

IT'S LONG PAST MAKE-YOUR-MIND UP TIME OVER ESA

He has an in-tray bulging with controversial issues, including shaking up school budgets, but the task of getting the money-saving Education and Skills Authority to work is one of education minister John O'Dowd's longest running problems. He talks to education correspondent **Simon Doyle** about the challenges and why he is running out of patience with the delays

EDUCATION minister John O'Dowd is on the verge of abandoning a planned education body which is supposed to save his department money but which has cost millions of pounds and still does not exist.

The minister has warned it is "long past make your mind up time" on the creation of the Education and Skills Authority (ESA).

With no sign of the political deadlock over the proposed body being broken any time soon, Mr O'Dowd told *The Irish News* he would have to consider another option.

The minister said he would authorise the rebuilding of all the existing bodies that have been wound down significantly over the last five years.

Already half a decade overdue, ESA is still reeling from the news that one of its key directors has walked away from the project.

Barry Mulholland was selected to oversee quality and standards at the new body, and stood to earn more than £100,000 a year. His sudden departure raised fresh questions about whether ESA will ever see the light of day.

The saga has already dragged on for five years and now the goal to be "operational in 2013" looks increasingly in doubt.

ESA will replace numerous bodies including the five area education boards and the Council for Catholic Maintained Schools.

While the body was designed to cut bureaucracy and save money, it has been beset by delays and cost millions of pounds just to set up.

The bill to create ESA was introduced in the assembly in October last year.

However, it was initially due to be in place by April 2008, then April 2009 and then January 2010.

Progress ground to a halt this year after concerns were raised that the proposed legislation threatened the

autonomy of voluntary grammar schools who employ all their own staff at present.

In other sectors, governors hire and fire teachers but non-teaching staff are employed by area boards.

To break this deadlock, and win the backing of the DUP, the minister conceded that grammar schools could continue being employers.

This same right would also be offered to all other schools but it is unlikely that many will accept such additional responsibility.

Schools would have to offer official conditions and rates of pay to non-teaching staff.

Sources said this was the single outstanding issue and agreement on ESA would be reached. It has not, however.

There are two options in the final business case for ESA – one to create the new body and another to restore the existing structure of five education boards.

While the second option would cost about £176 million more over a 10-year period, Mr O'Dowd says he has been forced to give this serious consideration.

"We have given a significant paper to the DUP several months ago and are awaiting a definitive response to that paper," he said.

"I believe the DUP leadership are serious about resolving the ESA issue but whether elements within the DUP or outside the DUP are holding them back remains to be seen."

Mr O'Dowd said he would soon have to decide whether to keep pushing for ESA, or backtrack.

The boards, meanwhile, have been significantly run down in anticipation of the new body, resulting in cuts in vital services to schools including crossing patrols and school maintenance.

Staff have also been leaving the system in their droves – hundreds have agreed to

redundancy packages.

New figures reveal that a total of 428 staff have left the boards, CCMS and other education bodies in recent years as part of the education sector voluntary severance schemes.

The Department of Education said these cutbacks could not solely be associated with preparations for ESA as they formed part of its Savings Delivery Plan 2011-15.

"Clearly the current ESA wrangle cannot continue forever," Mr O'Dowd said.

"There's been £16.5 million spent in preparing for ESA. That expenditure cannot continue.

"I think public expectations and confidence within the education system will not take any further delays regards this matter.

"It is long past make up your mind time around ESA. If we can't broker

a deal in the short period of time ahead, we will have to start rebuilding the structures that were there.

"That will again add further resource consequences for the public purse."

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Minister at end of tether

THERE have been hints about this in the past - 'get things moving or else'. Now it seems, the minister is at the end of his tether. In July last year, this newspaper carried a front page article that suggested ESA was "dead with no prospect of being resurrected". Whether it was coincidence, spite, or a case of 'don't dare second guess us', things started to progress almost immediately. Within days, the first and deputy first ministers said agreement had been reached. Talks took place in the executive by September and a month later the new education bill was introduced in the assembly. Perhaps people then got a bit ahead of themselves - even though the new body had a few more hurdles to

ANALYSIS

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clear, an advert was placed seeking a chairman and board members for ESA. No appointments have been made. The bill to allow for ESA's creation also managed to clear the tricky education committee stage, although 41 of its 68 clauses failed to

win members' backing. The cross-party committee raised numerous concerns including claims that the legislation would threaten the autonomy of grammar schools.

It was at about this point that it went quiet again. News that directors were jumping ship, however, brought everything back into focus.

John O'Dowd told *The Irish News* he was now considering, albeit reluctantly, the "Status Quo (rebooted)" option

contained in the business case for ESA.

This would be a backward step considering the amount of money spent on preparing for ESA and the millions more spent on making staff from existing bodies redundant.

Whether the minister is serious or not about rebuilding the boards, we will find out soon. Or perhaps, merely mentioning that ESA is doomed again will get things moving again. Either way, something needs to happen, and happen soon.

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