



Northern Ireland
Assembly

COMMITTEE FOR EDUCATION

Minutes of Proceedings

WEDNESDAY 3 JUNE 2020

Room 29 / Teleconference, Parliament Buildings, Belfast

Present: Mr Chris Lyttle MLA (Chairperson)

Present by Teleconference:

Ms Karen Mullan MLA (Deputy Chairperson)
Mr Maurice Bradley MLA
Mr Robbie Butler MLA
Ms Catherine Kelly MLA
Mr Daniel McCrossan MLA
Mr Justin McNulty MLA
Mr Robin Newton MBE MLA

Apologies: Mr William Humphrey MLA

In Attendance: Mr Peter McCallion (Assembly Clerk)

In Attendance by Teleconference:

Mr Mark McQuade (Assistant Clerk)
Mr Ian McAdam (Clerical Supervisor)
Mr Ed McCann (Clerical Officer)

The meeting commenced at 9:04am in open session.

1. Apologies

Apologies were as indicated above.

2. Chairperson's Business

2.1 Post Primary Transfer

The Chairperson advised Members of recent press reports indicating that a number of post-primary schools (which make use of academic selection to determine some or all of their enrolment) have elected to set aside the unregulated post-primary transfer tests for 2020. The Chairperson reminded

Members that the Committee had written to the Department suggesting that post-primary transfer guidance covering the present circumstances should be issued to schools urgently.

2.2 Chairpersons' Liaison Group update

The Chairperson advised Members that the Chairpersons' Liaison Group had indicated that Committee meeting length and frequency was becoming excessive. Consequently, the Chairperson suggested that Members should restrict their questioning to 4-5 minutes each per oral briefing for this week.

3. Draft Minutes

Agreed: The Committee agreed the minutes of its meetings held on 27 May 2020.

4. Matters Arising

There were no matters arising.

5. Examinations Covid Concerns – Association of School and College Leaders (ASCL) – Oral Briefing

The Committee noted a briefing paper from ASCL and correspondence from the National Association of Head Teachers (NI).

Witnesses joined the meeting by teleconference at 9:08am.

Mr Trevor Robinson, President, Association of School and College Leaders;
and

Mr Stephen Black, Executive Member, Association of School and College Leaders.

Proceedings were suspended at 9:08am.

Proceedings resumed at 9:15am with Mr Lyttle present in Room 29, and Ms Mullan, Mr Bradley, Mr Butler, Ms Kelly, Mr McCrossan, Mr McNulty and Mr Newton present by teleconference.

Witnesses briefed the Committee on their concerns regarding the impact of covid-19 on examinations and the proposed examination appeals process.

This was followed by a question and answer session.

The Chairperson thanked the witnesses for their attendance.

6. Consultation on Examinations Appeals - Council for the Curriculum Examinations and Assessment (CCEA) - Oral Briefing

The Committee noted a CCEA paper on the feedback from the consultation.

Officials joined the meeting by teleconference at 10:09am.

Mr Justin Edwards, Chief Executive, Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment

Ms Sharon King, Head of Regulation, Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment

Mr Trevor Carson, Chairperson, Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment

Officials briefed the Committee on the proposed examinations appeals process.

This was followed by a question and answer session.

Mr Bradley left the meeting at 10:50am

The Chairperson thanked officials for their attendance.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to CCEA recognising the critical importance of providing clarity and certainty in respect of examinations and the appeals process to schools, parents and pupils. The Committee agreed to recommend that CCEA should establish a pupil/parent helpline in order to address related concerns in a timely and focused manner.

Agreed: The Committee agreed that fairness and transparency should be the key features of the examinations appeal process and noted the complexity of the decision-making process relating to individual appeals which might or might not affect other students' grades.

The Committee noted with considerable concern feedback from the consultation in respect of the statistical model which is to be used to inform the process of the awarding of grades. Members noted with surprise that the model has yet to be fully developed or subject to any testing and that its characteristics and method of application have yet to be explained and communicated to schools including e.g. how the CCEA model will link to similar models in use by other Awarding Organisations in other parts of the UK.

Agreed: The Committee clearly indicated that an examination and appeals system should allow for cohort variation at centre level and including individual outliers. The Committee felt that professional teacher assessment would be a reliable basis upon which to evaluate both centre and individual progress. The Committee therefore agreed to write to CCEA indicating that centres should be allowed to make appeals based on the characteristics and application of the statistical model and that in the absence of information on the model, it was unreasonable for CCEA to deny such appeals.

Members stressed the importance of the needs of children and young people being at the centre of considerations relating to examinations and related appeals processes.

Agreed: Further to previous Committee consideration of the revised examination arrangements, the Committee agreed to write to CCEA seeking an update as to

whether examination fees for 2020 will be wholly or partly refunded to schools and students.

7. Department of Education - June Monitoring Round – Written briefing

In the absence of a written briefing on the June Monitoring Round, this agenda item was deferred.

8. Department of Education - Coronavirus Response – Oral Briefing

The Committee noted:

- the latest DE covid-19 situation report dated 29 May 2020;
- correspondence from Lurgan College, Wallace High School, Coleraine Grammar, St. Patrick's Grammar School, Armagh and the Association for Quality Education on post-primary transfer;
- a copy of correspondence to the Minister regarding the return of children to school from St. Patrick's Primary School in Crossmaglen; and
- correspondence from the Minister regarding the Restart Programme.

Officials joined the meeting by teleconference at 11:31am.

Mr Derek Baker, Permanent Secretary, Department of Education; and

Mr John Smith, Deputy Secretary, Department of Education.

The Minister, Peter Weir MLA joined the meeting by teleconference at 11:42am.

The Minister and officials briefed the Committee on the Department's response to the coronavirus.

This was followed by a question and answer session.

Mr Bradley rejoined the meeting at 11:53am

Mr McNulty left the meeting at 11:55am

The Chairperson thanked the Minister and his officials for their attendance.

Robin Newton left the meeting at 12:27pm.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Department urging it to issue Restart guidance to schools by mid-June in order to allow school leaders to plan for timetabling and the provision of Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) etc. The Committee further agreed to write to the Department:

- seeking information on the resource and capital it was seeking or was planning to allocate in order to provide PPE and other coronavirus equipment to schools;
- asking the Department to set out its budget allocations indicating all covid-19 and other ring-fenced elements including those for Grant Maintained Integrated and Voluntary Grammar schools; and

- seeking an update on the Department of Education / Department for Communities meetings on the issue of tackling holiday hunger.

The Committee considered correspondence from the Department relating to seclusion in Special Schools for children with covid symptoms.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to provide the Departmental response to the initiator of the seclusion in Special Schools correspondence.

The Committee considered correspondence from the Governing Bodies Association.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to defer an oral briefing from the Governing Bodies Association.

The Committee considered correspondence from the Committee for Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs regarding connectivity issues, home learning and rural broadband.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to respond indicating that the Committee has sought information on DE's project to loan/repurpose several thousand laptops/ipads and its roll-out of broadband access technology. The Committee also noted that the limitations of technology / broadband availability are a key consideration for the use of blended learning as part of the Restart programme.

Mr Butler left the meeting at 12:30pm.

Agreed: The Committee noted the responses from post-primary schools relating to post-primary transfer and agreed to commission the Clerk to devise a targeted on-line survey on related matters which could be launched later in June.

9. Correspondence

9.1 The Committee noted an index of incoming correspondence.

9.2 The Committee considered correspondence from the Irish Congress of Trade Unions seeking to brief the Committee on covid-19 concerns. The Committee noted that it had previously agreed to write to ICTU seeking a written briefing.

9.3 The Committee considered correspondence from an individual seeking legal advice about child registration in schools.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to reply indicating that the Committee cannot provide legal advice and suggesting that the query be redirected e.g. to the Department or to the Ombudsman.

9.4 The Committee considered correspondence from the Department seeking the Committee's approval for proposals to make a Transfer of Functions Order to transfer statutory responsibility from DE to the Department of Justice in relation to the Special Educational Needs and Disability Tribunal (SENDIST).

Agreed: The Committee agreed to consider a Departmental oral briefing on the SENDIST Transfer of Functions Order at its meeting on Wednesday 10 June 2020.

9.5 The Committee noted a response from the Education Authority about its plan to improve the Special Education Needs statutory assessment process and

providing information on corporate ownership, the timeline for improvement, and projected measures of success.

9.6 The Committee noted correspondence from the Corrymeela Community providing a copy of its report entitled: "Countering Paramilitary and organised Criminal Influence on Youth – a review".

9.7 The Committee considered correspondence from the All Party Group on Autism seeking an opportunity for Autism NI to provide an oral briefing on mandatory autism training for teachers.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to schedule a briefing from Autism NI on mandatory autism training for teachers in the autumn of 2020.

10. Forward Work Programme

The Committee noted a revised Forward Work Programme.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to receive an oral briefing from the Department on the budget and the June Monitoring Return as well as an oral briefing from the Education Authority on its report on statementing delays, at its meeting on 17 June 2020. The Committee further agreed that it would not consider the weekly covid-19 oral update from the Department on that date.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to receive an oral briefing from Stranmillis University College and Dr Noel Purdy on on-line education issues at its meeting on 1 July 2020.

Agreed: The Committee agreed, pending further guidance from the Clerking and Member Support office, to re-schedule all Education Committee meetings to commence at 9:00am until summer recess.

11. Any Other Business

There was no other business.

12. Date, Time and Place of next meeting

The next Committee meeting will be held on Wednesday 10 June 2020 in Room 29, Parliament Buildings and by teleconference at 9:00am, subject to revised guidance from the Clerking and Member Support office.

The meeting was adjourned at 12:34pm.

Mr Chris Lyttle MLA
Chairperson, Committee for Education
10 June 2020