



Association of Teachers and Lecturers

ATL Statement on the
Northern Ireland Executive
Draft Programme for Government,
“Building a Better Future”
and associated Budget, Investment Programme and
schedule of Public Service Agreements

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Response to the Northern Ireland Executive Draft Programme for Government, “Building a Better Future” and associated Budget, Investment Programme and schedule of Public Service Agreements

The Draft Programme for Government sets out the Strategic Priorities of the Northern Ireland Executive from 2008-11, setting out Principles, Priorities, Cross Cutting Themes and Key Goals in

- Dynamic Economy
- Tolerance, Health & Well Being
- Environment
- Infrastructure
- Efficient Public Services
- Linkages (North/South, East/West and international).

The Draft Programme is delivered through 23 separate Public Service Agreements (PSAs) .

The Draft Investment Strategy sets out an Investment framework with 6 Investment “Pillars” and 3 cross cutting investment themes.

The Pillars are

- Networks
- Skills
- Health
- Social
- Environmental
- Productive

These pillars are then divided in 23 “Sub Pillar” investment sectors

The Cross Cutting Investment themes are:

- Economic Growth and Competitiveness
- Society based on Partnership, equality, inclusuon, regional balance and mutual respect
- High quality built environment and environmental enhancement

ATL is primarily interested in the education and skills related elements of the budget. Our commentary is set out below.

Commentary:

General: The PfG is written in management consultant “*corporate speak*” gobble-de-gook and would be generally impenetrable to the general public. It has, however, been described glowingly by Iris Robinson MP, MLA as “a

Unionist driven Programme for Government” endorsed as “a radical right wing agenda” (1). ATL would find it hard to dissent from this assessment.

The Public Service Agreement (PSA) approach is a H.M. Treasury driven tactic to ape the ‘cost minimization’ culture of the private sector. This is a short term view driven by shareholder return and is not necessarily appropriate for the public sector. The PSA’s provide for a narrow, blinkered, and reductivist approach to public service which is not welcomed by ATL. The balkanized ‘PSA’ approach will not lend itself to ‘joined up government’ and common sense inter-departmental collaboration.

Balancing the Budget: A balanced budget, within a tight spending round, has seen three main tactics used to balance the books

- The 3% Efficiency Savings across all Departments
- Dependence on revenue raised from the sale of public assets
- Calling in funds carried forward under end of year funding arrangements and taking up the full amount of borrowing carried forward from earlier years.

There are aspects of the above that will impact significantly on Education

Efficiency Savings: The Minister for Education, Caitriona Ruane, has declared herself content with her Education allocation. The Education Budget, in common with all departmental budgets, will provide for “year on year “efficiencies of 3%. These efficiencies will be hard to make, and the detail of where they are likely to come from. ATL’s view is that cumulative efficiencies (ie 3% in Year 1, a further 3% in year 2 and a third 3% in Year 3) cannot be found without impacting significantly on “services to the frontline”. This was also the view of the Department of Education officers in a private briefing to the ICTU Education Unions earlier in 2007.

Asset Sales: Amongst the Asset Sales will be a large number of school properties amongst schools which will be closed or amalgamated under the recommendations of the Bain Report and Sustainable Schools policy. The disproportionate sale of state owned schools will see the school estate balanced in favour of Catholic and private interests. ATL does not consider this to be a healthy direction of travel. The continued use of Private Finance style procurement will accelerate this trend and have the tendency of ‘marketising’ education.

ATL’s Priorities: Notwithstanding a failing Negotiating Machinery, all teachers’ unions, and Management Side representatives did agree in 2007 to prioritize the aspects of the 2004 Curran Inquiry Report which remain unimplemented. We agreed that the priorities to be fed into the CSR (Comprehensive Spending Review) were to be:

- 10% Planning , Preparation & Assessment time
- Headship Time for teaching Principals

- A first guaranteed year for Newly Qualified Teachers, similar to that undertaken in Scotland under the auspices of the McCrone Report.

It is not self evident from the PfG that any of this has been achieved and, in view of the 3% Efficiency Savings set out above, the likelihood of teachers seeing even a pale imitation of the “*Raising Standards, Tackling Workload*” agreement in England and Wales look unlikely.

Public Sector Agreements

The PSAs relevant to education are:

- **PSA 2: Skills for Prosperity:** includes the Northern Ireland Skills Strategy, Apprenticeship, Learning for Life and Work, the Entitlement Framework and increasing STEM subject uptake
- **PSA 3 Increasing Employment:** Refers to the Careers, information, advice and guidance framework
- **PSA 6: Children & Family:** includes Early Years strategy and Sport NI investment programme (including schools)
- **PSA 10 Helping Children & Young People to achieve through Education:** aims to ensure that 30% of Free School Meals children achieve at least a Level 2 qualification and seeks to improve the performance of schools in Neighbourhood Renewal areas.
- **PSA 16 Investing in Health & Education estates:** includes provision for 100 school building projects through an area planning framework.
- **PSA 19 Raising Standards in our Schools:** includes reference to the revised curriculum, and the school improvement policy

Some Commentary on the Public Service Agreements

PSA 2, Skills: ATL is skeptical of the drivers behind the Northern Ireland Skills Strategy, which concentrates on delivering better outcomes up to Level 2 – a qualification level which brings nugatory rewards in the labour market. Equally the Skills Strategy and “modern” apprenticeship programme are misconceived and take no account of the competitive strategies of companies, ignoring that “Economic Growth drives Skills” – not the other way round.

PSA 10: ATL considers that the approach of “targeting” is misguided. We support universal provision, rather than means tested or targeted assistance. In the case of PSA 10, ATL would prefer a policy of **socially balanced intakes** into schools, rather than targeting disadvantaged children or disadvantaged schools through special measures. Balanced intakes are what will, more than any other single measure, improve overall performance. (See Note 1 at the end of this statement.)

PSA 16, School Estates: The main unresolved question in regard to school estates is whether, after the debacle of Balmoral High School, there will be continued use of PFI style procurement. The Finance Minister has not ruled out more PFI (or PPP, or SIB) procurement, and nor has the Education Minister.

It is clear that one PfG target, the rolling out of **Extended Schools**, will be undermined by the facility management of schools by private sector profiteers. For example, use of state of the art sports facilities in PFI schools is all but closed off to community interests as a consequence of high commercial tariffs. ATL considers that, in the light of the damning recent report by the Northern Ireland Audit Office on the “Pathfinder PFI schemes” (2), that the whole PFI route should be dispensed with, with the termination of the Strategic Investment Board a logical consequence

Area Planning too has not been resolved. Will areas be based on district council boundaries? Or on Further Education College catchment areas? Who will be on the planning boards? The concept of area planning, a cornerstone to resolving the schools estate issue, has not been thought through, as yet.

PSA 19, Raising Standards in Schools: The PfG ignores the vast body of evidence (see note on balanced intakes below) which sets out clearly that the largest determinant of differential performance levels by school children, by far, is social class. Some 85% of performance differentials are determined socially, with around 15% determined by other factors – of which what goes on in the classroom is the most important.

The most effective measures to improve school performance would be to implement measures to compress wage and income differentials and to reduce inequality of income. Such measures are not mentioned.

Accepting that school improvement measures focused on the classroom will have some effect, there are still no concrete measures outlined in the PfG or PSA agreement.

Summary: Overall, ATL considers the PfG to be a woolly, badly written and vague document - perhaps deliberately so, in order to achieve the requisite cross community consensus. The dangers of generous budgetary assumptions, including aggressive efficiency savings suggests that the 3 year period ahead will be one of difficult retrenchment. For teachers, it is not at all evident that the unimplemented agenda of Curran will be addressed in part, or at all. More clarification is required.

(1) Newsletter, 7 November 2007

(2) Education Pathfinder Projects, “Building for the Future – A review of the PFI Education Pathfinder Projects”, NIA 113/03, 14th October 2004. See also Transfer of Surplus Land in the PFI Education Pathfinder Projects (NIAO Sept, 2007)

<http://www.niauditoffice.gov.uk/pubs/onepress.asp?arc=False&id=188&dm=0&dy=0>

Note 1: On Balanced Intakes: A considerable body of evidence exists to support the view that balanced intakes (in ability and social class) provide the best overall performance, although this has not always been acted upon by policy makers.. The latest evidence is from David Jesson (York University) "*Comprehensive Education: Evolution, Achievements and New Directions*" studied the remaining 15 areas in England where selection at 11 has been retained and concludes that overall, national and individual performance would improve if the two tier system was ended.

An extract from Sullivan and Whitty (2005) 'Life Chances and Educational Achievement in the UK: A Research and Policy Overview' in '*Maintaining Momentum: promoting social mobility and life chances from early years to adulthood*' Eds Delorenzi, Reed and Robinson London: Institute for Public Policy Research comments:

'There is consensus that school composition effects are important and that schools with a high proportion of students of low social status or low prior academic ability are at a disadvantage (Coleman 1966, Henderson et al 1978, Mortimore et al 1988, Rutter et al 1979, Smith and Tomlinson 1989, Summers and Wolfe 1977, Thrupp 1995, Willms 1986)...Levacic and Woods (2002) find the concentration of social disadvantage in a school relative to other local schools has a strong impact on GCSE improvement over time. These school composition effects may be due to the influence of peer groups on aspirations and behaviour, or they may be due to other processes, such as schools with low proportions of 'able' students finding it hard to attract good teachers.'