



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Committee for Education

**OFFICIAL REPORT
(Hansard)**

**Entitlement Framework: Departmental
Briefing**

25 April 2012

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

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Members present for all or part of the proceedings:

Mr Danny Kinahan (Deputy Chairperson)
Ms Michaela Boyle
Mrs Jo-Anne Dobson
Mr Phil Flanagan
Mrs Brenda Hale
Mr Trevor Lunn
Miss Michelle McIlveen
Mr Daithí McKay
Mr Sean Rogers

Witnesses:

Mr Roger McCune	Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment
Mr Adrian Arbuthnot	Department of Education
Mrs Dorina Edgar	Department of Education
Mrs Shirley Sweeney	Department of Education

The Deputy Chairperson: I welcome Roger McCune, who is head of accreditation with the Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment (CCEA), Shirley Sweeney and Dorina Edgar from the Department's curriculum entitlement team, and Adrian Arbuthnot, who is director of curriculum, qualifications and standards. Good afternoon, and thank you very much for coming today. Initially, you had been due to come before the Committee at a later date, so thank you for facilitating the Committee's bringing forward today's session. I look forward to hearing what you have to say. I am a great believer in everyone needing a broad knowledge, because the rest of life comes at us fast if we are not prepared. Therefore, I think that a wide curriculum is very important. I look forward to your briefing.

Mr Adrian Arbuthnot (Department of Education): I do not want to take up too much of the Committee's time, but I hope that you will permit me to make an opening statement that will set the backdrop for the entitlement framework, and we can go into details and discussion afterwards.

The introduction of the entitlement framework is a core element of the Department's wider reform programme, which is aimed at raising standards in our schools and improving educational outcomes for pupils. The framework sits alongside other policy instruments, such as the revised curriculum; Every School a Good School; and Count, Read: Succeed. All of those aim to raise standards.

Under the entitlement framework, our young people will have the opportunity to choose from a wide menu of courses at Key Stage 4 and post-16. That will be regardless of the school that they attend, as every grant-aided post-primary school will be required to offer that wide menu. No longer will a pupil's choice of subjects at Key Stage 4 or post-16 be restricted by any limitations that individual schools may impose. In bringing forward the entitlement framework, the Education Minister is very much putting the needs of the pupils first.

The introduction of the framework in September 2013 was an important element of the Minister's statement to the Assembly last September. The Department has already made the regulations necessary to give effect to the relevant provisions of the Education (Northern Ireland) Order 2006 that relate to the framework. Importantly, however, the Minister has recognised that some schools may still benefit from a phased introduction, which is why, in September 2013, the requirement on schools will be to provide access to a minimum of 18 courses at Key Stage 4 and 21 courses at post-16. The minimum requirement will be raised to 21 and 24 in 2014 and to the full entitlement framework of 24 courses at Key Stage 4 and 27 at post-16 in 2015. Within those stipulated numbers, one third of courses must be designated as applied and one third as general. The balance of the curricular offer can be as each individual school determines.

The area learning communities that have come into existence comprise post-primary schools in particular geographical areas and their local further education institution. That arrangement will help schools to develop their curricular offer through co-operation and collaboration with neighbouring schools and colleges.

The increased choice available will provide to pupils enhanced opportunities to follow courses that interest them and lead not only to higher levels of achievement but to fulfilling careers in an ever-changing work environment. I will leave it at that, Chairman. I am happy, along with my colleagues, to answer any specific questions on the framework that you or members might have.

The Deputy Chairperson: Thank you very much.

Are we on track to achieve the targets? Will you comment on how you think that the introduction of the entitlement framework will be affected by area planning and the viability project?

Mr Arbuthnot: We carry out regular audits of schools to check how they are faring against the statutory requirements. At last count, 159 of the 213 post-primary schools were meeting the 2013 requirements for Key Stage 4. At post-16, 108 out of the 172 schools that offer sixth-form provision were meeting the 2013 requirements. We have achieved a lot so far, but there is still a bit to do in the year left before the entitlement framework comes into being. Did you ask about area planning?

The Deputy Chairperson: Yes. Will it distract schools from concentrating properly on how they introduce the framework?

Mr Arbuthnot: The area plans are still being examined and developed, as you are aware. However, I think that they are consistent with introducing the entitlement framework where we anticipate that schools will deliver a richer curricular offer to young people. The framework will also develop forms of collaboration, which could play very neatly into the area-based planning system once it has been decided. So I think that the entitlement framework is very complementary to the area plans.

Mr McKay: The schools have to meet the requirement of offering at least one third of applied subjects and one third of general subjects. Have subjects been tied down as applied and general?

Mr Arbuthnot: We have given guidance to schools, in general terms, about what is applied and what is general. We can go into the detail of how we are defining applied and general and how we are faring. Shirley, do you have the definitions in front of you?

Mrs Shirley Sweeney (Department of Education): Yes. We were keen to make sure that the definitions were clear and understandable for schools first and then for parents and pupils. That was a key driver in our consideration of the revised definitions, one of which the Minister highlighted in his autumn

statement. Logically, the assessment arrangements for a general course and an applied course differ. So our revised definitions, which were sent out in a circular in December, are simply that the demonstration of knowledge, understanding and skills in general courses is mainly through written tasks in a subject specific context. In an applied course, the demonstration is more practical and/or within an employability context, with employability already forming part of the terminology with which schools are familiar in the statutory curriculum.

Mr McKay: Does the Department have lists showing which courses are applied and which are general?

Mr Arbuthnot: That is exactly the work in hand at the moment. One of the reasons why Roger is with us today is that he and his team are being very helpful to us in combing through the huge number of qualifications and courses that schools offer and categorising them as applied or general. Roger, would you like to say something about that process?

Mr Roger McCune (Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment): Yes, it is a good question. I am very supportive of the entitlement framework. Qualifications in subjects at the extremes, such as leisure and tourism and history are, obviously, easy to define. The difficulties arise when we get into subjects in the middle. With the refined definitions, we have a sharper focus to work on. We have been advising the Department about the qualifications, and those then become part of the audit that schools will use. The audit is kept by the Western Education and Library Board.

So schools will have a much clearer focus on what are applied and what are general subjects. That is not to say that there are no arguments about whether certain subjects are applied or general, but with the more focused definitions and using the audit, we can clarify that for schools.

Mr Arbuthnot: It is important to add that schools will receive a comprehensive list so that they are in no doubt as to how their offer is characterised.

Mr McKay: Are you hearing from any schools that they will be unable to meet the targets for 2013-15, or is there any resistance from particular schools?

Mr Arbuthnot: I am not aware of any resistance. Schools are required under statutory provision to offer the entitlement framework from 2013. The area boards are working closely with schools to assist them in developing their curricular offer, and the work of the area learning communities continues in a way that will help schools that may still be falling short to regain any lost ground and ensure that they comply with the statutory provision in 2013.

Mr Flanagan: Thank you for your presentation. My first question picks up on an area that Daithí was probing: the list of subjects that are either general or applied. Could there be different lists, depending on the examination board used by schools?

Mr Arbuthnot: Lists will not differ depending on the awarding body. Many qualifications, for example, GCSE and GCE, are developed under common criteria. Issues such as the one that you described arose when we first came up with various definitions of general and applied, but we are clarifying the position.

The other important issue that we had to address was ensuring consistency between GCSEs and GCEs, and we sought to ensure that that was the case. In other words, the same subject cannot be a general GCSE and an applied GCE, or vice versa.

Mr Flanagan: Thank you for that. What action will be taken against schools that will not, or cannot, fulfil the criteria of the entitlement framework?

Mr Arbuthnot: We expect the employing authorities to work with the schools to ensure that they offer the entitlement framework. It would also be necessary to find out if there were any particular reasons why a school was failing to offer the entitlement framework. It could, for example, be as simple as a school waiting to recruit a teacher for a particular subject, meaning that that subject could not be offered until that teacher was in place. There could be circumstances in which, on a temporary basis,

a school might be one or two subjects short of the full entitlement but had a plan to deliver the full entitlement by a particular time. Ultimately, however, it is a statutory requirement, and if a particular school was failing to deliver the curricular offer, that would start to call into question its viability.

Mr Flanagan: Are you talking about closing a school, imposing financial penalties or standing down boards of governors? What type of sanctions would the Department seek to take, or would that be up to the employing authorities?

Mr Arbuthnot: We would have to consider each set of circumstances at the time. The important thing is that we need to ensure that schools meet the needs of our young people and that they offer a satisfactory and acceptable variety and number of courses at Key Stage 4 and post-16. Schools that fail to do so will not be delivering the curriculum as it is stipulated in Northern Ireland. It will be a matter for schools to have a development plan indicating how they will meet the curriculum offer. Failing that, a school that does not deliver the curriculum does not meet the needs of young people and would have to be considered in that context.

Mr Flanagan: Thank you. I think that I am right in saying that the legislation states that 80% of subjects at post-16 level must be studied within a student's campus or school. Where did the figure of 80% come from? Given that most A-level students take either three or four subjects, would a figure of 66% or 75% not have worked better and enabled learning communities to operate better?

Mr Arbuthnot: It is not a hard and fast figure of 80%. It is guidance that we give to schools. We expect each individual school to be capable of delivering approximately 80%. I will be corrected if necessary, but I do not think that it is a statutory figure as such. Rather, it is intended to avoid the situation in which young people or, indeed, teachers are constantly moving around the countryside to take classes. We expect the home school, if I may refer to it in those terms, to be able to deliver the majority of the curriculum in its premises.

Mr Flanagan: Will you clarify whether the 80% applies to each student rather than to each student's individual subject?

Mrs Dorina Edgar (Department of Education): It is that 80% of students' time has to be spent in schools that offer the subject.

Mr Flanagan: So the 80% applies to time and not subject. That is fine.

Mrs Edgar: You are right that most students take three or four A levels. Equally, however, some could be studying a combination of subjects and attending a college of further education one day a week.

Mr Flanagan: That is fine. Its being time based makes sense, because five days can be broken down to four and one.

Mr Arbuthnot: Yes, 80% of time equates to four days a week.

Mr Flanagan: That is grand. My final point is that a lot of work has been done to encourage sharing across learning communities. It is working particularly well in my area of Fermanagh. At the moment, is it possible for schools, at either GCSE or A level, to share learning across the border to meet the needs of the entitlement framework? Is any work being done to facilitate that?

Mr Arbuthnot: I am not aware of any specific cross-border work.

Mr McCune: The one difficulty that arises is the different qualification systems. With the leaving cert, pupils study six subjects. It is interesting that the South of Ireland has its established leaving cert and a vocational leaving cert, whereas we are trying to combine the two in one package through the requirement for one third of general and one third of applied subjects.

Mrs Edgar: I would just like to add something from my experience in a previous life. Teachers have to be vetted before they are able to work in schools. So it would not be as easy now to share across area learning communities and for teachers to travel to classes in different schools. Many procedures and processes would have to be set up, but there could be opportunities, especially in e-learning, to share resources. There are all sorts of other ways of sharing. We have flagged that up before, but now that we are getting the new Fronter system, the new C2k, Lot 7, which is much stronger and more robust, there may be other opportunities to expand on that or explore opportunities for cross-border working.

Mr Flanagan: The Irish language is an excellent example. An awful lot of border schools cannot deliver Irish language teaching because of their small pupil numbers. However, if they were allowed to share resources with a school across the border, a teacher from the South could come to work in a school in the North, or a student from the North could spend a day each week in a school in the South. I do not see any massive problem with that. There is no doubt that barriers exist, but they are not so insurmountable that they cannot be overcome. It would be useful to have a piece of work done to determine whether any such barriers could be addressed in the short to medium term.

Mr Arbuthnot: We will bring that suggestion back to the Department.

Mr Flanagan: You have, or you will?

Mr Arbuthnot: We will.

Mr Flanagan: OK, that is great. Thank you.

Mrs Dobson: Adrian, you referred to the area learning communities, which do a fantastic job. Schools are mostly supportive of the entitlement framework, but they will be hampered in its delivery because of budget cuts and the difficult decisions that they are having to make. What additional help are you giving to schools to deliver the framework, and have you listened to the concerns of the area learning communities?

Mr Arbuthnot: Are you talking about additional financial help?

Mrs Dobson: Given all the current redundancies, finance is obviously a major issue.

Mr Arbuthnot: Earmarked funding is currently available to schools, particularly to prepare for and deliver the entitlement framework. However, as you are probably aware, that earmarked funding is being phased out. From April 2014, schools will be required to fund the entitlement framework delivery from their delegated schools budget. Financial support will be available until then for schools to prepare themselves for the introduction of the framework.

Mrs Dobson: Does the Department realise that the budget cuts and redundancies in schools are, in some cases about which I have heard in my constituency, leading to subjects being dropped, which runs contrary to the framework?

Mr Arbuthnot: We are acutely aware from correspondence and from our meetings with area learning communities that budget constraints bear heavily on many schools. I wish that I was in a position to say that I could increase schools' budgets, but I am not. It is a matter for school management and boards of governors to consider ways in which they can deliver the entitlement framework through, as already mentioned, ICT methods, sharing teachers and innovative ways to deliver the necessary number of subjects.

Mrs Dobson: Last month, I wrote to the Minister because of concerns in my constituency of Upper Bann. I am talking about successful and viable schools that are penalised because of having to make redundancies and take difficult decisions. Redundancies will, ultimately, put pressure on the curriculum. It is difficult for those schools to see how they will be able to deliver the framework with fewer teachers. Are you in a position to outline what you are doing to help schools to deal with that situation?

Mr Arbuthnot: I cannot add much to what I have already said. The funding is being phased out, but I know that, elsewhere in the Department, the common funding formula is being examined to determine what revisions or updating might be required. That may be a source of assistance to schools, but I cannot be definitive about that at this stage.

Mrs Dobson: You do accept that, with redundancies, the framework will put additional pressures on schools?

Mr Arbuthnot: I very much accept that schools are in a very difficult financial situation when it comes to delivering the entitlement framework. However, I encourage them to look as best they can at innovative and collaborative ways of delivery and at ways in which costs might be shared.

Mrs Sweeney: That is one reason why the Minister, recognising the difficult budgetary pressures on schools, moved to introduce the entitlement framework on a phased basis. His work will continue to examine how he, at a strategic level, can maximise the resources available to go directly to schools through the viability audit, the sustainable schools implementation and, as Adrian said, reviewing the common funding formula.

Mrs Dobson: Adrian, you referred to the reasons why schools cannot deliver the entitlement framework. I think that that is pretty obvious, with the redundancies and budgets as they are, but thank you.

Mr Rogers: Jo-Anne's point was well made. I encounter the same problem, particularly in rural areas of south Down, where schools might be unable to deliver the framework.

My point is on coursework and school-based assessment. In the past, there have been problems with coursework. I know that the applied route involves school-based assessments. Given your recent experience, how will you ensure that both paths are equitable? Say, for example, a child of mine was studying business studies or applied business. How will you ensure that, for either path, whether a child studies applied business or business studies, the qualification is equitable?

Mr McCune: That is a very good point. There has always been a feeling that the only robust examination is one that is written, sent away and marked. Increasingly, although this has always been the case for art and design, technology and design, and so on — there is a range of subjects for which assessment expands into the area of showing skills and competences. That is an issue. However, we have safeguards in place to ensure that assessments carried out internally, as they quite often are, are moderated in a way that ensures robust outcomes. It is an issue with GCE business studies, or, as it was, NVQ applied business. We work very hard to ensure that the assessments are robust. It is also a matter of perception and convincing people, including parents, that there are more ways of assessing than a pupil simply answering 10 questions in a written examination that is sent away and marked. Moving right across into the occupational area, I think that the last thing that you would want is a written test for a mechanic who changes the plugs in your car. I know that we are not going that far on the vocational side, but it is a genuine concern. We work hard to ensure that the internal assessments are moderated to ensure that the outcomes are robust.

Mr Rogers: Do young people still take coursework home, or are they always assessed in school?

Mr McCune: That question was addressed when I attended the Committee before. At one stage, GCSEs included coursework. It was felt that coursework was hard to control because it was taken away and done at home. We have moved to controlled assessments, which, by their nature, have greater controls. That has brought issues. Last year, which was their first year, there were particular problems — I went to many principals' meeting and got a hammering. However, this year, we worked very hard on a report that MORI produced for us, and we looked at the issues that schools were having with controlled assessments. Again, it is about ensuring the robustness of internal assessments. Modern languages still cause us some problems, but, by and large, we have got to grips with some of the issues. I have always said that one of the difficulties with exams is that there cannot be pilots, because they are live. Therefore, we need to get it right first time, every time.

The Deputy Chairperson: I want to come back to the subject of the entitlement framework, which various people touched on. Normally, when something new is brought in, all the easy things get done first, and then you start to reach the blocks. Jo-Anne touched on funding issues, and I imagine that buildings and the sharing of schools are other issues. We need to know what, if any, problems loom in totally achieving the end targets. Are there any issues building up that we will find out about later?

Mr Arbutnot: I feel that schools are performing extremely well in preparing themselves for the introduction of the framework. The figures that I quoted at the start of today's session have been increasing, and I have no particular cause for concern as far as all schools being able to meet the requirements is concerned.

The Deputy Chairperson: That is good to hear.

Mr Flanagan: The briefing note provided to the Committee states:

"Currently 159 out of around 213 post-primary schools are meeting the 2013 Key Stage 4 requirements, and 108 out of 172 schools with sixth form provision".

Is it possible to get a breakdown of the schools not meeting them so that we can see how far some schools are from meeting the requirement?

Mr Arbutnot: Yes, but will you allow us first to finish the work, which should be completed soon, on categorising all the courses that are available and mapping that information against what schools are offering? Quite an administrative exercise lies behind your relatively simple request. We will need to know which courses are categorised as applied or general and to map those against schools' provision. However, we can provide that level of detail when it is ready, which may be in a month or two.

Mr Flanagan: Good job. Thank you.

The Deputy Chairperson: Thanks very much for your time.