

PRIMARY PRINCIPALS CONFERENCE – 05 JUNE 2009,  
CANAL COURT, NEWRY.

Go raibh maith agaibh as bheith ar fáil leis an cheist thábhachtach seo um Aistriú 2010 a phlé tráthnóna inniu.

I want to begin today by thanking all of you for giving up your time this afternoon to discuss the very important issue of Transfer 2010.

In convening this meeting, I was very conscious of the need to talk directly to you, the principals of primary schools, because you have been at the sharp end of the difficulties and problems created by the system of academic division at age 11 – a system which I am determined to end.

Testing children at the age of 10 or 11 for the purpose of determining admission to post-primary school is totally

wrong, particularly in circumstances where the stakes are so high. Putting young children under this sort of intense pressure when there are alternatives available is indefensible. For many children the experience is traumatic. Rather than encourage and nurture, it brands many of our children as failures – a categorisation that, as we all know, follows them through their entire lives. Branding 11 year old children as failure is immoral – it is unjust and it must be brought to an end.

The system has to change. We need a child centred education system which meets the needs of the modern world and which delivers for all our children and allows each of them to develop their individual strengths and talents. The singular focus on academic ability must be replaced by a focus on all talents and aptitudes. I intend to ensure that the needs, aspirations, well-being and rights of children are at the heart of our education system. In my

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

Secondly, the evidence clearly shows that that the old system created inequality; it served a small number very well, but failed many more. Children living in well-off areas have long been much more likely to gain admission to a grammar school than those living in more disadvantaged areas – as is illustrated by the figures in the hand –out distributed before this meeting.

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

Léiríonn na figúirí uafásacha an mhíchothromaíocht dhomain docharach agus níl me sásta glacadh leis an mhíchothromaíocht seo.

But the problem is not just one of inequality in access to grammar school places at an individual level. It is also systemic inequality amidst demographic decline. Children from disadvantaged socio-economic backgrounds are significantly over-represented in the non-selective post-primary sector where provision and educational opportunity are increasingly restricted and threatened by shrinkage and unsustainability.

I have told you previously of my determination to target resources towards redressing imbalance and inequality. I now have record levels of funding available for education services, with a resource budget of almost £1.9billion. I have commissioned a fundamental review of the funding of schools with a specific focus on the disparity between the primary and post-primary sectors and how we might better target disadvantage.

D'éist mé leis na buarthaí atá ar scoileanna, go háirithe ar bhunscoileanna, agus ar cheann de na príomhfhócais a bheidh agam i mblainna don athbhreithniú ar an bhFoirmle Cómhaoinithe, beidh fócas ar acmhainní a tharmlichtear go díreach chucu a uasmhéadú.

Bhí fiaradh ó thaobh múinteoireachta de sna bunscoileanna mar gheall ar an seanchóras, mar cuireadh gnáthcheachtanna scoile ar leathaobh ionas go ndéanfadh páistí páipéir cleachtais mar ullmhú ar theist. Thosaigh roinnt scoileanna an cleachtadh seo le Rang 5. Ach, fágadh na páistí siúd nach ndearna an theist, sin trian na bpáistí, ar lár na hullmhaithe agus mar sin, bhí baol ann go mbeadh a spéis cailte agus go dtitfeadh siad siar ó thaobh bunleibhéal litearthachta agus uimhearthachta a bhaint amach.

Thirdly, as you as primary principals know better than anyone else, the old system led to the distortion of teaching in primary schools, as normal lessons were

abandoned in order to put children through practice papers in preparation for a test. Some schools began conditioning children at P5. However, those who did not take the test – one third of all children – were left out of preparations and were, therefore, in danger of losing interest and falling behind in achieving basic levels of literacy and numeracy.

This kind of approach served neither the children nor the needs of society – we need well educated, motivated children who are equipped to make a positive contribution to society. Spending months coaching children for a test rather than providing them with a rounded and valuable educational experience has not only been a poor use of valuable teaching resources, but it also robbed children of time to develop and expand their learning experiences.

While our children were being coached for a test, others of the same age across Europe were improving their literacy and numeracy skills, learning languages and participating

in drama and sport. Our old system has put our children at a disadvantage in relation to children elsewhere.

I know that there is pressure from Grammar schools and from some parents to continue these practices but I am calling on all of you today to resist this pressure. Many of you have already made it clear that you will not be cooperating with these educationally and legally unsound tests. You have my full support and the support of my Department in doing so. You also have full legal cover.

I recently wrote to the Principals and Chairs of Boards of Governors of all primary schools to clarify the position.

The Transfer 2010 Guidance reflects the legal position that:

- (1) Primary Schools have explicit obligations within primary legislation (Articles 4-9 of the Education Order, 2006) to deliver the revised curriculum;
- (2) Primary schools are not legally required to prepare children for a post-primary school's Entrance Test and the Department strongly recommends against it.
- (3) No legislation provides primary schools with any explicit obligation to participate in any arrangements necessary to the operation of a post-primary school's Entrance Test.

There is a statutory duty to deliver the curriculum. And, apart from that legally binding duty, it is wrong, unfair and frankly arrogant that a small number of grammar school should expect to dictate teaching practice in our primary schools, and to do so in their own narrow self interest. But, crucially, you do not have to acquiesce in that approach. If you believe that the distortion of the curriculum is wrong

you can say no to the grammar schools. If you believe that testing 11 year old children is wrong, that attempting to divide them on the basis of perceived ability is wrong, that academic selection is educationally unsound – you can and you should take a stand and help to bring an end to it once and for all.

I know the approaches from grammar schools and pressure from parents have caused considerable concern in primary schools resulting in the extraordinary conference of primary school principals organised by the teaching unions in Belfast on 28 May 2009. The large numbers attending that conference clearly signalled the level of concern across the sector, and I did take note of the messages coming across and hope others did likewise.

The clearest message from that conference was the plea for clarity and more explicit guidance on how to respond to

the actions of the grammar schools which are attempting to block much needed reform and to hold the whole education system to ransom.

I want to acknowledge the leadership of the unions in organising that conference. In response to the call for guidance in dealing with the situation created by the grammar schools' determination to press ahead with entrance tests, I want to return to my opening remarks – we are going to create a system that is child-centred and which provides every child with an equal opportunity to reach their full potential. The old system deprived children of a fulfilling and quality educational experience in their final years in primary school because the focus was on preparing for a test. That was wrong.

You as primary school principals need no reminding of your duty to look after the interests of all the children in your care, to ensure they get the most out of their time in

your schools, and they get the best educational experience you can provide.

My message to all primary schools is clear – you should not feel pressured. You have no obligation in respect of any selective unregulated admissions process. You can, collectively or individually, say no to those who are attempting to put in place a new 11plus. You do not have to collude in the legally fraught attempt to reconstruct a failed system.

You as the leaders within your sector have a decision to make. You cannot be compelled to do something you consider to be wrong for your children.

Together we can improve the opportunities for all children regardless of their background. We have 1238 schools in our system.

We cannot allow a selfish minority dictate the pace of change. The non-selective post-primary schools have organised and spoken clearly. The teaching unions are as one. The Catholic Trustees are determined that selection will end in their sector. I, as Education Minister and the department are resolved to bringing it to an end. We do not have to wait three years. The grammar schools cannot succeed in the face of our united determination. I am calling on you today to stand up for what you believe in and to join with us in bringing these grammar schools to the realisation that their proposed tests cannot and will not work.

I appreciate that this puts you in a difficult position. I appreciate that a political agreement and legislation would have made for a clearer position and would not have placed you in the front line. I sought agreement earnestly, but despite my best efforts and significant concessions it was not possible.

So we are all now faced with a clear choice. Are we for change or are we prepared to acquiesce in the perpetuation of inequality and injustice.

There should be no participation or co-operation with the injustice of academic division. I call on each and every one of you here today to play your part in the ending of a system which creates inequality and stigmatises thousands of our children every year. I want to urge you to play your part in building a new system of education which gives every child an equal opportunity, which encourages and supports each and every child and allows them to excel in their own unique abilities and talents. An education system we can all be proud of helping to build. Every one of us can be a powerful force for change and good but only if we choose to be. And we need to do it with truth and courage.

We were here in this hotel a few weeks ago with many courageous principals from the Newry and Mourne area and I heard those brave voices of truth, courage and leadership and they inspired me. You are the leaders in your schools, you are the educationalists. Dream of a time when primary schools are no longer considered by some a stepping stone to second level. Dream of a time when no longer will envelopes come in the door while a white faced 11 year old awaits results for an exam he/she should never had to do in the first place to get an education they are entitled to by right. Let's shift the paradigm. Let's move the bricks and mortar out of the centre and put the child at the centre. When the child is at the centre it all becomes crystal clear.