

2.14 The Deputy of St. Martin of the Minister for Education, Sport and Culture regarding primary school catchment areas:

Will the Minister inform Members why parents who have siblings in a primary school have precedence over parents whose children either live in the catchment area or in the Parish who often have to pass their Parish school to take their children to schools outside the catchment area or Parish?

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

We aim to do our best for the child and their family although there are times when numbers of places in some of our primary schools can be a limiting factor. In general, children who live in a school catchment area will be given priority when determining the allocation of places. However, we recognise that it would be impractical for parents to take their children to 2 or more different primary schools at the same time every day. So if a parent with one child already in compulsory education moves home and locates to another catchment area, priority is given for their siblings to have access to the same school. Finally, as catchment areas for primary and secondary schools do not necessarily take into account Parish boundaries, there may also be occasions when children could be required to attend a school outside of their Parish.

2.14.1 The Deputy of St. Martin:

I do not know if the Minister is aware but of the 28 places allocated to St. Martin, 14 are going to siblings. Will the Minister agree that the current policy of siblings first is eroding the Parish links and the best way to ease that problem is to change the criteria whereby children living in the Parish or catchment have first priority and siblings second? We know at some time or other, there is going to have to be a change and some people will be affected, but if that change is effected now it will obviously save problems in the future.

The Deputy of St. Ouen:

I disagree. It is a bit of a chicken and egg situation because, as I said in my answer, children who live in a school catchment area will be given priority. The only issue is that if parents move out of the catchment area, it is only right that their other children are able to accompany or attend the school of their first child.

2.14.2 The Deputy of St. John:

Given the Minister and his department have signed up to, shall we say, the green revolution or eco-friendly, can it be right for parents to travel from Gorey to St. John or St. Mary or St. Ouen, or wherever it may be, so that their children can go to this other school because of the sibling policy, given that gallons and gallons of diesel, petrol, whatever they are driving in their Chelsea tractors can be burnt and does that stand-up with his green credentials?

The Deputy of St. Ouen:

I hope my green credentials are the same as the Deputy of St. John's. Indeed we do try and accommodate children who live in a catchment area within the schools. However, we do recognise, as I said before, that if a child starts at a school and the parents for whatever reason - and there are many - move out of that catchment area, their other children have the opportunity attend the school of their first child. It is all for continuity purposes and I still support that view.

2.14.3 Senator F. du H. Le Gresley:

Would the Minister agree if the Deputy of St. Martin is particularly referring to his Parish school, that part of the problem of the siblings being allowed places in the school is because it has a nursery school attached whereas I believe nearby Parishes, in particular Trinity, does not have that and therefore there is an increased demand to use St. Martin's Primary School?

The Deputy of St. Ouen:

I would agree with the Senator that not all of our primary schools have nursery schools. However, allocation to nursery schools does not necessarily mean that those children move through into the reception classes because we acknowledge that it would be unfair and unjust because of the fact that not all primary schools have a nursery school. I think that St. Martin's is in a particular position where it is close to a number of other large development areas and there are pressures on the school that go beyond what we would normally class as a rural primary school.

2.14.4 The Deputy of St. Martin:

In the criteria for allocation, having a special reason for wishing to attend a specific school is listed in third position. Will the Minister inform Members why that criteria is not made known on the application form so that parents could make their reasons known at the time of applying for a school and not learn about it when they have been refused a place at the school of their choice?

The Deputy of St. Ouen:

I am struggling to understand the Deputy's concerns because my information is that we are very clear about the criteria that we use to determine allocation of places in our schools. Also we make parents well aware that they are able to use an appeal system if they disagree with the decisions made by my department. So unless the Deputy can provide me with actual evidence that this is not the case, I struggle to understand what I could be doing in addition to what I am already doing.

2.14.5 The Deputy of St. Martin:

I have come prepared with the evidence so maybe will the Minister accept the evidence that there is nowhere on the application for parents to list their special or specific choice for a school?

[11:15]

The Deputy of St. Ouen:

I would absolutely accept any evidence and, in fact, I am really disappointed with the Deputy that he chooses, rather than come to me immediately with the information at hand that this issue can be addressed in the most appropriate manner, that he chooses to use this public forum to promote a particular issue.