

2019.04.30

11 Deputy K.F. Morel of the Minister for Education regarding the measures taken to address lost school days due to industrial action: (OQ.102/2019)

Given that the Island's schoolchildren have already lost 2 days of school due to strikes and that they may, reportedly, lose another 8 days in the coming weeks, will the Minister describe how schools will make up the lost days of education, particularly in light of the advice regularly provided to parents that even a single day out of school can potentially damage a child's education?

Senator T.A. Vallois (The Minister for Education):

Replacing the time lost from the industrial action is extremely difficult and highlights the value of each day of education provided. I know that schools are doing everything they can to prepare young people, about to take exams, by ensuring all content for these courses are taught before students go on study leave. Should days continue to be lost, schools will need to factor in what learning pupils of all ages will need, to ensure all elements of the curriculum will be delivered.

4.11.1 Deputy K.F. Morel:

In terms of making amends and compensating for the damage caused by the strikes, will the Government provide alternative facilities for children during strike days, or will parents be compensated for lost earnings due to taking time off for childcare, or for the cost of engaging childcare services? Will parents of children at fee-paying States schools be reimbursed for those days of education lost to the strikes?

Senator T.A. Vallois:

I will take the last question first, with regards to the fee-paying schools. As the Deputy will, no doubt, understand, I have had numerous emails, so have the fee-paying schools had numerous emails. I am advised that the Government of Jersey is unable to compensate parents and carers for the impact of the strike by teachers, whether this is for additional childcare costs, loss of earnings, or holiday, or to issuing rebates in respect of school fees at fee-paying schools. Closures, as a consequence of industrial action, are treated no differently to closures for adverse weather conditions. This approach is consistent with applicable legislation, including part 4 of the Supply of Goods and Services (Jersey) Law 2009. Fees for school are calculated and due on a termly basis, not a daily rate; therefore, you are requested to pay the balance of fees that are due at the schools at the earliest convenience. With regards to providing childcare facilities, my budget will not allow me to stretch to providing additional resources. Also, I would have to find a number of people, particularly with regards to safeguarding and the health and safety aspect, hence the reason why some schools may need to close, because we do not have the sufficient numbers of people to ensure the health and safety of our children in those schools at the time of industrial action. In terms of the childcare facilities, or the monitoring side of things, I am unable to give that commitment, because I just cannot do so.

4.11.2 Deputy M. Tadier:

Apart from the great education that our teachers provide, these kinds of questions show how much we rely on the teaching profession and on schools and their staff in general. If and when the strikes do occur in the next days and weeks, will the Minister encourage the students to use this as an opportunity to attend any rally supporting teachers and workers, so that they can experience first-hand, in a practical sense, about the power of trade unionism in Jersey and beyond?

Senator T.A. Vallois:

I absolutely recognise the sentiments in terms of the importance of our teachers and there is a reason why I wanted to become the Minister for Education, because it is about our future and it is about our future generations and it is about our economy, ultimately, in the next 20 years. However, I am not going to take a particular side, or push somebody to go and do something. I am sure they will recognise, themselves, the good work that the teachers do. I hear it regularly from children. I have my own children at school and it is affecting our family, as well, in terms of the industrial action. They see it on a day-to-day basis, they recognise the value of the teachers and also I believe that S.E.B. are doing everything that they possibly can. There was a full day on Friday, in terms of discussions, S.E.B. met yesterday and then there is all day today in terms of discussing a possible solution, before industrial action takes place.

4.11.3 Deputy M. Tadier:

Would the Minister confirm that - as a Minister for Education, rather than necessarily just as a Government Minister - she values the work that teachers put in and that if we want quality public services in Jersey, not just in the teaching profession, but, of course, now in the teaching profession, that we need to give excellent terms and conditions, if we are not to take these professionals for granted?

Senator T.A. Vallois:

I am not sure where I have ever said that I do not agree with those particular sentiments. I supported the last proposition, with regards to Deputy Southern's request for further monies and I made it explicitly clear my value that I place on our teaching profession. They are coming under more and more strain in terms of expectations for standards and achievements, more strain in terms of safeguarding requirements and the need to achieve, particularly in a more academic sense of the word. I would hope that whatever I have stated ... I fully support the teachers and I want to try and work with them. We work with them on the Education Consultative Council with regards to workload and there are discussions ongoing with my own officers around the terms and conditions. There are continued discussions about how we can support teachers and, therefore, support our children, in terms of educating our future.

4.11.4 The Connétable of St. Helier:

I should preface my question with a declaration that I am a teacher myself, as is my wife. Can I ask the Minister whether she believes that we are in a state of crisis in our schools when it is announced that our schools will only be sitting for 7 days in the month of May? Does the Minister agree that there is not enough money to pay the teachers more and does she have confidence in the S.E.B.'s ability to tackle this crisis?

Senator T.A. Vallois:

Three questions in one. Okay, is there a crisis? It feels like one and that is my own honesty that I am putting across. From an education point of view, I have a duty to ensure that our children in this Island are educated, as do the parents. We have a partnership role in this, to ensure our children are properly educated and having 7 days ... it is difficult to say that we are verging on that crisis issue because, of course, our children will not get, at the optimal level of education that they need to have. That is not right from my point of view.

[11:00]

In terms of the confidence, I think S.E.B have ramped up the discussion. They were in all day on Friday negotiating, they met yesterday and then today there is a full negotiation going on. It is

unfortunate that it is last minute. It is unfortunate that we are in this final position. I cannot recall, in the last 10 years of being a States Member, seeing this type of strike action in any area, but education I have not seen it before. I cannot remember the last part of the question.

The Connétable of St. Helier:

If I could just remind the Minister: is there more money to pay the teachers? I do not think she has quite got there yet, but does she have confidence in the S.E.B.'s ability to tackle the crisis?

Senator T.A. Vallois:

In terms of is there enough money, I am advised that there is not sufficient for this year. In terms of my confidence, I would like to say I have 100 per cent confidence, but being there myself, it is not an easy job to do, it is not an easy role to accomplish. I would like that S.E.B. recognise how important the role of the teacher is, not just because of our children and their education; but our future economy, which is something that is regularly referred to, in terms of the importance of our Island and how we move forward and in terms of our revenues, in order to pay for our very public services that we, I believe, love and cherish.

4.11.5 Deputy R.J. Ward:

I should state that, as everyone knows, I was a teacher. My wife is currently a lecturer and my children were educated on this Island and benefited from the incredible dedication of their teachers. Can I ask the Minister to publicly recognise that the decision taken by teachers to take this action was an incredibly difficult decision for them to take and that they were driven to this course of action by the inadequacy of the outcomes of the negotiations and, therefore, to demonise teachers in any way for taking this action misses the point and is wrong?

Senator T.A. Vallois:

I am not trying to demonise them at all. Hence the reason why I have stated I have not seen this in the whole time I have been a States Member. There is clearly something not right here. There is an issue. I am not involved directly in the negotiations. I am not aware of the exact requests that are being made, but I do recognise, even though it is my responsibility to ensure the education of all our children, I also recognise the rights of the trade unions to take strike action. It is within the law, they are legally required to do so and it is an unfortunate balancing act that I am in the middle of.

4.11.6 Deputy K.F. Morel:

Does the Minister recognise that it has left the parents and businesses to mop up after the inexcusable failure of the States Employment Board to sufficiently resolve this pay dispute? While she does not have sufficient resources to compensate those parents and businesses, who are mopping up after this debacle, will she commit to using her own resources to apply pressure to the States Employment Board in order to encourage it to resolve the teachers' pay dispute before the end of May, so parents and students need face no more disruption caused by this strike.

Senator T.A. Vallois:

I recognise the impact that this has both on parents and businesses. I am a parent myself and I have children at school, it is affecting myself as well. In terms of S.E.B. resolving this, in terms of what I have been doing, I have been forwarding all the concerns that have been ... I have had numerous emails over the last few weeks, I have been trying to send on all those emails, so the full S.E.B. are aware of the concerns and issues raised by parents, teachers, businesses and I have been trying to understand ... unfortunately they are in a negotiating position. I recognise there are issues that we

could deal with in terms of the education side of things, in terms of workloads and all those types of things, which is something that has been ongoing for a while now. But, I will continue to emphasise and put pressure on the S.E.B. like I have been doing to try to encourage a resolution to the dispute.