

STATEMENTS ON A MATTER OF OFFICIAL RESPONSIBILITY

5. The Minister for Education, Sport and Culture - statement regarding the proposed reduction in subsidies for fee-paying schools

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

Yes, it is me again. Members will be aware that Senator Perchard has recently lodged 'au Greffe' a report and proposition in which the States have been asked to request me not to make any reduction in the level of financial support in 2011 for fee-paying schools until the matter has been brought to the States. I have discussed this with the Council of Ministers. They support my view that the States should be asked to consider any significant changes to the funding of fee-paying schools. I am, therefore, happy to accept Senator Perchard's proposition. I have also listened to the representations that have been made to me by both governing bodies and parents. I accept that the original target set by the Council of Ministers to reduce the funding to fee-paying schools over 2 academic years is extremely challenging and more time is required. As such, I have, after discussion with the Chief Minister, decided to extend the timescale for consultation and will be talking about the detailed arrangements at a meeting scheduled to take place on Wednesday night with the chairs and governors of Victoria College, Jersey College for Girls, De La Salle, Beaulieu and FCJ. The discussion will also cover the inclusion of strategic options in the proposed Green Paper on the future of education. I am hopeful that all governing bodies will agree to participate in a review which balances the need for cost efficiency with the need to raise standards in Jersey's educational system as a whole. I propose to work with them on this over the coming months. To support schools in this process and following discussions with the governors, arrangements are being made for independent school advisers to assist each school in considering the efficiency and effectiveness of the education provided, including areas where increased collaboration could lead to more efficient practice and an improved curriculum. I look forward to further discussions on this subject **[Laughter]** and intend to bring a report and proposition to the States in due course for a full and proper debate and, in time, to allow schools to set their fees within the normal timescale.

The Deputy Bailiff:

Questions now to the Minister on his statement.

5.1.1 Senator J.L. Perchard:

Hallelujah. The Minister said in his statement just now that he wished to undertake a full review of the strategic options and prepare a Green Paper on the future of education for all the Island's children. Fantastic. Will the Minister then agree to withdraw his prescriptive and controversial proposals to reduce funding to fee-paying secondary schools by 50 per cent while this full review is being undertaken in an open and honest way?

The Deputy of St. Ouen:

First of all, I do not know where the Senator has been over the last 2 or 3 months, but I have spent much time speaking about the proposal and the introduction of the Green Paper that will determine the future shape of education on the Island. As such, it is absolutely linked to my policy. With regards the question about withdrawing the current proposal, I think it is absolutely appropriate that we pursue and continue the dialogue that is only just being started with the schools, which will form part and provide further information to support the development of the Green Paper that I want to bring out in the new year. As such, I have no intention of withdrawing the current proposal.

5.1.2 Deputy J.A. Martin:

I would be very interested to hear that now the Minister has decided to bring this to the States, what is his Plan B for raising the money, because it will not go through this House?

The Deputy of St. Ouen:

That is going to be something that obviously all States Members will have to determine. That is due process and I would have to abide and follow that.

Deputy J.A. Martin:

Sorry, has he not got a Plan B to raise this money?

The Deputy Bailiff:

Do you have a Plan B, Minister?

The Deputy of St. Ouen:

We had plans A, B, C, D, E, F and G about 6 months ago when we started the C.S.R. process. Through discussions, not only within my department but with the Council of Ministers, the proposal that the reduction to fee-paying schools or grant to fee-paying schools is just part of the proposals that the Council of Ministers chose to support further.

5.1.3 Deputy R.G. Le Hérissier:

In reference to the last paragraph, the Minister says he will allow schools to set their fees within the normal timescales. What does he mean by normal timescales?

The Deputy of St. Ouen:

To my knowledge fees are normally set towards the end of March, beginning of April, at the start of the new academic year. So in this case any fee increases should be notified to parents no later than April 2011.

Deputy A.E. Jeune:

Thank you, Sir, but my question has now been answered.

5.1.4 Senator B.E. Shenton:

The Minister says in his statement: "I accept that the original target set by the Council of Ministers to reduce the funding to fee paying schools over 2 academic years is extremely challenging." I was under the impression that this was the Minister's policy. His statement says that this is the policy of the Council of Ministers and has been forced upon him. Could he clarify his own personal statement?

The Deputy of St. Ouen:

I do not think I said "forced upon" me and obviously I include myself as one of the Council of Ministers. This has been a discussion that has been had. It has been part of the C.S.R. process. As such, the Council of Ministers have put forward budget proposals and C.S.R. proposals for 2011, 2012 and 2013 that are to be balanced against additional taxation. It has been recognised that, as such, my department is being required to deliver £11.2 million over that period. This is what I am seeking to do. I fully accept and acknowledge my role and responsibility in this regard.

5.1.5 Deputy P.V.F. Le Claire:

In my earlier question away from the topic of private schools, the Minister for Education, Sport and Culture dismissed out of hand learning online at home. Online learning and video conferencing are playing an important role in delivering high level education and reducing CO₂ emissions. Is he now saying that those will not be possible to be put forward as proposals under his Green Paper?

The Deputy of St. Ouen:

If we are talking about the opportunities for distance learning and adults improving their educational skills, then I think it is very appropriate that that particular area is explored. In fact we are encouraging that on the Island, and we have worked closely with outfits such as the university.

5.1.6 The Deputy of Grouville:

When the child commences a particular school, does the Minister not believe his department enters into a contract with that child and their parents? To change the terms to such an extent whereby some pupils will have to leave the school, E.S.C. (Education, Sports and Culture) is reneging on its contract.

The Deputy of St. Ouen:

With regard to contracts with pupils, there is an absolute and full responsibility that the Education Department take in providing education for all children. If the Deputy is suggesting that somehow I can be held responsible for fee increases levied at private schools, I am afraid my authority does not extend that far.

[12:15]

5.1.7 Deputy T.M. Pitman:

I have got a good bit of sympathy with the Minister especially after today, but I feel Deputy Martin is perfectly right. In bringing this to the States it will never get through, in my opinion, in an election year. Where then would that leave the Minister with regard to his position and especially to making up those savings or cost reductions as there appears to be no Plan B?

The Deputy of St. Ouen:

With regards to my position, I will continue to undertake my role and responsibilities as Minister for the Education, Sports and Culture Department. It would be rather perverse necessarily that the department would be held to deliver the 10 per cent when perhaps other departments have been allowed to deliver a lesser sum, especially if this Assembly sends out a strong message that this particular area should not be reduced. At the same time, it is my responsibility and I will continue to seek to deliver efficiencies in all areas that we are responsible for. As such, we will hopefully continue to provide not only the services that everybody has come to expect but at the right cost.

5.1.8 Deputy M. Tadier:

Very much following on from Senator Perchard's question. Now that the Minister has given an undertaking to put a Green Paper out for consultation, does he now accept that given the fact that private tuition fees at the private schools is only a small part of that, but it will nonetheless have implications on both sectors, is it not more sensible to leave that on the backburner until we have looked at the whole situation in the round?

The Deputy of St. Ouen:

This is a discussion that, I think I have already said, I need to have with the governing bodies. I think States Members must be under no illusion that whether it is my department or others, we are required to deliver savings to offset the need for additional taxation. There is no easy way of saying that. There will always be and are bound to be individuals that will feel and notice an impact of some of the proposals that are being brought forward. Our responsibility, as both the States and the Council of Ministers, is to ensure that process is managed and we end up with a system that everyone can feel part of and recognise as reasonable. I will be discussing and I will continue discussions with the governors and will return with a comment regarding a changing of time.

5.1.9 Senator J.L. Perchard:

I plead with the Minister for Education, Sport and Culture; if an honest review of the education provision is to be undertaken on the Island, could this review consider expanding the role of the fee-paying sector and turning the Minister's own policy on its head in an effort to save money for the comprehensive spending review?

The Deputy of St. Ouen:

I think, as I said before, education is not necessarily all about money and savings. I have already said that the education on this Island is extremely selective and, as such, we need to be mindful of that when determining future policy. With regard to any proposals and considerations for strategic options, my mind is truly open. I have made that clear to Parents for Choice and their spokesman that if they firmly believe that their proposal is right and fit for this Island that they come and discuss that matter appropriately, and in the right context, with me and my officers.

The Deputy Bailiff:

That brings question time on the Minister's statement to an end.