



Northern Ireland
Assembly

COMMITTEE FOR EDUCATION

Minutes of Proceedings

WEDNESDAY 12 FEBRUARY 2020

Room 30, Parliament Buildings, Belfast

Present: Mr Chris Lyttle MLA (Chairperson)
Ms Karen Mullan MLA (Deputy Chairperson)
Mr Maurice Bradley MLA
Mr Robbie Butler MLA
Mr William Humphrey MLA
Ms Catherine Kelly MLA
Mr Daniel McCrossan MLA
Mr Justin McNulty MLA
Mr Robin Newton MBE MLA

Apologies:

In Attendance: Mr Peter McCallion (Assembly Clerk)
Mr Mark McQuade (Assistant Clerk)
Mr Ian McAdam (Clerical Supervisor)
Mr Ed McCann (Clerical Officer)
Ms Caroline Perry (Assembly Research) - Item 9 only

The meeting commenced at 9:59 a.m. in open session.

1. Apologies

Apologies were as indicated above.

2. Chairperson's Business

2.1 Informal meeting with Strategic Leadership Group

The Chairperson reminded the Committee that he and other Members had met informally with the Strategic Leadership Group representing Special School principals on Tuesday 11 February 2020. The principals raised issues in respect of: the changing profile and increasing numbers of Special School pupils; enrolment practices; school building suitability; the absence of continuing

professional development for staff; difficulties with the staffing and budget formulae; and the lack of recognition of pupil qualifications.

Mr Bradley joined the meeting at 10:03am

Mr McCrossan joined the meeting at 10:04am

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Strategic Leadership Group inviting it to brief the Committee in formal session and seeking information in respect of:

- budget concerns;
- the staffing and budget formulae for Special Schools;
- recent relevant research; and
- details of some Special Schools which the Committee might visit in future and which represent the different categories of pupil learning difficulty.

2.2 School Starting Age Flexibility

The Chairperson advised Members regarding issues relating to school starting age flexibility in particular for children born before the 1 July cut-off or who may have Special Educational Needs. The Committee noted that a predecessor Committee had exchanged correspondence on this subject with the then Minister.

Agreed: The Committee agreed that the Clerk should share the relevant school starting age flexibility correspondence with Members.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Department seeking information on its plans (if any) in respect of school starting age flexibility guidance or legislation.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to Parenting NI and the National Education Union seeking an update on their views on this matter.

3. Draft Minutes

Agreed: The Committee agreed the minutes of its meetings held on 5 February 2020.

4. Matters Arising

There were no matters arising.

5. Department of Education, Department of Health and Education Authority – Mental Health and Well-being Framework- Briefing Session

The following officials joined the meeting at 10.07am

Ricky Irwin, Director, Inclusion and Wellbeing Directorate, Department of Education;

Mark Lee, Director. Mental Health/Disability/Older People Directorate, Department of Health;

Angela Kane, Head of Pupil Support Team, Department of Education; and

Nicola Topping, Children and Young People's Services, Education Authority.

Officials provided the Committee with an overview of the Mental Health and Well-being Framework.

The briefing was followed by a question and answer session.

Mr Humphrey made a declaration of interest that he was a member of the Board of Governor of Girls Model School, Belfast.

The Chairperson thanked officials for their attendance.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Department of Education in respect of the Framework:

- expressing concerns regarding the lack of consultation with the Community and Voluntary sector (including uniformed organisations) and urging the Department to undertake consultation as soon as is practicable;
- seeking sight of the consultee list for the Framework;
- seeking the key dates for the development and roll-out of the Framework;
- seeking sight of the NCB scoping report and information on the review of iMatter;
- seeking a breakdown of the £10m (over 3 years) sought in the upcoming budget;
- seeking details of the Department's plans to skill-up teachers to deliver the Framework;
- seeking information on the Department's existing measures of well-being and plans to develop new measures based on the Icelandic model; and
- requesting a response to the "Elephant in the Room" recommendations including particularly those relating to a revision to the curriculum in order to include explicit references to mental health.

Agreed: The Committee also agreed to write to the Department of Education indicating its concerns regarding the increasing demand for counselling support from the Independent Counselling Service for Schools and seeking:

- information on the demand and waiting list for counselling session;
- clarification as to whether plans will be brought forward to extend the service to primary schools; and
- an explanation as to why this service is restricted to mainstream post-primaries and Special Schools.

Agreed: The Committee further agreed to write to the Department seeking an update on the development of the Online Safety Strategy; and seeking data on the adverse impact of social media on pupil well-being.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Department seeking information on how it has benchmarked nurture provision.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to undertake visits to suitable primary schools in order to examine the use of the whole school approach to well-being including nurture provision e.g. in Currie Primary School and Edenbrooke Primary School in Belfast.

6. Department of Education – Nutritional Standards Consultation – Briefing session

The following officials joined the meeting at 11.40am

Margaret-Rose McNaughton, Director of Transport and Food in Schools, Department of Education;

Jill Fitzgerald, Head of School Meals Team, Department of Education;
and

Judith Hanvey, Regional Food in Schools Coordinator, Education Authority / Belfast Health and Social Care Trust.

Officials provided the Committee with an overview of the nutritional standards consultation.

The briefing was followed by a question and answer session.

The Chairperson thanked officials for their attendance.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Department seeking an update on its response to the issue of holiday hunger and its response to the report of the Children's Future Food Inquiry.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Education Authority regarding guidance on sugar levels in food etc. and the extent to which children are exceeding these.

Agreed: The Committee also agreed to write to the Education Authority seeking clarification on the actions it is taking to: reduce the perceived stigma associated with the receipt of free school meals and improve the uptake of free school meals.

7. Correspondence

7.1 The Committee noted an index of incoming correspondence.

7.2 The Committee noted correspondence from Mid-Ulster Council inviting it to hold a meeting in a council location.

7.3 The Committee noted correspondence from Pivotal on its work and its “Moving forward – putting Northern Ireland on track for the future” report.

7.4 The Committee considered correspondence from the Committee for Health regarding the teaching of menstrual wellbeing in schools.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Department asking if it plans to introduce menstrual wellbeing into the education curriculum.

7.5 The Committee noted correspondence from Comhairle na Gaelscolaíochta.

7.6 The Committee considered correspondence from Farmers for Action UK NI.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to invite Farmers for Action UK NI to an informal meeting.

7.7 The Committee considered correspondence from the Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission seeking details of the education related issues that it wishes to discuss.

7.8 The Committee considered a Departmental response regarding parental engagement in children’s education.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to invite Parentkind NI to participate in an informal meeting with Parenting NI in order to discuss parental engagement and related matters

7.9 The Committee noted a Departmental response regarding free school meals and uniform grants.

7.10 The Committee noted correspondence from the Construction Employers Federation.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Construction Employers Federation seeking details of the education related issues that it wishes to discuss.

8. Any Other Business

There was no other business.

Proceedings were suspended at 12:39pm.

Proceedings resumed in closed session at 12:45pm.

9. Assembly Research and Information Services – Educational Attainment and Underachievement Issues – Briefing session

The Committee noted a briefing paper from Assembly Research and Information Services on educational attainment and underachievement issues.

The Committee was briefed by Ms Caroline Perry from Assembly Research and Information Services on her paper.

The Committee noted a response from the Department of Education on the work of the Tackling Educational Disadvantage Team.

Mr Humphrey left the meeting at 12:53 p.m.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Department seeking an oral briefing; a timescale for publication; and sight of draft papers generated by the Tackling Educational Disadvantage Team entitled:

- A strategy to reduce educational disadvantage; and
- Proposals to revise and refresh the Extended Schools Programme.

10. Inquiry Terms of Reference and Forward Work Programme Options

Agreed: The Committee agreed to defer consideration of a possible Committee Inquiry.

The Committee considered a revised draft forward work programme in tabled papers.

Agreed: The Committee agreed the Forward Work Programme as amended.

11. Date, Time and Place of next meeting

The next meeting will be held on Wednesday 19 February 2020 at 9.45am in Room 30 Parliament Buildings.

The meeting was adjourned at 1:07pm.

Mr Chris Lyttle MLA
Chairperson, Committee for Education
19 February 2020