



**Text of a talk given by Jane Davidson AM, Minister for
Education and Lifelong Learning, to members of the
Institute of Welsh Affairs at the Cardiff Thistle Hotel on
June 10th 2004**

Diolch yn fawr am y gwahoddiad i siarad heddiw am "Heriau Addysg yng Nghymru Heddiw". Dyna teitl perthnasol iawn, a dw i'n diolchgar iawn am y cyfle i ystyried y heriau sy'n gwynebu bob un ohonyn ni, pan rydyn ni'n ymdrechu dosbarthu polisiau addysg a chwrdd ag anghenion Cymru yn y unfed ar ugain canrif.

[Thank you for inviting me to speak to you today about “The Challenges of Education in Wales Today”. That's an extremely pertinent title and I'm grateful for the opportunity to explore the challenges facing all of us as we seek to deliver education policies that meet the needs of Wales in the 21st century.]

Ac mae heriau yn bodoli yn bendant..... Rydyn ni wedi cynllunio rhaglen uchelgeisiol a dyheadol, gan ddarparu gweledigaeth am addysg a dysgu gydal oes i bawb mewn nifer o ddogfennau – Y Wlad sy'n Dysgu, Reaching Higher, Cam Sylfaenol, Llwybrau Dysgu, a Chynllun Gweithredu Sgiliau a Chyflogaeth – yn adlewyrchu yn yr Agenda Strategol y Cynulliad Cymru: Gwlad Well.

[And challenges there certainly are... We've set out an ambitious and aspirational programme, providing a vision for education and lifelong learning for all, in a range of documents – ‘The Learning Country’, ‘Reaching Higher’, ‘Foundation Phase’, ‘Learning Pathways 14-19’, and the ‘Skills and Employment Action Plan’ - all reflected in the Assembly Government's strategic agenda ‘Wales: A Better Country’.]

A demonstration of that commitment to high expectations and high standards is our goal for Learning Pathways that:

“All young people, by the age of 25, should be ready for high skilled employment or higher education by 2015”.

An informed audience such as the IWA will be well aware that we have some way to go to achieve this. You know that we have **too few** adults of working age with level 2 or 3 qualifications; we have **too many** 16-18 year olds not in education, employment or training;

too many adults have poor basic skills; we have **too many** secondary pupils who are disengaged from current provision; there is **too great a gap** between the highest and lowest performing schools in similar circumstances; too many children start school not ready for learning; and the evidence from the *Future Skills Wales* survey shows we are **not providing enough** of our young people - of all abilities, even graduates - with the skills they need for employment.

We're absolutely determined to take up these challenges to ensure that **everyone** can benefit from learning throughout life and **no one** lacks basic employment and life skills. One of the most important challenges we face is to make sure that our education policies and provision are **genuinely socially inclusive**. No society can afford to waste the potential of its communities by leaving them outside the loop.

So we've set ourselves a challenging agenda but already we have evidence of improvements across all aspects of education and training. Let me turn to some of the challenges I believe we're facing in Wales today, and how we're tackling them.

Iaith Pawb

One of our underpinning challenges is to deliver our commitment to **Welsh language and Welsh medium education** - to achieve a bilingual future through the development of Welsh Medium Education and the teaching of Welsh as a subject. The first strategic plan for a bilingual Wales, "Iaith Pawb", sets out our vision of how we shall continue – and enhance – the work we have been doing in support of the language at stages throughout education.

Enhancing the Learning Environment

Another challenge for education in Wales is creating the **best learning environment** for **all** learners. We've taken up the challenge of enhancing the learning environment in a variety of ways. One of the key pledges of the incoming Labour Government in 1997 was to **reduce class sizes** – in particular infant class sizes, to make sure that the conditions for learning were appropriate for young children.

We've delivered on that - all infant classes now comply with the 30 pupil statutory limit, and we've now moved on to tackle **junior class sizes** – another policy made in Wales.

But children aren't ready for learning unless they are **properly nourished**. We've recognised that many children are coming to school without the nutritional basis to enable them to learn so we've introduced our **Free School Breakfast Initiative** on a pilot basis starting in a number of Communities First areas this September.

Evidence has shown that successful breakfast schemes in schools have led to **positive attitudinal changes** – improved attendance, improved behaviour, fewer discipline problems and greater sustained concentration.

If children are to do well in school it is vital that they are able to study in a **safe and secure environment**. Sadly, this is not always the case. **Bullying** remains a problem in schools in Wales as well as across the UK.

As part of the general revision of our pupil support guidance we have already produced **Anti-Bullying guidance** for schools. The guidance, called 'Respecting Others' contains a number of practical ideas for preventing and dealing with incidents of bullying and advice on developing a school anti-bullying policy.

Another important element of our drive to improve pupil engagement is the work we are doing on **improving attendance** in schools. We're improving the way we collect and share information, looking at the role of the education welfare service, and electronic registration.

We remain concerned that teachers should have appropriate skills to deal with **disruptive pupils**. We've recently run a pilot behaviour management training course for teachers throughout Wales. We'll evaluate the effectiveness of this course and use this information together with reports we have commissioned from Estyn to enable us to further refine our strategy on tackling this important area.

Improving the physical environment

Of course the learning environment is also dependent on **buildings** that are fit for purpose, in good physical shape and properly maintained. We're well aware that meeting this challenge is expensive. So £560 million funding for **school capital projects** was pledged as a Welsh Assembly Government's top ten commitment for the Assembly's second term.

So much for the challenge of creating the right environment for learning for all learners, making equality of opportunity and social inclusion a reality - now I'd like to turn to **learning provision** and the challenges we face there.

Narrowing the Gap in the performance of Schools

One of our key challenges is to **raise standards of achievement** in **all** our schools.

Though standards of attainment have risen in all schools over the last 10 years or so, the gap between the best and the least well performing hasn't changed - it has not diminished or grown. We know that there is a strong link between deprivation and poor performance. Until we address that, and narrow the gap we can't claim that we are offering our children true equality of opportunity.

Best Quality Practitioners

How are we meeting the challenge of ensuring we have the **best quality practitioners** to deliver this learning?

We have established, at the beginning of a teacher's career in Wales, a programme of **induction and early professional development**, unique in Wales. We are also committed to

strengthening teachers' **Continuing Professional Development**, to ensure that it is tailored to both the needs of the individual and the needs of the schools in which they work. This will help secure what we all want to achieve – better teaching and more effective learning in the classroom; and **better school leadership**.

Early Years and Foundation Phase

One of our most significant challenges is to provide the right **foundation** for learning for children from all backgrounds. We know an enormous amount about how young children learn best, how their emotional, physical, social and intellectual development can be nurtured, and how important this is to their future development.

So we moved quickly to seize the challenge of making the best provision for our youngest learners. This year we have created some **9,000 additional free part time places** for our three year olds and are developing a mixed economy of provision using both the maintained and non maintained sectors to ensure we take account of parental choice.

And an appropriate curriculum for young learners in a new **Foundation Phase for 3-7** will be introduced in Wales. This will begin as a pilot for 3-5 year olds from this coming September, with child-initiated activities that help children to develop their personal and social skills supporting and complement those directed by adults.

The most effective early years programmes emphasise exploration, problem solving, active involvement, language development and different types of play. If this sounds like fun - it's meant to. We recognise that children learn best when they are involved and motivated - and when they are enjoying their learning.

This is one of the areas where we've set out to meet the challenge of developing **world class provision** for children in Wales, based on evidence from the best practice all over the world.

Integrated Children's Centres

I am very pleased that the Institute has taken a keen interest in the expansion of provision for 3 year olds and their associated Integrated Centres.

They have recently come forward to me seeking financial support for a research proposal that will evaluate the impact of both this expansion of early years and the establishment of these particular Centres. I am happy, in principle, to support their proposal and, subject to clearing a number of procurement issues, I hope to make available that support very shortly.

I believe that this proposed research will provide an objective assessment of the value of our early years proposals which I am convinced will clearly demonstrate the benefits for our 3 year olds in terms of their ultimate educational attainments.

Transition/Review of Assessment of KS 2 and 3

We've recognised that a **child's learning journey** is not always as smooth and seamless as we would like. And our current assessment arrangements may not be supporting this learning journey as well as they might, or provide teachers or parents with the best information to secure learners' progress.

We're working with primary and secondary schools to meet this challenge by **improving the transition** from primary to secondary.

And regarding assessment, one of the most exciting and important pieces of work recently undertaken in Wales was Professor Richard Daugherty's review of the **assessment arrangements** for Key Stages 2 and 3.

He's recommended that the **current tests** at key stages 2 and 3 should be **phased out**, and that we rely far more on teacher assessment. He's also recommended a set of "skills tests" which focus on "literacy", "numeracy" and "problem solving" to provide a "**skills profile**" of each pupil, taken at or near the end of Year 5.

I am currently considering Professor Daugherty's Report and ACCAC's advice on the national curriculum and assessment and will make a statement in early July on how I propose taking matters forward. Whatever my decision there will be a full and public consultation.

14-19 Learning Pathways

One of the areas in which we've met the challenge head on - and one in which I know you have particular interest - is the **transformation of 14-19 provision**, another of our commitments in '*Wales: A Better Country*'. We recognised that provision for this age group wasn't meeting needs in full for learners of all abilities. *Future Skills Wales Survey 2003* identified that we still weren't providing our brightest and best graduates with the wide range of essential skills they need for employment, let alone the rest of the learning cohort.

We also recognised that there is a significant number of learners - the "**invisible**" learners who pass through school almost "without touching the sides" - who don't make trouble, who keep their heads down, and do just enough to prevent drawing attention to themselves. These learners represent a huge waste of potential and we have deliberately set out to include them as well as those who may be presenting more challenging behaviour.

So we set out to devise an approach to 14-19 provision which would **extend aspiration and expectation**, and meet the individual needs of **all** learners, recognising that what young people need for success in the 21st century is very different to traditional approaches to learning and achievement.

By "we" I really do mean the **collective "we"** - this has been policy developed in partnership with representatives from all sectors - schools, colleges, training providers, employers, higher education and the voluntary sector. The guidance which will be published in July this year

has been firmly **based on the evidence** of what works for young people, authenticated by those who actually work with them, who are in a real position to make those judgements and provide the substantiating evidence.

More than 170 people have been genuinely involved in the task and focus groups developing this guidance, and, because of the open way this development has been undertaken, hundreds more have had the opportunity to contribute.

We've also involved **young people** themselves from the very beginning. They've told us in no uncertain terms why some of the existing provision isn't meeting their needs, and they are very articulate - and very discerning - in letting us know what they expect from these policy developments. So we know that what we have developed will work in a range of settings.

We've asked learning providers from that range of settings to work together in the interests of learners to take a strategic approach to future development of Learning Pathways. 14-19 Networks have been set up in each local authority area and are preparing their first development plans.

If there was a **single "magic ingredient"** for 14-19 learners we would have found it long ago. What Learning Pathways provide is a package of **six key elements** which constitute an entitlement for all learners, and which can be combined in a way that is flexible enough to meet individual needs.

The six key elements - six "magic ingredients" - are **individually tailored Learning Pathways, wider choice and flexibility, a Learning Core from 14-19, learning coach support, personal support and impartial careers advice and guidance.**

These six key elements fall into **two categories**. The 3 relating to curriculum provision - and I use the word in its widest context, meaning **all** the learning experiences a young person has - are:

- an **individual Learning Pathway** for each learner, leading to appropriate qualifications and awards of credit, recognising learning at the right levels, at the right time for the learner to meet needs, aptitudes and interests, and running from 14-19 - and beyond;
- a **wider choice** of relevant options through collaboration and cooperation between learning settings in an area, to allow choices from a **range of qualifications** in applied and general forms from entry level to level 4, and to allow **greater flexibility** to vary the speed and direction of the Learning Pathway; and
- a **Learning Core**, wider learning consisting of the skills, knowledge, understanding, values and experiences that all 14-19 year olds will need, whatever their Learning Pathway. The Learning Core has strong similarities to the Welsh Bac Core, but is intended to run as a **thread from 14-19** to ensure that learners in any setting have the opportunities and experiences to gain essential skills and wider learning.

The other 3 key elements relate to **support for learners** and include:

- an entitlement to **learning coach support** - an opportunity to discuss learning and progress on a regular basis. The learning coach will provide **support and encouragement for all learners** focused on their Learning Pathway which will help them develop and apply learning skills, make the most of their learning styles, and plan a Learning Pathway which gives each learner the best chance of success. We'll be developing a **specific qualification** for learning coaches to ensure learners get the best quality learning support
- Access to **personal support** when - and where - needed. For a significant number of young people, the availability of personal support to pick up problems early, before they become barriers to learning, will be an essential aspect of Learning Pathways. Personal support needs to be backed up by **more specialist services** such as sexual and mental health workers, social care, and voluntary sector specialist provision where necessary.
- And finally - the last ingredient - **impartial careers advice and guidance**. This will combine provision from Careers Wales advisers and the careers advice and guidance delivered in learning settings following the Careers Education Guidance developed by ACCAC in 2002. We believe young people need the highest quality impartial advice and guidance on possible careers, and that this is a specialist element of Learning Pathways.

The most important aspect of these elements of support is that they can be **combined** in as many different ways as there are learners. For all 6 elements of Learning Pathways, it's how we **mix the ingredients** - the recipe - that is the essential factor, rather than any one of the six elements.

Because the framework for Learning Pathways, and the guidance to be issued in July, have been developed in **partnership** with representatives from all relevant sectors, we know we've built on **evidence based practice** which is already making a difference for learners in different parts of Wales. And because so many people have been involved in developing the guidance, it's already beginning to be implemented in 14-19 Networks all over Wales - before we've even issued the final version.

The feedback I'm getting is that learning providers - and learners - in all sectors recognise that we have something really worthwhile here - a package that is **radical, yet built on firm evidence** of current practice, a package that will genuinely transform 14-19 provision in Wales.

What we have developed will be **world class**, without a doubt - **world class AND inclusive** - that's a pretty potent combination.

Many of you here today can make an enormous contribution to Learning Pathways in the areas of work focused experience and community participation. I'd like to **extend the challenge** to all of **you** to identify how you might make opportunities available for learners in your area and how you might **contribute** to the work of the **14-19 Networks** across Wales.

Welsh Baccalaureate

Learning Pathways run in parallel to, and complement, the development of the Welsh Baccalaureate. In future years we anticipate a seamless merger of Learning Pathways with the overarching Welsh Bac qualification.

As you're aware the Baccalaureate has been designed to meet the need for a new broad qualification. It's currently running in 18 schools and colleges, with more coming on board in September. I am particularly delighted that Wales is seen to be leading the way in developing this kind of qualification. UCAS (The Universities and Colleges Admissions Service) has recognised the Welsh Bac Core with 120 points in the UCAS tariff – the same as an A grade at A' level.

At the moment The Welsh Bac is being piloted at levels 2 (Intermediate) and 3 (Advanced) of the National Qualifications Framework, but I hope to expand this to include level 1 (Foundation).

6 more centres will be joining the pilot from September this year – and a further 6 in September 2005. And I hope that the Welsh Bac will then become available to all learners from September 2007.

The IWA is a long-standing proponent of the Baccalaureate approach for Wales and I hope that it will support the exciting development that we now have, in both the Welsh Bac and Learning Pathways. The IWA is well placed to help establish the currency of the Welsh Bac and of Learning Pathways with employers. I hope we can all get behind the developments which have the support of practitioners and learners in Wales to ensure that we realise the potential to develop a truly world class 14-19 system for **all** learners - to the great benefit of Wales as a whole.

Extending Entitlement

As part of our commitment to meeting the challenge of supporting and developing all our young people, we've set up Young People's Partnerships in every local authority area to develop provision to meet **10 entitlements for 11-25 year olds**, covering education and training, support and information, health and well-being, and opportunities and experiences. We're looking to all providers to meet the challenge of involving young people fully in the development and delivery of services.

Our 'Extending Entitlement' agenda has placed us at the forefront of European developments aimed at improving services to young people. Indeed, we are some way ahead of many of our European partners in implementing the principles contained in the European White Paper on Youth, which was launched in Ghent three years ago. It's very fitting, therefore, that Wales has secured at least one of the events that will mark the UK's Presidency of the European Union, in 2005. I'm delighted to say that Wales will host a major conference pulling together youth ministers and young people from all over Europe. This is brilliant news for Wales as it will provide an international showcase for our young person-focused policies. I very much

intend that young people will be at the heart of the event, including during the planning phase.

Post-16 Provision

One of our biggest challenges is to ensure that those leaving full-time learning have the **skills** needed to **obtain sustainable employment**. And, given that 80% of employees will still be in the workforce in 10 years time, much greater emphasis must also be placed on lifting the skills of **those currently in employment**. In May I published a second **Skills and Employment Action Plan** consulting on new proposals to boost skills levels and help more people into employment, which are two key aims in '*Wales: A Better Country*'.

It takes forward and builds upon the work begun in the original Plan under 4 main sections.

The first section looks at the **mechanisms for workforce development**. We propose action to develop a Learning and Skills Observatory for Wales which will collect and disseminate skills information. Working with the Sector Skills Councils we intend to develop Sector Skills Agreements to allow agencies and employers to jointly address skill needs from a firm evidence base.

The second section covers action to **supply new recruits with the skills needed for employment**. Employers want young people to leave school with good literacy and numeracy skills. They also want people who can show initiative and understand the needs of customers. So a new 6-point plan will address the key skills employers say they most require.

The third section is about how we can **work with employers and employees to improve skills**. We propose a range of action to boost employee skills through initiatives such as the Basic Skills Employer Pledge. Employer demand for skills must also increase if we are to achieve our ambition to be a competitive knowledge-based economy.

The final section looks at helping **more people into sustained employment**. In partnership with Jobcentre Plus we are proposing action to help people overcome barriers to work such as ill-health or transport, and we are aiming to expand activity to help economically inactive people access jobs in sectors experiencing skill shortages such as construction.

I hope you will all take the opportunity this consultation allows to contribute to the skills agenda by sending in your views on the proposed actions and by participating in the delivery of some of the key actions.

You'll have noticed that **skills** are a **key theme** in **14-19 Learning Pathways** and in the **Skills and Employment Action Plan**. Knowledge and understanding, values and attitudes remain vitally important aspects of learning, but we've taken up the **skills challenge** with a vengeance. Only by raising the skills of our learners and the workforce can we hope to compete in the European and world economy. We're committed to enhancing skills for all.

Supporting learners in remaining in learning - Education Maintenance Allowances and Assembly Learning Grants

We know that some people face **greater barriers** than others to continuing their education, and we have gone some way to meeting this challenge by providing **financial help** for eligible young people wanting to continue with their education after the age of 16.

EMAs - Education Maintenance Allowances - are to be introduced in Wales for the forthcoming academic year, providing up to £30 a week in support for eligible students aged 16-18.

We have already introduced the **Assembly Learning Grants** a scheme for student support for further and higher education students unique to Wales. It provides a guaranteed source of additional targeted financial support for eligible students in higher education, and, for the first time, in further education as well.

Supporting learners - Higher Education

Another challenge we've taken on is developing a strategic framework for a **competitive and inclusive higher education sector** in Wales as set out in *Reaching Higher*. The key to the sector's future success is **reconfiguration** and I have demonstrated my commitment to this ongoing process. Substantial funding has been made available to underpin this agenda and there have been notable successes – such as the **merger** between the University of Wales College of Medicine and Cardiff University, and **subject rationalisation** between the University of Wales Swansea and Swansea Institute. Reconfiguration will bring huge benefits to learners in Wales.

As part of our commitment to inclusion we're **widening access to higher education**. Higher Education institutions in Wales already consistently outperform UK averages in attracting a wide social mix of students and working with groups and communities that are under-represented in higher education.

And '*Aimhigher Wales*' aims to raise learners aspirations at an earlier age. It's already having a positive impact on the ambitions of Year 9 pupils to continue their education to university level.

Conclusion

I've set out a number of challenges that face education today - creating the right learning environment in a bilingual Wales, building the foundations of learning for 3-7 year olds, ensuring inclusion and equality, transforming 14-19 learning, enhancing skills for all, and creating competitive and inclusive higher education.

They are all about realising the potential of learners of all abilities, through the right balance of innovative provision and support. They are challenges for the Welsh Assembly

Government, certainly, but working with partners in all sectors, we really do have the potential for **world class, inclusive education provision** for all ages and all abilities.

Then we can achieve a fair and inclusive society, a vibrant high skilled economy, and safer, stronger communities. That is our vision for the future of education and training in Wales.

A vision takes time to achieve and has to be worked at. But the payoff from rising to the challenges I've set out today will be more than worth the effort. I look forward to continuing to meet the challenges facing education in Wales today.

Jane Davidson AM