



Northern Ireland
Assembly
Committee for Education
MINUTES OF PROCEEDINGS
WEDNESDAY 30 APRIL 2014
SENATE CHAMBER, PARLIAMENT BUILDINGS

Present:

Mervyn Storey MLA (Chairperson)
Danny Kinahan MLA (Deputy Chairperson)
Jonathan Craig MLA
Jo-Anne Dobson MLA
Trevor Lunn MLA
Maeve McLaughlin MLA
Stephen Moutray MLA
Robin Newton MLA
Seán Rogers MLA
Pat Sheehan MLA

In Attendance:

Peter McCallion (Assembly Clerk)
Karen Jardine (Senior Assistant Assembly Clerk)
Sharon McGurk (Clerical Supervisor)
Emma Swan (Clerical Officer)

Apologies:

Chris Hazzard MLA

The meeting commenced in public session at 10.00am

1. Apologies

Apologies were as recorded above.

2. Chairperson's Business

10.01am Danny Kinahan joined the meeting.

10.02am Jonathan Craig joined the meeting.

2.1 Early Years Allocations

The Chairperson referred Members to the answer to written question AQW 32840/11-15 which referred to the allocation of Early Years places.

Agreed: In order to inform its consideration of the effectiveness of planning for Early Years provision by the Pre-School Education Advisory Groups (PEAGs), the Committee agreed to write to the Department of Education and request information showing the number of applications and number of allocations at individual Early Years setting level for 2011-12; 2012-13; 2013-14; 2014-15 (when available).

The Chairperson also referred Members to the answers to written questions AQW 32826/11-15 and AQW 32830/11-15 which highlight a significant regional variation in the levels of full-time and part-time Early Years places and a lengthy timescale (2015-16) for the standardisation of patterns of pre-school attendance.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Department of Education to seek an explanation for this elongated timescale and for further details of costs per pupil for Early Years provision in different District Council areas.

Finally and in response to a previous query, Members noted that it had previously considered and agreed a statutory rule which removed the preferential pre-school allocations in respect of July/August birthdays at a meeting in June 2012.

2.2 St. Mary's University College SEN Conference

The Chairperson advised Members that he had been invited to address a SEN Conference at St. Mary's University College, Belfast on 14 May 2014.

Agreed: The Committee agreed that it was content for the Chairperson to address the SEN Conference.

3. Draft Minutes of previous meeting

Agreed: The minutes of the meeting held on 9 April 2014 were agreed by the Committee.

4. Matters Arising

There were no matters arising.

5. Visually Impaired School Children – Department Briefing/ELBs – Access to Health Services

The following officials joined the meeting at 10.06am

Caroline Gillan, Director of Access, Inclusion and Well-Being, DE; Ruth Bell, Assistant Senior Education Officer, Children and Young People's Services, SELB/WELB; Stephen Porter, Regional Vision Resource Base; and Margaret McMullan, Learning and Support Services, WELB.

The briefing was followed by a question and answer session.

10.11am Jo-Anne Dobson joined the meeting.

The officials left the meeting at 11.32am.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the each of the Education and Library Boards to seek:

- an update on the numbers of school children using visual impairment services;
- commentary on the role of the Low Vision clinics within each Board area and its relationship with local schools, including why other Board areas are seeking to replicate provision available within WELB; and
- clarification on the current situation regarding the provision of a Low Vision Clinic within Jordanstown School.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Department of Education to seek clarification on when funding for the Regional Vision Resource Base will become core expenditure and for information on how transition support for pupils with visual impairment benchmarks against good practice in other jurisdictions.

Agreed: Finally, Members agreed to ask Assembly Research and Information Services to provide information on how services to school children with visual impairment compares with other jurisdictions.

Agreed: Members also agreed to write to CCEA to seek clarification on how students with visual impairment are accommodated in respect of formal examinations.

6. Visually Impaired School Children – Non-Departmental Briefing – School Vision

The following witnesses joined the meeting at 11.37am:

Michael Gilsean, Optician; Michelle Monaghan, Principal, St. Clare's Primary School, Newry; and Ciara Reilly, Parent.

The briefing was followed by a question and answer session.

11.40am Stephen Moutray joined the meeting.

12.01pm The Chairperson left the meeting and the Deputy Chairperson assumed the Chair.

12.06pm Jo-Anne Dobson left the meeting.

12.09pm Seán Rogers left the meeting.

12.17pm Maeve McLaughlin left the meeting.

The witnesses left the meeting at 12.22pm.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Department of Education to express its support for a pilot study to investigate the relationship between vision stress and educational underachievement.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to ask Assembly Research and Information Services to provide information on research exploring the links between student vision and educational attainment.

Agreed: The Committee also agreed to write to the Department to seek clarification on:

- the role and nature of “School Health” as referred to in the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (DHSSPS) “Developing Eyecare Partnerships” strategy document and the associated use of school nurses;
- the nature of the P1 eye test and if consideration has been given to altering its scope to include vision stress parameters; and
- the nature of advice and support provided to teachers to help them identify vision stress issues.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to forward the briefing material provided by the witnesses to the DHSSPS and the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety for information. Members also agreed to write to the DHSSPS to request information on the uptake of free eye tests for children and young people under 16 years of age.

7. Correspondence

7.1 The Committee noted responses from each of the Education and Library Boards (ELBs) regarding Area Planning for Controlled Schools. The Committee noted that, unlike the other Boards, the South Eastern Education and Library Board (SEELB) appeared to have no formal subgroup or fixed channel for elected representatives or representative bodies to contribute to Controlled School Area Planning.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the SEELB and suggest that it amends its practices in this regard in line with the other ELBs.

7.2 The Committee noted correspondence from the Department of Education indicating that the Special Schools Area Planning report has yet to be finalised.

7.3 The Committee noted an amended response from the Department of Education regarding the Integrated Education Fund report: The Business of Education.

7.4 The Committee noted correspondence from ALTRAM regarding the withdrawal of funding for ALTRAM – an Irish Medium Education Early Years Group.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure to seek commentary on how Irish Medium Education Early Years support is to be managed in Northern Ireland through the North-South Irish Language Body.

Agreed: The Committee also agreed to write to the Department of Education to seek commentary on possible changes to the education remit of Comhairle na Gaelscolaíochta following amendments to funding for Irish Medium organisations through the North-South Irish Language Body.

7.5 The Committee noted a response from the Department of Education regarding concerns raised by primary school principals in respect of End of Key Stage Assessment – Levels of Progression.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to seek an oral Departmental briefing on Levels of Progression.

7.6 The Committee noted correspondence from the Department of Education regarding the recent independent report on Computer Based Assessment and the progress of the current pilot.

7.7 The Committee noted correspondence from the Department of Education and Belfast High School regarding the availability of seat belts on school buses.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to Translink to request a timeline by which the remaining 33% of buses used in the provision of school transport will be fitted with seatbelts.

7.8 The Committee noted correspondence from SEELB providing information on the extent of interactions between the ELBs and Sentinus, Earth Science Outreach and other similar organisations.

7.9 The Committee noted correspondence from GEOSERV regarding its interaction with schools; ELBs; the Department and CCEA regarding the promotion of STEM subjects, specifically Earth Sciences.

7.10 The Committee noted correspondence from the Department of Education on a number of STEM related matters including: an update on the STEM Action Plan; its interactions with Sentinus; STEM Networking events; STEM-related CPD for teachers; Initial Teacher Education Primary Programmes; the ETI Evaluation of “The World Around Us”; and the promotion of Biosciences in schools.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to consider this information again following the publication of the ETI report on “The World Around Us” in the autumn.

7.11 The Committee noted correspondence from the Department of Education regarding the STEM Module, advising that responsibility for a business case for a second STEM Module rests with the North Eastern Education and Library Board (NEELB).

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to NEELB suggesting that it should consider a capital bid for a second STEM Module in the next budget process.

7.12 The Committee noted correspondence from the Department of Education on matters relating to the joint Department of Education- Department for Employment and Learning review of careers including: the terms of reference of the review;

information on the appointment of panel members for the review; and further information on Business Education Partnerships and Young Enterprise NI.

7.13 The Committee noted correspondence from the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister relating to underachievement among Protestant boys highlighted in the third Community Relations Council Peace Monitoring Report.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister advising that it has already received briefings on the TIMSS/PIRLS and the NISRA GCSE/A-Level data in the CRC report and that the Committee is due to receive a briefing on 14 May 2014 on the “Taking Boys Seriously” report.

7.14 The Committee noted an invitation from Stranmillis University College to attend the launch of the CREDIT (Classrooms Re-imagined Education in Diversity and Inclusion for Teachers) report on Wednesday 7 May 2014, 2pm.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to forward the Executive Summary of the report to the Department of Education for comment on the relevant recommendations, following its publication on 7 May 2014.

7.15 The Committee noted an invitation from the Department of Education to attend the launch of the “Recognise and Remove” Concussion Campaign launch on Wednesday 30 April 2014 at 12.30pm.

7.16 The Committee noted a response from the Department of Education on reported changes to the Discretionary Contingency Fund for schools with financial surpluses. DE indicated that funding authorities have a responsibility to exercise a challenge function based on the individual circumstances of the schools when allocating contingency funds.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Education and Library Boards to ask whether now, or previously, they have exercised the challenge function by denying contingency funds to schools in surplus.

7.17 The Committee noted an invitation from the Minister of Education to attend a reception for “Outstanding” and “Very Good” schools and pre-school providers on Wednesday 28 May 2014 at 2pm.

7.18 The Committee noted a response from the Department of Education to its comments following the recent Departmental briefing on the OECD Report.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to defer a briefing on the implementation of the OECD recommendations until the autumn.

7.19 The Committee noted an invitation from the Probation Board NI to a drop-in event in the Long Gallery on Wednesday 30 April 2014.

8. Draft Forward Work Programme

The Committee considered its draft Forward Work Programme.

Agreed: The Committee agreed the draft Forward Work Programme.

9. Any Other Business

9.1 St Mary's Primary School, Brollagh

The Committee noted that the Minister of Education was due to meet with the North West Education Action Group in respect of St. Mary's Primary School, Brollagh.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Minister of Education: to request that the meeting with the North West Education Action Group happens urgently; seeking clarification on the Department views on a reported commitment from CCMS to facilitate staff transfers to St. Mary's Primary School to support the delivery of the full curriculum within that school; and seeking sight of the Cross-Border education study.

The Committee moved into closed session at 12.37pm.

10. Inquiry into the Education and Training Inspectorate and the School Improvement Process – Consideration of Draft Report

Agreed: The Committee agreed to defer consideration of the draft report on the Inquiry into the Education and Training Inspectorate and the School Improvement Process until the meeting on 7 May 2014.

Agreed: The Committee agreed that relevant excerpts of the draft report be shared with the Department of Education so as to confirm factual accuracy.

The meeting was adjourned at 12.39pm.

Mervyn Storey
Chairperson, Committee for Education
7 May 2014