

Statement to the Assembly

Learning to Learn: A Framework for Early Years Education and Learning

4th December 2012

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Minister for Education**

With your permission Mr Speaker, I wish to make a statement on the next steps for early years education and learning.

In July, I came to this Assembly to set out a clear way forward for early years. I explained at that time that the child and their needs must be the central focus of my revised proposals. I outlined my intention to proceed with a two strand approach. The first strand would be the development of revised proposals, with a clear focus on early education and learning.

The second strand would involve engagement with Ministerial colleagues to explore the potential for enhanced co-operation around early intervention, including early years under the Delivering Social Change Framework.

Mr Speaker, strand one is now complete and I am in a position to launch a new framework for early years education and learning entitled 'Learning to Learn' which for the first time, sets out a clear way forward for all early years education and learning services.

In developing this framework I have carefully considered the different views of a range of interest groups and have concluded that the approach I am announcing today provides a solid basis on which to move forward. I have also considered lessons learned elsewhere in early years education and have spoken with colleagues from other jurisdictions at a recent meeting of the British Irish Council to hear the experiences of other administrations across these islands.

Since the draft Early Years (0-6) Strategy was launched in 2010, aspects of early years policy such as childminding and day care have been realigned between my department and the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety. The starting position for reviewing the strategy is therefore very different.

'Learning to Learn' will be a key building block in a suite of important education policies aimed at helping children achieve their full potential through a determined focus on raising standards and narrowing the performance gap. It aims to strengthen existing policies and programmes delivering early years education and learning services to children and families.

Since 2010, when the draft strategy was launched for consultation, my department's investment in pre-school services has increased from £73m to £84m. If the foundation stage is included, this figure increases to over £200 million per annum.

I have made additional funds available to ensure the availability of pre-school places for 2013/14 in line with the Programme for Government commitment to make a pre-school place available for every child whose parents wish it. I have also amended the legislation for admissions arrangements for pre-school to remove the priority criteria for children with a July/August birthday.

Between 2006/07 and 2011/12 the number of children in funded pre-school provision increased by over 2,000.

Sure Start funding has more than doubled from £9.3m in 2006 to £23.4m in 2012/13 and the Sure Start Developmental Programme for 2-3 year olds which was first introduced in 2007 will be delivered to over 1,600 children in their penultimate pre-school year in 2012/13. This investment and focus on protecting early years budgets demonstrates my commitment to providing a range of early education and learning services for children. I am bringing forward proposals to ensure that the early years education and learning services we currently have are high quality, child focused and contribute directly to children achieving their potential.

Mr Speaker, the goals of raising standards for all and closing the performance gap, underpin the 'Learning to Learn' Framework. They are just as relevant to education services for our youngest children as they are for older learners. In fact - maybe more so. For children in the pre-school programme their education experience lasts for 38 weeks, the foundation stage for a further two years. Failure to deliver anything less than the highest quality early years educational experience short-changes these children. We know that some children come to pre-school, and start school, already lagging behind their peers cognitively, emotionally and socially. If we do not address this in the early years, these disadvantages will accumulate and can impact on a child's life-chances.

The overall policy aim for the 'Learning to Learn' Framework is therefore that all children should have opportunities to achieve their potential through high quality early learning and education experiences.

The Framework is underpinned by a set of early education and learning principles which make the needs of children the key focus of provision and will shape how we plan and deliver early years education and learning services now and in the future.

These principles are:

- Education and learning begins at birth.
- Children and their families are entitled to high quality, age appropriate early years education and learning services and opportunities.
- The rights of children and their family should be respected.
- Equality and inclusion are essential characteristics of quality, early years education and learning.
- And collaborative working between key sectors and bodies will play an important part in securing improved outcomes for young children in their early years.

Mr Speaker, the Framework details a number of specific actions to strengthen and enhance provision for children in their early years. I would now like to highlight briefly some of the key actions.

The Pre-School Education Programme should be focussed on children in the pre-school year only. This has been a long standing issue and I intend to legislate as soon as possible to define the age range for the Pre-School Education Programme. Only children in their immediate pre-school year will be eligible. However, I will retain a power to enable two year olds to be able to access services within schools and nursery schools outside of the Programme. I will also introduce legislation to prevent schools from establishing new or maintaining existing reception classes.

Sure Start represents a major investment for the Department. I intend to commission a review of the Sure Start Programme to examine the extent to which the investment is helping to secure well-being and developmental outcomes for children and families. This will include potential options for the expansion of a two year old programme and a consideration of how access to services is determined.

Early years education is an important stage of education in its own right as well as essential in helping prepare children for the transition to primary school and continuous learning. I therefore plan to extend the foundation stage curriculum to include a non-compulsory pre-school year and two compulsory primary years. This will be supported by the development of guidance and information for parents and practitioners on managing these transitions.

The thorough inspection process already in place will continue and be extended with the principles of 'Every School a Good School' applied to all DE funded early years' provision.

Children who may face barriers to learning because of disadvantage require particular support. I want to refocus the use of extended schools funding to nursery schools and nursery units to help identify and address underdeveloped social, language and communication skills. I also plan to make available additional resources to voluntary and private settings in the pre-school programme who meet similar criteria for extended schools funding.

In terms of quality, I am keen to draw on the expertise and experience which currently exists in the sector. I plan to pilot Early Years Education Support Clusters to help raise standards by making greater use of the teaching expertise in nursery schools and units along with expertise in playgroups, across other relevant providers and early years specialists.

Additional funding will be made available to support these pilots.

The role of the workforce is of fundamental importance. In my November statement, "Putting Pupils First", I highlighted the importance of effective leadership and high quality teaching. I am therefore planning to introduce a programme of continuous professional development for pre-school providers, with a focus on leadership and management.

A recurring issue has been around the enrolment numbers for nursery schools and nursery units, and staff ratios. I plan to introduce some flexibility in overall enrolment numbers up to a maximum class size of 30 in certain circumstances.

I am also going to engage directly with nursery teachers and principals around the development of pilots to test the optimum staff: pupil ratios for nursery schools and units. In the longer term, the Department will also consider options for standardised patterns of attendance in pre-school as part of a wider approach to area-based planning. Until this is done I do not plan to approve any new full-time provision.

Following evaluation, I will consider the extension of the current pilots initiated by the Review of Special Educational Needs and Inclusion. This will help improve access to specialist support and to build capacity for staff, to enable them to identify and meet the special and additional educational needs of children across pre-school settings.

I will also seek to identify further opportunities for joint working with other departments and improved co-ordination of services to families.

Mr Speaker, the key role of all parents or guardians as their child's primary educator, cannot be over-emphasised. Indeed, that is why I recently launched the campaign, 'Get involved, because education works,'" to try and engage and encourage parents from all walks of life to become more involved with their child's education. I will continue to develop this initiative and will engage directly with DHSSPS and other departments, under the Delivering Social Change Framework led by OFMDFM, to support parents to help them understand the value of education, and improve the home learning environment.

Mr Speaker, the changes I have outlined will have a significant impact on the way we manage and implement our services. Some of the proposals may involve a reallocation of early years funding, allocated outside of the schools' budget. Others will require additional investment. I have already made additional funding available to early years and I am prepared to make further funding available. In taking forward these actions I will review existing early years budgets with a view to redistributing funding from budgets which are no longer consistent with the Framework and our aims and objectives.

Mr Speaker, the Framework contains a number of specific actions. When these are implemented I believe that they will build effectively on existing good practice and enable significant further progress to be made in improving early years education provision. They will also increase the capacity for improvement and facilitate genuine engagement with parents.

The statutory sector and the voluntary, community and private sectors all have considerable expertise and a shared commitment and passion for early years services. Moving forward, I hope that all these sectors will be able to work together productively to deliver improvements for children and families.

While I welcome the debate on early years services, the context has changed with aspects of early years policy going back to DHSSPS, and the emergence of the Delivering Social Change Framework. The time has now come for positive action. I want all children and their families to benefit from quality services and today I have set out how we can achieve this.

I know that there will be considerable interest in the Learning to Learn framework and I am therefore announcing a further focussed consultation which will end on 31 January 2013. This will provide an opportunity for key stakeholders and interested parties to consider if the proposed actions require further refinement.

I am not ignoring the calls for an integrated approach to early childhood education and care for this administration, but I am not re-opening the debate about the policy aim, objectives and outcomes of this framework. We cannot hope to raise standards and narrow the gaps in performance if we remain locked in debates about strategies and take no action.

The time has come for me to set out what I plan to do to improve the early years education and learning experiences for children.

In conclusion, Mr Speaker, the publication of the 'Learning to Learn' Framework represents a new and important chapter in the development of early years education. For the first time, the Department of Education's overall policy for early years education and learning is set out clearly as well as the actions which I propose to take to strengthen and develop early years services.

I have already taken a number of important steps to develop this area and I want to see further progress.

Action is key. Children have a very short time to benefit from early years education and learning. I want every child to have the best early years experience we can deliver, and I want families to be genuinely engaged in their child's learning and development.

We should not think in terms of the child being ready for school, but of our services being ready for the child.

Thank you.