

Assembly Statement 25 November 2008

I am pleased to inform members that the reform and modernisation of our education system is moving ahead. Later today I will introduce the first of two Bills, which will bring about the most fundamental reform of our education system in over 30 years, culminating in the establishment of the Education and Skills Authority on 1 January 2010.

Mr Speaker, I would like to emphasise the fundamental purpose of these reforms. The RPA in education is not about tidying up administration, nor is it about cost-cutting. Its focus is on improving education: that vital public service that shapes and guides the development and life chances of our young people; that builds strong, cohesive communities; and that drives and fuels our economy.

I am not interested in re-arranging bureaucratic deckchairs. My aim is to have a fit for purpose system that will meet the strategic and economic challenges that we face now and in the future. These challenges include:

- i. dealing with unacceptable levels of underachievement, whilst building on our successes;
- ii. ensuring equality of access to a curriculum that will match provision to the needs of learners, and ensure that education fuels the development of our economy;

- iii. managing the transition to new post-primary transfer arrangements;
- iv. over 50,000 surplus school places with ongoing downward demographic change; and
- v. the pressing need to modernise the schools estate and our approach to planning and delivering the estate;

Central to this is the raising of standards and tackling inequalities.

There are widespread inequalities in educational attainment. The system is failing too many of our young people, and blighting communities.

We have much to be proud of in our education system, but it is not acceptable that 1 in 5 children enter post-primary education with poor literacy and numeracy, and that almost half our young people don't achieve the equivalent of 5 good GCSE passes including English and Maths.

How can we build a society that is based on equality when, after 12 years of compulsory education, almost half of our young people do not achieve a Level 2 qualification with English and Mathematics, and where there is the gap between the highest and lowest performers to which the OECD has drawn attention.

That is why I have put raising standards at the centre of the RPA.

There are particular groups of children and young people who lose out because of these inequalities.

Our working class communities, in particular, are affected. Protestant and Catholic, boys and girls.

In 2006/07 the proportion of Protestant males leaving school with less than 5 GCSEs (A*-C) was **44%** (2313) compared to **41%** (2564) of Catholic males.

The proportion of disadvantaged Protestant males leaving school with less than 5 GCSEs was **79%** (519) compared to **64%** (895) of disadvantaged Catholic males.

92% of Travellers have no GCSEs – compared with 4% of all school leavers.

In 2006/07 70% of children not entitled to Free School Meals left school with at least 5 GCSEs at A*-C yet only 38% of school leavers entitled to Free School Meals had the same level of achievement.

12% of people with a disability hold a qualification higher than an A level - compared to 26% of people who have no disability.

8.6% of minority ethnic pupils leave school with no GCSEs – compared to 3.9% of all pupils.

These stark figures indicate the need for fundamental change to tackle inequality, but they don't tell the whole story. There are other disadvantaged young people who don't always show up on

tables of figures: school-age mothers; children – especially girls - facing domestic violence and abuse; looked-after children; school-age carers; children from ethnic minorities suffering racism; and victims of all forms of bullying, including homophobic bullying.

It is all too easy for children facing those challenges to become totally disillusioned, and to fall out of education; drop out of our sight, and lose any expectation or chance of a lifestyle that most of us take for granted.

For those children, life has already given them an unequal chance. Let's ensure that our education system doesn't penalise them a second time.

I want every school to be a good school, and I want every child to have an equal opportunity. That is why I intend to establish the Education and Skills Authority with statutory duties and functions as:

- The planner of education;
- The supporter of education; and
- The challenger of education

Raising standards will be at the very core of its purpose.

The RPA is a single legislative programme. My intention is that it will be taken forward by means of two Acts, which will be intimately linked. Full implementation of both Acts will be necessary in order to achieve the objectives of the programme. Some key areas of

policy – such as area-based planning of the education estate - will span both Acts.

I have given particular consideration to the timing of implementation. I remain convinced of the importance and urgency of fundamental reform of education administration, for the reasons I have stated. However, a balance must be struck between establishing and maintaining early momentum; and the need for further development of some key policies before structural change is implemented. Therefore, I propose the following timetable for implementation:

- The first Bill will be introduced to the Assembly today, with the aim that it would be on the statute books before the 2009 summer recess.
- The second Bill would be introduced to the Assembly by June 2009, with the aim that it would be on the statute books by 1 January 2010 if possible, and no later than 1 April 2010.
- The substantive provisions of the first Act would be commenced on 1 January 2010, as would the provisions of the second Act, if complete.
- The Education and Skills Authority (ESA) would be established on 1 January 2010.

The development of these proposals has involved intensive consultation with stakeholders and the Education Committee, and I

am grateful for time taken by the Committee on this matter. Regrettably, there are a number of matters on which it was not yet possible to reach consensus with the Committee. My officials and I will work very closely with the Committee in the coming months to ensure that the complexities of this Bill are fully debated and will endeavour to resolve the issues raised by my Committee colleagues to their satisfaction.

Mr Speaker I would like to draw members attention to four particular aspects of the policy proposals that I am bring forward.

Firstly, local democratic accountability is vital for a service as important as education. The original proposal was that the ESA would have between 8 and 12 members, with no positions reserved for local elected representatives. However, I was not satisfied that the ESA would be an effective champion for education without democratic input. Therefore, I have decided that the majority of members of the ESA should be local councillors.

The objective is effective, responsive local delivery of services within a consistent policy framework. The ESA must be a single but decentralized organisation with a strong local presence and a real focus on local delivery. Local managers and delivery units will have the freedom to respond to specific local circumstances and need. They will be sensitive to and receive input from local Committees comprising, amongst others, a number of elected representatives. Provision for the establishment of such committees have already been included in the first RPA Bill.

Secondly, following the outcome of the review of the RPA for local government, I had constructive discussions with Minister Foster and NILGA on the future of youth services. However, I have heard no telling argument for the transfer of youth services to local government. I remain willing to give the matter further consideration in the future, but for now I propose to transfer the relevant functions to the ESA.

Thirdly, the Education and Skills Authority will be the employer for all staff in all grant-aided schools. The original intention was to implement this in two phases, with the first phase including controlled and Catholic maintained schools and the second phase including voluntary grammar, grant-maintained integrated, Irish-medium, and other grant-aided schools. Concerns were expressed by some stakeholders, Executive colleagues, and the Education Committee that this might result in an inequality of treatment between different school sectors.

I have given careful consideration to these concerns. I have taken on board the advantage in completing this necessary reform as early as possible. Therefore, I have decided to amend the proposals, so that the first Bill will establish the ESA as the employer for all staff in all grant-aided schools.

Fourthly I am also proposing a change to the proposals on school governance intended for inclusion in the second Bill.

My intention was that the second RPA Bill would include provisions to reform and simplify the composition of boards of governors of all

grant-aided schools. However, as an unintended consequence of that change, it would not have been possible to preserve, the current right of the Transferors' Representative Council (TRC) to nominate governors for controlled schools.

I recognise the importance of the contribution made by TRC governors for many years, and the need to ensure that their involvement continues. Therefore, I have decided not to proceed with the proposed legislative changes to school governance in the RPA legislation. The relevant legislative provisions will be retained, and the right of the Transferors to nominate school governors will remain. It is also my intention that the composition of Boards of Governors of schools will provide equality of opportunity and reflect the diversity of the communities they serve.

Transformation and convergence

In preparation for the establishment of the ESA, it will be important to press ahead with the programme of transformation and convergence of administration and support services. Effective leadership will be the key to this. The Chief Executive (designate) of the ESA has already been appointed, with a small support team. I now propose to move ahead with the process of appointing a number of key second tier officers as soon as possible, to accelerate the programme. Looking further ahead, I propose to appoint the Chairperson and the other members of the ESA as soon as possible after the first Bill completes its second stage in

the Assembly. In practice these appointments are likely to be in the Autumn of next year.

Mr Speaker, I trust that the Assembly will welcome those proposals, which will lay the foundations for the education system that our children deserve. I look forward in hearing the views of members today, and to constructive debate as I take forward the legislation.