

A Shared Future for Education and Skills

Peter Hain

Introduction

Our young people are being taught better, educated to a higher standard than ever before - and achieving better results as a consequence. This is excellent news for Northern Ireland's future - and we don't thank our teachers enough. Headteachers for their leadership and teachers for their dedication and passion, not just for their work but for the futures of the young people we entrust to them. So I thank them all today on behalf of the government.

Education has been the government's number one priority since 1997 and I have made education and the future of our young people my own personal priority since taking up this job twenty one months ago. Educational opportunity is the greatest gift we can offer our children and if we fail to provide it to even one young person then it is a tragedy likely to blight their whole lives.

The dedication of teachers is critical – but schools rely on extra investment to enable them to deliver. That's why we've increased the overall education budget by over 60 per cent since 1997 to a massive £2.1 billion next year – more than 22 per cent of the entire Northern Ireland budget. Direct funding for schools will increase to over £1 billion and capital investment to £400 million, because good teaching and good schools rely on and deserve good buildings. And in the coming days, Maria Eagle will be announcing increased spending allocations for schools for next year.

This combination of investment, combined with the dedication of staff, is achieving fantastic results – in fact the best ever. More pupils leaving primary school this year can read and write properly than in 1997. More children can do basic mathematics.

In 1997 67 per cent achieved the expected level in Key Stage 2 Assessments in English and 72 per cent in Maths. The latest figures are up to 77 per cent and 79 per cent. And in GCSEs and A-Levels, the results also speak for themselves – in 1997, 55 per cent of pupils in year 12 achieved 5 or more GCSEs at grades A*-C – now 61 per cent do. In 1997 92 per cent achieved 2 or more grades at A-E at A Level - now 97 per cent do.

So, why is reform still so necessary?

Because notwithstanding that success, and the commitment of those working in the education system, our standards of education are not high enough – with excellence still limited to some, but not all, pupils.

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Although many of our young people achieve at the highest level, far too many get left behind.

3 per cent of pupils achieve no GCSE passes and 11 per cent achieve less than 5 basic GCSEs. The most disadvantaged are only around half as likely to achieve 5 good GCSEs as the least disadvantaged and are 4 times more likely to have no qualifications.

And this has knock on effects throughout people's lives – and contributes to the dramatically higher levels of economic inactivity in Northern Ireland, and the poverty that flows from the lack of skills and work. The figures speak for themselves. Economic inactivity amongst adults is at 27.5 per cent compared to the UK average of 21 per cent. 22 per cent of the working age population has no qualifications compared with 13 per cent for the UK. And 17 per cent of the working age population has a degree compared to 19 per cent for the UK.

Our task is to make the changes necessary to ensure that no young person - whether their skills strength is academic or vocational – that no young person leaves school without core skills in literacy, numeracy as well as ICT and strong communication, inter-personal and leadership skills.

The dedication of staff is critical to this. The investment from government is critical to this. But so too are the reforms we are taking through. And today I want to say a little on the reforms we've taken through in the past few months and why they matter so much, and where I see the priorities for reform in the months to come – reforms I hope will now be taken forward by a returning devolved government.

A year of reform

I've tried to do several things in the past few months:

First, nothing can be done without investment, so I have ensured a further **driving up of the education budget**, while insisting on good financial management from those to whom we give the responsibility for spending taxpayers money. And I've insisted we join the rest of the UK in **paying money direct to school Heads**, with no strings attached, because I believe Heads know best what the priorities for their pupils should be. And I've created **a new Children and Young People Fund** – now standing at over £100million over this year and next – all new money to fund areas of provision where we have in the past allowed spending to fall behind – including £15million direct to the voluntary and community sector.

And to ensure this money reaches the projects that need it most, I appointed, for the first time, **a Minister for Children and Young People**, backed up by a unique high level Ministerial Committee to ensure that the needs and rights of children and young people are taken into account when decisions are taken across government.

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Second, because all the evidence demonstrates that the early years of a child's life matter most in terms of the impact on their later life, I have insisted on a new focus on those crucial years between 0 – 7. Central to this has been a decision to **unify all our early years provision**, such as childcare, Sure Start and Children's Centres, within a single government department for the first time: the Department of Education. So we can offer a more unified and coherent service to parents, with a simplified funding system for parents and providers. And we've boosted funding and announced new Sure Start projects and new Children's Centres.

And critical to this has been my decision to **introduce the concept of 'extended schools'** to Northern Ireland, with a large budget – again, paid direct to Heads, to turn our schools into real centres of their communities, open from early morning to late evening, helping parents who have to work long hours with childcare and providing greater opportunities for pupils.

Third, because the administration of our education system was – frankly - byzantine, inefficient and overly bureaucratic, I decided to announce the end to the Education and Library Boards and the other education bodies and their replacement by **a new Northern Ireland-wide Education and Skills Authority**, which – led by new Chief Executive Gavin Boyd - will also take responsibility for delivery of large parts of the work of the two education departments.

And bring together, for the first time, the planning of the different parts of the post primary education system: schools and FE: education and skills.

Fourth, I have taken through the legislation necessary to **implement the new curriculum**, so that every young person has the same wide range of opportunities for study regardless of the post primary school to which they go; and **legislated to end the 11+, and replaced it with the pupil profile** – ensuring pupil and parental choice based on the best interests of every young person. I know this was controversial. And I know that the way this issue became wrapped up in the wider political talks was unsettling for teachers, parents and pupils alike – and I regret how this issue became a focus of political wrangling. But no matter the comings and goings of the past months, we can all be clear on this: there is now agreement that the 11+ belongs to a different age and is not – to coin a phrase in currency – 'fit for purpose'.

My view is that it is best replaced by informed parental and pupil choice – but that will be a matter for local politicians if devolution is restored: they must rise to the challenge of putting pupils before dogma on this issue.

Fifth, because I want to see every school a good school; and every school with an ethos of excellence and achievement, I have **championed the concept of Specialist Schools to Northern Ireland** and the first 12 schools have now been through the rigorous process of accreditation, and the extra funding this triggers. These schools, on top of the full range of the existing curriculum, also take on a specialism, giving the school a focus that drives up standards across the board; and unlike in England we've chosen not to allow selection by aptitude.

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And because I am passionate that vocational education – and the skills we need for the future – are vital to our economic need and the opportunities we must offer our young people, I have made **a wider new commitment to skills and science with a new £35 million Skills and Science Fund**. Across two years, this is funding a range of new initiatives such as the new Pre-Apprenticeship Programme offering alternative educational opportunities to those young people who have disengaged with the traditional school curriculum and need engaging in schooling to get them to 16 when they can begin an apprenticeship.

And, finally, because we believe that no child should be left behind, we have begun a review of **Special Educational Needs** and the outcome of that must be implemented in full and without delay.

All these changes, reforms and initiatives – taken together – are the biggest revolution in education provision that Northern Ireland has seen.

The challenge that remains

But still they leave serious and fundamental problems. And even if – as I hope – we achieve the end of direct rule, it is vital that local politicians retain the focus and determination on reform.

I have spent much of my period as Secretary of State talking about the threats, and opportunities, of globalisation. You're probably tired of me talking about China and India. But it is only because I am so convinced of the incredible changes taking place there and the impact those changes will have here at home.

If we fail to change, we risk losing the economic success and prosperity we now take for granted.

China and India are growing at 10 per cent and 9 per cent a year respectively. China is producing something like 2.8 million new graduates this year, two-thirds of them in science, IT and technology; and India has the largest number of software engineers and IT specialists in the world.

Yet engineers making cars, PC's and other manufacturing products are working for 60p an hour. If we are not to be part of a race to the bottom – and we cannot, should not and will not be – then we must compete on the basis of being the best: with Northern Ireland an ever more attractive location for high value-added businesses which demand well-educated and highly skilled people. And not just some of our young people becoming well educated and highly skilled, but all of them.

How reform can meet the challenge

So, a huge challenge faces us. But, if Northern Ireland is to maximise the skills, the talent and the commitment to rise to this challenge and be truly world class, it will take a further stage of difficult reform to our education system. However painful some might find it, it cannot be ducked.

That is why a year ago I asked Sir George Bain to carry out an **independent Strategic Review of Northern Ireland's education system**, and particularly look at the wasteful additional costs that come, economic and social; from a segregated system – and what innovative ways are possible to achieve a Shared Future in education which would deliver much higher standards of skills. And thanks to the work of Sir George Bain we now have a blueprint, a roadmap to excellence in education in Northern Ireland, a route through the choppy waters that globalisation will cause and a chance to ensure decent educational opportunities not just for some but for all.

Let me take this opportunity to thank Sir George for producing such a substantial piece of work to an incredibly tight deadline. Education Minister Maria Eagle has already given broad acceptance to the report's recommendations on behalf of the government and I today not only reiterate that acceptance, but pledge to immediately begin the task of implementing the recommendations in full. **I urge the returning Northern Ireland Executive to complete that work.**

When I announced the Review, I said I wanted to see quality improvement at the heart of every school. I urged greater co-operation between schools, and between schools and colleges. I wanted to see more efficient use made of the massive investment we are making. And, above all, I wanted all young people - not just the most able - to benefit from the reforms we are taking forward.

And I asked for the reforms we are introducing to be judged on common-sense principles - not dogma, prejudice or educational theories, traditional or modern.

The main problem, as I saw it, was the lack of equality of access to the curriculum. Opportunities at age 14 and 16 still vary greatly – from less than 10 subjects to around 30. It is now time we ensured that all pupils, irrespective of the school they attend, have access to a wide range of academic and vocational courses. We also need to ensure that the curriculum we offer is relevant – not just to young people but to the wider economic and social context in which they will be living and working as adults.

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The blunt reality is that it is simply not going to be possible to offer the full range of opportunities in a system of education that does not have sharing at its heart. Not out of some dogma or attack on traditional ethos or religion and certainly not on any particular religion.

I deeply respect the different ethos in schools, and the care that trustees, Boards of Governors and others have taken in nurturing these schools. But we have to recognise that a large number of different types of school in Northern Ireland equals a very large number of small schools below the size that could realistically provide the full range of subjects in the new curriculum.

There are currently over 50,000 empty desks in the system – this means not only poor curriculum provision in many schools but budgets spread too thinly across too many schools and colleges. So the division of schools into a number of sectors in Northern Ireland brings a cost, and requires us together to find innovative ways of finding solutions.

That is why the starting point for my decision to commission a Strategic Review of Education was the need to look at innovative ways of schooling - sharing across and between sectors - learning from examples elsewhere so that we achieve higher standards, better facilities and a better use of resources.

As well as ensuring a higher quality education, this can also play a powerful and positive role in creating a more confident society, helping to make it sustainable and vibrant, with greater sharing between our communities.

I am greatly encouraged by the commitment of so many across education to share in this journey. For example the Northern Bishops in their publication “Building Peace: Shaping the Future” have given a courageous lead and it is important that we develop this dialogue.

The Strategic Review of Education – the reforms to come

The Strategic Review of Education urges us to have the courage to push beyond the boundaries set by the separation of the past and grasp the opportunity together to build a new, shared future based on mutual respect and understanding.

The 61 recommendations – all of which we accept – taken together offer a strategy for how best to use our resources more wisely to maximise their contribution towards delivering a world class education while remaining focussed on meeting the educational needs of our young people.

By committing fully to implement these recommendations - and backing this commitment with action - we can begin this vital process of change. It will take time to realise the full benefits of change.

But we can take the first steps immediately. **Today I want to announce the first steps that the Government is taking now to see this vision realised.**

First, we must immediately move to Area-based Planning of the schools estate. Strong, clear and coherent planning is crucial and I want to see the

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new Education and Skills Authority play a central role, even while in Shadow form, in drawing up proposals for area plans for each of the seven coterminous new strategic local authorities. In the short term the Department of Education will need to work with the education sector in progressing the area-based approach.

The current planning of education misses opportunities for the different types of schools to co-operate together more effectively and therefore for children and communities to learn together; for providing new facilities where currently that could not be justified on economic grounds; for providing enhanced facilities at schools to which, previously, they would not be entitled.

And this is not just about sharing between schools, but between schools and FE. If young people are to benefit fully from the new agenda for 14-19, with access to a range of academic and vocational courses as part of a new entitlement framework, then it is critical that the further education and schools sectors need to work together on provision for the local area.

We will therefore immediately begin working to draw up and publish these new area plans.

Second, we will ensure that all schools are sustainable. The Review highlighted the benefit of having strong schools which are educationally and financially viable for the long term.

It is in the interests of children; it is in the interests of teachers; and it is in the interests of the entire community. The Review recommended new minimum threshold enrolments for primary and post-primary schools and for sixth forms, below which the provision needs to be reviewed. The thresholds are 140 and 105 for urban and rural primaries respectively; 500 for Years 8 to 12 in post-primaries; and 100 for sixth forms.

The educational arguments for having larger schools are compelling and we need to make changes that are crucial for the future development of a world-class education estate.

Maria Eagle has reassured schools that the changes will be planned carefully and sensitively, with the educational interests of pupils paramount. I fully endorse this assurance. We will look at each case carefully and weigh up the educational needs of particular communities.

We therefore today are issuing a policy paper for consultation, incorporating the recommended minimum enrolments from the report.

Third, we will ensure that our capital investment programme meets these new challenges. It is important that investment in the estate supports well-developed area plans which reflect local needs. I have already agreed that no new capital projects will be announced unless they are compatible with area-based planning and projects already underway will need to be reviewed so that we are sure that they will meet the requirements of the future.

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The priority in reviewing these projects will be to ensure that they are consistent with the recommendations of the Bain Review. It is essential for our school building programme.

We will therefore complete this work in the coming months so we can achieve the greater potential benefits to be realised from a different approach.

Fourth, we will review the way individual schools are funded. As I've made clear, funding for Education in Northern Ireland is at unprecedented levels with current expenditure set to reach a massive £1.7 billion in 2007/08 and with some £3 billion of investment in school buildings over the next decade under the Investment Strategy for Northern Ireland. It is the responsibility of all of us to ensure that this funding is used in a way that maximises its value for all children in Northern Ireland and creates a world class school system. We want to make sure that the funding provided for education here reflects and is responsive to the changing nature of school provision in an environment where sharing and collaboration will increasingly be the norm.

We will therefore review the factors that make up the LMS common funding formula to make sure that they reflect and are responsive to the main costs faced by schools. I want to see a greater level of delegation to schools, giving real power to school leaders. We will look at how best to do this.

Fifth, and finally, we will respond positively and practically to the recommendations on sharing. Indeed, this is critical to the delivery of the other four reforms. In his Foreword, Sir George sets out the "social case" for rationalisation as contributing to *"societal well-being by promoting a culture of tolerance, mutual understanding, and inter-relationship through significant, purposeful and regular engagement and interaction in learning"*.

I agree – and remain convinced that Northern Ireland's young people can best understand their own identities if they also understand and respect other identities and have the insight to appreciate the common bonds of all traditions.

Northern Ireland has, and will continue to have, a diverse education system which acknowledges the wishes of parents to have their children educated in settings that reflect their own individual values and beliefs.

Many schools are already working tirelessly to foster and help nurture that mutual understanding and mutual respect. Those schools that have formally become integrated have demonstrated particular and distinctive commitment to a shared future. But it would be wrong to suggest that this focus on shared values and shared future is confined to the formally integrated sector.

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Very many other schools in the catholic maintained, controlled and voluntary sectors show too that same commitment to promoting trust and mutual understanding.

Our vision for education in Northern Ireland, therefore, is one that recognises that what we need goes far beyond different structures and different labels. What this government wants to support in every school is an abiding ethos of respect and tolerance. An ethos that recognises the value in sharing with others from the richness of one's own tradition. An ethos that recognises, too, the scope to be enriched from the traditions of others. We want every young person to be confident of his or her own tradition, but at the same time to have full respect for other traditions and a clear ability to make friends and relationships across the community divisions.

Sir George Bain has called on the government to provide tangible support to schools that are actively engaged in sharing with other schools, or schools that are developing an inclusive environment in recognition of the diversity of their pupils' religious, cultural and ethnic backgrounds.

We will therefore ensure that schools in all sectors will be able to apply for a new, shared future accreditation, developed with the sectors and a kite-mark for tolerance and sharing, which will bring with it some additional financial and other support.

Shared Future Accreditation will be open to all schools in all sectors, not just the formally integrated sector. It is designed to support any school which has an interest in encouraging its pupils to reach beyond their immediate surroundings and to extend a welcome to others. That welcome may be to pupils and teachers in other school sectors.

It may be subject based or sport based on culture based. Equally it could be a means of welcoming and accommodating those from different countries and cultures who are coming to live here or a means of bridging the gap between school life and the wider community.

In doing this I recognise that that such a system needs to recognise that, in different locations, sharing will take different forms. In some areas where tensions are high, even small steps can take courage – perhaps greater courage than in other more settled areas.

My vision however is that as we redevelop each school and support its development we should expect that each school, its owners and Governors should be asked to ensure that they are doing everything they can to build this concept of sharing.

It is not, certainly not, about them giving up their important traditions and commitment to their education, but it is about exploring sharing together: sharing facilities (school halls, canteens, sports grounds and music equipment) and sharing activities to maximise subjects and strengths together.

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The recommendations set out by Sir George provide a solid foundation for shaping future policy on planning the schools estate. They will act as a catalyst to change the way Government plans and funds education. They will lead to a stronger and more coherent strategic framework for planning and developing the school estate. And they will promote greater collaboration and sharing, delivering educational and wider societal benefits to our community.

Conclusion

So, to conclude – as we look forward to the restoration of devolution on March 26 and a locally elected and accountable Education Minister, I believe we will have left the education system in Northern Ireland in a substantially better position than we inherited twenty one months ago.

Thanks to the changes we have made we now have the opportunity for universal high quality childcare provision, having supported by a network of Sure Start Children's Centres, and wrap-around 8am-6pm schooling provision helping parents to both return to, and to stay in, work.

We have a single new Education Authority to ensure a more strategic approach to education and skills, bringing together all aspects of delivery of the new post-14 curriculum entitlement.

We have increased education budgets but also a new desire to trust Heads and delegate more of the school budget to them direct, with no strings attached.

And we have left a blueprint for further reform in the form of Sir George Bain's Strategic Review of Education. And, as I am confirming today, not only do we accept all his findings, but will begin immediately to implement them in the five critical areas I have outlined.

Let me just say a final few words to the incoming Executive.

I would urge them **to complete the process of creating the Education and Skills Authority and let it get on with delivering on the area based planning, minimum pupil numbers and review of funding** that the Strategic Review recommends.

And I would urge them to stick with the decision to let the Authority coordinate both schools and FE – bringing a proper joined up approach to education and skills. I would urge them, as part of a wider shake up of government departments, to look at mirroring this new arrangement with a new Education and Skills Department, so that policy and funding decisions can be made in the overall interests of education and skills, not made in silos.

I would urge them to use the opportunity of the Comprehensive Spending Review to **continue to drive up education spending; including continuing the focus on direct payments to Heads; and to roll out the Extended Schools programme** to the whole of Northern Ireland, following the successful two years of the initiative that has benefited an initial 40 per cent of schools.

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I would urge them to look seriously at **expanding dramatically the Specialist Schools programme**. In England, 27 per cent more pupils in specialist schools achieve five good GCSEs than in other non-selective schools - an advantage that remains strong on a value added comparison. Giving a school a specialism drives up an ethos of excellence and therefore results.

I would urge them to give **as much focus to vocational education as to traditional academic education**. Specialist Schools can play a part. As will the new curriculum entitlement. And also initiatives such as the Pre-Apprenticeship Programme. But we now need to look at ways of narrowing the perception gap between academic and vocational qualifications. We need to look at how we badge qualifications to end the apartheid in status.

And we should look at recent developments across the water, not least the new Skills Academies, in which top companies in a sector help provide high quality vocational education for young people who know what they want to do and need help to do it.

I would urge them to look at whether Northern Ireland could benefit from opportunities for pupils to study towards **the International Baccalaureate as an alternative to GCSEs and A-Levels**. Not every young person wants the restrictive nature of the present narrowness of choices at 14 and particularly at 16. In England at least one sixth form college or school in every area is to offer the IB, offering students a choice between schools. We must decide if to follow that lead. Education that properly meets the needs of today's young people must offer a real choice of post 14 options including GCSEs and A-Levels but also Pre-Apprenticeships, Apprenticeships, Vocational GCSEs and the IB.

I would urge them to look across the water at the new thinking being taken forward on **individualised learning**. The new Curriculum Entitlement will help. Part of this is more support for those who have slipped behind, whether in literacy or numeracy: and this is effective where it has been supported. But should equally apply to other children, whatever their own strengths – not just to catch up, but to move ahead. And learn at their own pace. With more personalised independent careers advice, tied to their curriculum choices and pace of learning.

I would urge them to work in partnership, across different traditions and entrenched opinions, in a non dogmatic way, to **take forward the method of post primary transfer**. I would hope that we will see no more arguments about a one off 'win or lose' test, and an acceptance that any method must involve parents, pupils and teachers more fully in deciding what form of learning is in the interests of each child.

I would also urge politicians to get the debate away from how the decision is taken, and on to when it is taken. Is 11 really the sensible age at which to force young people to make decisions about their future when we have settled on 14 as the age at which they make curriculum decisions? At 14 young

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people effectively 'self-select' themselves on the basis of ability – by dropping those subjects they feel they are less good at. Surely we should look at whether that is the sensible age at which to transfer school – so each pupil can match the courses they wish to follow to the different models of schooling available. If the new Area Based Planning means a reorganisation of the schools estate, now is the perfect time to also look at making this change as well.

Finally, I would urge them to again leave behind old divisions and the use of education as part of some wider political or social or religious division – and embrace the concept of sharing.

Not for an ideological reason, nor to dilute ethos, nor as some attack on religion or long held traditions and beliefs. But because, as Sir George Bain has found, this is the only way we can drive up standards and offer every child the education – and the future life chances- that they deserve.

Northern Ireland is a great place – with the exciting prospect of a new generation who have grown up knowing peace and stability; a generation able to look to the future not the past.

It has been a privilege to have worked with my Ministerial team on improving the education system and their prospects over the period of the past twenty one months.

I hope that the local politicians will now rise to the challenge of taking office, of working together in government.

And of taking up the task of implementing the next steps of making the education system – and Northern Ireland itself - world class.

ends

Rt Hon Peter Hain MP is Secretary of State for Northern Ireland