



Northern Ireland  
Assembly

Committee for Education

# OFFICIAL REPORT (Hansard)

Education Bill: Motion to Extend Committee  
Stage

14 November 2012

# NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

## Committee for Education

### Education Bill: Motion to Extend Committee Stage

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**Members present for all or part of the proceedings:**

Mr Mervyn Storey (Chairperson)  
Mr Danny Kinahan (Deputy Chairperson)  
Mr Jonathan Craig  
Mrs Jo-Anne Dobson  
Mrs Brenda Hale  
Mr Chris Hazzard  
Mr Trevor Lunn  
Miss Michelle McIlveen  
Mr Sean Rogers  
Mr Pat Sheehan

**The Chairperson:** The next item on the agenda is the Committee Stage of the Education Bill. The Committee Stage commenced on 15 October and is scheduled to conclude on 3 December. Standing Orders allow a Committee to put before the Assembly a motion to extend a Committee Stage. The Committee Clerk's note sets out a timetable for evidence-taking that takes us to the end of January, followed by informal and then formal clause-by-clause scrutiny, which takes us to the end of March. It is therefore proposed to extend the Committee Stage until 8 April. If the Committee completes its evidence-taking and deliberations earlier, a report can be produced more quickly and the Committee Stage immediately concluded. The 8 April 2013 reporting date would allow the Department ample time to arrange the subsequent stages of the Bill before mid-May.

One of the issues to come out over the past couple of weeks has been trying to get all the organisations into some order and to get responses from them, even at this stage, in relation to a date. Yesterday, I received a letter from one of the unions, which I passed on to the Committee Clerk, dated 6 November. It was about the union coming to address the Committee. That is beginning to filter out, even though we have put out the advert and have e-mailed. I want to be absolutely sure that, given the huge importance of the issue, we will not have any organisation or group feeling that they have been ignored or that their views have not been heard. That has delayed us somewhat in putting a table together. The Committee Clerk assures me, however, that we are making progress on that.

Is the Committee content to put down a motion to extend the Committee Stage of the Education Bill until 8 April 2013?

*Members indicated assent.*

**Mr Kinahan:** As I try to learn the job, and everything else at the same time, I find that parents are the hardest group to speak to. There are parent teacher associations, Parents Aloud, and two or three other organisations. However, we need to make sure that we find a way of talking to parents, because there does not seem to be a central organisation.

**The Chairperson:** One of the difficulties is knowing how much union representatives reflect their members, and how much governing bodies right across the piece — the Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment, the Council for Catholic Maintained Schools, right through to the boards — reflect the views of their membership. That is always a big challenge. We need to find a way of ensuring that the public understands what this is all about, because vested interests will ensure that there is a version out there of what they think it is all about. We may have our views, but as a Committee, we want to try to ensure that we hear a wide spectrum of views and that we are well informed on all the issues.

**Mr Lunn:** I tend to agree with Danny. I do not think that we can do much about organisations; we have to assume that they reflect their members' views, particularly the unions. However, my impression of any consultation is that, by and large, the wider public does not even know that it is going on. People would have to be very committed to their school and to the interests of their children — as everyone should be; however, these things pass them by. That must be the fault of the consultation organisers for not putting it out widely enough.

**The Chairperson:** The Committee Clerk can keep me right here, but there are organisations like the parent teacher associations that interact with parents. I am speaking tonight at the primary principals' AGM —

**Mr Lunn:** The Primary School Governors Association.

**The Chairperson:** There is an opportunity for us to ask those groups how they engage with parents. Maybe we should look at doing an event specifically for parents and those types of organisations, and not have the unions, or — I am just using that as an example — not have those types of organisations coming to an event similar to what we did in the Long Gallery. We should give that serious consideration.

**Mr Rogers:** I agree absolutely. I see there that that particular report talks about extra sessions at Easter and Christmas and whatever else. We should even have enough flexibility whereby another day or afternoon in the week would suit us to fit in another evidence session. I agree wholeheartedly with the idea of a stakeholder event.

**The Chairperson:** There is an issue with time in the Senate Chamber, because the Health Committee is looking at moving to another room. So, we can go from 10.00 am until 2.00 pm or later if we need to. You know how it is: if you take briefings from two organisations, it just runs on and on, and could be longer. I do not want to get to the point where we are rushing things through to salve our conscience and saying, "We have had those organisations. We have listened to what they had to say." Everybody should genuinely have an opportunity to quiz them and ask questions of them.

**Mr Lunn:** I do not want to be hard on any particular grouping, but we could ask them to present jointly, and I am thinking particularly of the unions. It would surprise me if the message coming from the various teachers' unions was variable, so why not have them all in here together?

The other thing is that — and I am not saying that we are not — I hope we are giving this enough priority and urgency. It is very important that we get it right, but it is also very important that we get it finalised. The Social Development Committee is meeting three days a week on the Welfare Reform Bill, and it met over the Halloween break. That is dedication.

**Mrs Dobson:** The Agriculture Committee is meeting twice a week.

**The Chairperson:** The reason for that is that the Treasury has put a time-bound process in place for the Welfare Reform Bill. That is why the Social Development Committee has to meet more frequently.

**Mr Lunn:** I understand that. This is urgent because of the dire straits that the education system is in, the state of the boards and the general apprehension and uncertainty that exists out there about all this. The sooner we can get on with it and finalise it, the better. Last time, we took nine or 10 months to scrutinise the first Bill. That was a total waste of time in the end, and we did not even get to the second Bill, and if we had, you could have been talking 18 months. I am fearful that the new deadline will slip.

**The Chairperson:** I do not agree that it was a waste of time. We needed to make sure that we got all the issues aired, and we certainly did.

**Mr Lunn:** Yes, there was plenty of air. Hot air, mostly.

**The Committee Clerk:** The deadline of 8 April is now agreed by the Committee. We cannot slip, and we will not get another chance. The Speaker will not accept a motion for a further extension. So, 8 April is the drop-dead date.

I used to be the Clerk of the Social Development Committee, and we were briefing about that Bill two years ago. As it went through Westminster, the stakeholders were very well informed and were able to come to the Social Development Committee with their amendments drafted. They have just brought back the amendments that they had drafted for the previous Bill. The issue with our stakeholders for this Bill is that they did not see it until it was introduced on 5 October. So, if we had asked them to come to the Committee immediately after the Second Stage, they would not have been able to talk about the Bill. That is why I had to give them until 16 November. Only a few have responded so far. Now, I expect a deluge by Friday. That is why the timing is the way it is. As the Chair rightly said, with the Welfare Reform Bill, there was the parity issue. Whether or not you accept that that concept is valid, the Committee has been working to a particular timescale so that parity is not breached.

**Mr Lunn:** Between now and 8 April, at a rough guess, we have about 14 meetings, and we have other business to do.

**The Chairperson:** That is why we have said that we need to consider longer meetings, and if we have to, we will have other meetings as well.

**Mr Lunn:** We just need to give it the priority it deserves.

**The Chairperson:** I do not want us to take our eye off the ball of all that is in this document either, and all the other issues in education. Otherwise, people will say, "You were so wrapped up in one issue that you did not pay any attention to these other things." So, we have a huge amount of work to do. If you listened to what was in the media the other day, you would think that we did no work in the Assembly. We all know how many hours we put in, and we do not have to put our diaries into the 'Belfast Telegraph' to prove how efficient we are. If we did that, we would try to do it in a way that reflected what does happen.

**Mr Lunn:** I should perhaps qualify my "total waste of time" remark. It was a waste of time because the Bill did not go ahead. However, it was also groundwork for what we are doing now. Of the discussion we had then, we could have 90% of it again now, or else draw from it and try to shorten it a bit; that is the thing. It will be helpful that all the parties around the table have some sort of commitment to making this thing go through.

**Mr Sheehan:** I agree that we should be as thorough as possible in our work on this issue. However, I introduce one note of caution: the research suggests that the longer a meeting goes on, the less efficient it becomes. I ask the Chair in particular to be more direct and to the point on some issues.

**The Chairperson:** That has been noted, although whether it will be heeded will be determined by the answers that we get.

**Mr Rogers:** At least two members of this Committee, Michaela and myself, have the Public Accounts Committee meeting in the afternoon. So, if you have longer meetings, we will be cut out completely.

On Trevor's point, should we be going for a second evidence session every week in the month of January to see where we are?

**Mr Craig:** Pat and I have a Policing Board committee meeting this afternoon.

**Miss M McIlveen:** We will just have to start at 6.00 am.

**The Chairperson:** We will just have to be here early.

**Mr Craig:** That is not a problem. If you want me here at 7.00 am, I will be here.

**The Chairperson:** I will meet with the Committee Clerk to discuss this. After Friday, we should have an idea of all the responses. On Monday, we will meet to try to compile a detailed proposal for dealing with this, which we will bring to the meeting next week.

**Miss M McIlveen:** If you recall, in the previous mandate, we met on a Friday morning. So, there is flexibility there as well.

**Mr Kinahan:** I want to take us back to the point I made at the beginning: it is the parents.

**The Chairperson:** Yes, we will not lose sight of that. Thank you.