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Raising school standards

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Preface

Leighton Andrews has one of the most challenging portfolios in the Welsh Government, as he acknowledged himself when he first became Education Minister at the end of 2009. In a series of speeches over the last year he has identified his priorities as being to build on the innovation the Welsh Government has introduced to the Early Years curriculum by tackling shortcomings further up the education age ranges. He is especially concerned about the attainment of Welsh school children between 11 and 14 and the readiness of the higher education sector to respond to the competitive demands of the global economy. In enunciating these priorities Leighton Andrews deserves our support since the success of Wales in every sphere first depends on a step change in our educational performance.

Geraint Talfan Davies
Chairman, IWA

'Raising school standards' by the Minister for Education and Skills

I am pleased to be here as Minister for Education and Skills, to continue the work I began in the previous 18 months.

Or to put it another way, bad luck, I'm back!

Tonight I want to provide you with an update on the work being undertaken to deliver on the programme of school reform I announced in February.

Since I set out that 20-point plan, these proposals have undergone the most rigorous consultation exercise that we have in Wales – namely a Welsh General Election.

Following that election, we have been given a clear mandate to drive forward the agenda that I set out on the 2nd of February, which was reiterated in Labour's manifesto for the Assembly elections.

Let no-one be in any doubt. Education occupied a central role in our manifesto. As we said, 'Education does more than shape the life chances of individuals or achieve economic success. Education is also fundamental to building a just, inclusive and fair society.'

In the manifesto, we paid tribute to the achievements in education in Wales in the last decade of devolution:

- The Foundation Phase
- 14–19 Learning Pathways
- The Welsh Baccalaureate.

We recognised that 'Teachers have a crucial role to play.' We said 'the best teachers can have a lifelong effect on all of us and we have some world-class teachers in Wales. We want to support teachers in their work and to raise the esteem in which they are held.'

In my job, I see every week, the difference that the best teachers make to a child's development.

And so whilst what we proposed in February was not uncontroversial, the response so far has been exceptionally positive to what we have set out.

That is because, I believe, no parent, teacher or trade union can argue with the notion that what we are asking of all schools is to replicate in the future what is already happening in the best schools today.

That is our ambition for all our schools and for all our teachers; such is the value we place on good teaching in Wales that we see teachers as the beating heart of the decade of delivery set out by the First Minister at the start of this new Government.

We said in our manifesto that 'We want our young people to be taught by the brightest and the best.' I will say more about measures to enhance the professional standing of teachers later.

However, we also acknowledged some of the challenges that we face – literacy; a lack of ambition and low expectations in some quarters; and too much variability between schools.

I want us to have a culture of ambition – a culture of great expectations. I believe that parents themselves have an important role to play in this and I hope parents will demand the best. To demand the best, they need to know what the best is, and how their school performs against the best, which is why I believe that data on performance is critical to creating that culture of great expectations.

In my speech on the 2nd February, I set out 20 action points to turn our system around. Today, I want to report on the progress we have made in following through on those 20 action points, in the context of Labour's election manifesto and the report I commissioned on the Structure of Education Services in Wales, undertaken by the independent Task and Finish Group chaired by Viv Thomas, published shortly before the last Assembly was dissolved. That review has been described by Professor Ken Reid as 'the most thorough and comprehensive Report of its kind produced since devolution in 1999'.

And everyone should read it.

The Review has taken a forensic look at the performance of providers at all levels: schools, colleges, local authorities, regional and national organisations. It has been based on extensive consultation, with contributions from many organisations and individuals – both in Wales and beyond.

Unsurprisingly, the Group found examples of exceptional achievement and inspiring leadership. But they also found a disappointing degree of inconsistency. I will say more about all this.

The first action point I announced on 2nd February was a School Standards Unit to drive improvement through the whole system. The Unit commenced its work at the beginning of May under the leadership of Brett Pugh, Director of Education in Newport, who has

joined us on secondment. The Unit contains some of the brightest and best within our Department. By collecting and analysing crucial data information and system knowledge, it is building a shared understanding of historical performance, trends, patterns, benchmarks and what excellence looks like. From this baseline it will provide early identification of problems by knowing what questions to ask and working with the system to unpick what is happening on the ground.

Working with Consortia and local authorities, it will understand exactly what high performing schools and local authorities are doing well. It is already starting to underpin our understanding of how current policy and any changes will impact on performance. The Unit will carry out priority policy reviews to ensure that policy is well implemented and having the intended impact, use data to inform discussion on performance and progress and work with consortia and local authorities to assess capacity and priorities for improvement.

Secondly, I made it clear in February that no new initiatives will be approved unless they add value to our demand for higher performance, and resources would be re-prioritised accordingly. We are working through our budgets line by line to release resource to support that objective. I made it clear that I wanted my entire department focussed on the single objective of driving up performance. The Viv Thomas review stressed the need for my own Department to be organised in a way which provides clarity of function and accountability. The Department has been organised into two groups with a clear focus – Schools and Young People and Skills, Higher Education and Lifelong Learning. It is a leaner department with a sharper focus. Are the cultural changes I have demanded of the Department fully embedded yet? No, but we have come a long way.

Thirdly, I stressed the need to ensure that the Foundation Phase should not in any way lead to a relaxation in literacy standards. The Foundation Phase has been widely praised across the sector and is supported by parents. From this September, it will be fully rolled out to all 3 to 7-year-olds. In addition, we are moving to undertaking a Baseline Assessment of each child's development needs when they first enter the Foundation Phase. This too will take place from this September in Welsh as well as in English. This is important as it will be used to inform their future learning needs and get the best from

the learning experience. As Professor Iram Siraj-Blatchford stated in her report 'Foundation Phase Pilot – Final Evaluation Report':

A strong case for Baseline Assessment does exist as it provides information about a child's capability as they start school which can inform pedagogy. Assessment conducted at the start of an educational phase provides a useful tool in discovering a child's prior knowledge and capabilities in order to build upon and develop learning in the most symbiotic, matched and appropriate way for the child.

This goes to the heart of the improvements we are making to drive up standards. It will be used by practitioners to build and plan each child's learning.

Fourthly, I announced that as part of our National Literacy Plan, we would introduce a consistent national reading test across Wales. We commissioned Professor Rhona Stainthorp of Reading University to provide an objective view of the validity, rigour and practicalities of the reading tests currently used across Wales.

There is a range of Welsh and English commercially produced reading tests being used in schools – with no consistent approach across Wales. There is variation from local authority to local authority. Professor Stainthorp's advice is clear – whatever test is chosen, all primary schools should administer the same reading test on an annual basis in the early part of the summer term. She recommends that in order to establish a reliable database for monitoring progress for the first five years – a regimen of annual testing for Years 2, through to Years 7 and 9 would be desirable. She points out that since many authorities already require annual testing, this should not add to the workload of teachers.

We have to get this right. I am not interested in testing for testing sake. I remind everyone that the commitment to a consistent national reading test was a Labour manifesto commitment. We need a reading test that delivers what we want for our children in Wales – a reading test that goes beyond simple decoding. A reading test that equips our children with the ability to go beyond the text and to use inference, deduction and higher-order reading skills. Comprehension of texts beyond the literal is essential for accessing the secondary curriculum. We want our children to succeed.

Professor Stainthorp emphasises and I agree with her whole-heartedly – that it is the quality of the teaching which will lead to higher standards in literacy.

I am pleased that as an interim step, the Association of Directors of Education Wales has agreed to implement the same reading tests on a voluntary basis from September 2011.

Fifth, I stressed that we would undertake similar plans in respect of numeracy from 2012–13, a point reinforced in our manifesto. Because of the non-statutory nature of the Skills Framework, local authorities have given it a low priority. The report on the Structure of Education Services in Wales stated that ‘it is disappointing that the skills framework was not made statutory as it would have been a key measure of quality assurance for pupil progression’.

To implement this commitment, I announced yesterday that we will be establishing a new National Literacy and Numeracy Framework on a statutory basis. We will move swiftly to consult the profession on this and following the consultation we will establish a steering group consisting of headteachers, local authority partners and DfES officials to develop and implement the Framework.

The new National Literacy and Numeracy Framework will be for all learners aged 5 to 14. The Framework will include literacy and numeracy attainment matrices which will identify annual expectation standards for learners. The matrices will, in turn, inform teachers on how to implement literacy and numeracy across the curriculum.

Learner attainment in literacy and numeracy will be determined by teacher assessment. The national reading and numeracy tests will complement the National Literacy and Numeracy Framework, generating evidence to inform teacher assessment. The Framework will exemplify how pupils are performing against national criteria at the end of each academic year. It will also enable schools to identify how best to support and challenge all of their learners.

Schools will be required to report on individual learners’ attainment in literacy and numeracy to parents/carers as part of an individual learner’s annual report. Schools will also be required to maintain a regularly-updated portfolio which contains annual outcome-based evidence that demonstrate learner progress in literacy and numeracy.

Sixth, I was able to announce in February that the Association of Directors of Education in Wales had also agreed to ensure that Key Stage 2 assessments were robust and consistent with national standards, especially in literacy, a point again reinforced in our manifesto. In the 2011/12 school year, we will work with all schools to provide moderation of end of Key Stage 2 standards in English and Welsh – with a specific focus on securing an agreed and consistent approach in primary and secondary schools to the assessment of reading, writing and oracy.

We plan to follow this with moderation of science and mathematics at the end of Key Stage 2 in 2012/13, which will complete the moderation of the core subjects. This work will be undertaken in partnership with local authorities and we will support authorities, where necessary, to review and improve their approach to securing consistent and robust assessment in all schools.

Seventh, I announced that we would integrate PISA assessments into school assessment at 15. Again, this was reinforced in Labour's manifesto. I have said that the PISA results were a wake up call. I have said that PISA is important as it tests the extent to which students near the end of their compulsory education have acquired some of the knowledge and skills needed for adult life and are able to apply them. It is clear to me that we needed to integrate PISA assessments in all schools to work with their Year 8 and 9 students who will face PISA in the next round and work with them on their skills.

We have made significant progress since February. We are putting arrangements in place with local authorities and secondary schools to support the use of the tests in the classroom, for literacy, mathematics and science. Workshops have been held with local authority advisers to agree a programme of work to run from September to provide secondary schools across Wales with support and guidance in the use of PISA tests to assess progress.

In parallel with this, action has already been taken to make the current bank of published PISA tests widely available to secondary schools. We will extend the bank by also making the tests available in Welsh.

The Association of Directors of Education Wales has made the point that the Welsh Government's programme to promote 'thinking skills' delivered in partnership with local authorities, promotes many of the reasoning skills that are tested in PISA.

While recognising that it is always difficult to isolate the impact of one initiative on pupil outcomes, we have already put in place plans to provide additional support for local authority advisers in working with schools to assess the impact of the programme. Therefore, in 2011–12 the programme will focus on secondary schools and target mathematics, science and literacy. Secondary schools will have access to and use the PISA tests to assess the progress being made in these areas on a regular basis.

This is not about scoring well in an international test. The test provides the benchmark. This is about equipping our young people with the skills they need for future study and the workplace.

My eighth point was that all teachers and headteachers must have appropriate levels of literacy and numeracy, and as my ninth point, I said that we would examine whether we could revise initial teacher training so that it became a two year Master's course, familiarising teachers with advanced teaching skills; there would be a statutory requirement for all qualifying teachers to be trained in literacy and numeracy, as well as assessments of ITT trainees' personal skills in literacy and numeracy; and we would ensure one INSET day focussed on literacy and numeracy assessment.

To support teachers, we will produce guidance on effective training days. It will guide how literacy and numeracy can be effectively embedded into INSET so that it improves both learners' and teachers' literacy and numeracy skills. Together with this, we are producing kite marked, high quality literacy and numeracy support material for all schools-based practitioners. This is a first step on the road to improved teaching standards.

We have been looking at a variety of options for introducing a Masters level element to teaching careers. A programme on entry to teaching could be offered, but we are also pursuing options of working towards credits for a Masters as part of continuing professional development after qualifying. We are aiming to provide newly qualified teachers with the opportunity from September 2012 to pursue a Masters qualification during their Induction and early professional development years.

The tenth action point I announced on 2nd February was that we would introduce a national system for the grading of schools which will be operated by all local authorities and consortia. I was able to confirm then that ADEW had agreed that all consortia would operate this model. This was firmly reinforced in Labour's manifesto. We are talking about a 'banding' system – a way of grouping schools according to where they are on their improvement journey to act as a starting point for discussion on how to move forward. This national system for banding is at the very centre of the School Standards Unit's work. The Unit has already made considerable progress, developing the approach for secondary schools which is being used as the basis for pilot stock takes with consortia this term. Banding will inform planning and better targeting of differentiated support and challenge to drive continuous improvement across all schools. Targeted action based on robust data analysis – a balance of support and challenge to meet the priority needs of the system in Wales.

We will use data to apply a consistent approach, to identify strengths and weaknesses, identify best practice, implement intervention and provide 'real time' monitoring alongside the inspection cycle. This is an improvement agenda for all schools, whatever their current level of performance.

All Primary and Secondary Schools in Wales will know the Band in which they are currently placed during the Autumn term 2011.

My eleventh point was that Estyn's new Common Inspection Framework was beginning to bite. Following my recent meeting with the Chief Inspector of Estyn, I can give more details. But it is also worth reminding this audience that the Report on the Structure of Delivery of Education in Wales set even tougher targets – that we should have no schools judged by Estyn as unsatisfactory by 2012, and no schools unsatisfactory or adequate by the end of September 2015.

Sadly, there is some way to go. Under the new, tougher inspection framework, Estyn has inspected 197 primary schools and 31 secondary schools. And Estyn has found that 97 schools require some sort of follow up, a staggering 42%, about the same for primary and secondary.

Yet again, school inspections have revealed common weaknesses relating to:

- literacy and numeracy standards and practice

- lack of depth in planning to improve skills
- inconsistency or inadequate assessment
- insufficient challenge from governors; and
- self-evaluation and improvement planning is often weak.

A key element in driving up standards is the role of governors, as our manifesto made clear. The twelfth, thirteenth and fourteenth actions I outlined on 2nd February directly related to the governing bodies of schools and the impact of the Education (Wales) Measure 2011. The National Assembly for Wales passed the Measure on 29th March and it has now become law. Changes under the Measure strengthen the governance of the school education system. It strengthens accountability.

Under the Measure, we now have the powers to allow local authorities to federate boards of governors of schools. Federation should stimulate joint working, sharing of resources, unified leadership across several schools, as well as stronger governance. We are currently funding a small number of federation pilots – in Gwynedd, Carmarthenshire, Rhondda Cynon Taff and Blaenau Gwent.

The Measure also introduced a means to regulate compulsory training for governors. Governors need to be knowledgeable to do their job and discharge their responsibilities effectively. Governors Wales are currently trialling 'The Governors Wales Quality Standards Award' and this will enable governors to clearly evaluate the quality of the very valuable work that they undertake in all our schools.

All new governors should receive induction training when they start. They have an important role in driving up standards within their schools and need to understand the legislative framework and the parameters of their roles and responsibilities. People who chair governing bodies also need training. They need training to be effective as the headteacher's critical friend – so that they can challenge and support.

The third area of training that governors should undertake is how to understand and use school performance data. They should be confident in asking searching and challenging questions and using data and facts impartially.

How many governing bodies spend even an hour a year discussing how to handle issues around attendance and behaviour?

I wrote to the Chairs of Governing Bodies at the end of March to make it clear that I want to raise standards and performance across the board, particularly in the areas of literacy and numeracy. I also set out that Estyn inspectors would receive guidance requiring them to evaluate how well governors are informed about the performance of the schools and how well governors hold the school to account for the standards and quality it achieves. Labour's manifesto reinforced the requirement from my February speech that all schools will need to provide an annual public profile containing performance information in a common format, and a school development plan will need to be endorsed by governors setting out how the school will reach improved standards of performance.

These changes I believe provide all local communities and parents in particular with an unprecedented opportunity to become equipped with the skills required to develop their local schools. Parents should expect no less.

I announced as my fifteenth point in February, plans to change performance management provisions for headteachers and teachers. I acknowledge the support that has been shown by the teaching profession for the improvement agenda. It is what happens in the classroom that really matters. Great teachers matter. Great leaders matter. They are the difference between good education systems and great education systems.

Headteachers and teachers have readily responded to the need for improvement. They have welcomed the clarity of what is expected of them.

Our proposals mirror the actions that our best schools have been taking for some time – but we need to ensure that our most effective practice becomes our standard because there is still too much variability of practice across Wales.

In April we launched a consultation on revised professional standards for school leaders and teachers which has recently closed. We have now launched a consultation on new performance management arrangements for teachers and headteachers which will more closely link our school improvement priorities to those of individual teachers and headteachers. This consultation will finish in September and we will then be working with stakeholders to produce guidance which ensures that these changes work in a coherent way to support implementation, enabling them to be implemented next year.

My sixteenth action point was that we will review teacher induction, alongside our review of the GTCW. Development and support for the first three years of teaching will focus on firm foundations for the teaching of literacy and numeracy. All NQTs will have to meet Practising Teacher Standards.

As I said in February, and as our manifesto made clear, we will review the role of the General Teaching Council for Wales. We have changed the funding arrangements for newly qualified teachers' induction so that their development will focus on core priorities of literacy, numeracy, behaviour management, ALN, reducing the impact of deprivation and reflective practice. Our consultation on professional standards, including the Practising Teacher Standards, concluded on 16th June and we are considering the responses.

This year, we have not prescribed the precise nature and content of the professional development to be undertaken during Induction and EPD as this will depend to a large extent on the needs of the individual teacher within the context of the school. For this year NQTs and EPD teachers will be expected to work with their Induction Tutors and EPD Mentors to plan how the priorities will contribute towards their Induction and EPD programmes.

We are currently working on building a bank of resources and high quality teaching strategies which will be developed during the forthcoming academic year and which will be flagged up to schools as they become available on the Welsh Government's website. From September 2012 onwards, NQTs and EPD teachers will be expected to make use of this resource as part of their professional development.

We are moving fast on my seventeenth point to ensure that Continuing Professional Development (CPD) will in future be focussed on system-wide needs linked to the School Effectiveness Framework and the Skills Framework.

While it is evident that there is excellent teaching and learning taking place in schools in Wales, the challenge is to ensure that this is not isolated practice but shared more widely. It is only through sharing the most effective practice that every teacher can improve what they do in the classroom.

We want to change the culture of CPD by developing a system that ensures that teachers collaborate together as part of their normal day-to-day practice and work to support the development of excellent teaching. In order to support this we will produce a range of development and support materials.

My eighteenth point on the 2nd February related to the need to produce Statutory Guidance for School Improvement, which sets out the best practice currently available in Wales and elsewhere.

There is good practice in Wales.

There is some world-class practice happening in schools. Estyn has deemed that there is sector-leading practice in 9% of primary schools and in 26% of secondary schools inspected so far. I have been told many times that good practice doesn't travel in Wales. I'm not prepared to accept this. Parents shouldn't have to accept this. We are a small country. We can communicate relatively easily and swiftly. What are the barriers to sharing good practice other than reluctance? The banding system that I have already mentioned will have a focus on ensuring that those schools being identified in the 'top' bands have a responsibility to share their successful strategies to the benefit of others – this is not a competition with only one winner, we want ALL schools to be excellent; ALL learners to have the opportunity and support to reach their potential. Collaboration, not competition, that is what will secure the sustainable improvements we seek. That is the role of our professional learning communities – teachers sharing best practice and learning from one another.

We are drawing together a range of work that has identified the most effective practice in Wales, and elsewhere, combining this with high quality 'kite marked' materials resources and sources of research and making these available to all practitioners in Wales. We are working with Estyn and local authorities to ensure that this material is coordinated and robust and easily accessible. We are planning to implement this as Statutory Guidance by the end of 2012.

I made it clear as my nineteenth point that local authorities which refused to participate in consortium arrangements would suffer financial penalties.

I asked the Task and Finish Group to take a long-term, whole system view. The primary objective I gave them was to ensure that the education system is structured in a way that will deliver sustained improvement to learner attainment across Wales. The view of the Group is unassailable and notes:

The development of regional consortia seems to us to be a positive way forward. Local authorities working in partnership in regions to tackle issues relating to resources, capacity and outcomes may well be the way forward at both political and professional levels. We believe that our local authorities cooperating in four regions offer a more effective way forward when compared to 22 authorities trying to resolve issues of delivering educational services, supporting schools and using resources in an effective way.

In March, I was given assurances by all 22 local authority leaders that education was their number one priority and they agreed a radical overhaul was needed to address the systemic failure in education. The evidence all points to regional partnership working as the answer – and the political commitment given by all 22 local authorities is that school improvement regional partnerships will be in place by September 2012. Change is never easy. But it is imperative. We can secure improvement by sharing services.

We have no time to waste. My challenge to the 22 authorities is to deliver an ambitious and radical set of shared services. Between now and September 2012, I expect to see:

- strong leadership
- upfront investment to deliver the agenda
- strong governance
- the creation of shadow provision and the appointment of key personnel
- targeting of resources to those schools in most need
- recruitment and deployment of system leaders against national criteria
- best practice being applied across consortia.

I am on record as saying that I would not have invented 22 local education authorities. I believe that the fragmentation of education authorities in the mid-1990s was one of the contributing factors for the downturn in educational performance a decade later, as effective challenge and support was lost in many parts of the system and time, energy and resource was dissipated. As Estyn has reported, strategic management is good or better in only half of local authorities.

Sadly, as I mentioned earlier, Estyn inspections reveal that there is an unacceptable number of under performing schools in Wales; underperformance cannot and will not be tolerated.

Underperformance covers not only those schools with very low absolute outcomes but also those where 'raw scores' seem acceptable but are actually considerably below what could be reasonably expected given the context in which a school operates. It is because of the need to consider performance in context that I do not hold with the use of 'simplistic league tables' – they mask the real picture and encourage 'gaming'. The new banding system that I am introducing aims to move away from this simplistic approach looking at outcomes in context and looking at progress as well as 'raw results'. Underperforming schools need to be challenged and where necessary receive expert support to make improvement.

I am serious about shared school improvement services – and I have agreed to provide seed funding to the four regional consortia so that they can provide immediate and urgent support to these schools.

The slowing in progress in educational performance is not the only unfortunate outcome of the creation of the unitary authority system in 1997. According to a report compiled by the Welsh Local Government Association, which they supplied to me last month, entitled 'Excellence in Education', there is evidence to show that there was an increase of backroom staff as a consequence of reorganisation. The WLGA concluded 'the numbers of back office Education staff increased following local government reorganisation in 1997'. Our Front Line Resources Review, following on from the work on the cost of administering the education system in Wales undertaken by PWC last year, is focussed firmly on driving resources to the Front Line, and I look to local authorities to implement this, along with their commitment to increasing the amount of resource delegated to schools from 75% to 85% within four years.

Along with assessing whether consortia should be challenged on the low aspirations of local authorities' targets agreed with schools, our new School Standards Unit will also assess consortia capacity and likelihood to raise standards and broker support or challenge. In the case where it considers additional support is needed, the Unit may act as a facilitator to build capacity on a sustainable basis.

I must make it clear that we are moving to a practical programme of school effectiveness. The Unit will contribute to turning the School Effectiveness Framework into a programme for implementation. It will track implementation and refine and moderate where necessary.

The Unit will need to operate quickly and end complacency. It will also be honest and engage to build strong lasting relationships. It must be viewed by Directors of Education as helping to strengthen their role in challenging and supporting schools. It will create a culture of continuous learning from the bottom up. It will support our efforts to improve performance across the whole system.

The Unit has already started its first set of performance stocktake visits to each consortium. During these visits, following robust conversation and discussion, a set of actions will be agreed. These actions will focus on sharing existing good practice to overcome underachievement. The Unit will visit each consortium on a termly basis to build upon these initial action plans and ascertain progress in delivery of intended improvement priorities. It will report to me regularly.

As far as I'm concerned, there is no opting out of the regional working agenda. I expect this to be in place in September 2012.

The challenge before us is significant. So far Estyn has inspected six local authorities under the Common Inspection Framework. The inspections of four local authorities have been published to date. Neath Port Talbot was judged to be good across the board. Cardiff was adequate. Or, to put it another way, barely good enough. There is a similar story with Wrexham and Powys – the judgement is good in terms of outcomes but otherwise judged to be adequate in terms of provision, leadership and management, current performance and prospects for improvement. It tells the same story – a fair system aiming to become good.

I fully intend to test local government to check if it has made good on the promise. I will be asking:

- Have education standards gone up?
- Are education services coherent with other services?
- Are LAs cost effective? Have they delegated 85% of funding to schools?
- Is change irreversible? Have milestones been met? Sufficient progress made?

The answers to these questions must be yes. If not, given my responsibility for learners, given my responsibility to parents, given the challenges identified to us by PISA and other evidence, I would not hesitate to follow a different route if the consortia do not deliver.

As the report of the independent Task and Finish Group chaired by Viv Thomas recommended a further review in 2013, I will apply these tests to see whether the consortia arrangements were delivering what was demanded of them. If not, more radical restructuring of education delivery on a regional basis should follow. Local authorities and consortia therefore have two years to demonstrate that they can deliver the improvements in school performance that our system requires. But I will start to look at delivery in detail from this time next year.

The twentieth point in my speech on the 2nd February related to behaviour and attendance. These are crucial issues and I have made it clear that we will have a zero tolerance approach to truancy. In March I launched the All Wales Attendance Framework for the Education Welfare Service (EWS). The Framework aims to enable the EWS and schools to deliver services that are consistent, accessible and of a high standard. I asked Professor Ken Reid to look again at the proposals in the NBAR report. He has reported to me and I met with him on Monday to discuss his new proposals. I was encouraged that his views are very much in line with plans my Department is already developing as part of the new Behaviour and Attendance Action Plan. That Plan sets out focused actions under three headings – training and development; standards and accountability; and a holistic approach to individual support and additional learning needs.

When I came into the Education Department eighteen months ago, I said I wanted better implementation, fewer initiatives, and for people to keep it simple. That remains my focus. I put in place a simple focus for the School Effectiveness Framework – literacy, numeracy and tackling the link between disadvantage and poor performance. I had a simple message on school improvement in February. Performance will be our driver.

Labour's manifesto made it clear that for us, education is a priority. We made it clear that we retain our commitment to a quality comprehensive education system for all.

We know we have great teachers in Wales. We know we have great leaders at all levels of our education system. We know we have world-class best practice in Wales.

Our challenge is to ensure that world-class best practice is available to all our learners. To ensure that all are able to achieve to their full potential.

The change we have to make, from a fair system to a good one, is a challenge for the whole system. I cannot make it happen. My Department can't make it happen.

Not on our own, anyway.

It is a challenge for all of us – politicians, officials, inspectors, advisers, headteachers, teachers, teaching assistants, governors, parents – and learners.