

## **Association of Northern Ireland Education and Library Boards Annual Conference 2009**

Thursday 19<sup>th</sup> November 2009, at Slieve Donard Hotel,  
Newcastle, County Down

Good afternoon,

Thank you Mr Chairman. I am grateful for the opportunity to address the Association at this important time.

As I speak today I understand many of you will have mixed emotions about what the future might bring for the education service - a service you have nurtured for more than 3 decades.

I know that in handing over the baton of service you will want to have confidence that both the legacy you leave and the challenges we face are fully appreciated and understood as we move forward.

Over the next 10 minutes I want to address three things:

- Firstly to recognise the service you and other board members have given to our education system over the last 36 years;
- To reassure you that we aim to build on your good work – that this is meaningful change built on solid foundations;

- And finally to say a little about how I want the Education and Skills Authority to go on serving local schools, youth settings and communities in years to come.

## **The Contribution of the Boards**

Over the time of their existence the Education and Library Boards have become an integral part of our community.

You are well known by teachers, pupils, parents, elected representatives and the wider public.

Under your stewardship important steps have been taken in the development of our education system. Your services diligently support the work of teaching and learning that happens in our classrooms and youth settings.

But that work goes much further.

Each day you ensure that, whatever the weather, thousands of children are transported to schools and colleges.

On arrival, you make sure the buildings in which they are educated are properly maintained and heated, that well balanced meals are provided, that schools are maintained and cleaned to the highest standards, and that all of those children are transported safely home again each afternoon.

And that only begins to cover the range of services provided.

When the Boards were created in the early seventies we had a very different Northern Ireland.

Through the darkest days of our recent past, you played an essential role in ensuring schools and wider communities continued to function through difficult times.

And in this context the contribution Boards have made to the development of cross-community co-operation is often underestimated.

In Board meetings and in Committees diverse elements of society have come together at local level to pursue common interests and causes and, in the process, develop understanding and respect for one another.

As employers, the five Boards have played a leading role in creating integrated and balanced workforces.

In work with teachers, schools and youth groups, you have multiplied opportunities for people from different sectors of our society to work together.

This contribution should not and will not be forgotten.

### **Building on the Foundations you have Laid**

That is why, as the new organisation takes shape, I am determined that we will build on the hard work put in by you and other

Education and Library Board members over the last 36 years.

Over the last 2 - 3 years Gavin Boyd and his team have worked closely with your staff to look at what is best in the current system.

The lessons learned have been fed into the emerging service delivery models for both educational and corporate services in ESA.

I was delighted, when we made our Director appointments in September that we filled six out of seven posts from the existing organisations.

Those individuals are now bringing their considerable experience to bear in developing ESA structures, ensuring vital insights and expertise are not lost and are carried through into the services of the new organisation.

We have also been talking to school leaders, both formally and informally about how we can best meet their needs in future.

Listening carefully to those who we serve is vitally important if we are to build a high quality organisation. I can assure you that the fora set up by the boards over the years to get feedback from schools and local communities will not be swept away, but adapted and built upon.

## **ESA and Future Education Provision**

So what of the future, how will the Education and Skills Authority, take forward the legacy bequeathed by you.

I firmly believe the aim of the education service should be to contribute to the development of our community by providing well educated, highly motivated and well rounded young people who can make a positive contribution to the economy and society.

Young people who will be the business and community leaders of the future, who understand their value and worth in our society.

In the months and years ahead I want to see an organisation that:

- Is focused on providing equality of access to an excellent education for every learner;
- Respects the distinctive ethos of all sectors and works collaboratively with all our partners in education;
- Ensures precious resources are focused on where need is greatest; and
- Ensures we continue to deliver quality services tailored to the specific needs of the communities we serve.

At present I am closely involved in the process of selecting members to ESA. As you will appreciate more than most – this is a critically important stage in building proper governance for the new organisation.

There was an excellent response to the initial advertising

campaign, with 220 applications received. The applicants have been of a very high standard and we are in the process of interviewing 80 of them.

Board members will come from a range of backgrounds – all focused on ensuring the organisation delivers policy on the ground as set out by the Minister and the Department.

As already mentioned we have appointed a Chief Executive and six Directors – all from within the existing organisations.

We've also just completed short listing for the remaining Director of Strategic Planning post with interviews taking place in December.

The emerging senior management team is now working hard to develop and finalise the Deputy Director Structure.

### ***Local Teams / Local Dimension***

An absolutely essential part of the work ahead and one that I know is close to the hearts of the Association is the local dimension of ESA – how we will carry on the work at local level that you have developed over the years.

I believe that education is a service that is best managed regionally – but delivered locally.

ESA will be a single, regional organisation, but with a strong local presence. Front-line services will be locally-based and accessible;

whilst back-office services will be centralised to maximise efficiency and value for money.

At local level, the ESA must have the flexibility to respond quickly and sensitively to local need, but within clear and consistent policies, strategies and standards; and taking account of the duty to promote equality.

Local managers and service staff will have the flexibility to respond to specific local circumstances and need. They will be sensitive to and receive input from the Local Advisory Committee for that area comprising, amongst others, a number of local elected representatives.

Clearly there is considerable work to be done to set up the structures of the new organisation both centrally and locally. However I know how important that work is and I am confident that we can develop an education service both fit for purpose and worthy of carrying on the work you have started.

### ***Conclusion***

Many of the Chief Executives here today will have first stood before their staff in November 2005 to advise them of the coming changes and the planned creation of a new Education Authority.

The original date for the establishment of ESA was April 2008,

which became April 2009 and then about his time last year was shifted to January 2010.

The planning phase has stretched well beyond the original planned implementation date of 1 April 2008. But I believe it is entirely appropriate for locally elected politicians with newly devolved responsibilities to work carefully through the draft legislation.

However, I am acutely aware that this extended period of change has been challenging for all involved in the process. In particular for those staff in the 'at risk' group the long period of uncertainty has been very challenging indeed.

As we move towards 2010 and beyond, I can assure you that Gavin and his team will be doing all they can to keep staff informed of what lies ahead and how it affects them.

Indeed, in under a week from now, Gavin and his Directors will be embarking on an intensive series of face to face meeting with staff in each of the education and library boards and the other organisations with staff transferring to ESA. Staff will not only have a chance to hear the latest available information, but also have an opportunity to ask questions on the issues that are concerning them most.

Communication is important. But communication is a two way process, and as a teacher of mine once pointed out many years ago - we have 2 ears but only one mouth for a reason!

As Chairman of ESA I will be keen to hear what you have to say, to learn from your experiences, to carry on the baton of service.

Thank you once again Mr Chairman for the opportunity to be here today, and for the chance to address this conference.