



Northern Ireland
Assembly

**COMMITTEE
FOR EDUCATION**

OFFICIAL REPORT
(Hansard)

**Inquiry into Successful Post-Primary
Schools Serving Disadvantaged
Communities**

2 February 2011

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Members present for all or part of the proceedings:

Mr Mervyn Storey (Chairperson)

Mrs Mary Bradley

Mr Jonathan Craig

Mr Trevor Lunn

Miss Michelle McIlveen

Mr John O'Dowd

Mrs Michelle O'Neill

Witnesses:

The Very Rev Dr A W G Brown)

Mrs Carol Stewart)

Mr Ian Williamson)

Ballycastle High School

The Chairperson of the Committee for Education (Mr Storey):

Ian, you are very welcome. Thank you for making the journey from Ballycastle to Magherafelt today. We are delighted and glad that Dr Brown and Carol are also with us. Ballycastle High School is in my constituency, and we value the work that it does.

Mr Ian Williamson (Ballycastle High School):

Ladies and gentlemen, before I commence, I wish to apologise on behalf of Craig Whyte, one of our parent governors, who, unfortunately, has been unable to attend at the last minute. I intend to deliver the presentation on behalf of Ballycastle High School, and my two friends and I will answer your questions.

In many respects, there are no huge surprises to be discovered in Ballycastle High School about the requirements for effective leadership in a school serving a disadvantaged area. The six key areas of headship are well-documented, and when those are effectively implemented, they make a difference. I feel that those key areas and associated qualities are significant in making a school successful.

Ballycastle High School has a strong sense of shaping the future and is celebrating its centenary this year. We have a strong sense of the successful history enjoyed by the school and the pupils who have attended Ballycastle High School over the years. Although designated as an urban school, Ballycastle High School's pupils are drawn mainly from the rural hinterlands surrounding the town. We enjoy a high level of loyalty from the community with, in many instances, several generations of families having attended the school.

While enjoying that sense of history, we are very well aware of the role played by Ballycastle High School and our neighbours Cross and Passion College in having helped to shape the future. Our vision of collaboration, efficient use of resources and increased choice has proven to be a highly beneficial story for pupils, parents, schools and the local community. That vision continues to grow through our involvement with the shared education programme, the Atlantic Philanthropies and Queen's University Belfast. The project has enabled further advancements of our vision and enhancement of shared provision for post-primary pupils in the Ballycastle area. Significant progress has been made at Key Stages 4 and 5 on meeting the requirements of the entitlement framework and furthering cross-curricular activities.

Our vision and ethos have grown organically within a heartfelt context of mutual dependency and respect for each other's differences. The non-threatening sense of shared purpose and simple

good neighbourliness has impacted significantly on cross-community relations.

In socially-deprived areas such as ours, many parents still just want the best life-chances possible for their children. That is the prevailing attitude of most parents, but the sense of aspiration and expectation has to be nurtured by effective communication and genuine, open, caring relationships. Parents know that every child in our school matters. We consider ourselves to be an all-round school and, at Ballycastle High School, we earnestly endeavour to show parents that education has provided and can provide the vehicle for their children's advancement.

We are a small, non-selective school, currently with an enrolment of 363 pupils, which covers the full range of academic ability. As a school, we benefit hugely from that diversity and wide range of talents, characteristics and personalities presented by our pupils. Our location and degree of geographic isolation has also been of benefit, with parents choosing to send their children to us instead of perhaps transporting them elsewhere. We cannot take that for granted, and our staff are keenly aware of our need to continue to be a successful school.

In relation to leading, learning and teaching, setting and communicating high standards of teaching and achievement for teachers and pupils is critical. Promoting a culture of high expectations and successes from all pupils of all abilities is fundamental to the ethos of the school. Fostering a work ethic in the school among the pupil body is again central. We closely monitor standards of work-effort on a monthly basis for each pupil and share the results with pupils and their parents. They are frequently communicated to provide immediate feedback to pupils on their progress and allow parents to feel part of the achievement process. Hard-working pupils are rewarded. There is no drug like success. We continue to develop the effective use of data to inform target-setting and we see further potential in developing that.

As a new principal, and having witnessed the work of my predecessor, Mr Bill Harpur OBE, I feel it is important to be aware, as a leader, of one's own need to develop professionally and to work effectively with others. By continually striving to develop a collegiate approach among our staff, to whole-school issues such as discipline, extra-curricular and enrichment activities and raising standards, the school works as a team for the good of its pupils, enabling senior colleagues to have their leadership skills fully-realised and utilised to empower them to develop their

strategic views and opinions that are essential to the school and its future.

A culture of proactive pastoral care and a firm fair and compassionate approach to discipline is very important to pupils, parents and guardians. Maintaining effective discipline in the school avoids many time-consuming problems of a pastoral/behavioural nature which dissipates teachers' energies, frustrates pupils and parents and dilutes the education process. Those discipline standards come from the top and need to be implemented in a firm, fair consistent and compassionate way.

In relation to school engagement with parents and the wider community, and strengthening community, as a first-time principal, I am increasingly finding that my job is:

“people at work and paper at home”.

I suspect that this is the way it has been and will be in a school that places such priority on relationships. Parents are encouraged to keep in regular contact with the school. There is a proactive pastoral system in the school and parents know who to contact for advice or to raise a concern. This approach is emphasised in year 8 and maintained throughout the school. The quality and commitment of year tutors is paramount to a successful discharge of the pastoral relationship with parents.

Our school-based care team meets monthly and that is of significant importance in monitoring and reviewing pupils with particular needs. Close liaison with other agencies is critical to addressing those issues and providing the support needed by some pupils and families. It also helps to monitor pupil attendance closely, with quick intervention when problems are identified. Time spent on that, with the active involvement of senior management, is a good investment of resources.

The school benefits immeasurably from extended schools funding. A wide range of extra-curricular activities are available, not all of which are taken by teachers, which enriches pupil education and helps to engage parents and members of the wider community in the school.

Ballycastle High School is, largely, a rural school with regard to pupil domicile despite the

Department's insistence that it is an urban school. Therefore, I do not believe that there are, perhaps, the same opportunities to host, for example, the local health centre, Probus club or evening classes that may exist in a more urban setting. However, the school engages with the community on the use of its premises for training by sports teams; performances that are hosted by local amateur dramatics groups; youth clubs; use of its facilities by summer camps; and occasional one-off events.

Again, extended schools funding has provided for a wide range of quality experiences for pupils, parents and the wider community, with 14 different activities being held through extended schools. We also have significant involvement with 10 local primary schools in that regard and serve as the lead school in our cluster activities. The wide range of activities on offer provide for a significant level of involvement by parents, pupils and the community. That level of parental involvement has a positive impact on building interest in school life from parents at the post-primary level.

The fact that we have that medium to establish cross-phase networking and support is very important. The framework promotes close relationships with primary schools, which, I believe, can be further developed to bring about future improvements in pupil experiences in our school. Although difficult to quantify with regard to wider school improvement, those activities have added significant value to pupil experience and community involvement. At this time of financial constraint, it is important that the benefits of extended schools are not forgotten.

Our parents' association is a small, but dedicated, group of volunteers who provide significant assistance in running fundraising events, which are important. Those events also help us to build our links with more parents and people in the community by providing enjoyable social functions. We currently see the need to develop our social capital as a priority. This year, we will be hosting a range of activities such as quizzes, musical concerts and a charity fashion show. Those family events are accessible, affordable and, perhaps, provide socially deprived families with a much-needed focus on school life beyond the academic.

With regard to the academic, we place importance on individual parent interviews after mock examinations in year 12. Those interviews are in addition to the normal run of parental

consultations. They are a useful tool to involve parents in their children's examination success. It is also a good opportunity to discuss career choices with parents and encourage the motivational benefits to pupils of effective career planning and goal setting. That makes parents feel and see that the school has their children's best interests at heart.

Involvement with local primary schools with regard to reading partnerships and STEM subjects, particularly science and technology-related activities for p6 pupils, has also proven to be most beneficial. Finding the time to engage meaningfully with other external agencies in the community is central to the dynamics that exist in the town of Ballycastle. Charities, schools, churches, social services, the PSNI, the council, and so on, all have their own agendas. The combined synergy of their interactions benefits significantly certain individuals in school and in the community. If co-ordinated and funded appropriately, those combined actions can bring significant benefits to a socially deprived community.

Addressing underachievement in disadvantaged communities is closely aligned to the key area of securing accountability. Monitoring of statistics and benchmarking data is necessary to reveal the extent of any problem and also to promote and develop a culture of self-reflection and school improvement by making effective use of the data available. In the past, Ballycastle High School offered supportive literacy and numeracy classes to pupils who showed underachievement in the first three years. Work that is also currently under way to develop the use of cross-curricular skills for levels of progression has the potential to further support literacy and numeracy in and across the curriculum. We endeavour to make effective use of ICT resources to support literacy and numeracy. That emphasis, coupled with purposeful whole-class teaching and, where appropriate, individual personalised support is an attempt to ensure that all pupils are supported to reach their potential.

MidYIS and YELLIS standardised testing will help to identify pupils who experience difficulties with basic skills, and remedial action will become increasingly more effective as the years pass and the current systems of support and identification become increasingly embedded in school life. The curricular choice offered at Key Stage 4 has been expanded and hopefully now includes subjects that are likely to attract boys, and that will continue to evolve. Significant investment in and effective use of ICT in the school has also been beneficial in that regard.

The review of performance and provision in the school is evolving, developing and constantly being tweaked. The benefits at micro or school level and macro or system level could be significant. However, those benefits must be managed in the context of the dynamic and vibrant environment that is a school. We need to secure a balance between the restrictions and pressures of time constraints and not losing sight of the fundamental importance of positive relationships in bringing about effective change in the school.

The Department of Education's school improvement policy Every School a Good School and the Together Towards Improvement documentation are beneficial and useful in securing accountability, particularly the latter document, which spells out what good practice looks like on the ground. It must be recognised that a large number of initiatives and policy documents have to be read, understood and acted on by principals. However, the booklets that accompany every initiative, each with many pages of information and, on occasion, not always a great deal of content, are time-consuming to read. Sometimes more significant and important aspects can prove difficult to find. Effective practical support is essential from external agencies, such as CASS and CCEA, to support effective and co-ordinated implementation of those strategies. There is a real danger of overwhelming staff with information that can create confusion. Gaining and retaining staff ownership of initiative implementation are essential to sustaining a positive working culture in the school. However, the situation is not helped when changes come about during the implementation phase that necessitate replanning and rescheduling and impact on the efficient management of the school.

The quality of support from RTU is important for the two schools. The assistance provided to the schools is particularly important at a time of significant staffing changes. Therefore, anything that eases succession planning and transition in relation to leadership and teaching changes in a school is important.

Finally, I would like to comment on the fact that my school is considered to be relatively successful in an area of social deprivation. That fact is testament to the hard work of the staff, parents and pupils in sometimes difficult physical conditions. We are in dire need of suitable, effective and, at times, a healthy and safe working environment. A school building should not make socially deprived children feel as though they are second class. At this time of financial constraint and economic downturn, it is important that we do not lose sight of the urgent need for

school refurbishment if not school replacement.

We are already witnessing increased interest in our post-16 courses from pupils who may have considered vocational training or work in the past. Those pupils are often from significantly socially deprived backgrounds and benefit educationally and socially from a prolonged experience of full-time education in school. However, they need higher levels of personal support and guidance, which means increased cost. Such pupils can become disengaged and drift if they are not appropriately supported. We want our pupils to succeed, but to help them to do that, we need sustained investment in infrastructure, but not necessarily on a huge scale. Pupils also need the sustained benefits and encouragements brought about by, for example, the education maintenance allowance, which is of significant financial benefit to nearly 50% of our sixth form. If those pupils do well and are seen to do well, they serve as role models in the community and as effective ambassadors for our school.

In conclusion, Ballycastle High School, although small, is successful and serves its community well. Its strength is very much in its collaboration with Cross and Passion College and, indeed, with Coleraine Area Learning Partnership. Whatever changes are afoot to the support provided by the mechanisms in place, it is important that they are not detrimental to the quality of provision that currently exists.

The Chairperson:

Dr Brown, would you like to comment?

The Very Rev Dr A W G Brown (Ballycastle High School):

We are a very new team, and I am, perhaps, the old hand in that I have been a governor for far too long. We have a new headmaster and an acting vice-principal, and our chairman, who cannot be with us today, is new. In a sense, therefore, we are presenting something that has just been handed over to us as a very good going concern. Speaking as a governor, we are now in very good hands. Our present headmaster has been vice-principal in the school for a couple of years, and he has made a great contribution. He is very gifted in relating to the pupils, and it is in that relationship that our strength as a school has existed.

For that reason, we are reaching out to and making an impact in a community where there is a very real measure of social deprivation. If you were to drive into Ballycastle, you would not think of it as a socially deprived community. It is a plush seaside town with lots of well-heeled individuals, but there are many people who are living in difficulty, who have social problems in their background and whose homes are dysfunctional. They are not huge in number, but they are there, and that is also true in the rural community. Over the years, the school has made a good contribution and is increasingly doing so. It is in that context that we have our presentation today.

The Chairperson:

I have known the school, and you will probably have been thankful for an act of providence that resulted in my parents deciding to send me to Ballymoney High School rather than Ballycastle High School. That was because my dad worked in Ballymoney and the transport from Armoy was easier. In this inquiry, we are keen to drill down to identify the challenges but also to see where schools have been successful. Despite the fact that the Department says that Ballycastle High School is an urban school, it has a huge rural hinterland. Geographically, it sits on the edge of Northern Ireland.

Earlier, John O'Dowd asked the question: what is education about? In your experience, what is the key ingredient that you have to have in place for the pupils who have difficulties and challenges, as opposed to other young people who may find life at school a lot easier and less challenging?

Mr Williamson:

From my experience as vice-principal and now as principal, I have been struck by a heartfelt sense of the school's ethos of being an all-round school at which every pupil can succeed and is expected to succeed. All of our pupils enter for GCSE or equivalent qualifications, and there is an expectation of success in those qualifications. I have been struck by the fact that pupils from a range of social backgrounds and academic abilities share together and are in classes together. That creates challenges for teachers in the provision of their teaching resources and the way in which they deliver lessons to a range of abilities, but it is the norm. It is the custom and practice, and it is what we do. It is incumbent on every member of staff that we are aware that pupils at

Ballycastle High School need to do well, and, in the local community in Ballycastle, they need to be seen to be doing well. That sense pervades. Pupils are aware of that, and that sense of pedigree is in the community. They come to us with an expectation that they will succeed to their potential in their achievements and qualifications that carry a degree of currency when they leave school.

Mr Craig:

I listened with interest to your comments about how you involve parents. Was lack of parental involvement in the past an issue that you overcame? That seems to be an issue in many controlled sector schools, particularly in inner cities. Common sense tells me that your school must have a huge intake of pupils from rural areas. Therefore, it may not be as big an issue for you. How do you keep parents involved? I was intrigued by your interviews with parents after mock-exam results. It is probably more important to interview the parents than the child in some respects.

Mr Williamson:

That has been custom and practice in the school for a long time. The size of the school probably helps in that regard. That engagement with parents, getting them on board and talking about their child on a one-to-one basis is worth its weight in gold.

With regard to engagement in the wider context of community involvement — perhaps, Dr Brown could comment on the situation in years gone by — I suspect that there have been periods of peaks and troughs. At present, we are very aware of the need to engage. It has been referred to as social capital. We have a buoyant parents' association. If people have talent in that regard, I let them get on with it. They do an outstanding job. In the current year, we have already seen major advancements in engagement with the local community — or communities, I should say — in the area.

Engagement between the two schools is also imperative. We have a music concert coming up in celebration of our centenary. There will be representation from Cross and Passion College because that essence of involvement is a significant part of our history. Therefore, everyone is mindful of the need to involve all aspects of the community.

In all honesty, engagement of socially deprived families presents a challenge, particularly in rural hinterlands. However, you have to be proactive. The parents' association is very good in that regard.

Dr Brown:

The business of engagement between the two schools in Ballycastle is a marvellous thing. We are physically across the road from each other. Therefore, there are no problems with transport and the time wasting that that can involve sometimes. The sixth forms essentially operate together now. That is being extended into the GCSE years. It has been good. There is much evidence that it has been very popular with pupils.

Mr Williamson:

I referred to that in the presentation. We have further advanced Key Stage 4 provision with regard to the entitlement framework through working closely with Cross and Passion College. There is a long tradition of post-16 provision. Again, we already see the benefits of that in the cross-community aspect and in the range of courses to suit boys and girls and to suit all abilities. The vocational aspect of some of those courses, for example, BTEC extended certificates in countryside management and sport, mean that they involve the community. Engagement is part of their very nature. We see that adding significant value to community involvement.

Mr Craig:

I want to ask about that issue. Does the fact that you are somewhat geographically isolated — any further and you would be in the sea — work as a disadvantage when it comes to linking yourselves with third-level education and the technical college?

Mr Williamson:

It has been. Again, our allegiance and affiliation to the Coleraine area learning partnership is long established. Pupils from both schools go to the Northern Regional College, to its Ballymoney and Coleraine campuses. There is a long-established relationship. Pupils take up courses in construction, engineering, media, and ICT, for example. That is a fundamental part of our provision.

Transport costs are an issue. Both schools have been working alongside our partners in the area partnership to try to mitigate that. For example, instead of bus loads of pupils going from Ballycastle to Coleraine, perhaps a lecturer will go from Coleraine to Ballycastle. Therefore, we have moved towards that pragmatic and effective use of resources. We hope to improve that.

The hope and desire is for effective use of ICT, blended learning and video conferencing. We are still a long way from that being an effective tool across the board. However, it lends itself to specific areas of the curriculum. I see significant potential in that regard in the short term.

Mr Craig:

You probably heard, during the previous presentation, mention of the use of banding in the school, which is intriguing. Do you use a similar process?

Mr Williamson:

It is similar, but we have a looser interpretation of banding in the context of individual year groups and pupils. Perhaps Mrs Stewart, the vice-principal, will comment on that.

Mrs Carol Stewart (Ballycastle High School):

Our banding is much more flexible and works on a year-to-year basis. We spend a lot of time with the primary schools before the transition. We go out and visit the primary schools and talk to the principals. We find out about the nitty-gritty of the children who are coming to us so that we are prepared. We set the children a little test to get a baseline of where they are. However, if a primary school tells us that a child has pastoral needs, we do not just put that child into a class based on his or her academic score. We look at the person as a whole, and, if that child needs to be with a friend who will support them, we keep them with a friend.

We also rely on the expertise of our staff. We do not like the idea of moving up and moving down. We do not promote that to our children at all. We promote their coming into the school as a fresh start. We promote the idea that they are all equal and that they will all find their niche here and leave having achieved something, whether it is academic or sporting success or self-esteem and self-belief. That is a very important part of our school. Our staff's expertise allows

us to deliver a curriculum to all three of our sets to allow them to progress to the GCSE subjects that suit them. There is not a different timetable at Key Stage 3. All the pupils study the same subjects. We do not move pupils down, as we find that that is demotivating. We have also found that our experiments to move pupils up have not been good for them, socially or personally. Leaving pupils alone and supporting them in the class works best for us and our pupils.

Mr Craig:

I am intrigued by that. The system in which I was brought up was more akin to what we heard about in the previous presentation. Could it be that the scale of the school dictates that approach?

Mrs Stewart:

We have a small school. We change what we do from year to year when we bring children into year 8. Sometimes we have a clear top set. Sometimes we have a clear weaker set. Sometimes we have two equivalent sets. We are flexible from year to year to meet our pupils' needs.

Mr Craig:

I am always careful about the terminology that I use. I never get into the idea of who are the real achievers. Some children are just inclined to go in a different direction. Maybe, in a smaller school, you do not have the luxury of streamlining pupils into a specific area and giving a pupil who wants to go into a vocation, for example, a more vocation-based education.

Mr Williamson:

We are aware of that. As we do from year to year, we are looking at that in relation to our Key Stage 3 offers. Increased collaboration and the benefits of economies of scale also help us in that regard, particularly at Key Stage 4. Collaboration at that level has necessitated a cultural change. We put a lot of time and effort into having good induction systems for pupils going into Key Stage 4 to ensure that nothing goes awry in the relationship between pupils and schools.

As was referred to in the last presentation, such issues as timetables increasingly have to be dovetailed. However, they have to dovetail in a way that is effective for both schools and both sets of pupils, and that is the key. We do not want staff, pupils or parents to feel threatened. It is about increasing provision and having the structures to support that. Pastoral support is another

dimension of collaboration. Ensuring effective pastoral support between the schools is another key aspect of what we do. We are mindful of that and working on it increasingly.

Mr O’Dowd:

Thank you for your presentation — and fair play to you for travelling down from Ballycastle.

The Chairperson:

They could not have come from a better place.

Mr O’Dowd:

I just wonder what would have happened if Ballycastle High School had gotten hold of Mervyn.

[Laughter.]

Unsurprisingly, there is a common theme coming through in the evidence that we have been gathering. Where schools are succeeding, it is down to leadership. I am not just saying that because the leadership of your school is here. How do we, as politicians and decision-makers, assist leadership in schools? In your presentation, you said that you are getting a lot of documents and that there are useful pieces of information hidden in them somewhere. The issue is finding those useful pieces of information. How can we assist you?

Mr Williamson:

As a first-time principal since September past, I have found the support from the education and library boards, the North Eastern Education and Library Board in particular, invaluable. External agency support is, without a doubt, a benefit. We cannot overlook that and the importance of engagement with the education boards, CCEA and RTU.

In developing leadership within a school, the collegiate approach gives staff the opportunity to develop their leadership skills. With distributed leadership in a school, people have a sense of responsibility for taking forward strategies and initiatives. That gives schools the space to allow them to explore certain aspects of education, as well as tweaks and changes that they may want to implement, against the background of accountability and being answerable. We want to be accountable, but we also want to have a wee bit of breathing space to maybe take risks for

learning on occasions and explore other options.

That is particularly important for pupils who are not necessarily gifted or talented academically. Promoting other opportunities for them to develop their talents is important. We need space and time to explore how we can do that and consolidate what we are doing currently.

Effective external support is critical, as long as it is not overburdening. Sometimes, when initiative after initiative lands on my desk from various agencies, I wonder whether they have spoken to one another before sending them out.

Mr O'Dowd:

In the political system, the Civil Service and politicians require something to measure success or failure against. That goes back to my question about exam results and the performance of school leaders; we are always looking for something to measure success against so that we can say that we did a great job or whatever. That is the way the system works.

The question of whether a grade D is a success was raised earlier by myself and the Chairperson. I am not saying that he was being critical, but it goes back to the point that politicians need something to measure success against. If we say that a grade D is a success or a grade E is success and that each individual pupil should be counted on his or her own, how do we measure our schools' performances? What is a better way of measuring our schools' performances than simply setting a statutory grade against each child and using that to measure whether a school is a good school?

Mr Williamson:

Obviously, one cannot get away from the need for measurement through quantitative data. Everybody welcomes that, including parents and pupils, because it secures accountability. However, there needs to be a promotion of a feeling of self-worth in the children. They need to have the opportunity to develop — we mentioned essential skills and employability skills — and gain the range of qualifications out there. There could even be awards for pupils that are not necessarily qualifications. The currency value for certain awards should be recognised and given increased kudos, so that pupils can use them and take them to employers.

One cannot get away from the importance of the development of an individual child and his or her talents, whatever they are. If a child leaves Ballycastle High School as a competent, all-round individual who can communicate and converse and has ICT, literacy, numeracy and communication skills, that in itself is a measure, although it is not necessarily a quantifiable one. Increased use of essential skills and key skills should be rewarded.

With regard to the measurement of leadership, the six key areas of headship expounded by RTU would provide a useful tool for measuring leadership, because they would relate to specific quantitative measurements as well as wider aspects, such as community involvement. There might be a vehicle for measurement there.

Mr O'Dowd:

That is useful. Reverend Brown, you said that you had been involved with the board of governors for many years. Have you seen a change in your role over the years? There has been an emphasis on the boards of governors taking on more of a leadership role, rather than simply a support role. Have you witnessed that and do you think it is effective?

Dr Brown:

Partly, it is. However, in the long run, most governors assume that the ultimate responsibility will lie with the professionals. After all, we are amateurs in this field, and, at times, government has perhaps tried to put too much weight of responsibility on the governors to do things for which they are not really qualified. Our role is a more general one. There is perhaps a tendency at the moment — perhaps I have misunderstood it — in the desire of the government to assess and check on the effectiveness of what we are doing with too great a reliance on statistics, which are often very time-consuming at the teacher end and, therefore, detrimental to some human aspects. How do you measure the success of a school? It lies in the happiness of pupils, in the values that they come to adopt and in their ability to have a sense of worth in other people across community divides so that they respect people for who they are and what they stand for and do not judge them on the labels that they wear. We need to leave schools a little freer and a little less inhibited by statistics, percentages, jargon-ridden documents and so on. I hope that I am not being unfair, but that certainly is the gut feeling of many governors who I know.

Mr O'Dowd:

It is a fair and useful comment.

Mrs M Bradley:

Your paper talks about addressing the achievements in a disadvantaged community and the need for adequate school buildings and refurbishment. How do your pupils avail themselves of all the sporting facilities that other high schools have? Do they miss out on any of that because the schools are so rural?

Mr Williamson:

Through effective management and the goodwill of teachers and the community, we strive to ensure that they do not miss out. One very real example relates to PE. In the town of Ballycastle, there is no swimming pool. The one in the hotel has recently closed, so I now have to hope that somebody buys the hotel or reopens it by the end of this academic year, or I will face considerable transport costs to bus pupils to Ballymoney to use a swimming pool. That is a live example of that problem.

Mary asked about the buildings. We have a strongly north Antrim culture of making the best use of what we have and putting our heads down and getting on with it. However, there is a sense that we can sometimes be a wee bit overlooked. That is the sense in Cross and Passion College. I do not want to speak on behalf of its principal and governors, but we have close enough relationships to understand that we feel that the area in general is deserving of more investment.

Because of the effective management of finance under the previous principal, we have been able to invest significantly in ICT resources. We make best use of what we have, but we cannot get away from the fact that the North-Eastern Education and Library Board's property services have had a significant impact through a desire to move things forward for us. However, we tend to feel that, in certain situations, it is a case of firefighting and that the board is restricted by financial restrictions.

Mrs M Bradley:

Does it disadvantage the pupils?

Mr Williamson:

Yes. You cannot escape from that. We make the best of what we have. We are a successful school, but life would be easier if we could sit in a salubrious, modern environment.

Mrs M Bradley:

The pupils who want to become sportsmen all —

Mr Williamson:

Without a doubt, sport is a major area for us. We want to offer greater vocational provision to be able to invest in and have adequate resources for that. We currently make do and make the best of what we have.

Mr Lunn:

Thank you for your presentation. In the information you gave to the Committee, you emphasised the role played in promoting social and cross-community cohesion, and Dr Brown mentioned the importance of trying to bridge cross-community divides. In the handout for your open night, you stated that your intake comes from the entire community, and it also refers to mutual respect and tolerance. That is music to my ears. Does that mean that you attract an intake from that community that might normally be expected to go to the Cross and Passion College?

Mr Williamson:

Yes.

Mr Lunn:

You do.

Mr Williamson:

I could not put a percentage figure on it. Taking into account the demography of the area, we have representation from all communities, as would any school that represents the community

and the area. When I went to the school, I was struck by the delight of teaching a learning-for-life-and-work class where pupils who played camogie were sitting alongside members of a loyalist flute band and engaging in a meaningful and friendly way. I thought it symbolic the other day when I saw a hurling stick standing alongside hockey sticks in the study. In a very simplistic way, that says a lot about what Ballycastle is like. We are mindful of that and we are careful that the ethos of the school and what goes on in the school will maintain, support and promote that.

Mr Lunn:

As regards the holistic attention given to children, it must be beneficial that they are not educated purely in one setting. I do not mean any disrespect to the previous contributors because there is plenty of opportunity for collaboration at sixth-form level. I am not making any point. It must be a north-coast thing.

Dr Brown:

It comes naturally to the north coast.

Mr Williamson:

It is. There is uniqueness to the community. It may be something to do with the geographical isolation. Our collaboration with Cross and Passion College is non-competitive and non-threatening. It is genuine organic, heartfelt, mutual respect. There is a lot of connection between the pupils and the school.

Mr Lunn:

I suppose it has nothing to do with the over-subscription of Cross and Passion College.

Mr Williamson:

I do not think so. Perhaps one or two pupils might investigate their options but, because we work quite effectively, pupils can pick courses in one school and still pick courses in the other school. However, I do not see that as a particular issue further down the school in years 8, 9 and 10.

Mr Lunn:

Long may it continue.

The Chairperson:

Part of it is probably due to the MLA for the area, who is always known for his tolerance and inclusion, and that may have rubbed off on them. Ian, Carol and Dr Brown, thank you very much. I am sorry that we have had to rush the meeting a bit, but we appreciate your presence.

As MLA for the area, I can say that your contribution is extremely valued. Unfortunately, that is used sometimes in a glib way. Glib may not be the right word: perhaps an offhand way. The value of the work between Cross and Passion College and Ballycastle High School stands as a testament to all that has been achieved. If people were to take a look at the area and community of Ballycastle, the stability of that area — despite all the years of the Troubles — is, by and large, down to the immense work done between Cross and Passion College and Ballycastle High School. When collaboration was a new thing, it was not new in Ballycastle. You are to be commended. We thank you for your efforts. We trust that you will continue to do the job that you have been doing.

Mr Williamson:

Thank you.