

2.7 Deputy R. Labey of the Minister for Education regarding measures to enhance staff confidence in the management of Highlands College and the Education Department: 1(392)

What measures is the Minister considering to enhance staff confidence in the management of Highlands College and the Education Department, including external, independent intervention?

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

I hope I can offer the Deputy some words of comfort while being observant of the fact that there are areas here which I cannot address, as they breach protocols relating to the H.R. (human resources) processes. We have 2 live cases currently running. The staff questionnaire, which the Deputy enquired about in his written question, related to the satisfaction of 79 per cent, which would appear very positive. Further to that, we work very closely with the unions on these matters and it is a matter of fact that the largest teachers' union representative is working in the college. So we have a clear picture of the Highlands landscape in terms of the staff. We live and operate on the same campus. Without breaching protocols, I can also relate I attended the recent prize giving and was unaware of any tensions. Other indications are results from the college are still consistently high. Recently, Highlands has moved from languishing about halfway down U.K. tables to now being in the top 10 per cent. If the Deputy has any specific concerns can I suggest that he visit us at Education, as did Deputy Tadier recently, to address those concerns?

2.7.1 Deputy R. Labey:

I would rather address these concerns on the floor of this House, in a public forum, because there are staff at Highlands College who have been gagged and do not know which way to turn, because they want to speak out. I would like the Minister to address Education Department policy and procedure, not individual cases. Has it been accepted procedure for teachers, who instigate grievance procedures for bullying and harassment at the college and have their original complaints upheld by investigators, then have to sit before a panel, chaired by a senior member of the Education Department, who overturns that decision?

Deputy R.G. Bryans:

As I said at the beginning, this is very difficult because we have 2 live cases at the moment. I am unaware of what the Deputy is referring to. As far as I am aware, no member of the Education Department has chaired a panel, but that in itself is going into the area of the cases, so I would be reluctant to say anything other than I am aware of the cases at the moment.

2.7.2 Deputy G.P. Southern:

Can the Minister be absolutely clear in stating whether, or not, in any appeal process about bullying, or other grievance matter that comes before the department, no member of the department is involved in adjudicating on that particular grievance and that he has a totally independent system in place, ready to go?

Deputy R.G. Bryans:

As far as I am aware, through the States Employment Board, this is the case. That it is totally independent. As far as I am aware, no member of the Education Department has chaired such a panel.

2.7.3 Deputy G.P. Southern:

The question was not “chaired”. That is a nice easy slip out. The question was “been involved in”. Is there a completely independent, separate system that members, when they make a grievance claim, can be confident is exactly that; independent. Not necessarily the chair, but membership.

Deputy R.G. Bryans:

I apologise to the Deputy. The “chair” was from the previous speaker, Deputy Labey. As far as I am aware, the cases that he is referring to are treated totally independently.

2.7.4 The Deputy of St. John:

Could the Minister advise whether there is an issue with policy and procedure in terms of bullying and harassment, or grievance procedures? Whether it is just a culture of fear that stems across the States and whether the Minister will take these issues up with the States Employment Board, in order to try and stem this culture and try to create a more open and transparent view from people who work for the States?

Deputy R.G. Bryans:

I am unaware of a culture of fear that exists within the States. I think that the question the Deputy was asking me is a fair one. I think if there was any consideration I would be quite willing ... in my way, I have always treated everything with as much openness and honesty I could, in terms of transparency. I would be quite willing to talk to the States Employment Board about policy.

2.7.5 The Deputy of St. John:

Is the Minister confident that the employees of the Education Department are fully aware of the procedures and policies that are in place for grievance and bullying and harassment? Whether they understand the difference between formal complaints and just a complaint?

Deputy R.G. Bryans:

Yes, I think the people that work within our department are the most professional individuals that I have honestly met with in my time in the States. I am sure they are fully aware of that situation.

[10:30]

The Deputy Bailiff:

A number of Members want to ask about this. We have time for Deputy Higgins and Deputy Mézec and then the final supplementary.

2.7.6 Deputy M.R. Higgins of St. Helier:

I was just thinking about the Care Inquiry, listening to those answers. “I believe”, “I was told” ... many Ministers were saying things were wonderful then. They do not know what their officers are doing. Can I ask the Minister: he has heard concerns expressed by Members in this Assembly about what is going on at Highlands College, will he look at it and come back and make a formal statement to this House saying what is going on and whether people are being treated with natural justice?

Deputy R.G. Bryans:

I am always observant of what my colleagues are doing within the department. In fact, I suppose, I spend most of my time up in the department on a daily basis. So I am fully aware of what they do. I will, as I say, we have got 2 live cases. Once those 2 live cases have run their course, I will look at the situation and come back.

2.7.7 Deputy L.M.C. Doublet of St. Saviour:

Can the Minister just describe the mechanisms whereby staff can raise concerns, the processes that happen, please?

Deputy R.G. Bryans:

Yes, to some extent. I think I could provide a more detailed answer to the Deputy away from the Assembly in terms of getting more information, but as far as I am aware, the protocols that relate to information of this kind would be that you would then relate it to a line manager, or somebody further up the scale and let known your situation and that would escalate up, as would be the norm.

2.7.8 Deputy L.M.C. Doublet:

Can the Minister provide some details for the Scrutiny Panel how many of these types of complaints are received per year, please?

Deputy R.G. Bryans:

Yes, I can.

2.7.9 Deputy R. Labey:

Would the Minister report back on that point of procedure that I asked in my first supplementary? Would he investigate and report back on the possibility of lifting the gagging order on staff, with the threats of dire consequences if they do not comply with that? He has stated himself he is unaware of the tensions at Highlands College; would he go and speak to some staff, because I think that comment will be met with utter disbelief by a lot of the staff, and would he submit the results of the staff survey to, say, the Education Scrutiny Panel, so it can be independently assessed?

Deputy R.G. Bryans:

I think, if I just pick my way through that. Firstly, I am not aware of a gagging order of any kind, but I will consider that, look at that situation. Sorry, if you could repeat the second part of what you said, Deputy?

Deputy R. Labey:

The staff survey: would he submit the staff survey to the Education Scrutiny Panel, so they can assess it?

Deputy R.G. Bryans:

Certainly yes, I can.