

STATEMENT FOR THE EDUCATION COMMITTEE

Once again, I welcome the opportunity to address the Education Committee. You have asked me a range of questions and I have passed to the Clerk a written response to these. Some of what I will say will rehearse this response.

As previously indicated I will also seek to explore with you some of the questions being covered in my discussions with stakeholders, discussions which are focused on the immediate question of transfer and admissions criteria for 2010, and the nature of the system in the long term.

Déarfadh mé arís chomh tábhachtach agus atá sé teacht ar chomhaontú. Agus muid ag obair le chéile, tá mé cinnte go dtig linn an bealach chun tosaigh is fearr a fháil le riar ar riachtanais iomlán dár gcuid páistí; beidh sé bunaithe ar chomh-fhís agus beidh torthaí oideachais den scoth agus comhionannas deiseanna oideachais do gach páiste mar chuid lárnach de.

I want to reiterate the importance of building a consensus. By working together I am confident that we can find the best way forward to meet the needs of all our children, based on a shared vision that places high quality educational outcomes and equality of educational opportunities for each and every child at its epicentre.

So – first to the broad themes of your questions to me, beginning with the transfer and admissions criteria that will operate in 2010, for all our schools. These are the immediate questions that we are discussing with the main educational stakeholders alongside the longer-term questions. These discussions are ongoing at many different levels and progress has been made.

The discussions revolve around key questions – questions I would also like the Committee to consider:

- How can we have an inclusive transfer process based on shared information about the applicant?
- How can we ensure the engagement of all the relevant players?
- How can we ensure the use of shared information in a way which helps parents but does not become the determinant of admission?
- How do we match children to the appropriate method of teaching?
- How do we ensure every child has a fair chance?

In cases of oversubscription we will use clearly defined admissions criteria. This will be done in regulations, after statutory consultation. Previous consultation suggested broad consensus around the following:

- family criteria to include sibling criteria and first/eldest child criteria;
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- community criteria to include named/feeder primary criteria; and

- geographical criteria to include parish and catchment area criteria.

Whatever exactly the permitted criteria will be there will always be a need for them to be intelligently and carefully regulated and monitored.

You have also asked me about my intention to introduce greater flexibility and agility into our school structures – particularly so that we can deliver expanded post-14 provision and choice to young people.

From 2013, we have proposed a process of election at 14. I envisage this will be well managed and structured. Equally as important this process will be inclusive and fair. The young person, in conjunction with parents, school teachers and careers professionals will elect which educational pathway they choose to follow. This is already happening in the majority of our post-primary schools. The young person's post-14 educational pathway may be academic, vocational, or a combination of both. For some, this may involve staying at the same school. Others may move to a different school to allow them to specialise in particular subjects. Schools may also collaborate to offer a wider range of subjects.

Introducing flexibility throughout a child's education is the key. Area-based planning and school collaboration can ensure that the ability of an area to offer a range of pathways is related to and responsive to demand. I have been asked many times about postcode selection – most shamefully by those who suddenly appeal to an equality agenda to protect a transparently unequal system: they know as well as I do that a child on free school meals has less than half the chance of admission to a grammar school enjoyed by all other children.

Only when a range of educational pathways can be matched to the needs of individuals can we guarantee equality in our system. I am confident we will successfully match children to the right post-primary provision. We will do this through effectively managing the current spare capacity in the system and working with post-primary schools in all sectors to ensure this happens. Indeed, I set out in my statement of 4 December some schools may require additional time and support to adjust. Once again I wish to reiterate that we are prepared to support that transition.

Area-based planning is at the heart of my proposals. I intend to make a statement in February which will set out how my Department will secure an overview of any potential restructuring within the area-based planning process. This will include Terms of Reference for taking this approach forward. I will engage with you on this before I make this statement. What I can add to this is that some local areas and sectors are already engaged in area-based planning, this is often prompted by demographic change and a desire to provide a broader range of choices.

My discussions with stakeholders also include questions about how we can retain school distinctiveness and diversity?

- Can this be done within the concepts of collaboration and a learning community?
- How can these models offer us the prospect of retaining what is best in our system while catering for the diverse educational needs of our children be they academic, vocational or a combination of both?

If, say, an area's children are largely served by four schools, two of which are currently selective at 11, what are the options?

- If applicants, parents and schools can agree the best post-14 educational route, why would it not work for 1 or 2 of these 4 schools to offer mainly academic education from 14, alongside two other institutions offering mainly professional and technical post-14 provision?
- Why could either or both of these mainly academic institutions not be 14-19 institutions defined largely by their academic provision?
- Alternatively, why could they not be 11-19 institutions offering at 14 the clear academic pathway for young people in their area? Why would government make this decision for them?

Oversubscription of an individual institution at either 11 or 14 is the point that is often raised here – but let us look at this on a broader canvas. The North's over-provision is such that nearly all local areas in the North have too many school places.

Sa chiall is leithne, ní féidir le grúpaí áitiúla scoileanna a bheith ró-shuibscríofa. Má théann scoil ró-shuibscríofa i bpáirtíocht le scoil fo-shuibscríofa, cad chuige nach dtig linn dóigh a fháil le cumas an dá scoil le freagairt ar ráchairt áitiúil a fhorbairt? Tá ceisteanna ar an rialtas faoi conas rollaí scoile a shainmhíniú agus dolúbthacht cumais sa chóras.

In a wider setting, local groups of schools cannot currently be oversubscribed. If one oversubscribed school is partnered with an undersubscribed school, why can we not find a way to realise the clear potential the two schools have to respond to the local demand? This is where there are questions for government about how we currently define school numbers and capacity inflexibility in our system.

These are the issues that I am currently discussing with stakeholders, discussions which are moving forward to a mature, practical and broad consensus on building an education system fit for the 21st century and laying down a solid foundation, that will ensure educational excellence and equality of educational opportunity.

Some opposed to have change have argued that this process will involve massive restructuring and huge costs. I do not accept this: after 10 years of dramatically falling pupil numbers we have 50,000 empty school desks. This number is expected to climb to over 80,000 in coming years. Structural reform is unavoidable - the Independent Review of George Bain is clear on this. Far from a question of unnecessary structural change, it is a matter of embracing the massive potential which this opportunity offers us to modernise our service provision and education system.

This Committee has rightly pointed out to me that it has an important role in the formulation of education policy. So I am eager to hear this Committee's contribution. If the Committee can reach consensus on these issues I will gladly take their thoughts on board.

If we do not reach a consensus and put in place admissions criteria regulations for transfer 2010 then that transfer will be unregulated. I have heard that this might find favour in some political circles. In this event, some schools have declared an intention to develop and operate an independent Common Entrance Examination.

I think it is important now to be clear about what kind of prospect this is. The current Transfer Tests are delivered by the Council for Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment (CCEA) an independent body of formidable expertise and experience. The Transfer Tests are delivered by this body because they need to be: these tests are a highly pressured and much-challenged mechanism. In the face of approximately 1100 appeals for re-marking each year, they have to be transparently accurate and robust. They have to be complemented by a Special Circumstances Procedure for those (for instance with dyslexia or dyspraxia) whose abilities would not be accurately assessed by two one-hour tests (approximately 1100 each year).

The Transfer Tests are currently perceived to be the single most important decision-maker in a child's educational progression. It goes without saying that they are contentious and disliked for this reason. But it is also for this reason that, whilst government is responsible for it, government asks a dedicated, expert, independent, professional body to ensure that every aspect of its delivery is as watertight as it can be.

This is the function a small number of schools are considering taking onto themselves. It is why an unregulated system should not be welcomed by any party in this Assembly. It is a prospect fraught with administrative and litigious perils.

It is important that all of us consider unregulation and the independent Common Entrance Examination a non-prospect. All of us need to sit down and engage with people with whom we do not necessarily agree and this is what I am doing. I find that when you do this the dialogue becomes practical

and mature and allows for much more common ground than is all too often precluded by a polarised public debate.

The debate has moved on, no-one is now arguing for retaining an antiquated system designed in 1947 around academic selection. Instead I am now hearing a genuine debate about transforming our education system into a dynamic educational model that reflects the world we live in and equips our children with the qualifications and skills they need for the 21st Century and that is all our children, not just the selected few. I am now hearing a debate that reflects the fact that academic selection is not only unjust – it is unnecessary.

Ní raibh riamh modh de roghnú acadúil ann a raibh gean air. Fiú iad sin a chosnaíonn roghnú acadúil go dúthrachtach, déarfainn nach próiseas iontrálacha atá siad a chosaint ach cineál scoile — scoil den scoth ag a bhfuil caighdeán arda agus a thairgeann an todhchaí is gile do pháistí. Cosnaím sin fosta. Thig linn sin a dhéanamh trí bhuntáistí an chórais a choinneáil agus a fheabhsú agus trí chosáin a fhorbairt a riarann ar thallana, chumais agus ar mhianta ár bpáistí. Is é an dúshlán atá romhainn córas comhordaithe a fhorbairt.

There has never been a popular method of academic selection. Even those who passionately defend academic selection are, I suggest, defending not an admissions process but a type of school – an excellent school with high standards offering children the brightest future. I defend that as well. We can do this by retaining and improving what is best in the system and by developing new pathways suited to the talents, abilities and aspirations of all our children. Our challenge is to develop a joined-up system.

We have a broad consensus amongst educationalists on the importance of 14 as a key educational decision point. We have a broad educational consensus and authoritative independent advice (Costello Review, Bain Review) on the need to deliver to young people the Entitlement Framework and expand educational choice from 14 onwards.

And then there is demography: demography is increasingly making academic selection an irrelevant admissions practice and the root of systemic decay. The grammar system was designed for 30% of children. In 2006, our 69 grammar schools admitted 42% of transferring children. On current projection this proportion will rise quickly. Meanwhile, in 2006 our 159 non-grammars took 58% of transferring children. 144 of them were undersubscribed and in 59 of these schools this was to the extent that 1 in 4 places were empty. Non-grammar schools face un-sustainability and decay and many grammar schools are no longer grammar schools in the former sense of the term: Only 7 out of our 69 grammar schools exclusively admitted children with grades A and B1.

This cannot be right. I am determined to ensure that my Department, in partnership with all educationalists, will ensure that every school is a good school that is sustainable and has a clear focus on high standards. It is simply

staggering that, last year, 12000 children, almost half of children in the North, left school without English and Maths GCSE Grade A*-C. That is why I have brought forward my revised school improvement policy, "Every School a Good School".

You have submitted some questions; I have given you my answers. I also have put some questions to you and I look forward to your response. But let no-one here be in any doubt of my determination to drive forward the process of managed change to provide a modern, dynamic, flexible, system that is fit for purpose in today's society, with equality for all our children at it's core.