



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

12 December 2012

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

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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 Trevor Lunn
Miss Michelle McIlveen
Mr Sean Rogers
Mr Pat Sheehan

Witnesses:

Ms Ruth Kennedy	Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment
Mr Dale Heaney	Department of Education
Dr David Hughes	Department of Education

The Chairperson: I welcome Dale Heaney, David Hughes and Ruth Kennedy.

Mr Dale Heaney (Department of Education): Thank you, Chair and Committee members. The Committee will have received the Department's response to the further requests that followed last week's briefing session. I do not propose to go through the response in great detail, but I hope that the Committee will recognise that much of what was asked for was already in train or will be put into place. We can, for instance, assure the Committee that we continue to engage with the shadow year schools both by the Department and the Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment (CCEA). Indeed, that engagement will widen over the current year as all schools move to assess using levels of progression. This will be a learning year for the Department and CCEA, and it can be effective only if we listen to schools' experiences. Our response summarises CCEA's work on task development, and as you will have read, guidance has also been drawn up in draft, pending a final decision on the order. We will issue that guidance as soon as possible, and we will discuss further support that could be provided to schools with the teaching unions in the coming weeks.

On the revision to the moderation timetable proposed by the Committee, we think that it is important to bear in mind that the currently agreed timetable has been drawn up to allow schools to report outcomes to parents at the end of the school year and to give parents confidence in those outcomes. We believe that the timescales, as proposed, represent the best compromise between assessment and moderation and enable schools to make adjustments to levels before reporting them to parents. Having considered the proposal to report unmoderated outcomes in the summer term, followed by moderated outcomes in the autumn, the Department and CCEA are of the view that this would only add to confusion in the system, potentially increase workloads in schools and decrease the credibility

of outcomes. It is difficult to see how confidence in outcomes would be strengthened when, under the Committee's proposal, there would be two sets of assessments at pupil, school and system level.

We accept that, in many cases, parents are not interested in or understand the reporting levels. We also accept that schools themselves question their value, particularly when a pupil transfers between schools. We acknowledge these points and point to them as the most important factors in introducing change. Moderated teacher assessment, as previously agreed by the Committee, is intended to give all the audiences outcomes that inspire confidence in what is being reported. The Committee will have noted the Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS) and Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS) results reported yesterday and will see how important it is to have confidence in the data at system level and how powerful that confidence can be. The new arrangements are designed to give pupils, teachers and parents that same confidence. However, the Minister is clear that confidence should not come at the price of interfering with teaching and learning, which is why he has emphasised the need for flexibility and support over the coming years. The Minister has tasked CCEA to provide a comprehensive report on how the arrangements are operating early in the summer term of the 2012-13 school year, along with a full picture of the issues identified by schools and CCEA's proposals to address them. When the Minister has received and considered that report, we will be happy to arrange a further briefing for the Committee.

In summary, the benefits of the proposed order are as follows: increased confidence in outcomes by schools, pupils and parents; better understanding of assessments generally and the levels expected; and a continuing improving system of education as the new assessment arrangements bed in. As we highlighted previously, the longer a decision on the way forward is delayed, the greater the risk of uncertainty. We sincerely hope that the Committee can reach agreement today on the way forward to allow us to proceed to the next stage of the legislative process.

The Chairperson: Members, the Committee has endeavoured to ensure that we have reflected the breadth of issues that have been raised with us. There has been an attempt by the Department to ensure that those issues are addressed. We still have a difference of opinion on the timing of moderation. However, the Committee can take some comfort from the fact that there has been a reasonably robust exchange on the issue over the past number of weeks. We need to ensure that teachers and others in the education system continue to have confidence that we are carrying out our statutory function, which is to scrutinise and ask questions of the Department and the Minister. Before I say anything else, I am happy for members to make other points.

Mr Kinahan: I am still uncomfortable with it. I think that we should delay it for a while because the schools are overburdened.

The Chairperson: That is certainly a view held by some. Are there any other comments?

Mr Rogers: I welcome your comments about engagement, listening and responding positively. Although, as the Chair says, there is no movement on the timetable at this stage, I hope that it is still open for discussion as this school year continues. Given the report produced in July, the situation is disappointing because many of the issues that we flagged up in the past two months should have been sorted out by September, never mind by now. I want an assurance that although the Department and CCEA regard the timing as an immovable feast now, they will be open, depending on the responses from schools etc, to moving this a bit further, if at all possible.

The Chairperson: Sean, I do not want to sound as though I am defending the Department. However, the reply that we received from the Department, which is among the tabled items, gives us some assistance. The penultimate paragraph states:

"Given the disadvantages and risks associated with the approach proposed by the Committee, the Minister does not intend to modify the timescales for moderation. The Department will, however, continue to work with CCEA to ensure that moderation operates effectively in the best interests of pupils without interfering in teaching and learning.

A full assessment of how this arrangement has operated in 2012-13 and the implications for 2013-14 will be made early in the summer term of the current school year."

Mr Rogers: Apologies, Chair. With so many papers, I missed that page. We have to be conscious of the comments made by the school principals during our visit last week about the effect that this has on

schools, particularly if it is delayed any longer. However, we have the reassurance that a close eye will be kept on this the whole way through.

The Chairperson: We need to work on fitting this into our timetable. Sometimes, because of various events, and so on, we revisit such issues only when they are brought to us as problems. We, as a Committee, need to be proactive and to table into our work programme when and how we will revisit this issue. At that stage, we will be able to judge what the commitments have been and what the process and practice continue to be.

Members, I take on board the Deputy Chair's concern. What is the view of the Committee? Given that all the concerns that we raised have been documented, that we have received assurances and that some progress has been made, are members content to make the rule subject to the assurances and to our writing to the Department to that effect? Obviously, if members are not content, there will be a different course. I take Sean's point about the principals, who stated their concerns about further delay.

Ms Boyle: The Department's response states very clearly that it has received that assurance and that it is a key element of CCEA's work stream for the coming year. So I concur with what you said about progressing.

Mr Kinahan: We will let it go, as long as the assurances are stuck to.

The Chairperson: Ruth, subject to the Committee's approval, it might be useful for us to go to CCEA at some stage rather than CCEA coming to us. I do not think that the Committee has ever visited CCEA. We still have not visited the Department — I think that the blockades are still up there. In the spirit of Christmas, we will maybe advance a wee bit beyond Stormont and go to CCEA. We could spend some time there and have a very practical discussion with CCEA to get a grasp of all that it does. That will also form part of our consideration of the whole issue of moderation. If members are happy, I will write to CCEA to request that. Ruth, I know that you cannot say that you will open the door for us and that we will be more than welcome. However, if members are happy, we will do that.

Are members content to make the rule, subject to the assurances and to the Committee writing to the Department?

Members indicated assent.

The Chairperson: David, Dale and Ruth, thank you very much.