

#### **4.11 Deputy K.C. Lewis of St. Saviour of the Minister for Education, Sport and Culture regarding reduced grants to fee-paying schools:**

Will the Minister reconsider his decision to reduce the grants to fee-paying schools and if not, why not?

[11:15]

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

At present I am unable to give that commitment. All aspects of my department's budget have been subject to rigorous and independent review and reducing the subsidy to fee-paying schools is one of a range of measures being explored and to be delivered over the next 3 years to meet the 10 per cent savings target which, with regards to my department, totals £11.2 million. Presently a sum of £9.8 million is provided in grants per annum to fee-paying schools and I cannot simply set that aside and not consider it. As I have already stated, I have only recently begun to have talks with these schools. Each has been asked to identify the implications of a reduction in subsidy and each has been asked to explore other ways to reduce costs rather than simply passing the effects on to the parents. Opportunities do exist to broaden the curriculum through increased collaboration. Opportunities also exist to explore the provision of shared services such as site management and administration. My department has already offered to support the schools as they explore these options and we have asked that the schools consider those opportunities before increasing fees. In these times all organisations, both in the public and private sectors, need to ensure that they are providing the maximum value for money. Even the States has demanded this for all departments. In the prevailing financial climate it is absolutely appropriate to review the existing policy for subsidising fee-paying schools. Therefore, until the work I have described has been rigorously undertaken, I am not prepared to withdraw this proposal.

##### **4.11.1 Deputy K.C. Lewis:**

Parents are already paying school fees through their taxes and people with private education pay yet again. Some parents are already struggling to pay school fees, with both parents working just to cover the bills. I am not talking about wealthy people. Many people I have spoken to are just regular people trying to do the best for their children. Many parents do without holidays just to cover the fees. It would be heart-breaking, not to mention disruptive, if children were forced to leave their schools and their friends and start again at another school. Does the Minister not agree?

#### **The Deputy of St. Ouen:**

I absolutely agree that we need, when discussing this proposal with the schools, to properly and considerately think and regard all of the implications that may cause an obstacle to the change but that does not necessarily mean that change cannot happen. We have already had discussions and I have stated on several occasions that this will be phased-in over time. I also have asked the schools to identify the current support that is provided by those schools to those parents who find themselves in financial difficulty. We need to be sure that that provision is sufficient. I do not want anybody to find themselves in a position, due to this decision, that their children are unable to continue at the schools that they are in. However, there is a cost one way or another.

##### **4.11.2 Senator J.L. Perchard:**

I shall ask a very succinct question that I hope the Minister will answer and I respectfully request, Sir, that you allow me a supplementary. Does the Minister believe that the fee-paying schools provide excellent value for money to his department, the States and to the taxpayer?

**The Deputy of St. Ouen:**

I value the contribution that fee-paying schools make to the education system.

**4.11.3 Senator J.L. Perchard:**

Will the Minister explain why his plan to reduce the level of financial support provided to fee-paying schools in 2011 was withheld from this Assembly during the recent Business Plan debate which took place only one month ago?

**The Deputy of St. Ouen:**

It was not withheld and in fact it was placed in the public domain by a number of States Members who brought amendments to the Business Plan and, after discussion, they agreed that there was a proper process to follow rather than just bringing forward proposals that were contained in either the Business Plan or amendments to it. The Senator seems to be shaking his head. I suggest that he goes back and looks at all the amendments proposed, including those that were proposed by Senator Shenton and indeed the Scrutiny Panel that is responsible for my department. There is a due process to follow. I have only just started that process and I do plan to continue along the route with the schools, supported by the schools, so that we can explore further whether this proposal is able to be delivered and in what timescale.

**4.11.4 Senator J.L. Perchard:**

There is a little bit of confusion. Could I ask for a point of clarification? Has the Minister denied that he does not intend to reduce the level of subsidy to fee-paying schools in 2011? Does he deny that he does not intend to do that and also does he accept that it does not get a mention in the Business Plan?

**The Deputy Bailiff:**

That question is 2 negatives but I think he means do you agree that you are intending to reduce the contribution in 2011.

**The Deputy of St. Ouen:**

Two things: first of all, in the Business Plan it clearly states that there is a total of £1.2 million of savings that will be delivered in 2011 which will be the subject of the outcomes of various reviews. This is one such outcome which is being explored further. Just to be absolutely clear, the proposal to start introducing reductions to the level of grants provided to fee-paying schools is proposed to start in September 2011.

**The Deputy Bailiff:**

That is now clarified. Senator Routier.

**4.11.5 Senator P.F. Routier:**

Does the Minister accept that there are a lot of worried parents who really do struggle to send their children to private schools and, in particular, the Catholic schools, that are paying more than the colleges are paying in their fees? Would he take the option of perhaps writing to the headmasters and asking them to forward the letter on to the parents so they have a clear understanding of what is being proposed? There are

mixed messages out there at the present time and for parents to have a clear understanding would be far better. Would he undertake to do that?

**The Deputy of St. Ouen:**

I absolutely concur with the Senator's view that parents need to be properly informed and I will do everything in my power, working with the schools, to ensure that that happens. I will definitely speak to all the governors to seek their permission to circulate a letter to their parents.

**4.11.6 Deputy J.M. Maçon of St. Saviour:**

Does the Minister agree that the States schools and fee-paying schools both provide a very high standard of education and is the Minister concerned that the emotional language such as: "struggling to put their children through schools," for example, is in some way reducing the perception of what the States schools provide? Does the Minister agree that both States schools and fee-paying schools provide a very high standard of education to the children of this Island? **[Approbation]**

**The Deputy of St. Ouen:**

I thank the Deputy for highlighting the fact that we should be extremely proud of the education that we provide to all children under our care, whether it be in private fee-paying schools or indeed in the States schools. We have excellent schools, excellent teachers and, although they have been faced with budget reductions over the last number of years, we are continuing to provide that same education which is of value to the whole community.

**4.11.7 Deputy K.C. Lewis:**

Many parents choose to send their children to faith schools, many of which would be free in the United Kingdom. I am aware the Education Department has had meetings yesterday with the schools, but will the Minister undertake to have a high-level meeting with all head teachers of all the schools concerned to ensure that no child will be excluded from the schools because their parents are not able to achieve the higher fees?

**The Deputy of St. Ouen:**

The commitment that I have given to the governors of all the fee-paying schools is that once I have spoken and had the initial discussions with the school and once the schools - all schools - have responded to my requests then we will meet again to discuss this matter further. I think that is appropriate and it is a balanced approach.

**The Deputy Bailiff:**

We come on now to question 12 which Deputy Le Hérissier will ask of the Chairman of the Privileges and Procedures Committee.