

## **Delivering better education and better opportunities for all**

*From April 2009 a new body will be in charge of delivering education services to teachers and young people. The Education and Skills Authority (ESA) will bring together the wide range of administrative bodies currently providing education support services. Education Minister Caitríona Ruane explains why she believes the change is both essential and desirable.*

Since becoming Education Minister I have met many children and young people in schools, youth clubs and in other settings.

I have also met hundreds of teachers and parents, and with the staff of those organisations providing a range of educational support services

What has struck me on every occasion is the talent and enthusiasm of the young people, and the undoubted commitment of those who work each day to educate and enrich their minds. There is much to admire in what we do and it is rightly celebrated.

But, too many of our children are not sharing that wonderful educational experience and not enough are realising their true potential. I have met parents who tell me of their struggle to access the special support their children need. I have visited classrooms where teachers work hard to provide the best education they can in circumstances far from ideal. This cannot continue.

My determination to ensure all our children have equality of access to an excellent education is well known. And while considerable focus has rightly been placed on the post-primary debate, there are other changes happening which will help transform education for the better.

When the outcomes of the review of public administration in education were announced, the focus was primarily on saving money. While I support the reduction of bureaucracy and the redirecting of funds to frontline services, my focus is different.

I believe this change is only worthwhile if we can show that it helps all our young people to realise their full potential, ensures that every school is a good school, and that every learner is given a fair and equal chance.

The success of ESA will be measured in exactly those terms.

I recognise that those who work directly with our children and young people - our teachers, youth leaders and support staff - can only make that change happen if they have the necessary resources.

ESA will provide our schools and youth clubs with the resources, training and support to make the improvements needed. It will take a leading role in driving up standards, and it will ensure good practice is shared. It will have the potential to achieve the goal of the best possible education for every child.

As parents we all want our children to be educated in the best possible circumstances. We want them to be content and happy and to learn in modern well equipped schools with access to a broad and balanced curriculum. That means doing things differently and ensuring we respect the role of parents and take their views into account.

In future, ESA will work closely with local communities and education sector interests to develop area plans for schools. These plans will be based on a shared understanding of each area's immediate and future educational needs, and how they can be best met. ESA will have a key role in supporting and coordinating this process.

I recognise that some in our community will have concerns that a large central body may not take care of education at a local level, that it may be too distant, too bureaucratic.

This will not be the case. I will ensure that ESA is designed to deliver a highly responsive, highly accountable service to the whole community; a service that is planned together and delivered locally, answerable to me and answerable to you.

Very soon I will bring forward the relevant legislation to the Assembly. In advance of that, work is now taking place to ensure that equality is embedded in all aspects of the new organisation.

Through the leadership of ESA Chief Executive (Designate) Gavin Boyd, and with the engagement of an ever growing number of staff in the education sector organisations, considerable preparatory work has already been undertaken to bring together a range of core education services ahead of April 2009.

Let me be clear. The changes I have outlined here are no criticism of the staff and board members who have served our community with due diligence and great commitment.

Unfortunately the system of administration does not always match the quality of the people. First set up more than 30 years ago, the system is now well past its 'sell by' date. Despite some amendments, it has become cumbersome and does not make best use of the talents and skills of the people within it.

The review of public administration in education has presented us with a once in a generation opportunity to change things for the better.

The time is now right to take forward the change: to give clarity and direction to staff in the existing education sector organisations; to tell teachers and parents how the reforms will benefit our schools and our children; and most importantly of all - *to ensure a better education and better opportunities for all.*