

**Speech by Education Minister Caitriona Ruane to the  
Equality Commission Annual Conference - 12 November 2008  
(Paragraphs in Irish are immediately repeated in English)**

I would like to thank the Equality Commission for inviting me to make the closing address to their 8<sup>th</sup> Annual Conference.

I'm sorry I was not able to attend the morning session of the conference, or to be at any of the workshops. This morning I was in Cavan and had the pleasure of addressing the Joint North/South Conference on Numeracy in Primary Schools.

The aims of the Joint North/South Conference are in many ways similar to the aims of *Every child an equal child* – tackling underachievement and supporting young people to reach their full potential, and that is my focus today.

There is tremendous work is being done to promote equality by educationalists. There are often invisible barriers between educationalists as they work in different areas. Together we can deal with the problems.

We should take hope from the USA presidential election. They are very symbolic and we are not to underestimate the

importance. I note there is similar language between Equality Commission and Barack Obama with Every Child an Equal Child. Barack Obama believes that no child should be left behind which demonstrates a desire for equality for all children.

I was delighted to see that the focus of the Equality Commission was on the outcomes of the education process. While I understand the importance of inputs to the process in terms of equality. We must focus on the outcomes.

My Department is committed to tackling inequality throughout education, and we will continue to prioritise those children and young people that we know are at particular risk such as: Travellers; children from ethnic minorities; or children with additional needs or children from disadvantaged backgrounds.

Contrary to some views there is a significant challenge to be addressed, one that does not often feature in the media, nor in public or political debate. I am talking about the widespread inequalities in educational attainment. The system is failing too many of our young people, and blighting communities.

*Tá a lán rudaí inár gcóras oideachais arbh fhéidir linn  
bheith bródúil astu, ach níl sé inghlactha go dtosaíonn*

*duine as gach cúigear páistí a n-oideachas iar-bhunscoile le drochchaighdeáin litearthachta agus uimhearthachta, agus níl sé inghlactha nach bhfaigheann beagnach leath cuid dár ndaoine óga cúig phas GCSE nó a gcomhcháilíochtaí, Béarla agus Mata san áireamh.*

We have much to be proud of in our education system and we must celebrate that, 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 good GCSE results.

How can we build a society that is based on equality when there is such a gap between the highest and lowest performers that the OECD felt the need to comment?

That is why the raising of standards is at the top of my Department's priorities.

There are specific groups of children and young people who particularly experience and lose out because of these inequalities.

92% of Travellers have no GCSE's – compared with 4% of all school leavers. I have established a Taskforce on

Traveller Education, chaired by Catherine Joyce, a Traveller herself, and Dr Robbie McVeigh was established last month and just last Monday I was privileged to speak to the members of the Taskforce at their first meeting. This is a very important start.

Children learning through the medium of Irish face a number of specific challenges including a severe shortage of resources. I have launched a Review of Irish Medium education which will look at key issues such as accommodation.

Children from disadvantaged backgrounds are more likely to under-achieve at GCSE level.

After 12 years of compulsory education, almost half our young people, 12,000, do not achieve a Level 2 qualification with English or Irish and Mathematics.

This level of underachievement presents real challenges for boys. Protestant boys face a particular challenge. Underachievement is also a real concern for girls, many of whom will go on to face so many other barriers in their adult life.

Violence against women and children can also have significant impacts on educational opportunities and so create inequalities and contributes to underachievement.

There is a group being established, led by senior civil servants committed to resolving these issues on domestic violence.

Only 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 GCSE's – compared to 3.9% of all pupils.

I note what the Equality Commission has said in relation to lack of data on sexual orientation. I pledge that the Department will work alongside the Equality Commission to see how we can move forward together.

A socially disadvantaged pupil in a catholic managed 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.

It is a challenge to see how we can raise these standards.

I recognise that this is a multi-faceted issue and that schools, parents and local communities are all part of the solution.

It is not just the Equality Commission or me saying this. During a debate in the Assembly on Monday, Dawn Purvis spoke about how our current selective education system discriminates against working class unionist areas. It is a pity more politicians do not recognise and acknowledge this fact.

All of these inequalities must be challenged - disability, community background, race or sexual orientation cannot be used as justifications for denial of opportunities. We must work to reduce the impact of the barriers to achievement, and that includes tackling the poverty of aspiration that some young people have been conditioned to accept for far too long.

Different communities face different barriers and I

recognise the need for there to be targeted intervention based on objective need.

We must work with them - rather than trying to impose a single simplistic solution, and recognise that some children and young people are not only trying to get through a glass ceiling but also having to climb a glass wall to do it.

So there are many, many challenges facing us as a society and within our education system if we are to deliver equality and opportunity for all of our children.

Over the next year, my Department will be working with the Equality Commission to put together indicators to assess and measure equality within schools. I welcome the interest and input of the Equality Commission and the Human Rights Commission.

We are undertaking a series of initiatives to deliver for the most disadvantaged in our society and I want these scrutinised to ensure that they do deliver on the equality agenda.

But today I want to deal with a fundamental systemic fault

that needs to be addressed and corrected. This issue has attracted most comment and attention over the past 18 months and it is, of course, the issue of academic selection and the transfer of children from primary to Post Primary education. In my opinion this is, at its core, an issue of equality and justice.

The current system is described as academic selection. For the majority of children it is academic rejection. The current system is in reality academic apartheid.

The 11+ has failed our children. It created division and inequality. It created elites and, every year, it condemned thousands of 11 and even 10 year old children as failures. Any system that regards even one child as a failure is wrong. A system that condemns the majority of our children as failures is an outrage and cannot be justified.

International evidence underlines my concerns about the current system. The early “sorting” of pupils tends to be associated with social division and greater social differences between schools - as can the uneven social mix within oversubscribed schools.

For example, during the current school year, 95% of pupils

transferring from primary schools serving the Malone Road went to grammar school compared to 26 % for Shankill Primaries and 20% for New Lodge Primaries. Do these figures suggest every child is an equal child?

Over the past 18 months I have sought to balance the urgency of this issue with the need to listen. But there is a legitimate and growing demand for clarity.

Let me be clear then. While I am still prepared to discuss sensible proposals I intend to bring an early conclusion to these discussions. In the absence of political agreement, I will issue guidelines to all schools.

And let me be very clear. Pupils will transfer in September 2009 on the basis of the current 11+ system for the last time. The 11+ is at an end. The 11+, not the children, is a failure. It has failed and it is finished.

The system that replaces it must have the child at its centre, and it must ensure equality for all our children. I firmly believe that every one of our children can be a success given the proper encouragement and support.

Every one of our children is an individual with unique

talents and abilities. It is the task of the education system to support and encourage every child and to find that spark – to acknowledge that every child is different, yes, but that every child is also equal.

On that premise, no child is judged a failure and, most fundamentally, every child can be a success.

We are at a crossroads in education, we can continue with failed policies or we can move forward. Look at Europe, England, Scotland, Wales, they have done it and removed academic selection, why can't we?

I believe we can.

We need your voices, loud and clear and we cannot let a small minority block change. If you see what the media is doing and you don't agree with what they are saying, phone up, write letters and be part of the debate. We cannot lose this opportunity.

Go raibh maith agat.