

2019.07.02

10 Deputy K.F. Morel of the Chairman of the States Employment Board regarding the financial impact of teachers' strikes on families: (OQ.173/2019)

Yes, I do pay school fees to one of the States-owned fee-paying schools. Given that a number of parents are reportedly refusing to pay school fees for those days of education missed by their children because of the teachers' strikes, will the Chairman state the total fees that would not be paid should that happen and will he advise what assessment has been undertaken of the total cost of the strikes to families, for instance through missed days at work and extra childcare?

Senator J.A.N. Le Fondré (Chairman States Employment Board):

The Connétable of St. Ouen is answering the question. I have a similar conflict of interest.

The Connétable of St. Ouen (Vice-Chairman, States Employment Board - rapporteur):

Yes, I am far too old to have that conflict of interest sadly; my children have long since left school. Issues in relation to school fees are not within the remit of the States Employment Board. However, the Children, Young People, Education and Skills Directorate have been asked what the total fees lost might be in the event that parents withhold some, or all, of the outstanding amounts. Unfortunately, this amount is not yet known as summer fees, as the Deputy I am sure will know, have already been paid in advance and the autumn billing run has yet to be issued, or received by parents. While I understand that some parents may have calculated amounts to withhold, it is, I believe, the Education Department's position that any fees that are due must be honoured, as evidenced by the recent Director General's letter. The second part of his question, it has not really been possible to do any assessment of circumstances, arrangements, or costs incurred by individual families resulting from the strike days, as we do not hold any relevant data. It is, therefore, virtually impossible for us to quantify the cost and any number we provide here would be purely speculative and unverifiable.

3.10.1 Deputy K.F. Morel:

I find it astounding that no assessment has been made of the potential cost to the Island and to families and I ask the Assistant Minister, or the Vice-Chairman of the States Employment Board in this situation, is that one of the reasons why the strikes were allowed to drag on for so long? I mean, unprecedented strikes, as far as my lifetime is concerned. I have never known teachers go on strike for 8 days in one month. Is that one of the reasons why the States Employment Board was so slow to act and to bring this to an end? Was it because they had no idea how much it was costing the Island, or Islanders?

The Connétable of St. Ouen:

I completely refute the Deputy's suggestion that we were not aware that it was costing parents money while this action was taking place and I have to say we deeply regret this. However, it was not entirely of our making, it in fact was not us who called the teachers out on strike; it was, in fact, the N.E.U. (National Education Union) that called them out. In terms of verifying this, I will discuss this with the Education Department and I know they are thinking about doing a piece of work, but it will be a fairly long-term piece of work and when I say 'long-term' a couple of months, at least, before we can have any accurate figures.

3.10.2 Deputy R.J. Ward:

Can the Assistant Minister confirm that, during the strikes, when some staff were unpaid for a day, they returned to class to teach exam classes in an effective unpaid way and can he confirm what happened to the unpaid money to staff during that time?

The Connétable of St. Ouen:

Yes, I can confirm that some teachers did return to classes to teach exam students and, obviously, we are extremely grateful for them doing that, because exams are a particularly crucial time in any student's lifetime. I am not able to provide the Deputy with an accurate figure. In fact, in terms of the teachers, the amount of money that will, or will not, be paid to teachers, we will not know that until the July pay day takes place. But I am happy to provide that information once that happens.

3.10.3 The Connétable of St. Brelade:

Given that several pupils will have been affected by the strikes in terms of tuition at a crucial time, would he agree that it would be appropriate to hypothecate some of the monies that have not been paid to teachers to the Education Department, to provide additional specialist tuition?

The Connétable of St. Ouen:

I thank the Constable for his question. This really is not a matter for the States Employment Board; it is a matter that would need to be referred to the Minister for Education, because it would be her decision, not mine, to do this.

3.10.4 Senator S.C. Ferguson:

It is not just families who have felt the cost of this; some companies have, in fact, made it possible, have run crèches for families, so that they could carry on with their work. However, if I hire a tradesman and he does not complete the task for which he has been engaged, I do not pay him. So, why not give a discount to parents on the next *tranche* of fees that are due, to recognise the fact that it has cost them to cope with the vagaries and the vicissitudes of the strike?

The Connétable of St. Ouen:

I thank the Senator for her question. The response is pretty similar to the one I gave to the Constable of St. Brelade. This is not a matter that is within the remit of the States Employment Board and it is a matter for the Minister for Education.

3.10.5 Senator S.C. Ferguson:

But, surely, the S.E.B. can make a recommendation to the Minister, or at least raise the topic?

The Connétable of St. Ouen:

Yes, the topic has been raised with the Minister for Education but, as you know the Minister for Education as well as I do, I would not dream of speaking for her and it is a decision that she has to make. We will be having discussions with her.

The Bailiff:

This is suspiciously close to your area of responsibility, Deputy.

3.10.6 Deputy L.B.E. Ash of St. Clement:

Would the Assistant Minister agree that one of the difficulties is that fees are not merely for teachers, they are also for buildings, for support staff, for books, for groundsmen, so that is one of the reasons that making that calculation would be difficult, would he agree with that?

The Connétable of St. Ouen:

I thank the Assistant Minister for his question; however, I do not want to be drawn on this subject, I think it really is a matter for the Minister for Education to opine on. But I have some sympathy with his view.

3.10.7 Deputy K.F. Morel:

Could I ask the Assistant Minister, along with the States Employment Board, to undertake basic due diligence by creating a guide of basic calculations - where, if a certain department is on strike, whether it is Fire, whether it is other civil servants, whether it is teachers - basic guides as to how much it costs the Island for these people to be on strike? If nothing else, it will focus the minds of the States Employment Board in future to know the costs of the strikes, or pay disputes, that they are involved in.

The Connétable of St. Ouen:

I thank the Deputy for his question, which is as insightful, as it always is. All I can do is say that I will take note of his views. We are broadly aware of the economic impact and the costs of any strike and we deeply regret it. But, yes, I will take note of what the Deputy says.