Northern Ireland
Assembly

COMMITTEE FOR EDUCATION

OFFICIAL REPORT
(Hansard)

Inquiry into Successful Post-Primary Schools Serving Disadvantaged Communities

19 January 2011

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Members present for all or part of the proceedings:
Mr Mervyn Storey (Chairperson)
Mr David Hilditch (Deputy Chairperson)
Mr Jonathan Craig
Mr Trevor Lunn
Mr Basil McCrea
Mr John O'Dowd

Witnesses:

Mrs Janice Clarke	)
Mr Johnny Graham	) Belfast Model School for Girls
Mrs Jacqueline Weir	)
Mrs Carmel McCartan	)
Mrs Ita McVeigh	) St Louise's Comprehensive College
Mr John O'Rourke	)
Ms Jill Ashenhurst	)
Mr William McCullough	) Ashfield Boys' High School
Mr Andy McMorran	)
Mr Micheál Mac Giolla Ghunna	)
Ms Emer Mhic an Fhailí	) Coláiste Feirste
Mr Diarmuid Ua Bruadaire	)

The Chairperson (Mr Storey):

We will begin with the presentation from Belfast Model School for Girls. Johnny, it would be fair to say that we sense that you are so glad to be in your current position. We face a dire situation. As you are aware, yesterday this Committee had the Education Minister in front of us to discuss the Budget. There were fewer answers and more questions. The issue of capital is certainly a huge problem for many schools that today do not know what will happen; in fact, in some cases they now know that their projects will not be moving forward. I am sure that you have a sense of great satisfaction and relief that you have been able to move through what was a very painful process. I do not think that the Girls' Model got to this stage without many long days, weeks, months and years of work, but certainly from what we have seen and heard, the end product is very impressive. We are delighted to be here and I ask you, Johnny, to make your presentation.

Mr Johnny Graham (Belfast Model School for Girls):

Thank you very much for your kind words. We have a lovely, brand new school, which is fantastic, but what we have to worry about now is whether we will have any teachers in this new school after the budget.

I have been principal of Belfast Model School for Girls for 10 years. Beside me is my colleague Janice Clarke, who is our full service extended school co-ordinator and who has been since the start of the programme over four years ago, and Mrs Jacqueline Weir, who is a very supportive chairperson of the board of governors. The three of us welcome you to the Belfast Model School for Girls.

We thank you for the opportunity to present to the Committee. I know from my previous experiences that the Committee members are extremely receptive to the views of the professionals at the coalface, and I am especially pleased that they will also be hearing from students this afternoon, as their views must be listened to for this inquiry to be successful. The

Committee has received the submission that we sent before Christmas and has also been sent a copy of the main points that we feel are most pertinent to the inquiry. I will spend a little time highlighting some of the main issues, and I will then ask Janice to talk for a few minutes on the impact of the full service extended school on the school and its community. I will finish by pointing out some major issues of concern that, if they are not addressed in a positive manner, will impact extremely negatively on the work being done by schools serving disadvantaged communities and, more worryingly, on the future of pupils who live in these areas of disadvantage. After that, we will be happy to answer any questions or clarify any points as you wish.

I realise that time is limited, so I will outline a few of the main features relating to the inquiry. I know that the other three schools giving oral briefings this morning may well touch on similar themes; however, their context will be very different as our catchment area, the greater Shankill and north Belfast, has a unique set of circumstances and a very chequered history, which we all are too familiar with. Therefore, a customised response from schools such as ours is needed to provide an education pathway that can allow as many young people as possible to rise above that long history of deprivation and unrest in order to achieve their potential, both academic and social, and take their place in a new, modern, shared future for Northern Ireland. However, we must remember that there are many barriers to learning to overcome in order to achieve that goal.

I will provide some context. Here at the Girls' Model we are well on with that journey, with our five A* to C or better at GCSE improving from an average of around 30% in the years between 2000 and 2004 to 66% in 2008-09 and 58% in 2009-2010. Every girl left with some GCSE accreditation in 2009-2010, which is well above the average for similar schools. Every girl in Key Stage 4 studies our specialist area of ICT at GCSE, and last year, out of over 150 girls, 96% achieved a pass rate at A* to C, with 86 A* recorded. At A level, 64 girls sat A-level exams last year, up from 31 in 2004-05, with just under 40% gaining three A* to C, which is up from 17% in 2004-05.

We are very pleased that 26 girls went to university last year, and every one of those 26 girls was the first in their family to do so, which is fantastic. That creates a new generation of role models for the Shankill and north Belfast. In our specialist area of ICT, 90% of the 38 girls entered in the A-level exam gained A* to C, with Sarah Jane Pollock achieving the top mark in the whole of the UK in AQA applied A-level double-award ICT.

The reason why I outlined that is that those results set a standard for the girls lower down the school to aspire to, and raising aspirations is one of our main features. It raises the bar for the future, which I know is one of the things that the Committee is looking at.

Something that I think is very pertinent is the fact that over 80% of girls in the sixth form receive the education maintenance allowance (EMA). The news in England yesterday mentioned a school in Tower Hamlets with the highest number of kids receiving EMA, and it was 75%. Over 80% of our girls rely on EMAs so that they can come back to sixth form. That begs the question: what would happen if it were discontinued? The answer is that a lot of the excellent progress currently happening would simply stop and we would slip back to the situation in the bad old days, when children who had the potential to achieve at sixth form were not accessing it due to financial considerations, and that is something that we really have to look at.

The problem facing us is that the intake ability profile of pupils coming to the Girls' Model is changing. I have provided a data sheet, which I will explain. MidYIS is the test that we give the girls when they enter year 8, first year. A score of 100 is average for the whole of the UK. The data shows that in the early 2000s — from 2001 through to 2005 — we had scores very close to 100. However, the first-year pupils in 2007, who will be doing their GCSEs next year, were down to 92·7. You can see that the ability profile is going way down.

With the Yellis, which is the Key Stage 4 baseline testing, an average comprehensive school

would have 25% of pupils in each of the groups: A, B, C and D. The figures for our school show that, for five or six years up to 2006, about 30% of our girls were in the top two bands. Of the girls who are doing their GCSEs next year, 2% are in the top 50%. There are two reasons for that.

The first reason is that grammar schools are now taking the girls who we would have got: the B1s, B2s, C1s and C2s, who we got for years and years. However, because of demography, the grammar schools are now taking those girls, to fill up their numbers. That leaves us with the situation where academic role models are not coming, and that is a massive problem because we rely on such girls.

The second reason is that the children who have come to us in the past couple of years have gone through the Shankill feud. The primary school principals say that that had an amazingly negative impact on those children and caused trauma. Again, that is shown in the figures. There is a slight light at the end of the tunnel, in that the MidYIS results have started to go up a little bit again, to 95·1. Therefore, hopefully, the worst-case scenario has passed. However, that is a massive problem in a school such as ours, especially now in a budgetary situation where there are less and less resources to deal with the pupils with weaker ability who are coming through.

As we mentioned in our submissions, we feel that the crucial areas in our success are the excellent professional staff who believe in our vision of achievement for all; the leadership throughout the school; a broad and balanced curriculum with a relevant mix of academic and vocational progression routes and parity of esteem for each, focusing on pupils' strengths to maximise potential for success. Another area is our having a data-rich environment to track pupil progress and thereby identify underachievement early so that we have strategies in place to deal with that, by putting in support mechanisms such as special educational needs, literacy and numeracy, mentoring and counselling and extended schools, to minimise the barriers to learning for girls who come to the school. A further area is the use of ICT as a tool to support learning

across all areas of the schools, particularly our virtual learning environment, which allows pupils to work at their own pace. As well as that, I have provided a little bit of information on how the VirtualGMS helps pupils. That is very important and really helpful in our situation.

Most importantly however, we need, and have, focused staff development for practising teachers. That must be delivered by practitioners who have the necessary credibility to enthuse and skill staff through individualised, not generic, centralised training. We really feel that we are a teaching school along the lines of a teaching hospital, and we work with schools such as St Louise's Comprehensive College, Ashfield Boys' High School and others to make sure that we get advice from practising teachers across schools. That is the way forward.

I sometimes feel that a lot of money is spent on the curriculum advisory and support service (CASS), which I feel has outlived its usefulness. It is nothing to do with the CASS people; they are very good people. However, the days of having someone who has not been in a classroom for 10 or 15 years parachuted in to a school to tell teachers how to teach are over. Schools are losing money to pay for that. To me, that is nonsensical. People who are practising teachers and who are doing the job at that time should come in and work with teachers. I have always said that and have said it in front of the education and library boards as well. I have nothing against the CASS service per se — there are very good people in that — but the days of using it are finished. We need training for schools by schools, with practising teachers involved in up-to-date teaching and learning training.

As our school has such a wide range of girls from diverse social backgrounds — from those who have excellent home and community support to those who have little, none or even negative support — it is very easy to see how important a support network is to a student's success. We can identify girls who have the same ability as others in their class but who will never be able to realise it fully without extra support, because they do not get it at home. I will ask Mrs Clarke to talk for a few minutes about how the full service extended school is helping to redress that

imbalance.

Mrs Janice Clarke (Belfast Model School for Girls):

Good morning; thank you very much for the opportunity to speak to the Committee. Full service school was implemented in January 2007, and I have been the full service school co-ordinator throughout the duration of the programme to date. I have also been a teacher in the Belfast Model School for Girls for the past 16 years. It is difficult to believe but true.

The programme was implemented in January 2007, and we work in partnership with the Belfast Model School for Boys. The aim of the full service programme is to reduce barriers to learning. There are many barriers to learning in our catchment area, not just for our young people but for their whole family. The full service school aims to address those barriers, get the young people into school and get them ready to learn when they are in the classroom so that they can go on to achieve their full academic and social potential.

We are looking at the full service programme being family-led, needs-led and totally child-centred. We also want to avoid duplication. There are many services and voluntary and statutory organisations on the Shankill that will provide support to young people and their families. We want to work together to avoid duplication. We want to ensure that the young person is getting the support that they need and that we are all working in partnership and collaboration for the good of the young person.

At the start of the programme, we carried out extensive auditing of our school community; that is, our pupils, parents, teaching and non-teaching staff, primary schools, business community and the voluntary and statutory organisations. From that, we identified our needs, the barriers that we need to look at and the issues that we need to address to enable the young person to learn. We put those into five key target areas: pupil engagement; parental engagement; transition

support; health engagement; and community engagement. From that, we can see that schools cannot work alone to provide support; we have to work with our whole community.

Having identified the needs, we put programmes and strategies in place. Among those programmes are coursework clinics, in which we provide additional and professional support for the young people who are identified as struggling with coursework. We also run Easter classes, additional classes after school and evening classes for our whole community. Furthermore, we have an extensive extra-curricular activity menu, which encourages us to look at the young person holistically. It enables us to look at all of their needs and to encourage them to be part of the school life and their local community. We want the young person to achieve in school, and we want them to be able to put that back into their local communities, to raise educational aspirations for the future.

Not only have we implemented programmes and strategies through the full service programme, we have been fortunate in being able to employ staff. We have employed a family link attendance officer. That officer works with young people who have an attendance rate between 80% and 90%. We are careful not to impinge on the role of the educational welfare officer, and we are working in partnership with those officers.

Over the past year, we have been working with a cohort of 55 girls who have attendance issues. By the end of last year, the overall attendance of that cohort had increased by 18%. That meant that they were in the classroom more often and accessing the curriculum, which means that they have a better opportunity to achieve their full potential.

We also offer learning and emotional support to all of our girls. Part of the full service school programme is counselling support, which involves referring young people to the proper counselling that they need. They may require counselling for bereavement, a family break-up or

for a wealth of other reasons. Again, we work with our local community to provide a good, strong support network for our girls.

We have also employed a family link co-ordinator. Her role is to give individual support to families. We are aware that 80% of a girl's learning comes from their home and community, and only 20% comes from the school environment. We have to tap in there; we have to work with parents and the local community to ensure that learning takes place. The family link co-ordinator will also signpost families to other organisations from which they can receive support.

We have a behaviour mentor in school. I know that that is hard to believe; I am sure that you do not think that we need a behaviour mentor, but we do.

The Chairperson:

I think that the Education Committee could do with one.

Mrs J Clarke:

They mentor young people who are, in most cases, experiencing difficulties outside of school. We need to work with the families in such situations. Often, there are not procedures or rules in place at home. We try to gently tell the parents that we have to work together to make sure that their daughter is in school and that she is learning, so that she has every opportunity for the future.

We were the first school in Northern Ireland to employ two transition teachers. Our transition teachers work in all of our 18 feeder primary schools. They offer individual support and small-group support for literacy and numeracy in those primary schools. We also offer additional programmes, such as summer schemes, information days and fun days, all of which encourage

young people to be able to move on to the Girls' Model, settle earlier into their year 8 programme, and, therefore, start learning at an earlier stage. Another big benefit of the transition programme, which I find invaluable, is the links that we now have with all of our primary schools. More information comes to us earlier from the primary schools. We can address issues sooner and put in support at an earlier stage. I know that the primary schools welcome that.

Finally, we have community and health engagement. We welcome our close working with health and community partners. We have a network of organisations. At present, we work with 32 partner organisations that deliver classroom input in schools and offer counselling support. That has enabled us to fast-track services. For example, when we do home visits in our local community as part of the parenting programme, we find that there are many mental health issues in families. We are able to fast-track them on to services that offer support at an earlier stage. That benefits the young people for the future. The Shankill area needs that type of intervention because it is unique. Many problems and issues are out there. That intervention is needed in order to tackle those barriers to learning.

The full service school programme is fully integrated into the life of the school. We work very much within the curriculum and with pastoral care to ensure that every young person in school has the best life chances. That is what we want for them. I just want to finish with a quotation from Don Edgar in the 'The Patchwork Nation':

> "The purpose of a school is to help a family educate a child."

That is so true of what we are trying to do in the Girls' Model. We want to work together in partnership to ensure learning and address underachievement.

Mr Graham:

Thank you, Janice. Because of the nature of the Shankill, it is important that it has the resource of the full service school. We are wary of that resource being cut. I pointed out a few reasons why we are a successful school. I could have mentioned others, such as student voice. In recent years,

we have been pioneers in working with other schools' pupils to develop that student voice, which has a big role to play to shape learning, teaching and pastoral care in schools.

I want to finish my remarks by saying that I am scared about the future. That is true particularly with regard to the current financial situation and the draft budget that has just been released, as well as the hammer blow of the proposed ending of end-year flexibility (EYF). To deal with the latter issue first; the ending of end-year flexibility has massive implications for any school that is currently strategically planning for the future. John Wilkinson from Dromore High School is a friend of mine who is losing £320,000 because he is saving to start a new sixth form. He needs that money to start the new sixth form. Judging by the way things look at the minute, he will not have that money. That is shameful. He is someone who has been strategically planning but who finds himself in a poor situation.

We have been planning for downsizing due to the capping of numbers at our new school. We had kept aside money to try to keep on some staff next year due to the school's number of pupils being down to 950. Schools that have overspent are not affected. Schools, like ours, that have been forward-thinking are affected badly. The worst-case scenario for our school is that we will have almost £450,000 less next year due to a combination of the end of specialist school funding; the inability at present to use EYF; a reduction of pupil numbers due to capping; and the likelihood of a reduction of local management of schools (LMS) funding of at least 2·5%. That will cause immense harm to our ability to maintain success in serving a disadvantaged community, as our essential support mechanisms will not be able to be resourced through lack of finance.

Our class sizes will rise. However, our complement of teachers will be reduced. Our small-class working and one-to-one working in literacy and numeracy will be decimated. The excellent progress that we are making will be sorely compromised as we strive to maintain and improve results with a weaker academic intake.

In order to sustain development, we should be getting more, not less, resources in the next few years. The education system, and you as politicians, need to work together to reposition funding to front line services, as the waste of money on non-essential bureaucratic layers is shameful. People talk about it, but little is being done to resolve the issues, which include empty desks; pupils receiving free transport and being bussed past perfectly good schools; the amount of money that is being spent on the duplication of services; and the costly bureaucracy. I see all that, then I look at my budget for next year and agonise over which young, enthusiastic teacher with expertise I am going to lose, knowing that there are no jobs for them elsewhere. I also have to try to minimise the damage to the pupils whom I am charged with looking after.

I am talking with 37 years' experience of teaching in five schools in different areas in Northern Ireland. Pupils have only one chance of success. The present education system is not fit for purpose, unless the front line services are protected and the unnecessary spending to resource other areas is cut. If that is achieved, with money going to schools and making them responsible and, more importantly, accountable for the outcomes, schools will need to be successful in all areas, including areas of disadvantage, and standards will go up.

It is vital that the hardworking staff in any school believe in the vision of achievement for all. That is a fact that was borne out when the chief inspector, Mr Stanley Goudie, visited our school and spent over three hours meeting staff and students. He said that it was obvious that the vision of achievement for all permeated throughout the school. He felt that the school was living that vision.

I know that the other schools presenting this morning will have similar visions to ours and will have hardworking staff who believe in their vision. As we work closely together, we share ideas and we ask each other for advice, which is given freely, school to school. We have worked with Carmel in St Louise's on many occasions, and Andy and I meet regularly to discuss issues and ideas. To date, we have not been linked with Micheál and his team, but, hopefully, we will in the

future. I am looking forward to hearing their views this morning, and I know that I will learn from them.

The Chairperson:

Thank you. On the basis of those two presentations, we could spend from now until this time next week talking. Unfortunately, we do not have that time. I will try as best I can not to stray on to the issue of the budget, because we want to focus on the inquiry, but your point is well made. Suffice it to say, you might not be in receipt of the letter that came from John McGrath, but we have a copy of it. My personal view on the letter is that it is not worth the paper that it is written on, because it does not tell us anything that we do not already know.

Mr Graham:

It says nothing.

The Chairperson:

I spoke to the Finance Minister yesterday, and Basil spoke to him this morning on a certain radio show, but I do not think that he was very successful. A meeting will take place on Friday between the Education Minister and the Finance Minister. I believe that every effort needs to be made to deal with the short-term issue of EYF. The Committee has to look seriously at the budget, and is doing so. You are right; it is worrying. I worry particularly about the aggregated schools budgets because those will direct the end product. I do not want to go down that road, but I will ask a couple of questions. Members will also ask just a couple of questions, so that we can keep the presentations moving.

I am very interested in a variety of things, but the full service extended school has been a reaction to the circumstances in which the school found itself as a result of amalgamation and of bringing the new school into existence. The point that was so well made was that this school or any school cannot stand in isolation. In the past, there has been an idea that the school is up there

and that whatever goes on in it is to do with the school. It is an integral part of the community. That is easily said, but it has to be translated into how the community and the school interact.

Have transition teachers been key to pupils' transition from primary schools to this school? Have they been a key component in making the right choices for those pupils and in ensuring that that transition is a seamless and easy process?

Mr Graham:

I will make two points about that. First, it is not about making the choice to come to whatever school the pupils come to. We work with all pupils, no matter what school they go to. It is more or less to try to have early intervention and deal with problems in primary schools. It creates much closer links. When pupils go from Key Stage 3 to Key Stage 4 to Key Stage 5, it is a seamless transition because it happens in the same school. The hardest transition is from Key Stage 2 to Key Stage 3, because, in our case and in other cases, the pupils come from 18 or 20 different primary schools. Therefore, we have to try to make sure that we make that as easy as possible. Whenever they come to us in first year and go into an English or maths class, they come from totally different positions. We do not know what maths or English they know. We are working with the primary schools to try to get some sort of consistency so that we know exactly where to start.

The Chairperson:

I will not get into the other debate about the pros and cons of selection or non-selection. However, has there been a reluctance to use standardised, acceptable criteria to determine where a child is at? Has that whole system failed because some people believe that we will use it solely for the purpose of selection? For example, I have gone to a school in Cookstown that does not use an academic selection process. It uses a different system, and it works for that school. Surely the key issue should be having relevant information that enables us to know where a child is at during their progression from primary school through to the day that they go to university.

Mr Graham:

I agree entirely with that.

The Chairperson:

Does that hamper you when you go to primary schools to determine what level girls are at?

Mr Graham:

That problem is that the levels in primary schools are not moderated. Therefore, different primary schools have different ways of doing it. In other words, when they tell us a level, we have to test the pupils again here to make sure that the level is right.

The Chairperson:

We do not test children any more. We are not allowed to test children.

Mr Graham:

No. We look at children to see where they are and to determine what class to put them in when they come to the school. We have to do that ourselves because 20 different primary schools will have different levels because there is no moderation. That is a big problem.

Mrs J Clarke:

I agree. The work of the transition teacher is key to that, because that teacher identifies the levels, which is especially important for children who are underachieving and need the additional support. They gather that information, and we are ready for those children to come in at the start of year 8. Furthermore, that teacher is a familiar face for young people, and they are very much used to the transition teachers, from their being in their school. Again, that eases the transition process. We not only work with children who we know are coming to the Girls' Model; we work

with all the girls. We do not specify or say that we will give extra literacy and numeracy support to girls who come to the Girls' Model. Everyone gets that support at that stage.

Mr Graham:

The most important point about the transition teachers is that they teach 50% in our year 8, which is the first year here, and 50% in the primary schools. That provides continuity. Moreover, a lot of primary schools are too small to have certain support systems, which we then put in for them because they may have only five or six staff and cannot do very much with their budget. Through the transition teachers, we can give them access to support in drama, numeracy, literacy, music and some sport. Without those transition teachers, they could not do that because they do not have the budget for it. That is another help for them.

Mrs Jacqueline Weir (Belfast Model School for Girls):

In another life, I am the chairman of a primary school board of governors. Therefore, I see it from the other side. We find the support of transition teachers very useful on the primary school side.

The Chairperson:

I want to make a point to not only Johnny and his colleagues but to others who will make presentations and to members. As we go through this, we will discover that similar elements of work will be done in the Girls' Model, in Ashfield Boy's High School or in the other schools and that there is commonality. However, different things will be done in different ways. That is what we want to try to tease out. My worry is that the model of the Girls' Model — excuse the pun — may not be the exact model that should be used in every school.

Mr Graham:

I agree entirely.

The Chairperson:

Every School a Good School does not mean every school the same, and that is the challenge for us. There are, however, key components, one of which is leadership. I commend you for the leadership that is given in this school.

Mr Lunn:

Thank you very much for your presentation. I noted what you said about the grammar schools moving down the ability scale to fill their books, which is obviously happening. It always seemed to me that, ultimately, a slightly lower achiever at 11-plus will do better in a school such as this than in a grammar school, where they might struggle. Is that your impression?

Mr Graham:

I will not start into the selection debate. I went to a grammar school and some of the pupils in the lower classes there probably did not get as much attention as those in the top classes. Because we have achievement for all, every girl who comes here is treated exactly the same. We do not give special treatment to the girls who are higher ability. Everyone receives good treatment here. I am sure that it is exactly same in grammar schools. To me, a good grammar school is a good school, and a good secondary school is a good school. For me, the debate about grammar schools has gone on for far too long. Schools are either good or they are not. That is all that I will say there, but that argument can be made.

Mr Lunn:

I was not trying to draw you into the selection debate in any way. That is for another day.

Mr Graham:

I think that that argument can be made.

Mr Lunn:

I declare an interest: I went to Belfast Royal Academy (BRA), which proves that grammar schools do not always turn out successful people. Basil went there too, which is further proof. *[Laughter.]*

Mrs J Weir:

I went to BRA too, and I am on its board of governors.

Mr B McCrea:

Nelson McCausland also went there.

Mr Lunn:

There is an awful lot of emphasis on successful outcomes and achieving A* to C. We have had some interest in that recently. Surely a D is not a failure; is it not effectively a pass?

Mr Graham:

We have to work with raw results because inspectors look at raw results. However, all our work in school is about value-added results. We baseline the girls when they come in. We look at their predictions from a valid test that is used across the UK and we see whether they get positive or negative residuals. Girls who get a negative residual are underachieving, and we can identify them. Girls who get a positive residual have value added. There are girls who come in here with IQs in the 50s and 60s. Those girls will never, ever get five grades between A* and C. However, it is a fantastic achievement if they can get Es and Ds. Instead of saying that they are a failure, they should be shown where they started from and told that, in getting Ds and Es, they have added fantastic value and achieved something brilliant.

Mr Lunn:

I will go back to my original question about grammar schools. I am interested in the fact that

Jacqueline is on the BRA board of governors. Take, for example, a child with relatively low achievement who goes to BRA, but who you could make a success of. Will BRA do a better job with that child than this school? What are the statistics?

Mrs J Weir:

I do not know the statistics.

Mr Lunn:

There must be statistics for that.

Mrs J Weir:

There may well be.

Mr Graham:

It would be very difficult to get statistics on that, because you would have to work from baseline statistics. It can be done in England, where children are tested the whole way through, under the nationwide PANDA system. We do not have that situation.

Mr Lunn:

I am sure that you have an opinion on it though.

Mr Craig:

Thanks for the presentation. You have my sympathies, Jacqueline; I sit on the board of governors for a few schools in Lisburn, and I know what is ahead of us all.

I am very interested in what you said about the family link co-ordinator. Janice discussed that issue and talked about dealing with parents. I do not know what it is like here, Jacqueline, and I will not try to second-guess that. However, I know from my personal experience in a similar position that the parents are a bigger problem than the pupils. Is that the experience here? Does the family link co-ordinator mitigate a lot of the issues that parents bring into the school, never mind the more important issues that arise with the pupils themselves?

Mr Graham:

It is not possible to divorce the two issues. When we meet the parents of some of the pupils who are underachieving or are causing problems, we realise what the situation is. That is why Janice is working so much with parents.

Mrs J Clarke:

It is. We have a person who goes out to pupils' homes; that is the key. When we go to the homes, we do not do that to be nosey or to see what is happening in there. However, it gives us an overview of what family life is like for that young person. If we are more aware of that and are in their own environment, they are much more willing to speak and open up. Moreover, if we are aware of the issues, it is easier to deal with them. In the past, we found it more difficult to engage with parents and did not know what was happening. The child did not open up to us in school, and we did not know what the main problems were. We are starting to identify the problems. Now that we are identifying the problems from working with the parents, we need solutions and we need to be able to support the family and the young person. That is why we work in partnership with other organisations and with our local community.

We are now finding that parents are more willing to contact us to tell us about what is happening in the home. That is definitely true of the parents who we work with through the full service programme. They are engaging with us much more than they did in the past. However, it is a real challenge — as is parenting — to get the parents to realise educational aspirations. That is a community-wide issue for the Shankill and, perhaps, much wider than that. I attend many

different forums, community groups and executive meetings on the Shankill as part of my role in full service, and one of the main issues that people are trying to tackle is how parents interact with and give back to their local community.

Mr Craig:

That interests me. Quite honestly, your experience mirrors my experience in Lagan Valley in Lisburn, in that the loyalist communities are the ones that are difficult to reach. The breakdown of the traditional family is leading to a lot of difficulties for children.

Mrs J Clarke:

I live in Lisburn.

Mr Craig:

You probably know where I am talking about.

Mrs J Clarke:

I know you; I see you a lot in the 'Ulster Star'.

Mr Graham:

One of the problems is getting parents to value education and to see that it is the way to raise aspirations. Because a lot of our parents had a very poor experience of education, they do not value it. We try to raise the value of education. The 26 girls who were the first in their family to go to university last year is a good start; it shows what could happen to our girls, and, hopefully, they will be role models in the future.

Mrs J Weir:

That has to start before they even get here. It has to start in primary school or even nursery school.

Mr Craig:

The key is working with the family to get the pupils to that stage.

Mrs J Clarke:

That cycle sometimes starts with the child and sometimes starts with the parent, depending on which opportunity is best.

Mr O'Dowd:

Apologies for being late; I need a crash course in time management. I also have to leave early; I am a disaster area today.

I will comment first, then ask a few questions. Those from the non-grammar school sector are always very polite about the selection process. I do not want to get into the debate, especially in front of politicians, but strong elements in the grammar school sector are not so polite and are up to their oxters in the political debate. We may need a wee change in tempo. However, I will not draw anybody into a debate that they do not wish to be drawn into, because there is enough in your presentation to provide food for thought. Janice's quote sums it up:

"The purpose of a school is to help a family educate a child."

Was that correct, Janice?

Mrs J Clarke:

Yes.

Mr O'Dowd:

That sums it up. You had a discussion with Jonathan about the support network outside the schools, for the schools. In other debates there is a lot of terminology around ethos and what it means in a school. Some portray it as if some schools do not have an ethos. What is the ethos of this school?

Mr Graham:

Our ethos is achievement for all. We want to make sure that everyone who comes here gets the same opportunities and the support that they need, regardless of where they come from or their ability level. I do not mean the same support for everybody. Those who need more support get more support. Pupils will be given the opportunity to fulfil their academic and social potential. Everybody buys into that.

Mr O'Dowd:

There needs to be a new mindset in society about what education is about. It goes back to the quote; it is there to facilitate and support families and the communities. I understand why this happens, but the situation is often that parents send their children to school or drop them off, and, after that section of the child's day, they come home from school. You mentioned visiting homes. No one goes into a school without reflecting on their own era in school. I look at the lives of some of the people I went to school with, and I can understand what happened to them. I suppose that I am talking in circles, but I am trying to get to the core. Should we refocus the educational output around the kind of support work that Janice and this school deliver, especially in communities such as the one that is served by this school? If you were asked for five priorities that would help our young people to achieve, if education were to focus on underachievement — that might be the wrong term — what would they be?

Mr Graham:

Contexts are different. In the context of the Shankill, the first thing to do is to get the family to

value education. That is the core. If the family values education, the young person has support in the family for that. Secondly, the parents need to be skilled up so that they can help their daughters or sons. Thirdly, it is important that children have basic numeracy and literacy when they come here. By the time that they come to us, it is too late to teach them that. They have got to have that early in primary school and coming through. Fourthly, it is about having a situation in which young children are not classed as being a success or a failure. The pupil is there as one who is developing at the pace that is relevant and right for them, and we should get rid of any stigmas in that regard. Those are four priorities.

Mr O'Dowd:

There is a focus around what education delivers for the individual. Perhaps it should be more about the creation of a good citizen and a good individual, rather than the creation of five C, five D or five E pupils.

Mr Graham:

I agree; holistic education is vital. Academic qualifications are part of a package. They are not the whole package; they are part of the package of the whole child.

Mrs J Clarke:

Education should be child-centred, because each child is an individual. They are all different, and they all need different levels of support and help.

Mr Graham:

If we are looking for a shared future in Northern Ireland, we have to work on how we work with everyone in Northern Ireland. That is very much part of our education.

The Chairperson:

I remind members to keep questions succinct, because I am conscious that we run the risk of running badly out of time.

Mr B McCrea:

If parental involvement is the key, what do you do about it?

Mr Graham:

That is the $64,000 question. We work with various strategies, but the parents have to want to be involved.

Mr B McCrea:

I know that that is what we need them to do. The question is: how do we do it?

Mrs J Clarke:

We employ strategies, such as our family link co-ordinator. If the parent will not come to us, we will go to them. We try to keep as much contact as possible with the parents. We offer that additional support and help. We also offer parents the opportunity to come to the school, as all schools do. Some parents do not take up that opportunity, and often it is the parents of the children who we need to see who do not come, so we follow those up. We have a very strong pastoral care system in the school, which works alongside the full service school.

Mr B McCrea:

What percentage of children have attendance of less than 85%?

Mrs J Clarke:

In my group, I have about 55 girls from year 8 to year 12 whose attendance is between 80% and 90%.

Mr B McCrea:

The Chairperson has asked us to be brief, so I do not want to labour the point. However, I have a couple of observations. First, if pupils are not at school, it is very hard to do anything with them. Secondly, I was at some of the nursery schools in the Shankill, and what came across was how logistics play a part. If it is easy to get children to the school, they are more likely to go.

I do not want to take too long, and we will talk about it later on. I have already had my first grilling of the day, which is why I was late. The staff got me outside. I wonder whether we can start to think outside the box. I read the papers about bureaucracy, the multi-levelled services and so on. Could we move to having area-learning communities that are run by secondary schools? Nursery school and primary schools would feed directly into secondary schools.

Not only are there administrative savings to be made, but it seems to me that we are wasteful in the disconnect in the transfer from nursery to primary and primary to secondary. Everyone is trying to find out what has been done and tested at other schools. I wonder whether we would be better to say that the school at the top will manage everything at the bottom. Secondary schools can work out what their feeder schools will be; that can be divvied up whatever way you want.

Mr Graham:

The problem with that is that you would have to ensure that the school at the top is accountable and is very, very good.

Mr B McCrea:

I read your inspectorate report, which is to be commended. We are all being very polite, but Mr Goudie said that 35% of our schools are failing because their head teachers are not up to it.

Mr Graham:

That is for the Education and Training Inspectorate to say.

Mr B McCrea:

I did say that Mr Goudie said it. I just wonder whether that is the answer. We are all running around talking about bureaucracy. I would like to see a model in which principals of secondary or grammar schools — whatever it is — are empowered and supported by boards of governors to follow a voluntary grammar principle, although they do not necessarily have to be grammar schools. Schools could be given the opportunity to do that, but they would have to take responsibility all the way down the line.

Mr Graham:

I would rather the money be given to schools, as long as they are autonomous and accountable. Let the schools buy in the services that they need. The money should go to the school for it to make the choices. However, there must be rigorous accountability. Schools must ensure that they use that money very wisely, and autonomy must be taken from them if they do not. For me, it is far better for schools to make those choices. A school knows its surrounding area and context. Education is not generic; it depends on the context.

Mr Hilditch:

Johnny, thanks very much for the presentation. My question is specific to the difficulties facing your school and the unique position in which it has found itself, probably more so in the past.

Considering the school's geographic position, are you able to continue activities here after the school bell rings at 3.30 pm or whenever it is? Do you go out into the areas that you serve, such as the Shankill? Do you do have on site or off site programmes, or a mixture of both?

The Chairperson:

David, that is one of our perennial problems. Some 60% of our girls live in the Shankill, and, given the patchwork quilt of north Belfast, it is impossible for them to walk home. If we have after-school activities, we have to pay for buses. That is a massive drain on our resources, but we must ensure that the girls get home safely. Janice has to pay for the girls' transport home from after-school clubs or anything like that. That is a massive problem. We also do outreach work with primary schools.

One of our biggest problems is that a lot of the parents live in the Shankill. It is difficult for them to get here. There is no direct bus, so they have to get a taxi. That is a logistical problem that may be unique to the diverse area of north Belfast. It would be far easier if we were in different position. However, we are here, and we have to make the best of it, but it causes financial problems.

The Chairperson:

Thank you, Johnny, Janice and Jacqueline. As we have said, we could spend all day on this issue. We have your submission to the inquiry. This is a specialist school for ICT, and there is concern among many about the proposal in the budget to do away with specialist schools. We need to take that on board, and the Committee has to have a discussion on that. Aside from the submission that you have given us for our inquiry, we are interested to hear what impact the budget, as it stands, will have on schools. I say that to all the schools. My fear is that many of the elements of the full service extended school would have to be axed should you have to cut your cloth accordingly. That would have a detrimental effect on your purpose, the reason why you exist and what you are doing.

Mr Graham:

I agree entirely. It is a very scary future.

The Chairperson:

OK. Thank you very much.

I welcome to the table representatives of St Louise's Comprehensive College. We are delighted that you have taken the time to come to today's meeting, and we look forward to hearing what you have to say.

Mrs Carmel McCartan (St Louise's Comprehensive College):

Thank you for the opportunity to present to the Committee. I am principal of St Louise's Comprehensive College in west Belfast. With me is Ita McVeigh, who is the director of specialism in St Louise's and a member of the senior team, and I am delighted to also have with us John O'Rourke, who not only is the chairperson of our board of governors, but an accountant, which is useful in today's climate.

I listened to Johnny's presentation, which resonated very strongly with me and will resonate with what you are going to hear from us. There is no doubt that a lot of what I am going to say resonates with the situation in the Girls' Model. We have been passionate about improving the life chances of young women for over 50 years. We are also passionate about equality of opportunity and social justice. You mentioned the values system. I will be discussing with you the importance of a strong values system in a successful school.

Like the Girls' Model, we face many challenges. St Louise's has the distinction of having the largest number of young people on EMA in Northern Ireland. As you will know, we are one of

the largest schools, so we serve a large community. We have over 1,500 girls and we have a high free school meal percentage. We attract young people from the most disadvantaged areas, according to Noble indicators of disadvantage.

We have been a specialist college for six years. Like the Girls' Model, we have noticed from our MidYIS results that our intake is increasingly skewed towards bands C and D, and that is undoubtedly a challenge. I will elaborate on that later when I discuss the selection argument. Unlike my predecessor, Mr Graham, I will not skirt around that issue, because it is at the heart of the debate about what is quality in education.

St Louise's believes in the holistic development of young women. Although the focus may artificially be on five A* to C as the only measure of success, we have been very proactive in promoting and developing the talents and abilities of all young people in the performing arts, STEM subjects and the caring professions. That is what we believe a good school does. There is another level to the debate about what a good school is. It is not purely about how many pupils get five A* to C, even though that is the benchmark used. It is about the values system and a culture of high aspirations and achievement.

We are ranked in the top 10% of schools for A-level performance using value added, and we are great advocates of value added, because that is a fairer way of measuring improvement and success. We have been ranked in the top 10% for four years in a row using A-level value added performance.

At GCSE we are the highest performing non-selective school in Belfast, and we are among the top 10 in Northern Ireland. In Yellis value added at GCSE, we ranked in the top 5% of schools and colleges this year. That is a very strong position, because that is out of thousands of schools across Britain and the North of Ireland. We have received the Jerwood award for excellence,

which was one of our main achievements of the past five years, as well as other marks of excellence and specialism.

Our values system is grounded in Vincentian Catholic comprehensive ethos, which is based in social teaching that is passionate about equality of opportunity, excellence for all and service. People often ask me what the word "Vincentian" means. It is grounded in the work of St Vincent de Paul. All of us know about the importance of the St Vincent de Paul Society for the less advantaged in today's climate. It is about service, empowering everyone and equality of opportunity.

I will address the Committee under the three main themes in the paper that we submitted, and I will invite Ita to discuss some of the issues as we go along. The first key theme is effective school leadership as a factor in a successful school. I will then invite Ita to talk about parental and community links, which I know the Committee discussed earlier. I will then talk about quality learning and teaching, because excellence in learning and teaching is part of our mission statement. The successes that I have just mentioned are grounded in excellent teaching and learning in the classroom. I will then make some concluding comments to do with budgets, selection and the major challenges that we face in west Belfast.

I will begin with the theme of effective school leadership, to which there are three dimensions. The first dimension is the importance of a values system that everyone buys in to. The second is learning-centred leadership and what that looks like in reality. The third dimension is the importance of quality whole-school development planning.

I begin with values-driven practice. As I said, St Louise's has been passionate about all-ability comprehensive education for over 50 years. We feel that selection is morally, socially and educationally unjust. I am privileged to have started my teaching career in a school led by a

principal who even then — I will not tell you which decade or you will all know what age I am, but it was a long time ago — realised that you cannot divide children into sheep and goats or label some as failures and label some as successes. I am privileged to have been grounded in that values system, and we ensure that the staff who join us are also passionate about social justice and equality. That is what gets us out of bed every morning and what makes us go the extra 100 miles that we all have to go. Those things motivate us and put the fire in our belly because they ensure that we give every child the best opportunity, through sharing our gifts. The main gifts that we share are our time, our high-quality teaching and our compassionate pastoral care.

We have invested heavily in quality learning and teaching and innovative practice; Ita will elaborate on that. Our school has always been innovative in reaching out. I have been fortunate enough to go to America, China and, of course, across to England and down South to see where the next example of best practice is. I have also been very fortunate to be linked with schools such as the Girls' Model and others, so I can come here and share ideas. That is what underpins the improvement agenda in St Louise's. That does not just apply to the principal; everyone at every level must be passionate about improvement and quality.

We heard earlier about the need for compassionate pastoral support to help our young people to overcome barriers, which, given that we serve a disadvantaged community, is grounded in our values system. We do a lot of work in the pastoral domain, and we have been described in inspection reports as "outstanding" in that area. However, that is very resource-intensive and emotionally demanding. Therefore, we need to ensure that I, as principal, and the board of governors can continue to invest in that. It requires an additional time budget for staff to visit to homes and sit with and listen to troubled children rather than having to rush off to class. I can talk at length about our pastoral support centre and the work that it has done using a multi-agency approach to support children who face many barriers, including social and economic barriers, family break-up and poor attendance. Those issues are faced in north Belfast and west Belfast.

Our pastoral support centre has not been fortunate enough to be part of the resourcing for the full service community network. Therefore, we fund that centre from our LMS budget and with a very small pot of money from extended schools. I will come back to that issue at the end, because I feel that the amount that we get relative to other schools that serve similar catchment areas is very unfair. However, in our pastoral support centre, we have worked very hard to ensure that all the agencies are there to support the child. We have a parent support officer, as the Girls' Model does. That is the only additional resource that we have. His role, which involves visiting homes and supporting the whole family, has been invaluable. Again, that accords with what we heard earlier.

As a team with leaders at all levels in the school, we invest heavily in high-quality strategic planning and detailed action planning to ensure that there is a rigorous culture of self-evaluation and improvement. That sounds like the jargon that we read in 'Every School a Good School', but the reality is that in St Louise's people are held accountable for outcomes depending on their leadership role or their role in the classroom. There is a clear culture of shared responsibility for improvement.

I will now move on to the second dimension of the first section: shared learning-centred leadership. Over the past number of years we have had to restructure our leadership model. That was driven, first and foremost, by budgetary pressure but also by the need to create a shared leadership structure that is fit for purpose in the twenty-first century. We have developed a culture of accountability and responsibility for ensuring every student's success. We talk about personalised learning. Every single student who puts on a brown uniform is important, and her development, through learning and pastoral support, is a shared responsibility. I could talk at length about how we use the form tutor to provide pastoral support, but I am conscious of the time budget here.

Teachers in the classroom use value-added measures so that we know that the children in their

classrooms are achieving in the top quartile relative to similar children in other schools. Under Yellis, MidYIS and ALPS, every teacher knows the minimum acceptable grade or outcome for the child. We then work collaboratively to ensure that the child achieves at least that. We use a lot of detailed quantitative and qualitative data about pupils. We have all the measures that we have talked about, using value added, but we also use a lot of qualitative analysis, such as student voice surveys.

We have a family-like system at pastoral level, where the form tutor is, as I say, the mother/father rolled into one for those 20 children, from the moment that they come into St Louise's until they leave, hopefully seven years later. We have close contact with the families, and it is important to know each child and her interests outside school and to ensure that the school, the home and the external environment are working in harmony as far as possible.

Whole-school development planning is also important; we are always articulating our strategic intent. We are passionate about the external dimension and the next example of best practice, ensuring that St Louise's is forward-thinking and the children are getting the best practice. Like Johnny, I feel strongly that a lot of that comes from systems leadership in the school or by sharing good practice with colleagues in other schools. That is where most of our learning has taken place. It has not come from CASS personnel who, as we have said, are very good people, but who are not tuned in to the reality of dealing with learning, developments and good practice in brain-friendly learning in the twenty-first century.

We focus on detailed action planning, self-evaluative outcomes and on our school as a specialist college. We have been fortunate to have been a specialist college. It has been an outstanding catalyst for improvement in outcomes and community links across the school.

Ita will address the Committee on the specialist dimension and on engagement with the

community. Following that, I will make concluding comments.

Mrs Ita McVeigh (St Louise's Comprehensive College):

I will discuss elements that are crucial to our success, particularly in relation to the school's engagement with parents and the wider community. We are part of the extended schools programme, and, as a result, we have employed a parent support officer. His remit is the health and well-being of our pupils and parents. That is done through links with families through home visits. It is a child-centred approach and supports those girls who have particular needs at particular times. However, he is available for all children at our pastoral support centre. At the centre, we have our special educational needs co-ordinator (SENCO), who is responsible for networking the multi-agency support for the entire community. We have over 20 agencies working with us. That support is co-ordinated through the SENCO.

Classroom support and counselling services are available for all our pupils, and there is individual support for families working with our community support learning.

Our specialist schools initiative is another element that is crucial to our success. As director, I have been in the privileged position of developing our specialism across the community with many partnerships, our local community organisations, our primary schools, post-primary school and adults from the Belfast Health and Social Care Trust who have learning disabilities. That is a catalyst for whole-school improvement across the board.

We have 11 to 12 primary school partners. Our programme, delivered through performing arts, aims to support transition and literacy, as well as develop confidence and self-esteem in pupils at our partner primary schools. We have run transition taster days, which is a programme that disseminates our literacy and numeracy strategies to our colleagues in primary schools. In turn, they contribute their expertise to us. That programme is running this week. You asked the

Girls' Model how it shares that practice with its primary school partners. We have been in the position where we have been able to share our curriculum with them. Using level descriptors, we have been looking at the levels of literacy and numeracy and examples of work. It is a first step in the standardisation between what we are doing in our post-primary school and what is happening in the local primary schools. We have about 30 primary schools in this week, and the programme is running each day. That is one of our specialist initiatives, and it has been very successful.

We also work to reach out to our post-primary partners, and we have been involved in the sharing education programme for the past three years. That has come to a conclusion with two of the projects, but we are still working with Ashfield Girls' High School to break down those community barriers and work through performing arts to deliver the curriculum and to look at aspects of reconciliation and ways in which we can address that in a safe and caring environment.

We have warm relationships with parents, who are a key aspect of all our work in St Louise's, and we work with parents to nurture mutually respectful relationships. We are also working hard to communicate progress to parents at regular intervals through our progress updates initiative. Those updates include information on the pupils' MidYIS value-added information or Yellis, and they also look at level descriptors using the primary level. We are attempting to develop a programme that is common across departments so that, when parents see a level 4 for English and a level 5 for maths, they understand the corollary between the two. Furthermore, we track progress, and pupils are identified as being on target, above target or below target. That communication with the parents is so vital, and they have told us how important it is to them.

We also offer reading programmes and learning programmes in partnership with the school, and parents come to the school to do literacy programmes with our literacy co-ordinator. We have been building that initiative over the past couple of years. It has been particularly strengthened this year, and parents have greatly valued that opportunity.

Another crucial aspect is the quality of our teaching and learning, and we were recognised as "outstanding" in that area in our recent inspection report. It said that we have creative and innovative approaches to learning and teaching. That is exemplified in our delivery of quality learning in lessons that are based on the accelerated learning cycle. I will not get into the jargon, but we look at assessment for effective learning ongoing with effective feedback. We have established a quality learning in teaching team that involves 19 members of the school community, particularly young teachers. That team brings forward the connected curriculum and embeds the thinking skills and personal capabilities agenda through the developing of higher-order thinking skills for our pupils. That is a very successful initiative, and connected learning, particularly at Key Stage 3, makes learning relevant for our girls and helps them to make those connections in the wider world.

As Carmel said, we have established a rigorous model of target setting and pupil tracking. Our pupils are identified at the outset through visits with our primary schools to gather the relevant data on their InCAS and bring that forward into our MidYIS. Underachievement is identified and supported. The pupils are rigorously tracked throughout and supported in all subject areas. We have quality assessment tasks through rigorous step learning opportunities that lead to a learning outcome. Home learning goes with that on a regular basis.

There is deep support from the pastoral team, which is the form tutor and the heads of year, and there is individual mentoring and peer mentoring when necessary. We report three times a year, and each student has a personal learning plan in which they track their own progress. Aspects of career development and careers education information advice and guidance are combined in that plan. We have accelerated learning for our gifted and talented pupils, particularly in performing arts subjects, but also across the board; for example, in languages. We have established coursework clinics to give extra support where necessary and for our gifted and talented pupils. Those clinics happen at lunchtime, after school and at weekends.

The provision of the full entitlement framework is also key. We are one of the few schools that provide the complete entitlement framework within one establishment. We have more than 25 AS/A-level subjects, and we offer a range of vocational NVQs and BTECs. We offer 30 GCSE subjects to Key Stage 4 pupils. We also ensure that we look to the economy and further explore the labour market to ensure that our curriculum is fit for purpose and meets the emerging needs of both the economy and our pupils.

The pupil voice supports all that and underscores everything that we do. We ask our pupils about their learning, relationships and courses and about what they want to do, where they want to be and how they want to get there. We listen to their voice, and it is key to where we have been and where we are going.

Mrs McCartan:

I hope that you will have an opportunity to talk to some of our girls about these themes this afternoon, because they will be able to elaborate on them.

We face key challenges. The budget is a big headache for us. Against a deficit situation, we will potentially lose the £150,000 that comes with specialist school status. I invite the chairperson of our board of governors to highlight some of the reasons why we face extreme financial pressures and are losing sleep at night over those.

Mr John O'Rourke (St Louise's Comprehensive College):

As an accountant and someone who sits on our LMS committee, I have found that schools accounting is very different from real-world accounting.

The Chairperson:

Is it any more transparent?

Mr O'Rourke:

Unfortunately not. It is very difficult to understand.

As Carmel and Ita have said, what is obvious is that you are penalised if you offer a wide curriculum. We offer more than 25 subjects for post-16s. Schools are trying to balance the budget, but it is a trade-off between incurring extra costs and being able to offer pupils a wider choice. The easy way out is to not offer that choice.

The one thing that I have never been able to get my head around in schools accounting is that a deficit does not go away. It stays there forever and is carried forward. A deficit will often have been due to circumstances totally beyond a school's control. Indeed, part of our deficit has arisen as a result of a backdated job evaluation, which goes back six years. The school ends up bearing the cost of a backdated job evaluation exercise, unlike redundancy, which is covered centrally. Such evaluations can go back four, five or six years, and we have suffered very badly in that respect.

As Carmel said, and Johnny Graham made the same point, we are fortunate to have had specialist school status for the last couple of years. It has meant an extra £150,000 or so. When that money disappears, we will either have to cut back accordingly or look to make savings elsewhere. In my experience, and having gone through the budget line by line, it is very difficult to find any savings at all.

Mrs McCartan:

We have worked very hard to make savings. I talked about our restructuring of the senior team.

To save money, we reduced the number of vice-principals from four to two. We then looked at leadership across the school. The reality is that it means a smaller number of people having to work even harder, but that is an example of the pain.

That has the potential to impact on the drive to improve the life chances of young people, and, as Johnny said, the jobs of innovative, brilliant young teachers, the likes of whom, with their tremendous skills and abilities, I have never seen in all my years. There is a terrible emotional cost involved in considering those young people for redundancy in a time of economic downturn.

We have over 1,500 children and get £48,000 from extended schools. However, other schools in the same catchment area that are one third of the size of ours get £38,000 and £40,000. The reason why we are getting what seems very like a very unfair deal is because we are capped. We are a victim of size, and that has been another problem in budget terms. Once a school goes beyond a certain number of pupils, it gets only £10 a student. I looked at this recently: if we got pro rata the same amount of money that the boys' schools or other schools get, we would have £100,000-plus to spend on our pastoral centre and extended school initiatives, which improve life chances. That is a major headache for us. A lot of that £48,000 goes on our parent support officers, so the flexibility to run all the other innovative schemes that help young people to overcome barriers is severely curtailed.

Another major area of inequality is the difference in the standard of school buildings and resources between the selective sector and the non-selective sector. I know that this school is an exception to that, but if you travel around west Belfast and rural towns in Northern Ireland, you will see that inequality. Not only does the two-tier system create a mindset that grammar equals better; nowadays, grammar does equal better in many cases, because of the sector's access to state-of-the-art resources and facilities.

Our school was in line for a newbuild but, unfortunately, unlike the others, we were not far enough up the queue, so we are going to be in substandard accommodation and have substandard resources for many more years. Our school is entitlement-framework compliant, successful and meets the criteria in Every School a Good School, but, due to factors outside our control, our ability to sustain excellence could be severely undermined or destroyed. That really is a critical issue for the future of west Belfast and the work that schools such as St Louise's and other quality schools do to empower young people to take their place in society and to make a contribution; indeed, citizenship was mentioned earlier.

As regards the political agenda, we know that forces out there could drag us all back into the abyss. However, education is a great liberator, and the empowerment of women in west Belfast has certainly been a key factor in stability, the economy and all areas. Therefore, as a principal of a school that has successfully encouraged that, I implore the Department to not make decisions that will undermine or impact negatively on our capacity to continue to improve life chances. There is no doubt that there are too many schools, and that, despite the economic downturn, there are too many surplus places. However, we need courageous leadership and we need leaders to grasp the nettle of rationalisation and support successful schools that are doing a good job, so that they can continue to improve life chances.

My final point is that, as I said at the outset, selection is morally, educationally and socially unjust. We in St Louise's spend a lot of time building up the self-esteem of young people who have been wrongly labelled as failures, some of whom you will meet this afternoon. Many young people who are on pathways into the professions had been labelled as failures, but because of the work in schools such as ours and other high-quality all-ability schools, their self-belief and confidence have been restored.

I urge you to do all that you can to get rid of selection as soon as possible — I cannot put it any more bluntly than that — and to ensure that systemic inequality is not exacerbated by unequal

access to resources and state-of-the-art facilities. In other words, we want a fair deal for all our young people. Thank you for listening to us.

The Chairperson:

Obviously, you do not expect us to get into that debate today, because we are not here to discuss the issue of selection. I will make one comment, however. There is sometimes an overemphasis on the whole issue of injustice and inequality. It all depends on your definitions and where you stand.

You hit the nail in the head in respect of a huge issue, namely grasping the nettle of rationalisation. The reality is that there are sectors in this city that have not rationalised. The boards sometimes get a very bad press. You have seen all the press about the future of the boards and the debate about whether we should have the education and skills authority and so on. However, in fairness to Belfast Education and Library Board (BELB), it has now delivered for this city with two very good schools in this locality: the Boys' Model and the Girls' Model. There is also Ashfield Boys' High School and Ashfield Girls' High School, and we will hear from Ashfield Boys' later.

Other sectors are still having an internal debate about what they need to do. That, equally, comes down to the whole debate about injustice and inequality. We need to deal, collectively, with the issue of how many schools we will have. For me, the simple premise of the budget is that schools will be financially starved out of existence. It will not matter what name is across the door, whether maintained, controlled, integrated, Irish medium or whatever; if they do not have the money, they will not be there.

I am a dab hand at using all the old phrases. I read some of the material that has come from the schools, and it falls into one camp or another. We need to get out of those camps, because that is a fundamental problem that we face. I appreciate the presentations, because they give us a

sense of the different opinions and ideas that exist. We need to listen to all the voices. Sometimes we are keen to listen only to the voices that we want to hear.

Mrs McCartan:

I am also a realist. I see schools on the periphery of west Belfast that have the label "grammar school" but are becoming all-ability schools by default. They are denuding quality schools of the children that Johnny referred to earlier. I see a future in which many parts of the North will have all-ability schools, not because of a principled position but because of the reality that only the fittest will survive. There will be a lot of pain for schools that are withering on the vine if they are allowed to do so, rather than getting support and leadership. Selection exacerbates that.

Mrs McVeigh:

It is about resources as well. Chairperson, you talked about the model of the Girls' Model, the Boys' Model and the Ashfield schools. There has been a budget to support that rationalisation, but it is no longer applicable. That is where we are.

The Chairperson:

The point that I am making is that, for a variety of reasons, those who have control over some of the schools have not brought forward proposals for amalgamation. There is no point in beating about the bush: there is still an ongoing debate in the maintained sector. There are still 30 schools in the maintained sector that are pro-selection. In this city, there has been a failure by the sector to grasp the nettle and deal with the issue. We cannot continue to say that we want equality and an end to injustice and then expect money to be available every time you want to fund that. The reverse is the case in relation to whether it is a grammar school or a non-selective school. That is where we need to get to.

By getting into that whole debate, we are straying off badly. We want to focus on the issue of

what makes a successful school. It is now 12.30 pm, and we have two other presentations still to hear. I do not want the other two schools to feel as though we are treating them less favourably. We do not want to deal with people inequitably. We have a timescale to try to stick to, so I ask members to keep their questions succinct.

Mr Craig:

I do not want to stray into that debate, but I am the chairperson of the board of governors of a comprehensive school. Within a quarter of a mile of that school are two of the best grammar schools in the country. I appreciate what you are saying, but do not get paranoid about it. My advice is to turn your school into a better school than theirs; that is the only way that you are going to survive.

I am fascinated with the issue that was raised earlier about how you interface with the families and parents of children. I am interested to hear your experiences of that. Do families who send their children to your school hold back their children's education or do they actively encourage it? I do not know whether it is a myth, but there is an idea that people from the communities that send children to your school are much more proactive in education than those from the community and background that I come from.

Mrs McCartan:

I agree. Those parents are very ambitious for their children. Obviously, over 50 years, thousands of young women have gone through the doors of schools such as St Louise's. Those women are now the mothers or the grandmothers. Those generations have been empowered and know that it is now time for the second or third generations to go to university. We send over 100 students to university every year. My drive is to continue to empower our parents to be equal partners, give them information and progress updates, talk to them about the curriculum and make sure that they do not feel in any way intimidated when they come into the school because of bad experiences from generations in the past.

One of the great strengths of our school is that we have tremendous support from the parents in west Belfast, who are very ambitious and have a culture of high aspirations, which is what every parent wants for their children. It is a privilege to work in an area where that exists. That does not mean that those families are not experiencing barriers to getting children through school. However, the culture of high aspirations and the desire to give their children the best start in life is very strong.

Mrs McVeigh:

I think that that culture is growing. Given the global situation, parents recognise that education is the way forward. There is a tangible feeling that, for their children to succeed, they need a fit-for-purpose education system. St Louise's can work in partnership with parents to deliver that so that those children have a future.

Mr Craig:

It is very much a partnership between the parents and the school.

Mrs McCartan:

As far as possible, we try to make it an equal partnership. We have talked about the fact that we are equals; we both want the same outcome, which is what is best for the child.

Mrs McVeigh:

We try to gather the voice of parents through our parent surveys, focus interviews and post-event conversations, which we have all the time. It is an ongoing process to refine what we do so that it best fits.

Mr Lunn:

I will not take much time. We have be warned not to stray into particular areas —

The Chairperson:

Then do not. *[Laughter.]*

Mr Lunn:

I will not mention the S-word again. However, let me say that I find it difficult to form questions when I have agreed with every word of the presentation.

I am concerned about specialist school funding and the inequality in extended schools funding. Can you put that in the context of your overall budget? Where do the £150,000 and the £48,000 fit into the overall scheme of things?

Mr O'Rourke:

The overall budget income for St Louise's for the year is around £7 million.

Mrs McVeigh:

In specialist schools, 50% of that budget is for community partnerships. Therefore, 50% of the £75,000 is used in the delivery of community partnerships and supporting those programmes.

Mrs McCartan:

When you mention £150,000, the educators around the table tend to think immediately of two teachers' jobs or three teachers' jobs, a technician's job and so on.

Mr Lunn:

As is said, I agree with every word. I just wanted to put it in context.

Mrs McVeigh:

There is also the impact on the curriculum as a result.

Mr Lunn:

You touched on the ethos of the school and the Vincentian ideal. You also mentioned breaking down community barriers, which I know is a passion for you. To put it delicately, how many non-Catholic pupils do you have?

Mrs McCartan:

This afternoon, we have brought along one of our girls from year 13. She is from the Muslim community and came here from the Philippines. Although it is a very small percentage, we have an increasing number of children from Muslim backgrounds and so on. We do not have any non-Catholics along the traditional Catholic/Protestant divide in Northern Ireland because of our location. However, we have an increasing number of children from other ethnic minorities.

Mrs McVeigh:

We have a mixed staff too.

Mr Lunn:

Looking through the papers that you gave us, I see that you have a very wide catchment area. You also have a very fine record of achievement and output. Recently, I was in a Catholic school: the Dominican College in Portstewart. That school is unique because of its Presbyterian headmaster. It has managed, perhaps through geography, to deal with this situation, and Protestant girls and boys have no problem in attending that school. There is nothing in its ethos that would put them off. I get the feeling, more and more, that there is nothing in the ethos of a school such as yours that should put off children from another tradition, if the standard of education that they receive and the location of the school is suitable. However, it still does put people off.

Mrs McCartan:

It is also about geography or location. Sadly, due to our segregated city, certain people feel threatened if they move outside what they perceive as their area: west, east, north or south.

Mr Lunn:

You are bussing people in from Crumlin.

Mrs McVeigh:

That is a good point.

Mr B McCrea:

If the biggest challenge is educational underachievement, where do you think that we should be focusing our resources?

Mrs McCartan:

The obvious answer is early years development, for preventative action. However, resources need to be targeted at schools that are serving disadvantaged areas across all ages. We know that disadvantage starts in early childhood. However, that is exacerbated and increases as barriers become higher and the disadvantage gap widens. Resources should be targeted at all levels from early years.

Mr B McCrea:

On that basis, the Department recently suggested that the pyramid is the wrong way round, with too many resources being given to sixth forms and secondary schools. Given that we have a fairly tight, constrained budget, if we really want to tackle educational underachievement, perhaps we should have much larger classes in sixth forms. Perhaps that could be done on a shared basis, as happens at university. That money could then be put into nursery and preschool education. Would you support that position?

Mrs McCartan:

In Montgomery County in America, I saw much larger classes. At A level, a teacher could teach larger numbers of pupils. The average class size is 15, but up to 25 pupils can be taught. However, the challenge for teachers is the marking burden. In a university environment, lecturers have a lot of non-contact time alongside their large classes. If it could be ensured that preparation time and marking time was given to staff to provide quality feedback for young people, that could be done. However, the bigger argument is around the number of sixth forms that can be sustained against the background of diminishing demographics.

Mr B McCrea:

We keep hearing the argument that we should invest in the nursery sector for good development. Primary school teachers talk to us about the pressures that they are under. There is only so much money.

Mrs McVeigh:

It is about making choices to help underachievement. What helps underachievement is ensuring that the support needed along the way is there. That is crucial.

Mr B McCrea:

In a fair chunk of the evidence that we hear, I am struck by the fact that early intervention is suggested as an appropriate course of action.

Mrs McVeigh:

As is continued support; as are further strategies for literacy and numeracy.

Mr B McCrea:

I was only asking your opinion. Given that there is a finite sum of money, there can only be one

of two options: resources can be split in the same way as they are now, or, if you decide that you are not happy, the split can be changed. If you change it, what will be the direction of change? We get a lot of representation from primary school teachers who talk about how their roles and responsibilities have dramatically increased but their resources have not. They point to the fact that secondary schools and nursery schools appear to get more funding per pupil. Therefore, you could argue that, if pupils go to university — as you have great aspirations for your girls to do — and will be a in a big, free-thinking class, perhaps it is wrong to have big classes in early school, slightly smaller classes in middle school and tiny classes in final school. Perhaps we are doing it the wrong way around.

You raised the issue of selection; we will not debate the whole point. You have a particular environment in west Belfast to deal with, but how would you deal with children who come from a school in a rural setting and are not close to a good school but will be disadvantaged if we use a proximity arrangement? What alternative do you suggest to deal with the 30% to 40% of pupils in Northern Ireland who live in rural areas?

Mrs McCartan:

I live in a rural environment. The ideal model is for children to transfer to the local post-primary school. They have, hopefully, spent seven years in a good primary school in a mixed-ability environment and they should transfer together, as they do in Keady, Maghera and Armagh. We want quality for all children, and in those areas, they transfer to a high-quality all-ability school that offers every child, irrespective of his or her innate talents or abilities, pathways that will allow them to progress.

Mr B McCrea:

I will not labour the point. However, the debate that people have about selection is simplistic. There are aspirations, and we all want a good school for everybody. However, our environment and our education system are products of evolution. You talked about the change in aspirations

in west Belfast over a certain period, and the system that you have is great. There were different generations in different communities at different times, and the difficulty is trying to find a way to get money that will go around everybody on a fair and equitable basis. The biggest problem that I can see is that the funding formula that you talk about is competitive. I believe in differential schools with different specialisms. Some offer pastoral care and some offer an academic focus. However, we only do what we can with the finances that are available, and, at the end of the day, we have to make decisions. At the moment, I am leaning towards early years intervention because that really gets to the heart of the problem.

The Chairperson:

At the risk of Johnny and Carmel ganging up on me, I will ask one question before we conclude this session. We talk about inequality, social justice and treating everybody the same. Do you believe that single-sex schools offer equality? I speak as a parent who sends his daughter to an all-girl school. We throw mud at certain ideas and say that they are awful, unjust, wrong and terrible. The next presentation will be from Andy McMorran, and he will be able to tell me whether it is right for boys. However, that debate has always been under the table. I have heard it said that single-sex schools work for girls but not for boys, and I hope that Andy will make reference to that. However, if we are to deal with inequalities, can we financially, morally and educationally continue to hold on to single-sex schools?

Mrs McCartan:

Post-primary review has been going on in the maintained sector. Believe it or not, as a well-known, single-sex, girls' school — we have some boys in sixth form but they are a minority — our submission has opted for a co-ed school in the future with a gradual integration of boys from year 8. It is not an amalgamation; that is a different idea.

However, there is certainly a notion of co-ed boys being able to access the school and its opportunities with their sisters. I have to say that the young men who have joined our sixth form

have enriched the life of the school in many ways. They are very brave, because they are a minority — albeit a big one — in a large girls' school.

The Chairperson:

Or they are very lucky. *[Laughter.]* It depends on how you look at it.

Mrs McCartan:

Or unlucky, being among all those powerful women.

Mrs McVeigh:

We also went to our parents and pupils, who agreed that it is the way forward.

The Chairperson:

The debate is going on in the school that my daughter goes to.

Mrs McVeigh:

They want a family school and they want equal opportunity to quality education for their boys and girls. As the parent of boys and girls, you have to acquiesce. That is what you want as a parent.

Mrs McCartan:

Most of our selective schools are co-ed, certainly in Belfast and the surrounding area.

Mr B McCrea:

How does that affect your numbers? At 1,500 you are getting close to the top; if you get to

beyond 2,000 pupils I think that it is unsustainable. What will going co-ed do to your numbers?

Mrs McCartan:

It is not about just taking 500 boys from another school. We are looking at staying within an enrolment number, but it is about achieving a balance. If we take, on average, 200 in every year, how will that 200 be broken down? That could be one way forward. Obviously those are debates that are ongoing.

The Chairperson:

The question that that raises is how it would affect the outputs of the school.

Mrs McVeigh:

With strong leadership, hopefully the outputs will continue to improve.

The Chairperson:

Carmel, Ita and John, thank you very much. John, if you do not mind, we may ask for your advice at some stage in the relation to the budget, if you are happy to make your services available. *[Laughter.]*

We will move on swiftly, and I implore members to keep their contributions succinct. I welcome Andy McMorran, the principal of Ashfield Boys' High School, Jill Ashenhurst, the vice-principal, and William McCullough, the chair of the board of governors. Andy, I know that recent reports of your demise and passing are not accurate.

Mr Andy McMorran (Ashfield Boys' High School):

Apparently I died in front of an assembly last Tuesday, but I have managed to recover.

The Chairperson:

We are glad to see you here alive and well, and we wish you well in your planned retirement, when that comes. I ask you to make your presentation. Many of the questions will be similar to those already asked, but we should try to stay focused on the subject of the inquiry.

Mr McMorran:

I am staying away from two subjects: money and the 11-plus or selection. The good thing about the two principals who have spoken about it is the passion that they showed. I know that Carmel and I are at different ends of the spectrum on the 11-plus, but I am not going to mention that.

I will first talk about stereotypes. Our school is in a Protestant, underachieving area, it is non-selective and is all boys. Given all those stereotypes, I am afraid that we should be closed. There is no single explanation for our success. We would not be sitting here now if some people did not think that ours is a successful school. I am a firm believer in on-site solutions and whole-school approaches.

I was appointed 12 years ago. I will not give you too many figures, but when I came into the school 3% of the pupils were achieving at least five A*to C. That is now 70%. The staff attendance was 66%. If you cannot get the staff into the school, how can you get the pupils in? The pupil attendance was 72%, and it is now up at 90%-plus. It was a sink school and was closing fast. The percentage of pupils achieving five A* to C has increased from 3% to 70%, which is very high for boys, not only in Belfast but in Northern Ireland.

However, that does not tell the whole story of the school, because we have pupils coming into the school aged 11 with a reading age of six. We have a very strong special needs department. One of the reasons why Jill is here is that, as the vice-principal, she is also in charge of special needs. As you said, I am retiring this year, and I hope that somebody sensible puts Jill in place

when I go. Billy is the chair of the board of governors. He also lives in the area, and when we are talking about community links later you will find that he does a fairly good job on that.

We have been on a journey, not because of the 11-plus and money but despite them, and we have got there by building relationships with the pupils, teachers and parents. The first two words spoken to me on my first day at the school were said by a pupil; I will not mention the first word, but the second one was "off". It was the pupils against the teachers, and that is the way that it went on at the school. The parents did not come to the school. To be honest, the pupils were being treated like dogs. There was this idea that if you kicked them enough, they would go into a corner or go away. However, what happened was that if they were kicked enough, they would bite back. That was something that I had to attack at the very start.

I was able to get a few retirements and redundancies and bring in new appointments. However, that is when it started to get silly. I was a firm believer that females could not teach in an all-boys' school. If the females in the room would just let me finish before they come over the table, I will explain. The teaching staff was 70% male and 30% female, but since then it has changed to 70% female and 30% male, and what really annoys me is that those females are better teachers than I ever was.

The school building is not new like this one, but I have been very happy with the capital and budget that the Belfast Education and Library Board has given to me. I am, unfortunately, going to say some nasty things about the board later on, so I just wanted to make sure that I mentioned that good point first.

I have given the Committee a sheet to show what improvements have been made in the school. All of that came from the former principal, Mr Rab Dunn. When I was vice-principal, he sat me down and we discussed what was needed at the school, which was literacy, numeracy and oracy.

We sat down and looked at the future and decided to go back to basics. After my appointment, I spent two years watching 148 lessons to see how pupils learn in a classroom rather than how a teacher teaches. I used to go to the second period of the day so that the kids had a chance to settle in. I would then attend the last period of the day and, after removing the teacher, I would questions the kids to find out how much they had retained from the second period. That process took so long because I was the principal.

I once watched one of the science teachers doing a lesson on finite resources. She did a very good lesson for the first 28 minutes, and the kids retained 63% of the information. However, she panicked when she mistimed the lesson and started to discuss her experiences from the year before in Australia: burning kangaroo dung, skin cancer, the use of the sun, etc. The retention rate of the pupils was 100%. She came to see me to apologise for the last 12 minutes of her lesson. However, I told her that she had better stop apologising and that I wanted her to talk to the staff. I then took her to a staff meeting, where we went through what had happened, and I explained that the real teacher had come out. After the Education Reform Act 1988, we were hit with glossy documents on the curriculum and so on, and my teachers were being choked because they were not being allowed to teach. However, the new curriculum allows us to teach, and, as a result, it is working well.

Another thing that I did when I joined was to disband the senior management team. I did not want to listen to people talking nonsense during the school day when other teachers were out there teaching, because it was a waste of time. I broadened it and made it into a school management team. We met after school, and it was really strange because after we started to do that the meetings were not as long, because people were trying to get home.

We also looked at the whole area of underachievement. We did an audit with the parents to identify the needs of pupils and the status of exams with parents. I have massive contact with the parents, and I have a couple of sneaky ways of getting them to come up to the school. For

example, we do not post out reports. If parents want their son's report, they have to come to the school to get it, and if I am handing over that report, I will want to sit down with the parents for 15 or 20 minutes to discuss what is happening with their wee fella. I have to congratulate the parents in the area on the fact that when they come to see me, they ask, "What has he done now?". They do not say, "Prove it", they ask, "What has he done now?" That is a fabulous compliment to east Belfast parents.

We also looked at literacy and numeracy and developed the whole area of special needs, for which we now have extra teachers.

I am not part of the full service initiative. I tried to be part of it, but I was told that I was a victim of my own success. However, I have thought of a really good idea to get on to the initiative: take the whole of the fifth year down to Dee Street on a Saturday night, give them all alcohol and tell them to break windows and burn buses. If I did that, I might get some more money within six weeks because something had happened in the area. However, I have not done it and I have not got full service. As you can hear from my voice, I am not very happy about that, because Johnny Graham has proved what a fabulous initiative that is and what it can do.

As I said, the whole area of literacy and numeracy is the focus of the school and its teaching. What goes on in the classroom is absolutely paramount. That is why the results have gone so high and why we are oversubscribed. However, I noticed that as achievement increased, the levels of indiscipline in the school dropped considerably. The kids started to achieve, especially the low-ability kids. Every child who comes through my door has a special need; some have extreme needs, some do not. We worked on that and got the level of indiscipline down.

It used to be in the past that the little boy in the corner getting on with his work was the target. It is now the messer who is the target, and the pupils are telling him to knock it on the head

because they want to get on with their work. You will meet four gentlemen from my school this afternoon who will explain it all.

I mentioned the learning policy. I will talk about the school leadership policy. Johnny Graham got very excitable, as he does, when he talked about CASS. I am very selective about the training initiatives that I take on. Johnny talked about the long meetings that we have; they are mainly on a Thursday night and they are mostly alcohol-induced, so we will not go there. *[Laughter.]* I am selective about who I let into my school. I have not allowed a curriculum adviser in for 10 years. That sums up my view on that. I know that Carmel and Johnny said that they were very good people, but I am sorry; I do not agree with that. They do not get into my school.

As part of school leadership, the treatment of my staff is very important. It is a job; they have families and they do not want to be there spending extra time in meetings listening to someone rambling on. I want to make sure that they are treated professionally. If a member of my staff makes a professional request to attend a course that I think will not do me any good, they will not be allowed to attend it. Some of the courses that are run are not very good. Personal requests are totally different. There is no discussion; they can go, and I get the benefit back tenfold. For example, at the extra classes in the school last Thursday night I had over 70% of my fifth year and more than 50% of my staff. There is no money for that, which shows you what it is all about.

The community is vital to the school; I gave you a list of some of the things that we have been up to. We work with primary schools and — I will put this in inverted commas — "community groups", because I am in east Belfast so I have to talk to them.

I will talk about the role of the schools inspectorate in the area of school improvement. We went through an inspection in 2008 and I felt that it was user-friendly. We learned a lot from it

and we came out with an excellent report. The staff got together beforehand, and the positives that came after the inspection were very good. However, I do not see why money has to be spent inspecting good schools. Sometimes, when the inspectors go into schools, they make mistakes. Anyone who has ever been to St Patrick's College, Bearnageeha, on the Antrim Road, knows that it is a very good school. I know, because we have a very strong link with it. P J O'Grady and I do not always get on, but it is great to work with him. For someone to term that school as "satisfactory" is a disgrace, in my opinion. We need to look at that. As Johnny said, Stanley Goudie has been visiting schools. He came up to us, and we discussed that. At the end of that discussion Stanley told me that he was retiring, so I do not know whether I hastened that. *[Laughter.]*

We have a very strong rewards system in the school. It starts with trips, and includes teaching staff and my office staff. We went to the World Cup in South Africa and we are about to go to New York. The kids raise the money themselves; we do not just sign a cheque. We reward what the good kids do. When I went in, the good kids were not being rewarded. Most of the time was being spent on the kids who, in many ways, were trying to destroy the school. We have found that the rewards system increases the self-esteem of the kids. They have to reach a certain percentage of achievement before they can go on those trips.

I am very positive about the life and work initiative. It has been a big help to Ashfield Boys' High School. It is about citizenship, personal, social and health education and employability and all that that entails. It allows us to take a subject right across the school and reach out into the community. For example, the year 12 pupils did a project on homelessness. I took a big risk; I took them into town, along with some staff members, to visit homeless people. That is what I do; I take risks. When they came back and talked about it in assemblies and other classes, it was a plus.

I have to commend the extended schools. I was absolutely shocked to hear Carmel saying

how little money her school gets. I get nearly as much money as Carmel gets, yet my school has nearly 700 pupils. I can totally understand her frustration. The Belfast Education and Library Board got itself into trouble. I hope that Mr Cargo is listening, because it has done a great job to get out of that trouble. However, to get out of that trouble, the board had to make cuts. One thing that was cut was the dissemination of good practice.

I sit on the literacy and numeracy task force, and I am now working on a project about underachievement in Protestant working-class areas. I visited the controlled commission for a while but left for reasons that I will not go into now. The two things that the literacy and numeracy task force talked about were early intervention and dissemination of good practice, which are vital. Johnny and I do it, and I know that other schools do it through their area learning programmes. I remember watching a presentation by De La Salle College, and I picked up their system immediately because I thought that it was great.

It was great to hear Carmel saying that she finds that girls who attended her school are becoming the good parents now, and I have found the same thing. However, I worry about the ones who came before that, because it does not say much for our education system. Remember that, when we criticise parents, we are criticising the education system that they came through.

Results and statistics are not everything, even though ours are very good. In many ways, the special needs provision is the heart of the school. We have a linguistic phonics teacher, and we do work to try to bring boys' grades up from Ds to Cs. We have specialist classes in reading, science and maths and so on. The money for that is not supplied by the Department of Education; we have to raise the money ourselves. I have a third-generation pitch that I rent out for £50,000. I have C2k upstairs in the school, which everyone goes on about us lending to the Department of Education. It means that we are cramped, but it does not matter because money is brought in. We have people who bring money into the school, but how you spend that money is what is important. That is why I talk about on-site solutions, and Johnny Graham mentioned some of

that. It is about how I spend that money for my boys.

Someone asked about a school's mission statement. First, I want to find out what my kids are good at and like doing, and I want to get them paid for doing it. That is one. On another point, it is strange that you asked about single-sex schools because you have just talked to three single-sex schools, so we must be doing something right.

Secondly, I hear boys in school explaining why they have not done their homework by saying, "My mummy did not let me do this". Or they might explain where their lunch is by saying, "I have forgotten my lunch; my mummy did this". I firmly believe that my boys can achieve anything. I go in with that optimistic view; if I had the view that every child who comes through my door will let me down at some stage, I should just get out of the way.

Before I leave this year, I would love to put one sentence up on the front of the school. For my boys, it is the most important sentence in the English language. It has 10 two-letter words: "If it is to be, it is up to me." Instead of making excuses about the budget, the 11-plus and what is happening outside, we have just got on with it. We should be closed, but we are not.

The Chairperson:

Andy, it would be very useful if we could bottle that. That gives us all a sense of perspective.

Unfortunately, we always come back to the issue of funding. You talked about just getting on with it, but that can only be done in the context of how much money you have. I listened to what Carmel said about disparity and inequality as regards what some schools get compared with others. Everything is very clinical in an accountant's world. However, in the real world, is it possible to get a formula that is fair across the board? It is often about being cute enough to

access the funding. I will not use the term hokery-pokery, but schools can sometimes access money with a wee bit of shifty footwork. That is not the way that our schools ought to be funded.

Mr McMorran:

I understand that. In the real world, that is the way it is. My answer to the question is quite simple: I do not know, but when I am given my budget at the start of the year, I am out there getting money left, right and centre. I have used the lottery very well, and I have used the neighbourhood renewal fund. I have a full-time school counsellor because we need him. Every school should have one. The Department of Education says that every school has access to a counsellor if they want it. That is right; I can get one for two hours a month. That does damage. I need a full-time school counsellor. I was lucky to get one outside the Department of Education by going to another Department and getting it through neighbourhood renewal.

I will very quickly describe his role in the school. A little boy walks across the playground with a school bag and our school uniform on. He has got in his hand invisible baggage that he sets down at the front door. It could be drugs, sexual abuse, physical abuse, a dysfunctional family or alcohol abuse. He sets that baggage down, comes into my school and behaves the way that we want him to. At the end of the school day, he lifts the baggage up, takes it home and he has to live with it for the rest of the day. The school counsellor will never make the baggage go away, but he will try to lighten it. I could not do without that school counsellor at the minute. I am sure that members have seen in the news about the problem with cars going round east Belfast. The counsellor has been working tirelessly at night and has a drop-in centre. However, I went out to find the money for that. I go to the lottery and to other people. It might sound awful, and I know that there are big problems with money, but I have to run a school so I have to get on with what I have.

I agree with exactly what Carmel and Johnny said: we will have to increase class sizes. I understand that, but there will be other ways to do it. I will give a very quick example. People

always ask why Ashfield goes on so many trips. I believe that a lot of my kids will learn as much outside the classroom as they do in it. However, any time there is a trip, the boys raise money through bag packs and so on. Some of the money goes towards staff cover while they are away. Therefore, the boys pay the teacher who is brought in to cover the teacher who is away with them. That is a case of ways and means, not hokery-pokery as the Chairperson said.

The Chairperson:

I have one other question. It is astounding that there are situations in which boys of 11 are going into schools with the reading age of 6. What, in your mind, is going on in the feeder primary schools to put us in that situation?

Mr McMorran:

As I said, the literacy and numeracy task force has been looking at that. Not enough money is going to the early years. It is as simple as that. Jill is in charge of special needs, so she might want to comment on that.

Ms Jill Ashenhurst (Ashfield Boys' High School):

The primary schools have mixed-ability classes. Therefore, the teacher:pupil ratio for children with additional needs is critical to how they will progress. Often, those children are not given the support that they need because of a lack of funding, staffing or expertise in that area. That is why primary schools are suffering with that situation.

When such pupils come to us, they are in a situation where we can do withdrawal support for them. All our year 8s are on a reading programme. Each class, regardless of whether pupils are at the top or bottom of the academic scale in the school, goes out to reading classes throughout the entire year. They go out in sessions from September to the first half-term holiday and from Halloween to Christmas and so on. It works on a rota basis, and every child gets the offer of help

to improve their reading in a small group situation. Alongside that, we have an accelerated reading programme and, although it does not increase their reading age as significantly as our small group programme, it increases pupils' motivation to read. As a lot of us know, the underlying motivation to read and reading underpins a lot of other subjects. That is the key to addressing it.

Mr McMorran:

Without wishing to start an argument, I am 100% pro academic selection. However, I am 100% anti 11-plus. The story is: a little boy came into year 8. At the end of P7, he had not been to school for eight weeks because he had been causing so many problems. We brought him in to discuss things, and he is now in the school and doing really well. When we looked into it, we found that he had been in a class that was being prepared for an examination, but, because he was not doing the exam, he was sat in a corner with nothing to do. He overreacted, caused trouble and was undisciplined, so he was thrown out. I know that we have to deal with discipline problems. Nevertheless, that child deserved more than anybody to be taught right through, but that did not happen. He is now in school. He is not perfect, but he is getting there. So, obviously, I am 100% against that aspect of the exam.

Ms Ashenhurst:

We have another child in year 8 who is an exceptional mathematician. His parents decided that he would not sit any AQEs. Again, he caused a lot of trouble in primary school and came to us with a very bad reputation, but you can see already that he will be an A* maths student, because he is particularly gifted in that subject. He had been sitting with a group of children who were not going to be doing an exam, and, because he was bored, he created mayhem.

Mr McMorran:

We are sorry for mentioning individual examples, but sometimes they explain things better.

Mr Hilditch:

On the subject of parents, you spoke about getting them in to collect reports. What other work is going on in the field of communication with parents?

Mr McMorran:

We have total communication with parents. In year 8, there is an interview with all parents to find out, after six weeks, whether their son is settling in. That meeting is so important because you get contact with parents, which means that, the next time we phone, we can get them up to the school. However, if parents do not turn up to the year 8 meeting, real pressure is put on them to make sure that they come to the school. It is quite simple: if they are not there, their son will be at home for the next six weeks, which never happens. That is the start of it. We then have two additional meetings a year with parents, as well as individual meetings. The inspection report talks about our pastoral care system. We need to establish contact. We are lucky because, unlike Carmel McCartan, who talked about the location of her school, we are situated on the edge of east Belfast, which is quite easy to get to and there is no flashpoint to go through. At the year 12 meeting yesterday, only six parents did not turn up, and we got them this morning. *[Laughter.]* I did not mean it like that.

The Chairperson:

I am glad that you clarified that.

Ms Ashenhurst:

We also have an open-door policy. Parents are made very welcome and, if they want to drop in, it is not a question of having to make an appointment. We usually try to accommodate them, because their worry is immediate and if we can address it instantly, we do so. If we cannot, we make sure that they go away in the knowledge that their worry will be addressed within a very short period. That helps to build relationships.

Mr B McCrea:

Mr McMorran, run that past me again. You are happy with selection, but not with the 11-plus.

Mr McMorran:

If a child has spent seven years in a primary school, are you telling me that, by the end of P7, their teacher cannot say whether that child is suited to a certain type of school?

Mr B McCrea:

In their submission, the representatives from St Louise's said that the 11-plus is morally and educationally wrong.

Mr McMorran:

I know, but, as I said at the start —

The Chairperson:

That is why we do not want to get into that.

Mr McMorran:

There is a lot of testing going on throughout the primary school sector. InCAS is a perfective example of that. Putting kids through a test on a Saturday morning three times in a year is obscene. Of the kids who come through my door, there are the boys who have not sat the test and the kids who, in their minds, have failed it. Our primary school induction team spends the first six months building up children's self-esteem. The rest is history. What happens after five years is there for all to see through the GCSE and A-level results. Then we have the kids with special needs, who may have been pushed out. In that case, I agree totally with Carmel McCartan about the 11-plus, but I do believe that, sometimes, we are very hard on our system. We have some

very good grammar schools and high schools. We have no such thing as a bad school; we have schools that need support and guidance. If they do not have the population, close them.

Mr B McCrea:

I know that we do not want to get into the debate, but the issue is germane to our discussion. I can buy into a situation where, in certain parts of the country, the grammar or main school is sucking in all the population and, therefore, other schools have to deal with a different —

Mr McMorran:

I have a waiting list for second year of 93 pupils, 36 of whom are at a grammar school and want to come to me.

Mr B McCrea:

That is the positive thing about you, and I take my hat off to all the principals here. However, Stanley Goudie came out with statistics that, frankly, I was shocked by. Those statistics were to the effect that 35% of our schools, including primary and secondary schools, are failing because of leadership. How do we fix our educational underachievement? The question of selection is a complete red herring, and with finances, we have to manage with what we get. The real issue is leadership. If we get principals and staff such as the folk who are here today, we will get good outcomes. That seems to be the lesson, and I am absolutely for it. There is a case for having horses for courses and having different styles in different places. As the schools that are represented today are really successful, I want to learn from you about what we should do. You tell me: is it OK that we have a diversity of provision?

Mr McMorran:

I am not a systems person; I am a principal of a school. I deal with people, whether it is pupils, parents, educational psychologists or community workers. You are into systems; that is fine. Everybody can talk me through the systems. I believe in on-site solutions, and I cut my cloth to

suit my kids. The first day that I walked into that school, my reaction was, "What I am doing here?" The first child told me to go somewhere, and I noticed that the kids' self-esteem was down and the teachers were not attending school. I was not worried about the education system in Northern Ireland. I was worried about people in the school.

Mr B McCrea:

Here is the hard question. A PAC report showed that the achievements of Protestant, working-class boys are pathetic compared with other places; it was 5%.

Mr McMorran:

I attended that committee; I agree.

Mr B McCrea:

We wanted to, without going into gender or religious background, look at underachievement and identify the problem. I know that you have achieved fantastic results, as have the others here. I am absolutely in favour of good schools. However, we have only a certain amount of money, and we cannot afford to fritter it away. The one thing that worries me about you — apart from how to take a blood sample and clone you — is that it cannot be right, as the Chairperson said, that educational success depends upon the innovation of one head teacher. The Big Lottery Fund is good, but everybody should have access to it. If extended schools is the right way to go and St Louise's should have that on a pro rata basis, that is the issue that we need to look at. I am sorry, but we have to go into systems.

Mr McMorran:

About 700 children walk into my school, and 1,500 walk into Carmel's. How many do you have, Johnny?

Mr Graham:

Just under 1,000.

Mr McMorran:

Every one of those kids is different. Therefore, when you put them into a school, that school will be different. Every school in Northern Ireland is different. They all have a heart and a certain way of running. Some of them need support, and others are going really well. That decision has to be looked at so that that cannot be stopped.

I mentioned Every School a Good School in my submission. I sat on the literacy and numeracy task force for the past four years and the findings from that document keep getting thrown at me and I would love that to stop. I was doing all that 12 years ago. I looked at what I had and thought then that we had to do that. The document is the biggest load of logic that I have ever read. That is all it is: logic. Every teacher that reads it asks, "What is that about?" However, it is nice to be able to refer to it, and it is now being called ESAGS. It took me two days to work out what that meant. Every School a Good School is what has been going on in those schools for the past 12 years. St Louise's is a perfect example.

Mr B McCrea:

We might have to get you into the diplomatic corps now that you have resigned. *[Laughter.]*

Mr McMorran:

I am retiring to Florida.

Mr Lunn:

I am sorry to mention the word again, but what form of selection are you advocating, if it does

not involve a test?

Mc McMorran:

If a child is in a primary school for seven years, the school should be able to say where that child should go. The problem is that middle-class parents are walking into a school thinking that their child is a level 5, but they will never be level 5. They are level 3. However, the parent has sat in a middle-class primary school with the principal and has been told that the child is level 5. Why? To avoid an argument.

Mr Lunn:

I knew that I would start him off again. Who makes the decisions about what school they go to?

Mr McMorran:

That decision has to be made in the primary school.

Mr Lunn:

So the primary school makes that decision?

Mr McMorran:

I decide who goes into my top class and who goes into my bottom class, because we stream rigidly. I decide who is selected for A levels and who is not. I have those decisions to make, and they are big, hard decisions. I agree that early years and primary should get more money, but they are going to have to earn it.

The Chairperson:

People will see me as being in one camp in the selection argument, but I have always said, and I am now totally convinced, that it is not a case of either/or; it is a combination of both. We have destroyed ourselves, we have argued this thing to death and we have caused further division as a result. We have allowed a situation to develop in which we are still hanging on to clichés and phrases and definitions. To some people, the concept of comprehensive schools spells disaster because they do not understand what it is, but if I talk about an all-ability school, that changes the whole dynamic. We need to change the language that we are using. We fought each other for 40 years and then we said that we had to change the language that we used to talk to our neighbours. We need to change the language that we use to talk to our children and the people who run our schools.

Mr McMorran:

Johnny Graham brought up the point about the standard dropping. There are two big grammar schools in east Belfast. Out of a total mark of 140, the cut-off point was set at between 88 and 92. Those grammar schools took all those kids because the population is dropping. We take the rest. There are less able children going into those schools, so they will become all-ability schools naturally.

The Chairperson:

If we allow that to happen, it will be driven more by what has to be done for the child rather than what has to be done for the institution.

Thank you, Andy. William, you got it easy.

Mr William McCullough (Ashfield Boys' High School):

Yes. *[Laughter.]*

The Chairperson:

We will talk to you over lunch. Andy and Jill, thank you very much.

We will move on. Micheál, you are making the final presentation, but do not think that it was deliberate or that you have any less time than anyone else. Along with your colleagues, you bring a different perspective to the discussion. Obviously, coming from an Irish-medium school, you face challenges and issues that have a different emphasis. At the end of the day, your pupils still face barriers and challenges, and you have to address those in the context of the specific issue of underachievement. We will try to stay away from the debate about selection and funding, although I am sure that you have many concerns about the funding issue.

Mr Micheál MacGiolla Ghunna (Coláiste Feirste):

First, I thank you for the invitation. We are extremely pleased to be here and have our success recognised by the Committee. We do not often look at our success; we look at where we are failing, so that we can try to improve those areas. I also welcome the opportunity to listen to the representatives of the other schools. Andy talked about sharing good practice and listening to what is happening in other schools and learning from them. We do not get enough opportunities to do that.

I am joined by Emer Mhic an Fhailí, who is our SENCO. She does an awful lot of work for us in the area of learning support, and she will talk about some of the details of that. Diarmuid Ua Bruadaire is our head of Key Stage 4 and has done a great deal of work in raising our GCSE results. He will go into more detail about that.

I will run through a few general issues relating to the school's success. Coláiste Feirste was founded in 1991 with six pupils and no funding whatsoever, by a very dedicated group of parents and teachers who wished to have post-primary provision through the medium of the Irish

language. The school was founded as a co-educational school; and that is very much a part of our success. We are the only co-educational school here today. We are an all-ability school, which is also a part of our success. We cater for the widest possible range of ability in the school, which is also a part of our success, as is the fact that we are a school for 11- to 19-year-olds. We provide a seven-year process as opposed to a five-year process. We encourage all our pupils to come back post-16. We find ways for them to come back and, at present, we take back about 80% of our pupils.

We have 551 pupils in a building that is designed to house 350. We are very, very cramped. We got one new building, but we are still using a former hospital building and 10 mobile classrooms. Of our pupils, 83% come from neighbourhood renewal areas, which may be a better indicator of their social and economic background than free school meals. However, 33% of pupils are on free school meals. Over the past 20 years, we have experienced great difficulties, such as a lack of facilities, a lack of teaching resources for the Irish medium and a lack of support for staff development. However, we have managed to find ways of overcoming a lot of those difficulties. Nevertheless, significant challenges remain for Irish-medium post-primary education.

Having said all of that, we have had year-on-year improvement in our examination results, with 78% now achieving five GCSEs, and we have similarly good results at A level. However, our work is not simply about GCSE and A-level results; it is about giving pupils the skills, confidence, choices and qualifications necessary to have successful and happy lives after they leave school. Part of that is to do with academic qualifications, but, as the other schools pointed out, there is an awful lot more to it.

So, what makes us successful? We had to sit down and think about that for a while. One of the biggest reasons for our success is our ethos. We have a very strong Irish language ethos. If a school's ethos is strong and clear and motivates people, it will be the basis for all other school

improvement work. Our strong Irish-medium ethos means that our pupils have a very positive identity, good self-esteem and a sense of belonging in the school. It is important that pupils feel that the school belongs to them and that they feel a commitment to it through the Irish language. The fact that the pupils have a better commitment to the school means that they also have a stronger commitment to the learning process.

Our ethos also motivates the staff to give that little bit extra. As teachers and professionals, they have good relationships with the pupils, but they also have an extra link with them because of the Irish language. That motivates them to do extra work on weekends, learning support days and so on. It also creates a very good basis for the school's relationship with the parents, who have chosen an Irish-medium education for their children. The parents, too, are committed to the Irish language and that commitment makes them more committed to the school. They set up the school, and that gives them a sense of ownership. That makes it much easier for us to work in partnership with them to support the children's learning.

Our pastoral environment is quite different from that of many other schools. For example, the pupils address us by our first names, so if a first year pupil came to me, they would call me Michéal. There is no "Sir", "Miss" or "headmaster". That means that the pupils, particularly those from socially disadvantaged backgrounds, feel very comfortable. They feel comfortable at the school because of the family atmosphere. However, that is not something that simply happens. You have to work very hard at relationships in schools. We place great emphasis on that, and we are constantly trying to look at ways of improving relationships between teachers, parents and pupils.

As Basil mentioned, leadership is also very important. In 2007, we restructured our senior leadership team, and, as a result, we brought in a lot more people and gave them particular projects to look at. At that time, we recommitted ourselves to a vision of child-centred provision. We developed a culture of self-evaluation and strategic planning. Most importantly, we placed an

emphasis on building middle-leadership capacity, because there is no point in having a principal at the top if there is no one in the middle to implement all the great ideas and visions. That was very important.

We believe that a commitment to our staff is also very important, and we do a great deal of work on that. For example, a couple of weeks ago when the staff came back after their Christmas break and were very depressed, we provided them with some therapies. We look after staff welfare. We brought in Colour Me Beautiful image consultants, for example. It might not seem that that type of thing concerns the learning process, but it is about re-motivating and re-energising staff. It is important to look after staff welfare as much as pupil welfare.

My wife works for BELB and travels around various schools, including my own. For her, the biggest thing that stands out is the calibre of our parents. She notices that the parents of the children in our school are different. They have very high aspirations and they are very motivated and involved in their children's learning. That is not to take away from the parents in any other school, but I am as proud of our parents as our pupils.

We have tried to do a great deal of work on extended schools. We would like to have a full service network, but we do not. Nevertheless, a couple of years ago we took the decision to appoint a full-time person from a community development background to lead our extended schools work. That involves building relationships with community groups, with those groups offering learning opportunities to our pupils, and it also involves raising money for specific projects.

We also looked at the curriculum choices that were available for our pupils. That is one of the things that has made the biggest difference. We now offer 25 GCSE subjects. We have 17 level 3 courses for post-16 and another five at level 2, which are not recognised as post-16 but should

be. Perhaps we will discuss that later.

Most of all, our success is based on good teaching and learning. You cannot get away from that. We can talk about all the other things, but if you have a good pastoral system, good relationships in the school, good teaching and good learning opportunities, people will go on to succeed. I will pass you over to Diarmuid, who will discuss what we do at Key Stage 4.

Mr Diarmuid Ua Bruadaire (Coláiste Feirste):

Go raibh maith agat. As Micheál said, over the last four years there has been a significant year-on-year increase in the percentage of Coláiste Feirste students who attain the benchmark figure of five GCSEs. It was 36% in 2006 and 78% in 2010. As head of year 12 initially, and as head of Key Stage 4 over the last three years, I have been part of that change.

The Key Stage 4 team — principally me and two year heads — recognises that, although good progress has been made, there is still lots of work to be done. We look at our current position as a step along the way rather than our destination. A lot of the work that we do is about raising expectations and keeping them high. We begin the work of raising expectations during year 10, when students are encouraged to consider what they would like to achieve in their lives, what type of jobs they might want to do and the impact that that will have on their GCSE choices. The Key Stage 4 team takes assemblies with year 10 students and highlights the issues of subject choices and the increased work and study expectations at Key Stage 4.

The curriculum is very important. At the start of this journey it was recognised that our curricular offer did not meet the need of all our students. In fact, some of the arrangements were such because things were always done that way, rather than being what was best for the student cohort of that particular year. The structure of Key Stage 4 was changed to accommodate a wider range of student ability and need. Three pathways were identified: academic 1, academic 2 and

vocational. New courses were adopted and taught to meet the needs of vocational students especially. Career guidance was enhanced to match students with GCSE subjects in which they have a better chance of succeeding.

It seems like a small detail, but we put a lot of work into compiling the Key Stage 4 calendar in August. We present it to parents and pupils in a very readable and pupil- and parent-friendly fashion. We laminated it so that it can be stuck on the fridge or put in some other prominent position at home. The calendar includes all the information about coursework deadlines, exams, meetings, study days, seminars and so on. That begins the process of encouraging parents and pupils to participate in all the activities that are organised.

We have regular reporting to parents and students about progress in their attitude and work. That helps to create a focus and also identifies students who are underachieving. The reports are easy for teachers to complete and easy for parents to understand.

The role of the SENCO is essential in raising achievement at Key Stage 4 in Coláiste Feirste. The Key Stage 4 team works very closely with the learning support centre and its co-ordinator, Emer. She will talk about that a little bit more. However, it is worth noting that the breakdown of the stigma attached to receiving support has been extremely important in raising achievement at Key Stage 4, as has tailored individual support for students.

An example of our working in partnership with parents is the form teacher meetings that we hold. We have a system where we hold two series of meetings with parents. The meetings are attended by a form teacher or a year head and at least one parent and the student. The first meeting is held in September of year 11, and the expectations of the student and the school are explored, objectives are agreed and study strategies are discussed. At the second meeting, held after the mock exams in year 12, progress and mock exam results are analysed and targets are set

for the GCSE exams. All of those meetings are held along pro formas and they are agreed with the form teacher. Emphasis is placed on study skills, not just with pupils in the classroom but with seminars, and there are opportunities for parents to become aware of them.

Motivating teachers is an essential part of our success. A culture of accountability has been developed whereby exam results are analysed by staff and ambitious departmental and whole-school targets are set. Teachers have the opportunity to illustrate how they have raised standards in their own departments in order to disseminate good practice and ideas.

Practice makes perfect. In exams, maths and English were identified as areas for improvement, and a series of practice exams were organised. They were carried out under real exam conditions in the assembly hall. Emphasis was placed on simple things such as the equipment that was required to sit the exam; for example, a calculator. It was amazing how much an emphasis on having the right equipment and learning to use that equipment under exam conditions affected the success of the exams.

We provide tailored support. Study days, revision and support classes are organised on a regular basis. We use the extended schools system to facilitate those. We value community support, as was mentioned in other presentations. We have made use of a wide variety of services in the community to raise confidence, primarily, and to raise participation in school. That has been essential in improving performance in areas of underachievement, especially for boys, but not exclusively so. We organise key programme motivational speakers and study skills seminars, etc, and students are participating very well.

Celebrating success is another aspect of our work; for example, through students seeing their picture in the paper. To keep expectations high, it is important to celebrate the good news stories in the school, particularly Key Stage 4 good news. Assemblies are used to recognise the

achievements of our students, and we have raised the profile of prize night over the past number of years. Noticeboards, newsletters and the local press are full of stories celebrating our students' endeavours, and there is always a large turnout of students and staff at our end of Key Stage meal, which is held in Cultúrlann. That is an opportunity to celebrate the relationships that have been built and the respect that staff and students have for each other.

Pastoral support is important. Students listen to us because they know that we care. We had Billy Dixon, a motivational speaker, in Coláiste Feirste recently, working with our year 11s and year 12s. In his presentation he told them that communication is much more than just words. Our pastoral care system is well structured and organised, with clearly defined roles. We have endeavoured to become more proactive, rather than reacting to situations as they arise. That approach has been largely successful. However, the most important aspect of our pastoral care system is that we care about our students and they know that we care. We tell them and show them that they are important to us and, as a result, our students are more inclined to listen.

I will finish by discussing support from the Key Stage 4 team and implementing the plan. Raising achievements at Key Stage 4 is rocket science, and it requires continuous hard work. It is the most challenging period in young people's lives, where hormonal change, social conditions, personal development issues and educational choices all combine. To meet the key challenges, the Key Stage 4 team must work together and work to a plan. However, what works for one student may not work for another, so flexibility is essential. And the hard work should not be forgotten. We heard before from the speaker from Ashfield that after parent-teacher meetings, he calls the parents who do not show up. We could organise a maths day on a Saturday, with all the teachers lined up, but if there are no students there, it will not be a success. The letters, the assemblies, the profile-raising and the phone calls on the morning itself are what make the plan work. Go raibh maith agat.

Ms Emer Mhic an Fhailí (Coláiste Feirste):

As Micheál said, I am the school's full-time SENCO. I am a non-teaching SENCO, which is a

huge drain on resources, but it shows the school's commitment to special needs, given their importance in the school context. Pastoral care is the scaffolding to any school, and the special need in the school is the nuts and bolts of that scaffolding; that is how I see it.

I make no apologies for being a firm believer in aesthetics. There is an aesthetic association to everything in life, and when I joined the school in 2008 my priority was to find the perfect place in which to base the learning support centre in the school. It is very important for the learning support centre to be a nurturing environment. It has to be somewhere where the children want to go. If you put special needs facilities in the old classrooms at the back of the school, no one will want to go there. I am also a strong believer in what we have heard about this morning, which is good practice. However, we do not call it good practice; in our learning support centre we call it "magpieing", in which we go round to other schools, find out what the best practice is and steal it from them. *[Laughter.]* That has been incredibly useful for us, and I recommend it to everyone.

As Micheál has mentioned, the school has been incredibly supportive and innovative in its approach to special needs. We have a gorgeous, newly built centre. The school has had a new building in the past few years, and we got the nicest room in the school. We are pivotal to the school. I use the word "centre" and not "unit" deliberately; there are too many negative connotations with the word "unit", so it is important that children see it as a learning support centre.

That negativity meant that it was very important to create an inclusive environment. Initially, our remit was to look after the additional learning needs within the school. Now we look after absolutely anybody and everybody in the school. As Andy said, everyone has a special need, everyone has an additional learning need, because each child learns in a different way. On any given day, we can have the high-flying A-level students who want to come in to get a bit of coursework proofread, and children who are simply so frustrated by not being able to read and write in year 9 that they come in to get a wee bit of support. We have to drop tools at that stage

and commit to them, which is what the school has done in committing a full-time SENCO, in me.

Our varied choice of paint in the centre was researched. Again, I make no apologies for that. We had a beautiful, newly built, white suite in the centre of the school. However, we did a bit of research on Google and found that if you use lilac when children first come in, it works as a calmer, and we have a gorgeous teal colour in the main room, which acts to motivate learning. It is true; it does work.

Anecdotal research shows that mainstream pupils are reluctant to have any association with centres or units because of how their peers may perceive them. Therefore, it was crucial for us to employ an open-door policy. In this, our third year, we are beginning to see an influx of pupils who have no named learning need, as I have said, but who know that they will get the extra TLC when they come to the centre. I am the hug in this equation, which can sometimes be very annoying to my colleagues, but I think that it works for the school.

The learning support centre is staffed by 2·5 teachers. There are two full-time teachers and one part-time teacher, with myself as full-time manager, as SENCO. That is funded entirely by the school, and principals here know how expensive that is and what that means for the school's budget. As things stand, to qualify for funding as a unit, you must comply with the Department of Education criterion, which is specific to x number of children with a recognised diagnosis of moderate learning difficulties. I will deviate and explain that briefly.

With a dearth of accurate and relevant diagnostic tools for Irish-medium children, it is impossible to diagnose them as having moderate learning difficulties at primary level. Therefore, most of the children who come to Coláiste Feirste, although they may have been on a code of practice, have not moved up significantly enough to be statemented. Unfortunately, we are disadvantaged as a result of that.

As there is a dearth of accurate and relevant diagnostic assessment tools through the medium of Irish, or at least any with an understanding of the cognitive alteration in Irish medium, there are not, as yet, any pupils coming to us who have an assessment, diagnosis and subsequent statement under that criterion. However, our own experience in this very short period has shown us that the current model for special needs provision needs to be urgently addressed, with a duality of service provided.

Our centre takes a three-pronged approach to support. I will talk about that briefly, because I have been asked to talk about something that works. Currently, although it will undoubtedly change, our academic approach employs the methodology of Dr Jim Connolly, who recommends that extensive academic learning needs must be addressed in a significantly reduced and controlled learning environment. Therefore, our high-support learning classes in years 8 and 9 are capped at 15 to 16 pupils. That class is then further divided, with a group of six children being taught English, maths, Irish, geography, history and learning for life and work within the centre by centre staff. We call that group the "dream team", which they absolutely adore. They think that they are the elite of the school, which they are to us; they are fantastic people. The other 11 pupils in the class are taught in the general body of the school by school staff but, crucially, the reduced ratio allows for greater absorption of learning.

Traditional methods of support have also been employed. In the last two years, small groups were taken from year 8 to year 10 classes for group work in English literacy, Irish literacy and numeracy. However, we are now offering those on a whole-school and a whole-class level, and we are teaching Irish literacy, English literacy and numeracy to all of our year 8 and year 9 classes.

We have outside agency support as well, which has been alluded to by different schools. St Gerard's Educational Resource Centre provides outreach support for children who score significantly under 70 in reading assessments. Again, it is very difficult to assess our children;

we have to take everything with a rule of thumb. As a psychologist mentioned to me recently, when she was doing an assessment with one of our children the child recognised the word in Irish but was not able to say it in English. That can also happen the other way around with some tests. It is very difficult to pinpoint whether the child has passed or failed the assessment. Therefore, it is necessary for us to have some type of diagnostic tool that can read our children properly.

Our autism spectrum disorder (ASD) provision has worked beautifully over the past few years. Pupils with a statement of special educational needs or a diagnosis of ASD — that goes from Asperger's syndrome to attention deficit disorder to attention deficit hyperactivity disorder — are supported. I co-ordinate that support and appoint a classroom assistant to our children, but we have a very open approach to our classroom assistants within the school. Therefore, although some of our children may need a classroom assistant assigned to a specific lesson, we are very much about sharing the love, and we share the assistants with other classes when we need to.

We have a large team of assistants who provide support, not only to the appointed child but to individual classes for reading programmes and for behavioural support in other classes. Each pupil has what we call a success diary, where the classroom assistant records daily achievements. That is key to our success. I meet each student and classroom assistant weekly to review those achievements and plot success against a success chart, which is visible in the centre. I have big 17-year-old boys who will remind me on a Friday afternoon if their stars are not on the success chart.

Our lunchtime clubs are an amazing hit with our ASD children, who do not cope well with the social restrictions within the school yard; it is a very stressful time for them. We provide a lunchtime club with board games. We have a club called the "war hammer club"; I do not know whether anyone knows what that is, it is basically tiny little soldiers and a huge army. If my boys heard me describe it in that fashion, there really would be war. There are lots of games, lots of looking after and lots of work with the staff. Instead of us assigning who should go to the club,

we find that the pupils who need us arrive with us organically, although we do have some teacher referrals.

Lastly, I will talk about our nurture approach. We support students who have difficulty with completing homework at home or organising themselves for school. We are currently providing link sessions with referred year 12 to year 14 pupils who are feeling the pressure of the academic push towards GCSE. Those can be children who are not achieving their targets or children with real aspirations who are making significant improvements. A number of boys and girls who feel that they simply do not fit in have the use of our centre rooms and offices at lunchtime, when we are kicked out. That allows them to escape the noise and social restrictions of the large school setting.

Parents have commented on the peace of mind that our approach has created for some of our very vulnerable year 8 transfer pupils. How do we find who is vulnerable at year 8? We have a fantastic transition programme that we initiated two years ago and that we feel very confident is now beginning to hone in on those children. We start links with the primary schools very early on. We have two to three visits before the children arrive with us in June for their first taster sessions of going into year 8, and we meet the children three times between June and December. The year 8 transfer transition programme has gone very well.

We use the lunchtime duties of our centre staff very creatively. Teachers provide extra maths, English and Irish support at lunchtime instead of doing duty in the yard.

The gifted and talented pupils are always the poor cousin in special needs, so that is something that we have been keen to address over the last few years. Mentoring programmes with staff assigned to pupils who are doing very well has again added to the success at Key Stage 4, which Diarmuid commented on.

Mr Mac Giolla Ghunna:

I do not know how much time we have. I will conclude with a couple of points. First, there is nothing secret in what Diarmuid, Emer or I have said; we talked about more or less the same things as the other schools here. We may have done that work within our own particular context, but we have done it to the best of our ability. It is about the ethos; pastoral care; teaching and learning; curriculum choices; communication and partnership with parents; and opportunities for pupils to develop self-esteem, leadership skills and their own engagement with the community.

I will finish with one final point. We still face a number of challenges. We faced an awful lot of challenges to get here, but we still face a number of challenges that make things increasingly difficult. As I mentioned, we have a building for 350 pupils, but we have 550. Some people are talking about empty desks; we almost have two pupils to a desk. We have the top marks in BTEC sport in Belfast this year, yet we have no sports facilities whatsoever. We are signing for some ground attached to Beechmount leisure centre on Friday, but who knows what the capital funding budget will be for that, and that is urgently needed.

Emer talked about special educational needs and the learning support centre with 2·5 teachers that we have set up. That costs us around £150,000 a year overall. That comes out of the school budget and is very difficult to meet. Increasingly, it will become unsustainable. Our governors, who have been very supportive and innovative and have given a great deal of leadership, have said that they are not going to look at reducing the learning support centre and have challenged the Department to find ways for us to continue to offer the sort of work that Emer is doing.

Emer also mentioned the development of diagnostic tools. Again, the Department has been quite slow to address just how to diagnose the learning needs of pupils through Irish medium. Teachers are creating curriculum support materials by themselves. We have undertaken a project in conjunction with the Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment to look at how we can design or translate text books and other teaching materials. It is a very slow process;

hopefully we are making some progress, but there is a huge amount to do.

We get very little support for the development of our relationship with our feeder primary schools. There is an awful lot happening within Irish medium at primary level. We see ourselves as having a leadership and support role in that, because those pupils come to us at Key Stage 3. We need to look at what is happening at Key Stages 1 and 2, particularly in literacy and numeracy but also in the wider context of special educational needs, so that learning becomes a continuum. I said that we are looking at seven years; we should be looking at 14 or more years. It is a continuum, and every pupil should have the opportunity to stay on from the age of three or four, in early years, right through to when they are 18 or 19 and looking at their choices after that.

Thank you very much for the opportunity to present to you. I hope that we have not taken too long; it is very difficult to condense all that information into such a short period.

The Chairperson:

Micheál, thank you very much. We do not want to feel that the session is rushed but, unfortunately, we are already well over the allocated time.

I failed miserably when I said earlier that I did not want to get into the selection debate, as that did happen. As I have said, I want to come to your school at some stage and have a longer conversation with you. There has been the review of Irish-medium education, and I do not want to start the whole debate about the particular challenges that you face as an Irish-medium school. However, I noticed in one of your inspector's reports that he made reference to the fact that the proportion of pupils in year 14 obtaining two A levels at grade E or above has declined in recent years. Is there a particular reason for that? You have made immense progress, and that is the reason why we identified yours as a school that has bucked the trend in a sense, because you have gone from 36% in 2006 to where you are now. Is there a particular reason why that issue has

arisen?

Mr Mac Giolla Ghunna:

It is a much more complicated than that, because you cannot look at just the bare statistics. What we are doing now at sixth form is bringing back 80% of our pupils to study a range of subjects. Some of our pupils will do three or four A levels, and, of that group, last year only two did not go on to university. We bring back another group of pupils who will do their A-level Irish and a series of, quite often, level 2 courses. That is a progression, and they will go on to progress to level 3 courses after school. We are keeping them in the education system, motivating them and giving them the skills to help them to progress. The Department is saying through the entitlement framework that pupils at age 16 should be ready to do level 3 courses. Not all pupils are ready to do level 3 courses. We believe that there is an onus on us to offer pupils a mixture of level 2 and level 3 courses to bring them through to level 3. Therefore, when you look at the school's A-level statistics, you need to look deeper, at the actual pupils involved. We have taken a decision that we do not care what the statistics look like; we are working for the benefit for those individual pupils.

The Chairperson:

That is becoming more and more of an issue. Trevor referred to it earlier and it was mentioned in another presentation, that there is an issue of whether outcomes are the right measurements to use. Some people talk about children being labelled a failure at age 11 and the stigma that that brings. However, we are equally having to deal with an issue of failure if some do not fall into the A* to C category. We face a huge issue in looking at how we deal with that and how to use the right measurements and the right terminology to help with that.

Mr Mac Giolla Ghunna:

We bring back pupils with their five GCSEs, A* to C. However, we also bring back pupils who might have only two GCSEs. We have 78% of pupils getting the five A* to C, but we also have to look at what to do with the other 22%. We are not going to tell them that they did not get that

benchmark so they are not welcome in the school post-16. We look at what courses we can offer them that suit their abilities and their interests, and they go on to be very successful as well. That is what a school is about; it is not just about producing academic results.

Mr B McCrea:

Micheál, thank you very much. As you know, I have been up to the school and I must say that I was very impressed with the pupils and what I saw when you showed me around. It seems to me that what you are saying is that because the Irish language is particularly important to people, it overspills into the whole area of academic achievement, or at least some form of valuation of education. Is that correct?

Mr Mac Giolla Ghunna:

Yes, absolutely. In any situation, if a school has a clear ethos, that creates a foundation for a strong school community that, in itself, engages more pupils to a greater degree in the learning process. Certainly, in our experience, we have found that because pupils, parents and teachers are all motivated by the Irish language ethos, that has a knock-on effect on educational standards and attainment in the school.

Mr B McCrea:

I am not going to take too long because I realise that it has been a long day for us all. I mean this gently, and I will come on to finish with another point. There was a school inspector's report: how did you feel about it?

Mr Mac Giolla Ghunna:

We had an inspection report in 2007 and a follow-up in 2009. In 2007 it said that the teaching and learning was good but there were significant problems with leadership, school development planning and the whole strategic approach of the school. I believe that that happened due to uneven development; the school outgrew the management structures that were there at the time.

As I mentioned, in 2007 we changed the leadership within the school. We expanded it and looked at different structures, such as developing our middle leadership. Diarmuid and I were brought in at that time and Emer was brought in a year later. Since then, there has been a dramatic rise in results. What is behind that is the dramatic rise in other standards in the school that are less easy to measure. The inspectorate came back and was very happy with the follow-up inspection in 2009.

Mr B McCrea:

The Chairperson mentioned visiting the school. I am also interested in doing that, whether individually or accompanying him.

I will finish with this point. I think that there is sometimes a feeling that the Irish-medium sector is over here and everybody else is over there. We need to know a little bit about what is going on in that sector. I know that there are some difficulties with doing that, but looking at how we build bridges would be a useful exercise.

Mr Mac Giolla Ghunna:

As Emer said, we try to go out being magpies and looking at good practice in other schools. It is more difficult for us to explain what is happening in our school because, obviously, much of it is done through the medium of the Irish language. That is why we welcome this opportunity to discuss exactly what is going on in the school.

Mr B McCrea:

I agree that there is a language issue, but it is a challenge worth tackling. When you engage with people, all people, you pick up more just from being around the place, even if you do not necessarily understanding what is going on.

Mr Mac Giolla Ghunna:

I agree absolutely, Basil.

The Chairperson:

Emer, you referred to the paint: we can conclude that paint and parents contribute to a good school. We may have to look at a repainting programme.

Ms Mhic an Fhailí:

Undoubtedly.

The Chairperson:

Micheál, thank you very much for coming today and for being part of the inquiry. It is very important that you were part of it. You have made a contribution and we have your submission, and it will form part of our considerations on the inquiry.