



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Committee for Education

Minutes of Proceedings

25 March 2026

Meeting Location: Room 30 Parliament Buildings

Present:

Mr Nick Mathison MLA (Chairperson)

Mr Pat Sheehan MLA (Deputy Chairperson)

Mr Danny Baker MLA

Mr David Brooks MLA

Mr Jon Burrows MLA

Mrs Michelle Guy MLA

Ms Cara Hunter MLA

Mr Peter Martin MLA

Mrs Cathy Mason MLA

Ms Aoibhinn Treanor (Assembly Clerk)

Mr Mark McQuade (Assistant Clerk)

Mr Jim Nulty (Clerical Supervisor)

Ms Aisling Willighan (Clerical Officer)

Ms Barbara Love (Bill Clerk) (Item 8 only)

Ms Maeve Corrigan (Legal Advisor) (Item 8 only)



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Ms Niamh Devlin (Research Officer) (Item 8 only)

The meeting commenced at 2:01pm in public session.

1. Apologies

No apologies were received.

2. Chairperson's Business

The Chairperson advised members that a briefing from the Department of Education on Childcare had been postponed and would be rescheduled as soon as practicable.

Mr Martin joined the meeting at 2:01pm.

3. Declaration of Interest

There were no declarations of interest.

4. Matters Arising

The Committee considered correspondence from 'Reclaim the Enlightenment' on academic selection.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to forward the correspondence to the Department of Education for information.

The Committee noted guidance on the role of bill sponsors serving on statutory committees.



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5. Draft Minutes

Agreed: The Committee agreed the minutes of its meeting held on 18 March 2026.

6. Early Years Workforce Support and the First 1001 Days Oral Briefing by Dr Aisling Hylands

The Committee noted a briefing paper and correspondence from Stronger from the Start.

The following witnesses joined the meeting at 2:05pm.

Dr Aisling Hylands, Senior Lecturer, Early Years, Stranmillis University College.

The witness provided the Committee with a briefing on support for early years workforce.

Mr Burrows joined the meeting at 2:12pm.

This was followed by a question and answer session.

7. Effective Early Intervention for Nursery and Early Years Oral Briefing by the National Association of Head Teachers (NAHT)

The Committee noted a briefing paper from NAHT and a report on 'Effective Early Intervention for Nursery and Early Years'.

The following witnesses joined the meeting at 3:06pm.

Mrs Clare Majury, National Executive Member, National Association of Head Teachers

Ms Emma Corry, National Early Years Representative, National Association of Head Teachers

The witnesses provided the Committee with a briefing on support for early years services.

This was followed by a question and answer session.



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Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Minister of Education seeking an extension of the Early Years inclusion fund to the end of the school year.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Education Authority asking it to consider, in cooperation with the Department of Health, preparing and providing advice to parents on children joining the education system.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Department of Health regarding resources for Health Visitors.

The Committee adjourned at 4:18pm.

Mrs Mason left the meeting at 4:18pm.

The Committee resumed at 4:25pm.

The Committee moved to closed session at 4:26pm.

**8. Proposed Committee Bill to allow all pupils the choice to wear trousers -
Consideration of Draft Instructions**

The Committee noted legal advice on a proposed Religious Exemption in the Bill and drafting instructions on the Bill.

The following witnesses joined the meeting at 4:26pm.

Ms Barbara Love, Assembly Clerk, NIA Bill Office

Ms Maeve Corrigan, Legal Advisor, NIA Legal Services

Ms Niamh Devlin, Research and Information Service

The witnesses provided the Committee with a briefing on.

This was followed by a question and answer session.

Mr Burrows left the meeting at 4:53pm.

Ms Hunter left the meeting at 4:58pm.

The Committee returned to public session at 5:17pm



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The Committee received legal advice on the proposal of a religious exemption which had come via correspondence from the Free Presbyterian Church.

Mr Brooks made a declaration of interest that a relative of his wife was employed by the Free Presbyterian Church.

Agreed: The Committee agreed not to require in drafting instructions provision for a religious exemption.

Mr Brooks and Mr Martin recorded their support for a religious exemption in the Bill.

Agreed: The Committee agreed that the drafter should consider both stand-alone and amendment models of legislative vehicle and advise on the most robustly enforceable means; that draft provisions should be inclusive of sportswear and early years pupils; that provisions should be enforceable as a stand-alone duty as well as via the mandamus mechanism described in the 2026 Act; and that provisions should come into force at the beginning of the 2027 academic year.

Agreed: The Committee agreed that it was content with drafting instructions for the proposed Committee Bill to allow all pupils the choice to wear trousers as amended.

Agreed: The Committee agreed that the Committee Clerk would circulate the amended drafting instructions to Committee members for comment before issue.

9. SL1 – Special Educational Needs (SEN) Regulations 2026 Committee Consideration

The Committee considered the Special Educational Needs (SEN) Code of Practice.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to add the Code of Practice to the Committee website and extend the closing date for the survey to 8 May 2026.

10. Correspondence

10.1 The Committee noted the 60th report of the Examiner of Statutory Rules.



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10.2 The Committee noted a response from the Department of Education regarding the use of restrictive practices in educational settings.

10.3 The Committee noted correspondence from Caleb's Cause seeking a meeting with the Committee on the 14-19 framework.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to arrange an oral briefing with Caleb's Cause.

10.4 The Committee noted correspondence from the Benedict Blythe Foundation providing a copy of correspondence to the Minister of Education on the inclusion of the foundation's core aims through new statutory guidance.

10.5 The Committee noted correspondence providing the Department of Education Retention and Disposal Schedule.

10.6 The Committee noted the 61st report of the Examiner of Statutory Rules.

10.7 The Committee noted a response from the Education Authority providing further information on the work of the Educational Welfare Service.

10.8 The Committee noted an index of correspondence received.

10.9 The Committee noted correspondence regarding SEN provision at St Paul's High School, Bessbrook.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to add the correspondence to evidence for its Strategic Review of Current SEN provision and Transformation Agenda.

10.10 The Committee noted correspondence from the ACCORD partnership providing a response to information provided by the Education Authority at the Committee meeting on 18 March 2026.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Education Authority seeking a response to the issues raised.

10.11 The Committee noted correspondence from the Independent Autism Reviewer asking the Chair to take part in a short video for the launch of her 1st annual report.

Agreed: The Committee agreed that it was content for the Chairperson to represent it .



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9. Forward Work Programme

The Committee considered its forward work programme.

Agreed: The Committee agreed that it was content with the forward work programme as amended.

10. Any Other Business

No other business was discussed.

11. Date, Time and Place of Next Meeting

The next Committee for Education meeting will be held on Wednesday 15 April 2026 at 2:00pm in Room 29, Parliament Buildings.

The meeting was adjourned at 5:28pm.

Nick Mathison MLA
Chairperson, Committee for Education
15 April 2026