

Written Ministerial Statement

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Department of Education

MISCHARACTERISATION AND MISUNDERSTANDING OF TRANSFORMED, CURRICULUM, ASSESSMENT AND QUALIFICATIONS REFORM

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Mr Givan (The Minister of Education): “People are entitled to their own opinions: they are not entitled to their own facts.” So said former US Senator, Daniel Patrick Moynihan a generation ago.

Those words remain true today.

Put another way, debate and scrutiny are essential in a healthy democracy and I welcome both. But scrutiny must be grounded in facts, not in misunderstandings, mischaracterisations, or misinformation.

TransformED is Northern Ireland’s programme to raise standards and widen opportunity by strengthening the core of areas of our education system: curriculum, pedagogy, assessment, qualifications and professional learning. It is locally designed, evidence led and deliberately phased so schools have the time, tools and training required to deliver for every child.

Over the last number of weeks there have been frequent mischaracterisation of key aspects of the TransformED Reform Programme. Because TransformED is too important to get wrong, and because I do not wish to see these inaccuracies repeated, whether through misunderstanding or something less generous, I am issuing this written statement to set the record straight.

It is accompanied by a 10 Myths Document designed to challenge some of the most common misunderstandings about TransformED, highlight the evidence behind the reforms and explain what is really changing. A copy has been placed in the Assembly Library.

Priorities and Strategic Focus

Much has been made of the programme’s focus on curriculum, assessment, qualifications and teaching practice.

For example, on the Stormont Sources podcast (Thursday 12 March), Michelle Guy argued that curriculum and qualifications should not be our first priority. However, the international evidence is unequivocal in the opposite direction to Ms Guy’s conclusions. High quality teaching and learning are the primary drivers of educational improvement.

The McKinsey, Spark and Sustain report (February 2024) emphasises that successful education systems “ground changes in the classroom, focusing first and foremost on teachers and the content they deliver”.

The most important factor in determining how well children succeed is the quality of teachers and teaching. To quote Andreas Schleicher of the OECD, “you can spend a lot of money on education, but if you don’t spend it wisely, on improving the quality of instruction, you won’t get higher student outcomes”.

Around the world, successful reforms focus on interventions closest to pupils and work outward, starting with the classroom - what is taught (curriculum), how it is taught (pedagogy) and how learning is evaluated (assessment and qualifications). These factors are particularly crucial for pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds, for whom strong teaching can make the greatest difference.

These essential components have received almost no focus or investment during the past number of years in Northern Ireland. Reform and investment in these areas is long overdue.

It is, therefore, deeply troubling that Ms Guy characterised curriculum and pedagogy as an optional extra, a “lovely tapestry” rather than the essential foundation and foremost priority of any high-performing system: an argument at odds with decades of robust international evidence.

Equally inaccurate were her claims that I have neglected urgent issues relating to budget, Special Educational Needs (SEN), workload and the school estate. In reality, I have published a comprehensive five year Strategic Budget Plan; developed detailed plans for a major SEN capital programme; and commissioned and completed an independent review of teacher workload.

My department’s five-year Budget Strategy provides a pathway to the long term financial stability required to address the profound structural challenges facing Northern Ireland’s education system. It has a central focus on the reform and improvement of SEN services.

Meanwhile, detailed plans for an Executive led SEN Capital Investment Programme, which set out with unprecedented clarity the scale of the crisis across both the SEN and mainstream estate, have been waiting with the Executive since September 2025.

These proposals would move Northern Ireland away from emergency, stop gap accommodation and towards long term, planned, sustainable provision, modernising specialist SEN facilities, replacing crumbling buildings and restoring essential curriculum spaces in special schools. By ring fencing the required SEN capital investment as an Executive priority in line with Programme for Government commitments, the programme would stabilise the entire schools’ infrastructure and ensure safe, modern, fit for purpose facilities for the first time in a generation.

In the absence of Executive support from Sinn Féin and the Alliance Party, and in the face of proposed cuts to next year’s education capital budget, it is difficult to see how these parties can credibly claim to support transformation of the school estate while rejecting the only viable route to achieving it.

Facts on pace and delivery

There have also been frequent assertions that TransformED is progressing at an unsustainable or breakneck speed. These are equally unfounded.

The published implementation roadmap for curriculum, assessment and qualifications reform sets out that first teaching of the new statutory curriculum will be phased over three academic years from September 2028. This will be followed by first teaching of revised GCSEs from 2029 and A levels from 2030.

This timeline provides more than two years of preparation for curriculum reform and more than three for the introduction of revised qualifications. My department’s published roadmap for reform is publicly available precisely to provide clarity, predictability and planning time.

Cathy Mason stated on the recent Stormont Sources podcast, “We have children who are sitting at home with severe anxiety over the reforms and not being able to do coursework, not being able to do AS levels.” If this is indeed the case then Ms Mason should really take the opportunity to point out to parents that the first cohort of children to be impacted by the GCSE changes are still in primary school and the children affected by the removal of AS levels in Northern Ireland are in the first year of post-primary education - to say nothing of the compelling case for the changes which are proposed.

I am not optimistic that such facts will be conveyed if there is a political point to be made. I note that Cathy Mason also explicitly claimed on Stormont Sources that 378 circulars had been sent out to school principals. I am unclear to what this figure and timescale this number relates. However, for

clarity and accuracy, the actual number of Departmental circulars issued in the whole of 2025 is 14 and 12 to date in 2026.

Consultation, independent review and listening in practice

The frequent suggestions that consultations are merely procedural and that decisions are pre-determined are also disingenuous. A full public consultation on the future of CCEA GCSEs, AS and A levels ran from 18 September to 13 November 2025. This was followed by three regional engagement events attended by most post-primary principals in Northern Ireland and the publication of a comprehensive Consultation Report in February 2026.

Public consultations are vital, but they are not plebiscites and informed policy making requires a balancing of public responses with robust evidence and analysis. True leadership means taking responsibility for making informed decisions not outsourcing judgement to the outcome of a consultation or to a citizens' assembly.

Nonetheless, the Policy Framework for General Qualifications, published on 3 March 2026, reflects meaningful changes made in response to consultation feedback including the decision not to alter the GCSE grading scale, the retention of graded speaking and listening in GCSE English Language, and the introduction of a new modular A level structure.

The original consultation proposed a fully linear A level; however, many stakeholders believed that placing all assessment at the end of Year 14 would create stress and anxiety for pupils, given that A levels determine university entry.

After listening carefully to the views of pupils, parents, teachers, and school leaders, we have, therefore, adopted this modular alternative. It retains the key advantage of AS, allowing pupils to bank marks after one year, while addressing the significant problems associated with the current AS system. These include the substantial teaching and learning time lost to the AS series, the use of AS results as gatekeeping for entry into Year 14, and the excessive number of exams pupils currently face in Year 13.

The new modular A level fixes this: it consists of three units across two years, with a single unit (30%) that can be taken in Year 13 and the remaining two units (70%) in Year 14. This reduces the number of high stakes exams, protects teaching time, and retains the ability to "bank" marks.

At GCSE, English Language, Mathematics and Science will remain modular to support focus on these core areas; other GCSE subjects will move to linear to provide time for deeper learning.

English, maths and science are central to educational achievement. This approach means that if schools wish to enter pupils for GCSE exams in Year 11, the focus will be on supporting strong attainment in these core subjects rather than widespread early entry.

Many pupils who are entered for unit exams in Year 11 are likely to achieve better results at first sitting if they take their exams at the end of Year 12 when they are both more mature and have benefitted from more teaching time. Otherwise, they are competing against older Year 12 pupils who have enjoyed an extra year of teaching. We do not need our 14 and 15-year-old children to enter a whole series of high-stakes exams in Year 11.

Equity and evidence - including non-exam assessment

There have also been frequent claims that reducing coursework harms disadvantaged and SEN learners, who it is claimed benefit from continuous assessment rather than high stakes final exams. These claims are similarly unsupported by evidence.

Ofqual's large scale analysis (2004–2017) found negligible to no impact of coursework on outcomes by socio economic status or SEN, while highlighting persistent concerns about authenticity and

consistency (issues heightened by the rise of generative AI). Indeed, better outcomes in coursework are linked to student income characteristics and centre contexts, raising concerns about equity and portability.

I note that non-exam assessment will remain in subjects where practical skills need to be assessed (for example Art and Design, PE, Technology and Design); it is only being removed where it duplicates written exams and adds workload without educational benefit. Notably, Ms Mason ignores that my proposals in this regard were strongly supported by both school leaders and teachers

In terms of linear and modular structure, studies carried out by Ofqual and the Oxford University Centre for Educational Assessment found no educationally significant difference in outcomes between linear and modular examination systems. They also found that equity gaps - whether by gender, socio-economic status or school type - were not affected by exam structure.

Northern Ireland's plan

Comparisons with England's 2010s structural reforms made particularly by the Sinn Fein and Alliance Parties are also misplaced and show a lack of understanding of both the TransformED Programme and the Gove reforms.

It is not my intention to replicate in Northern Ireland the changes that took place in England: rather it is my intention to learn from what has worked across the world and to apply the lessons learned in a way that reflects the needs, strengths and context of Northern Ireland.

The English reforms centred on academies, free schools, league tables and market based accountability. These are not elements of TransformED. Unlike, TransformED, the English reforms placed limited emphasis on sustained investment in teacher development or system wide professional learning.

TransformED takes a fundamentally different approach. Our focus is on strengthening the core of teaching and learning. Our education system has many strengths. We have a resolute and highly skilled workforce. We have a culture of community and service, visible in every school's response to need. Our schools have a strong tradition of innovation, collaboration and research informed practice. TransformED invests directly in those strengths, with the first sustained investment in professional learning for many years.

We are investing in teachers and leaders through initiatives such as the £31 million Teacher Professional Learning Fund, the CPD Academy, the science of learning programme for primary schools, and funding for schools to develop research informed conferences. This approach builds capacity, fosters collaboration and supports professional growth rather than creating competition between schools.

To give an example of the need for investment in these areas: we are currently the only jurisdiction in the UK without a professional qualification for headship, a key commitment with TransformED. This is vital because it ensures that school leaders possess the specialised knowledge, skills and judgement required to lead complex organisations effectively.

To summarise: our philosophy is one of support, not sanction; development, not market pressure; professional trust, not top down control. At its heart, TransformED is grounded in equity, inclusion and the belief that long term improvement comes from strengthening the profession and supporting schools.

Curriculum Reform

The case for renewal in Northern Ireland is also straightforward: the current statutory curriculum framework dates from 2007 and is now nearly 20 years old.

The current framework is too high-level and lacks clarity about the essential knowledge and skills pupils should acquire at each stage of their education. This has led to inconsistency across schools, with teachers often left to make disproportionate decisions about content.

Instead of setting a clear and ambitious benchmark for all learners, the curriculum has allowed gaps to emerge. It also lacks coherence, making it difficult for learning to build logically over time, as there is not clear, well-sequenced content for each subject supported by high-quality resources. Equally, there is no bespoke content for Irish-medium or special schools.

It is equally important to challenge the misconception that introduction of a knowledge rich, well sequenced curriculum is a right wing English Conservative agenda. Rather, the centrality of knowledge in curriculum design emerges from contemporary cognitive science and has been endorsed across political traditions both in England and internationally, including by the Francis Review and the current Labour Government in England, and for example, by the Labour administration in Victoria, Australia or the Swedish coalition government comprised of Moderates, Christian Democrats, and Liberals

In Scotland, for example, the OECD recommended a more explicit role for knowledge and a systematic review cycle; Education Scotland has now instituted a national Curriculum Improvement Cycle.

These are converging conclusions, not partisan preferences.

Presentation over delivery

Michelle Guy has described me as the “Minister of Announcements” rather than tangible delivery. This ignores the scale and urgency of creating a coherent, evidence based policy framework after years of drift. In just two years, I have delivered the most comprehensive programme of policy reform in decades including the TransformED Strategy itself as well as major reviews and new policy frameworks for curriculum, assessment, qualifications, and literacy.

It also overlooks the substantial, tangible delivery already in place for schools, teachers and pupils. What follows is not aspiration, it is action.

- The Northern Ireland Childcare Subsidy Scheme, reducing childcare costs for working parents.
- The Pre-School Expansion Programme.
- The SEN Reform Agenda and a five-year Delivery Plan to address long-standing structural failings in SEN services.
- Creation of more than 1,300 additional SEN places for the 2025–26 academic year.
- A dedicated Controlled Schools’ Unit within the Education Authority to enhance support for controlled schools.
- A new system-level sample assessment in literacy and numeracy for pupils in Years 4, 7 and 10 to provide robust, standardised monitoring of system performance.
- The TransformED Teacher Professional Learning Fund - £31 million of investment over three years — giving every school dedicated, per-teacher funding for high-quality, evidence-based professional development tailored to their needs.
- The Online Teacher CPD Academy for post-primary schools, now supporting 145 of our 190 post-primary schools and more than 6,000 teachers with research-informed, on-demand CPD.

- The Science of Learning programme, delivered with Evidence-Based Education, now supporting around 240 primary schools.
- An expanded induction package for newly qualified teachers, including online and face-to-face training in SEN, literacy, numeracy, behaviour management and the science of learning.
- Funding for more than 100 schools to deliver 50 research-informed conferences, enabling practitioners and researchers to share what works.
- A new partnership with the Chartered College of Teaching, funding 100 teachers to pursue Chartered Teacher Status and offering associate membership, with tailored professional learning, to 100 classroom assistants.
- A new Initial Teacher Education Bursary Scheme addressing shortages in key post-primary subjects.
- Procurement of a new Professional Qualification for Headship to support the next generation of school principals.
- Evidence-based guidelines on the use of mobile phones in schools.
- Halloween revision programmes in 70 post-primary schools, with over 100 schools participating in GCSE and A-level Easter 2026 revision schemes.
- The RAISE Reading with AI research programme, providing AI-driven literacy tutoring to more than 8,000 pupils.
- £3.7 million invested in locality-led RAISE projects in areas of disadvantage.
- Funding secured for the long-delayed Strule Shared Education Campus, now under active construction and set to deliver state-of-the-art facilities for 4,000 pupils.
- Fifteen major new-build, extension and refurbishment projects progressed to contract and construction.
- Life-saving defibrillators provided to every school that needed one.

Others can decide whether this is simply a record of announcements or a record of delivery. By contrast, I await the report on the Education Committee's mini-inquiry into RSE, which commenced almost two years ago.

Conclusion

The facts are clear. The TransformED programme is evidence led, responsibly paced, openly consulted upon and focused on the areas that matter most. Schools are already benefiting from real investment and practical support. Claims to the contrary rely on rhetoric and misinformation rather than reality.

The conclusion is simple. Northern Ireland's children get one chance. TransformED gives our system the clarity, stability and ambition it has lacked for far too long.

Those who misrepresent it must explain why they dismiss the international evidence that shows precisely what improves outcomes for pupils, particularly the most disadvantaged.

I will continue to listen. I will continue to refine policy where evidence requires it. But I will also continue to deliver. Our children deserve a system built on truth, not distortion; on progress, not politics; on evidence, not inertia.

I was not satisfied with a 'steady as you go' approach and an unwillingness to confront the failure of orthodoxies long past their utility.

Children cannot afford decision-makers to luxuriate in analysis and debate long after it is clear what is needed. I will not allow their future to be held back by those who prefer political commentary to action and ground their criticisms in myths and misunderstandings.

Paul Givan MLA
Minister of Education