

3. Questions to Ministers Without Notice - The Minister for Education, Sport and Culture

The Deputy Bailiff:

We come now to questions to Ministers without notice. The first question period is for the Minister for Education, Sport and Culture. I call on Deputy Hilton.

3.1 Deputy J.A. Hilton:

In response to a previous question, when I asked the Minister whether the figure of 28 per cent that was given at the Parents for Choice Meeting last week was correct, regarding passes at English and Maths at G.C.S.E. level in one of the States schools, the Minister responded that it was not true. Can he tell Members whether all the States schools meet the minimum target of 51 per cent G.C.S.E. passes at English and Maths? If indeed it is the case, that some of the schools are not reaching that figure, does the Minister not agree that this in fact strengthens his case not weakens his case for additional funding to address these areas?

The Deputy of St. Ouen (The Minister for Education, Sport and Culture):

I am afraid that I do not have the information at hand to answer the Deputy's question. But I do know that we monitor the performance of all our States schools very thoroughly. If we had any concerns about a particular performance of a school, action would be taken. If the Deputy is asking me whether or not funds should be directed towards supporting vocational training, especially for 14 to 16 year olds, absolutely.

3.2 Connétable J. Gallichan of St. Mary:

Will the Minister advise whether there has been a need to undertake remedial work on the roof of Hautlieu School? If so, can he confirm whether this work was achieved under building works guarantees and that there has been no need for additional expenditure?

The Deputy of St. Ouen:

I have noticed work being undertaken on the roof. We are not responsible for property. It is now the responsibility of the Property Holdings Department. As such, I would ask that the Constable would direct her question to that department.

3.3 Deputy K.C. Lewis:

Further to the Minister's refusal to meet with Parents for Choice, does the Minister not believe that meeting with parents at an open meeting just to hear their views and concerns would be beneficial?

The Deputy of St. Ouen:

First of all, maybe the Deputy or other States Members can answer me this question, why will Parents for Choice not come and meet with me? [**Approbation**] I have already made... and I do not know how many more times I need to state it, but it is my plan to meet with the parents of each individual school to talk about the possible impact or otherwise of the proposal on their school. This is what I intend to do.

3.4 The Deputy of Grouville:

I am going to ask my question you disallowed before. It might be more appropriate now. The Minister claims that he was seeking to understand the impact of his proposals. Could he explain what research and advice he received from his officers before making such proposals?

The Deputy of St. Ouen:

A number of reviews have been taken by the department over the last 12 months, instigated by myself. One is the funding of primary and secondary schools. That report did help to inform the

view expressed by my department that there may be an opportunity to reduce the current support provided to the fee-paying schools. Subsequently, and totally separately, the department was subjected to an external review undertaken by Tribal, instigated by - I believe - the Chief Minister and the Treasury Department to ensure that every area of our department was considered. As such, those 2 pieces of evidence have led us to the position we are in. The problem that I am trying to address is to fully engage with the schools and identify how they would propose to handle this reduction, if indeed it was agreed.

3.4.1 The Deputy of Grouville:

A supplementary, Sir? Does the Deputy not accept that imposing or increasing a user pays charge is not reducing expenditure to his department? It is not an efficiency saving.

The Deputy of St. Ouen:

I would agree that it cannot be classed as an efficiency saving. It is reduction in cost. I would remind the Deputy that all the services provided by the department are funded through the taxpayer. As such, it is my responsibility to look at how those funds are appropriately used. The Deputy will also be aware that many of the individuals and parents involved in the current discussions are equally concerned about the cost of higher education, which has diminished over time, and I have tried to address, in the short time that I have been Minister. I am afraid that whichever way you look at it there are some difficult choices to be made. It is my responsibility, not only to explore those options, but ultimately to come back to this Assembly with a clear picture of what I believe is acceptable and what is not.

3.5 The Deputy of St. Mary:

Can the Minister confirm that in the present C.S.R. there are no plans or there will be no closures of any schools, primary or secondary?

The Deputy of St. Ouen:

I know my department and the Ministerial team have had in the forefront of our minds that any proposals to reduce our costs of the department should be managed properly without impacting on frontline services. This is still the aim, and it is my view that the C.S.R. proposals will not require schools to close. There are other matters that will need to be considered over the coming years with regards to pupil numbers, both in the fee-paying sector and in the non fee-paying sector, which will need to be addressed.

The Deputy of St. Mary:

That was hardly a yes or a no.

3.6 Deputy P.V.F. Le Claire:

Giving the Minister a breather from private schools for a moment. In terms of comprehensive savings that could be achieved with what we are trying to achieve in education in the future, what is the Minister doing to divert pupils from attending school and to take part in education at home online?

[11:45]

The Deputy of St. Ouen:

That really would be perhaps a brand new policy for the department to adopt. We are responsible for providing education to our young people. We have appropriate resources and facilities available throughout the Island with experienced staff on hand that can deal with all of those matters. As such, I do not believe that it was necessarily appropriate to support learning from home.

3.7 Deputy T.M. Pitman:

Did the Minister take his decision to now bring the issue of possible reduction in subsidies for fee-paying schools to the States as a result of political pressure? Does he feel that this may, in reality, be setting a precedent for any future contentious decisions that he may feel it necessary to take as Minister?

The Deputy of St. Ouen:

I was always adamant that the States should be allowed, and quite properly should be allowed, to determine how the department's budget is spent. There is an issue to do with the timing of this matter. It was recognised in the Business Plan and, as such, because the savings were going to be subject to the completion of some major reviews, those took place. Now we are doing some further work to identify how those savings are made. I, equally, recognise the efforts made by both the Education and Home Affairs Panel and, indeed, Senator Shenton, to amend the Business Plan and 2 statements were issued, which acknowledged the work that I was undertaking and the requirement for additional time.

3.8 Senator J.L. Perchard:

Deputy Breckon made the point that it may be counterproductive to compare schools and their results. I have some sympathy with that and the Minister echoed that. But my question is, to the Minister, parents when considering where to place their children, if they are forced to leave fee-paying schools for cost reasons are entitled to know where a school is performing. Are there any value added measures used by Education, Sport and Culture to assess and compare relative performance of Island schools? Will the Minister release this value added information?

The Deputy of St. Ouen:

First of all, I really am pleased that the Senator is so keen on the subject of fee-paying schools. However, apart from asking questions in this House, the Senator has chosen not to attend upon my department or engage in any meaningful conversation on the range of matters that are properly to be considered. With regards to the parents' choice, I fully recognise that choice. We all make choices and we need to provide sufficient information for the parents to do just that.

3.8.1 Senator J.L. Perchard:

Supplementary, if I may, Sir? The Minister does not seem to understand the question. Are there any value added measures used by his department to assess and compare relative performance of Island schools? If so, would he make that information publicly available?

The Deputy of St. Ouen:

I have information that is available at the department for the Senator to view. I am not currently prepared, as I have said before, to create any form of league table, including value added. Thank you.

3.9 Connétable L Norman of St. Clement:

Is the Minister able to confirm that the number of children in our primary schools continue to decline? If that is the case, what is happening to the rate of decline?

The Deputy of St. Ouen:

In recent times we are seeing an increase of births and the recent predictions show that the number of children in our primary schools will remain relatively constant.

3.10 Senator F. du H. Le Gresley:

In the budget which we will be debating later this year, the capital of expenditure programme shows that the rebuild of St. Martin's primary school is being deferred to 2013. Could I ask the Minister if he supports this decision and whether any attempts will be made to deal with the deteriorating condition of the temporary classrooms which are attached to the main building?

The Deputy of St. Ouen:

Do I support the decision to defer it? No. I would have loved it to have been built probably a year or 2 ago. The issue is that there are only sufficient funds for particular capital projects. It went through a prioritisation process and it has now been accepted that it should be built in, I think, it is 2013, as the Senator suggests. I would hope that that is a commitment that both the States and, indeed, the Council of Ministers at the time will meet.

3.11 Deputy R.G. Le Hérissier:

Would the Minister tell us, given his aversion to using league tables, how the performance of schools is judged at the moment by stakeholders as different as parents, the educational management at Highlands and himself? How does he judge the relative performance of schools?

The Deputy of St. Ouen:

We have a professional partnering system that we have put in place and a governing body that oversees the school and the performance of it. The combination of that, and with independent inspections that happen at regular intervals, I am quite confident that the performance of our States schools are being managed appropriately.

3.11.1 Deputy R.G. Le Hérissier:

Supplementary, Sir? Could the Minister say what happens if a governing body has been reassured by the data it receives then it learns that another school of a comparable kind is performing very differently? How does he deal with that situation?

The Deputy of St. Ouen:

We have experienced staff within the department that fully appreciate the issues that particular schools face, and they will deal with it in an appropriate manner. If the Deputy chooses to find out more, please come to the department and meet my officers.

The Deputy Bailiff:

That brings the first question period to an end.