

ASSEMBLY MOTION POST-PRIMARY TRANSFER

10 NOVEMBER 2008

Speech from Education Minister Caitríona Ruane

(Please note paragraphs in Irish are immediately repeated in English)

Since becoming Minister I, and my department as a whole, have, as everyone would expect, devoted enormous time and effort to this issue and to constructing a new transfer system which has, at its centre the child – and the rights, the welfare and, crucially, the educational success of all of our children.

The 11 plus has failed many of our children. It has created division and inequality. It created elites and, disgracefully, it condemned as failures the majority of our children. Any system that inherently condemns even one child as a failure is wrong. A system that condemns the majority of our children as failures at age 10 and 11 is an outrage and cannot be sustained or credibly defended.

Over the past 18 months I have sought to balance the urgency of this issue with the need to listen. I want to achieve consensus. I want to move forward by agreement. The St Andrews Agreement required that new laws on post-primary admissions be agreed.

If they were not agreed then there would be no new laws when the old laws lapsed. This has led many in favour of academic selection to characterise St Andrews as “saving academic selection”.

This demonstrates a mindset refusing to recognise the challenge handed to us all at St Andrews: to reach a consensus on this issue. St. Andrew's means that the absence of consensus and agreement also means the absence of admissions law and, ultimately, an absence of regulation.

Tá sár-iarrachtaí déanta agamsa agus ag mo Roinn chun teacht ar chomhaontú agus chun creatlach láidir reachtach a bhaint amach do phróiseas ríthábhachtach na n-iontrálacha scoile, próiseas a bhíonn go mór faoi bhrú. Ón 8 Bealtaine, 2007 – is é sin dáta athbhunaithe na n-institiúidí – go dtí an díospóireacht seo inniu, bhí 49 cruinniú agam, ag mo chomhairleoir speisialta nó ag oifigigh sa Roinn Oideachais leis an réimse iomlán páirtithe leasmhara oideachais.

My department and I have made enormous efforts to reach agreement and arrive at a robust legislative framework for the vital and pressured process of school admissions. From 8 May, 2007 - the date of restoration of the institutions - to this debate today, I, my special adviser or DE officials have conducted 100s of meetings with the full range of educational stakeholders.

I have listened carefully and I believe that the proposals that I have brought forward show this. They contain elements with which I and my party fundamentally disagree – but which we offer in the interests of consensus.

In respect of my plans for post-primary transfer, I have appeared before the Education Committee 7 times and have provided written answers to every single one of the Education Committee's 66 questions.

This is now my 6th appearance in this Assembly on this subject. I have put two different papers to the Executive and have also made a formal legislative bid for my post-primary transfer proposals. I have written to all executive colleagues requesting individual meetings with them to discuss my proposals.

The potential for agreement, for proper and long-lasting certainty, has been vetoed because those in favour of the 11plus consider the default to be on their side. My efforts have been met by those who have a preference for the absence of law, the absence of permanent clarity and certainty.

And now I am asked, because of an uncertainty that I have striven to avoid and resolve, to tolerate and extend the status quo that has so miserably failed the majority of our children.

Tabharfaidh mé léiriú air seo. Is é an DUP an t-aon pháirtí amháin a tháinig chun tosaigh le moltaí malartacha. Is iad an dá leathanach go leith seo na haon moltaí malartacha a chuir mo chomhghleacaithe sa rialtas faoi mo bhráid.

Let me illustrate. The only party that has come forward with alternative proposals is the DUP. These, two and a half pages, are the only alternative proposals that have been put to me by my colleagues in government.

I shall describe them to you so that you can judge firstly just how consensual these are and, secondly, how they would address the inequalities and structural absurdities of the current arrangements.

The DUP have proposed that the law should allow schools to opt-in to academic selection if they so wish.

They also propose that government should provide these schools with an assessment mechanism to use if they make this choice.

This is exactly what we have now. Nothing forces grammar schools to use academic admissions criteria – they opt for it – and then the Department provides a test. In other words, the only other proposal is in effect the current, failed, system.

How will this proposal address the fact that academic selection is acting as social selection? How will this proposal address the challenges and inequalities that demographic decline is bringing to bear on our system? And how is this proposal an attempt to face up to the challenge of St Andrews and reach a political agreement?

No one in this Assembly has put forward any alternative proposals. Yes we have had many Assembly debates, I have been asked many Assembly questions and we have read endless press releases, but the same effort has been singularly absent when it comes to addressing the real issues.

Let me put this in more simple terms. The proposers of this motion simply have not done their homework.

I believe that the absence of any credible alternative proposals demonstrates that many of my colleagues in government have never had an intention of reaching agreement.

I have, against my own principles and beliefs and against those of my party, offered three years of partial academic selection. I have offered a system that will match children to provision at 14 and will preserve our excellent academic traditions.

The offer has been derided, but has it, in any sense, been matched?

Déanfaidh mé athrá ar chuid de na focail sin a dúirt mé agus mé ag plé na ceiste seo "...traidisiúin acadúla den scoth." Deirimse na focail sin arís eile le béim a chur ar mo thacaíocht don tsármhaitheas acadúil inár scoileanna. Tá mé ag iarraidh go mbeidh ár scoileanna uilig thar barr, bíodh sin maidir le cúrsaí acadúla nó eile, agus go dtabharfaidh siad na deiseanna is oiriúnaí dár bpáistí agus dár ndaoine óga ó thaobh a riachtanas agus a gcumais de.

Let me just repeat some of the words I have used in talking about this issue "...excellent academic traditions." I repeat those words to highlight my support for academic excellence in our schools. I want all our schools to be excellent, be it in academic or other areas that give our children and young people the educational opportunities best suited to their needs and abilities.

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 identify and encourage every child, not just a minority identified by questionable academic criteria.

None of our children are failures but many of them are failed by the current 11 plus .

The failure is the 11 plus - not the children

I am told by this motion that in the absence of agreement, we should turn back to the 11plus Test and we will have an end to uncertainty. Just consider what sort of an end to uncertainty this would be? How did the 11 plus serve us in this year's admissions process? For admission into this new school year, 73% of children transferring from the primary schools of Holywood transferred to a grammar school: similar in Hillsborough (72%), Malone Rd (95%), Stranmillis (85%).

However, 37% of the children attending the primary schools of the Sandy Row area transferred to a grammar school. In Poleglass/Twinbrook it was 34%, in Rathcoole it was 22%, in the Shankill it was 26% and in New Lodge it was 20%.

Is this the certainty, the socio-economic determinism, that those proposing this motion would like me to continue? Are they really urging on me the maintenance of an admissions process that, with grim certainty, leads to the appalling statistic that whilst 1 in 4 children in our non-grammar schools are entitled to Free School Meals, the ratio in the grammar schools is 1 in 17?

The area by area situation I have outlined above is a true post-code lottery, which those on the benches opposite have endorsed and supported for too many years.

How has the 11 plus served our primary schools? Do those proposing this motion recognise that what they are urging me to continue is the certain distortion of teaching in primary schools as normal lessons are abandoned to put the children through practice papers in preparation for the test itself?

Some schools begin conditioning children from P5, with those who are not taking the test (one third of all children) left out of the preparations and therefore in danger of losing interest and falling behind in basic literacy and numeracy.

Is anseo, le linn na tréimhse dhá bhliain, go gcliseann an córas ar pháistí agus do ndaorann an córas drochthodhchaí sa scoil orthu.

It is here, during this two year period, that the system starts to fail children and condemns them to a poor future in school.

How has the 11 plus served our non-grammar schools and the children who attend them? How for instance have the 11 plus and the current process served Fermanagh?

There are 14 post-primary schools in Fermanagh. 4 of them are grammar schools, 10 are not. Pupil numbers have fallen in Fermanagh to such a degree that these 4 grammar schools now educate practically half of Fermanagh's post-primary pupils.

The 10 other schools, the non-grammar schools educate the remaining half. A quarter of the desks in the 10 non-grammar schools are empty. 20.3% of the children attending these 10 non-grammar schools are entitled to Free School

Meals and together these 10 schools educate 109 children in receipt of a statement of Special Educational Needs.

By contrast, the 4 grammar schools are full. 7.1% of their children are entitled to Free School Meals and 9 of their children are in receipt of a statement of Special Educational Needs. Thanks to the Transfer Test and the selective process, Fermanagh has a fundamentally divided post-primary system – with ten schools absorbing all of the area’s various challenges.

The same can be observed in Belfast, Derry and elsewhere. Is this divided system that the proposers of the motion would like me to continue?

Let us look at the current position: my department stands ready to process, at the first opportunity, legislation for the proposals that, after lengthy and detailed discussion, I have developed.

This opportunity can only present itself if the Executive engages with me on these proposals. Within this engagement, as I have always made clear, I am prepared to listen to any ideas that will improve these proposals and which pursue the objectives of equality, urgently needed structural reform and genuine consensus.

I think that there is much, for instance, in the joint statement issued by the four churches on November 5, 2008. I will meet the 4 church leaders tomorrow to further discuss their proposals.

It is not a question of “my way or no way”. I am keen to discuss and engage, given the opportunity, in the appropriate forum.

If agreement can be achieved then children transferring to post-primary school for the 2010/11 school year will have the option of sitting a test and grammar schools will be able to determine part of their intake by reference to these test results.

Muna dtiocfaimid ar chomhaontú polaitiúil, beidh easpa rialúcháin iontrála ann. Sa chás seo, d'fhógair roinnt scoileanna go bhfuil sé ar intinn acu leanúint le critéir acadúla iontrála, bunaithe ar a dtastálacha féin.

If we do not achieve political agreement, then there will be an absence of admissions regulations. In this scenario some schools have declared an intention to continue to apply academic admissions criteria, based on their own test.

I consider this to be an awful prospect for the system and the children it is there to serve.

In the absence of political agreement I am duty bound to inform parents pupils and teachers of the way forward. I have instructed my departmental officials to draw up admissions criteria. In the absence of agreement I will issue guidance.

To conclude – we have a collective responsibility to reach a settlement on this issue. Avoiding or postponing this, as the motion demands, will not bring certainty.

This motion demands the retention of the current system the 11 plus, a flawed system that divides and segregates, which condemns the majority of our children as failures, which perpetuates and deepens inequalities. The 11 plus means for most children, academic rejection, All of us as parents and constituency representatives will be aware of the pressure under which Transfer operates.

I prefer a legislative framework. As a result of the St Andrews Agreement, such a framework can only be provided if we can all agree on such a framework.

By definition – a system of transfer we can all agree on is going to require us to stretch our respective positions, to concede some ground, to meet in the middle. I have tried to do this. I urge those who, as yet, have not tried to do this to appreciate that they need to.

I will in the absence of political agreement act. I am duty bound to do so, parents and teachers and politicians have clearly stated that they require asap admissions criteria for 2010, in the absence of political agreement I will provide such criteria./

Then we may get fair and long-lasting certainty.