Northern Ireland
Assembly

COMMITTEE FOR EDUCATION

OFFICIAL REPORT
(Hansard)

Inquiry into Successful Post-primary Schools Serving Disadvantaged Communities

16 February 2011

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

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Members present for all or part of the proceedings:
Mr Mervyn Storey (Chairperson)
Mr David Hilditch (Deputy Chairperson)
Mr Trevor Lunn
Mr Basil McCrea
Mr John O'Dowd

Witnesses:

Mr Eric Bullick	)	
Mr Nigel Frith	)	Drumragh Integrated College
Ms Nicola Gormley	)	
Ms Geraldine McKenna	)	
Mrs Sandra Cashel	)	
Mrs Anne Moore	)	Castlederg High School
Mr Simon Mowbray	)	
Mrs Daphne Watt	)	
Mr Adrian McGuckin	)	
Mrs Máire Quinn	)	Dean Maguirc College
Mr Seamus Shields	)	
Mr James Warnock	)	

The Chairperson (Mr Storey):

The Committee for Education decided to conduct an inquiry into successful post-primary schools serving disadvantaged communities. The Committee has been exercised on a variety of issues in its time, particularly in this mandate, and an issue that was of considerable concern to it, and that was repeatedly brought to the fore, was underachievement, or underperformance, as we have also had it identified as during the inquiry.

We endeavoured to look at positive elements, because we too often dwell on the negatives in our education system. We felt that it would be useful to have an inquiry into what is and what constitutes a successful post-primary school. By using a method of assessment, we came up with a list of schools that we felt covered Northern Ireland's geography and its education system's different sectors. Therefore, we have taken evidence at — the Committee Clerk will keep me right here — the Belfast Model School for Girls and St Pius X College in Magherafelt, and we brought a number of other schools to those visits.

We are here in Drumragh in Omagh, and we are delighted that Nigel will give the first presentation to us. We should each stay within our allotted time, and I will try to lead by example on that. We want to try to ensure that we each have as much time as possible.

Mr Nigel Frith (Drumragh Integrated College):

You are all very welcome to Drumragh Integrated College. That includes the visitors: those from Castlederg High School, Dean Maguirc College and many others represented this morning.

I will introduce those sitting with me. Eric Bullick, a member of the board of governors, was until a year and a half ago principal of the integrated primary school in Omagh. I doubt that there is anyone in Omagh who knows more about integrated education and its history. Geraldine McKenna is the college's special educational needs co-ordinator (SENCo). She is the best special needs co-ordinator that I have worked with in 25 years. She loves it when I say that publicly. She deals with a wide range of special needs within her remit. Some 10% of students at this college are statemented — 60 in total — and that leads on to the students on other levels of the special needs register. Geraldine works very hard to cater for their needs. Nicola Gormley is

the college learning mentor. Committee members may or may not find this an unusual role. It is one that we crafted very carefully. Her remit is to work with individual children who are in danger of falling through the net, if I can put it that way. They may have a range of social and emotional difficulties — what we call collectively "barriers to learning". Nicola's role includes liaising with parents and external agencies in the interests of those children. It is a very busy life.

I accept Mervyn's invitation to stay within time. I intend to run through some key components of the provision that we offer children from disadvantaged communities. I hope that we can tease out some of the issues through questions afterwards.

Before I begin to make the points that I want to make, I find it refreshing and welcome that the Committee is conducting this study. It seems to me that it is engaging with a very real issue and one that is very live. Members will be aware, as we are, that a fair body of research has been conducted in Northern Ireland and beyond into why students from disadvantaged communities do not always perform as highly as those from other backgrounds and what the many different factors involved are.

I am aware, for example, that in the PricewaterhouseCoopers study of 2008 some of the factors identified for the long tail of underachievement included:

"A lack of parental involvement in their children's education"

and

"A perceived lack of value placed on education".

One of the outcomes of the research — as I am sure members are very aware of — is that Protestant working-class males are the key group identified. Another factor identified is a "shortage of positive role models" and the "impact of 'The Troubles'", which continues to ripple through Northern Ireland even today.

In the research conducted by the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister in 2001, we find the factors for Protestant working-class males identified as:

"Feeling alienated in terms of ability and getting on with others; Not taking part in school activities and not seeing education as important in his life …; Unlikely to have access to the internet; Doing less than one hour of homework per night and believing his teachers would not expect more"

and wanting to get out of school as soon as possible.

In that kind of context, I will run through eight factors that we deliver here that are crucial in the framework of needs. The first element is for children to feel safe and secure. That is perhaps the reason that I provided members with a copy of Maslow's hierarchy of needs, with which you are probably familiar. We believe in its importance as a model to identify the fact that if children do not have their basic needs for food, drink, warmth and space met, they are unlikely to be able achieve at the higher levels identified in the hierarchy. Therefore, the first need that we strive to meet here is for children to feel safe and secure.

The second element is a system of behaviour management that includes high standards of discipline, which we unashamedly maintain. At the same time, we complement that with a reward system and structure that is very much live and active. Our younger students in particular buy into a system of reward merits, which are extremely popular. There are rewards for good work and particularly outstanding effort. The students love to get those merits, because they gives them a sense of achievement, and they are a way for us to say that we appreciate who they are and what they have achieved.

When speaking to the students, particularly those who have got themselves into a bit of a tight spot, we often use the image of our behaviour management approach being like a train on a railway track. Therefore, if you do not mind, I will talk you through that image, which, although simplistic, actually says a lot. For a train to run efficiently, two tracks have to be firmly in place. If one of the tracks becomes derailed, the train will leave the track and cause a train wreck. We identify one of those tracks as being the discipline policy of the school. Students at Drumragh Integrated College know, for example, that violence equals suspension. That is a very hard value to which we hold firm. The students and parents understand it, and we stick to it. The students understand the clear and transparent boundaries that are set for them. The other rail on which the train runs is that of support. That is where the reward system and the particularly important work of folks such as Nicola, our learning mentor, Geraldine or, indeed, any of the staff come in.

The third element is quality teaching. I worked with a principal some years ago who was very fond of saying that if surgeons used surgical methods in their work that were 50 years old and clearly outdated, there would be such an outcry. Why should schools get away with it? We pride ourselves on taking on board the fact that more has been learnt about the working of the human

brain in the past 20 years than at any other time in history. We know a lot now about how youngsters learn and about where their barriers to learning arise from. We seek to build on that understanding in order to help our youngsters to achieve the very best that they are capable of. That includes the concept as set out in the briefing paper of promoting a belief among children and parents that there is no single type of intelligence and that intelligence is, in fact, multiple. There are many ways of learning and many different preferred learning styles. We seek to encourage our students to understand how they learn best and to use learning methods that are most appropriate for them.

The fourth factor is engagement with parents. We promote the triangle of student, parent and member of staff — teacher or not — and we seek to develop that partnership in the interests of the child. That is worked out in many different ways, one of which is the support provided by Nicola and Geraldine. They will readily lift the telephone to invite parents to come in to discuss their children's progress. In Nicola's case, if parents do not want to come into the school, she will jump in the car and go to see them in their home. Let us just pause and reflect on the reason for that: sometimes students who have barriers to learning come from homes that also have barriers to learning, and sometimes we are looking at parents who themselves had a very negative experience of school and do not like coming into school. They feel intimidated the minute that they walk through the door, and that creates a barrier to our communication with them. Nicola, therefore, begins to build links with them in their living room. She earns their trust there before they come into school to meet us. We also reach out to parents through consultation days, as an alternative to traditional parents' evenings. In fact, we are holding one here today. Parents come in with children from two year groups to meet staff in the main hall behind me while the rest of our students are on a home study day on work that has been set specifically for them to complete at home. We have revision skills workshops, to which we invite parents and students to come and learn together about how to revise effectively and what is involved in preparing for exams in the best way possible. There are other examples, but I am conscious of time, so perhaps we can talk about those later.

The fifth factor is high exam grades. Whatever else we do, we are acutely conscious of the fact that students need to leave here with the best exam grades possible. We are in the middle of a recession. The odds are stacked against our young people as they enter the employment

market, so the least that we can do is to fulfil our responsibility to give them the best exam grades that we can. To that end, some of the activities that we engage in include mentoring all our year 12 students. All children in year 12 have a member of staff working alongside them through that critical GCSE year. That member of staff meets them regularly, listens to their needs and helps them to overcome any barriers to learning that they may have.

We have abandoned the traditional notion of study leave. Members will be aware that, traditionally, schools say farewell to students in the middle of May and almost abandon them at the time when they need us most. Instead, our staff put on a full programme of revision lessons and compile registers of who attends. We are convinced that that programme is instrumental in the GCSE results that we achieve, which were that 81% of pupils achieved five or more GCSEs at grades A* to C. That is a delight to us, and we think that the mentoring, coaching and revision skills that we deliver to our students is part of the reason for it.

The sixth factor is a sense of acceptance. Learning is a very emotional business, and, too often in the past, schools have assumed that it is purely an intellectual exercise, leading perhaps to the idea in Pink Floyd's song about children being seen as another brick in the wall. To learn effectively, students need to feel comfortable and engaged. We know from research into the brain that the ideal learning state is called "relaxed alertness", and, if a child can be encouraged to work in that mental frame, it produces optimum learning. To achieve relaxed alertness, youngsters need to feel that they are given time when they have a problem, and they and their parents need to know that, when a problem is reported to us, we will deal with it and that that will be done efficiently. Students need to know that they can trust us, and they also need to know that, regardless of their potential or their learning needs, they are welcome here and that they are accepted.

That applies regardless of whether they have learning difficulties, such as the type that Geraldine deals with, or whether it is an emotional barrier of some sort, with which Nicola deals. It also applies to the students who are gifted and talented, and we have a discrete programme for gifted and talented students. It identifies them, because we need to know who they are, and we have a programme in the classroom and beyond to ensure that their learning needs are met.

The seventh factor is the sense of values that we seek to develop in our students. That includes tolerance and respect, as well as the values that underpin integrated education, which are about inclusion, accepting difference and seeing difference as a positive. One of the latest initiatives in which we have involved ourselves is called restorative justice, through which youngsters learn to resolve differences for themselves, not at a high level but at a lower level. They engage face to face, ask questions such as how a person felt when he or she was involved in a situation, and they listen to each other. Often, the outcome of that is a new sense of tolerance and understanding. Sometimes there are tears, and often there is handshake over the table and the issue is resolved. That is a part of the programme of value development that we are rolling out and seeking to improve for the good of the youngsters who attend here.

That brings me to my eighth and final point. I have deliberately saved it until last. It is riddled through the briefing that I sent the Committee. It is on the quality of relationships between staff and students. Children from disadvantaged communities in particular will sometimes come to school with barriers ready to go up. They often do not want to be here. They come from homes where parents do not particularly value what we do, and they themselves are suspicious of the whole world of school and education.

If I were to point to arguably the single most important defining factor that enables those children to learn at Drumragh, it would be that they know that teachers respect them, that teachers and staff will listen to them and spend time with them, that they are accepted for who they are and that there is time for a chat about their own interests — whether it be about the judo that they were involved in at the weekend, the running competition, their music or even their football team. Out of that comes a relationship of trust. Students know that staff here expect a great deal from them. They also know that they have a lot to give back and that they will receive a lot from staff here.

Often if one walks down the corridors of this building after the end of the school day, in one room one will see a club or an activity going on, where children are continuing to learn happily. What is equally inspiring is that one will pass a number of classrooms in which there is a teacher working with just one or two children, giving them extra coaching and extra time.

Students here feel comfortable and relaxed about approaching staff if they have a problem. We have successfully combated the tout or snitch culture, and students here know that, if they have a problem, it is important that they talk to us and share what the problem is. Our guarantee is that, if they tell us what the problem is, we will solve it. I will end deliberately on that note. The quality of relationships between staff and students is perhaps the most important factor of all in helping children from disadvantaged communities to learn effectively. Thank you very much for listening. We will happily take questions on anything that we have said this morning.

The Chairperson:

Do any other witnesses on your panel want to make any comment before we move on?

Mr Eric Bullick (Drumragh Integrated College):

Yes, I would like to make a comment about something that Nigel has not mentioned, and that I have not run past him either. My background in primary education in the local integrated primary school means that I am aware of how many children transferred to this college with what was traditionally called a B grade but who left seven years later with three A levels. I have been astounded at the percentage of children who have had that experience. At the end of primary 7, they were, unfortunately, regarded as some type of failure, yet they are now in university. This college has consistently turned those B grades into three A levels. I will leave it at that brief comment.

Ms Geraldine McKenna (Drumragh Integrated College):

Nigel has referred to the number of students in our school on the special needs register. In my estimation, the figure is above the average in Northern Ireland. In integrated schools, we do tend to get higher numbers on our special needs register, and that is possibly because of the way in which we deal with children. It is not just about addressing their learning needs; it is much broader.

The Chairperson:

I welcome John O'Dowd to the meeting. I want to ask one question. One other school that we visited takes a similar type approach to the rewards and the merit work that goes on. Historically, it came from a difficult set of circumstances, but that school has turned itself around and now has

a reputation for engagement with the local community and a place of prominence and importance in that community. An element of that has been the emphasis on a reward and merit process. Do you think that has been a key component of establishing the other element that you mentioned, which was the way in which pupils are respected and the interaction that takes place with pupils? Has the merit process been a key component of that? If you did not have it, would there be a deficit in that relationship between staff and pupils?

Mr Frith:

That is only one piece in a jigsaw, some of whose pieces we have looked at this morning. It is not the defining factor, but it is an important one. It is essentially a tool for staff to be able to say in a tangible way, "Well done. Congratulations." It is important that students who are not achieving the highest levels academically receive those merits, so they can be given simply for effort. That is equally import to the concept of achievement.

Therefore, yes, it is important. It allows the staff/student relationship to be positive, and I include myself in that. The principal's merit is regarded as being very cool because it is large, maroon, has gold writing on it and is worth five ordinary merits. If my office door is propped open, that means that students are welcome to come in without an appointment. I regularly have them come to my office to show me judo medals, or whatever they have achieved, and they receive merits. That is a positive take on the fact that the principal's office is often seen as a negative place to be. Even members of staff have been known to have the colour drain from their face when I ask to see them for a moment, but it is rarely about anything that they should be worrying about.

The merit system gives children a sense of belonging and acceptance. They are regularly told, "Well done, you have achieved something brilliant." A body of research suggests that rewards should be intrinsic rather than external, but this external system gives students a healthy boost along the way. We set ourselves the goal three years ago of being a celebration culture rather than a disciplinary culture, yet underneath that we have high standards of behaviour. However, if the prevailing tone and mood is one of reward and celebration, that is the atmosphere that we would like to foster.

The Chairperson:

I am going to prove, Nigel, that you cannot trust the word of a politician: I said that I was going to ask only one question but I will ask another. Members knew that I could not stick to that.

Mr B McCrea:

I would be surprised if it were only two.

The Chairperson:

The merit system is important, and I see value in that approach. Something else that came out over the past number of weeks as the Committee has visited schools was the issue of the right teachers doing a valuable job. One school clearly indicated that it would not have made the progress that it had made had there not been a change in the staff profile.

When you are selecting or interviewing candidates for teaching vacancies, how do you assess whether they have the right attitudes towards pupils, because that is a core element of the ethos of this school. When you are going through that process, how do you determine that that teacher has the right attitude to fit in exactly with the success that you want to maintain and build on?

Mr Frith:

First, any recruitment process for any member of staff at Drumragh is a full-day affair at the very least. If the vacancy is for a teaching post, one of the first things that we insist on doing in the morning is to watch them teach. We sit at the back and watch not only how they deliver their subject but how they engage with students. You learn so much from a simple classroom observation. You see how they treat children and respond to the unexpected little tweaks and occurrences that inevitably come up.

The second thing that we like to do is invite them to meet students during the day, and we watch how they engage with them. Traditionally, we have engaged in student interview panels during the morning, at which we have a formally trained panel of students who interview candidates in the same way as the adult panel will in the afternoon. The Labour Relations Agency (LRA) and the national Association of Schoolmasters/Union of Women Teachers (NASUWT) tell me that I should not be doing that, and it is currently under review. However, I

will replace it only if there is a viable alternative. We have found that to be an excellent way of gauging student responses and candidates' ability to interact with staff.

Let me give you an example: we were interviewing a few years ago for a classroom assistant and the student interview panel fed back afterwards that it had found one candidate condescending. Immediately, that candidate was out of the running and there was no hope of that candidate getting the job. It is essential to see how staff interact with youngsters, and if they do not have the, if you like, Drumragh Integrated College ethos in the way in which they approach children, they are not the ones for us, and we let them go. Does that answer your question?

The Chairperson:

It does. That is something that I was keen to visit. I note that in your response to the inquiry, you stated:

"As part of a drive to self-evaluate, I believe principals and senior leaders should be able to observe classroom practice more easily, to monitor what is happening in the classroom; the Department is not doing enough to resolve the dispute with the NASUWT who are threatening industrial action against schools that attempt this."

That is something that Committee members should bear in mind and try to tease out a little. It is a different way of approaching things. Much of what we have focused on concerns pupils, but if we are looking for leadership, we need the correct process to appoint that leadership. I think that that is a key issue, and I found it very useful.

Mr Frith:

If the Committee does not mind, I will elaborate on that point for 60 seconds. My colleagues will know that you have just touched on a very important issue for me. As the principal of this school, I am charged with guaranteeing that the quality of teaching and learning is the very highest that it can be. The fact that I am effectively prevented by one teachers' union from entering the classroom when I like to observe what is happening makes my blood boil. It is entirely wrong. In fact, it is ridiculous.

Several years ago, I proposed conducting a learning walk, and I went head to head with the NASUWT over it. I proposed that, whenever I had spare time during the week, I would hit the corridors, enter a classroom, stay for 15 minutes to half an hour and watch what was going on. I would talk to some of the students and take an interest in the work that they were doing that day,

and the staff would be given the choice of whether to make me an invisible presence or to involve me in the learning experience. I proposed that, when leaving the room, I would simply place a postcard on the teacher's desk that would tell the teacher what I most enjoyed about what I had just seen, and I would leave one piece of positive feedback. If there was anything else to be followed up on, I would do that later and separately from the classroom environment.

The NASUWT told me that I could not do that unless it was within a performance review and staff development (PRSD) remit, which allows me to conduct either one or two classroom observations each year. The union continues to block any other attempt by principals to monitor what is going on in the classroom, and I think that that is ridiculous.

The debate continues. Last month, I was told by my union, the National Association of Head Teachers (NAHT) that the issue was resolved and that there was to be a new beginning. However, the NASUWT sent out a briefing paper to its members within the same month that told them that if any principal attempted to enter their classroom for any type of observations that are not PRSD that they should report them immediately to the union. Therefore, the NASUWT withdrew from the agreement that it had made.

As I said in my briefing, I think that there is a lack of leadership in that area. It should not be down to one principal to go head to head with one union to resolve the issue. It is something that affects every school in Northern Ireland, and it is long overdue for being resolved. Thank you for giving me the opportunity to discuss that.

The Chairperson:

It is an important issue, of which the Committee needs to be aware.

Mr Lunn:

Nigel, I really enjoyed your presentation. In fact, as you made it, I thought that if the Committee could just take that presentation and turn it into a report, it would probably not be far off what it is trying to achieve.

Mr Frith:

Thank you.

Mr Lunn:

I say that not because you are the principal of an integrated school, which I admittedly favour. It is also it because of the marvellous ethos and atmosphere that you have created and the approach that you have taken.

Mr Frith:

Thank you.

Mr Lunn:

You have already explained most things, so I do not have much to ask you. However, to tie it into our inquiry, to what extent is this a disadvantaged area?

Mr Frith:

It is in a couple of ways. First, we draw some students from the identified postcodes but not enough to qualify for extended schooling funding. We would love to attract more, but it is not to be. It is simply a numbers game. The second type of deprivation that we see locally is rural deprivation. Until I was vice-principal at my last school in south Lincolnshire, that was a new concept to me. I had always seen deprivation as an inner-city problem, and it was a surprise to me to see that we had youngsters coming in from the farmlands from farming communities that had real and substantial barriers to learning. That became identified as rural deprivation and disadvantage.

That can include parents who, as I said earlier, do not particularly appreciate education, and sometimes children who are destined for a life on the farm and therefore come to us with a belief that there is no point in getting exam grades or pursuing life in the classroom, and whose parents will, at a moment's notice, hook them back out of the classroom because they are needed on the farm. It has a number of different ripples, but the concept of rural disadvantage is a very live one, and it affects some of our students.

Beyond that, we face nothing different from any other school. We live in a recession, and more and more of our parents are caught up in that, which is then being passed on to the children, and there are increasing levels of stress at home. That is a level of disadvantage that is common to us all now, and it is getting worse, not better.

Mr Lunn:

Eric made the point about pupils that come here aged 11 with less than satisfactory achievements who subsequently turn out to be successes. They may not all get three A levels, but they improve considerably from start to finish through your school. To me, those students are perhaps the bigger successes. Do you agree with me?

Mr Frith:

We believe in the concept of personal best, and we compare it to the training of an athlete for the Olympics or some other great sporting event. In other words, we do not encourage children to compete against one other. In everything that they do, the goal is to do better than they did yesterday. The student who achieves a GCSE grade D when, at best, they were predicted to get a grade E is as much a cause of celebration for us as the child who gets an A*.

Mr Lunn:

I will not go on. I just want to comment on the concept of relaxed awareness, because I love that. As someone who went through school in a state of somewhere between tension and pure horror —

The Chairperson:

Do you think we should introduce it in the Assembly, Trevor?

Mr Lunn:

Depending on what day of the week it was, I was not in a state of relaxed awareness. However you have managed to achieve that, it must be a major factor.

Mr Frith:

It is a defining piece of research. I came across it years ago, and it is now central to my approach,

because relaxed alertness is a fine balance. If one becomes too relaxed, one becomes lethargic, and if one becomes too alert, one becomes stressed. It is quite a fine balance to strike, and we strive to achieve it here.

Mr Lunn:

Where did you do your degree in psychology?

Mr Frith:

I did not study psychology, but I have taken an active interest in it, as I like to know what is going on and what the research is showing.

The Chairperson:

Now to someone who is the epitome of relaxed alertness — Basil. *[Laughter.]*

Mr B McCrea:

I am not sure how to take that. Thank you very much for the presentation, Nigel. I am not sure who you were talking to before, but there are certain phrases that we come across. Andy McMorran — I do not know whether you know Andy — was lecturing us about the importance of the relationship between staff and pupils, so we do pick up certain themes.

I want to make one point before I ask you some questions. I am forming the opinion that there is something in the central tenet that you mentioned — the relationship between the head teacher, or the leader of the school, and the staff. I can tell you that I am not averse to tackling unions that stray into areas that I do not think concern them. There is obviously a role for unions in other areas, and I am very supportive of that role, but the professional leadership of the school rests with the principal. That should be clearly understood. I want to put on the record that that is my feeling on the matter.

Mr Frith:

Thank you.

Mr B McCrea:

There are a couple of points that I thought were quite interesting. In your submission, you state that collaboration is not necessarily in line with achievement. As the principal of an integrated college, and having been given the virtues of the area learning community here, will you expand on that for me?

Mr Frith:

What I am really saying is that collaboration is one factor among many. Just occasionally, the messages from the Department are that collaboration is being held up as the be-all and end-all. I think that collaboration is vital to offer students a broader curriculum than the school can offer. The ease with which we are learning to work with one other and to send students to other schools to access courses that our school cannot offer is brilliant and absolutely essential.

Mr B McCrea:

Do you think that collaboration of itself is useful? Obviously, there is academic achievement and pupil development, but we also have community development.

Mr Frith:

I do. Absolutely. It helps youngsters to become more tolerant and self-aware. Alongside the benefits of collaboration, we need to remember the importance of what goes on in the classroom, as well as the other elements that I have identified this morning. Four years ago, for example, two big initiatives were being presented to us as being centrally important. One was collaboration and the entitlement framework and the other was the revised curriculum. If anything, I regret that collaboration has been given greater prominence than the revised curriculum, because I believe that the revised curriculum embraces a lot of the best of teaching and learning methodology. I would love to see the same amount of resource going into that as is being pumped into collaboration and the entitlement framework.

One of the other papers that I submitted to the Committee is titled 'Lessons for Learning'. It outlines what we believe constitutes good teaching and learning in the classroom at Drumragh. It encapsulates some of the best practices of the revised curriculum that, we know, help students to learn. I do not know whether that has found its way into members' packs.

The Chairperson:

We will just check. There are a couple of things that we want to get from you.

Mr Frith:

I will give you these copies.

Mr B McCrea:

I know that other colleagues want to ask a couple questions, but I just wish to ask a brief question that touches on your paper. It states that the growing emphasis on statistical targets is in danger of being overplayed, yet you stated with some pride that 81% of your charges got five or more A* to C GCSE grades. I am concerned about the fact that we fixate on such results. I cannot help but think that, by the law of statistical averages, if 81% of students are getting those grades, some children somewhere are not getting them.

What type of targets ought we to set to assess whether, in the public's mind, a school is doing a good job? I note that you mentioned that you want to use words. However, the trouble is that parents, who are an important ingredient in what we are doing here, may think that using words is somewhat woolly. Is there anything that we should be looking at to explain what some people would call the added value element, which is a point that Eric made. We need to look at where we are now, where we hope to get to and how we can ensure that that is celebrated as a success. Are there any particular tools or methodologies that are worthy of looking at to achieve that?

Mr Frith:

Yes, there are. Rather than pick out one or two statistics, even though I am guilty of doing that myself, because I like that one —

Mr B McCrea:

Believe me, Nigel, we are all guilty of that. Mervyn, in particular, has a penchant for quoting statistics that suit him but that are usually detrimental to me.

Mr Frith:

There are, of course, other statistics that I do not want to dwell on. That is life.

To create an effective value-added system, which is clearly what is needed, we need to know the benchmark from which the school began and what the school and the students have achieved from that initial starting point. Without a value-added system, the statistics are essentially meaningless and hollow. To go beyond an emphasis on exam results, we need to begin to formalise processes, such as the Together Towards Improvement documentation, produced by the Education and Training Inspectorate, and to analyse the findings of questionnaires run with parents and students, and even the staff, in the way in which the inspectorate does in order to sample pupil and student response.

Every school should be running with an agreed common tool so that we can see the findings, which are as important as the exam results at the end of the process. It would include questions such as, "When you find yourself the victim of bullying, is the issue dealt with promptly?" That is the kind of data that I would like to see as a parent. If I were considering a school for my child, I would consider that to be the sort of fundamental question that is just as important as whether my child will achieve high exam results. It requires an agreed tool so that we can begin to be transparent in the way in which we present a profile of the school's achievements and strengths.

Mr Lunn:

I have a question on Basil's point about achievement, and Mervyn would be disappointed if I did not ask it. How do you rate a grade D?

The Chairperson:

I was going to mention that, because that was a valid point that Eric raised.

Mr Lunn:

There is an ongoing debate among the people whom we are talking about, who feel that a grade D has more respect and value than it currently attains. Where does it sit in your thinking?

Mr Frith:

At GCSE level?

Mr Lunn:

Yes, GCSE English and maths.

Mr Frith:

I will turn it into words. A grade D should be respected more highly, because it proves that the student is competent. That is a fundamental fact. The marking schemes that are used by examiners show that students have to be competent in a subject to achieve a grade D, yet, too often, employers say that it is not good enough because it is not a grade C. There is an artificial divide. Students who achieve a grade C prove they are very good, students who achieve a grade A prove that they are excellent and students who achieve an A* prove that they are spectacular. Achieving a grade D means that a student is competent.

Ms Nicola Gormley (Drumragh Integrated College):

Nigel has alluded to some of the levels of intelligence that we talk about, and, in my role, I deal with emotional intelligence. When a child comes to me, we look at emotions and managing emotions. I hate the term "anger management", but that is what is used. If children come to me and leave the school emotionally intelligent, knowing what they need to do to manage their emotions, thus preventing them from entering the criminal justice system, that has to be celebrated without any marks or statistics or examination results. That is what I like about the school, and that is what makes the school work.

Mr Lunn:

It would be hard to give it a grade.

The Chairperson:

We have some information from the inspectorate and on the programme for international student assessment (PISA) stuff. That will go on our website, so it will be accessible to everyone here. I trust that schools will find the information that we are collating in this inquiry useful, so we want to get it out to people. I am not sure where John is at on the relaxed alertness spectrum.

Mr O'Dowd:

I was thinking of anger management.

The Chairperson:

I was wondering about that.

Mr O'Dowd:

I apologise for being late and missing the presentation, although I have read through the paperwork. The comment about statistics brings my mind to a story from yesterday. I do not know whether any Committee members present were in the Chamber yesterday when a local MLA, Barry McElduff, as Chairperson of the Committee for Culture, Arts and Leisure, gave a report on the Budget. He said that in Wales there had been only a 5% cut to the culture budget, that in Scotland there had been only a 2% cut to the culture budget, while here we are suffering a 17% cut. The Minister of Finance and Personnel stood up and said that the Member would be aware that in England there had been a 25% cut to the culture budget and said that he had not mentioned that. Barry responded that he was perfectly aware of that figure but that it did not suit his argument. *[Laughter.]* That was one of the lighter moments in a very long day.

Mr B McCrea:

It was a very good line.

Mr O'Dowd:

There has been commentary around the value of a grade D, on what education is about, and about what we want to achieve with all individual pupils as they journey through their educational career. That is important to the inquiry and, indeed, to education, because we can get too hung up on statistics and figures, and we all use them and rely on them to make one argument or another. You spoke about emotional management.

Ms Gormley:

Emotional intelligence.

Mr O'Dowd:

I see that one of the key factors is the relationship with the family unit, which can take many different shapes. There is no traditional family. I note that you engage with parents, and so on. How do you engage with that group of hard-to-reach guardians?

Mr Frith:

In a range of ways, and I have already referred to Nicola Gormley's work. In more extreme examples in her caseload, she goes out in the car to meet parents who will not come into the school. That also links into something that I said to Basil a moment ago. If parents come to us with problems such as their child is not getting on or is being bullied, they must be able to see that we have a 100% record of dealing with such problems. A level of trust then begins to grow. Although these things take time, those parents will begin to see that, actually, we really do care about their kid. They then begin to engage, and trust slowly begins to embed.

The process includes bringing them in to take part in, for example, the mentoring programme with our GCSE students. Parents, too, take part in that. We also involve them in the consultation day model that is taking place in the school hall today as an alternative to the traditional tired, sweaty parents' evening, which we find to be a highly pressurised environment that leaves everyone shattered at the end of the day. Parents, who often come swinging in without any tea, just wish to get out and go home again. Those evenings become a kind of a tip of the hat towards consultation, whereas the model that we are introducing here states that this is important: we are taking a day out of our schedule to talk to you, and, unashamedly, we ask parents to book a day off work to come and talk to us. We request that, in the interests of their child, we really engage. Through a range of such networks, we find that trust begins to grow.

The final element that I will mention brings us back to relationships. Many staff here will lift the phone when concerned about a child's progress or welfare. They will ring that child's parents and have a chat with them and engage with them. Through dialogue and establishing a relationship, we begin to see the sort of progress that we are witnessing.

Mr O'Dowd:

It may be a harsh thing to say, but how do schools interact with parents who do not care about

their kids or who are emotionally challenged? How do you view your role in that situation?

Mr Frith:

The bottom line is that we sometimes discover that we are working against the parents, not with them. At that point, we become particularly passionate, because we know that without us the child is sunk. That may sound arrogant, but it is fundamentally true. A most difficult moment is having a parent and a child sitting in front of me over something that has happened. For example, the parent may say, "Well, I've always told my boy to sort himself out. Hit back. If anybody makes life difficult for him, he should get in there and sort it out." We have to say back, "No, that is not the ethos here. The one thing that we admit is that we cannot do is read your mind. If you had told us there was a problem, we guarantee that we would have sorted it." We do not say to the child, "Now that you have followed your dad's advice …", but we effectively say, "Now that you have followed your parents' advice, you have landed yourself in trouble. You have got a suspension. Let's talk about where we go from here." That is a difficult thing to do. Sometimes we have to accept that a parent will not work with us and that we must do everything that we can for that child.

Ms Gormley:

I will pick up on that. My background is not in teaching — it is in nursing and social work — so parents who have difficulty with teaching staff will ring me and use me as a point of contact. I bring a multidisciplinary element to Drumragh. For instance, Nigel has invited me, along with Eric, to board of governors' meetings at which there has been a total difference of opinion about a child coming back and the risks that he or she presents. However, they listen to what I say.

Ms McKenna and I work with some of the most disaffected pupils and the statemented pupils. Although parents see that Drumragh has a very rigid discipline policy, pastorally it is also very active, and I would go along and say, "No, on this occasion, I do not agree. I think that this child should return." My opinion is valued. Parents see that. I do home visits with parents who have had difficulty with schools. It is liberating to see a parent who had a particular difficulty throughout her education coming into meetings and, where previously she would have been aggressive rather than assertive, conduct herself appropriately for the benefit of her child. I think that I bring an element to the school that helps with those relationships.

Mr O'Dowd:

Thank you.

Mr Hilditch:

Thanks, Nigel, for your presentation. Out-of-hours activities and other activities out of the classroom, such as after-school work, community projects and sport, have helped to develop positive relationships. Have you any such examples here at Drumragh?

Mr Frith:

Absolutely. When we were in the old Tyrone and Fermanagh Hospital (T&F) building, possibly the only advantage of being on that site was that a service bus came past the end of the site at 4.20 pm every afternoon. The minute that we moved up here, we suddenly realised that we were off the bus route. To allow a wide-ranging extracurricular programme to run, we pay for one of the Western Education and Library Board's yellow buses to come up here on Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday and Thursday afternoons. We pay for it, so it simply pulls up at 4.00 pm in the afternoon in the car park, and children who have chosen to stay behind can hop on that bus, which then takes them down to the bus depot.

That facilitates a wide-ranging programme that runs after school, and sometimes at lunchtime. It includes sports and an art club, which is very active. If the Committee is able to stay for the tour later, you will see some of the work that the pupils have done together. We have an ecology group, which is working towards the silver award for being an eco-school. The programme also includes, crucially, an Amnesty International group, which is very active. Children are taught to see how different parts of the world are, and the range of needs that exists around the world so that they have a global outlook. The spin-off from that is that they learn to appreciate what they have. Those students were privileged to go to the headquarters in London. They found themselves campaigning in favour of the rights of women in Iran and have been caught up in protests. It is a terrific lesson in citizenship for them.

Our goal is to have an extracurricular programme for everyone. Our head of year 8, which is the first year for most students at this college, challenges every child to try something that he or

she have never tried before. All children, in their first term here, between when they start and Christmas, are encouraged to try something that they have never done. Even if they do not keep it up, that is fine. They can drop it later, but, before Christmas, they should try something different. Even from the beginning, we encourage youngsters to see the school as something that is beyond the classroom and the normal timetable, where there is something for them to get involved in.

Finally, for those who do not have access to the Internet or who need extra support with study, our library remains open after school, and the children can go there to do their homework if they wish. For some, that is probably a more appropriate learning environment than they will find when they get home.

The Chairperson:

I have one final comment to make about social services and interaction. You said that your background is not in teaching, Nicola. How much interaction is there in social services issues? Is a joined-up approach taken? We, as politicians, talk about joined-up government. It does not exist: we aspire to it, but everybody stays in silos. We listen to other organisations, which say the same, although we see some very good practice in operation. Is that a core element of the work that you carry out? Is that vital to the delivery of what happens in the school?

Ms Gormley:

I am the link because, through my background, I am known to social services and the child and adolescent teams out there. Social workers will liaise with me and view me as a point of contact. I see how, systemically, it can be difficult for a teacher to continue to maintain liaisons when timetabled into teaching times. The pastoral care teacher is freed up, but I see myself as being an intrinsic link.

It was invariably the systemic failings that made me leave social work in the first place. It can become very frustrating, and this job was like a sidestep for me. Here, I have the time to link up with social services and maintain links with children who are looked after or are known. I am a vital link with child and adolescent teams, because we see a lot of children who suffer from emotional breakdowns and other things. I am the point of contact. Children make disclosures to

me, so I support them to go to other agencies, one of which is just across the road. I even physically take children there. I am an intrinsic link. I totally base my practice on the Bamford vision that multi-agency work promotes the most positive outcomes for all young people.

I know that social services are very busy. I understand the workload that they carry, but I phone every day until I get somebody. However, at times, it is difficult for teachers to do that, given their timetable.

Mr B McCrea:

A points of contention arose when we tried to extend the remit of schools beyond purely education. That was met with considerable resistance from the Department of Education, because it was worried about taking on unfunded liabilities. However, there is a real issue here. It is interesting that you are drawing a connection. It is not just based on a need to do good for the community; there is actually a positive educational achievement outcome. Extracurricular activity is part and parcel of education. I wanted to note that and to say that your presentation has reinforced that opinion in my mind.

There may not be time to deal with this, but can you expand on your statement about multiple intelligences, neurological developments and how the brain works? I happen to have an interest in neural development. Do not ask why; I just do. However, the message has not got through yet to Committees, and so on, about why we do different things. Even in social work, people talk about the state of a young citizen's brain at different stages of development. You said that there is a lot of research being carried out, and it may be something that you want to feed into the Committee's inquiry, or you may want to give a quick overview now. It is an area of new information for us that you and your colleagues may be more familiar with, and I would certainly like to know more about it.

Mr Frith:

There are a couple of issues there. First, Nicola referred to emotional intelligence. Essentially, that means that a child is extremely able academically but, emotionally, is immature. Some of the outcomes of that will include an inability to deal with conflict and a complete inability to handle uncertainty or challenge, and the child's relationships are often ineffective. Therefore, taking

strategies forward to help children to develop their emotional intelligence is vital to their academic achievement. People have to be high in academic and emotional intelligence to be successful, never mind the fact that, when they go into the workplace, they have to have teamworking skills and be able to challenge pressure.

One of the most famous tests on emotional intelligence ever conducted was the marshmallow test, where small children were given the choice of accepting a marshmallow immediately or, if they waited 10 minutes, they could have two. Those children were tracked right into their adult working lives. Those who waited for two marshmallows were more successful in their working lives and achieved higher exam results, which was an unexpected outcome of the study. However, even at the age of four, those children had intrinsically grasped the concept of delayed gratification and waiting in order to achieve something more important down the line. That is just a tiny indicator of this whole world of emotional intelligence.

The multiple intelligence theory simply says that there is no single type of intelligence. David Beckham is a kinesthetic genius, whatever he was like in the classroom. The man who fixes my car is a genius in his field. Some people are smiling because my car has been off the road for six weeks, but that is another matter.

Mr B McCrea:

That is a Barry McElduff statistic.

Mr Frith:

I came dangerously close to it. The multiple intelligence theory is liberating, because it promotes the view that every child is good at something. There will be areas of expertise and strength for them, and, instead of asking whether someone is intelligent or not, the question is: where are your strengths? What are your key intelligences, and how shall we play to those?

I will give one final example and then I will stop talking, because you are in danger of getting me going here. One type of intelligence is interpersonal and another is intrapersonal. The revision methods or teaching methods that are employed for children who are high in either of those areas are completely different. A child who is high in interpersonal intelligence will love it

when the teacher tells the class that, as a treat, they are going to work in small groups. The interpersonal learner will say, "Brilliant, I learn well this way", but the intrapersonal learner will curl up and say, "Oh, not again. Please do not do this." In fact, the intrapersonal learner will be thinking, "What I would love you to do is tell me what I need to do and how I can succeed." Then he or she will say "Please, give me space, and I will do it myself." We are learning to balance the teaching and learning strategies brought into the classroom in order to play to individuals' strengths.

We have taken that to the point that we have a database in our computer system of which are the highest intelligences of each child in the school, and that can be turned into a class profile, whereby a teacher can draw up a pie chart of the class and see which intelligences are the highest, then plan teaching and learning strategies accordingly.

Mr B McCrea:

That is interesting.

Mr Frith:

It is powerful.

The Chairperson:

We would be very keen to receive a paper or some more information on that. Nigel, Nicola, Geraldine and Eric, thank you very much. That was very useful and helpful, and we look forward to having a further discussion over lunch.

I welcome the acting principal of Castlederg High School, Anne Moore, and her team. You are very welcome. Thank you for making the journey to Omagh this morning. I invite you to make a presentation.

Mrs Anne Moore (Castlederg High School):

I will let the members of my team — our team, I should say, or Castlederg High School's team — introduce themselves. They are all experts in their field and can speak a lot better about their roles than I can. I will start over here with Simon.

Mr Simon Mowbray (Castlederg High School):

I am acting vice-principal in Castlederg High School, and I have responsibility for curriculum provision and curriculum development in the school. I am also a head of department and a former year head, and I have responsibility for extended schools provision. I also look into avenues of external funding that may be available to the school.

Mrs Daphne Watt (Castlederg High School):

I am the pastoral co-ordinator for the school and the designated teacher for child protection. I am also responsible for the induction of the new year 8 students into the school. I am also a teacher governor.

Mrs Sandra Cashel (Castlederg High School):

I am the special educational needs co-ordinator and the teacher tutor responsible for teachers who are new to the school and those teachers in early professional development. I am also the teacher librarian and a year head.

Mrs Moore:

I have been acting principal only since September, but, before that, I was vice-principal in charge of behaviour management and leading the school development plan team. Ten years ago, I was also part of the major change that took part in the school, with the introduction of the ethos under our former principal, Dessie Williamson.

We will focus on what we think makes Castlederg High School one of the most successful schools in its sector in the Western Board area. The school makes it a policy to exploit our students' disadvantage. We do that by ensuring that our mission statement is not just a collection of platitudes but a shared vision to motivate our young people beyond their perceived disadvantage. It states:

"The ideal to which we aspire is to develop the confidence and self esteem of the pupils so that they are motivated to achieve their highest potential within a safe and caring environment."

The mission statement was agreed five years ago by all staff — teaching, learning support, technical, catering and caretaking — and the board of governors. It is revisited at the start of each new academic year. The mission statement, along with a set of core values, established a learning

environment with high expectations that is delivered through positive encouragement and mutual respect. In the implementation of the ethos, all parties have worked together to set up structures and policies to promote quality teaching and learning to be delivered in a secure and supportive environment.

The school development plan (SDP) has been in operation since the 1999-2000 school year. Over the past 11 years, its focus has been on improving teaching and learning. Initially, it identified a group of underachieving year 11 boys. Staff training centred on combining shared strategies that they, as professionals, knew had a positive impact on motivating boys, with techniques that were researched by educational bodies. Since then, boys' learning, differentiation, thinking skills, assessment for learning, effective questioning strategies, literacy and numeracy have been the ongoing focus of our development plan.

The school development plan is one of the key issues on the agenda for staff training. It is effective because it is tailored to achieve our targets and is delivered by a highly committed and motivated team. The SDP's teaching and learning targets are monitored through the PRSD process, which is effective in ensuring that it is actively pursued as a whole-school issue. The profile of teaching and learning is kept at the forefront of departmental meetings, during which staff are directed by the SDP team to undertake an evaluation of individual pupil attainment in their subject. Heads of department are required to give feedback of progress to the SDP group at termly meetings. A combination of teachers' professional judgement, use of data and support from the Western Education and Library Board's advisory team ensures the implementation of those targets. Evaluation is ongoing throughout the academic year, as Simon will explain later.

Mrs Watt:

I will talk about the pastoral element of the school. Teaching and learning can take place only in an environment in which pupils feel secure, have a sense of worth and dignity and assume a sense of responsibility, and in which success and achievement are celebrated. Those are the aims of the pastoral dimension of our school. Our links with primary schools, coupled with our induction programme, ensure that, on transfer, year 8 pupils settle in quickly. Detailed information from primary schools ensures that individual pupil needs are understood and catered for. Ongoing support from senior pupils acting as guardian angels provides another safety net.

In our pastoral system, each class remains with the same form teacher and year head from year 8 until year 12, which is a structure that fosters a sense of trust and identity. Extra support is available from the school counsellor or outside agencies. The school's pastoral provision is underpinned by mixed-ability, timetabled lessons in personal development education.

In all aspects of school life, our emphasis is on the positive. Our merit mark and other reward systems promote good behaviour and encourage positive contributions to the school. However, effective structures are in place for dealing with the challenges with which our pupils inevitably present us. Pupils are encouraged to develop confidence, interpersonal skills and a sense of responsibility through the prefect system, our active student council and various other projects, such as the unity team. Pupils in our school know that their voice will be heard and heeded.

A crucial element in the success of our pastoral provision is communication, be it through staff training, where aspects of the pastoral dimension feature prominently; through monthly meetings of numerous pastoral teams at all levels or management; or through daily morning briefings, the minutes of which are e-mailed to both teaching and support staff. The relaying of decisions to all parties, including pupils and parents, ensures that all members of the school community understand our system and have the confidence to use it. In short, in the pastoral dimension, as in all other areas of our school, dedicated leaders head a team of committed staff with a common vision that has the pupil at its centre. That is the way in work we work.

Mrs Cashel:

I will take a moment to outline how learning support supplements the pastoral and curricular dimensions. It ensures that our core values are accessible for pupils who experience learning difficulties and who might otherwise be marginalised. Its high profile is exploited as a key strength on open night, is tangible in the day-to-day running of the school and is credited by the community as ensuring that young people really do get the help that they need. Here, too, the emphasis is on the positive, and there is a culture of high expectation for all pupils to achieve. That aspiration is mirrored by the onus of shared responsibility on all staff. That collaborative approach is driven by ongoing in-service education and training (INSET) and informal teacher support, the provision of up-to-date information and data, communication during scheduled

meetings and accountability monitored through pupil progress reviews and PRSD observations.

Success is possible for our less academic pupils or those with a special educational need only when they have been supported in overcoming the barriers to learning. To that end, we seek early identification of difficulties and prompt planning and provision from a wide range of support mechanisms. Our staff of 13 highly motivated learning support assistants is our greatest resource to that end, with in-class support being the primary means of intervention.

Raising standards of literacy and numeracy is a central preoccupation for us. Learning support works in partnership with the co-ordinators of those two key skill areas to manage a programme of both cross-curricular and discrete initiatives. As I am sure the Committee is aware, reading is potentially the greatest barrier to learning, so our reading partnership programme offers one-to-one support as an integral part of the English curriculum for the lowest ability classes in both Key Stages 3 and 4. The value added is so significant that it can only impact positively on pupils' performance across the curriculum and help to limit underachievement.

Our learning support policy aims to enable pupils, parents and staff. It is a partnership approach that is accessible through many channels of communication, both formal and informal. We actively encourage input from pupils and parents, as well as staff, as we work together to create a positive school experience for each young person.

Mr Mowbray:

I have responsibility in the school for the implementation of the Northern Ireland curriculum and the entitlement framework. That is an obvious overlap with the school development planning team, of which I am also a member. As far as the Northern Ireland curriculum is concerned, as a development team, we decided to focus initially on thinking skills, personal capabilities and assessment for learning, and we took those forward as areas for whole-school development. We felt that thinking skills and personal capabilities were an important area to focus on, as they have a direct impact on the methodologies and strategies that our staff are using and that the pupils will benefit from.

We strive to promote an active learning environment for our pupils while aiming to maintain

the academic rigour and content that is required for external examinations at Key Stage 4 and post-16. We felt that the sharing of learning outcomes, success criteria and formative assessment were examples of good assessment practice that we should develop right across the curriculum subjects in a whole-school and coherent approach. We have developed our own INSET training and deliver it through our own staff. We have built into it regular evaluation procedures through which our staff are able to give us qualitative and quantitative feedback. We have identified PRSD as one of the main vehicles to monitor and evaluate the success and implementation of thinking skills and assessment for learning techniques.

We always strive to include as much time as possible in our INSET days for our staff to focus on teaching and learning, with the heads of department then feeding progress back to the school development planning group through heads of department meetings, reports to the principal, and so on. By doing that, we ensure that the communication between senior management and departments and on to the classroom teachers moves in both directions effectively.

We encouraged our staff to choose agreed PRSD targets. For the past three years, we have agreed two targets that were set around thinking skills and assessment for learning, and, for the third target, we allow the staff to pick a particular area that they would like to develop.

After studying the recommendations of the Every School a Good School document, we modified our school development plan, and we have identified and implemented actions for pupils in years 8, 9 and 10 who are at risk of underachieving in literacy and numeracy. The pupils are identified through the pupil data, and they are mentored by the literacy and numeracy co-ordinators and by departments that have been given responsibility for the implementation of communication and using mathematics at Key Stage 3. Targets have been identified and communicated to the pupils, staff and their parents and through individual education plans (IEPs), which are reviewed twice a term. By implementing those strategies early, we hope that, in a few years, those pupils will be able to attain five GCSEs at grades A* to C, including in English and maths.

Our school is a member of the Derg Mourne Learning Community (DMLC), which consists of six post-primary schools and approximately 3,000 pupils in the Strabane District Council area.

We have worked with the other schools to develop strategies for the full implementation of the entitlement framework. I acted as the part-time co-ordinator for the DMLC for two years. That has helped to raise the profile of the entitlement framework in our school, and we have been able to achieve a tangible level of success. This year, 387 pupils from across the community are involved in collaborative courses, with additional courses and elements of rationalisation included for September 2011.

Our school has introduced five BTEC courses this year, and we currently deliver 25 courses at GCSE level, 43% of which are vocational. That gives our pupils a broad and balanced curriculum. Our major challenge, as a smaller and rural school, is the post-16 level. Nonetheless, we have increased our delivery from 13 subjects in 2007 to 22 subjects this year.

We have established a number of subgroups in the learning community, all of which are working effectively. Those include a careers subgroup, an online learning subgroup and a monitoring and valuation subgroup, which monitors the outputs of the learning community. Last year, we undertook a study to ascertain whether pupils who have been involved in collaborative learning were benefiting from collaboration or whether they were performing better in their home schools. All the subgroups are working positively towards their goals in the implementation plan in a spirit of trust, harmony and industry. It is our opinion that, by 2013, we will be able to meet the statutory requirements of the entitlement framework and, more importantly, the needs of our pupils.

Mrs Moore:

Our approach can be summed up by two simple things. The key to ensuring that pupils and staff receive the support that they need is, first, to put structures in place to implement the agreed policies. That is crucial. Secondly, it is key to have senior members of staff, who are represented here, driving those structures and acting as a link between each of the important whole-school issues.

The Chairperson:

Thank you to the team. I want you to elaborate on the issue of underachievement, particularly among working-class Protestant boys, a group that has been identified in previous surveys. Work

to address it commenced in 1999, and we are now in 2011. Good progress has been made, and one of the elements that you mentioned was the extension into differentiated learning. How has that as a concept and a way of dealing with underachievement changed over the years? Have you decided that there are things that you did as a school in 1999 that you would do differently now, or has a core element of your work remained static over that time and built to help give you the outcomes and the undoubted progress that you have made on underachievement?

Mrs Moore:

There is no change. When we started 11 years ago, we realised that there was a group of boys leaving by year 12 who had underachieved significantly. They were not even attending school. Therefore, we identified, with expertise in the school, how we could improve on that. At the time, we looked at boys' learning and we shared good practice among staff, as well as looking at what professional bodies had to offer. We worked with the behaviour support team at the Western Board, which at the time was headed by Josephine Hasson. That was very good and helped us start on the road. We have not changed, and I would not do anything differently, because we had to identify what had happened to our rural school; what had gone wrong. I cannot say that what we did would work in every school, but it worked in our school, and we built on that work.

As to differentiation, we initially gave staff a choice. Before PRSD, we were working with one other in the classroom. The choice was to look at boys' learning and ways to improve it or differentiation, because we had identified that in the school development plan as a way forward. They opted for boys' learning and the various methods that they could use to improve it. Then, the following year, when it was a success and we began to see a change in the attitudes of the young boys in particular, we brought on board differentiation.

Therefore, everything has been brought along with agreement. We revisit it; it is imbedded. Differentiation is still there, even though it was introduced 10 years ago. It is still a crucial part of our learning process.

The Chairperson:

Does it create any challenges with the girls?

Mrs Moore:

As I said at a recent prize night, we are at a point at which our boys are achieving more than our girls. We now need to go back to the drawing board.

The Chairperson:

I am delighted to see the boys outperforming the girls. I will have to be careful with that comment.

Mrs Cashel:

We are victims of our own success.

Mrs Moore:

It is because of last year's particular set of girls. We have to take each year group as individuals. With last year's year 12 girls, we did not identify early enough that they too had learning problems. However, we will ensure that that does not happen this year.

Mr Mowbray:

When we started the boys' learning project, we had been involved in the dissemination of good practice through the Western Board. One of the things that members may have picked up from the presentation is that connections across the different areas are crucial. From a behavioural and pastoral point of view, we were looking at methods and strategies. Boys very clearly like strict boundaries, and they like praise and reward. Therefore, we incorporated that aspect into our pastoral and behavioural system.

We also tried to tailor our curriculum to meet the needs of the boys. At that time, a lot of the boys were leaving shortly after Christmas and did not complete their years. We introduced an alternative education provision, which suited their needs better. We looked at courses such as construction and joinery, plumbing, motor vehicle studies, and so on. Slowly but surely, we began to evolve occupational studies and, as our curriculum developed over the years, we found that the boys were studying subjects that they want to study. Obviously, they have still to work on English, maths and science, but they are much more engaged in the curriculum.

We offer pupils free choice in year 10. They can pick whatever subjects they want, and we try to build our curriculum blocks around that. We just completed the process last week, and of the seven free choices that the pupils had, every one of them was able to have at least six. That means that the pupils are studying subjects at Key Stage 4 that they want to study and that they enjoy. That has a positive impact as well.

The Chairperson:

A write-up of that would be helpful to the Committee. You have approached the issue in a very particular way in Castlederg and you are to be commended for it.

Simon, my question to you follows on from what Basil said about the previous presentation. Drumragh Integrated College's presentation stated:

"Collaboration does not necessarily enhance these important 'ingredients' for successful achievement."

Did I pick you up correctly? Did you say that you have done a survey, or an evaluation?

Mr Mowbray:

Yes, as a learning community.

The Chairperson:

We are glad that we have the representatives from the learning community here, and we want to have some discussions with them over lunch. Can that survey be made available to us so that we can see what was discovered?

Mr Mowbray:

That will be down to Alison Smyth. I cannot see it being a problem, but I —

The Chairperson:

I appreciate that you cannot make that decision. We would be interested in having a discussion about it and seeing what the outcome was. It is becoming more of an issue, but if "collaboration" is only a buzzword, it does not matter. However, if it is working in some areas and not working in others, there may be things that need to be done to make it work better in other places.

Mr Mowbray:

I cannot see that being a problem. We compiled the survey in such a way that the contributors gave their information totally anonymously. Looking at the documentation, even I would struggle to pick out our own pupils. We set it up using a pupil number. The first column details the course that the pupil is involved in together with the collaborative course, and then their other subjects. I do not have the exact figures with me, but 97 year 12 pupils were involved in the collaboration, 77 of whom had a positive residual. In other words, they had achieved better in their collaborative course than they did in their home school.

The Chairperson:

Obviously, because of the rural context of Castlederg, and the rural nature of the learning community, it is interesting just to see how it works in practice, because it is not always the case in large urban areas, but in rural areas it is a key component of the delivery of what is best for schools.

Mr Mowbray:

The more rural one's environment, the bigger are the challenges that it throws up with, for example, transportation. In our school, especially at post-16 level, we view collaboration as being crucial to meeting the sustainable schools requirements. If you are looking at different criteria for sustainable schools — although we are not fixed on the 24 or 27 figure — and in order to present a broad and balanced curriculum to our pupils, especially at post-16, collaboration will be crucial to us. The other challenge that we face is the 500 figure, which we sit slightly below.

Mrs Moore:

Collaboration is also important in broadening experience. As a rural school, we are isolated. Our community can be isolated, and we have problems in that regard. It is important to broaden experience and show that, by working together, we can move forward, and not just to provide a broader curriculum.

Mr Lunn:

Thank you for your presentation. You have already explained those eye-catching figures about

the achievement of boys against girls in grade A* to C results. I think that you know what is coming: the grade D. I will put it another way, just for a change. Of the 38% of girls and the 35% of boys who do not achieve A* to C grades in five subjects, is there a noticeable difference in achievement between those girls and boys? Does it balance the other way?

Mrs Moore:

Are you asking whether more boys get grade Ds than girls?

Mr Lunn:

More or less, yes.

Mrs Moore:

Every year is different, so I could not make a broad statement about that. What is unfortunate about the grade D is that someone, somewhere has decided that the grade C has the monetary value that gets you ahead. Unfortunately, there will be youngsters, as our hosts have said, for whom a grade D is a huge achievement. Luckily, vocational avenues are very much still open to them. It just means that, academically, they will not go on to do A levels.

I will ask Sandra Cashel to comment on the learning support programme, because she is involved in that. It is about added value. When pupils come to us in year 8 with such a poor level of achievement, to come out with a grade D is a huge achievement. I honestly cannot say whether more boys got grade Ds this year. I do not particularly look at those figures. Statistics, as you all know, are there to use to your advantage. We look at children individually. We have a mentoring programme, which has been very successful over the past five or six years. We mentor children at the beginning of year 12 if we feel that they are on five or six estimated grade Ds to see whether we can pull those estimated grades up. That exercise has proved hugely successful. Any child who has been mentored has had their grades pulled up, which makes one wonder whether every child should be mentored. The problem is that we are finding it particularly difficult this year, because this year's year 12 is completely different to any year 12 that we have had previously. That is why it is absolutely crucial to treat every year as an individual year. Every approach has to be different. We cannot set something in stone and say that it works and go with it. It has to be constantly re-evaluated.

Mrs Cashel:

It is frustrating that people fail to recognise the fact that a grade D exists as an achievement and a grade in its own right. I can think of a number of pupils in school who entered year 8 with a reading age that perhaps just tipped over seven years. Literacy presented a considerable challenge for them in their English achievement but also in their access to other subjects across the curriculum. When they went into a science or geography class, if they could not manage to read the textbooks, they were disadvantaged right from the word go. I can think of several pupils who came in at that baseline but who ultimately — through their schooling, the support that we have in place, and the strategies that teachers employed across the curriculum — came out achieving a grade D.

There was considerable value added for those pupils and for their self-esteem at having been able to go through a GCSE course and achieve what was, for them, a credible grade. That was a great achievement in itself. It requires a great level of intervention for them to be able to achieve that through the types of support programmes that I mentioned; for example, the reading partnership. That programme tries to ensure that pupils have a functional level of literacy that will impact on their ability across the curriculum.

Mr Lunn:

This is the eighth school of which I have asked that question, and I always get the same answer. The only place that I do not get the same answer is from whoever dreams up these level 1 or level 2 criteria. A level 1 is unsatisfactory, and a level 2 is basically satisfactory, but a grade D is equivalent to the top end of level 1.

I will not belabour the point, although I will ask the question of the next school as well. *[Laughter.]*

The Chairperson:

They can be prepared.

Mr Mowbray:

The other problem is an alternative. We had looked in some length at an alternative to GCSE English and maths, where pupils would be able to achieve a level 2. The issue there is the currency of that mark. We came to the conclusion that a grade D or a grade E in GCSE English or maths was of much more value than the available alternatives.

Mrs Cashel:

It means much more to the pupils' sense of self-worth as learners: the fact that they are achieving GCSEs, just the same as the other pupils in higher streams in the school.

Mrs Moore:

Perhaps the public and workforce need to be educated in what a grade D is, and what that pupil can do with a grade D in English. The problem is ignorance. People think that if pupils have not achieved grade C, that is it, they are failures.

The Chairperson:

That point is coming out more and more, and I think that we will be very conscious of it when we are writing our report on this inquiry. Hopefully, we can contribute to getting out to the public what is a key element.

Mr Lunn:

I noticed in your submission that you mention some pupils who passed a transfer test but chose to come to you. I am always glad to see that. Is there a grammar school in Castlederg? I do not know this place very well.

Mrs Moore:

We have two grammar schools on our doorstep, as well as the integrated school in Drumragh. Omagh Academy is another of our competitors, as is Strabane Grammar School, which is currently being amalgamated. Unfortunately, as Daphne, who is the link teacher, will tell you, the abilities of primary schools are assessed on how many children they can they can get through to a grammar school. That is how they are assessed by parents. We have the unfortunate situation of primary schools encouraging as many as possible of their year 7 pupils to go on to

grammar schools, as well there being two grammar schools that will take quite low-ability children. We have a lot of competition in that field.

Mr Hilditch:

Thank you for your presentation. It never ceases to amaze me the number of talented young footballers who come from Castlederg. *[Laughter.]*

The Chairperson:

Tom Buchanan was not one of them.

Mr Hilditch:

I am quite jealous of Harry McConkey at Dergview; he seems to have a wealth of talent at times. There are others who went to the school who have gone further afield. That is very positive.

Engagement with parents and community links seem to tie in with each other in such a rural sense and probably complement each other. That is very important. Will you tell me a wee bit more about your parental engagement?

Mrs Moore:

There is a variety of links with parents. Our first link with primary schools is when parents come through on open night. We also have strong links with extended schools funding, which is an important facility for us as such an isolated rural area. Simon Mowbray has more facts on that.

Mr Mowbray:

We are in an area of social deprivation, which allows us access to the extended schools funding. We receive approximately £28,900 a year. We run a variety of after-school clubs for our pupils. A lot of that funding is spent on transport, as you can imagine. We pull in pupils from a huge diaspora that stretches 14 miles, as far as Gortin. We offer a range of activities for pupils, from sports to after-school revision classes and booster classes for GCSE. We have an ICT group, a chess club, a science club, and our literacy and numeracy club for pupils identified as underachieving in those areas.

We specifically use the extended schools money for our pupils in school. We are also part of a cluster of 12 primary schools. One of the great facilities that we have at the school is our synthetic pitch, with floodlighting, a pavilion, and so on, for which we applied to the Big Lottery Fund eight or nine years ago. Around 100 pupils from primary schools come every Thursday afternoon to access our sports, arts and crafts, drama, music and one other provision that I cannot recall off the top of my head.

That access is also cross-sectoral, with pupils coming from the maintained and the controlled sectors. It is funded not through extended schools funding but through Peace III. The school applied two years ago for Peace III funding to promote shared spaces in the local community, for which we offer a range of activities after school for primary-school children. Cross-sectoral primary schools come together to go swimming. As part of that, 50 pupils are about to go on a cross-community trip to Edinburgh. We run evening activities for parents in dancing, ICT, Spanish, guitar and arts and crafts.

Therefore, through extended schools funding and Peace III funding, we try to promote that coming-together. Again, more than 500 people a week from the local community use the school's synthetic pitch. Other groups also use the school. It is regularly used for charity concerts. The Blood Transfusion Service comes in — the list goes on. We see the school as part of the hub of the community.

Mrs Moore:

Particularly in the past five years, we have involved the parents of our own pupils in forming policies. Of the main policies, two stick in my mind. The first is behaviour management. Before we composed the final draft of that, we sent questionnaires to parents, pupils and all staff. The same happened with our anti-bullying policy. Therefore, over the past five or six years, we have had more contact with parents on the formation of school policies. We involved parents as well as the board of governors.

Mrs Cashel:

There is also contact as we monitor learning. For example, in year 12, when pupils are being mentored toward GCSEs, we look to the head of year 12 to identify pupils with attendance

difficulties. If we see patterns of a dip in attendance, we try to intervene. The head of year and an education welfare officer will visit a pupil's parents to address any issues and to try to motivate them to maintain that pupil's attendance, with a view to achieving better progress in the months prior to GCSEs.

From a learning support perspective, our teaching and learning education plans and our literacy and numeracy performances are regularly monitored and reviewed. The results are sent out to parents, who have the opportunity to provide feedback and to suggest targets for improvement. Parents have an input in the process and are aware of how it is developing.

We also do the same for our reading development programme, which is a big part of our provision for the two lowest streams. We constantly update parents on what the pupils are achieving and give them some feedback in the form of qualitative comments on what has been focused on in school with the child's reading so that, ideally, the parent will seek to give the child some support at home and will have the tools to do that.

Mr Mowbray:

Anne mentioned the fact that the parents were actively involved in drawing up procedures and policies, and we have found that very few parents then question any of the decisions.

Mrs Moore:

They are very supportive.

The Chairperson:

Will members try to keep their questions succinct? I am aware that time is running on.

Mr B McCrea:

Why do you always say that when I start to scrutinise? Everyone else has been talking for longer.

The Chairperson:

That is just your guilty conscience. Or your complex.

Mr B McCrea:

I have not said anything yet.

Mr Lunn:

There will be a blue moon in the sky the day that I speak for longer than you.

Mr B McCrea:

How many of your folk leave without any qualifications?

Mrs Moore:

None. Last year, 99% left with five or more qualifications. One boy left with only four GCSEs.

Mr B McCrea:

Therefore, you accept that most of them have adequate numeracy and literacy life skills. They have some qualifications.

Mrs Cashel:

Absolutely. One of our key aims is to ensure that they achieve functional levels in those two areas.

Mr B McCrea:

The central plank of the Committee's inquiry is to determine why Protestant working-class boys underperform. Why do you think that is?

Mrs Moore:

It could be low expectations, and the culture of underachievement must be challenged.

Mrs Cashel:

It could be a lack of support at home.

Mrs Moore:

The school has identified that, and ways of addressing it. There are definitely high expectations

for all abilities, not just the examination classes as such or the high achievers. There must be high expectations of behaviour and achievement, academic or otherwise.

Mr B McCrea:

I was interested in a key point made by the Chairperson that you had identified a particular intervention for boys. However, you said that the issue also related to parental aspirations. How does that work? What is your specific intervention to tackle low expectations from either the parents or the community?

Mr Mowbray:

I have been a teacher in the school for 12 years, and I specifically remember that, when Mr Williamson and Mrs Moore took over as principal and vice-principal, there was a change in mindset. I saw a definitive change in mindset, where the core values of the school were clearly defined and laid out. One of those values was to address the issue of self-esteem. One day we took an INSET and identified the different ways in which we addressed the issue of the self-esteem of our pupils and the ways in which we could improve it. We filled two A3 pages and went onto a third page. That was crucial. I remember the principal specifically telling pupils that just because they came from Castlederg did not mean that they could not achieve the same as a pupil from three or four different towns that he mentioned. Following that, there was a change in mindset and a change in direction as far as the school was concerned.

We used two specific approaches to address the issue of boys' learning. First, we looked at the different methodologies and strategies that we were using in the classroom and we looked at strategies that boys particularly benefited from, and we tried to roll out what we learned.

Mr B McCrea:

Such as?

Mr Mowbray:

At the beginning, it was learning outcomes. Basically, we are seeing it all roll out now in the Northern Ireland curriculum: the use of learning outcomes and the assessment for learning techniques. Boys need to see specifically what they have to do to achieve success. Boys need to

know that they have to do x, y and z to get top marks. We used an example in staff training where we asked staff to draw a house. They drew a house, and I then gave them their mark for it. If they had a chimney to the right-hand side, they got a mark. If they had a door in the middle at the front, they got a mark, and if they did not, they had marks taken off. Applied to the boys, if they had known at the beginning of a project that they had to do various things, it would have been much easier for them to achieve.

The organisation and structure of the lesson is important. We found that boys specifically benefit from the more active learning techniques. One thing that they find particularly troublesome is disorganisation.

Mr B McCrea:

David mentioned football. One might say that boys learn in a more active way than girls. It was interesting that, in the previous presentation, we heard about interpersonal and intrapersonal learning. I also think that there is an issue between girls and boys. Girls, certainly in the early years, tend to be more collaborative in their approach. I think that it at the nub of how we fix things.

I would not want to speak longer than Trevor because there is a blue moon coming around, so I will finish with this. We mentioned the issue of D grades and we also mentioned currency. I think that the real problem is that we live in a competitive world, and, whether a D is satisfactory or not, employers will still say that a C is better than a D. There is a difficulty in getting around that. What do you do about giving career advice to your young men? What jobs do you anticipate them going into, and how do you guide them into learning trajectories that will lead to good employment possibilities?

Mrs Moore:

You have to make sure that they know that they are not all going to be the David Beckhams of this world. One of the greatest roles that the Derg Mourne Learning Community is working on at the minute —

Mr B McCrea:

Before you go on, I want to reassure you. I played football for the Assembly two weeks ago and we were 6-0 down after 10 minutes, by which time I had substituted myself. I am not in the same league as David Hilditch.

The Chairperson:

That was before they put the ball in the net.

Mrs Moore:

Young people do have a view of life that they can go on 'The X Factor' and be an instant success, or they watch David Beckham playing and think that that will be them and therefore should put all their energies into that. We have to make them aware of the real world. At the moment, the Derg Mourne Learning Community is focusing on careers, and it has a careers subgroup, which has changed the whole way in which we deliver careers.

Mr Mowbray:

I do not think that we can put pupils into boxes or hatches any longer. One cannot look at them and say that they are going to be a plumber or an electrician. For a start, the jobs are not there any longer. I actually chaired the careers subgroup, despite knowing very little about careers. The subgroup developed a wealth of resources right from year 8 up through key stage 3, and a lot of that was done through asking the pupils to look at their personal strengths.

It gets to the stage now where the pupils are beginning to make their own decisions. If someone wants to be a vet but is never going to get the qualifications to be a vet, we cannot say to them that they are never going to be a vet. What we have to try to do is get them to evaluate their skills, abilities and potential for academic achievement, and then allow the pupils to make their own informed decision. In tandem with that, we give them as much guidance as we possibly can.

The careers subgroup in particular has really identified a procedure that seems to work quite well. In our own school, when making their choices, pupils go to the assembly hall and speak to pupils who are studying the subjects that they may be interested in. Quite often, teachers can tell pupils to study, for example, GCSE history because they are quite keen to get a history class, but

the pupils are now speaking to other pupils about subjects.

In our options booklet, for example, the current sixth form give advice and guidance on what they did when they were at that stage. It also includes testimony from past pupils who have gone on not just to university but into further education or perhaps employment.

One thing that we were very pleased with last year was that, at the end of year 12 when the pupils were moving on, a lot of them chose to come back to do sixth-form study in our own school. Some moved to the local grammar schools, many went to the local FE college and others moved into employment. Only one person took a gap year and had no particular pathway. I think that the school's careers provision has really progressed, not just in our school but through the collaborative work across the learning community.

Mr B McCrea:

I would like more detail on that.

The Chairperson:

Alison Smyth is here from Western Education and Library Board's curriculum advisory support services (CASS). We welcome her, and we will ask her to provide information on that. I thank Anne and her team for appearing before the Committee today. That was very useful.

Before we move on to the next evidence session, does the Committee want to write to the Department about the issue that was raised earlier about the NASUWT and observation of classroom practice? In that letter, I feel that we should try to clarify what the situation is so that we are informed. Should we also write to the NASUWT?

Mr B McCrea:

It might be worth writing to all the unions. I am interested in what their opinion is.

The Chairperson:

OK.

I welcome Mr James Warnock from Dean Maguirc College. I hope that you do not think that, by having you appear before the Committee last, we are in any way belittling your school or your presentation. You are very welcome, and I hope that you have found what you have heard so far to be useful.

Mr James Warnock (Dean Maguirc College):

Thank you very much.

The Chairperson:

Just to clarify, are you accompanied by Seamus Shields?

Mr Seamus Shields (Dean Maguirc College):

Yes, I am a member of the board of governors.

The Chairperson:

Are you also a councillor?

Mr Shields:

Yes.

The Chairperson:

Thank you, it was just so that we could get your full title.

Mr Warnock:

With me today are our newly appointed vice-principal, Mrs Máire Quinn; our curriculum co-ordinator, Adrian McGuckin; and, as you already know, Seamus Shields, who is a local councillor and a member of the board of governors. We are very aware of the time restrictions, so we will deliver an abridged version of our presentation. Before we talk about our school being a successful school, I want to give the Committee a little bit of background on the type of school that we are.

The mission statement of Dean Maguirc College is:

"We commit ourselves to the growth and development of people."

That is what we are all about. Dean Maguirc College is situated in Carrickmore, in rural Co Tyrone, and, believe it or not, it is the home town of Barry McElduff, who continues to live there.

The Chairperson:

After his performance yesterday —

Mr Warnock:

I am sure that he would come back to me if I did not mention that.

Mr B McCrea:

We all know Carrickmore.

Mr Warnock:

The school opened its doors in 1966, and it has catered for all abilities for 30 years. It is a co-educational maintained secondary school with 472 pupils with an age range of 11 to 18 years of age. Like Castlederg High School, the number of pupils at the school is just under the 500.

As a rural school, 90% of our pupils travel by bus, and 14% of our pupils come from the Southern Education and Library Board area. The ratio of boys to girls is 50:50, and 24 of our pupils have a statement of special educational needs. We have a teaching staff of 36, eight classroom assistants and our head of mathematics and numeracy co-ordinator, Mrs Máire McGinn, is a member of the Northern Ireland Literacy and Numeracy Task Force.

As a school, we are very proud of our academic success and the achievement of our pupils who pursue vocational courses. The school has also been very successful in extracurricular activities. It has achieved national and provincial titles in sport, has represented Northern Ireland in the UK final of the Formula 1 in Schools: the Formula One Technology Challenge and has won numerous awards, particularly in the areas of the arts. We come together as a school community twice a year to celebrate the achievement of our pupils.

We are a school with a vision, which is clearly reflected in our mission statement. Our basic

aim is to enable every pupil to achieve his or her full potential using the gifts that he or she has been given, and we endeavour to meet the curricular and pastoral needs of pupils across the ability range. The starting point for achieving that is our link with feeder schools, about which I shall speak later.

On entry to Dean Mcguirc College, children are set in classes containing, on average, 20 pupils. Classes are banded for English, mathematics and science, and, to enable movement between the four classes for those subjects, they are run concurrently, which, in turn, ensures that children work in a class that is appropriate to their needs.

We have a coherent plan for delivering the curriculum at the relevant Key Stages, and that plan is outlined clearly in the school development plan. We adhere to the statutory requirements of the Northern Ireland curriculum and, where possible, seek opportunities to enrich it.

In promoting a culture of high expectation and aspiration, we ensure that, on entry to Key Stage 4, all pupils follow the education pathway that best suits their needs. At Key Stage 4, we provide three education pathways, two of which entail vocational courses that are offered in collaboration with South West College in Omagh. That link existed some years before the establishment of learning communities.

Collaboration has enhanced the provision of a broad and balanced curriculum, enabling us to move towards meeting the needs of the entitlement framework. The school is a member of the Mid-Tyrone Central Partnership — one of the four pupils who is here today travels twice a week to Ballygawley for lessons. We are also a member of the Omagh Learning Community, of which I have the privilege of being chairperson. Soon, I will hand over to Nigel Frith, who spoke in an earlier evidence session. Members of staff are involved in the online learning and teaching for educators (OLTE) initiative to promote e-learning, and, last year, in order to upgrade ICT facilities in the college, we invested in 66 new workstations.

Pastoral care is very strong in Dean Mcguirc College, and we are very proud of the good relationships that exist in the school. Indeed, various external agencies and the Education and Training Inspectorate (ETI) have commented on those relationships. Staff play a vital role in

meeting the pastoral needs of pupils, and, at all times, the pastoral care co-ordinator works closely with form teachers. Pastoral issues that arise are given immediate attention. To foster discipline in the college, we encourage in all pupils a sense of respect for themselves, others and property. Pupils are expected to adhere to a code of conduct, and a referral system is in place to address discipline problems.

Our school is built around child-centred provision, and we believe firmly that every pupil deserves the same opportunity. In addition to pursuing academic success, we focus on the personal, social and spiritual development of each pupil. We provide many programmes and workshops for pupils, including presentations, retreats and pupil participation in projects such as Spirit of Enniskillen and Youth Sport West, which is a cross-community and cross-border project.

Being a leader in Dean Mcguirc College means being empowered to be a team player, whether at whole-school level or as a member of established teams in the college. Members of the senior leadership team and middle managers have clearly defined roles and responsibilities, and teams have been set up to assist further in delivering the curriculum and in meeting pupils' needs. Continuous professional development for all staff is encouraged, and participation in Western Education and Library Board and regional training unit courses and programmes is facilitated. School development days involve members of staff leading various presentations and the presentation of capacity-building opportunities.

A culture of self-evaluation exists in the college. Part of our school development plan is to look at practices to see how we can improve pupils' learning experiences. Staff review their work regularly and use PRSD as a link to initiatives in the Northern Ireland curriculum. We use Every School a Good School documentation to guide self-evaluation, and we continue to examine our teaching and learning practices at a personal, departmental and whole-school level. We use Together Towards Improvement to further our development. We promote a culture that encourages the sharing of good practice and expertise, through departmental and middle leadership team meetings that are held during directed time and INSET days.

Our effective use and analysis of data yielded by standardised tests, diagnostic tests and the Northern Ireland cohort data promotes improvement. The monitoring of pupils and the early

identification of underachievers results in appropriate intervention and informs planning, which, for the relevant pupil, may take the form of setting short-term targets, drawing up an IEP or mentoring. The school intervenes with pupils who have been identified as underachieving in literacy. A culture of high expectation exists in numeracy, and the college uses creative approaches to the teaching of a relevant and interesting curriculum to motivate pupils. School policies reflect the fact that the development and promotion of literacy and numeracy are whole-school priorities. Strategies such as tutorials and after-school revision classes ensure maximum success in those subjects and others at GCSE.

The ongoing development of science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) subjects and an emphasis on career guidance are very much on the school agenda and form part of our school development plan. We promote STEM subjects and, through the use of Young Enterprise and Sentinus, get our pupils to engage in various workshops related to that area. Representatives from South West College and a careers officer from Careers Service Northern Ireland attend our information evenings for year 10 and year 12 pupils, which inform parents on subject choices and provide educational and career pathway guidance.

We take pride in our strong links with feeder schools. Our primary schools liaison officer, who is also our SENCo, visits those schools every January and June. The first such visit relates to our P7 day and P7 open night. The P7 day is one on which all P7 pupils in our feeder schools come to Dean Maguirc College to engage in various activities. That annual event is followed, on the same day, by our open night. In June, the second visit provides information to establish a profile for each pupil who will transfer to our college. That enables us to provide the most appropriate setting for the child and informs staff of any pastoral or medical problems regarding incoming pupils.

In working closely with parents, we operate an open-door policy. We see ourselves as a listening school. We encourage concerned parents to contact us, and requested meetings can take place to facilitate parents before, during or on the conclusion of a school day. Parents are involved in school initiatives, from our paired reading programme and helping with school productions and sporting activities to playing a part in school liturgies.

The extended schools programme has enabled us to provide a range of after-school activities for our pupils, as well as valuable programmes and workshops for parents and the wider community. The work of the extended schools cluster group, in which we are the lead school, has built further on relationships with our feeder schools. We work closely with various departments in the Western Education and Library Board, including with Alison Smyth and CASS, education welfare and special education, the Western Health and Social Care Trust, the PSNI and youth counselling. Our good relationships with those agencies have enabled us to support the child further, be it in achieving his or her potential, addressing behavioural difficulties or monitoring a pupil who is experiencing problems at home.

Dean Maguirc College has, over the years, developed very close links with local community organisations, and the school is used for many evening and weekend activities by those groups. As a part of our annual fund-raising programme, we donate to the local St Vincent de Paul and groups such as cancer groups. Our engagement with local groups clearly portrays a school at the heart of its community, which is, we might add, a community that empathises with us in our frustration over the setbacks that we have had in getting a much-needed and deserved new school building.

To conclude, we must continue building on what we have achieved to date. Although we are a successful school with high expectations and aspirations, we, like all other schools at the moment, have concerns about future provision being compromised in the light of the proposed Budget cuts. That matter is for another day. Thank you for listening to our presentation.

The Chairperson:

I was amazed that we got through today without two things being raised that would have taken us down a particular route: one is the Budget; and the other is transfer. We will resist debating either of those two. However, thank you very much.

I am intrigued by one issue. You establish a profile of every pupil transfer. We are not going to debate transfer. However, I have always held the view that education is a continuum. We have too much: preschool; primary school; post-primary school; further and higher education; and university. It seems as though they are all silos with little connection and that they do not all

work together in the same way, yet they all have the pupil at the centre of everything that they do.

Has that been a key component, not in establishing the school to which the child will goes, although obviously from Dean Maguirc's point of view that is very important, but of identifying the real needs and challenges for that individual child? Is that the purpose or rationale that drives it? We have heard it described in other places as a "pupil passport". It was described to us in that way by another school. Here, it is a profile. How important is that in the individual development of the child to ensure that his or her particular needs are fully met?

Mr Warnock:

As I said, it was the starting point for us. The SENCo, the pastoral care co-ordinator and our primary schools liaison officer all meet as a result of the meeting that takes place in June. We want to have this link with the primary school to get a profile. That will tell us exactly where the child is at with regard to numeracy and literacy and how he or she is getting on in primary school. We get that information through liaising with the P7 teacher and the principal, and it enables us to set the child in an appropriate class.

We have to know more than just that, however. We want to know whether there are other issues and what we must look out for. There could be medical problems, as I mentioned, or domestic problems. We have to be vigilant, keeping an eye on pupils as they transfer.

Furthermore, we may be told by the primary school that only three of its pupils are coming to us. It might be in the best interests of all three to keep them all in the one class if at all possible. We get that kind of information as well. Therefore, by the end of the visits around the primary schools, we can sit down as a group of people and say, we have this person here on paper, so let us now start getting the right class for the pupil. Getting that right is, to us, the stepping stone from primary to post-primary. Sometimes things may have to change.

You talked about banding. If a child is not good at mathematics or numeracy, we might start them off in the special needs group. At Halloween or Christmas, we might realise that the child is progressing very well, and, therefore, we have to move that child up a class.

The Chairperson:

Is there consistent assessment of pupil ability across different feeder primaries?

Mr Warnock:

Our relationship with feeder primary schools has been very strong, and there is very good trust there now. That has been very important because, as I said, we have been catering for all abilities for 30 years. Like Castlederg High School, we are in competition with the so-called grammar schools, and we have tried to take a consistent approach.

Mr Adrian McGuckin (Dean Maguirc College):

We also use standardised testing to aid us. For example, Suffolk reading tests, Vernon spelling tests, and so on, complement what comes from the primary school. For example, if an IEP needs to be drawn up for a pupil, it is drawn up as quickly as possible. Furthermore, as James said, pupils need to be put in the correct band. Someone might have a strength in mathematics but a weakness in literacy, and they should be put in the appropriate band.

The Chairperson:

I notice from your paper, which was very helpful, that there is a very strong emphasis in the school on the use of data. Is that right? Adrian's comment may confirm that. Is that data based on before the child enters the school? Is it then updated and kept as a record of progression?

Mr McGuckin:

One technique that we use is cognitive ability tests, or CATs, as they are known. We use that as a diagnostic test, and it lets us see where the pupils are. However, to tackle underachievement, we look out for a discrepancy between, for example, literacy and numeracy that sets the alarm bells ringing. We identify that, although that person may not be a low achiever, he or she is underachieving. We put systems in place, an example of which is the reading partnership programme, which is specifically aimed at literacy. Pupils go into that and get help. That raises their literacy levels and helps in every subject.

The Chairperson:

I do not want to expand too much, but I notice that you have literacy and numeracy co-ordinators,

who, obviously, play a key role.

Mr Warnock:

Very much so.

The Chairperson:

Do they tie into all that?

Mr McGuckin:

Yes. Whatever information they have ties into the school development plan and into whatever programmes we set up.

Mr Warnock:

If we take underachievement as part of our agenda, our literacy and numeracy co-ordinator has to work very closely with us, and we have to use whatever data that we have if we are to address the needs of the pupils. We get information from the primary schools and do standardised tests in our school later and, of course, diagnostic testing. That helps us to get a bigger picture of the pupil and, through tracking, we can see where that pupil is going.

You asked about a consistent approach from the primary schools. We have challenged primary schools and the Key Stage 2 levels. Inconsistency has happened, but not in recent years. We found that, in some cases, some of the levels were very high, and we have now got to a stage at which we will ask where that level has come from. It is about accountability. We did challenge in the past, but now we have a more consistent approach.

Mr B McCrea:

I will put a proposition to you, if only for the sake of argument, because we are interested specifically in underachievement. It strikes me that, at one stage, schools — not your school — might treat almost everybody the same and deal with them in a homogeneous way. There is then another level, where schools do, as you do, quite intensive banding, and you look at CAT and have data come back in. I wonder, given some of the other issues that we have heard about, whether this differs across schools. People now seem to be getting right down into individual

learning plans on multiple layers. Is that the continuum? Is that where people are heading to, or is that going too far?

Mr McGuckin:

To give each pupil a fair shake of the stick, schools need to be going that way. We need to look to see what the pupils' needs are. The premise of the Northern Ireland curriculum is that a pupil progresses at his or her level to the best of his or her ability. Taking that to be the underlying statement, we should be looking at what we can do best for individual pupils.

To anticipate Trevor's question, we have serious issues with accreditation. Pupils do a course that is suitable to them, yet they might not get the credit that they deserve for it. I am thinking, for example, of entry-level subjects at GCSE for which they do not get much accreditation. However, it is best suited for them, and, according to the Northern Ireland curriculum, that is the path that they should follow.

Mr B McCrea:

The general issue is that some employers are going directly to school leavers from the top end rather than to people who are leaving higher and further education because they are not getting qualifications that are meaningful to them. There is an issue of trying to encourage people to do something that will be useful to them in the future.

Mr McGuckin:

In the presentation, James said that we provide three pathways for pupils. One is a choice of totally academic subjects, and pupils can choose to do that at the end of Key Stage 3 and into Key Stage 4. The other two pathways involve a vocational element. In one of those, pupils do occupational studies or a BTEC at the South West College here in Omagh. In the third, they do a reduced number of GCSEs, a placement in South West College and a work placement. In addition to that, we do an award and certificate in education, training and skills (ACET) in employability, which raises their skills in what is needed to be employable.

Mr B McCrea:

I do not want to take too long, but do you notice any particular difference between boys and girls?

In the previous presentation, we talked about differential results. I stress that I do not raise this to be sectarian in any way, but a Public Accounts Committee (PAC) report included data that showed that some groups of people were performing in a similar way and that one group was not performing well. Part of the issue was that boys were performing below the level of girls. In your school, is there any differential in the outcomes for boys and girls and the treatment of boys and girls?

Mr Warnock:

I will take that. We noted that there was a gap between boys and girls, and we have tried to address that gap in recent years. As Castlederg High School has done, we have looked at the year group. We had to do that, after saying that we needed to bridge the gap. We then found that boys did better than girls at GCSE. One of the boys was the top achiever, and he is over there in the Public Gallery.

Mr B McCrea:

We will embarrass him later.

The Chairperson:

No pressure there.

Mr Warnock:

We have been looking at that issue. This year was an exception, and I cannot say what next year will bring. I suppose that I do know that it will not be the same as this year. We have to try to bridge that gap, and we are doing that. The other issue is to do with pupils taking different pathways, which Adrian mentioned. We have to look at offering courses that are relevant to pupils when they enter Key Stage 4. We have pupils in the third pathway who, in a week, do a day in South West College on a vocational course and a day at a related work placement. They come to school for three days a week, and, perhaps through career guidance or their outlook, they realise that they must try to get some qualifications in GCSE English and maths. It is not a case of our telling them that that is important. Naturally, we will say that. They may be getting advice from external agencies. I should add that it is not just the boys who are going out into the workplace. There are also some girls, be it for hairdressing, or whatever.

We need to look at courses that are relevant, but we also have to remember that the pupils need to have some grades when they leave. For us, a D could be the equivalent of an A* for a pupil. Those grades, whether Ds or Es, add up to points for the next stage or the next course that they go on to.

Mr B McCrea:

I do not want to go on, so we will talk over lunch.

The Chairperson:

So that I do not lose the train of thought, Adrian, you raise a very interesting point about the entrance accreditations. We are keen for you to expand on that for us, perhaps even in writing, because it is something that we would like to take back to the Department to discuss. You have raised a very important issue. You are the curriculum co-ordinator in the school, and you are seeing it from the practitioner's point of view rather than from a policy point of view.

Mr McGuckin:

We are also seeing it from a wider viewpoint. James can pick up on this point. There is work ongoing in the Omagh Learning Community to look at accreditation for pupils.

The Chairperson:

Perhaps, rather than put the burden on you, we will have a discussion with Alison Smyth. Alison is going to end up asking why she was not at the table making a presentation to the Committee. Yes, that would be useful, Adrian.

Mr O'Dowd:

Thank you for your presentation. I have a broader question that may seem strange. What should formal education be about? What should the outcomes be for the individual pupil?

Mr McGuckin:

I think — Sorry, James.

Mr Warnock:

You go ahead.

Mr B McCrea:

That was well ducked, James.

Mr O'Dowd:

Now we know from where Barry McElduff learned it.

Mr McGuckin:

Our mission statement sums it up. We commit ourselves to the growth and development of people. That takes various forms, from the pupils who leave with the highest grades and go on to university to those who are going into employment or technical courses that suit them. We are looking at it holistically.

Mr O'Dowd:

I agree with you.

Mr McGuckin:

I will keep quiet now, because I do not want to steal my principal's thunder.

Mr O'Dowd:

I agree with what you are saying, but is there perhaps a misunderstanding among the general populace of what formal education is about and what society needs to achieve from formal education?

Mr Warnock:

I do not want to reiterate what Adrian has said. If we are educating pupils, we need to get them qualifications, but we must also have a holistic approach to education, as Adrian said, because we have to develop people who are going to be fit to take their place in society, contribute to society and take a place in the workplace, if there is work there.

To me, formal education is about qualifications, but it is also about empowering somebody who is going to take on a very big role in society. We have to look at various aspects. Are we just getting people to finish school with qualifications? No; that is not what we want. We want people who will be independent and responsible and who will be able to think for themselves. The next big thing in education is becoming independent learners. Yes, formal education is about qualifications and producing people who can go out there and play a role in society. Like all other schools, everyone that comes into our school feels that they have a role to play in school, and then a further role to play when they leave.

Mr O'Dowd:

Thank you.

Ms Máire Quinn (Dean Maguirc College):

It is very important that we strive to empower our young people at all times. I will talk about some of the activities that we do in school. For example, we have a class prefect system from year 8 until year 12. Post-16, we have senior prefects, who have a say and involvement in the school.

Our student council also runs very well. We regularly survey our pupils about school life. We recently surveyed year 8 pupils about how they had settled in. Last June, we surveyed our present year 9 pupils — last year's year 8 pupils — about what advice they would give us to change the programme for our present year 8 pupils. It is very important that pupils have a say in our school, because it is their school, and we value their opinion and input at all times.

Mr O'Dowd:

How does the school manage interaction with families, parents and guardians? Is there an outreach programme? Do you seek out the guardians and parents especially of pupils who may not be achieving well? That can often be related to an incident or incidents in the family home.

Mr Warnock:

We work closely with the Education Welfare Service. That has to be our first port of call. We try very much to establish relationships with all parents, and there are times when that might be quite

difficult to do. However, we have to keep moving in that direction.

I will give you an example: there was a pupil whose father we could not get in, and we knew that there was no point in bringing the mother in because she was going to side with the pupil. We needed the father in so that we could work collectively or in partnership. He was working in England so was not available between Monday and Friday. I said that that was fine and that we could meet at the weekend, which we did on a Saturday morning. I think that he realised, when he came in, that we were not threatening him but trying to work together. We have to try to work with the Education Welfare Service and social services because we are all in this together. The child and parents may see then see that the school is trying to do the best for them.

Mr McGuckin:

We also have a learning guidance team — comprising me in a curricular capacity, Máire in a pastoral capacity or in her role as SENCo, our careers officer inside the school and a careers officer from outside the school — that gets together to look at individual pupils who we think might be presenting a problem. That information is fed up the line from class teachers and form teachers. Therefore, we have a focus. If a pupil has a problem, we are looking at not one area but at several to see how we can help.

Mr O'Dowd:

Thank you.

The Chairperson:

Seamus, you wanted to make a comment.

Mr Shields:

It is not like a politician to sit with his lip buttoned for too long.

Mr B McCrea:

Exactly. Speak up, Seamus.

The Chairperson:

That is why we thought we would give you an opportunity to speak, Seamus.

Mr Shields:

I have been associated with this school in one way or another since it was founded in the mid-1960s although not very directly until the past 20 years or so when I joined the board of governors. Therefore, I have had the opportunity to observe the school from its very beginnings until the situation that James presented so eloquently with regard to the school's performance today.

The school faced formidable difficulties in the early days, not least because it started life as a secondary intermediate. I taught for many years in the neighbouring primary school. When we talked about post-primary education in the classroom, the school was very often referred to as "the Intermediate down the road". I saw the school progress from being that intermediate school until, stage by stage and step by step, it came to be where it is today: a highly esteemed local college catering for all pupils from the transfer from primary school right through until many of them progress to higher education, and many of them into the higher courses at university.

I had the opportunity to observe its transition from what might have been regarded as a struggling school to a very successful school. I have some perception of some of the landmarks that might have led to this point, but the crucial one is how the school has grown in the estimation of the local community. What brought that about? The most important factor of a successful school is the relationship that it has with the community that it serves, and the esteem in which it is held by the community that it serves. I came across a statement recently that came into my mind again a moment ago, which was that the community is a powerful ally of the local school. That has been amply demonstrated by this school, because of the relationship that it has had with the community.

In its early days, the school competed with grammar schools, because the community in Carrickmore and the surrounding area always set great store by educational achievement. The drive and the pressure in the primary schools was to get the children through the 11-plus so that they could get places in a grammar school. Gradually, however, that changed, not least through

the efforts of the secondary school to demonstrate that it could bring children through the full curriculum and have them performing perhaps equally as well as many of the children in the grammar schools.

The community's perception of the school changed gradually, until, around 10 years ago, the school introduced a sixth form, and the community saw the students progressing successfully through that. Those were important factors in raising the esteem of the school. Much more important, however, was the relationship that grew between the school and the community as a result of openness and a new attitude of welcome in the school community to the local area.

I emphasise in particular that, as the school grew and developed, the new cohort of teachers that came into the school were, very often, people who had strong roots in the community. Many of them were closely associated with Gaelic football, for example. There is a powerful association with Gaelic games in the area that the school serves. The people have a very great regard for Gaelic football success, and many of the young teachers, many of whom I know personally, were prominent Gaelic games players. That gave a new image to the school, which the children liked to be associated with, and it gave the school a lift.

The school got a new name as well. It was no longer known as the "Intermediate" but became known locally as "The Dean". It began to produce school magazines and other annual publications. The community came to the school prize-giving ceremonies, and the parents loved to see their children's successes being celebrated. All that built up the feeling that the school was a good school, and people were proud to send their children there and be associated with the school in many different respects. All those influences, I observed, allowed the school to grow. I would not, in any way, demean the efforts of the staff and the powerful input that they provided, nor the vision that the school had for high expectations and high achievement. All that was vital, but no less important was the support of the community, which saw the school as a good school. The community saw the school as its school, and people were glad to have their children there. That has been the transition that I have observed. It is a credit to the school staff that they can present such a positive image of and such a positive report on their school.

The Chairperson:

That is a very fitting conclusion to our public hearings, Seamus. This is the final public hearing in this round of engagements as part of our inquiry. Thank you for that. I hope that John O'Dowd will take some of Tyrone's Gaelic expertise back to Armagh.

Mr O'Dowd:

I want to put on record that I am a Down man.

The Chairperson:

As someone who knows nothing about it, I would not want to interfere.

Mr Shields:

When I taught in the primary school, I had the opportunity, perhaps the privilege, of teaching Barry McElduff.

The Chairperson:

So you are responsible. Can we all have a word with you afterwards?

Mr Shields:

I just wanted the opportunity to tell that in public. I have to say that Barry taught me more than I ever taught him.

The Chairperson:

Thank you very much. I thank James Warnock and his team. That was extremely useful. I wish you well in your newbuild, and I hope that work on it is progressing. I know that it was announced, and I hope that it will be brought to fruition. We wish your school well, as we do all the schools that have taken part today. As we have found on all these occasions, we go away informed, armed with examples that can be used and built on. Thank you for the time that you have taken to see us today.