

3. Questions to Minister without Notice - The Minister for Education Sport and Culture:

3.1 Deputy I.J. Gorst:

Can the Minister confirm what progress, if any, has been made towards the creation or conversion of a French-speaking primary school? Has a feasibility study been undertaken and if not why not?

Senator M.E. Vibert (The Minister for Education, Sport and Culture):

The suggestion of a French-speaking primary school was made at a meeting of the Alliance Française. I said at the time, if anybody listened, I thought it was a complete non-starter and always was going to be unless it was a private initiative. What has been looked at instead is a private French-speaking nursery class. I have been in correspondence with the Alliance, as other people have. The reason a primary school if one thinks it through would be very, very difficult - in my view impossible - to establish at present, would be (1) we do not have an empty school to do it with and (2) we have space in our schools and people want to go to their local schools and not have to go somewhere else because that local school is only French-speaking. I think that the way ahead would be that if there is sufficient interest perhaps a nursery class to start with. I have visited such classes - Gaelic-speaking - in Ireland when I was attending the British-Irish Council and also in Wales they have such classes and it is a grounding for the children. Then you can see if it wishes to continue, but there is no intention at present to convert one of our state primary schools into a French-speaking only primary school.

3.2 Deputy J.A. Martin:

Would the Minister please give the House an update, I did mention this to him a few months ago? There is a new Olympic-style competition called the United Kingdom School Games. It was covered by Channel 4, Sir, over a period of 2 hours one Sunday and another 2 hours. It is a mini sort of Olympics and there are medal ceremonies, and I think it would be worthwhile for our Education Minister to at least investigate and just give an update to the House where we are on this. It seems an excellent event where our children can compete against 15 to 17 year olds.

Senator M.E. Vibert:

Yes, Sir, and can I thank the pupils of J.C.G. (Jersey College for Girls) who have womanfully sat through nearly 2 hours of the States, and I hope it has not put them off too much, but I thank them and it shows a part of our initiative to increase knowledge of the States and citizenship in general is working well. But, to return to Deputy Martin's question, yes, I have asked my Assistant Director Sports to look into this and report back. At present we take part in the Jeux des Iles which is a very high-quality competition and is very good value for the Island because we pay a joining fee one-off and then can send as many people as we want and only have to pay for the travel, and we are comparing the U.K. school games against such other competitions as we are in. If it proves to be something that we should be taking part in I will endeavour to ensure that we give our children the opportunity to do so.

3.3 Deputy R.G. Le Hérissier:

Would the Minister comment on the continual turnover of principals at the Jersey College for Girls?

Senator M.E. Vibert:

It is very, very unfortunate that there has been a turnover of principals. There have been very good and usually personal reasons for the turnover and I would hope that we will have better luck next time. We will be advertising early in the New Year for another principal and we hope that the new principal appointed, whoever that person happens to be, will be there for certainly some time because we feel it is unfortunate there have been so many in so short a time.

3.3.1 Deputy R.G. Le Hérissier:

Would the Minister tell the House whether upon investigation he feels his recruitment procedures may be remiss in this regard and that something has gone fundamentally wrong? Because there have been too many of these occasions.

Senator M.E. Vibert:

We run a very, very rigorous recruitment procedure and the procedure I believe, and it has been checked by H.R. (Human Resources) and the States Employment Board, is very good and has resulted in some excellent appointments. Unfortunately although I think all the appointments to J.C.G. have been very good, unfortunately they have not lasted long enough and for personal reasons the people concerned have decided in general to move back to the U.K. That is unfortunate but I do not think it reflects on the recruitment procedure.

3.4 The Very Reverend R.F. Key, B.A., The Dean of Jersey:

Would the Minister agree that he and I both share the need to bring quality people from the professions to the Island and it is of first importance, and I am sure his department does this, but I would be grateful for the assurance, that as well as assuring that the candidate has all the appropriate professional qualifications and vision and drive, that although it may be outside normal Human Relations policy it is important that they realise the personal delights and also challenges of living the other side of that 100 miles of water?

Senator M.E. Vibert:

Yes, Sir, and we cover this in our recruitment procedure and we spend some time explaining life in Jersey and the differences and we also explore it in the recruitment procedure in interview with the candidates.

3.5 Deputy G.P. Southern:

Will the Minister confirm to Members that the 16 to 18 year-olds recently enfranchised cannot yet sign on to the electoral register until the law returns from the U.K., but that when it does he will make arrangements to ensure that take-up of signing on to the electoral register by under-18s is maximised in every school?

Senator M.E. Vibert:

We will be explaining to all 16 to 18 year-olds once it is possible for them to sign up, and what we will also be ensuring is that during the lead-up to the election there can be no political bias applied in the schools from any particular candidate. So, it is something we are working on and we will be issuing guidelines to head teachers and others to ensure that we try to get 18 year-olds interested in registering to vote but that they do not have undue pressure put on them in relation to political bias.

3.6 Connétable J.L.S. Gallichan of Trinity:

Just as a point of information for the Senator and Deputy Martin, I am delighted she did see the school games because my grandson was picked, could I just say, he swam for the south-west of England, but the times are such that the standard is all national swimming times and you have to be really of a very high standard to be picked. I am delighted he was picked, I think they came third, the south-west, but it is just for your information to put a team from Jersey the times required to take part in this, which is a mini-Olympics as you say, all the teams that take part are very, very strenuous indeed, Sir, but just for information, Sir.

The Bailiff:

Constable, you must ask questions at question time.

The Connétable of Trinity:

Would you agree? [Laughter]

Senator M.E. Vibert:

I agree, Sir. We do support them and my answer to Deputy Martin, when we were looking at it, we have to look to see if we did take part, realistically how many young people from Jersey would make the qualifying times as to whether we should be part of the south-west team or send our own Jersey team.

3.7 Deputy I.J. Gorst:

Notwithstanding that the Minister and I disagree on the creation or conversion of a French-speaking primary school, his earlier answer seemed mostly to be based upon his personal opinion. Would he not agree that the only way to prove which of us is correct is by undertaking a feasibility study? Will he therefore agree for such a study to prove me wrong?

Senator M.E. Vibert:

There has been some considerable work done on this. The Alliance Française did a survey and while the majority of the people replying to the survey said yes, they would be in favour of this, it was a very small number of responses. We have also discussed this with teachers and with my curriculum council and others and it is not just a personal opinion, and if the Deputy wishes, I will not have time here to go into all the details that make it a very, very difficult proposition, I am quite happy to host him at my department and he can meet the officers and understand the difficulties in doing this, which is why I favour a nursery class to start with.

3.8 Deputy G.P. Southern:

Will the Minister inform Members whether discussions are taking place with teachers' representatives over changes to sickness leave and pension arrangements for teachers' conditions of service.

Senator M.E. Vibert:

Yes, Sir.

3.8.1 Deputy G.P. Southern:

Also, if I may, Sir, the bit I did not ask: what those changes are?

Senator M.E. Vibert:

As we are in negotiations, it would be wrong for me to go through where we are, but we are listening to what the union representatives are saying to us. I am also a member of the States Employment Board, and what we are trying to do is to ensure that teachers have exactly the same conditions of service as all members of the public sector and, in some cases, there are variations.

3.8.2 Deputy G.P. Southern:

Supplementary, if I may, Sir? The Minister appears to be saying that they are talking about a level playing field, but they are levelling down the playing field. It seems to me that he is talking about taking away current conditions and reducing them to another level.

Senator M.E. Vibert:

No, Sir. There are some where teachers' conditions are slightly in advance of the general ones, and there are some where they are below. What we are trying to do is to achieve consistency throughout.

3.9 Deputy R.G. Le Hérissier:

Building on Deputy Gorst's question, would the Minister not acknowledge that the Canadian method of French immersion has been proven through lengthy research to lead to competence

equally in both the French and the English languages, and it is not an exclusive system which locks children into one particular of the 2 languages?

Senator M.E. Vibert:

The Canadian system - I presume by this Deputy Le Hérisier means the Quebec system? Well, Quebec have a slightly different system to the rest of Canada, so I was not sure which we were referring to. But, yes, immersion has proved to be a very successful method of any language teaching, French or otherwise. One of the difficulties is whether parents wish to have this, and whether they would like to have a primary school near them where they would have no choice but to have this. These are some of the difficult situations. I certainly am a very, very keen advocate of improving the quality of our language learning, and to see more and more young people being able to take an interest in and speak other languages, particularly French. We are encouraging that throughout our schools. As I said, in the first instance for immersion, I would like to see - thank you, Deputy Hill - I would like to see a nursery class a possibility to see the take-up of it, and if it is successful, we would look at that experiment.

3.10 Deputy A.J.H. Maclean:

Would the Minister advise the Assembly whether he shares the recently publicised views of the Minister for Transport and Technical Services regarding his policy of zero tolerance on school buses following reports of poor behaviour? Could he also advise the Assembly whether or not there has been an increase in vandalism and poor behaviour in our schools in recent times, and if so, what steps he is taking to remedy the situation?

Senator M.E. Vibert:

I heard the Minister for Transport and Technical Services... sorry he is not in the Chamber. It is a nice phrase. I have no idea what zero tolerance means. But, does it mean if somebody shouts out a word, is that not acceptable? What is acceptable? What is not? What is totally unacceptable is unacceptable behaviour, and I am all for trying to ensure it does not occur. In fact, that is why as soon as I was made aware of the issue by the Minister for Transport and Technical Services, I undertook straightaway that all our schools' head teachers were contacted and asked to send out a very clear message in their assemblies that we will not accept such behaviour on buses, and that has been done this week. I agree with the Transport and Technical Services men that children identified as behaving in this way will find themselves subject to vigorous sanctions. It is a privilege to be able to travel on a school bus at a highly subsidised rate, and young people must recognise that and behave accordingly.