rudaí a fheabhsú.

This is indeed the last annual conference of Education and Library Boards. For the last 36 years the Boards have played a central role in education. Let me at the outset recognise the dedication of so many Board members, and many staff, over the years. I know that that dedication has delivered many key services; it has developed many new approaches; and it has supported much improvement.

All of you share with me the desire to see best practice spread right across education. We want to ensure that consistently, in every school, in every youth club, we deliver the best for our young people. Our children deserve the best. We cannot afford to sit around and delay.

To take forward this urgent reform requires effective leadership and governance. That means leadership:

- from me as Minister;
- from my Department,
- from Seán Hogan, the Chair of ESA Gavin Boyd the Interim Chief Executive and his team at ESA,
- from school governors, principals, and teachers; and
- from our young people, who should have an active voice in their schools.

I have spoken frequently about the need for change. Change to put our children at the heart of education. Change to tackle the scandal - that while some elements of our system are world class.

- almost 4,500 children leave primary school without the basic literacy and numeracy skills they need;
- last year around 11,000 young people left school without having achieved five good GCSE's including literacy and maths;
- we have far too wide a gap in achievement between our most disadvantaged and our most affluent pupils.

So my priorities are clear: My total focus is on five issues:-

- Raising standards and equality for all;
- Closing the achievement gap;
- Developing our education workforce;
- Improving the learning environment; and
- Transforming the administration

To raise standards, I have introduced 'Every School a Good School – a policy for School Improvement'. Its task is simple - to ensure that the characteristics of good schooling are firmly, and consistently, embedded everywhere. To ensure that we have child-centred provision; high quality teaching and learning; and schools that are connected to their communities.

In delivering this, good leadership and clear accountability are key. We see that good leaders – both at Board of Governor and Principal level - set a clear vision for their school. They inspire and motivate. They develop good relationships with staff, with pupils, and with parents and the wider community. They foster a strong ethos, and set high expectations for all their pupils.

They are key to delivering the reforms we need to drive up standards.

Tabharfaidh mé straitéis chun tosaigh go luath chun caighdeán sa litearthacht agus san uimhearthacht a ardú ó bhunscolaíocht go hiarbhunscolaíocht. Ba chóir go mbeadh caighdeán maith múinteoireachta, chomh maith le tacaíocht do pháistí a d'fhéadfaí go mbeadh deacrachtaí acu, agus creat measúnaithe a chinnteodh go bhfuil feabhsú á sholáthar, ba chóir go mbeadh siad lárnach sa straitéis seo.

I will soon bring forward a strategy to raise standards in literacy and numeracy from primary through post-primary. Central to this must be good quality teaching, combined with support for those children who may be having difficulties, and an assessment framework that will give us all confidence that improvement is being delivered.

Our focus on improving educational outcomes for - and therefore the life chances of - all young people will continue undiminished in the weeks and months ahead. It is simply too important a responsibility for other things to get in the way.

I have heard talk of withdrawing co-operation; of reluctance or unwillingness to engage in giving effect to my school improvement policy. Let me be clear - I expect and require the full co-operation of every ELB in ensuring the immediate implementation of all aspects of "Every School a Good School". And I expect action to be taken to support schools that need to improve and to challenge underperformance wherever it occurs.

As ELBs you have a duty to all schools and a particular responsibility for those schools that you own and for which you are employing authority. Where inspection evidence tells us that the quality of education is less than satisfactory I will require you to take prompt action to safeguard the interests of children not institutions.

There can be no excuses - and no claims that existing legislation does not give you the power you need. Under existing legislation you have a statutory duty to ensure provision of EFFECTIVE education for all children. You will not, let me assure you, find us wanting in supporting you in fulfilling that duty.

Earlier this week I published the “Together towards Entitlement” report, prepared by Adeline Dinsmore, Joe Martin, Reverend Robert Herron, Pat McAleevy, Mairéad Uí Mhairtín, John Young, Tom Shaw which sets out how the Entitlement Framework can be delivered through area based planning. It is clear from that report that we have made some progress but not enough.

I want to see a change in pace, a stepping up of efforts in working towards 2013, when delivery of the Framework will be a statutory requirement.

I have also asked my Department and ESA to review the progress of every post-primary school towards delivery of the full Entitlement Framework.

My second priority is about closing the attainment gap. And it is because our current transfer procedures are so unjust, so badly distort our young people's lives, that I am committed to change.

All of our young people must have equality of access to high quality primary and post-primary provision.

That some children are sitting breakaway grammar school tests is entirely unnecessary. Academic selection is a failed system. Any education system which judges even one child to be a failure at age 11 is wrong; it is unjust and it is indefensible.

Transfer 2010 will lay the foundations of a system based on social justice, equality and excellence. We must get on with making the reforms we desperately need to close the achievement gap and raise standards.

Equally important to me, in ensuring that every young person, realises their potential, I will be bringing forward a new Early Years Strategy to ensure the right foundations are laid in early childhood and can be built on as children move through the education system.

Agus an Teist Aistrithe anois imithe, is féidir le bunscoileanna dul i ngleic leis an obair chun a chinntiú go bhforbraíonn gach duine óg bunscoileanna sa litearthacht agus san uimhearthacht.

Now that the 11+ is gone, primary schools can get on with the job of ensuring all our young children develop the basics in literacy and numeracy.

We also need schools to tackle the barriers to successful learning many children face. Hence why I have introduced a policy for supporting Newcomer Children and set up a Taskforce on Traveller Education. It is also why I have commissioned Achieving Belfast and Achieving Derry to address the particular problems of underachievement in these cities. I am also working through the North South Ministerial Council to tackle underachievement; in fact the Council is due to meet again in the next week.

A progressive and radical reform of the education system is badly needed and long overdue. All the policies I have brought forward are interconnected and part of the same jigsaw of reform – Every School a Good School, Revised Curriculum, Entitlement Framework, Transfer 2010, Irish medium Review, Special Educational Needs and Inclusion Review, Early Years Strategy, Review of Public Administration – all taken forward to promote equality within the system.

But the quality of outcomes is ultimately dictated by the quality of teaching. I want all our governors, principals and teachers to understand their responsibility for ensuring the highest possible standards for all children.

I greatly value the contribution School Boards of Governors make to education. It is a demanding yet rewarding role. We are deeply indebted to so many people who freely commit long hours throughout the year.

Creidim go mbíonn gach gobharnóir ag iarraidh difear a dhéanamh – chun a scoileanna a fheabhsú agus chun na torthaí a bhaineann na scoileanna amach a fheabhsú.

I believe that all governors want to make a difference – to improve their schools and to improve the outcomes achieved by their schools.

School Governors can do this by taking the strategic decisions needed to raise standards in their schools – and by acting as the ‘critical friend’. By asking the principal: ‘how can we improve things for our pupils?’

Governors, leaders and teachers will get the high-quality and fit-for-purpose support they need to improve performance to raise standards.

I have established a new Education Workforce Directorate in my Department, my third priority. I have done this because I believe that our entire workforce is critical succeed. We are reviewing teacher education and leadership development programmes and the School Workforce Review will go ahead shortly. I want to work closely and develop new relationships with the trade unions representing the entire workforce.

In return, all schools are expected to deliver improvement and will be held accountable for their outcomes. ESA and ETI will be charged with monitoring and, where necessary, challenging schools to succeed. In our current financial climate, the need to demonstrate effectiveness and to make better use of our existing resources is greater than ever before.

My fourth priority is ensuring that our children learn, and teachers teach, in well planned, warm and maintained school.

- I have provided additional funding directly to schools, an uplift of some £56 million on school budgets in 2009/10 compared to last year. I want to make sure school funding arrangements support policies aimed at raising standards and tackling underachievement and disadvantage. I have therefore commissioned a comprehensive review of the school funding formula and will be publishing proposals for change shortly.

In the current budget period, 2008 – 2011, I intend to invest some £718m on school and youth services and over the ten year period to 2018, total planned investment is £3.5 billion. It is essential that this enormous investment in the education estate is consistent with and supportive of the policy framework I am putting in place.

Moltar sa tuarascáil “Le Chéile i dTreo na Teidlíochta” go gcaithfimid feidhmiú an Pholasaí um Scoileanna Inbhuanaithe a luathú. Mar gheall air seo, tá athbhreithniú ar thionscadail reatha údaraithe agam lena chinntiú go bhfuil siad go léir i gcomhréir leis an gcreat beartais agus go mbeidh siad inmharthana san fhadtréimhse.

The ‘Together Towards Entitlement’ report suggests that we accelerate the implementation of the Sustainable Schools Policy. In response, I have commissioned a review of current projects to validate that all are consistent with the policy framework and will be viable and sustainable in the long term.

The sustainable schools policy looks at thresholds in a range of different circumstances. Quality is the key criterion. With academic selection ended the future must be based on popular, all-ability entry post- primary schools. Schools that build on existing excellence and focus on standards but offer a wider choice for all children.

We will also move to develop area based planning led by ESA to ensure that we put in place the right pattern of provision in the future. A pattern that puts children, their aspirations and their potential first.

I have spoken about the need to make better use of our existing resources in a difficult financial climate. Now more than ever we need to change how we manage and administer our system. This brings me to my fifth priority, transforming education administration through the establishment of ESA.

These new structures will mean the biggest changes in a generation. The creation of a unitary authority heralds an opportunity to put into practice ideas that many of you have been discussing and promoting for many years. Increased coherence and improved efficiency of services will follow.

We anticipate substantial financial savings from these reforms, savings we must start implementing immediately. And I will insist that these savings will be channelled back into front-line services. I want less spent on bureaucracy, more spent on teaching and learning.

More importantly, they will generate new ways of thinking and support the raising of standards and better opportunities for all our young people. I have made it clear to Seán Hogan, ESA Chair and Gavin Boyd the Interim Chief Executive that I expect them to set the pace, working with schools to ensure that there is a sustained focus on improving outcomes for every child. That is their number one priority.

I am grateful for the support of many, especially the outgoing chairs of Boards, who have met with me regularly to ensure a smooth transition to the new arrangements. I know that they, like me, want to see the new structures quickly functioning effectively to take forward the work that has already been started in many areas. I thank them for the leadership they have shown and that I know they will continue to show.

Finally but by no means least, I turn to the slow progress of legislation to bring ESA into being. The implementation date for ESA has been delayed several times. This has been unsettling for staff and potentially disruptive for services.

It is worth noting that the Executive committed itself to 1 January 2010 as the establishment date for ESA and I as an Executive Minister have devoted my energies and that of my Department toward implementing this Executive decision.

It is common knowledge that the Bill has not reached Consideration Stage and that we are close to the wire. I do however believe that if the political will existed, the legislators, that being the Assembly could deliver this Executive objective. I too have been anxious for certitude to relieve the uncertainty

People rightly want to know who they will be working for on 1 January. This is a reasonable expectation which I have striven to deliver.

While it is still politically possible for the legislative process to be complete for 1 January, as the Minister responsible for education, I recognise that the heightened uncertainty which could impact on front line services has to be dispelled.

I have asked my officials to finalise proposals for the interim governance arrangements in the period to then.

I believe that collectively all those interested in the education system, in the children at the heart of that system can and will ensure a smooth transition to ESA whether that be on January 1st or beyond that date.

The simple reconstitution of the Boards is not practical or desirable, many board members rightly state they have done their part, it is time for others to step forward.

To simply reconstitute the Boards for 3 months or 3 years will only cause further uncertainty for staff and would be contrary to the stated objective of the Executive.

Bainfidh mé leas as an reachtaíocht atá ann faoi láthair chun a chinntiú go bhfuil struchtúir ann a chinnteoidh reáchtáil mhín na seirbhíse oideachais do scoileanna, do sheirbhísí don óige agus don tsochaí.

I will use existing legislation to ensure structures are in place which will ensure the seamless running of our education service to schools, youth services and society.

Those politicians who have blocked the legislation must now also play their part in ensuring that the delay they have created is not used as a political football but rather a transition ran in the interests of frontline education services.

I will say more about the interim arrangements in the coming days. I am conscious that I have a duty to inform my Ministerial colleagues and fellow Assembly members of the Interim arrangements I will be putting in place.

But let me assure everyone either in or outside of this room that a smooth transition is on my agenda and it should be on yours!

The revised arrangements will be capable of accelerating the convergence process toward ESA and ensuring that we are fit for purpose to face the next financial year.

It is clear that we face significant resources constraints next year. In addition, the existing delay in ESA coming into being has meant that savings of £21m in total costs of excess bureaucracy which are already factored in to our financial plans, have yet to be achieved and we will face a huge challenge to meet these savings. If not addressed and addressed urgently this will impact on front line services. That I cannot allow to happen.

In the period ahead I will task the ESA Implementation Team to lead and co-ordinate work across the existing organisations to maintain service continuity and deliver the levels of savings required in preparation for ESA.

I know a delay will be disappointing to many here and many more across the education system.

I regret that the political process has not yet delivered what the Executive promised, but I remain determined that it will before long.

For that reason I have indicated that even without the passage of the legislation I am required to press ahead with new governance and planning processes from 1 January, to ensure that the momentum towards the Executive's commitment to ESA is not lost.

This is particularly so as we face the real challenges of tightening budgets and the hard decisions that are going to have to be made in the coming months. New Governance arrangements will therefore be rapidly developed for educational services.

Ba mhaith liom buíochas a ghabháil le chuile dhuine a bhí páirteach in obair na mBord as an tseirbhís atá tugtha acu don oideachas. Tá an buíochas sin tuillte go mór acu, agus tá oidhreacht fágtha acu atá le feiceáil trí chuile pháiste a raibh tionchar acu ar a saol.

I want to thank everyone who has worked for the Boards, every single person, for their service to education. Everyone deserves our thanks, and every one has left a legacy through each and every child whose lives they have touched.

And I look forward to a good working relationship with ESA in delivering my reform programme. Together we can create a truly world-class system that gives every child the same opportunity to succeed, regardless of socio-economic background, gender or race. Our young people deserve nothing less.