



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Committee for Education

OFFICIAL REPORT (Hansard)

The Education (Levels of Progression for
Key Stages 1, 2 and 3) Order (Northern
Ireland) 2012: DE/CCEA Briefing

3 October 2012

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Members present for all or part of the proceedings:

Mr Mervyn Storey (Chairperson)
Mr Danny Kinahan (Deputy Chairperson)
Ms Michaela Boyle
Mr Jonathan Craig
Mr Chris Hazzard
Miss Michelle McIlveen
Mr Sean Rogers
Mr Pat Sheehan

Witnesses:

Mr Richard Hanna	Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment
Mrs Katrina Godfrey	Department of Education
Mr Dale Heaney	Department of Education
Mr Carl Savage	Department of Education

The Chairperson: Katrina, Richard, Dale and Carl, thank you very much for attending today.

Mrs Katrina Godfrey (Department of Education): I will kick off, Chair. I was not expecting to be back so soon, but, as always, it is a pleasure to be here. We are here to aid the Committee in its scrutiny of the statutory rule that relates to the levels of progression. I know that the Committee may want to raise other aspects of the wider assessment policy, but, at the outset, it is important that we are able to make the distinction between what the statutory rule is intended to do and the wider concerns that the Committee may wish to raise with us at this point.

Chair, you will know already that Richard has been leading the operations of this work in the Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment (CCEA). Dale heads up the policy team looking at assessment and qualifications, and he is supported by Carl. That is why they are here today. My role is to provide any wider strategic or contextual dimensions that might be helpful to the Committee in order to advance the scrutiny.

Before I hand over to Dale for more detail, I want to make absolutely clear my Minister's perspective that the introduction of the levels of progression for literacy and numeracy is crucial to his wider drive to improve standards in literacy and numeracy and close the achievement gap that members were debating yesterday afternoon in the motion on absenteeism.

The levels of progression represent the standards that we expect most pupils to achieve in literacy and numeracy at certain key points in their education. If you remember from our discussion last week,

we talked about the need to make sure that when children complete their compulsory schooling, they are able to demonstrate certain skills, knowledge and abilities in relation to these core areas. The levels of progression, in essence, unpick those at different levels. If we want children to be able to achieve at a certain level at 16, then where do they need to be at 14, 11 and eight? That is very much the purpose of the levels.

The Committee will be aware that, if you take the curriculum as a whole, there are seven specific areas of learning for primary and nine for post-primary; the very important aspect of the thinking skills and personal capabilities; and the cross-curricular skills of literacy, numeracy and ICT. It is only in those latter areas that we take a particular system focus, and that is simply because of the importance in any education system of knowing the standards that we expect in literacy and numeracy, how pupils are doing and how, as a system, we are performing in relation to our aim of making sure that children leave school equipped with the communication and using maths skills that they so definitely need.

In that context, the rule that you have in front of you relates back to a transitional order to which the Committee gave its consent in May 2010. I am conscious that the Committee's membership will have changed, but, as I do, Chair, you will probably recall that the Committee wanted an assurance that this was a temporary solution while we completed the work necessary to decide on and define the levels of progression, made sure that they were right and introduced in a timescale that allowed for the training to be completed and for a shadow year to be completed. That is essentially the process that has brought us to where we are today. The rule that you have before you does what we undertook to do back in May 2010. It updates something that was very much a temporary fix and brings it into the realms of making sure that we have a robust system of standards and assessment for those core areas of literacy and numeracy that reflect best practice and allows us to know how we are doing and, more importantly, helps teachers to help pupils to achieve their full potential. That is the wider strategic context. With your permission, Chair, Dale will say a few words about the detail of the statutory rule that you have before you.

Mr Dale Heaney (Department of Education): Thank you, Chairman and the Committee, for the opportunity to update you on the statutory rule. Given the amount of noise that there is in the system about this and the associated issues, it is important that we try to disaggregate those issues for you to make things a bit clearer. We suggest that there are three issues at play here: first, there is the principle of using levels; secondly, there is the levels of progression themselves and how they differ from the levels of assessment that they will replace; and, thirdly, there is the methodology used to give teachers confidence that the standards that they are applying are consistent with those of colleagues, both within their school and across other schools.

All three issues are important, but the statutory rule applies to the second one, relating to the levels of progression and the detail within them. That is separate from the first issue, the principle behind using those levels, which is already in legislation, and the third issue, which is associated with the mechanisms to take forward that legislation. In other words, no matter what level we put in place in the statutory rule, if checks and balances are introduced, we need evidence supporting teacher judgments in order to justify what they are feeding back to us and to CCEA. If we do not have that evidence from teachers, we would question how confidence in those standards can be established.

The first issue, the principle, is already in legislation in the Education (Northern Ireland) Order 2006. The curriculum changed in 2006, and the legislation that brought in the revised curriculum stated that assessment arrangements to support it should be set in place as soon as practicable. It also specified levels of progression for the cross-curricular skills of communication, using maths and using ICT. The curriculum was then successfully introduced on a phased basis from 2007. However, the current assessment arrangements are based on levels of attainment that predate the curriculum. The schools have been assessing a new curriculum using old levels and old arrangements. That is far from ideal.

I will now take the second issue, relating to what the levels of progression are and how they are different. There was some commonality between levels of progression and levels of attainment. They both assess the same broad content. However, the levels of progression have been updated to meet current needs. Some of the key features include a focus on skills as well as knowledge, and an emphasis on the cross-curricular skills of communication and maths. The levels of progression set out, in can-do statements, a continuum of skills that we should expect pupils to demonstrate if they are able to build the communication, numeracy and ICT skills needed to function in life and work. The levels set those out as separate competence-based statements, rather than general-level descriptions. They are, therefore, more challenging than the current levels of attainment that they will replace.

I will now take the third issue, relating to the method used to give teachers confidence that the standards that they are applying are consistent in and across schools. We know from consultation and feedback that schools do not have confidence in the outcomes resulting from the old or current arrangements. There has been no compulsory moderation of outcomes since 2007. Apparently, that moderation took place at Key Stages 1 and 2, but there were no checks on the accuracy of the outcomes reported, and there has never been moderation at Key Stage 3.

It is essential that there is confidence in the outcomes of assessment for pupils, teachers, parents and the system as a whole. We all need to know whether pupils are progressing as they should in the key areas of numeracy, literacy and ICT. Therefore, we suggest that change is needed. With that third issue comes the issue of workload and manageability. It is that aspect that is causing most concern for schools, not the principle behind the levels of progression or the levels of progression themselves. Assessment arrangements should be straightforward and fit for purpose in a way that supports teachers and recognises that they are best able to assess the progress of the pupils, which should not divert their time or resources away from teaching and learning. We acknowledge that. That is the brief that the Department gave CCEA, and that is what the shadow year was intended to try to streamline. We have also ensured that CCEA has developed those arrangements with considerable input from teachers and trade unions.

In summary, we acknowledge that there is a lot happening in schools this year. Part of that is due to policies being delayed in the past. Again, teachers were saying that there was too much pressure on them, and the Department had to listen. We believe that there is widespread support and agreement for both the principle of levels of progression and the levels of progression themselves. The Minister has asked for a comprehensive report from CCEA on how the arrangements are operating early in the summer term of 2012-13, along with a full picture of the issues identified by schools and CCEA's detailed proposals to address those for subsequent years.

The Department is serious about its emphasis on literacy and numeracy, and the proposed levels of progression will help our children to move forward with the increased stretch required. Those are our new standards, and we need them in place if we are to make the progress to which we aspire. We are happy to take any questions that the Committee might have.

The Chairperson: Thanks, Dale. The last point that you make concerns the workload, and it is absolutely right. We have been inundated with concerns, and there are nine pages of concerns that we will forward to you. Teachers feel they have to deal with area planning, this process and inspections in their school between now and Christmas, yet the only answer that they can get from the Department when they raise concerns is, "It is a statutory requirement."

I take the point that Katrina makes when she says that this was flagged in 2010 and that we are now in 2012. I would not go as far as to say that there is widespread consensus on the principle, because you get varying degrees in the arguments made. However, it seems that we always fall foul when it comes to the implementation.

I am hearing a lot of concerns, especially about the fact that we have dumped the interactive computerised assessment system (InCAS) and now have not one but two providers when it comes to that process. Teachers are at a point at which they cannot take much more. We have serious concerns. My problem is that I am not sure that this Committee should be endorsing the process as far as the progression of a statutory rule is concerned. That creates problems and a challenge when it comes to the issue of whether we bring a motion for negative resolution to the Assembly.

It seems as though the process goes on, concerns are raised, the Department says that it is listening, the legislation is passed and the poor teachers are told, "This is the law. You have to do this." There never seems to be a point at which you can say, "Stop. Can we have some logical progression?" It is always a bit of a contradiction in terms when the Department talks about "progression", because there is no progression when it comes to implementation.

You will turn around and say, "Hold on. We started this in 2010." As far as I know, teachers still have children to teach in schools, which is something that we sometimes lose sight of. We have all this stuff coming down to teachers yet still expect them to teach from 9.00 am to 3.00 pm. I met a group of principals who told me that the only time that that could be done was on a Friday afternoon and at considerable cost to the school. The principals also had serious concerns about the training. Online training for some of this is not the best way in which to do things.

Mrs Godfrey: There are always challenges when a change is made, and it would be naive of us to think or say otherwise. We talked at great length with teachers and their representatives about the timescale for introducing this. You are right: we were going to bring this in a couple of years ago, but we stopped and listened. We placed a requirement on CCEA to meet incredibly regularly with teachers and their representatives to make sure that there would be no surprises, that they would see things as they were being developed and that they would have an opportunity to comment. That is exactly what has happened.

Therefore, these are levels of progression that we agreed some time ago would come into place this year, and this is the statutory rule that gives effect to them. If we do not have the statutory rule in place, we will have invested in training teachers, listened to them, responded to them by making adjustments and teed them up for assessing their year 4, year 7 and year 10 pupils against those levels of progression, and then the law will say, "Sorry. In June, you will have to go back to assessing against the things that we told you three years ago that we were stopping." That is a particular difficulty at the moment.

The other thing that I am very conscious of is that this is an absolutely integral part of the Department's literacy and numeracy strategy, so this is very much part of the raising standards agenda. This is not, and should not be, an administrative exercise, because the whole point of assessment is to identify how children are doing in core areas, with the purpose of helping them to build on strengths and overcome areas for improvement; of informing parents so that they can work and support schools — that is a key part of our wider campaign at the moment — and of making sure that teachers have confidence. Teachers told us that they did not want the system that is in place, where they each assess in their own school. They wanted moderation, because with moderation comes the assurance that not only are you are doing it right but that you know everybody else is doing it right. That was really important to teachers as professionals.

The introduction of any change is never easy, and it would be wrong of us to suggest that, but this is a change that has been planned and consulted on, delayed to respond to feedback and implemented in a shadow year. Richard may be able to say a bit about the learning and feedback from schools during that shadow year and how that has been responded to.

Mr Richard Hanna (Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment): Katrina has covered very well the points about the rule and the levels of progression versus levels of attainment. The levels of attainment were written against the legacy curriculum. That curriculum has not been in place since 2007, so the legacy levels of attainment are being applied. They were designed for the previous curriculum, but they have been applied since 2007 against the revised curriculum. Clearly, that is not a position that any of us want, and it is certainly not a position that teachers in schools wanted at the time or since.

As Katrina pointed out, since 2007, there have been no checks and balances in place to help teachers and schools to get the confidence that the standards that they were applying in good faith in their school were consistent with the standards that were being applied by their colleagues in the same school or between schools. In my comments, I am separating the statutory rule from the implications of bringing effect to the new arrangements, which is the implementation, as you described. If we are moving from a situation in which there were no checks and balances in place for some years to a situation in which we are now introducing checks and balances to provide teachers with the assurance that Katrina has just described, clearly there is a change.

To reassure teachers that the outcomes of statutory assessment are credible and that the standards that they apply in their classroom and school are consistent with those of their colleagues in the same school and with those of teachers in other schools, we need to have some kind of standard. The proposals that we had in place and trialled in the shadow year were that we would look at examples of judgements that were made by teachers. We would examine those against a standard — that is the term "moderation" — and judgements would be made about whether those standards were being applied consistently between schools.

There are a number of things that we learned from our experience in the shadow year. It was incredibly valuable. Sometimes the findings were not always comfortable. We had some very positive outcomes in the shadow year. For example, we facilitated teachers coming together with other teachers in their own school and between schools. We even facilitated teachers coming together between phases — that is, primary and post-primary — and discussing those kinds of standards.

The feedback that we got from that work was enormously positive. Teachers valued that experience considerably. There were issues around the workload. We were testing proposals in the shadow year. We heard the message loud and clear from the schools in our shadow year, and that message was that there were challenges around the proposals as they stood. There were challenges around, for example, the timescales: when are schools expected to send samples of work to CCEA, how quickly is that turned around, and will that give sufficient time for schools to report back to parents? As a consequence of experiences in the shadow year, we have changed those timescales. In the proposals, we have given schools a larger window, if you like, to be able to submit samples to CCEA.

There is still learning to take place. The shadow year involved 29 schools. We learned a lot from that, but I think that it would be entirely unreasonable for us to expect the system to be able to shift from the legacy arrangements to the new arrangements within one school year. Katrina mentioned that we have been engaging with teachers' representatives, teachers, groups of principals and a broad range of stakeholders. What we have been doing with our colleagues in the Department is to look for ways in which we can allow teachers and schools the time and space to become familiar with the new arrangements over time.

When explaining it to my colleagues, I have used the analogy of learning a language. This is a slightly different language of assessment. When learning any new language, the early parts of the process involve learning the words. As confidence builds, it becomes a question of putting those words together, and, over time, fluency can be achieved. Again, I am separating the rule itself, which governs the levels of progression, from the methodology that we use to effect that. We have been discussing with our colleagues in the Department the fact that this will take time and that we are still in the process of engaging with teachers' representatives, teachers and principals to explore the ways in which we can provide that flexibility in the early years of implementation.

The Chairperson: I will tell you where I struggle with this, and you have confirmed it, Richard. The Department's paper talks about the fact that the introduction of two assessments will present significant challenges for training, and the Department has agreed to an outline CCEA programme. You say that it is like learning a new language, but when you learn a language, you have one dictionary. In this case, you have two, because InCAS is being taken away.

Mrs Godfrey: It is important to say that the order for levels of progression does not relate in any way to computer-based assessment. This is different legislation altogether.

The Chairperson: Yes, but what I am saying is that all of that is going on at the same time. My point is that you have this on the one side and progression on the other side, and teachers just do not know how they are going to manage with those two things. That is why I am not convinced that the implementation of all of this is being done in a teacher-friendly way. It is going to have, I think, a detrimental impact on how teachers deliver in the classroom.

Mrs Godfrey: It really should not, Chair. That is not its aim at all.

The Chairperson: I know that that is not its aim, Katrina, but how many teachers have spoken to Committee members in the past number of weeks to say that they are not able to cope with this? Members will probably raise the same issue.

Mrs Godfrey: And yet, at the same time, we constantly hear teachers say, "Why are we still on an assessment system that is not as robust as we think it needs to be? What is keeping you? You promised us levels of progression with the revised curriculum in 2007. You openly admit that you are requiring us to assess against levels of attainment that were designed before the revised curriculum, so what is keeping you from landing the new assessment arrangements that are designed to give us confidence?"

That is what teachers have told me on many occasions. You often hear that particularly strongly from the post-primary sector. Teachers there will tell you that they do not have confidence in the reporting for the children that they receive in September, and they, therefore, feel that they have to go off and add to their workload by doing a whole lot more. If we do not change that system and bring in the important improvements, we will continue to have that conversation as well. That is one of the challenges. There is pretty good acceptance of the need for these changes and the need for standardisation, levels, reporting and robust moderation.

One example that Richard shared with me before I came in used the old levels of attainment in ICT. They have no reference to using the internet, because they predate the common understanding in schools that, as part of the ICT curriculum, children would be taught how to access the internet safely and appropriately and how to manage that information and those skills. It is important, and there has been a very clear push towards us in which we have been told that we have to implement this quickly but not too quickly. That is what we have been doing for the past two years: investing in training, consulting, discussing, listening to the feedback and making adjustments based on those issues.

Richard's point is right, in that these things do not just come in. If, in the Civil Service, you have new sets of requirements, you have to change your working practices. That can be difficult, but the key focus is on making sure that we have the right expectations in literacy and numeracy for children and the right tools to help us to close the gap that we want to see closed. It should not be, and it cannot become, an administrative burden, because it is designed to make sure that children get every chance to achieve their full potential, particularly in the core areas.

Mr Kinahan: I share the Chair's concerns on the workload, and I am very grateful to hear Richard saying that you are talking to him to try to find a way forward. I would like to hear a few more resolutions before we let this go through, however.

I take your point that you need to get it in place. We have all received the letter from the Irish National Teachers' Organisation and the Ulster Teachers' Union stating that the arrangements are unworkable and burdensome; that teachers have insufficient time; and that this would encroach significantly on the learning time for pupils and teachers. The letter goes on to ask some questions about how it works. We would expect that sort of reply from unions who are protecting their members, but I am concerned, and I want to know more about how you are dealing with those matters, Richard.

Mrs Godfrey: It may be helpful if Richard outlined how the moderation process is intended to work so that it does not take away from teaching and learning in the classroom.

Mr Hanna: I note and fully accept your comments about the computer-based assessment, Chair, but, at the risk of repeating myself and going over ground that Katrina has covered, it is very important to understand that the focus of this meeting — the statutory rule — has no reference whatsoever to the computer-based assessment; it is just about end of Key Stage assessment. I fully accept the cumulative effect of workload, and I think that there is a challenge there, but if I may go back to end of Key Stage assessment, which is governed by the rule, the overwhelming feedback that we have had from principals and teachers is that we must have a more robust system. They ask how they can have confidence as teachers that the standards that they are applying in good faith are being applied consistently in other places. That is accepted.

I have to confess that I was a little surprised to see some of the most recent union comments. I met with the union concerned last Thursday. We had a very useful meeting, and the issues that we discussed were exactly the same issues that we are discussing today. I felt that the outcome of that meeting, certainly from my perspective, was very positive in so far as I was making it clear that CCEA was engaging with colleagues in the Department. We absolutely recognise the challenges of the workload. We are working with our colleagues in the Department to explore some elements of flexibility in the first few years, while accepting the principle that I mentioned before, which is that it takes time to become fluent in and familiar with the arrangements.

To go back to Katrina's point about, if you like, the quantum required from schools, our statisticians have worked closely with my CCEA colleagues who deal with curriculum and assessment. What we have been working towards is trying to balance the expectations of teachers and principals in so far as they would like a robust system with a balance struck between workload and manageability. There is a balance to be struck, because if we consider that as a continuum, at one end you have no checks and balances in place and very little confidence. That is largely where we are with the current arrangements. If we were to take the extreme opposite view of that, it would mean not sampling but looking at every piece of work that every teacher is assessing all the time. Clearly, that is an untenable position.

Therefore, what we have been working towards is trying to establish where between those two extremes, if you like, we can have a system that provides the kinds of assurances that we know that schools want but, at the same time, is manageable. That is what we were testing in the shadow year. We have now got what we believe is a credible sample size that we would be looking for at a school level to be able to make the judgements that I have described.

That having been said, we also recognise that there is perhaps a lack of confidence because teachers and, indeed, even teachers' representatives have expressed the view that they are here in September 2012, the new arrangements have just been introduced and they do not have a high level of confidence or fluency. We are anxious about some aspects of the new arrangements. We fully accept that.

Mrs Godfrey: I suppose that one of the ironies is that it would have been wrong to finalise proposals until you had completed and been informed by the learning from the shadow year. That was one of the challenges.

Mr Kinahan: I have two questions on the back of that. Should we resource teachers a bit more? Have we learnt from the shadow year whether the solution is to provide shadow teachers or a little bit more money so that they can have a little bit more time? Is there something that we should try to put in the rule will ease a lot of that?

My final question relates to the likely changes to the English baccalaureate — or GCSEs — in the long term. I know that we are three or four years away from that. Are we changing something, only to have to change it again when we move to a new system?

Mrs Godfrey: No, we should not — well, to the extent to which anything is ever fixed in politics or education, I suspect. The arrangements that we have focus primarily on Key Stages 1, 2 and 3. At the moment, GCSEs are the main method of assessment beyond that. If the arrangements change, the assessment method beyond that changes but not at Key Stages 1, 2 and 3. The critical issue is that, regardless of what the system is, the statements that are in the levels of progression should stand because they have been tested educationally, with feedback from business and industry, parents, teachers and others. Regardless of the sort of system that you have, they are the sorts of skills that children need to be able to exhibit. That should not change because of the way in which the levels of progression have been approached. I hope that that makes sense.

Mr Rogers: Thank you very much for your presentation. You are very welcome. I came to the meeting today having read the material concerned. I am now startled by a number of things that have been said. Dale used the term "noise". I agree with the Chair's view. From visiting schools, I know that their deep concern is over the workload. Katrina, I understand that it is your position to push the Department line that we need to push on with this no matter what. CCEA expressed its concerns about the levels of progression, and, in its letter to the Committee, the unions referred to CCEA's letter giving a:

"minimal outline of the process".

The unions went on to state:

"CCEA has failed to provide schools with samples or appropriate guidance" ,

and:

"No sample of a portfolio has been provided."

A teacher may have a joint class of P3s and P4s with 30 children in a room — in a recent answer to a question, we learned that a number of schools have 35 pupils in their classes — and the P3s have to be taught as well as the P4s. Time and space was mentioned today, and I cannot see how teachers will have the time or space to teach it effectively or get it across.

I have a number of questions. Your briefing refers to the report of the shadow year. It would have been very useful if we had had that report in front of us. What sort of resourcing went into the 29 schools for the pilot? It was mentioned that there was cross-sectoral consultation between primary and post-primary schools. Katrina, you mentioned things in the Civil Service, but this is about children and hard-working teachers. I agree that we want this to be robust and accurate. Dale, you said that you will look at it again at the end of 2012-13 and tweak it again if necessary. If this goes ahead in its current format, I am really concerned for the teachers in our schools and, particularly, those in our primary schools.

Mrs Godfrey: Sean, it is important to make it clear that bringing in the levels of progression does not preclude us from working constantly with schools to smooth in the arrangements for the assessment. We would want to do that in any case. The statutory rule allows us to say something that we have been saying for the past three years. We can tell schools that they can be confident to assess against the levels and that these are the sorts of skills, levels of knowledge and applicability of skills that we want to see in our young people. That is absolutely clear. However, as I said, that does not preclude us from working constantly with schools to try to make sure that the arrangements for assessment are as smooth as they can be. We do that with any system. It is in nobody's interest for the arrangements for assessment to take away from the teaching and learning of the young people. It is quite the reverse. The arrangements should be workable by teachers, and that was a commitment that we gave right at the start.

The point that you made about tasks is interesting. At the very start of this process, we had the idea that CCEA would simply provide three or four standard tasks to schools. Teachers did not like that. They wanted the system to allow them to develop their own tasks, which CCEA could then say were entirely in line with the standards. As you will know, teachers are professionals who see assessment as part of their professional role. They wanted to be able to come up with their own tasks to allow them to assess a child's performance against the levels of progression, and use things that they knew might seize the imagination or be relevant to the children in their classroom. That focus on the balance between being supported to develop your own tasks or doing standard tasks that CCEA might provide was a direct response to feedback from teachers. They, very clearly, see one of their professional responsibilities as assessing pupils.

It is a tricky one. When you bring in any change, you can have absolute support for that change and concern about adapting to it. Those two things are not mutually exclusive. We would not be doing this if it were not such an integral part of the wider focus that we have in the Department, in the economic strategy and in the Programme for Government on improving outcomes for children and young people, particularly in the core areas of literacy and numeracy.

Mr Rogers: Can I go back to the task of resourcing of this pilot and whatever? I agree; if a group of teachers sit down in this pilot, maybe they have an opportunity to discuss between themselves and come up with sample tasks and whatever else. However, I am talking about the teacher who is sitting with 30 children in their class and making it happen. Having sample tasks, or whatever, would be quite useful. I suppose my other point, too, is this: can you give me a little more on what sort of resourcing went into the pilot?

Mr Hanna: As far as resourcing the pilot is concerned, what we were able to do was provide substitute cover, for example. We brought together the principals and assessment co-ordinators of the 29 schools, and we involved them in professional dialogue. Clearly there were costs associated with that in bringing them out of schools. As I said previously, one of the most powerful outcomes or findings from the shadow year, for us, was the feedback that we got from teachers about the professional dialogue that you have just described. CCEA was able to facilitate that, and we were supported because we were working through this with our literacy and numeracy colleagues in the education and library boards. So it was being presented and facilitated jointly by CCEA and our colleagues in the education and library boards.

Our literacy and numeracy colleagues in the boards were dealing with the aspects of school improvement, for example, and my colleagues in CCEA were dealing with the aspects of assessment, and bringing those two things together. We were able to do that on school development days. So we worked with schools and co-ordinated some of their school development days so that there was no disruption to children in the schools, because the staff were having an opportunity anyway, and we brought them together. With resources, therefore, there was a lot of facilitation from CCEA. We shared that with our colleagues from the education and library boards, as I mentioned. There was a lot of facilitation, but this was very much a question of teachers. It was teacher-driven, and we got a lot of enormously helpful and useful feedback from teachers in that process.

Mr Rogers: Just to follow on, is there any resourcing available during this school year for this?

Mr Hanna: For —

Mr Rogers: Is there any staff, any time?

Mr Hanna: For training and support, yes. We are providing an element of training and support. As well as that, obviously there are still school development days in place, and we have been trying to work with schools on, I suppose, a call-down basis. CCEA has capacity, albeit limited, to support schools that ask for additional help, for example. There is a difference between primary and post-primary schools, but some have identified a greater need than others for support. Some schools are — I use the word "content" — but some schools have been moving forward with this themselves without a lot of support from CCEA. There are other schools that need support.

One of the things that I have been working on with my colleagues in the Department is looking at ways of identifying the needs, and that allows us to bring proposals to colleagues in the Department about how we can, perhaps, meet those needs in the weeks and months ahead. Clearly, with that, there may well be a requirement, or at least a request, for additional resources. At the moment, we are hearing — and it has been expressed in some of the communication from teachers' representatives — that, in some cases, schools do not really understand what is expected of them. We can address that need, and we can work closely with schools and help them to understand what the expectations are. Our experience is that that is not the case across the entire school service. Some schools have asked for that kind of help, and we are working with colleagues in the Department to address how we can meet that need.

Mrs Godfrey: The critical point of assurance to the Committee has to be that, right through this year, we will be in constant contact with teachers and their representatives. As Richard said, we will respond if needs are identified, and we will do our absolute utmost to make sure that those are responded to in a sensible way. It will inevitably be tailored. Some schools will have been champing at the bit to get on with this because they know how necessary it is, and they will not need too much assistance. There may be others where hand-holding is more important as you build confidence and start to implement it. However, we can certainly assure the Committee that this will be kept under review every month. We will also have to look very carefully at how we communicate what is expected, as much to handle the misunderstandings as to improve the understanding. Therefore, if there are urban myths out there that this means x, and it does not, we will have to be very skilful and quick at explaining what it is not, as well as what it is. That is a commitment that you might reasonably expect from us.

Mr Hanna: If I may make a brief comment regarding your reference to online training. One of the other positives emerging from the work that we have been doing over the past 18 months or so has been teachers' reaction to online training. It has been very positive. We have used what is called a blended approach, which was a combination of initial engagement, which was face to face, setting out the stall and building an understanding of what was going to happen. That was with principals and assessment co-ordinators. However, the feedback that we have got in respect of the online element of it has been very positive, because teachers have been able to engage with that training at times when it suits them. It has not been intrusive, so it means that we have not been drawing large numbers of teachers out of schools just for one or two days or whatever. The other thing about it is that it is there all the time, so teachers can dip in and go back.

We have developed large libraries of exemplification to show what expected standards might look like. That has been a very positive aspect of this work. However, to go back to what Katrina said, the approach that we have taken over the past 18 months or so has been very much system-wide training. It has been the same for every school and teacher. I think that we are at a point in time where we need to differentiate between the needs. We need to focus our attention and our resources on areas where there is most need and requirement for most support. As we move forward, it is important to tailor our support plans and provide a much more bespoke solution to the system.

Mr Hazzard: Thanks for the presentation. I have to agree with some of the things that Katrina has said. I view the levels of progression as vital in moving the system forward, especially advancing numeracy and literacy, although I share the concerns about the hurdles and the challenges. However, I do not think that we should view this simply as an administrative exercise. This is about pushing up attainment and improving numeracy and literacy. Only yesterday, we heard in the Assembly the call for the need for action. We need to move forward. Any talk of negative resolutions is a retrograde step. It is vital to improve on what we have. If we are going to tackle low attainment among Protestant boys in working-class areas, this is the sort of integrated and imaginative approach that we need to take. With that in mind, can I ask how you feel the likes of this will tackle the low attainment of Protestant boys in working-class areas?

Mrs Godfrey: What it does is that it sets out for everybody — teachers will know much of this already, but the levels of progression set out quite confidently the sorts of skills that we expect young people to be able to demonstrate at certain key points in their education. They set them out in quite user-friendly language. They set them out, as Dale said, as "can-do" statements: as what we might reasonably expect children and young people to have a grasp and a command of and be able to apply at certain key points. That is important at all sorts of levels that we have already talked about in measuring progress against a standard and using that information to improve. However, it also starts to further advance some of the other issues that we have been talking about, including how parents can engage with their children's education and how parents understand the sorts of things that a child might reasonably be supported to achieve at certain levels. As the language used is, in many cases, quite straightforward, it allows greater engagement by parents.

For example, a maths question might be about the extent to which you have an understanding of time. At year 4, that will be one thing around telling the time, and at year 7, it might be calculating the time. In a simple example, if you put the oven on or a DVD recorder on to record a 60- or a 75-minute programme. It will actually set out the sorts of skills and knowledge that we expect young people to have at certain key points. If you can explain that not just in the old way, which was whether you can spell 30 words or do a page of sums, if you can translate it into the real world, you immediately allow parents to see where it is that they can step in.

That is certainly an example I had through the early implementation of the revised curriculum with one of my children, because the teacher was able to tell me, your child has a difficulty with time, and here are the sorts of things that we would expect she should be able to do at certain points; here is how you, as a parent, can help when you are doing the shopping or when you are in the kitchen. That translates out of the classroom in a really powerful way into everyday life, and starts to provide a basis for much greater explanation to parents about the purpose of the revised curriculum. Through that, we can have much greater engagement of parents in supporting the learning of their children.

To come back to where you started on this point, we know that that is an absolutely defining factor in tackling underachievement, because one of the correlations is between the extent to which parents feel able to engage with and value education, and the attitudes that their children will have to learning and doing well at school. It takes the sorts of things that we expect children to be able to do out of the classroom and into a much more accessible language that allows parents to engage as well. That is why we do not just require the assessing but the reporting, because reporting to parents how their child is doing is a key way to engage parents in supporting their children's education if we get it absolutely right. Good schools do this anyway.

Mr Hazzard: I hope that that sort of integrated, collaborative approach with parents will have a positive effect on lowering absenteeism as well. Is that something that you would share?

Mrs Godfrey: If you understand what your child is doing in school and you understand the importance of it, and — this is a key element of the curriculum — if it is being taught effectively in a way that is relevant to you, school is going to be a more enjoyable and fulfilling experience. Parents are going to see its importance. That will not be the only thing, because as you were discussing in the Chamber yesterday, absenteeism is a multifaceted challenge. However, it will certainly be a contributor.

Mr Hazzard: I am glad to hear that we can meet those hurdles and needs and work with the teachers and everything else.

Mrs Godfrey: And keep it under constant review, as well.

Mr Hazzard: And keep it under constant review. I think it is important that we progress with this issue. I agree with what Danny said yesterday, that there is a need for action. It is important that we do not stall here.

The Chairperson: I wish that I had the same confidence. I heard what Chris and Katrina said. I am not normally a big fan of unions, and I do not think that the unions would look upon me as one of their champions.

Mrs Godfrey: If it is helpful, we can provide some information in response to some of the points on that.

The Chairperson: That would be very useful, because we want to ensure that schools are as unfettered as possible. However, all I see happening is another chain, another chain and another chain, and it is no wonder that people do not want to be teachers. I love the circulars from the Department; they should all be framed and put away somewhere, never to be seen for years. You will probably remember one from 1993 or 1998 about reducing bureaucracy in schools. I do not know whether it has gone through the shredder because, since then, all we have done is produce bureaucracy, yet we still have the problem of children leaving school unable to read or count. It is frustrating. While I respect your professional judgement, although I reserve the right to disagree, I must say that it is not working.

Mrs Godfrey: The critical thing for us, Chair, is understanding the implications. We have brought legislation and transitional arrangements to the Committee and have set out a very clear trajectory. Yes, that is not without its challenges, but failing to deliver on it will create a different set of challenges altogether, and they will be felt most acutely in classrooms. It is important to mention that.

It is also important to note that the best systems in the world combine two key elements: autonomy in what is happening in teaching and learning in the classroom, and accountability. The best systems in the world have high autonomy in the classroom and high accountability for the school. We know that that combination works best. So, when we were designing the arrangements, a very simple way to do it would have been to, as Richard said, require every child to be moderated and tested and to require something that the system would do to schools. The feedback that we got most from teachers, particularly from local teaching unions, was that teachers wanted to be at the centre of assessment. They wanted to carry out the assessment and not have the Government or CCEA do it for them. However, they needed the moderation to make sure that, as Richard said, they had confidence in everybody else's outcomes as well as their own. This actually fits that model very effectively, and it is, therefore, very much in line with emerging good practice in other good education systems; that sense of the teacher at the centre of assessment, but the school accountable for the outcomes that it produces.

Mr Hanna: To amplify something that Katrina said, we see this as a journey, and I set that out in my earlier comments. There will be an implementation phase, which is a phase of change as we move from one methodology to another. One of the things that we have proposed is that, over time, two to three years after that implementation phase or phase of change is concluded and there is a higher level of confidence among teachers and principals in applying the standards, and the fluency that I described earlier has been achieved, we anticipate a much lighter touch in moderation of schools. For example, if a school has demonstrated over a period of time that it is applying the standards accurately and consistently, it strikes us as unnecessary to continue to moderate that school year-on-year. I think it is important — teachers have told us this — that, in the initial stages, this is moderation across the system. However, if we have the level of fluency that I have described, it may well be possible — indeed, I think it would be preferable — to allow schools the type of autonomy that Katrina has just described, and it may then just simply be a sampling of schools. It is our aspiration that we will reach the stage, perhaps four years after that time, when, instead of sampling 100% of the schools, we may be sampling a proportion of schools year on year.

The Chairperson: I am not so sure, Richard, that that would give any teachers who are currently in the process any great comfort. We have left out one element of this — exemptions. There are exemptions for special educational needs, but there are no exemptions for children whose first language is not English. If they are included, with the associated challenges and difficulties, is there a risk that that is going to add to one of the concerns outlined by the union? As there has not been enough engagement with parents to explain that children may achieve lower targets due to the new arrangement, we could find ourselves in a worse position — rather than addressing the issue that Chris referred to about underachievement, and so on — with a bigger problem.

Mrs Godfrey: I think that the critical issue there would be the reason why we would not want to be able to give parents information on their child's progress in communication and in using maths and ICT just because their first language was not English, perhaps. Those parents need exactly the same information, because the same things that I mentioned earlier apply. It is about how your child is going to be supported to continue to achieve to their full potential. What is the information that helps you as a parent support that child? So there are issues about making sure that children are not denied the opportunity of being assessed, just because they happen to come into a school and English is not their first language.

Mr Carl Savage (Department of Education): I just want to clarify. Currently, a principal can exempt pupils if there are particular reasons; if there have been emotional difficulties, or the likes of a pupil coming from outside this education system. Again, however, the presumption is that that pupil should be assessed; exemption is only in exceptional circumstances. We hope to clarify that within the next couple of months, possibly via circular.

The Chairperson: Another one; somebody has already drafted it. You can pick up that there are differences of views on this, but the majority of Committee members have a general concern. What does the Department see as being a compromise here? Serious issues have been raised by the unions. They cannot be ignored, and I would not want to ignore the genuine concerns that have been raised in the correspondence, and other members have been spoken to by teachers, and so on. A need and an incessant rush sometimes comes with these things. It has to be done; this statutory rule will have to be put through. Then, of course, when we have put that in, we have heard — and I am not being disrespectful, Richard, but we have heard the Department talk about light touch before. I do not think its touch is light. It becomes very heavy and burdensome. Is there time that we can have to allow the concerns that have been raised in this correspondence and here today to be addressed, so that the Committee can look at that again within the next few weeks?

Mrs Godfrey: There is a window, not least because of the points that you have been making, Chair. Schools need the certainty to know. They need to know that this is happening, as it was planned for some years. If, for some reason, it does not happen, they need to know that the goalposts will suddenly be moved on them. Undoubtedly, that will create a huge issue for schools. So we do not have a huge amount of time. Ideally, we would like to be clarifying and confirming this to schools, as we said we would, as quickly as possible. It could not have come to the Committee any earlier, because of the point that I made. It would have been daft to bring you something that was not informed by the trialling, the shadowing and everything else.

We can certainly commit to providing you with a response to the points in the union correspondence that you have referenced. Right from the start, the unions have been in the room with us helping us to design things, so I am concerned about whether we need to do more to help the unions communicate among their own members, because, from the word go, they have been enormously supportive of this process, the timescales and of getting the balance right between moving quickly, but sensibly, to allow for trialling and everything else. We can come back with responses. We can certainly come back to the Committee on the sorts of issues that Danny talked about and Sean raised, about keeping things under review, responding, training, development and support for schools. We can do all of that. If it would be helpful for the Committee to have the response to the union points in time for its session next week, we can certainly do that, too.

The Chairperson: I think that that would be helpful. Katrina, Richard, Carl and Dale, thank you for your time.