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# Reforming Education - the role of primary

Speech by the Cabinet Secretary for Education  
Kirsty Willams.

## Good morning and welcome.

It hardly seems possible that a whole year has passed since I became Cabinet Secretary for Education. Like many of you, the hope of me ever getting a solid eight hours sleep again has long gone. But is it worth it? Absolutely.

We all know the importance of education. It is our national mission to raise standards, reduce the attainment gap, and deliver an education system that is a source of national pride.

Events like today give us the perfect opportunity to share and test our thinking. So, it's not just me, or Graham or Steve talking to you about expectations – we've devised the programme today so that we share thoughts, ideas and evidence.

I don't deny there's a lot going on in Welsh education – and I know that you recognise that too. But my simple test for any policy, reform or programme is whether it helps to raise standards and reduce the attainment gap. If it doesn't meet that test then it doesn't get my seal of approval.

Over the last 12 months, my favourite part of this job has been getting around the country and visiting schools. Hearing first hand from teachers, parents and pupils.

I am always – always - impressed and inspired by so many head teachers across Wales.

It is a real privilege to see and hear of how lives, families and futures are being changed for the better by you and your colleagues.

I know that you live that personal and professional mission to change lives. And, of course, you weren't conscripted into the national mission I talk about.

There are all sorts of professions you may have chosen instead. Many that would require fewer hours, less stress, and a whole lot less public scrutiny.

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But I can't think of many more honourable professions than being a school leader.

So I would like to thank-you for taking the hard, but hopefully rewarding route – for being a key part of this national mission to raise standards in our schools and give every child the opportunity to be the best they can be.

## Leadership

Now, the OECD have advised us that leadership must be a prime driver of education reform.

I couldn't agree more, and it is something that hadn't been prioritised previously. Therefore, on coming into Government it was right at the top of my agenda.

I'm sure you'll agree that to succeed, every school needs inspirational leaders at all levels, from the classroom to the headteacher's office.

This is why I prioritised having our own National Academy for Educational Leadership.

In the last 7 months, since the establishment of the Shadow Academy Board, chaired by Ann Keane, I have been encouraged by the steady progress that has been made.

The Academy will provide access to the best learning in the world. It will ensure that we successfully develop current and future talent, working with schools, local authorities, regional consortia and universities.

And be in no doubt: this Academy is an investment in future leaders, but also an investment in you, our current leaders.

I believe leaders should, first and foremost, be leaders of learning in their schools and beyond.

So, there are a number of things in train at the moment to make sure we not only have motivational leaders, but leaders with the right access and engagement in their own professional learning.

It doesn't matter if they want to focus solely on their classroom practice or if they want to move into formal leadership roles up to, and including, headship.

The proposed new professional teaching standards will bring together standards for both teacher and leaders, with leadership being one of the five areas of practice for all teachers, not just leaders.

Where the NPQH is concerned and in respect of current provision, we have now enhanced it through working closely with consortia.

There are practitioners currently going through this programme and I will be asking them for feedback about what's working and whether further improvements could be made.

So, while I am in no doubt that the NPQH needs to develop, I am also clear that we should maintain the requirement and keep a threshold for entry to headship.

I know that we're asking a lot of head teachers.

So, I will shortly be announcing innovative match funded pilots for primary school clusters so that we can expand the numbers of business managers.

This will support leaders and teachers to better focus on raising standards.

Having business managers in place will effectively free up more time for you to concentrate on the jobs you are best equipped for, and what you signed up to do.

Nobody wants teachers and head teachers to be overburdened - we need to focus on more teaching and less admin.

That is one of the reasons why I commissioned the recent National Education Workforce Survey which was administered by the EWC.

The survey provided a great deal of detail on the workforce's concerns and over the next few months we will continue to analyse the data in order to help guide our policy reforms.

We have also been working at identifying unnecessary bureaucracy and have recently compiled and published a comprehensive document detailing all the external data returns and statistical collections required of schools.

I have tasked my officials to work with stakeholders from across the education workforce to scrutinise this document and identify areas that can be simplified and reduced.

Cutting down workload and bureaucracy will be particularly important as we move forward with curriculum reform.

## **Curriculum Reform/Pioneer Schools**

I remain focused on ensuring that the curriculum reform programme is implemented well and in a timely way, learning from what works in Wales and across the world.

A key lesson from other countries is that during reform implementation, things can sometimes get a bit messy.

This is why we have engaged with practitioners and the wider sector from the outset and why consortia are working with us to ensure practitioners are at the centre of developing the curriculum through the pioneer schools approach.

The approach is innovative, brave and trusts in our profession.

This is a deliberate step away from the top-down approach of the past, where the Government directs, instructs and sanctions, to one where it provides strategic leadership, facilitation and support.

However, it also means that we cannot know every detail of what the final curriculum will look like at this stage and I recognise that some stakeholders will find the new approach uncomfortable to begin with.

But we have proof that it can work. Let's look at the development of the Digital Competence Framework. The same situation existed, the same open opportunity at the start, the same need to build a team and work together to achieve a shared outcome.

It wasn't easy, but a superb result was achieved, owned by all, and is already in the early stages of awareness and adoption as you'll know – and I hope are involved in.

## **Foundation Phase Update/Network/Action Plan**

I want to highlight how important it is to keep in our minds that while we're developing our new curriculum, we must not lose what we've built with the

Foundation Phase.

Evidence shows us that the Foundation Phase is working, and it makes learning more enjoyable and effective.

Where it is being implemented well, it is clearly raising the attainment of children.

I want to make sure we build on this progress and continue to support our young children through their early years to make sure they have the best start in life.

But I believe we need far greater consistency across Wales.

That is why, last month I announced an additional £1 million to develop the skills of all staff who deliver the Foundation Phase for 3 to 7 year olds.

The funding will be used to develop a Foundation Phase Excellence Network, which will support the sharing of effective practice and will work closely with the National Networks in Science and Technology and in Mathematics, which are already being developed. Working together, these networks will contribute towards the development of our new curriculum.

## Wellbeing

Without wanting to preach to the converted, we know how important it is that children are happy at school so they can learn and flourish.

International evidence is clear that children with higher levels of emotional, behavioural, and social wellbeing, on average, have higher levels of academic achievement. They are more engaged in school, and then later on in life.

The wellbeing of a child must be at the heart of our inclusive education system which is why it will feature prominently in our new action plan when it is published later in the year.

It's not just a question of intervening when problems start to emerge, although that is of course essential. But it's also about promoting positive wellbeing, helping children to develop into happy, confident individuals, who are able to cope with life's challenges.

And one of the early 'life challenges' that a child must face is the transition from primary to secondary. It's a monumental thing.

Going to the 'big school' is a memory that probably sticks in most of our minds. For some, it's a happy memory, for others it's a memory recalled with a shudder!

I am in no doubt that our primary schools are delivering for our pupils. But there is so much more we must do to successfully support this important transition, and we must look at evidence of best practice.

Take Porthcawl Comprehensive School – Estyn have cited them as an excellent example of leading the way where transition is concerned. This school has worked hard to make the transition between primary and secondary as smooth as possible for pupils.

They work closely with feeder schools to identify children who might find the move more difficult and then liaises with pupils and families to help resolve any problems before they change schools. There is a 'Helping Hands' group for vulnerable or anxious children to join, and it has proven to help them improve wellbeing, self esteem and attendance rates.

I know there is a lot of other good work being done regarding wellbeing and

transition. We have a collective responsibility as leaders, teachers and parents, to make that transition for young learners as smooth and painless as possible.

But it is you, as leaders and heads that are crucial in preparing them for what lies ahead.

Depending on how you manage this transition, you will be a major factor in how they navigate the educational journey in front of them. You are setting the course.

So no pressure there, then!

## **Accountability & Assessment**

Now, I spoke to you earlier of my keenness to visit as many schools as possible and to listen to your concerns.

One concern I have heard is how we will achieve the Welsh Government's goal of a million Welsh speakers by 2050, if we haven't got sufficient teachers in place.

Planning and developing the education workforce is a vital part of reaching our aim. We will ensure that all ITE programmes include Welsh language skills development so that all NQTs have a basic level of Welsh when entering the profession, and develop the skills as they progress.

Another recurring theme that has been brought up with me on my visits around schools is accountability and assessment. I have listened carefully to these concerns.

I am in no doubt that assessment and accountability will be critical to raising standards.

I recognise that assessment's prime purpose must be to provide information that can guide decisions about how best to progress pupils' learning and to report to their parents.

By doing so, assessment should improve learners' learning, teachers' teaching and parents' understanding. It should be used in the best interest of your pupils; enabling you to adjust your teaching strategies to support their progress.

However, teacher assessments also form part of our accountability system and the lines between the two have too often been blurred, leading to unintended consequences in the classroom.

I have listened to the criticism and studied the international evidence: perhaps there is insufficient clarity at different levels of our system regarding evaluation and improvement.

I am currently considering a range of options and will say more about this in the very near future. However, I am clear that having the appropriate and complimentary measures of improvement at a school, regional, and national level will be at the heart of our approach.

## **Call To Action**

And so, colleagues, I am confident that our emphasis on leadership, teaching excellence, equity and wellbeing for learners, and collective responsibility – will enable us to reach the highest standards.

I will continue to give you my full support, my whole backing and my trust.

And in return I know that as leaders it will be your influence, energy and dedication which transform our schools, and give students the very best tools to become successful, educated and engaged citizens.

I want us to continue to work together, making sure a child's background doesn't determine their future.

Together, so everyone reaches their full potential.

Together, so Wales can become a world leader in education.

Together, so that our national mission truly reduces the attainment gap, and raises standards for all.

Thank-you – Diolch yn fawr.