

2017.06.20

3.17 Deputy K.C. Lewis of the Minister for Education regarding the steps he was taking to minimise the impact of proposed grant reductions to States and private fee-paying schools: [1(355)]

In light of P.41/2017 being lodged, what steps, if any, is the Minister taking to minimise the impact on those parents affected of the proposed grant reductions to state and private fee-paying schools? Thank you.

Deputy R.G. Bryans of St. Helier (The Minister for Education):

Thank you to the Deputy. In order to minimise the impact on parents, we look carefully at all the options by spreading the savings fairly and equally across all sectors of the education service. In the case of fee-paying schools, we kept the saving as small as absolutely possible to limit the impact on families' disposable income and delayed it as long as possible. So in 2018 it would be a reduction by 1.5 per cent in the subsidy and in 2019, again, 1.5 per cent, so a total of 3 per cent over those 2 years. Some parents are under the misapprehension that we are taking away the subsidy or reducing it significantly. I want to stress that this is not the case. In the first year, if schools pass the whole savings to parents, which they do not have to do, it will work out at £3.20 a week or about £30 a term. In the second year, it will average out at £52.66 a term. This is clearly explained in the proposition.

3.17.1 Deputy K.C. Lewis:

I thank the Minister for his reply but the ongoing savings, I believe: 2018, £300,000, 2019, £308,000, so there would be ongoing savings of around £608,000. While I appreciate the need for savings, does the Minister not believe that he could be pushing schools and indeed parents just a little too hard? Thank you.

Deputy R.G. Bryans:

As I said, we looked at this very carefully; this is the last consideration that we did have. As I must remind Members that this was passed in the Medium Term Financial Plan and is part of our savings programme, if we did not make this particular saving, if it was rejected, then we would have to look elsewhere in the Education budget for it. As most people are aware, our Education budget is very delicate at this point in time.

3.17.2 Deputy M. Tadier:

Will the Minister take this opportunity to remind parents who might be finding it difficult to pay the school fees, especially if they are increasing that, there are some very good non-fee-paying schools in this Island in the state sector which, as I said, are absolutely free and they could consider saving themselves a lot of money in sending their school children to those schools which I am sure would willingly accept them and educate their children well?

Deputy R.G. Bryans:

Thank you to the Deputy for saying that. Absolutely right in the situation that parents find themselves, they do have a choice and this is about choice. We have an excellent state education system and it is about fairness that we have had to introduce this reduction of subsidy to the fee-paying schools.

3.17.3 Deputy G.P. Southern:

In a similar vein, would the Minister not agree that given the high standards of education in both our primary and secondary schools in the state sector that if parents require a particular form of education, then it is almost inevitable that they will have to pay for this?

Deputy R.G. Bryans:

That is absolutely right. But to reiterate again, the state sector is quite welcoming with regard to the choices parents have to make. If it is difficult for parents, and I understand the situation they found themselves in. Again, I must repeat, it is not necessary for the fee-paying sector to put these increases into their fees. But if they do choose to elect to move from the fee-paying schools to our state schools, we would welcome them.

3.17.4 Deputy G.P. Southern:

A supplementary, if I may? Is there any issue with the number of places in either primary or secondary States education currently?

Deputy R.G. Bryans:

There would be an issue to some extent if everybody elected to do that but we do have capacity in our schools if some parents feel they have to move their children. However, over the past 5 years the fee-paying schools have raised their prices by greater amounts than this that we are suggesting every year and we have not seen a significant migration to non-fee-paying schools.

3.17.5 Deputy M. Tadier:

If any subsidies are to be maintained for the fee-paying schools at all, does the Minister think that it is important that there is a mutual reciprocal obligation, especially in regard to provision for special needs, that these subsidised schools also have a proportionate amount of special needs provision so that it does not fall just or largely on the state sector?

Deputy R.G. Bryans:

Yes, that is a very good point. In terms of the fee-paying schools, it is true that the majority of the special needs children are within the state sector but it is a matter of choice and it is generally a matter of choice for parents because we have very excellent teaching for the special needs children through our States system. So we have schools that look after deaf children down at St. Clement, we have more needs recently introduced at Bel Royal Primary as an example. So we have very good facilities and teaching in all of these state schools for the special needs.

3.17.6 Deputy J.M. Maçon:

Given since the M.T.F.P. the Minister knew these cuts were due to take effect, what consideration was given to phasing them in, say, for example, to bring them into a new cohort for year 7, et cetera, et cetera, instead of bringing them in immediately to affect all years? What consideration, if anything, was given to that model?

Deputy R.G. Bryans:

There was a great amount of deliberation with regard to what we were considering here and it was ultimately the choice between us that we decided on the model that we have accepted which is introducing this very small reduction of 3 per cent over 2 years and warning parents well in advance.

3.17.7 Deputy K.C. Lewis:

I thank the Minister for his replies, but most of the people that have contacted me - there is a slight elitist flavour coming in here - are just regular people doing regular jobs and not wealthy by any

stretch of the imagination. If somebody wishes to have a private or fee-based education for their son or daughter, they have the right to do so but obviously in moderation with the fees. Does the Minister not agree?

Deputy R.G. Bryans:

Yes, it is, as I said earlier, a matter of choice and particularly when it comes to faith in the schools that we have over here. But, as I say, we have deliberated over this, we have put in the smallest reduction that we could and we told heads well in advance of the situation so that they could accommodate it in their previous fee increases.