

TACKLING EDUCATIONAL UNDERACHIEVEMENT CONFERENCE

21 February 2017

Spectrum Centre, Belfast

Speech from Education Minister, Peter Weir

Many thanks to Jackie and to the Greater Shankill Partnership Board for hosting today's seminar here in the Spectrum Centre and welcome to our guest speakers and to the teachers, school leaders and representatives of community groups who have taken the time to attend.

Tackling underachievement and driving improvement in every school so that more of our young people can fulfil their potential has been one of my key priorities as Minister for Education.

Whilst headline examination results show a continued upward trend there is still a need to address under performance and to reduce the educational inequalities that remain. In many respects we have a good education system but we must continue to strive for improvement.

Having engaged with a wide range of stakeholders over the last eight months, it is evident to me that people working across the education system are genuinely committed to improving outcomes for our children and young people.

Events such as today's conference offer an opportunity to concentrate our efforts and share our ideas on the actions that can be taken to address this important issue.

Tackling Social Disadvantage

Many of our children and young people encounter barriers such as poverty, low aspirations, ill health, or family difficulties which mean that they need additional support to help them to achieve all that they are capable of.

There is clear evidence that pupils from socially disadvantaged backgrounds have greater obstacles to overcome and the schools and providers serving those areas with the highest proportions of our most deprived pupils need additional resources to help these children and young people achieve their potential.

In recognition of this, I have maintained the level of funding for Targeting Social Need and in this financial year almost £80 million has been allocated directly to schools to support the learning of socially disadvantaged pupils and those at risk of educational underachievement.

My commitment to support schools was also seen in the provision of an additional £14 million spending power to schools this year.

Funding is also being targeted at disadvantaged communities through programmes such as the Full Service Programmes in north and west Belfast; the West Belfast Community Project and the West Belfast Partnership Board's 'Sharing the Learning' Programme.

This year, I have made over £10.6 million of Extended Schools funding available to almost 550 eligible schools serving areas of the highest social disadvantage. The programme allows those schools to put in place a range of interventions and additional learning opportunities to address the identified needs not only of pupils, but also, crucially, their parents, families and wider communities.

Over time, Extended Schools have developed partnerships with social services, a range of health professionals, early years and youth providers, family and parenting support, sporting organisations, businesses and community groups in the delivery of their programmes. There are many good examples of this collaborative working.

However, it is clear that there is no single solution to the problem of underachievement; it is about building a range of interventions that will work in an area and which will be supported by the local community.

Existing Policies

A consistent message has been that school leaders and teachers are best placed to identify those at risk of educational underachievement and to identify the most appropriate strategies to meet individual pupil needs.

I have focused on those policies which aim to support schools and teachers in their work to raise standards and overcome the barriers to learning which some pupils face and which support collaboration and sharing of good practice across the school system.

These policies highlight that a good school is one that is connected to its local community and which focuses on the core characteristics of good teaching, good leadership with strong community and parental engagement and a clear focus on the needs of the pupil.

This is supported by the Inspection process which has shown that across Northern Ireland the most effective schools are characterised by high expectations with an uncompromising belief that every pupil can and will do well, including those from a disadvantaged background.

Such schools demonstrate effective leadership that focuses, through self-evaluation, on high quality learning and teaching. They have well-informed and decisive governors who support and challenge the school as appropriate.

Community involvement

I recognise the powerful influence that local communities can exercise on educational outcomes and the importance of engaging with parents and families. Whilst Ministers and their departments have a role to play, so much more can be achieved when a community itself takes the lead.

I believe that community-based initiatives are one of a number of factors that can help improve educational outcomes for pupils, particularly those from socially disadvantaged backgrounds. In my experience, irrespective of what community it is, achieving a level of community buy-in is very helpful and significant.

I have met a number of community representatives and recognise the influence that they can exercise and achieve. I have been encouraged by the Greater Shankill Partnership Board, the West Belfast Partnership Board and the other partnership boards, in their work to share the model of good practice. All these partnerships can play an important role in the community in helping to tackle the key problem of educational underachievement.

Schools need the commitment of parents and communities if they are to ensure that young people are supported to attain and achieve. A partnership approach aids community cohesion and benefits those living in the local area and, in turn, society as a whole.

Together, all these factors impact positively on pupils' progress and achievements.

Early interventions

In Education, we need to ensure that we are looking at things from a long-term perspective.

It is important that the issues which lead to underachievement are addressed as soon as possible, so that children are provided with every opportunity to realise their potential.

The growing recognition of the importance of intervention in the early years has therefore led to the Department's increased investment in Early Years initiatives such as the Pre-School Education Programme and Sure Start.

The Pathway Fund provides around £2.7 million funding to support early education and learning services particularly to improve the development of children who are at risk of not reaching their full potential within the school system. In 2016/17 around 3,140 children assessed as being in greatest need are benefiting from support through Pathway funding.

Sharing best practice/collaborative approaches

Whilst we rightly focus on the areas for improvement it is also important to acknowledge some of the excellent work being undertaken in pre-schools, schools and youth and community organisations to help our children and young people to succeed in their education and in their future work and lives.

We have many excellent and highly dedicated people who work tirelessly to ensure that our children and young people receive a high quality education.

There is much good practice and many innovative approaches already evident in schools and the community. It is important that the best practice that has been demonstrated is widely shared so that other children can benefit.

We need to continue to focus on building collaborative partnerships between schools, teachers, parents and local communities to raise standards and to tackle educational underachievement.

Conclusion

Ensuring that every child and young person is given the opportunity to achieve to their fullest potential is a societal issue. Education is not just about schools we all have an important role to play - government departments and agencies, education stakeholders, voluntary and community organisations and parents.

Our future economic success depends on a high quality education system that develops the different talents and skills of children and young people – our future workforce.

I welcome the opportunity to hear a range of views and to consider in some depth how we might work more cohesively to achieve our aims.

I am looking forward to hearing from our guest speakers who will have much to add to the discussion on how to tackle underachievement from their various roles and perspectives.

Thank you once again for making time to attend today's seminar, I will now handover to our guest speakers.