Northern Ireland Assembly

Public Accounts Committee

OFFICIAL REPORT (Hansard)

Improving Literacy and Numeracy Achievement in Schools: DE Briefing

13 March 2013

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

Public Accounts Committee

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Members present for all or part of the proceedings:
Ms Michaela Boyle (Chairperson)
Mr John Dallat (Deputy Chairperson)
Mr Trevor Clarke
Mr Michael Copeland
Mr Paul Girvan
Mr Daithí McKay
Mr Mitchel McLaughlin
Mr Adrian McQuillan
Mr Sean Rogers

Witnesses:

Mrs Noelle Buick	Department of Education
Mr David Hughes	Department of Education
Mrs Karen McCullough	Department of Education
Mr Paul Sweeney	Department of Education

Also in attendance:

Mr Kieran Donnelly	Northern Ireland Audit Office
Ms Fiona Hamill	Department of Finance and Personnel

The Chairperson: I welcome Mr Paul Sweeney, Mr David Hughes, Mrs Karen McCullough and Mrs Noelle Buick to today's meeting. You are all very welcome, as is Kieran Donnelly, the C&AG, and Ms Fiona Hamill, the treasury officer of accounts.

Today, we will have the evidence session on the Audit Office (NIAO) report 'Improving Literacy and Numeracy Achievement in Schools'. Does any member want to declare an interest?

Mr Mitchel McLaughlin: I have a conflict, as I am the Assembly private secretary to the Minister of Education. I will have to be excused from the rest of the meeting.

The Chairperson: OK. Thank you, Mitchel. You are excused. What about other members?

Mr McQuillan: I am on the board of governors of Cullycapple Primary School and Carhill Integrated Primary School.

Mr Copeland: I am on the board of governors of Braniel Primary School.

Mr Clarke: I am on the board of governors of Creavery Primary School, Randalstown Central Primary School and Groggan Primary School.

Mr Girvan: I am on the board of governors of Ballyclare Secondary School.

Mr Rogers: I am on the board of governors of Grange Primary School.

The Chairperson: There are no other declarations of interest. I have a declaration: I am a member of the Committee for Education, as is Mr Rogers.

Mr Clarke: During the period covered by the report, I was, as well as being a Member, a member of the education board for the north eastern region.

The Chairperson: OK, members. Those are the declarations of interest. Members, you have correspondence from Mr Paul Sweeney in response to the Committee's request for information on results in controlled schools that have above average free school meal (FSM) entitlement. The material is also sifted into tables. You can compare those in the Audit Office report from pages 68 to 70.

Mr Paul Sweeney, who is the accounting officer of the Department of Education, is here to respond to the Committee today. Mr Sweeney, you are very welcome.

Mr Paul Sweeney (Department of Education): Thank you, Chair.

The Chairperson: Thank you for furnishing us with that additional information. We are very grateful. Will you introduce your team?

Mr Sweeney: Yes. Good afternoon, members. My colleague Noelle Buick is the chief inspector in the Education and Training Inspectorate (ETI). David Hughes is the director of curriculum, qualifications and standards. David is an assistant secretary in the Department, and he joined the Department in October last year. We also have my colleague Karen McCullough. Karen is a principal officer in the Department. She leads the standards and improvement team. Importantly, she is a statistician. She is sponsored by the Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency (NISRA).

The Chairperson: You are all very welcome. Mr Sweeney, I will get into the main part of the meeting. The objective today is that members get an opportunity to question you on different areas of the report.

In 2006, the Westminster Public Accounts Committee (PAC) looked into the report by the NIAO into literacy and numeracy and made recommendations on it. At that time, the skills deficit was found to have increased between primary and secondary schools. The underachievement of boys was a particular concern. The disparity between the results of Catholic and Protestant children from low-income families was also very worrying at the time. What improvements have been made since then, given that this year's report contains the same message as that in 2006?

Mr Sweeney: First of all, the Department very much welcomes the report. We worked with the NIAO in its preparation. From my point of view, it is arguably one of the most significant reports that has been scrutinised by the Committee, given its impact on our whole community.

I will point to a number of areas of improvement since 2005-06. In 2005-06, 53% of pupils achieved the standard of five GCSEs, A* to C, including English and maths. By 2011, that had gone up to 60%. The number of pupils achieving three or more A levels, A* to E, went up from 40% to 53%. There has been an increase in the proportion of pupils achieving the expected levels in Key Stage 2 and Key Stage 3 in English and maths. Since 2006, the proportion of pupils leaving with no GCSEs has halved. Fewer than 2% — 1·9% — now leave without any qualifications. Since 2005-06, almost 3,000 fewer pupils are now leaving without having achieved the benchmark of five GCSEs, A* to C, including English and maths. Of that number, 2,000 are from the non-selective sector. The proportion of pupils staying on at school has increased, from 55% then, to 69% in 2012. The academic outcomes for special educational needs (SEN) pupils in mainstream schools have improved significantly. The proportion of SEN pupils achieving five or more GCSEs and those leaving with two or more A levels has doubled since 2005-06.

I suggest that the Department has worked hard to challenge the complacency that undoubtedly existed in our education system. There is now a general acceptance that there are deep-seated and fundamental failings in parts of our education system that we need to give greater priority to. Against that, there is much in the education system that we can be proud of. In a nutshell, progress has been made. Important foundations have been laid that will, hopefully, act as a springboard for further improvement. However, there is much more work to be done.

The Chairperson: Back in 2006, the Department agreed to publish a literacy and numeracy strategy. That was not published until 2011. Why was there such a delay in getting that published?

Mr Sweeney: A great deal of work was done in between. With devolution being restored in May 2007, it was important that primacy was given to the Minister at the time so that the Department would take direction from the Minister.

In advance of the 'Count Read: Succeed' report being published in 2011, a great deal of preparatory work was undertaken in the Department. With your approval, Chair, I will list some of the important preparatory steps that we took. That will explain the context of why it appears that there was a delay. Would that be helpful?

The Chairperson: Yes.

Mr Sweeney: Immediately after the Westminster PAC reported, we issued a circular to all schools that drew attention to the importance of raising standards in the context of the Westminster PAC findings at that time. We revised the school development planning regulations so that they included a new emphasis on raising standards and, in particular, tackling literacy and numeracy. It was one of the recommendations of the Westminster PAC in 2006, and we commissioned a number of major pieces of research into what comparative cities were doing to tackle some of those issues, the use of data in driving up standards, and looking at best practice in preventative and remedial work targeted towards the underachievement of boys in particular. The inspectorate undertook a review of 34 primary and post-primary schools to identify the characteristics of schools that were successful in tackling low levels of literacy and numeracy.

We introduced a revised curriculum in primary and post-primary, which was quite a fundamental step in moving towards our literacy and numeracy strategy. We established the literacy and numeracy task force in February 2008, which gave rise to the publication of our revised school improvement policy, 'Every School a Good School', in April 2009 . We also revised our assessment arrangements and our arrangements for data processing, and put in place the entitlement framework. We developed a sustainable schools policy — more about that later — and we undertook the review of special educational needs.

Chair, the reason why I took a little bit of time going through those various steps is that, in putting in place our strategy for tackling literacy and numeracy, we spent a number of years putting in place an important suite of complementary policies and programmes that formed the basis of a really solid strategy for tackling literacy and numeracy. Prior to that, there had been 10 separate plans for tackling literacy and numeracy. So, it was important that we cleared the ground, if you like, and put in place a number of important policies and programmes. That, again, formed the basis of the document that came out in March 2011.

The Chairperson: Mr Sweeney, you will understand that it took five years to do that. Obviously, there was still a concern out there. What was the Department doing in the interim to ensure that our children did not miss those crucial steps to literacy and numeracy? Albeit that the programmes you outlined were in place, it is important that the Committee hears what was happening with your Department and the process via schools.

Mr Sweeney: Chair, what I was seeking to convey was that there was a great deal of activity happening in policy development and in developing programming. If I could take one area: the revised school improvement policy document 'Every School a Good School', one of the core elements of which is a much more interventionist role on the part of the Education and Training Inspectorate. Prior to the 2006 Westminster PAC investigation, the inspectorate completed various reports and sometimes found schools performing at outstanding levels. However, the real challenge was what we did about schools that were not reaching satisfactory levels. A core element of ‘Every School a Good School’ was to provide an arrangement whereby the inspectorate could, if necessary, enter schools — that were, because of the evidence produced, underperforming and risking the education of the

children in the schools — into a formal intervention process that supported them and helped them to drive up standards. That was a very important step by the Department.

The Chairperson: Mr Sweeney, paragraph 1.7 of the report tells us that the average funding for post-primary pupils in 2012-13 was £4,172. Doing the sums — as you would — this costs the taxpayer a lot. For instance, last year, the education system spent over £35 million on young people who failed to meet the minimum required standard. Literacy and numeracy is a rich resource for us. Is this a laudable objective? Where are we with that at the minute?

Mr Sweeney: Sorry, Chair. Was that paragraph 1.7?

The Chairperson: Yes.

Mr Sweeney: Were you drawing attention to the sums of money allocated?

The Chairperson: Yes, for the 9,000 school leavers.

Mr Sweeney: In 2006, that figure was about 12,000, and getting it down to 9,000 was not an insignificant achievement. I do not want to give the impression that those 9,000 children have fallen off the precipice and have been utterly failed by the system. Yes, they have not achieved that high standard of five good GCSEs, including English and maths; nevertheless, quite a number of them have achieved five GCSEs, albeit it not including English and maths, and many of them have had a good educational experience. However, by the high standards that we have set, we have reduced the number from 12,000 to 9,000. That has an enormous knock-on effect on our community. When we look at the adult population, one in four is struggling with literacy and numeracy, and that cohort is four times more likely to be unemployed. There is no doubt that the social and economic costs of sustaining that level of underperformance is very significant. There can be no complacency.

The Chairperson: Is the Department taking the lead on this?

Mr Sweeney: Yes. It is the role of the Department of Education to lead on this. This is not meant to be an excuse, but it requires all other partners to work together, and, particularly in the areas of greatest disadvantage, it requires a joined-up co-ordinated approach led by the Department of Education, but in conjunction with other key players. Perhaps, there will be an opportunity to develop that later.

The Chairperson: By "key players", you obviously mean teachers and others in the learning community.

Mr Sweeney: Well, particularly parents. I use the term "three-legged stool". School is an important driver in raising standards, but the role of parents and the community is crucial in setting an ethos of expectation and desire to drive up standards.

The Chairperson: How is the Department working with parents in that area? If parents are key to the learning of our young children, how does the Department co-operate with them? What is the link between the Department and parents? Is it via schools or is it direct?

Mr Sweeney: If you are happy enough, I will bring in other members of the panel.

Mr David Hughes (Department of Education): If I may, I will set out one or two particular points. There is a particular direct effort by the Department to reach parents through the 'Education Works' advertising campaign. However, of course, it is the schools — the teachers, the leadership and other members of school staff — who have constant contact with parents. That focus on the connection between schools and parents, and schools and the wider community, is an expected part of school improvement. It is part of the strategy the Department recognises it has set out, but that is actually put into effect by schools.

Mrs Noelle Buick (Department of Education): If I may add, we have the extended schools programme. In that, £11·8 million comes from the Department to provide extra support for pupils in areas of disadvantage, and £1·2 million of that is around parental engagement. The inspectorate carried out a survey of the extended schools programme in 2010 and found that there was a very

good level of parental engagement. If you want some examples of that later, I will be happy to provide them.

The Chairperson: Yes. I think that some members will have questions about that later. Thank you.

I will now open up the discussion to members of the Committee. Mr Michael Copeland and Mr John Dallat will cover the role and independence of the inspectorate. Michael, do you want to lead off?

Mr Copeland: Thank you very much, Chair. You are all very welcome. Perhaps I am wrong, but it strikes me that the cost of educating a child well and not educating a child well is pretty similar. I am curious as to how the system seems to be failing children in specific areas. That seems to be particularly the case in Belfast, and three of the worst performing Westminster constituencies are North Belfast, West Belfast and East Belfast. I have a particular interest in East Belfast.

I know the children who live in East Belfast, and they are far from stupid. However, the end product of the primary schools and secondary schools does not reflect their ability. Is it because of the way we are now teaching children? For example — and I will use a personal example, as it is the only one that I really know — my son is 22. When he was at school, some wonderful mechanism called the Oxford Reading Tree was introduced. I looked at it and I did not really understand it, because I went to a school that had little cards that read "A for apple", etc, and you constructed words phonetically. He benefited from the Oxford Reading Tree to such a degree that, when he was nine years of age, we were told that he would never be able to read and write. He is now a medical student, so obviously the analysis was wrong.

Are we sure that the way we are spending the money is getting us the maximum bang for our buck, and that the actual mechanics of teaching are not having some impact on the outputs?

Mr Sweeney: I agree with Mr Copeland: there is no question that our children are stupid or are, in any way, innately behind other countries. Indeed, later, I hope that there will be an opportunity to dwell on some of the comparative studies as regards our international comparators. The Northern Ireland primary sector is world-class, and Karen will develop that later.

We will go specifically to costs. In the report, there is an average breakdown, which shows that nursery provision costs about £3,600 per pupil, primary provision costs approximately £3,000 and post-primary provision costs approximately £4,000. Statistics from the Office for National Statistics and analysis from the Treasury or across Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) countries shows that we are approximately on a par in expenditure. We are not out of kilter on expenditure per pupil. There are issues, and it is a great debate when we come to the common funding formula independent review. Should we give more in the early years, where we spend about £200 million at the moment? Should we spend more in the primary sector relative to the post-primary sector? There are debates, but, generally, compared to England, Scotland and Wales, Northern Ireland is on a par, on a cost-per-pupil basis, in delivering our education system, and, relative to those countries, we are performing well.

Mr Clarke: It is interesting that you focused on the expenditure and the money aspect. What about the results? You are drawing a comparator with OECD countries but, in 2002 and 2003, you were above average, and in 2006 and 2009, you are well below average. It is fine to talk about it on a pound-for-pound basis, but why have the results slipped?

Mr Sweeney: My colleague Noelle wants to come in on the part of the question on the quality of teaching, but I will invite Karen to deal with the OECD analysis at primary and post-primary level.

Mr Clarke: Yes, and please speak to the criticisms in the report and explain why, in 2002 and 2003, you were above average. In your previous answer, you congratulated yourself on the expenditure, but expenditure does not say very much if your results are poor. Why have the results slipped from 2006 to 2009?

Mrs Karen McCullough (Department of Education): In the international study?

Mr Clarke: Yes.

Mrs McCullough: That is a survey of 15-year-olds. We participated in that study in 2000, 2002, 2003, 2006, 2009 and 2012. In 2000 and 2003, we were above the international average, and we are now at the international average. We are no different to the OECD average.

One of the advantages of doing the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) is that, as well as giving us the results of the tests that the children do, it ties it to other factors to say what is impacting on the performance of children. It also allows us to look at where there is improvement and the level of achievement of children across the grades. The difference between us and the highest-performing ones is that although we all have pupils at either end of the scale with high performance and lower performance, we have a longer tail of underachievement with a higher proportion of children at the lower end.

Mr Clarke: What is the difference between 2000 and 2003, and 2006 and 2009? It is the same data, and I imagine that it is the same children from the same backgrounds. What were you doing differently in 2000 and 2003, when you were above the average, given that you are now only average? To me, that suggests that the Department has failed in something that it was doing?

Mrs McCullough: I will try to explain it. In 2002, there were fewer countries participating. The more countries that participate in it, the more precise the measure of where we stand internationally becomes. So, in 2000, there were fewer countries, and we were above the OECD average. It is a bit like this: if you are in a room and are the person who, at 6 foot, is the tallest, you are ranked number one. When other people who are 6 foot 2 inches come into the room, you may be ranked number three. That does not mean that you have slipped, you just have a better idea —

The Chairperson: It has to do with the participation of other countries coming —

Mr Clarke: Sorry, I have to come back on that because you are comparing apples with oranges. You cannot compare height with ability because they are two different things. The size of something is different. We are talking about the ability of a child. We are comparing the ability of our children aged 15 with children who are 15 years of age in other countries. So, if our average has slipped against that of other countries, whatever educational means we used must have failed. What that tells me is that if other countries are above average and we are below average, they are doing something better.

Mrs McCullough: I think that it is a more precise measure. We have a better understanding of where we stand internationally. We now have 65 countries, including all the OECD countries, and those 65 countries represent 87% of the world's economies. Therefore, we have a better understanding of where we fit relative to all the other countries. It is a more precise estimate.

The Chairperson: Maybe we could come back to that later, Trevor.

Mr Copeland: Paragraph 3.13 startlingly highlights the chief inspector's report, which identified:

> *"poor quality teaching in just under one-fifth of primary schools and in one quarter of post-primary schools."*

What constitutes poor-quality teaching, and how is it assessed? What is done to improve it, and what happens to poor-quality teachers? Poor-quality teaching deprives children who may already be challenged when it comes to an entitlement to the basic human right of learning to read and write. If you cannot read, write and count, practically every other educationally based skill is double Dutch.

Mrs Buick: The inspector grades teaching and learning on a six-point scale from outstanding to unsatisfactory, and that is based on direct observation of teaching and learning in a school. Those are the mechanics of it, if you like. For good-quality teaching, we expect to see high teacher expectations, a clear focus on learning outcomes and teachers building on the prior knowledge, experience and understanding of pupils. We expect well-structured and planned lessons that meet the individual needs of pupils, ensuring that there is effective questioning to draw out pupils' knowledge and understanding, and a plenary to sum up what pupils have learned and to determine whether there are any aspects that need further improvement. We are very clear about what good or better teaching and learning look like. The figure that you quoted is not good enough: it is teaching that is satisfactory or below. However, we should be really proud of the work that teachers do in our schools. In the main, the majority of teaching and learning is good. In 82% of the primary schools that we inspected, the teaching and learning were good or better, and they were good or better in 76% of the

post-primary schools. That does not mean to say that there is not work to be done, but we should take some comfort from the fact that the majority of teaching and learning is good or better.

Mr Copeland: Is the ability of the teacher to teach measured and balanced against the ability of the pupil to learn? In other words, could a lesson taught in a certain way to a certain class in a certain geographical location result in a different adjudication of that teacher's skill than if the same lesson were taught to a different set of pupils in a different school in a different geographical location?

Mrs Buick: The absolute focus in any observation is on pupils' learning. It is not about the performance, if you would like to call it that, of the teacher. It is about whether the pupils are learning and progressing in their learning and understanding.

Mr Copeland: I understand that there is a substantial — forgive the phrase — bums-on-seat payment. The payment for a child in P7 is substantially lower than it is six months later, or six weeks later in the case of the summer holidays, when the child starts first year in a post-primary school. In your view, is that break in expenditure satisfactory or should the spend be smoothed over? Is there a reason why a pupil is worth— forgive the term — x pounds to a school at the end of year 7 and x pounds plus whatever at the beginning of year 8?

Mrs Buick: I am sure that Mr Sweeney would like to come in on the financial point. From the learning outcomes point of view, the trends in international mathematics and science study and progress in international reading literacy study results show that our primary school pupils are performing very well and well above the OECD average. So it is not necessarily about the amount of money spent; it is about how that money is spent.

Mr Copeland: I understand that. Your schools inspectorate sits totally within the Department of Education. I am not calling into question its independence, but I am rather curious about whether a totally independent inspectorate would, perhaps, be a more transparent option and one worth considering.

Mrs Buick: There are many models of how inspectorates are structured across Europe. I have been chief inspector for nearly two years, and I can say that the Education and Training Inspectorate inspects absolutely without fear or favour and without any ministerial interference. I have come from the English system, as you know —

Mr Copeland: — which is independent. Is that correct?

Mrs Buick: I was just going to explain. One of the inspectorates that I was in was a non-departmental public body, and the second was a non-ministerial Department, which was at some considerable distance from the Department. I can absolutely say that there is no difference between the independence of our role here, within the Department of Education, and our independence in those other two structures.

Mr Sweeney: It might be helpful to point out that the inspectorate provides a range of services across the Northern Ireland Administration. We provide services for the Department for Employment and Learning, the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure and, from time to time, the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development. In the past, the Prison Service has also called on the inspectorate. Therefore, it is not an inspectorate solely within the Department of Education; it is an inspectorate service that is available across the board.

I move now to the costing issue. I was interested to hear Mr Copeland use the term "bums on seats". Of this, there is no doubt: there is a great deal of competition for pupils, which is, I think, unhealthy and means that the needs of institutions are sometimes put before the needs of pupils. Perhaps, when we come on to area-based planning, we can discuss the dynamics of that. The amount delegated by the common funding formula to the aggregated schools budget is approximately £1·2 billion a year. The formula that we use has been in place since 2005. Roughly speaking, the outworkings per pupil are that nursery gets approximately £3,600, primary gets £3,000 and post-primary gets £4,000. As Mr Copeland said, when a pupil moves from primary to first year at post-primary, the money allocated rises from £3,000 to £4,000.

Mr Copeland: That is a 25% increase.

Mr Sweeney: The Minister, conscious of the criticisms being made of the current system, commissioned an independent review of the common funding formula that has been in place since 2005. Sir Bob Salisbury reported in January of this year, and it is a very interesting and detailed report, and the Minister is now giving very serious consideration to some of its core recommendations. In essence, the independent review says that greater emphasis needs to be placed on early years intervention. Indeed, Sir Bob Salisbury points out that the inefficient way in which we provide post-primary education, and our failure to rationalise that part of the educational estate, is at the cost of the primary sector. There are, therefore, fundamental issues here that the Minister will wish to take forward and consult widely on, with a view to looking at options for reconfigurating the common funding formula.

Another core element of that, which is very relevant to this report, is a recommendation on the proportion of money targeted towards the areas of greatest need. The independent review targets a very substantive weighting on children who receive free school meals. So, in the first instance, it will be a matter for the Minister to deliberate on the independent review and to consult key stakeholders. As a result of that, there may well be changes to the manner in which the funding formula is distributed across the various sectors. It is, undoubtedly, a real, live issue.

The Chairperson: Michael, are you satisfied with the response on the quality of teaching in Belfast?

Mr Copeland: From examining the results, I could not say. I understand that everyone is doing their best, but I see the product of this at first hand.

Mr Hughes: You have put your finger on a critical point. I think that the report, as well as the Department's school improvement policy, picks up on the fact that what makes the biggest difference to the effectiveness of schools is the quality of teaching, the quality of leadership in a school, the focus on pupils and the connection between the school and the community at large, including parents. Those four features, which are the features of successful education systems, sit at the heart of the school improvement policy.

You asked whether a teacher could give exactly the same lesson in two completely different contexts. If he or she understands how those pupils learn and responds to that, it may well be the right lesson. If, however, the teacher says that he or she has been teaching the same lesson in exactly the same way everywhere and for all time, he or she is not responding to the pupils, and that presents a challenge to how that teacher is learning. That is part of the process of improvement.

Mr Copeland: I understand what you are saying, but I want to cite an example of a school that I have some knowledge of. My old school, Lisnasharragh High School, has gone; Orangefield High School is going; and Knockbreda High School and Newtownbreda High School are merging. Up the road, we have Dundonald High School, opposite which is a housing estate with 10,000 people. Should that school close, it would be extremely difficult for children from that estate to get to any new proposed school. Dundonald High School has a method of teaching, which, I think, is as good as that school could ever possibly achieve. However, because of the raw material that the school has, I do not think that it can conform to the norms: to change, reconfigure and show improvements in its statistics. In my view, the essential element is belief: the belief of the principal in the teaching staff and pupils, and the belief of the pupils and parents in the staff. Unfortunately, we seem to be focused on bigger schools and centralisation. I understand the economic need for those, but you cannot put a price on the cost of failing children in their education.

The Chairperson: I will bring Karen in on that as she wants to respond.

Mrs McCullough: You said that you did not know the outcomes for Belfast. We have looked at pupils resident in Belfast. Since 2005-06, their performance has improved by 9·6 percentage points, which is at a faster rate than in other parts of Northern Ireland.

Mr Copeland: Was that using the same measure as previously?

Mrs McCullough: Yes, it is based on five-plus GCSEs. On the same measure, their performance improved, and at a faster rate. The gap between Belfast residents and residents in other areas has declined. There is still a gap, but it is declining.

Mrs Buick: Mr Copeland, you described exactly what a good school should be doing. It should be raising the expectations of its pupils, and the leadership of a school should have high expectations for those pupils. Unless that is driven from the top in a school, we will not see the improvements needed. I do not think it acceptable to say that just because a child comes from a deprived area, he or she is not capable of achieving the absolute best. Earlier, I outlined the characteristics of good teaching. If you find those good teaching characteristics and leaders who firmly believe that every pupil should achieve their full potential, you are looking at a good school.

Mr Copeland: A good school is measured by the achievement of a certain number of marks in a certain set exam. I am not 100% sure that that is the way in which we should measure children because the ability to pass exams is different from intelligence.

The Chairperson: That will be covered in another area of questioning.

Mr Copeland: Sorry, I am straying from the subject.

The Chairperson: Mr Girvan, did you want to come in with a supplementary?

Mr Girvan: I would like clarification because I am getting a mixed message on funding. I do not necessarily believe that throwing extra money at education brings better results because it costs the same to pay a bad teacher as it does to pay a good teacher. One teacher can get better results in the same subject and teaching the same group than another, which is evident from GCSE results: a maths teacher who teaches exactly the same tier of pupils as a colleague in a room further up the corridor may achieve much better results. That is the point. You can throw a lot of money at trying to deal with and identifying the cause of such things, but it is really down to the teaching. Having been there and witnessed it at first hand, there are those who have bought into teaching and see it as a calling, and there are others who see it as just an opportunity and a job for the meantime.

You talked about reallocating funding from certain schools. I really cannot see how that works. What will be done about failing schools to ensure that they do not continue to fail? We have a list of schools that put in place measures to deal with certain issues that were identified to them, and they improved their results. It was not always necessary to throw money at a school for it to change its results. Sometimes, it is a matter of changing the principal or getting a board of governors that does not necessarily nod its head every time the principal says yes. Sometimes, it is a matter of making changes, and that is what has to happen. Unfortunately, people have to be rattled sometimes to identify where the problems are.

Mr Sweeney, you said that funding was a key factor. Some of those who come from areas of deprivation are as brainy as anyone else and should have an equally good opportunity to get a qualification, go to university and do whatever has to be done. That has to be pulled out of those young people. That is irrespective of what people feel about streaming or whether children should go to grammar schools because those are not the issues. It is about getting children through that process, and I cannot see how money makes a difference to that.

Mr Sweeney: We agree with each other. Money is important. I know that you are not saying that, but we need to fund our education system adequately. The key factor is how that money is spent.

As a bureaucrat, I do not claim to be an expert in the science of teaching per se, but I often reflect on a study that was carried out in 2007 by McKinsey & Company. It states that the quality of an education system can never exceed the quality of the education that takes place in the classroom. I absolutely agree with you that it is about what happens in the classroom. As Noelle said, we know that a school works if it is well led, pupil-orientated, delivers good quality teaching and has strong links with the community. Time and again, we have been able to see two schools with comparative hinterlands and similar proportions of pupils on free school meals — perhaps higher than 50% —

Mr Girvan: I do not agree with that analogy of assessment, but I know that other people have different views on that.

Mr Sweeney: The point that I am trying to make is that two schools with exactly the same characteristics can achieve remarkably different outcomes with exactly the same funding formula. That presents a challenge to the Department's role, the role of the boards, or, if it is a maintained school, the Council for Catholic Maintained Schools (CCMS), and the role of the board of governors in

that school. As members have said, children get only one chance at education. Ultimately, it is about the quality of teaching in the classroom. Everything in the education system should be about bringing about respect for that but also holding teachers and leaders to account for performance.

Recently, we have been giving more support to boards of governors by way of providing important data so that they can benchmark the performance of their school relative to other areas. We sent out a set of documents to the post-primary sector last year and the primary sector this year. We have been getting very good feedback: boards of governors say that this is exactly the sort of easily understood data that they need. It enables them to fulfil, at times, their challenge function. At other times, it enables them to play their role of supporting principals and teachers in the classroom.

Mrs Buick: I wonder whether it would be helpful if I gave an example of an outstanding school and its characteristics, some of which are similar to what Mr Dallat described. When we inspected Omagh High School very recently, it came out as outstanding. Its results are well above the national average for similar schools. Teaching and learning were good or better in two thirds of the lessons that we observed. Teaching was challenging, stimulating and brisk, and pastoral care was outstanding. The behaviour of pupils was exemplary. The key factor, however, was the rigorous tracking and monitoring of individual students. The school identified low achievement or underachievement — there is a difference — and put in place strategies to address particular issues for particular students. There was a creative approach to designing the curriculum to make sure that it matched pupils' needs. Most importantly, from a leadership and management point of view, there was effective self-evaluation and school development planning. The school knew exactly what its priorities were and which areas required improvement. There was good progression after GCSEs into full-time education. In addition, 33% of years 13 and 14 went into full-time education, and 58% went into higher education.

I hope that that sums up some of the characteristics of an outstanding school. It is about a relentless focus on high outcomes throughout the school.

The Chairperson: I will bring in the Deputy Chairperson.

Mr Dallat: I am Mr Dallat, and I have not spoken until now.

Mrs Buick: I am sorry; I beg your pardon.

Mr Dallat: I hope that you were not talking about me before this. *[Laughter.]*

Mr Girvan: Send the dreaded Mr Dallat.

Mr Dallat: We have just heard an example of a good school.

Mrs Buick: Outstanding.

Mr Dallat: Noelle, you have been here for a couple of years. No doubt, you have been to glittering prize nights and seen the special guests, the cups being presented and all of that.

Mrs Buick: I have been invited to a few.

Mr Dallat: Have you been to our jails?

Mrs Buick: I have been on a prison inspection.

Mr Dallat: That is comforting. I visit Magilligan occasionally. I know that there is one person in the public audience who has devoted a good part of her life to that. There is 80% illiteracy and innumeracy — I prefer to call it what it is — in our jails. Is that not a reflection of the failure of the past?

Mrs Buick: We inspect teaching and learning in our prisons. We did a separate survey that identified the need to improve the quality of teaching and learning in our prisons and the opportunities to do so. You are right. The report states that if a young person has not had the opportunity to get a good education at school, the chances of getting involved in crime later in life are quite high, and we now see the manifestation of that. This comes back to what we have been talking about, the things that

make outcomes better: the child-centred vision, quality teaching and learning, good leadership and management, and the links with the community that put such a value on education. I do not disagree with you. However, a number of measures, which Mr Sweeney described, are in place to address some of that.

Mr Dallat: We have heard of the millions of pounds that have been spent. It intrigues me that somebody who has a criminal record and goes into prison can, if there for long enough, get a second chance and go on to third-level education.

Mr Girvan: Correct. We have some of them here.

Mr Dallat: Perhaps one of the disadvantages — hands up — of being on the Committee for too long is that I have heard it all before. I am not sure whether that applies to you, Mr Sweeney, but you, Mrs Buick, are new. You came from a country where the inspectorate is independent. How on earth can you cope in this silo, where your paymaster and boss is the Department of Education?

Mrs Buick: As I explained earlier, we inspect absolutely without fear or favour. All our judgements are based on first-hand evidence. There is no ministerial interference at all in our work. Please take comfort from that. That is absolutely the case, and you are hearing it directly from me.

Mr Dallat: OK, I will accept that. I accept everything that I am told.

I tabled a question recently about the infrastructure of our schools. There are several thousand temporary classrooms, some of indeterminable age. Is that an environment conducive to getting the best out of children? Have you seen such classrooms when out on inspection? Have you been screaming at the Department about them from the rooftops? Why is the situation getting worse rather than better?

Mrs Buick: I will start off, and I am sure that Mr Sweeney will then say something about the Department's capital projects.

If we see that the fabric of a building or accommodation is interfering with the quality of teaching and learning and pupils' experience, we will say so. At the back of every inspection report is a section where we can comment on accommodation. Just because a child is taught in a temporary classroom does not mean that he or she is not getting a good teaching and learning experience. We have seen some very good —

Mr Dallat: May I interject? That is an interesting point. I had the privilege of going into classrooms in Africa, in particular, Malawi, where I saw 80 children to a classroom, sometimes without pen or paper but fluent in English as well as their native language. So why on earth do we have 250,000 people in Northern Ireland between the ages of 16 and 64 with the lowest levels of literacy and numeracy? What does that say about the system?

Mrs Buick: I am sure that Mr Sweeney will want to come in on this. We have accepted that that is not good enough, but a significant number of the 9,000 young people about whom we are specifically talking today do get some qualifications. They may not get five A* to C grades, including English and maths, but 95% of them go on to further education and training. So they have a stepping stone to progressing their learning. Pupils mature at different levels in their ability to learn, so enabling them to move on to some area of further education allows them to develop other skills in that setting.

Mr Dallat: Chair, I know that other members are anxious to come in, but, surely, there must have been some kind of early warning system in place, particularly after the 2006 report, which was about as damning as you can get. Yet, here we are in 2013, and it is a case of déjà vu. I have heard all this before: all the priorities and all the rehearsals.

The members around this table are intelligent people, and they know when they have heard a yarn before. I hear nothing today that tells me that any of those who have lower levels of educational attainment — the 9,000 leaving school; those aged between 16 and 64; or the 80% of prisoners — are getting a fair deal. Somebody will challenge, through the courts, why a person educated with public money leaves school unable to get a job in these competitive times. To be honest, I have not heard anything today that tells me that lessons have been learned. I am glad that somebody clarified an important point earlier because I am not blaming the teachers for this — the whole system is not right.

The Chairperson: Do you want to respond, Mr Sweeney?

Mr Sweeney: I have a couple of points. On the capital side, I think that Mr Dallat agrees that you can often get tremendous educational outcomes in fairly dilapidated schools.

Mr Dallat: Yes.

Mr Sweeney: Our educational estate is valued at approximately £4 billion. This year, our budget for capital renewal is £100 million. We have a backlog of £300 million for critical maintenance. In an ideal world, one would like to have more money to invest in refreshing the educational estate. The Minister has done his level best to take every opportunity to do that. He made two very significant announcements: one in June last year; and a statement —

Mr Dallat: May I intervene, Chairperson? The Public Accounts Committee is apolitical. We are not here to judge the Minister. We are here to judge the Department and the inspectorate — end of story. I would prefer to keep to that subject. Otherwise, we will get into political —

Mr Sweeney: I was not making a political point, Chair. We all operate under the direction and control of the Minister. The point that I was making is that every opportunity is being taken, where we can within the resources available, to address the challenges in the educational estate. Over and above that, there is a real challenge for the Department to rationalise the schools estate through the sustainable schools policy. We put that in place in 2006, and the Bain report in 2006 said that we have too many small, unsustainable schools. We brought out the sustainable schools policy, and the Department has now embarked on area-based planning in the primary and post-primary sectors. I am making that point because there is an opportunity to rationalise and optimise the school estate and to make investment — *[Interruption.]*

Mr Clarke: Can I interject at this point? Did you need someone to tell you that you needed to rationalise the estate at that stage? We are hearing an explanation about Bain. Did we not have the expertise in the Department to know that the estate was too big in the first instance? Did we have to depend on somebody coming in to tell you how to do your job? You are giving us a big, convoluted answer that, in my mind — I support John Dallat on this — is fairly meaningless. I would rather get back to the report. It seems to me that you had to pay someone money to tell you what we could have told you anyway: that you were not doing a very good job and could not make decisions for yourselves on the size of the estate and the amount of money that needed to be spent on schools. By your admission, £300 million was needed for critical maintenance. You needed some expert to tell you that. That says a lot for the people who work for the Department currently.

Mr Sweeney: I do not want to get overly defensive. The Bain report was a terrific piece of work in 2006, and it gave rise to the Department formulating a sustainable schools policy. It was really important that we consulted widely on that, because, as the member and all members will know, the issue of rationalising the schools estate is very emotional because, very often, it is about looking at the fact that we have too many small, unsustainable schools that are very often in the wrong place.

Mr Clarke: It also says to me that you have failed for so many years and that your focus has been entirely wrong. The reason why you have those schools is because your focus was entirely wrong for so many years. If you drill down into it, that might be the reason why some of those schools have failed.

Mr Sweeney: Some of the schools are struggling because, in my view, a number of them are unsustainable. The Department has taken proactive steps in that regard, and I am conscious that I need to come back to a number of points that Mr Dallat made.

Mr Dallat: Please do.

Mr Sweeney: We will do.

Last year, we requested that the education and library boards and CCMS carry out viability audits to ascertain the extent to which a number of our schools were exhibiting stress. We use three criteria. Which schools are struggling with enrolment numbers? Which schools are struggling with educational outcomes? Which schools are struggling with financial outcomes? That is all in the public domain,

and I will be very succinct. Nearly half of our primary schools, nearly one third of our grammars and five out of six of our secondary schools exhibited at least one element of stress. So, we need to do something quite radical and urgent about rationalising the schools estate. Mr Copeland has now left, but some of the schools that have small enrolment numbers and are struggling financially and with educational outcomes do not have the sufficiency of scale to deliver the revised curriculum and the entitlement framework.

Mr Clarke: Who denied you doing that work many years ago? Did you not have the expertise in the Department to realise that there was a problem and that that should have been done some time ago? We will all have to accept that there will be pain in each of our constituencies, and we are big enough and old enough to realise that some schools will close. However, are you telling us that we have to go about this in a piecemeal way and that it took about 15 years longer than it should have to employ people to tell you that we have too many schools and that the estate is too big? If that is what you are saying, you are treating us with contempt.

Mr Sweeney: Chair, there is no question of me, as permanent secretary in the Department, treating Members of this Assembly with contempt. I did not see any behaviour on my part that exhibited that. Perhaps the member can help me. I am genuinely here to help the members, and I am focusing on the very important work on the rationalisation of the schools estate at primary and post-primary level. There is a great deal of consultation taking place on all that. The post-primary plans are now published, and the primary draft plans will be published next week — *[Interruption.]*

Mr Clarke: Can I help you? We are here to talk about literacy and numeracy in schools, not about area-based planning and the rationalisation of the schools estate. That is what you seem to be focusing your time on now, as an excuse, as far as I am concerned. It would be good if we could get back to the report.

The Chairperson: To be fair to Mr Sweeney, he is trying to explain the overall bigger picture —

Mr Clarke: And doing a good job of it.

The Chairperson: — and that is kind of what he is leading into.

Mr Sweeney: Yes. A number of schools are not sustainable, for the reasons that I have stated. Despite the fact that many of them are very well led, and despite the fact that many of them have excellent teachers, the reality is that if they have not got the sufficiency of scale to deliver the full curriculum and entitlement framework, that is, I think, grossly unfair. All those issues are interlinked.

The Chairperson: So, basically, you are saying that, five years from now, there will be a big change.

Mr Sweeney: That will depend on the will of the community, frankly. As a Department, and in conjunction with the education and library boards and CCMS, we have mapped out a way forward for the post-primary sector. Draft plans will be issued for the primary sector next week. It will require bold decisions to be made. Some schools will have to close, but it is the Department's view that, as a result of that, we will be in a position to copper fasten a more sustainable approach to the educational estate.

Can I come back to Mr Dallat's point?

The Chairperson: Yes, you can indeed.

Mr Sweeney: I regret the fact that Mr Dallat feels that there has been insufficient progress. I believe that very significant progress has been made. I do not believe for one moment that the Department has been in any way complacent. There have been significant improvements in a number of areas. However, it is a feature of the Northern Ireland educational system that we have the worst, and that it is, at times, the most challenging. We know from international evidence that we have some outstanding schools. My colleague Karen talked about this earlier. We know about the tail of underachievement and the disparity between the higher performing schools and lesser performing schools. I do not know whether we have the largest gap in the OECD countries, but certainly the disparity is stark. That is part of the challenge. We are trying to get behind those schools that are succeeding, to ensure that the momentum is achieved there, and to tackle underachievement wherever we find it. Part of that response is looking at whether the school is of sufficient scale to

deliver a quality curriculum and the entitlement framework. If it is not — if it has not got that scale of provision — there is a need to rationalise. Opportunities are now being taken to do that.

Mr Clarke: Years too late.

Mr Dallat: Chairperson, I am sure that Mr Sweeney would be disappointed if we came here simply to discuss the achievements. I can do that with great comfort. I would claim that the best secondary school and primary schools are in my town of Kilrea. I know that to be true. However, I would not be doing my job if I was not reflecting on the young people I see around the courthouse in Coleraine, week in, week out, being drummed in and drummed out of petty crime, drugs and everything else; or those I see in Magilligan jail; or, on a happier note, those I see at the Limavady college of further education getting the first certificate of their life. If I sound a bit emotional about this, it is because I come in contact, so often, with people who have been failed by the system. All around this table, all of us, inspectorate included, need to focus on that.

As for the schools estate — not to go back to Trevor's point exclusively — it would be interesting to know how many millions of pounds the Department has spent on architects' fees for schools that were never built and never will be built. It would be interesting to know how many millions of pounds have been spent on new schools that are now closed or are scheduled for closure in the next two or three years. That would certainly point up that, for whatever reason, the long-term planning has been sadly inadequate. That does not just mean that schools were kept open, it also means that, where there was a failure of long-term planning, particularly in the controlled sector, whole swathes of geographical areas have now been left with no schools at all, because there was no forward planning.

I will just sit back now and listen to other members, and allow them the opportunity to speak. We are discussing a very serious problem. When an employer comes to the Committee to tell us that he has to take workers off the production line to teach them basic English so that they can read basic instructions, I ain't proud.

Mr Sweeney: Let there be no doubt that the Department is approaching long-term planning in a very, very proactive and systematic way, in consultation with the education and library boards, CCMS and other organisations, and, of course, importantly, with the community. We are absolutely seized of the criticality of planning the estate in a much more systematic manner.

The Chairperson: And moving forward with that.

To go back to the architects' fees, Deputy Chairperson, are you putting the question to the Department that you want that information?

Mr Dallat: Yes, please. Some of it may be easily enough got, but it tells a disturbing story. It suggests that boards of governors and people were fobbed off just to keep them quiet and no decisions were ever reached.

Mrs Buick: Chair, is it worth adding some of the strategies that have been put in place to improve achievement? I am thinking specifically of Achieving Belfast. The inspectorate did an evaluation of the Achieving Belfast project, which focuses on improving achievement in 14 primary schools and four post-primary schools. Although it is moving from a low base, there is no doubt about that, we have seen a positive trajectory. The results at Key Stage 2 have almost doubled; at Key Stage 3, it is plus 10 percentage points; for GCSE grades A to C, it is plus 20 percentage points; in English and maths, it is plus 8 percentage points. Now, we are not saying that we are there. However, the Achieving Belfast activity does seem to be making a difference to outcomes for our young people. I agree with Mr Dallat.

Mr Girvan: What is that initiative? What is the difference between what is being put forward in that and what happens in normal teaching?

Mrs Buick: There is the Achieving Belfast project and the Achieving Derry-Bright Futures project, which came out of, I believe — it was before my time — the report in 2006. It was really to tackle specific pockets of underachievement.

Mr Girvan: I know that, but what measures are being used to achieve those targets or outcomes?

Mrs Buick: It is all the things that I was talking about earlier. I do not want to repeat them all, but it is about making sure that the schools have an emphasis on high expectations and strong leadership. The key thing that has made a difference is the tracking and monitoring of individual pupils, and putting in place strategies to address their particular needs.

Mr Girvan: Was it throwing money at it?

Mrs Buick: No.

Mr Hughes: The budget for Achieving Belfast and Achieving Derry-Bright Futures is around £360,000 a year. There is additional resource. It also means that the resources that are available through the Western Board and Belfast Board can be focused on schools where the need is the greatest.

Mr Girvan: What is the resource?

Mr Hughes: It will be those officers on the board who have the time and resource to focus on those schools. There would also be some programmes. In some ways, the Achieving Belfast programme is an enrichment and extension of the extended schools programme. There is resource to engage in additional programmes that support the children who need the greatest support. There is more resource available.

Mr Girvan: I appreciate that those programmes work, but they work not because of what is happening in the classroom. Is that correct? They work because of additional help that is being given and additional reporting processes to identify pupils who might be struggling, which really should be happening anyhow. I have witnessed it many times in the past. A teacher will see that Jonny in the corner is having a bit of difficulty understanding an algebraic equation, and say, "I will have a wee chat with him after class and explain it to him".

Mrs Buick: I suppose the important thing is that it is absolutely focusing on the things that should be happening in all schools around good teaching and learning.

Mr Girvan: Should be.

Mrs Buick: And is, as I said, happening in a majority of schools. As I described, 82% of teaching is good or better in primary schools and 76% in post-primary schools. Those schools were at quite a low level and some intervention was needed to improve outcomes for young people. The programme enables teachers to observe good practice in other schools and bring it back to their schools. In that way, they can form good practice clusters and share ideas on teaching and learning in specific subjects. There is an ETI evaluation of the programme and an ongoing evaluation by the Belfast Education and Library Board. A pocket of underachievement was identified and some action was taken to address that. We are not there yet, but it is making a positive difference.

The Chairperson: Have the Achieving Derry and Achieving Belfast models been replicated across all the schools.

Mr Hughes: Achieving Belfast is concentrated in a relatively small number of schools in the Belfast area.

The Chairperson: But it is working in the schools in Belfast?

Mr Hughes: Yes. Achieving Derry took quite a different approach and works with all the schools in the Derry city area. It engages with other agencies that work with the schools in supporting individual pupils, in many cases, to tackle barriers to education. Quite different approaches have been taken.

Over the years, Achieving Belfast has increasingly developed connections to the same support agencies outside schools. Achieving Derry has an increased focus on work to improve educational outcomes. Over time, both schemes are becoming slightly more similar in the way that they approach things.

The Chairperson: Can I come back to you on that? I think that is very interesting. It is sad that it has not been replicated right across.

Mrs McCullough: Can I pick up on that? Mr Dallat asked about the outcomes for everybody. We have seen improvements in phases. There have been improvements among girls and, particularly, boys at Key Stage 2 and Key Stage 3 in English and maths. On the measure of 5 GCSEs including English and maths, since 2005-06, we have seen improvements for boys, girls, our free school meal children, those resident in Belfast, those resident elsewhere, children in urban areas and children in rural areas. So, whichever way you cut it, there have been improvements in the performance of all those cohorts.

We have also seen significant gaps starting to close. The girls/boys gap is closing, the grammars/secondary schools gap has closed, as has the Belfast/other areas gap. These groups might still outperform each other, but the gaps are starting to close.

Mrs Buick: If it is helpful, at a later stage, we could talk about closing the gap and the formal intervention process. Those are two examples of how improvement is replicated across the sector.

The Chairperson: I think that we are just about to move on to that discussion. Before we do, Mrs Buick, I am interested to know how many inspections the inspectorate undertakes each year. Is there a paper on the programme of inspections by the ETI? Can members have that?

Mrs Buick: Broadly, we carry out 300 inspections a year. Probably the best document is 'The Chief Inspectors' Report 2010-12'. It is current and was published in October 2012. It outlines the number of inspections that took place between April 2010 and June 2012 and the number of full inspections, follow-up inspections, interim inspections and survey visits. It very clearly lays out the number of inspections for primary and post-primary, etc.

The Chairperson: OK. We can get that. Thank you.

Mr McQuillan: Before we leave that, why do you give notice of inspections? Giving notice means that things can be organised. Why do you not just land into a school and inspect it?

Mrs Buick: As you can imagine, there is a mixed school of thought on that.

The Chairperson: Very briefly.

Mrs Buick: Very briefly, the inspection notification period for post-primary standard inspections and primary focused inspections is four weeks. It is two weeks for primary short inspections, and we are looking to move all inspections to a two-week notice period.

Mr McQuillan: Why do you not just go in and see the school raw, as you see it? Everything is set up for the inspectors coming.

Mrs Buick: We have the opportunity to carry out unannounced inspections, mainly in relation to safeguarding. There is an option to do that.

Mr McQuillan: How often do you take up that option?

Mrs Buick: Probably very rarely. Thankfully, no safeguarding issues have been notified to us.

There are logistical matters that need to be arranged in preparation for inspections. We think that it is important to talk to teachers about what the inspection process will be like. Moving everything to a two -week notice period, which is the direction of travel we would like to go in, is a step in that direction.

Mr McQuillan: Chair, I will be brief on this point. The general public see that as a cosy relationship between schools and the inspectorate. That does not go down well outside here or anywhere else.

Mrs Buick: I do not believe that we have a cosy relationship with schools at all. We take a professional external evaluator view.

Mr McQuillan: That is the perception.

Mrs Buick: That is honestly not the feedback we get. Our feedback is that we make professional external evaluations of the quality of schools that are right and proper.

I will take the Committee's views into account when we are discussing the notice period for inspections.

Mr McQuillan: I will leave it there, Chair. I have no other questions.

Mr Clarke: Can I come in on that point?

The Chairperson: I am conscious that Mr Rogers is anxious to leave early. He has another appointment. Can we come back to it, Mr Clarke?

Mr Clarke: It was on that particular thing, but I am happy enough.

The Chairperson: OK. Hurry up.

Mr Clarke: Who do you receive the feedback from?

Mrs Buick: NISRA carries out independent evaluations of all the schools we inspect after an inspection has been completed. We also have customer service excellence, in which an external evaluator meets some of our customers, or people we inspect, and gets a view. Generally speaking, the feedback is really positive.

Mr Clarke: That is the point that I think my colleague was trying to make. It is a closed shop. They close ranks on this.

Mrs Buick: Parental questionnaires are completed on all inspections —

Mr Clarke: I have seen them —

Mrs Buick: — and parents have an opportunity to give their view on the quality of schools and to make any other comments they want to make.

Mr Clarke: Do you not accept that schools that have been inspected after being given four weeks' notice can put on a good show for the inspectors?

Mrs Buick: We take that into account when we evaluate teaching and learning.

Mr Clarke: Do you believe that that happens?

Mrs Buick: Anecdotally, I suspect that we have had some information that schools have an opportunity to think about the inspection before it takes place. However, inspectors are experienced, knowledgeable and skilled individuals, and will know whether a lesson is a performance. We take into account a whole range of evidence in addition to the actual teaching that we observe. We look at the work in children's books and the outcomes. All that gives us a rounded picture of the quality of education.

Mr Clarke: What is the background of your inspectors?

Mrs Buick: They are all experienced senior managers or teachers from the education system in Northern Ireland.

Mr Clarke: So, they have been teachers at one point.

Mrs Buick: Absolutely.

The Chairperson: OK. Thank you. Apologies to Mr Rogers who, along with Mr McKay, is covering underachievement and early intervention.

Mr McKay: It is an interesting report. Obviously, there are a number of concerning statistics, but I welcome the emphasis on the literacy and numeracy strategy, gender and FSM entitlement.

Last week, we discussed something that I suppose goes back to the 2006 report. Point 4 on page 64 of the report discussed the concerns in the 2006 report about the:

> *"reasonable degree of consistency between the performance of Catholic and nondenominational schools in Glasgow in English and Mathematics at GCSE...level".*

It goes on to state:

> *" this is certainly not the case in Belfast. Here, schools with 40% or more pupils entitled to free school meals do disturbingly less well than their Catholic counterparts",*

and recommends that those issues must be addressed.

In this report, the Audit Office states:

> *"social deprivation appears to have a greater negative impact on achievement levels in controlled schools than in their maintained counterparts".*

On page 28, it provides statistics to back that up. It states:

> *"In 2010-11, 23.3 per cent of Protestant pupils entitled to FSM achieved 5+ GCSEs including English and maths."*

It went on to state:

> *"The equivalent rate amongst Catholic pupils was 35.9 per cent."*

That is a difference of 12·6%. It does not appear that the problem that was identified in 2006 has been addressed. Our question last week was what is the cause of that.

Mr Sweeney: The stark statistic, using that standard of five good GCSEs in grades A* to C, including English and maths, and looking at the cohort of pupils on free schools meals, is 23·3% in the controlled sector and 35·9% in the maintained sector. Indeed, for boys in that cohort, the statistic is 20% in the controlled sector and 28% in the maintained sector. That has been the subject of a number of reports.

We had the report sponsored by Dawn Purvis, and the Education Committee looked at the characteristics of high-performing post-primary schools with high levels of free school meals. If the Member is asking me to develop the reasons for that, frankly, I cannot see beyond the analysis set out in the Purvis report from March 2011. It looked at the dynamics and more in communities. If members are not offended by this, although we are talking about the controlled and maintained sectors, the Purvis report talks specifically about the Protestant community. I know that, when we talk about the maintained and controlled sectors, it does not mean to say that one is exclusively Catholic and the other is exclusively Protestant, but that is overwhelmingly the case.

Mr McKay: In backing that report, are you not shifting blame from the school system and the education system back on to the community? I am just playing devil's advocate here. We debated this last week. How much of the responsibility lies with the school as opposed to what happens outside it?

Mr Sweeney: I will answer that, and then David wishes to come in. The Purvis report makes the point, drawing on a whole range of research, that 80% or more of the differential in educational outcome can be explained by what happens outside the classroom.

In this report, we see that 50% of children from the most disadvantaged areas are already very significantly disadvantaged even before they join the formal education system at the age of three. Although the Purvis report talked about the importance of the community dynamic, it, nevertheless, acknowledged the fact that even small differences in the classroom can make a big difference to life opportunities for pupils. It majored on the importance of leadership in schools and came up with a

model of leadership, which I personally found quite inspiring. It was this idea that if you are a school leader in a particularly challenging community, education is very important but that outreach into the community can be the agent of educational transformation. The Purvis report looked at models of school leadership, and I think that there is very considerable scope to develop that further. I know that David is keen to come in.

Mr Hughes: The Purvis report certainly makes the point about cultural distinctions and community factors, which affect participation and perception of education, but other factors need to be played in as well. I think that anyone looking at the education system would draw a distinction, in some areas, between the approach taken by CCMS to drive improvement and the work done by the boards in the past, as well as the slightly different perception of their respective roles in the schools that they have responsibility for.

I have heard it said — again, I do not have statistical data to back this up, but this is people's experience — that the connection between the leadership of some maintained schools in the immediate community can, at times, be stronger than the connection between the leadership of some controlled schools and their immediate community. We have always made the point, under the school improvement programme, that that connection between school and community is one of the key factors that makes a difference to educational outcomes.

Mr McKay: How do you measure that? Will you measure that so that we have some indication of whether it has an impact on what comes from schools?

Mr Hughes: I think that if it were straightforwardly measurable, and I can see —

Mr McKay: The simple question is this: how are school principals engaging with their community?

Mrs Buick: We certainly pick up on that in school inspections. Engagement with the community is one of the aspects that we look at, and we comment on it in inspection reports. So, we do evaluate that.

Mr McKay: It could be analysed from a macro level?

Mrs Buick: Yes, no doubt.

Mr Hughes: It is an interesting point at which to ask this question, particularly since the Education Bill is being scrutinised by the Education Committee. The Education and Skills Authority (ESA), as an organisation, will have a responsibility for improvement and driving up standards. There are other elements, all of which play in. Again, it is very hard to know which of those elements has the greatest impact.

The Chairperson: Excuse me. Someone's phone is on. It is not sufficient to have them on silent, because they interfere with the audio recording required by Hansard. Sorry, Mr Hughes.

Mr Hughes: In some places, it may well be that the configuration of schools means that the actual range of ability in non-selective schools can differ from place to place. The starkest distinctions between the performance of maintained post-primary schools and controlled post-primary schools are in those areas of greatest social deprivation. In those areas, it may well have something to do with the number of schools and, particularly in Catholic communities, the relatively limited selective sector. So, the range in the non-selective schools is slightly broader. Those are all factors, and it is very hard to know precisely what plays in, but it is something that we are conscious of and which the report has drawn out.

Mr McKay: In the figures for 2010-11, the gap is 12·6%. How has that changed since 2006? Has it changed from 2010-11? I want to get some idea of whether we are moving in the right direction.

Mr Hughes: What page is that on?

Mr McKay: It is in paragraph 2.26 on pages 28 and 29.

Mrs Buick: I will continue, while my colleague is looking at that statistic. What really makes a difference is social deprivation, more so than whether it is a controlled school or a maintained school. When we compare the previous chief inspector's report with this chief inspector's report in relation to achievement in standards in primary schools, we see the difference between the evaluation for overall effectiveness that was awarded to schools serving communities of low deprivation compared with those serving communities of high deprivation. In the previous chief inspector's report, the difference was 54%, but it is 23% in this chief inspector's report. That indicates that the gap is narrowing. The gap was 19% in the post-primary sector. That is not to say that there is not more work to be done, but, again, the indication is that the gap is closing in the primary sector.

Mr Sweeney: We are getting those statistics, Mr McKay. David is comparing and contrasting the two dates. It is relevant to say that part of the recommendation that came out in 2006 was that the Department would carry out some research into that area. We looked at comparative cities. We looked at a number of London boroughs, because they were bringing forward what was called the London Challenge. We looked at Glasgow, Liverpool, Cork and Dublin. I think that Glasgow was the most relevant, because the way in which Glasgow organises its education is not dissimilar to us in religious terms. We found that the statistics for our Protestant counterparts in Glasgow and the gap between Protestant schools and Catholic schools there were not nearly as stark as is the case in Belfast. So, there is a particular challenge in Belfast.

In relative terms, the gap between Protestant boys and Catholic boys is the difference between 20% and 28%. In absolute terms, 450 Protestant boys fall into that category, but, in real terms, there are 888 Catholic boys. The Department adopts the policy of tackling disadvantage wherever we find it because the reality is that there is profound educational underachievement and disadvantage in all communities. I think that we are considerably along the road, but we need to put in place a robust system that is capable of eating into those kinds of very challenging figures. It cannot be a zero-sum game.

CCMS is not represented here today, but if it was, I believe that, for balance, it would make clear the figures for the maintained sector. The statistics that I have show that 32 post-primary maintained schools are performing below or significantly below the Northern Ireland average in respect of educational outcomes. The point I am making is that there are challenges in all communities. It is important that the Department has a robust system of tackling disadvantage wherever we find it.

Mr Hughes: I want to make sure that we are looking at the right figures. There has been a change over time in the performance of pupils receiving free school meals, and there is a distinction between those from the Protestant community and the Catholic community. As Mr Sweeney has said, there is quite a significant difference in the numbers. I am looking at a row of figures that is referring to the number of Protestant boys achieving five GCSEs at grade A* to C, including English and maths. In 2005-06, it was 17·6%; in 2006-07, it was 14·8%; in 2007-08, it was 12·2%; in 2008-09, it was 18·8%; in 2009-10, it was 20·3%; and in 2010-11, it was 18·6%. So, you can see that there is quite a significant fluctuation.

Mr McKay: Is that for Protestant boys?

Mr Hughes: Those are Protestant boys entitled to free school meals. There is a lot of fluctuation in that. The numbers are much greater for Catholic boys with free school meal entitlement. In 2005-06, it was 25·1%; and in 2010-11, it was 31·3%. It is a more steady set of figures. It fluctuates slightly, but it goes up more steadily from 25·1% to 31·3%.

Mr McKay: I think that it would be useful, Chair, to get, in writing, the statistics for Protestant and Catholic boys, and pupils overall, for that period, and the gap between them for each particular year, because the Committee might be able to recommend some action on the back of that.

The Chairperson: Would that be possible, Mr Sweeney?

Mr Sweeney: Yes.

Mr Hughes: Picking up on Mr Sweeney's point, this is where a school improvement policy that is designed to be based upon the self-evaluation and self-examination of schools, with the identification of what will improve performance in that school with those kids and teachers in those circumstances, and the emphasis on precisely the right tailored, relevant and appropriate response to that school, is

effective and sustainable. It changes attitude to constant self-reflection, self-evaluation and improvement. I think that that approach to school improvement is probably one of the most substantial and significant changes that there has been since the Audit Office looked at this issue in 2006.

Mr Girvan: I appreciate that some people probably feel that free school meal entitlement is the only statistic that we can use to deal with that and achieve it, but I have a severe difficulty with the issue. I am on the board of governors of a school at which 20% of those who we know should be getting free school meals do not apply because of the stigma attached to it. They are frightened to do it. Certain classes might be worse than others. One ward within the council area that I represent is in the top 20 of the most deprived wards in Northern Ireland. Believe it or not, we have virtually nobody from that area taking free school meals, and most of them attend the school that I am on the board of. You might ask why they are not taking it. It is simply because there is a stigma attached to putting your name forward and saying that you get free school meals. It is the way it is dealt with at the school. If they are deemed to be receiving free school meals, they are dealt with differently. There has to be another way of extracting that information. In the school that I am on the board of, we can extract that data ourselves.

Mrs Buick: Perhaps Mr Sweeney will come in in a moment, but I will talk about inspection. It is about free school meal entitlement; it is not the uptake of free school meals that we use to calculate —

Mr Girvan: How do you assess the entitlement?

Mrs McCullough: There is a set of criteria to be eligible to claim, and you then have to claim your entitlement to it. That information is held on the schools information management system.

Mr Girvan: They are not claiming it at all, so not taking it up is not the issue. I want to know how you identify and work out who should get it.

Mr Sweeney: You mentioned stigmatisation. We are very much encouraging schools to make every effort to avoid that. Technology has been introduced whereby, in a number of schools, there is a pass that is individualised for each pupil. Therefore, at the point of the meal being served, you cannot differentiate between those who are on free school meals and those who are not. That is important. A number of schools have introduced that.

You asked about proxies for identifying social disadvantage. Of all the measures that we have looked at, we have come back again to free school meals as the most relevant proxy for measuring that. Like all proxies, it can be imprecise, and there can be degrees of under-representation. Karen, do you want to come in? Of all the systems that we looked at, it is the one that we kept coming back to.

Mrs McCullough: We are asked a lot about why we use that as a proxy for deprivation, and there are some very clear reasons. It is highly correlated with multiple deprivation. There is a very strong correlation between children on free school meals and where they live. Using free school meals allows us to identify individuals who are entitled in a way that the spatial model, which assumes that everybody in the area is the same, would not. It is updated annually if people claim their entitlement to it, and the information is validated. It is a very robust piece of information and a good proxy. We keep it under review, and other people have looked at the —

Mr Girvan: It is only robust if the information is volunteered. Parents do not want their child to be stigmatised, and they believe that that happens. I come from a community where the people are very proud about what they are, and they do not want everyone to think that they live off government handouts or whatever. That is the way that they look at it. So, the parents do not even necessarily let the school know. They will still pay whatever additional moneys the school wants for sports and that type of thing out of their own pocket rather than identify that they are socially deprived. I know a lot of the families, and you sit back and wonder how come they have not been identified as vulnerable. It is not registered in the school anywhere. How can you extract information if you do not have it handed to you from the parents, who intentionally hold it back?

Mrs McCullough: It is a challenge to encourage people, and there are several —

Mr Girvan: That happens more in my community than it happens in the maintained sector.

Mrs McCullough: That is something else that is said. There is an issue of under-claiming. We have looked at whether there is any systematic bias, and that has also been looked at as part of the common funding scheme review. We have not seen any evidence of that in our analysis. The common funding scheme review carried out a comparison of free school meal registration rates with available information on absolute poverty rates, and that indicated no differential registration rates by religious background. There is a difference — we record it when we do our survey — in the uptake of free school meals. People may be registering and claiming their entitlement, but they are not walking in and taking the meal. There is a 10 percentage point difference between controlled and maintained schools in that. As Mr Sweeney said, schools and the boards are working on measures to address the issue of pupils being identified.

Mr Rogers: You are very welcome. Thank you for being here. My first point is about early intervention. It is certainly not a new concept. Why is it not working?

Mr Sweeney: Noelle will talk about some of the evaluation that we have done on early intervention. I come back to a point that is made in the report on page 25:

> *"By the age of three, poor children have been assessed to be one year behind richer ones in terms of communication and in some disadvantaged areas, up to 50 per cent of children begin primary school without the necessary language and communication skills."*

The Department is putting approximately £200 million a year into early intervention. Of that, £55·7 million is invested in nursery schools and voluntary preschool. We have the Sure Start programme, which is 35 projects catering for 34,000 children aged nought to four in the top 20% disadvantaged wards. The Department is looking at increasing that to the top 25%, although no final decision has been made. There is also the foundation reception years in the primary sector. In monetary terms, we are putting approximately £200 million a year into early intervention and preschool. Earlier this afternoon, there was the debate about the relative sums that we put into the post-primary sector as opposed to the primary sector.

Noelle can say a few words about the evaluation of the programmes.

Mrs Buick: I will say a little bit about what we have observed in preschool as part of the inspection process. In the overall effectiveness of the preschool provision that we inspected, 76% was good or better. We saw a real improvement in quality in the voluntary and private settings. There had been an issue around the quality of some of the private settings. Where we saw it best was where activities were challenging, where they matched well to the age of the child, where there was a greater involvement of interaction with adults to develop children's language and thinking skills, and where they were using play to progress their learning and language. The majority of learners who attend our preschool provision are getting a good quality education.

We saw the introduction of the foundation stage. That is really important for the transition between preschool and primary. There is not a set date for when a child will move into formal learning; it depends on when the child is ready in those two years of the foundation stage. The improvement in the preschool provision and the structure that the foundation stage provides help to improve that early identification that you are talking about. We all know that it is critical.

It might be worth mentioning that the Department has instigated what we call the Stranmillis project, which is training for special educational needs teachers in literacy in our primary schools. Two teachers are taken out and given eight twilight sessions of three hours each, in which they have an opportunity to improve their skills in identifying at an early stage issues with a child's development or progress. That project is in its first year. The early indications are that it is really making a difference. There are 180 schools involved. Teachers really think that it is helping them to identify issues earlier.

Mr Rogers: I acknowledge that that is very good. However, I wonder how you square that with the following examples. Parents in my area who have an autistic child would love to be able to educate their child at home until they brought that child up to an accepted level. If they lived 10 miles down the road in a different board area, that would happen. However, it is not happening in their board area. That is example one.

The second example is as follows: if my child has a particular problem with eyesight or whatever, that type of thing can be diagnosed quite quickly. They get their glasses, etc. By the time that they are eight or 10, their glasses could be in the bin. However, if my child has a language acquisition problem

or a specific learning difficulty, I have to go through the board's psychology service. That can take ages. Unless the parent, along with the school, is quite assertive and pushy, they may get nowhere.

Mrs Buick: The special educational needs review — perhaps Mr Sweeney will pick up on this — identified that the five steps in the current code of practice are quite protracted. The first three stages involve the teacher, the special educational needs co-ordinator and the educational psychologist. It is only at stage 4 that you move to the board assessment stage, at which stage the pupil will get a statement if the assessment identifies that. We identified in inspection that too many primary schools are looking externally for support; 44% of special educational needs in primary schools were looking for some form of external support. We need to capacity-build in the mainstream schools so that teachers can identify and address those issues at an earlier stage. The project that I have just described is one example of that.

'Learning across the Continuum' is a really good project in which mainstream schools are linking with special schools to capacity-build the capabilities of teachers in mainstream schools. Dealing with some of those young people is challenging. Teachers do a really good job, but they all identify that they need more skills in doing that. There are processes in train to upskill, where needed, teachers in our mainstream schools to deal with some of the difficulties that you have described.

Mr Rogers: I accept that, but some people would say that that is an educational psychology service on the cheap. Although it is important to build skills, and so on, in the teaching staff, that is actually putting more pressure on staff.

Mrs Buick: If a child can be taught in a mainstream school, our view is that that is better for the child. It may be that they have to be withdrawn to some special support sessions for special educational needs. However, if they can be effectively reintegrated into the class for the rest of their teaching and learning, that really builds their confidence and self-esteem. That is really important.

Mr Rogers: As a fellow educationalist, you will understand that language acquisition is a subject that you just do not pick up in three three-hour sessions of an evening course or whatever. Many children need specific speech and language therapy to bring them on. I think that you will also understand that, because the process takes six months or whatever, that six months out of a child's life at that stage is like five years.

Mrs Buick: It was identified through the special educational needs review that that process needs to be streamlined. I do not know whether Mr Sweeney wants to come in, but that was certainly one of the successful outcomes of the review.

Mr Sweeney: Mr Rogers, you are right: the average time for assessment is about 26 weeks. We aim to bring that down to 20 weeks. In addition, we are looking at the independent resolution of disputes where parents are dissatisfied. We are looking at addressing some of those shortcomings in identifying pupils who have special educational needs.

You made a point about parents 10 miles apart in two different board areas. At one level, the justification for establishing one single regional authority in the form of ESA is that it will iron out those types of anomalies. I would like to think that the gap in provision in two board areas is not so huge. However, you cited an example where one set of parents is able to educate their autistic child at home, and you said that that is not available to another parent because they are in another board area. From the Department's point of view, we are co-operating fully with the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety's autism strategy. The Department is co-funding the Middletown Centre for Autism. I do not know the specifics of that particular case, but if you wish to draw it to my attention, perhaps I could look into it.

Mr Rogers: Thank you for that.

My third example is as follows: 3,500 young people are falling through the net at the end of Key Stage 2 in literacy and numeracy. When a child goes into post-primary school and says that they hate maths or they cannot read, it is extremely difficult to turn that round at that stage. What is being done there to make early intervention more effective?

Mr Hughes: It may well depend on how the school responds to its intake in year 8. I am conscious that post-primary principals and senior management teams may take different approaches, but they

will be aware of the intake that they are getting from their feeder primary schools. I know that there are particularly good examples of post-primary connections to feeder primary schools, where they are looking at where those young people are at the end of P7. That informs their preparation of what is needed in year 8. That is very difficult for some post-primary schools. Where they have a lot of feeder schools, that may not be the answer for them. They will get people from so many different places.

The revised curriculum is intended to provide sufficient flexibility that a post-primary school is able to prepare the course that children will be following in Key Stage 3 to reflect where they have started and where they need to get to by the end of Key Stage 3. It is not so prescriptive that that kind of flexibility is not possible. There will be examples of good practice. The challenge is to bring those examples of good practice to shape practice in schools where those challenges are not being picked up to the same degree. Again, it comes back to the school evaluating whether it is succeeding in getting its intake to the right place at the end of Key Stage 3. If it is not and if it sees that it has a challenge, it is for the school, with the appropriate support, to devise an approach that enables it to do the right thing by the kids that it gets in year 8. It may not be that there is a single answer but rather that there is a recognised challenge and ways in which schools are responding to that challenge.

Mr Rogers: Mr Hughes, it is not because by the time that the intake comes to the end of Key Stage 3, another 1,500 have fallen off.

Mrs Buick: Mr Rogers, I will come in there. We have looked at why one in six pupils have not been achieving at Key Stage 2. As someone who has been involved in education, some of the reasons will not be a surprise to you. The reasons include teachers and leaders not focusing sufficiently on achievement and standards and insufficient knowledge of individual pupils' attainment and their ability, meaning that underachievement, as opposed to low achievement, is not being addressed. There is too much emphasis on textbook teaching, rather than on teaching and learning that absolutely addresses the individual needs, knowledge and understanding requirements of that child. Other reasons are insufficiently high expectations of young people and the ability to close the gap between young people who come from areas of higher deprivation and lower deprivation and, in some cases, using that inability as an excuse for underachievement. There is a basket of issues that needs to be addressed through the high-quality teaching and learning that we have said is so paramount and also the high-quality leadership and management.

Mr Rogers: Mr Hughes, you mentioned the idea of dissemination of good practice. Why is the dissemination of good practice not happening?

Mr Hughes: It does happen, but it is a critical area to develop. I quite acknowledge that. The Every School a Good School — ESaGS.tv — approach, where schools that have done very well in inspection may well be approached to present those elements of what they are doing that are really worth letting others know about, is an important part of it. There are opportunities for teachers and principals to meet others through the area-learning community and through the chief inspector's conferences, following her report. The sharing of good practice within schools is another area where a huge amount can be done to develop the good practice that colleagues are following. Those are all areas where there is sharing of good practice and where good practice is shaping practice in schools. More can be done, and the report accurately reflects the fact that this is an area where improvement can be made relatively straightforwardly. It is one where further development is needed.

Mr Rogers: Can you address Achieving Belfast and Achieving Derry? A great deal of good happened there, but none of the rest of us throughout the Province heard anything about it.

Mrs Buick: As well as Achieving Belfast and Achieving Derry, there is Closing the Gap, where the education and library boards identify schools that need intervention. That is provided through the Curriculum and Assessment Advisory Service (CASS) in a prioritised fashion. We also have inspections that will identify schools that need formal intervention. I can elaborate on that if you would like me to.

I want to follow up on Mr Hughes's point about good practice. Over the past month, we have held conferences on the chief inspector's report, with 300 senior school leaders at the two primary sessions, and 150 at the post-primary sessions. Practitioners who had been identified, through inspection, as being very effective at what they do ran a significant number of workshops on improving outcomes in literacy and numeracy, and the feedback from that has been extremely positive. We are going to roll forward such dissemination events.

Mr Rogers: Thank you. I welcome the idea of workshops because although all the circulars, glossy booklets and the "six pack" from the past sit nicely in a cabinet or whatever, nothing beats seeing practitioners delivering at the chalk face, the whiteboard face or whatever.

You mentioned CASS. Since the conception of ESA, CASS has been winding down. I think that that is where we have a particular problem. I know that one board area has one post-primary maths adviser. That person simply cannot facilitate the development of numeracy throughout the board.

Mrs Buick: We agree that there, perhaps, needs to be greater resource, and ESA will look at that. However, CASS is providing a good service to schools, albeit in a prioritised fashion. When we do follow-up inspections of schools in the formal intervention process, we comment on the quality of support received from CASS officers during the improvement phase. Universally, the reports are that CASS is providing good support to schools, but it is not just left to the CASS officers on their own.

When a school goes into formal intervention, our lead inspector will carry out interim visits to it and provide it with ongoing support in addressing the actions in the action plan before the follow-up inspection takes place. That has also received positive feedback in helping schools to address actions for improvement.

Mr Sweeney: Early intervention is crucial. We are world class at primary level. However, at post-primary level, we are distinctly average. Therefore, the more we can do through early intervention, the better.

CASS belongs to a place in time; it was put in place to support the introduction of the revised curriculum in 2007. It is important to look at the role that ESA will play in raising school standards, and I welcome the ESA legislation. Some people are majoring on the fact that ESA will save money because five boards will be conflated into one, but the rationale behind ESA is that, as a regional authority, it will give prominence to raising standards.

We are very clear in the Department about the role that ESA will play: it will monitor the performance of all schools and challenge them on their performance. Every year, ESA will be required to prepare and publish an overarching school improvement plan, and the Department will hold ESA to account for that. I want to be hugely respectful to the boards because they have served the community well for 40 years but, since 2006, they have been in a state of flux because they have been winding down and awaiting the establishment of ESA. Services such as CASS, in respect of its resources —

Mr McQuillan: I do not think that that is an acceptable answer. Those who are working for the boards are not winding down at all; they are still getting paid, and we are entitled to expect a day's work. That is no excuse. Never mind ESA coming into play; the boards should be fit to hold the schools to account.

Mr Sweeney: The resource has been reduced significantly. This is not an excuse, but boards' capacity and capabilities have been seriously depleted. In preparation for ESA, the Department has been effecting savings. As you know, a major voluntary severance scheme has been put in place.

As we wait for the establishment of ESA, the boards, through no fault of their own, have been in a state of flux; they have served our community well, but they have been winding down.

We are clear about the role of ESA: it will produce a new school development service, for which we have set aside approximately £10 million a year. We are looking at the lessons that we have learnt from CASS and that we can learn from the inspectorate process to put in place a truly fit-for-purpose school development service. The £10 million will be available to provide a regional service that ESA will take forward. Linked to that will be a programme of giving even greater support to boards of governors to drive forward the raising standards agenda.

Mr Rogers: Paragraph 1.9 on page 13 of the report states:

> *"PISA reported that the success of a country's education system depends more on how educational resources are invested than on the volume of investment."*

That has been mentioned today. There seems to be a lack of a strategic plan for educational planning. At this stage of the year, most schools worth their salt will have their plans in place for the next school year, but they are only getting to know what their budgets will be.

Although I welcome 300 teachers coming in to address numeracy and literacy, that seemed to have been pulled out of a hat. If we are to address numeracy and literacy, surely there has to be a clear, strategic plan over a number of years.

Another example was last year when the age-weighted pupil unit changed suddenly. Principals were tearing their hair out thinking that they were going to have to make redundancies, etc, only to discover that it was changed that wee bit again in a month's time.

Mr Sweeney: There are a couple of points on that. The difference between 2006 and now is that the Department brought about a situation whereby schools are required to submit three-year school development plans and set regulations in place around them.

There is no doubt that the comprehensive spending review settlement has been challenging for Departments, particularly for the Department of Education. I hope that members will agree that we have been very open and transparent about the education budget. As you rightly said, additional money was made available in January 2012, and we wrote to schools immediately to give them the good news that the First Minister, the deputy First Minister, the Finance Minister and the Education Minister got an additional £120 million for schools.

Schools plan strategically over a three-year period; they all know what their budgets will be until 2015. It remains very challenging, particularly for those post-primary schools that, as manifested in the viability audits, do not have a sufficiency of scale and are struggling. However, we have coherent policies in place. We have informed the schools about their budgets, and we require schools to develop three-year plans so that we can get away from this kind of ad hoc approach.

Mr Rogers: Schools have had three-year development plans for years. Every time you came down, the first thing you looked for was the three-year development plan. There is not the same level of strategic planning in the Department.

Mr Hughes: You made the point about strategic planning for literacy and numeracy. The 'Count, Read: Succeed' policy document sets out a strategy to address literacy and numeracy. It is in play, and it sets out the respective responsibilities of those involved. It is so closely tied into the overall school improvement policy and the role of the inspectorate that there is, as it were, a check on ensuring that it is embedding and delivering.

The report highlighted that the improvement in performance in literacy and numeracy has not been as great, or as fast, as we had hoped, nor is it going as far. Nevertheless, as the policy works through, alongside all the other strategic policies for the education sector, it should produce the improvement we are all looking for.

There is coherence and a strategic approach. However, there is always more to be done and there is always the challenge of ensuring that there is momentum behind it. The Department takes the lead in providing that momentum, but my experience is that, throughout the education sector, there is a desire to keep working to the best outcomes for the children and young people in front of teachers, principals and senior managers. That is the real challenge.

Mr Girvan: As the man says, it is always difficult to make a silk purse out of a sow's lug. When you do your reports, areas where there are differences will be identified. Sean just mentioned one and, for the sake of argument, specialist teachers are having to be brought in to teach maths.

What feedback do you make to the training colleges to ensure that the teachers coming out of them are at a level that they can and will effect change? I am not going to leave it at that. I think that there are areas where there is a need for refresher training, and some teachers need to go back to college. In every profession, some people have to be retrained. Indeed, some of us in here might need to be retrained after a while.

We need to close the loop and identify those who are failing. It is not always the pupils. Parents have told me that they have had to spend nights teaching their children what they were supposed to have been taught for six hours at school. One lady was a teacher who gave it up to raise a family — she will probably go back to it. She told me that when her child came home, she had to go through everything and re-teach it. The children are being left behind. Where are you closing the loop?

When a school gets a bad report, parents will say that that school did not do very well and will not send their children to that school. Parents are making those choices and are trying to close them down.

Where are the changes being made, not only in the teacher training colleges but for teachers who have been identified as failing?

Mrs Buick: Perhaps I could pick that up from an inspection perspective, and my colleagues may want to add to it. As the Education and Training Inspectorate, we inspect initial teacher education in all our colleges and universities in Northern Ireland. Our view is that teachers are well prepared to teach. As we are talking about it, we feel that, as a result of the initial teacher education programme, teachers are well prepared to teach literacy and numeracy. We have also found that induction for new teachers is good, and that there is good support from teacher tutors when teachers go into schools. However, we feel that work needs to be done on developing a path for teachers from the beginning of their careers to leadership level to present a more cohesive training opportunity. We are publishing a leadership report tomorrow that will identify that requirement.

Mr Girvan: I know that they brought in those so-called Baker days

Mr Dallat: That was a long time ago.

Mrs Buick: Absolutely —

Mr Girvan: I am just saying —

Mr Clarke: That is a day off.

Mrs Buick: We expect teachers to undertake continuous professional development (CPD). That is part of good leadership in a school, and we make sure that teachers get appropriate, frequent and relevant CPD. Mr Hughes mentioned earlier the role of area-learning communities. Subject teachers from an area-learning community get together to share examples of good practice in their subject, and that is an extremely positive development. We see initial teaching education doing a good job in preparing our teachers for education. We expect CPD to be undertaken in the school but also through the area-learning communities and other opportunities that teachers get to come together. We have talked about our good practice conferences. That is professional development for teachers, and I heard many of them talking to the presenters of the workshops and asking whether they can come to a school to watch them teaching the aspect that they are presenting on.

Parental engagement is very important. We want parents to sit down and read with their children in the evening, and that came out through the Valuing Education campaign. That is an important part of a child's development of language that Mr Rogers talked about.

Mr Girvan: John said earlier that those parents had probably been failed by the system and perhaps do not feel confident in engaging with their children. While they are at primary school, that is not a problem; the difficulty comes when they go to secondary school and do other subjects. Mr Sweeney said earlier that we are world leaders in the primary sector but only average in the post-primary sector. Where is the disconnect? What is the problem? Irrespective of what area they come from, we are still world-class and lead the world at primary level, but only average at post primary. That is a problem.

Mrs Buick: One of my colleagues might want to come in. We are about to publish a literacy and numeracy good practice survey, and you will see many examples of where tracking and monitoring of individual pupil performance has identified pupils who need additional support. That is sometimes provided after school through the extended schools programme, the full service extended schools programme or the full school service network. There are opportunities for exactly what you describe. There are parents who had a bad experience at school and who probably feel under-equipped to help their children, and after-school classes make sure that that support is provided for those children. That is a positive thing. Through the full service extended schools programme, we see opportunities to engage with parents to upskill them in their capacity to support their child. It is a two-pronged approach and is supportive of literacy and numeracy.

The Chairperson: Before you bring in Mr Hughes and before I bring in the Deputy Chairperson, I want to ask about the very important issue of pupil and teachers' emotional health and well-being and the

relationship between pupil and teacher. If that fails, all else will break down, and therein lies your problem. The child does not want to come into school to be taught, and the teacher is frustrated. What is the Department doing to put pupil and teachers' emotional health and well-being at the heart of the school day?

Mrs Buick: I will give the inspectorate perspective again. In post-primary schools, we have identified that pastoral care is good or better in 88% of circumstances. That is very positive. The view from the inspectorate is that pupils are very well supported in schools and that, generally, relationships are good between pupils and teachers. Mrs McCullough — *[Interruption.]*

The Chairperson: Not in all schools.

Mrs Buick: We carried out a survey of behaviour in 2010 and identified that there are behavioural issues in about 3% to 4% of the school population. We have to equip teachers, through the CPD programme, to deal with those circumstances. Through the full service extended schools programme and the extended schools programme, we have seen the opportunity to bring in experts from other areas to tackle mental health or behavioural issues.

You are quite right; it does happen. However, it is not such a big issue in schools in Northern Ireland, but where it happens, there are support mechanisms in place to support that. That is what we are seeing, but I do not know about the Department.

The Chairperson: I dispute that. The pupil emotional health and well-being programme is very good; I do not know whether you are aware of it. It is a pilot programme that has been run out to 15 schools across the North, and it is very highly recommended by those 15 schools. The number of sick days that a teacher takes due to work-related stress has a detrimental impact on teaching and learning during the school day. Therefore, I dispute that, Noelle. There are problems in schools, because of stress and teacher and pupil health. I know that there are programmes on mental health and pastoral care, but I do not think that that goes far enough to address the issue of emotional health and well-being between the teacher and the pupil.

Mrs Buick: Child-centred provision is crucial. If provision focuses on the needs of the child, some of the behavioural issues will be addressed. Research shows that if boys sit in a formal classroom in rows taking copious notes all day, they get bored and become disruptive. I am not saying that it would address all the problems. However, if a school has a child-centred active learning programme that engages learners, it will help to address some of the disruption. The focus is on a child-centred approach. From my perspective, that improves outcomes for learners.

The Chairperson: Teachers should get support and personal development around relationships with pupils. If a child comes into a school and a teacher reacts to an issue, that child will look at how the teacher reacts to them and take it onboard. That affects the whole school day. I believe that there needs to be a great deal of support. We have said much about teachers today. However, there is a big issue, and teachers need to be supported in their emotional health and well-being.

Mr Hughes: I cannot comment on pupils' emotional health and well-being. However, you make an important point that I know is relevant to the studies that have been done in schools where boys' performance has been strikingly good and the common gap between girl and boys' performance has not been as evident as elsewhere. A key factor has been the relationship between the boys in a school and their teachers: a strong relationship can improve results. I visited a school and asked one year 8 class what I should visit while I was there. I got the answers that you would expect: the art department, because it is full of bright colours and pictures, and the gym and fitness suite, because it has lots of kit. However, they said that I should visit one particular teacher, not because her classroom was anything special or because I would see her class, but because the children rated her so highly that she was a feature of the school. Having spoken to her, I saw that that was because they trusted her, engaged with everything that she said and loved her classes. That was striking.

I want to come back on three big points that Mr Girvan made. You started making the point about what happens when one teacher, in comparison perhaps to other teachers, is a weaker link — is that a fair phrase? In many schools, the increased desire to understand what is going on in the classroom, to know how kids are doing and to follow them to see how they are doing at different stages means that leaders in schools are conscious of the information that they have on how classes are doing compared to one another. You mentioned what happens when inspectors see a lesson that they are not particularly impressed by. However, that is far less important than a school that is constantly

looking to improve and looking at what can be done. That is a cultural thing that we see increasing its impact, and I expect that to continue. You made the point about the impact on the parents of a child who is perhaps being let down in class. I do not know all the circumstances of individual cases, but one has to remember that if you have a department of several teachers, a teacher in the staff room may see their colleague dealing with a class and think: "I get them next year; I will have to mop up." In such circumstances, the whole school, the whole department and the senior management team know that they need to address those issues. The desire for continuous improvement means that a constant vigilance about how things are going is part of the school improvement culture that the Department wants to see growing, and is seeing growing, and would encourage, as everyone would.

The other point that you made was on the international studies into what happens between the ages of nine or 10 and 15. What is particularly striking is that the characteristics of a good school, as set out on the pages of the 'Every School a Good School' policy document and based on international research — good teaching, effective leadership, good connection to communities and families, and a real pupil focus — are there in spades in primary schools in Northern Ireland. That is the main lesson that we took out of that study. Others responded in different ways. Some prioritised one characteristic over others in the commentary after the publication of the international studies. However, we have all four characteristics, not 100% or universally, but strongly in primary schools here. The challenge is to get those characteristics as deeply embedded in post-primary schools.

Mr Girvan: That brings me back to the point that some primary schools are run on a shoestring and do not have the luxury of the wonderful IT suite or the great gym; they do not have all those wonderful flashy things. However, they are small schools, and some of them are very connected to their communities because they are right in the community, more so than some of the post-primary schools, I suspect. Those are the schools that are being affected the most.

Mr Sweeney: We talked about the difference between primary and post-primary. Can I go back to your point about teachers whose performance is unsatisfactory? That is very important.

Mr Girvan: Yes.

Mr Sweeney: In 1997, the managing authorities and the teaching negotiating committee put a process in place with procedures for dealing with unsatisfactory teachers, principals and vice-principals. The teaching negotiating committee and management side have acknowledged that it is not fit for purpose, is not timely and does not intervene swiftly enough. I want to share with you, Mr Girvan, that that procedure has now been looked at. Yesterday, I met a number of the teaching unions. They tell me that they are very close to reaching an agreement on a new procedure for dealing with unsatisfactory teachers and one for dealing with unsatisfactory principals and vice-principals. They tell me that that procedure is now near final stage. We hope that it will be accepted and rolled out in the very near future. Ultimately, in the first instance, it is a matter for boards of governors. It is important that the Department support boards of governors, because a performance review and staff development scheme is aligned to the school three-year development plan. There are procedures in place. However, the teaching negotiating committee and management side are now openly acknowledging that they need to be improved, as they have not been robust enough. We must find ways of intervening earlier and giving support, whether mentoring or retraining, as soon as shortcomings are identified. Hopefully, again, you will see their momentum in seeking to address what is a very key issue.

Mr Dallat: Chairperson, rightly or wrongly, I get the impression that we are coming towards the end of the hearing. I am very conscious that we also have a report to do, and I certainly do not want it to fail. I have to say that the report we have here attracted a great deal of public attention. It was certainly one that got a lot of media attention. Perhaps, I am being unfair. I do not want to be. However, I have not gotten any sense of urgency about this matter. Although this is the most damning report that I have seen for a lifetime, I am not picking up that there is any urgency. Perhaps, so that our report will not be another one that falls short, I thought that I might have heard about some innovative stuff today; not science or riveting stuff. I have not heard a word about after-school clubs, breakfast clubs or home-school links.

I have heard some recognition that illiteracy and innumeracy are passed from one generation to another. Mr Hughes, you came from the Department of Justice. You must have seen the train wrecks in the jails that I mentioned earlier. I am not picking up on that.

What kind of cross-departmental discussions are going on to stop after-school clubs closing due to lack of funds? What efforts are being made to promote breakfast clubs? I know that in many parts of Northern Ireland, and, probably, in Belfast particularly, the first meal that some children get is actually when they arrive at school, because their families do not have the money. We are now facing the whole issue of social-welfare reform, and there will be a lot more of that.

Rather than talking about education and library boards winding down and ESA taking time to pick up, and so on, all of these things do not depend on some kind of bureaucratic body, where important people sit round tables for hours: this is all practical stuff. Will we be able to put something in a report whereby the Department will actually become the ambassador for this kind of stuff, which recognises that all children are not equal when they go to school? They might have the same uniform because there was a grant for it. However, they are not equal, because they have inherited a legacy of inequality that has gone on for years and has not been addressed. We have not heard anything about that.

Mr Sweeney: From the Department's point of view, what I sought to convey this afternoon was that we have a range of policies and programmes in place. If you were looking for evidence of some of those after-school clubs, breakfast clubs, booster classes, Easter classes, and so on, we did not major on citing it because we think that it is manifest in the case studies at the back of the report. With regard to the policies and programmes that the Department has put in place, it is clear that when the Northern Ireland Audit Office did its sampling exercise, it was seeing very good examples of all of those things happening in primary and post-primary schools.

From my point of view, if I have failed to convey a sense of enthusiasm and passion for that, let me say this: it is not just a group of paid officials in the Department. I front a senior management team that is passionate about this issue. We want to work with the Committee. We are not arrogant enough to think that there are no new ideas that could be brought to bear. However, we are particularly proud of the path on which we have set ourselves. It is based on the best international research and exhaustive consultation with all of the key players. Yes: we have unashamedly set very high targets. We do not apologise for having ambition for the education system.

Mr Dallat: Chairperson, I am very glad that I asked that question because we have now experienced a bit of enthusiasm.

Noelle, in case you feel as though you have missed out, you have not. I do not want to go over old ground again. However, you have a serious problem — not you personally; the inspectorate. Let us face it: you are part of the establishment. What can you do to convince the public that you can really be independent and exert your influence in the same way, perhaps, as they do in England?

Mrs Buick: I will answer in two parts. I will just follow up on your earlier question. I mentioned the £11·8 million that goes into the extended schools programme in 460 schools. It is used to do exactly those things, such as after-school classes, breakfast clubs and that type of activity. So, there is absolutely a really good landscape in place to provide that.

As regards the inspectorate's role, I come back to the point that I made earlier. I believe absolutely that we are independent in making our judgements. We make them without fear or favour, based on first-hand evidence. You know that I came from Ofsted. That was a non-ministerial government Department. I reiterate the point that I do not see any difference really in my capability to make independent decisions here compared with when I worked in Ofsted. I would say that it is not the public's perception — I certainly have not got that from schools or parents — that they feel that we are hampered in any way by being part of the Department. In fact, in these straitened economic times, there are positives to being part of the Department in as much as we do not have a separate HR function. All those activities come under the Department's umbrella. However, I cannot stress enough the independence of our judgements. I hope that this gives you some —

Mr Dallat: Please, trust me: there is a credibility gap, and you need to be aware of it. You need to make it clear at all stages that, despite the fact that you are part of the institution, you are independent. We will leave it at that.

I have one final —

The Chairperson: I am sorry, John. There are more members to ask questions.

Mr Dallat: I know. I am selfish. We talked about all those things that some schools are doing exceptionally well. I know schools where, if children are dropped off at 8.30 am, they stand outside the school until a caretaker decides that it is all right to let them in. What will you do to ensure that all those wonderful things that you have now told us about in those schools will happen in all schools?

Mr Sweeney: Noelle has been talking about the extended schools programme. Perhaps, where there are scarce resources, one has to set priorities and criteria. However, 460 schools now benefit from that programme, which has provision for things such as breakfast clubs.

There are nearly 1,200 schools, and 460 falls short of 1,200, so if we were to make that level of provision throughout all 1,200 schools, the resource would be significant. For example, if we were to bring the primary sector up to the £4,000 average per pupil in the post-primary sector, that would cost £191 million. To roll out the extended schools programme throughout all schools would require a significant resource. So, we believe that there is a rationale to identifying those schools that are under very considerable stress, working in the most disadvantaged areas, getting a robust set of criteria in place and ensuring that scarce resources are targeted towards those areas of greatest need. Nevertheless, 460 schools are benefiting significantly from programmes, such as breakfast clubs and involving parents, which Noelle discussed earlier. If there were more resources and there were a case for rolling that out to other schools, the Department would not close its ears to that.

Mr Dallat: I am definitely finished, Chair.

Mr Rogers: I have a very quick question on Mr Hughes's response to Paul earlier on the development of the culture, and so on. The report was agreed with the inspectorate. With regard to recommendation 6 on page 58, it states:

> *"culture across all schools is essential and inexpensive but as yet there appears to be no clear strategy or desire to introduce a systematic in-service programme to make this happen".*

I would like a comment on that.

Mr Hughes: As I said in response to the earlier question, we do see that the issue of sharing good practice and ensuring that that is not just sharing but something that leads to the shaping of practice elsewhere is very definitely one of the most important things that we need to do as we go forward. We have structures and policies in place, but, in practical terms, this needs to grow. There needs to be greater momentum, and there needs to be a systematic approach to utilise the expertise that already exists. The recommendation is a very helpful recommendation to the Department as a further encouragement to this particular challenge.

Mr Sweeney: It is a very early action point. I agree with Mr Rogers entirely, and I agree with the recommendation. Although we are disseminating good practice as a core part of Count, Read: Succeed, the literacy strategy, I give the assurance to the Committee that, in light of this report, the Department invited the inspectorate to carry out a survey of post-primary schools where, in English and maths, there were particularly good examples of good practice. That report is now at draft stage. It will be important to roll that out. I want members to get a sense of momentum that we take that on board. You cannot do enough of it, and for it to be very bespoke to this work, the inspectorate was invited by the Department to carry out that exercise. We now need to disseminate that widely.

Mr McQuillan: It is difficult coming in at this time of the day, because most of the questions that I had drafted have been asked.

There are still a few that I want to ask. Mr Sweeney, you said that, in 1997, a body was set up for unsatisfactory performance of teachers. Sixteen years later, you are realising that it is not working. Things move far too slowly. I will share a case that I had on a board of governors one time. A P6 teacher was not performing in the way that she should have been, and a teacher who was "mopping up" after her, to use a phrase that Mr Hughes used, came to the board of governors to say that her performance was not good enough. The board of governors looked at it to see what it could do, but the word "sack" was never mentioned. When I mentioned the word "sack", the board nearly all had heart attacks because it had never been heard of. How many teachers have been sacked since 1997 for non-performance?

Mr Sweeney: Mr Dallat asked an Assembly question about this, so, with respect, I will draw on that a little. I do not know how many teachers have been dismissed since 1997, but, in answering that question, we found that, over the past five years, the numbers were so low that we were not able the specify them. The danger is that that could have identified the individuals.

Mr McQuillan: Is it one or two?

Mr Sweeney: The numbers are miniscule. Over the past five years, there have been a number of suspensions for a number of reasons.

Mr McQuillan: On full pay.

Mr Sweeney: Going back to the point, yes, the procedures that are in place are not fit for purpose. The teaching negotiating committee and management side have been reviewing that for some considerable time. It is important to get those agreed and implemented.

Chair, you have made the point that teaching is a very stressful profession. In many instances, it is really important that if a teacher is struggling and needs help, there is early intervention. Mentoring can be very important, and, frankly, one of the characteristics of the school system locally is that there does not seem to be a great deal of opportunity for people to move between schools. We would like to bring about a situation where there are career opportunities and a culture where people can move. Even the most effective teacher comes to a point where they need to refresh themselves. I agree with you, Mr McQuillan, that there should be a greater sense of urgency because children only get one chance at this. We are well served by our teaching profession, and there are some outstanding examples of excellence, but, like any profession, there will be a group of individuals where intervention is required.

I want to show respect here because a number of members are members of boards of governors. My experience is that boards of governors spend an inordinate amount of time dealing with perhaps one or two very difficult personnel issues that can then distort the emphasis that needs to be put on the more exciting school development side. So, all those shortcomings in the system need to be addressed. Our mantra is, "Put the pupils first". I think that that is really crucial, but it is not at the expense of teachers. If you get that pupil focus right and have good teachers behind it, remarkable things can be achieved. I am maybe labouring the point, but we need to get those new procedures in place and implemented as quickly as possible.

Mr McQuillan: You mentioned suspensions. You cannot tell me how many were sacked, but can you tell me how many were suspended on full pay, and what the average length of time was?

Mr Sweeney: Yes, drawing on Mr Dallat's question for written answer, which I have here, over the past five years, it was something like — I will get it in a moment — 20; 30; 30; 40; and 45. I do not have the detail on the length of suspensions, but I am happy to provide that to the member. That is over the past five years. We can go back further if you wish. Does that give you a picture?

Mr McQuillan: Yes, it does, but if you could display that in writing, we will look at it again.
From your earlier answers, it seems that you are pinning a lot of hope on ESA going through. From 2006 until this report, there does not seem to have been a big movement on things. Is ESA going to be the difference? In, say, six or seven years' time, when the next report comes out, are we going to see a big change and a real difference?

Mr Sweeney: I will tell you what would be really helpful: let us end this uncertainty about whether there is going to be an ESA.

Mr Dallat: We are back to politics.

Mr Sweeney: I am sorry, I do not wish to stray into these things. I am talking as a bureaucrat here. *[Interruption.]*

The Chairperson: This is important.

Mr Sweeney: It is important. This is not meant to be a lame excuse; it is meant to factual. Since 2006, the various structures for delivering education in Northern Ireland have been in a state of flux.

That is not to say that the people involved have not being doing their level best, but one thing that could help enormously is ending the uncertainty so that we know exactly what the landscape will look like in the future.

Not surprisingly, I believe in the whole rationale for having a single regional authority, because, for example, it will iron out that little anomaly where two boards have two systems for dealing with autism, which affects two sets of parents differently even though they live 10 miles apart. I believe that there is a very strong case for accepting the fact that although our education and library boards have served this community remarkably well over 40 years, it is a 40-year-old business model, so it is time to move on. I believe that the rationale for ESA is soundly based, but — I will get my excuses in first — it will, like any new organisation, take time to bed in. The board has not yet been appointed, so we have a skeleton staff in place. So, it will take time.

I would be shocked if, coming out of your report, there is not a great sense of urgency put behind these types of processes so that we can move on to an administrative structure that is truly fit for purpose for our community.

Mr Hughes: Could I —

The Chairperson: Sorry, Mr Hughes, but Trevor wants to ask a supplementary question.

Mr Clarke: I have two very short supplementary questions. The first one goes back to about an hour ago when you referred to ESA in a response to someone else. Following on from what my colleague said about whether it will happen — I know that that is the politics of the thing — it is interesting that you have already taken action by depleting the boards. So, in a sense, if ESA does not happen, that could prove to be another failing that is in the next document. So you have pre-empted something that might not necessarily happen. That is probably more an observation than a question.

You talked about boards of governors. To be fair to the Minister, he has recognised that some of the boards of governors have not challenged particular schools enough. One of the interesting things I found from listening to your response, again, to my colleague, about how staff and boards of governors resolve these matters is that there seems to be a closed shop policy in the Department. Given that the secretary of each board of governors is the principal of the school, and the board representatives are picked from the parents, I think that the board representatives invariably find it difficult to go against the principal as the secretary. The Department needs to realise that that is bad practice and get away from that mentality, because it gives us all the perception that it is a closed shop. It is about how we can challenge — sorry, Adrian.

Mr McQuillan: Go ahead.

Mr Clarke: Sorry. I did not realise.

It is about how we can get over that perception, because it is the reality. We have heard about the inspectorate today. No disrespect to Noelle, but, as one of my colleagues said earlier, the perception is about the four weeks' notice before the inspectors go in. It is a closed shop. They put on the best performance that they can for the inspectorate to come, and they get a glowing report. A letter then goes home to tell all —

Mr Girvan: Or not glowing.

Mr Clarke: It is normally glowing.

The letter talks about how well the school has done. "Perception" seems to be a buzzword politically today as well. The sooner that the perception is sorted out in education, the better.

Mrs Buick: I have to respond to your point about inspection. We have an experienced group of inspectors who carry out our inspections. They are supported by associate assessors, who are our senior leaders and principals in our schools. We inspect against the framework Together Towards Improvement. We absolutely will make a judgement of inadequate or unsatisfactory if the provision is not good enough. Of the post-primary schools that we inspected, 65% were good or better. That means that, unfortunately, we have had to make the decision that a substantial number are inadequate or unsatisfactory. However, we will make that decision. That is with four weeks' notice.

Mr Clarke: Those are statistics again. In the south Antrim area, I was approached by teaching staff in a particular school. They met me privately. They were concerned about what was going on in a school. Some months after that, an inspection was done on the school, and it received a glowing report. The staff came to us privately and told us about all the failings in the school. On the back of that, you need to look at the experience of the inspectors. They did not pick it up in that school. The staff were very clear that the problems were with the management of the school. Not six months after that, your Department did an inspection and the school received a glowing report. I am saying that because the four weeks' notice gave the principal and the senior staff the opportunity to put on the window dressing for the inspectorate to come in and give it a glowing report.

Mrs Buick: We could talk about this all day, but we will not.

Mr Clarke: I am happy enough.

Mrs Buick: With four weeks' notice, we are still finding too high a proportion of schools that are inadequate or unsatisfactory. We are looking at moving towards shortening that notice. On inspection, we can see only what we can see. I wonder whether those teachers spoke up to the inspectors. They have an opportunity through the staff survey report to identify any issues or concerns. Principals will say that if a member of staff did not get a promotion or there is some difficulty with that member of staff, that skews our view of the school. In fact, we would not take just one person's view. We would use the questionnaires to find trails to follow and to triangulate evidence. We would not take just the views from that. I wonder whether those teachers spoke up, because we will see only what we will see in the school. There are many opportunities to do that. The district inspector is another way of doing it. People have phoned me directly. There are other opportunities to do that.

The Chairperson: I am conscious that other members are looking in, and I have to let Adrian finish his line of questioning.

Correct me if I am wrong, but it is not the job of the inspectorate to deal with personalities in schools. I am sure that you come across that when you do your inspections. How do you deal with it?

Mrs Buick: Could you elaborate?

The Chairperson: Personalities in a school.

Mrs Buick: Relationship issues?

The Chairperson: Yes; relationships between staff members and the board of governors in a school.

Mrs Buick: We comment about relationships. You will see that in many inspection reports. If the relationships are not working and they impact on the learners, we must make that judgement. In fact, one of the most important things, along with all the other important things, for a successful school is that there are good working relationships among staff and between staff and pupils. It is a really important aspect.

The Chairperson: Is it something that is brought to your attention, or is it something that you have to look into most schools to identify? Perhaps not all schools would want to inform you that there are staffing issues or otherwise.

Mrs Buick: All staff complete a confidential questionnaire. They have an opportunity to raise any issues that they want to through that. We will carefully follow those up in the form of evidence trails, and we will triangulate the evidence. We also have discussions with staff in the schools, so there is an opportunity to bring up issues then. Furthermore, we identify problems through observation.

Mr McQuillan: To continue with my line, does the Department encourage teachers to take up specialist training?

Mr Sweeney: I wonder whether I should answer Mr Clarke's question about boards of governors and then come back to that. Would that be OK?

Mr McQuillan: That is all right.

Mr Sweeney: It would not be fair if I did not do so. The board of governors part of the corporate governance of education is critical. If a board of governors feels intimidated by the principal or the relationship is not working, that is unacceptable.

Mr Clarke: That is not what I said. The practice is that the principal is always the secretary of the board of governors. He or she is basically in charge and in control of the membership of the board of governors. They can direct and guide it.

Mr Sweeney: We need to increasingly support boards of governors so that they operate in that kind of support and challenge role. I talked earlier about the very user-friendly additional benchmarking data that is made available to boards of governors.

Mrs McCullough: When the data packs went out, they went to the chairs of the boards of governors. There were also suggested questions that they would like the board to put to the principals about how they are performing and how particular groups are doing. Those were suggestions to help them to challenge.

Mr Sweeney: It is crucial. Boards of governors are all voluntary. There is so much depending on the boards of governors being properly supported so that they can properly discharge their role.

Mrs McCullough: Tomorrow night, I am going out with a team from the Department to give governor awareness training, which will run through the roles and responsibilities and work through the school development planning. It is actual support.

Mr Clarke: It is a tick-box exercise. We have all done it.

Mrs McCullough: The —

Mr Clarke: Your training. It is a tick-box exercise. We have done the awareness training and all the other various aspects. It is a tick-box exercise: you have attended, and you have passed.

Mrs McCullough: We go into schools.

Mrs Buick: On 26 September 2011, the Minister said in a statement that he wanted the inspectorate to strengthen its inspection of governance, not least so that good practice could be identified and fed back to the sector. From January 2013, on all focused and longer primary and post-primary inspections, there is an expectation that governors will complete a self-evaluation against five key questions. They will evaluate their own performance and identify any training needs that they have. That questionnaire will be used as part of the discussion that we have with governors on the Tuesday afternoon. Currently, we are reporting orally a confidence level. From after Easter, we will put in inspection reports a statement around our evaluation of confidence in boards of governors. A strengthening of the inspection of governance is in place at the moment at the Minister's request.

Mr Clarke: You should welcome that.

Mr Sweeney: I come back to Mr McQuillan's question about opportunities for specialist training for teachers. That is largely driven by the profession. Obviously, teachers come out of the initial teacher education experience or universities. They register with the General Teaching Council for Northern Ireland, which is the self-regulatory professional body for teaching. It identifies 27 core competencies required of a teacher. Some of those will be readily available when a teacher qualifies, but a number of them will be manifest through continuous professional development through a teacher's career.

It is the Department's role to create a situation in which teachers are supported to do professional development.

Mr McQuillan: The schools need to be supported while the teachers are training.

Mr Sweeney: Yes. The Secretary of State at the time was Baker, so we talk about Baker days.

Mr Dallat: Apple tarts.

Mr Sweeney: The Department provides five — pardon?

Mr Dallat: Apple tarts.

Mr Sweeney: Apple tarts?

Mr Dallat: Yes.

Mr Girvan: Buns.

Mr Sweeney: Each year, five dedicated days out of the 190 teaching days are set aside that teachers can use for self-driven professional development.

We are looking at a new strategy for supporting teachers. We need to ensure that we recruit the right calibre of people into the profession, that we give them the best possible training that we can and that we support them throughout their entire career. I will come back to the point that no education system can be better than the quality of the teaching in the classroom.

Mr Clarke: You left one out.

Mr Sweeney: What is that?

Mr Clarke: Get rid of the dead wood.

Mr Sweeney: I think that we discussed the procedures for dealing with unsatisfactory teachers, principals and vice principals. We talked about people needing to be supported. We can ventilate the system, move people on or give them additional training. It is impressive how many teachers fund their masters courses themselves. They move on from a BA degree to a masters degree as a career development and a professional development opportunity.

Mr McQuillan: That does not necessarily make them a good teacher specialising in certain subjects.

Mr Sweeney: No, but it shows a healthy approach.

Mr Hughes: I will add one small point. I am particularly conscious of additional resources being made available for teachers who need to develop their skills in subject areas that move quite fast, particularly the science and technology subjects and IT. That is an area in which, in line with the Executive's STEM — science, technology, engineering and mathematics — strategy, the Department of Education has a role to play in supporting the teaching of STEM subjects, and part of that has been to provide additional resources in areas where things move quickly.

Mr McQuillan: Is there any disparity in the uptake of training between the controlled sector and the maintained sector?

Mr Sweeney: Not that I am aware of. Let me go back upstream a little bit — I will use proxies again, because I do not want to be unfair — and look at Stranmillis and St Mary's as the sources of initial teacher education. The good news that I can bring members this afternoon is that, as you know, teacher-training courses are dramatically oversubscribed and that, therefore, those colleges are recruiting some of the brightest and best of our young people who are coming out of the post-primary experience. Although the report talks about minimum thresholds, the reality is that we are far exceeding the minimum thresholds. We are recruiting a very high-quality intake, which is not the case in England, Scotland and Wales. So, we are particularly pleased that we have a rich source going in at that level.

I talked about the 27 competencies. It is a self-driven professional requirement for people to identify training needs as they go through their careers. The Department does not have an interventionist role in that other than wishing to encourage ongoing professional development.

Mr McQuillan: I am glad that you said that the Department wishes to encourage that, because I think that it is important that it does. I was talking about the teachers who are in post, not the new teachers who will be going into post. Is there any disparity in the numbers of teachers that are already in controlled schools and maintained schools going on to do specialist subjects?

Mrs Buick: I will give an inspectorate point of view. Whenever we inspect schools, we look at opportunities for continuous professional development and the extent to which that is a central focus of the school development plan. We also look at the extent to which self-evaluation is taking place so that we can identify where the learning and development needs are. Anywhere that you see a good school — we have good schools in the controlled and maintained sectors — you can be confident that there is good professional development among the staff.

Mr McQuillan: How do we encourage those schools that are not doing that?

Mrs Buick: That would come out at inspection in the areas for improvement. For example, if aspects of literacy and numeracy are not being well developed, professional development can be an element of improving them.

Mr McQuillan: I have one final question. What is the ideal balance between teaching and managing for principals? How do you get the right balance to make them a good leader of the school, as well as a good teacher?

Mr Sweeney: I do not want to be jargonistic, but we have seen in the case studies the idea of distributive leadership. The leadership in any given school is critical, and I include in that the board of governors and certainly the principal. We have seen in the case studies, and certainly in the inspection process, that a really good, strong leader will have a very strong senior team and that that leadership will be distributed throughout the whole school so that every single teacher knows exactly what their role is, particularly in literacy and numeracy.

That is the point at which I go back to Count, Read: Succeed. We require that to permeate all aspects of school governance. So, a good model of leadership, which we saw some examples of in the case studies, is where strong leadership is linked into the community, a strong senior team heading up your English department, a strong senior team heading up your mathematics department, a literacy and numeracy co-ordinator and a SEN co-ordinator. Where you see all that in place and inspired people discharging their role, you will see a good school delivering a really good service for the pupils.

Mr Dallat: I am thinking of the Hansard report, and I am glad that you made some comments about good teachers. As a Committee, our role is to recognise high standards, of which there are plenty. I am sure that we will do that in the report. The teachers whom I know who left the profession early did not do so because they were failures; it was because they were burned out by a system that, I think, can be improved. There are statistics to show that a person who stays on to 65 will probably be dead by the age of 68. I think that we have to recognise that good teachers, whom Trevor talked about, are those with a vocation.

I recognise that the work experience that is available to pupils now is of a very high standard. It is an opportunity for pupils to experience the world of work and for employers to participate in that. I know that it is difficult, but I have a feeling that it would help if those opportunities were also available to teachers, some of whom leave university, spend their whole life in a classroom and are never actually in another workplace. I do not know how practical that is, but it would help. They would come face to face with the literacy and numeracy issues that we are discussing.

I will turn to the issue of the school inspection and the four-week warning. A general inspection is a big issue, and I do not think that you can plan in it any less than four weeks. Cute inspectors will go into a school and, despite all the frills, fancy noticeboards and everything else, will check the dates of the schemes of work, lesson plans and homeworks that have perhaps have not been marked, and they will know within a very short time what is for real and what is not. I did not think that I would end up giving credit to inspectors, but they go in with a purpose, and they are not slow. There may be an exception, Trevor, where —

Mr Clarke: Do you need sugar, John?

The Chairperson: I would not call them cute; I would call them very good at their job.

Mr Dallat: To be honest, they are. They have to write reports that they can stand over and that a school can then implement. That happens in the same way as we have to write a report. I would not want our report to suggest that we have been involved in a session of teacher bashing, because that it not what this is about.

Mr Clarke: No; just some of them.

The Chairperson: Paul, what does leadership training for principals entail? Are we training the next generation of principals, as well as the current one, for leadership?

Mr Sweeney: I will shortly ask Noelle to deal with that question, because she mentioned that the inspectorate has just done a review of leadership.

I will respond to some of Mr Dallat's points. I am with you, members: I did not get the impression that we were teacher bashing this afternoon. If anything, I think that we have all been supportive.

All the leading teacher unions have approached the Department to look at whether we could put in place a scheme that might refresh the workforce. The idea that it is a very demanding workforce needs to be looked at very carefully. I am just putting on record that the teacher unions have approached the Department on that. I am not saying that the Department is about to do that, but I am saying that an approach has been made and that the issue needs to be looked at very carefully. Where the vocational aspect of education is concerned, I am conscious that members will be writing up a report, and it is important that they believe that officials are both relevant and passionate. I believe that the entitlement framework is key. We have put it in place, and schools can now select to put one third applied, one third general and one third either applied or general. Mr Copeland, you talked about the local community context, and some schools might go for more vocationally orientated provision. We know that tremendous investment has been put into the further education sector. It really is important that we tie more into that so that the courses are seen to be even more relevant. So, when you are writing up your report, please include a plug for the entitlement framework. The Department has done well to put it in place, and there is very considerable scope there.

We like to encourage cross-sectoral engagement with the private sector, and you saw in one of the case studies relating to St Mary's secondary school that it was an exemplar of reaching out and having a link with Microsoft. We are seeing evidence of really high-performing leadership in schools. You see that model of the principal reaching out into the community and into the private sector.

Chair, are you content if I ask Noelle to talk about teacher leadership?

The Chairperson: Yes.

Mrs Buick: I will cover that briefly. First, Mr Dallat, thank you for your comments about the inspectorate. Tomorrow, we will publish a leadership survey about effective principals in schools. The major programme for leadership development at the moment is the professional qualification for headship Northern Ireland scheme, which you will be familiar with. That is possibly a programme that was of its time. We have seen an approach to leadership development that has been too fragmented. The qualification for headship is voluntary; you do not have to undertake it to become a head. So, maybe there is something to be addressed to do with some of the qualifications that principals need to be leaders. That is one aspect of it, and the other is about making sure that there is career development right through from the initial teacher education, which I have made very positive comments about, and the induction for beginning teachers as they move through to be middle managers and senior leaders. That is too fragmented at present, and the leadership survey will identify that. So, as the Minister suggested, there will be an opportunity to refresh the leadership development programme.

The Chairperson: Trevor and Paul, your line of questioning is on international comparisons.

Mr Girvan: I think that we have covered quite a bit, and even parts of our issues were strayed into. My point is associated with international best practice and with where good examples have been identified of how that has worked in other jurisdictions. I am talking not just about Scotland, England and Wales but other places in Europe. Have any work and studies been done on how those have

worked and how we could implement some of the aspects that have benefited the outcomes in those areas?

Mr Hughes: We are all really keen to leap in on this one. The international evidence of effective education systems is pretty consistent, and it has been for some time. It is at the very root of the strategic policies that the Department has in place. Under the school improvement policy, the qualities of a successful school are front and centre. That is what we are all aiming for, and it is based on studies of successful and effective education systems across the world.

A number of the points that we made this afternoon have picked up on a consistency of experience. A point was made about how much money is spent on each pupil, and so on, and the chart that the Audit Office put into its report shows that there comes a point when spending more and more is not what makes the difference. That is about the quality of teaching and leadership and the connection between the community and the pupil centre. We quite deliberately have a set of policies that is based on the international evidence. We are very much looking forward to hearing what OECD has to say about the Northern Ireland education system. It visited earlier in the month and was here for eight days. It met a lot people, and as far as I can see, it took in a huge amount of information. That is part of an international study, and we expect to hear about the findings by the late summer or early autumn. We are very attuned to what international observers have to say about our system and what international organisations — OECD is the lead in those — have to say about what is successful in schools.

Mr Girvan: Does it give feedback on best practice in other areas?

Mrs McCullough: Yes. I think that 26 countries are involved in the study, and we were the fourteenth country that OECD visited. It looks at the issue in the context of other countries. It will tell other countries about things here, and we will learn from other people about what works and how assessment and evaluation can be used to improve outcomes for children. So, the OECD very much looks at the issue on an international basis.

Mr Girvan: China is one country that has been mentioned as having a very low economic base. It says that it has such a base, but we all know that it is a superpower in money terms. It outperforms every other country in the key subjects. What is going on there that means that it is so far ahead, even though it claims to be an area of deprivation? It is very wealthy while also being extremely poor, but it seems to average very high.

Mr Hughes: A number of factors will inform education systems' performance. I am thinking in particular of the studies of primary schools that were published in December that showed that, as commentators anticipated, east Asian countries' education systems perform exceptionally well as a general rule. Some will say that it is very specific to the way in which they teach or the way that their schools are established. A number of countries in east Asia share a fundamental culture about the value, importance and priority of education and the importance of working hard to succeed as opposed to having innate brilliance. I do not know whether there is a country that, classically, takes that approach.

There are cultural differences, and I think that taking the international view is enormously helpful to us in looking at our education systems and our cultural assumptions. It challenges our assumptions to see how other cultures and countries look at and think about education. So, a lot of factors are involved. The international studies are useful in that there are factors that, frankly, any education system can pick up and use itself, as opposed to a culture that is ingrained. We will know what those are. The challenge is putting those into place and into practice here while recognising our cultural approach to education. It is also about getting the two to match up so that our culture does not upset the policies and practices and that they build on what we already have.

Mr Girvan: I appreciate that. I am not one to teacher bash or to do anything like that. I appreciate that we some have exceptional teachers, and you have to recognise that some of the best teachers in Great Britain are based in Northern Ireland. I hold my hands up to that. However, some are not.

I have a difficulty with our targets and our outcomes of having five GCSEs in grades A to C. If you want to work it on that basis, you will see that it is the broad spectrum of our curriculum. We have schools where you can do 13 GCSEs and where they try to teach all 13 to certain pupils. This is maybe the wrong place to say this, but should we not focus on the key building blocks of education, which are English, maths and probably some of the sciences, and use that as our key driver? Are we

not focusing on the key areas properly? School performance figures is the other matter that I have some difficulty with. We keep hearing about some schools not entering pupils for and holding them back from exams, because they want to make their score for the number getting good exam results look better on paper. That has happened, and I wonder whether there is not a mechanism in place to ensure that the issue is dealt with on that basis.

Mrs McCullough: You cannot be exempt from the return for the school leavers survey. We collect information about every child who leaves school here annually, which is a cohort of around 23,000 children. So, we collect the information from the school and then go through a validation process to make sure that we have outcomes for each child in the system. Therefore, you cannot not make a return on that unless you have emigrated.

Mr Girvan: I am just conscious that some schools do not want a low pass rate. They will say, "We entered 200 pupils for GCSEs, and out of those, 96% achieved a GCSE pass". Alternatively, they may give those sorts of statistics, but they will not feed in the information that says that, although they could have entered 220, they held back 10% because they knew that those pupils would not achieve a pass.

Mrs McCullough: Schools make a return with a summary of the annual examination results, and they can exempt pupils from the results. However, eight criteria have to be applied, and when schools make the return, they have to say which pupils are exempt and give the reasons for their exemption. The targets are set on the data that are in the school leavers' survey. Everybody has to have an outcome. As we talked about, about 400 out of 23,000 children leave school with nothing. As part of the validation process, we go back to the schools and make sure that we have the right information about the pupils.

Mrs Buick: I was going to point to some inspection evidence. You made a couple of points in your question. One was about the revised curriculum and its breadth. Certainly, we see that that breadth enables schools to be able to choose a curriculum that matches their learners well. I gave the example of Omagh High School, although it is not the only example, where the curriculum was tailored to the learners' needs. I think that that is really positive. So, what we are seeing is the embedding of the revised curriculum.

You will see in our inspection reports that criteria must be followed for schools entering pupils for GCSEs, and if we find that a larger proportion of pupils than we would expect have not been entered for their GCSEs, we would comment on that. Every child should be allowed to aspire to their best.

Mr Girvan: Have you had to include such a comment in a report?

Mrs Buick: I read one report last week in which we made such a comment. A new principal came in and said, "We need to enter far more children for their GCSEs." I suspect that there might be a dip in the outcomes in the short term. It is about absolutely focusing on making sure that the young person has the best possible chance to achieve.

Mr Girvan: So, does that mean that it has been highlighted in the past?

Mrs Buick: Yes.

Mr Hughes: I just want to reiterate a point that has been made in both cases. In effect, a pupil-centred school underpins a pupil's making the right decision about the pathway that they take, which leads to the qualifications that they get. That stretches that pupil so that they are able to fulfil their potential. If decisions are taken for the sake of the school prospectus, that is completely contrary to what is effective overall in a school. An effective and successful school has a pupil focus.

Mr Girvan: Has that been identified?

Mr Hughes: I am not aware of any such instances. The whole premise upon which the entitlement framework is based is that the more options there are, the more likely every child will find the right option and go down the right pathway. If decisions are being made for the benefit of logistical convenience, a school's reputation or how it looks in print, that runs contrary to what we are trying to achieve for the benefit of the pupils.

You opened up a huge question about assessment. Of course, those international studies are based on assessments, which are made specifically for those studies, and on qualifications. So, the target that the Department has for GCSE results is qualifications based. That is a very big issue, and it is not one that I am sure that I will be able to unpack entirely. Given that there is so much flux in the shared GCSE and A-level qualifications between this jurisdiction and England and Wales, we have commissioned from the Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment (CCEA) a fundamental review of GCSEs and A levels. That review is intended to look broadly and deeply at what a pupil gets. Do they get a certificate? Do they get an assessment? What do we need to know? What does the pupil need to know? What does a pupil's potential employer need to know at the end of that pupil's compulsory education or when they leave school? So, there is a big question there, and it has been opened up for discussion and consideration.

Mr Girvan: That is something that John and I discussed — maybe it was Sean, not John — where different examination boards are concerned. Schools pick different examination boards for different exams to suit their own style, knowing the way that they will get results from that. Some examination boards are based more on continual assessment and coursework, while others have a proper exam at the end of the term where you have to know your subject. Some seem to be going down a different route. Why have we got such differences whereby some schools would pick, for argument's sake, a London board for a maths exam but will not go under our system?

Mr Hughes: There may be any number of reasons why a school decides which exam board to use. All examinations fall within a regulatory framework.

Mr Girvan: I appreciate that.

Mr Hughes: I am not saying that it is never for reasons that the principal has in mind, but if it is fundamentally for the benefit of the pupil, you can see the advantage. If it is the right exam for a cohort of pupils coming through a school, it is the right exam.

Mr Girvan: I am not always sure that we are comparing apples with apples.

Mr Hughes: Given that there is a regulatory framework, which covers all examinations, a consistency is achieved. You made the point about international comparisons. There is an effort across Europe to achieve something like — this may be a little blunt — an equivalent approach at the European level so that employers in different countries know what the different qualifications mean, with the result that there is a way of comparing.

Mrs Buick: In the past year, about 21,000 pupils sat maths exams in Northern Ireland. Over 11,000 of those sat the CCEA exam. The next biggest number was for the AQA exam. It gives schools an opportunity to look at the examination board that best fits. The curriculum is the same, but schools can look at what examination boards best fit their methods of assessment. Certainly the bulk seems to be using CCEA.

The Chairperson: You will be glad to know that we will make our concluding remarks. This is an important issue, and I think that we would all agree that this session has been important. Literacy and numeracy are priceless. They are tools for our children to fulfil their promise as individuals going into society and taking their place in the world. I think that we all agree with that. They represent the potential for this society to excel economically and to contribute in the world. This is such a valuable resource that the Public Accounts Committee will be examining very thoroughly what has been done and what can be done to enhance and safeguard that.

I think that we all agree that literacy and numeracy is a shared responsibility. We talked about early intervention, parents and communities, which are also key. We want to ensure that every pupil leaves school with the literacy and numeracy skills that are required for going forward into work and to aspire in life. Everybody around the table had an area to discuss, and you responded to that. So, going forward, the Public Accounts Committee will examine thoroughly what has been said and what we can do to enhance and safeguard literacy and numeracy.

The Committee will now consider the evidence and produce its report in due course. We may wish to write to you for further information. I know that requests for information came out of some areas that we discussed today.

Thank you all for attending. I know that it was a long session. Thank you, members, the C&AG and his team, the Committee Clerks and Hansard for their contribution today. Thank you, Fiona; we have not forgotten about you. Thank you very much, Paul, David, Karen and Noelle.

Mr Sweeney: On behalf of my colleagues, Chair, I thank you and the members, the Northern Ireland Audit Office, the Clerks, Hansard and Fiona for the courtesy that has been afforded to us this afternoon. It was very much appreciated.