



Northern Ireland  
Assembly

Committee for Employment and Learning

# OFFICIAL REPORT (Hansard)

Inquiry into Careers Education, Information,  
Advice and Guidance in Northern Ireland:  
CCEA Briefing

13 February 2013



heart of the curriculum, although schools have a great deal of flexibility in designing the curriculum experience.

**Mr Allister:** Is there anything wrong with the basic output in numeracy and literacy?

**Mr Hanna:** Recent international studies have shown that, certainly from the end of Key Stage 2, we compare very favourably with other countries in literacy and numeracy.

**Mr Allister:** You think that everything is fine.

**Mr Hanna:** I do not think that everything is fine in our system. We have a very high-achieving education system.

**Mr Allister:** Therefore, when employers tell us that they bring in students who, at the extreme end, cannot read and write, we should not believe them because everything is fine and things are working well.

**Mr Hanna:** That may be an employer's experience, but I cannot comment on the experience of a specific employer. Nevertheless, we recognise that our education system has a tail of significant underachievement that needs to be addressed.

**Mr Allister:** What does that tail of underachievement tell us about our curriculum?

**Mr Hanna:** A wide range of influences and experiences affect the performance of young people, the schools and the system, one of which is the curriculum. The curriculum, as it stands, provides opportunities for a broad and balanced experience for children and young people. As I said, it has literacy and numeracy at its core. I recognise that there is underachievement in our system. That is a matter of fact. However, in my view, the curriculum is not a constraining factor.

**Mr Allister:** Do you have underachievement at the very core?

**Mr Hanna:** I do not think you can say that there is underachievement with the curriculum; underachievement is an outcome.

**Mr Allister:** Therefore, it is someone else's fault?

**Mr Hanna:** I would not suggest that it is someone else's fault. I just recognise the fact that there are various considerations and influences that affect —

**Mr Allister:** Therefore, you do not think that, from a curriculum point of view, anything needs to change.

**Mr Hanna:** I believe, as the feedback from schools shows, that the curriculum, as it stands, provides a great deal of flexibility and the opportunity for schools to design curriculum experiences that are fit for purpose and which match the needs of children and young people.

**Mr Allister:** Therefore, if there is failure, it is failure in the schools.

**Mr Hanna:** I would not —

**Mr Allister:** I wonder where the failure is; it is obviously not with the curriculum.

**Mr Hanna:** As I say, various elements are at play. Think of what you have described here as outcomes of our system, as opposed to the statutory framework that is the curriculum. It is a matter of fact that we have underachievement. The Department of Education has policies, specifically Every School a Good School, to tackle underachievement.

**Mr Allister:** Do you ever talk to employers?

**Mr Hanna:** Yes. In fact, we have worked very closely with the employer that you just mentioned. We have regular and frequent engagement with employers. The one whom you mentioned specifically has worked very closely with us on our work to support science, technology, engineering and maths (STEM). We have a comprehensive programme to promote STEM subjects. We engage with many employers, including the one you have just mentioned.

**Mr Allister:** Thank you.

**The Chairperson:** I just want to make one point before I bring you in, Bronwyn. As part of our inquiry into careers, we had the Confederation of British Industry in front of us, whose representatives said that Northern Ireland Electricity was looking for 50 apprentices. Of the 2,000 people who applied, 300 did not bother to turn up, and of the 1,700 who sat the basic skills test in literacy, numeracy and mechanics, only 600 made it through. That is a lot of people who did not make it through the basic test. Of the 600 who did make it through to the practical test, only 200 succeeded in it. The figure went from 2,000 to 600. That is an issue that we have to address. I am also keen that we actually deal with careers when we are here. As time is limited, Richard, let us just move on to that.

**Ms McGahan:** Your presentation mentions Learning for Life and Work (LLW). My 16-year-old daughter is doing that course. When speaking to her this morning, she talked quite positively about it, and she feels that she has learnt a lot. When I read the presentation from the National Association of Head Teachers (NAHT), I was a bit surprised to find the statement:

*"LLW has been swamped as a 'catch all' content driven GCSE ... and ... lost relevance".*

Do you have any comment to make on that?

**The Chairperson:** Good point.

**Mr Hanna:** Learning for Life and Work is a new area in the revised curriculum. In response to requests from schools, the CCEA developed a GCSE course; demand was driven by schools. The comments that we have had about Learning for Life and Work in the curriculum have been very positive, consistent with what you just said. I interpret your question as referring to the tension between Learning for Life and Work in the curriculum and Learning for Life and Work as a qualification. Is that right?

**The Chairperson:** The National Association of Head Teachers — who will be here after this session — said that it has a problem with LLW. It feels that LLW is well-placed to enhance careers but, unfortunately, is swamped as a catch-all driven by GCSEs.

**Mr Hanna:** From CCEA's perspective, I certainly do not see it as a catch-all. It addresses areas of the curriculum and the school experience that might not have been covered consistently before. In that sense, I see learning for Learning for Life and Work as a very valuable addition to the statutory curriculum and the experience at Key Stage 4.

**The Chairperson:** Richard, Bronwyn is saying that it is a good course that her child actually likes. However, the point is that you would have thought that Learning for Life and Work is about careers advice, yet we do not seem to be getting good careers advice.

**Mr Hanna:** Careers advice is not part of Learning for Life and Work in the curriculum.

**Ms McGahan:** There is an employability section in it.

**Mr Hanna:** Absolutely, but employability is not careers guidance. It is important that I draw a distinction between the two.

**The Chairperson:** We did not say that it had to be careers guidance. We are holding this inquiry because, as Mr Allister outlined, many employers come in here and say that they cannot get the staff or that people do not have the right skills, and many young people say that they have skills but no job. There is a mismatch in our society in some shape or form, and vacancies go unfilled. The question put to us by other people is this: should we be dealing with careers not as regards how to fill in a CV but about jobs and work earlier on? Does the curriculum deal with that?

**Mr Hanna:** The thinking processes leading to educational and, ultimately, careers choices should not be restricted to Key Stages 3, 4 or 5. There is a recognition that decisions on subjects are made at the beginning of Key Stage 4 and, should young people choose to stay on, at the beginning of Key Stage 5. However, the curriculum recognises that that process takes the thinking processes and develops the skills, knowledge and aptitudes that young people need in a career and in the world of work. It cannot be switched on at Key Stage 3; it begins in the foundation years. The curriculum seeks to lay foundations in literacy, numeracy, ICT and in other transferable skills.

**The Chairperson:** I will stop you there because I have a number of members to bring in. Bronwyn?

**Ms McGahan:** This is a separate question on underachievement.

**The Chairperson:** You have the floor.

**Ms McGahan:** I sit on Dungannon and Coalisland neighbourhood renewal. A secondary school in that area has taken an initiative that is additional to tackling that area of work. Do your policies feed into that? The secondary school's approach to neighbourhood renewal is very focused and targeted. I would like to know about your policies for dealing with that.

**Mr Hanna:** The policies on school improvement are the Department of Education's. I can speak on behalf of CCEA and its responsibilities for curriculum assessment and qualifications. We contribute to Department of Education policies on improvement. However, CCEA does not own the school improvement policy, so I —

**The Chairperson:** Your point is made.

**Mr Lyttle:** Thank you for your presentation, Richard. In your submission, you say that careers guidance should complement the curriculum and be consistent in and between schools. You also say that it should inform young people of the jobs that are available in an advanced economy. How well are our schools doing on those two key aims?

**Mr Hanna:** CCEA's responsibilities relate to the curriculum, examinations and assessment. In promoting STEM subjects, for example, and in engaging with schools, we recognised that there was not as much awareness in some schools — perhaps, in many schools — of opportunities in STEM-related careers or knowledge and understanding of opportunities in an evolving economy.

That has been one of the objectives in our STEM work over the past three and more years. Feedback from schools that engaged in the programme showed that it has helped an understanding of career and job opportunities in our economy.

Our economy is changing; there are jobs now that simply did not exist when I left university. CCEA believes that part of our responsibility for the curriculum and for Learning for Life and Work is to raise awareness of those opportunities. We believe that we have been successful in doing that, albeit on a limited scale.

**Mr Lyttle:** How well are we doing at including parents in the information and awareness-raising process?

**Mr Hanna:** That is a very good question. We mentioned school improvement, and engagement with parents and communities is a critical part of that process. CCEA has limited scope to interact directly with parents, but we can engage with communities when it comes to industry and the economy. I recognise that that is a vital aspect of any successful careers guidance policy.

**Mr P Ramsey:** Good morning, Richard and Ruth, you are very welcome. I served on the Committee for Culture, Arts and Leisure, and in a discussion about the creative industries, I recall a witness saying that 50% of the jobs for the next generation of young people have not yet been created.

In youth employment week, the Committee visited Brussels to listen to various presentations, one of which was by the chief executive of Google Europe. His challenge to schools across Europe was to change the curriculum fundamentally and accelerate ICT programmes into primary and secondary schools to meet the demands of the creative industries in the future.

You made a valid point about ICT skills, but it needs to happen at the grass roots, from primary schools on. What are you doing to meet those demands?

**Mr Hanna:** ICT is a mandatory part of the revised curriculum; it is written large in it in the same way as literacy and numeracy are. It is one of the three core elements of a curriculum that provides opportunities for engaging in ICT at the very earliest point in a child's school career.

One of the issues that we have been addressing recently is an observation, indeed even a criticism, that ICT is one aspect of engaging with technology and that there is a need for the harder skills, if I may refer to them in that way, of software development and systems design. In response to that, CCEA has developed an A-level qualification in systems design and software engineering to supplement the A level in ICT. The opportunities are there in the curriculum for young people to engage with ICT at the very earliest opportunity. There are opportunities for qualifications, and we are looking at a GCSE.

**The Chairperson:** OK. We will have a look at that.

**Ms Ruth Kennedy (Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment):** The statutory use in the curriculum of ICT for assessments comes in next year. In advance of that, the primary ICT accreditation scheme, for example, has been very successful. We have 600-plus primary schools involved in that, on an optional basis. That looks at the more creative aspects of ICT.

**The Chairperson:** Could you send us some detail of that?

**Ms R Kennedy:** Yes. In fact, there are demonstrations of the work online, and of pupils using —

**The Chairperson:** I am trying to rush things through, because we have things to do. The idea about this presentation is that we get the general thrust, and then we ask you to give more information to back it up. There is an issue that ICT is not what we need, and Richard brought it up. We need people with harder skills, and they need to get interested earlier in that area.

**Mr P Ramsey:** I have a quick supplementary question. Since you are trying to meet the future needs of industry, what collaboration takes place with the wider industry and business community?

**Mr Hanna:** Do you mean engagement with the software industry?

**Mr P Ramsey:** Yes; and wider industry.

**Ms R Kennedy:** There has been work going on with regard to STEM, an aspect of which looked at STEM futures, where CCEA worked with MATRIX to identify some of the big themes for the future, such as nutraceuticals. Those then became the target for developing resources and working with schools. We have also had a very productive connection with CERN to produce learning resources, some of which are being used by CERN. We have also implemented a STEM directory, which is open to all local businesses. They can register on it and indicate that they are willing to work with schools. There is a large range of —

**The Chairperson:** Can I put to you the point that Mr Ramsey brought up? Europe says that we will have to change how we do our curriculum. I raise a concern, which I invite you to address — not now, but in writing — that science is no longer a core part. It is part of a part, but it is not front and centre. If you are not doing science at primary school, it is more difficult to get enthusiastic at secondary school. What is the success of getting science and IT taught earlier in the curriculum? Although you provide the opportunity for people to do it, I wonder whether it gets taken up, because there are many optional issues.

**Mr Hanna:** It is not for CCEA to ensure the requirement for schools to provide a broad and balanced curriculum; that is for others. In fact, that is being delivered in schools.

**The Chairperson:** OK. Can you answer the question for us? I understand the different responsibilities, but could you come back to us and say how science is promoted in primary school

and throughout the curriculum? Part of that will be along the lines of what Ruth was talking about, and the same will apply for IT.

I want to ask you a couple of specific questions. We have time to deal with it now, or perhaps you will come back to me. At paragraph 1-8 you say that education for employability is not intended to provide careers guidance, but that it helps build an understanding of local economies and develop transferable skills. What skills does education for employability give them?

**Mr Hanna:** As well as what it says there, transferable skills are such things as working with others. It supports the revised curriculum — the statutory curriculum. Skills include problem solving and working with others, which are vital in a working and career environment. Education for employability provides opportunities for students to engage in group activity, work with their peers and others to solve problems. As the paper says, it is not intended to guide young people into particular career paths. It provides them with knowledge and understanding of various career opportunities; it is not intended as advice or guidance.

**The Chairperson:** Going back to Mr Allister's earlier point, I say to you that schools can influence people's thinking in many ways. I know that this is almost heresy, but you cannot just say, as you do in paragraph 1.1, that the guidance is centred on the needs of the individual. Individuals need to be well informed about what the opportunities are. Nobody is trying to tell them what to do. I worry about the fact that we are too soft on this in all of the words that we use. As it says in paragraph 2.3, it is all about reflecting on the knowledge that is required. It is about reflecting, and this and that. It is about saying, "Oh, you might want to go and do that." Two weeks ago, the Committee heard from a person who said that her ideal job was to take photographs of nature, which is a very nice thing to do. However, I wonder how many people would pay her to do it. The issue that I am interested in is the curriculum and how we can ensure that the skills that society needs and which business is prepared to pay for are given to young people. If I may say one last thing on that, it is that confidence and communication — being able to speak and say, "This is why you should employ me" — are key skills that young people need to get very early on. I wonder where they would fit in to the curriculum, if at all.

**Mr Hanna:** You make a point that I heard as two issues, which, although closely related, are separate: whether the opportunities are there in the curriculum, and whether young people are being given all those opportunities all the time. I can answer the question about whether the opportunities are there in the curriculum. However, as regards the experience that young people are getting day by day —

**The Chairperson:** I understood the distinction. I am happy for you to make that distinction to the Committee again in writing; just to make that point and say, "Here is what we do. Here is how the curriculum provides for the issues that have been brought up." Perhaps you would review the Hansard report and see whether you could address that. I realise that we need to ask other people whether they can take advantage of the opportunities in the curriculum.

**Mr Hanna:** The other thing that you may find helpful would be for us to provide you with details of the uptake of the sciences and, indeed, other subjects, such as ICT, at GCSE and A level.

**The Chairperson:** Our interest is with primary school. I want to bring in Fra for just one question because I have to bring this to a close.

**Mr F McCann:** The discussion up to now has been interesting. Every year, we hear that the number of people who pass exams at different levels has increased. At the other end of that, however, we also dealt with 36,000 people who got no exams or GCSEs. Do you analyse why that has happened to determine how you change the curriculum either with regard to education or —

**The Chairperson:** You have the question.

**Ms R Kennedy:** The tail of underachievement in literacy and numeracy has been there for some years and through different iterations of the curriculum. What has been happening in recent years is a close commitment to looking at how to deal with that. One aspect of that is through the work that CCEA does with the curriculum and assessment, and the focus on communication using maths, literacy and numeracy; how that links in with the Department's literacy and numeracy strategy on achievement —

**The Chairperson:** I have to bring other people forward. That question and others will be in the Hansard report. I invite you to reflect on the report and provide us with specific written answers to those questions. Specifically, the charge is that the move to the entitlement curriculum — is it entitlement now, or —

**Mr Hanna:** It is the entitlement framework. That is the breadth of qualifications that are available.

**The Chairperson:** Alright, but the issue is that our curriculum has changed so that we have taken our eye off the skills that our employers need, whether they are numeracy and literacy or IT, science or whatever. Obviously, you will come back and tell us, "Here is why we don't think that is the case." I am just telling you that that is a question that the Committee wants to ask. Is our curriculum fit for purpose in order to produce the young people with the skills that our society needs and that they will get a job from?

**Mr Hanna:** We will come back in writing, but, if I may, I will respond briefly. The fact is, perhaps even on the contrary, the focus of the revised curriculum introduced in 2007 was indeed on the very skills that you described, namely literacy and numeracy, and the other skills that employers told us during the consultation leading up to our advice to the Department that they needed. Those skills are the very crux of our curriculum.

**The Chairperson:** Sometimes, Committees ask unfair questions, but they give you the chance to answer them. Would you please answer —

**Mr F McCann:** Two or three weeks ago when we had a presentation, one of the questions was exactly what you said: is the curriculum fit for purpose? We were saying that there were changes that had been implemented and that the difficulty was that they had not filtered down.

**The Chairperson:** I understand the separation of powers, but let us deal with your bit. CCEA deals with the curriculum. I have no doubt that you will come back and tell us that all the things that we want to achieve are in the curriculum. Do come back and tell us that, look at the issues and we will ask others whether they are being brought forward. You might, just because Bronwyn brought it up, reflect also on the NAHT submission, which is in the Committee pack and mentions some things about LLW. We will forward that pack to you. Thank you very much. We appreciate your time.

**Mr Hanna:** Thank you.