



Northern Ireland
Assembly

**COMMITTEE
FOR EDUCATION**

OFFICIAL REPORT
(Hansard)

Entitlement Framework

1 June 2011

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

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FOR EDUCATION**

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Members present for all or part of the proceedings:

Mr Mervyn Storey (Chairperson)
Ms Michaela Boyle
Mrs Jo-Anne Dobson
Mr Phil Flanagan
Mrs Brenda Hale
Miss Michelle McIlveen
Mr Daithí McKay

Witnesses:

Mrs Katrina Godfrey) Department of Education

The Chairperson:

We now move to the entitlement framework, which is another light subject.

Mrs Katrina Godfrey (Department of Education):

Yes, this is another light subject for a Wednesday morning. I want to link this session to the previous discussion. We see the entitlement framework very much as an integral part of our wider efforts to raise standards. In the same way, we see it as integral to the work on the new economic strategy. For those members who may not be steeped in this, the policy has been designed to meet the needs of young people and to help them become more positive contributors

to the economy by improving the range of courses that are available to them and by ensuring that the courses that they take after the age of 14 are relevant to their career aspirations and future job prospects.

The entitlement framework came about, at least in part, because of concerns in the past about inequitable provision across schools in different parts of Northern Ireland. Some pupils were having access to 15, 20, 25 or 30 courses, whereas others were having access to a much more restricted number of courses once they got to the age of 14, which, as you know, is when pupils will naturally start to make choices that are related to what they enjoy, what they are good at and their future career aspirations and job prospects.

So, the focus over the past number of years has been on supporting schools to improve the range and balance of courses that are on offer to young people when they are making choices at the age of 14 — that is, at the end of third year in old money, or year 10, as we call it now — and again as they are about to go into sixth form. The focus has been on trying to help schools to increase the range of courses available to young people that they offer either by themselves or often in collaboration with other schools and, particularly for those courses that require a specialist input, offering them in collaboration with further education (FE) colleges across Northern Ireland.

The target over the past number of years has been to try to get every school to a point where, no matter where a young person goes to school, they can access somewhere in the region of 24 courses at the age of 14 and 27 courses at sixth form. Obviously, they will not study anything like that number, but the sense has always been that, if you have a broad choice and a broad range of relevant courses from which to choose, you are more likely, as a young person, to find something that you enjoy, that you are good at, that you see as relevant and that will take you into the next stage of your education. We all know from ample research that when young people enjoy things and see them as relevant, they tend to do pretty well at them and to achieve. So, that is why we have always said that the entitlement framework is a really important part of the wider raising standards agenda.

The progress has been extremely heartening. I was looking back at some of the statistics, and,

this year, 104 of our post-primary schools are already offering 24 or more courses at Key Stage 4 for children after the age of 14. That number of schools was 29 in 2007-08, so that means that a host of young people are sitting in schools across Northern Ireland with access to courses that they would not have had access to four years ago. Even through the publication of the GCSE results, we have seen that that is having an impact on young people's attainment. It is keeping them in school and is encouraging them to stay on at school — we have seen significant increases in the number of young people staying on at school post-16 — and it is also helping them to attain. So, the focus has been very much on greater choice.

The other thing that we have always been aware of, and, as parents, are always acutely conscious of, is that there is very little point in offering young people a huge degree of choice at 14 and again at 16 if we are not also offering them good careers education and good careers advice. It is about making the right choice. Another aspect of the entitlement framework has been the link that we have made between it and the joint Department of Education/Department for Employment and Learning (DEL) careers strategy. That is designed to improve the quality of the careers advice that is given to young people at every stage in their education but particularly when they are starting to make choices that carry implications for how they continue their studies and how they go on into the world of work. Choice is important.

Breadth and balance are hugely important, as is good careers advice. Also, we constantly talk to schools about the coherence of options because, particularly at the age of 14, the choice and opportunity to study from a range of subjects should be designed in a way that keeps options open for young people for as long as possible, rather than closes them down. We think that it is very important that you study a range of subjects that do not start to close doors for you when you are only 14. We do not want to be in a position where, when young people get to 16, 17 or 18 and have a real interest in a career, they suddenly find that they have the wrong subject combinations. So, that is where the careers advice is hugely important.

The other thing that we are very conscious of is that this is another strand of work that links into what the Department for Employment and Learning has been carrying out on young people not in employment, education or training (NEETs). The fact that more young people are staying on and doing well at school is encouraging. We think that the opportunity for even more young

people to study subjects in which they are interested will be an important factor in reducing the number of children who are not engaged after compulsory schooling in some form of education, employment or training.

From the collaboration that many schools are involved in, we also see clear benefits not just in increasing the range of courses that are available to pupils but in the engagement that there has been with staff through professional development opportunities and those that come from studying in a slightly different environment with a different set of people, which has an effect on aspirations. Across the North, we have seen examples of good collaboration, which is doing far more than just increasing the number of courses that are on offer for pupils. We also see it in the ability of young people to access some of the specialist provision that is available in further education colleges while they are still at school and getting the ongoing pastoral support and the wider education that they need at that stage.

So, the progress and the link to attainment and to the wider economic focus have been hugely encouraging. That is not to say that, as with all other areas, it is not without challenges. For example, we know that the financial context presents challenges for schools, which, although wanting to offer more to their pupils, have to balance budgets. We also know that it can be a challenge to make sure that pupils follow courses that carry credible qualifications and that are credible in the eyes of parents, employers and further and higher education institutes. In that regard, the Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment (CCEA), as our local awarding body, has been doing some quite innovative work with colleagues in Invest Northern Ireland to try to identify areas of skills shortage and where there is a need for a different type of qualification or a new area for qualification. It has also been involving business in the development of those qualifications. So, we are seeing new qualifications coming on stream that are directly influenced by feedback from those in the economic sector, such as Invest NI and others, that discusses where there are likely to be opportunities for young people in the future.

The other challenge that we have and that schools frequently raise with me is the understanding of and the differentiation between applied and general qualifications for the purposes of the entitlement framework. We have taken the view that, if we cannot explain it simply and clearly, particularly to parents, we need to do more work. So we recently asked

CCEA for advice on whether the current definitions that we are using for applied and general qualifications are as good as they can be. We are also taking that a step further by talking to a group of school principals about what they think of the definitions and how they work in the reality of running a school so that we can make sure that they are as sensible and as easily communicated as they can be.

That is a sense of the progress that has been made and of the realism that we have adopted in recognising that there are challenges in trying to broaden and improve the range of opportunities for pupils.

The Chairperson:

Is the legal position with the entitlement framework that it will be statutory as of 2013?

Mrs Godfrey:

Yes.

The Chairperson:

Are we going to be able to meet that deadline, given the report produced by Dr Adeline Dinsmore, which raised a considerable number of concerns? If we can, we will make that report available to members, because it is useful to set the context with an assessment that was done on the entitlement framework. For example, issues were raised about the number of applied and general courses and about the number of pupils in classes, some of which had fewer than 10 pupils, raising an issue with economies of scale. We also have an added problem, because, as the Department's last briefing on funds from the Budget told us, £6 million is being taken out in 2011-12, £8 million in 2012-13, £14 million in 2013-14 and £19 million in 2014-15. How will we ever be able to meet the statutory requirements for 2013?

Mrs Godfrey:

You are quite right about the statutory requirement. The intention has been that we will work with schools and support them to help them to make as much progress as they can. The provisions in the Education (Northern Ireland) Order 2006 that govern the entitlement framework remain uncommenced, because our focus has been on helping schools to achieve, rather than on

putting in place a legislative hurdle without the support and the time that the schools need.

We have seen this from so many schools, and the evidence seems to suggest that making sure that young people can have access to a broad and balanced curriculum is having results. Therefore, we do not want to go back to a position where you might have access to only eight, nine, 10 or 11 subject areas depending on what school you go to. The breadth of opportunity provides a real opportunity for young people to enjoy what they are doing, to succeed and to do well. Evidence suggests that that is something that we have to build on.

The Dinsmore report specifically mentioned issues to do with class sizes. That becomes more of an issue in the current financial context, because you have to start asking whether it is more sensible for three schools in one area to offer subject x to three pupils in each of those schools, when perhaps one of those schools could offer it to nine pupils and the other two schools could offer something different that would provide a new set of opportunities for other young people.

We have seen really innovative practice in some areas of Northern Ireland. We have seen schools that initially saw barriers and then started to see opportunities. Interestingly, one of the things that you will hear discussed most often is issues with timetabling. It is very hard to collaborate if schools are all in different timetable blocks. In the past, schools tended to hold timetables very sacred, and the way that they did things suited them. However, in some areas, we have seen schools working together so that they move to a common timetable, not in the sense that everybody is doing the same thing at the same time, but in the sense that the structure of the timetable is designed in such a way that there are points in the school day when it is much easier for collaboration and for pupils to access a course. That would have been impossible in the past.

We will have to look increasingly at those sorts of issues in a financial context, because nobody wants to shut down opportunities for young people. It is about making the best use of the resources that we have to get as many young people as possible access and opportunity to courses that they need. That will be the challenge. We have already seen how schools in some areas are getting around that and are working together very innovatively to find the best way of using what resources they have. For example, in the North Eastern Education and Library Board area, the principals in Magherafelt did an excellent piece of work on what it costs to run a sixth form, and

they are using that to inform their decisions on what they offer both in their schools and on a shared basis. They will tell you that that has driven a lot of the additional work that they have been doing on a collaborative front to make sure that as many pupils as possible have access to as many courses as possible.

The Chairperson:

This is an issue that consistently worries me. We aspire to the concept of shared government, but I have always said that I think that that is a misnomer, because I do not think that it exists. It exists in some places, but the report states that:

“the FE sector has expert knowledge as well as specialist, industry-standard buildings, equipment and resources to deliver a wide range of professional, technical and applied courses: such courses, which are suitable for 14-19 pupils at all levels, up to and including level 4, can and should complement those delivered by schools”.

Having spent a huge amount of money reorganising further and higher education colleges, are we not left with the same problem, in that we are asking schools to duplicate something that already exists? Yet, when the previous Minister gave a statement to the House in November 2009 launching the report, she said that:

“More work needs to be done, particularly on the 14-19 strategy, and I will work closely with the Department for Employment and Learning to introduce that strategy.”

We have still not seen the strategy.

Mrs Godfrey:

We have actually advanced a number of aspects of it. You are quite right, in that I cannot hand you a single document, but the way that we have been approaching it has been to look at individual issues that focus specifically on the 14 to 19 age group. For example, we prioritised the careers element of it and brought forward, through the two relevant Ministers in the previous term, a joint careers strategy. We have been working very closely with DEL colleagues on the science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) agenda. Again, the economic input has pointed to the importance of STEM, so we brought forward the joint STEM review. The Executive response to that was published in March, so the STEM action plan is moving forward.

The other pieces of work that we have been involved in relate to qualifications and particularly to the point about collaboration between schools and further education. It is very clear, and I said this already, that there are facilities and a degree of expertise in some subjects in the further education sector that are hugely important for our young people to get to tap into. We do not want to be in the position where schools are replicating those subjects, particularly those that have required significant public investment in facilities and technology and so forth.

What we have been working on with DEL, and the FE sector has made huge progress on this, is the link between school and FE and making sure that, when a young person accesses a course through FE, the communication between the school and the college is effective and that the information on the pupil's needs, learning size and aptitudes is communicated. We have also been working on making sure that the pastoral systems are talking to one another and that all that you would expect as a parent to see in place if your child were going from their school to an FE college and back again is working as it should. There has been an awful lot of work under way on that.

I also mentioned the contribution that we feel we can make to the NEETs work that is being taken forward is to again make sure that when young people are at school they are supported to do as well as they can. The work with DEL has been continuing on a number of levels. The argument is that it could have been the easiest thing in the world to write jointly on a piece of paper, but the real thing is working together on the actual aspects of policy that matter most. That is where we have been putting our focus.

The Chairperson:

One of the other issues which was mentioned in Adeline Dinsmore's report is that you had a number of schools that were offering worthwhile courses to pupils, but they were not regarded as being eligible for inclusion in the entitlement framework because they did not meet the criteria about the number of guided learning hours. Have we resolved that issue? To me, that seemed to be more of a bureaucratic than a practical issue.

Mrs Godfrey:

At one level you could say that, but remember, at another level, one of the priorities for us is to make sure that the courses that young people are on lead to credible qualifications. We do not want young people spending time on a course and then not getting something that you, I, an employer or a higher education institute would recognise as a qualification. That is where the balance has to be struck. To get a level 2 qualification, for example, there are things that you have to be able to do and lengths of time that you have to spend. A lot of that has been clarified, and we have also looked at the issue of flexibility at the edges. If you were doing a course over 119 hours, and the rules say that it must be 120 hours, there is an argument that you need a bit of flexibility.

That has certainly been a focus, but it is not simply a bureaucratic exercise, because if we have young people following courses, there will be qualifications requirements to make sure that they can get a credible qualification. That is what plays in as well, and that is why I wanted to make the point about making sure that it was not just about courses but about courses that led to credible, recognised qualifications. The qualifications that are recognised by employers, parents and by further and higher education will, in their own right, have a degree of robustness attached to them that you have to achieve to be awarded them. So, that is always going to be a dimension, but it is not as bureaucratic as it perhaps sounds. It is about the link between what the pupil is doing and the requirements of the qualification.

Mrs Dobson:

Thank you. I have a couple of questions that I would like to ask you. With one third of courses under the framework being at the discretion of each school, can you give us a flavour of what courses schools are offering to their pupils under the framework?

Mrs Godfrey:

Not surprisingly, you will see many pupils, particularly those between 14 and 16 years old. We would, for example, expect all pupils to be studying GCSE English unless there are very exceptional reasons for not doing so. So, although you will see pupils doing the sorts of courses that you would immediately recognise, you will see them combining those increasingly with other courses that would come under the banner of “applied”.

Some of those will be applied GCSEs. ICT is an example of an applied GCSE, but others will not carry the GCSE label. If you look at schools, some young people will speak articulately about their experiences in some of the travel and tourism or sports and leisure courses where they are using a completely different skill set. They are applying their skills, yet they are achieving something that is credible and recognised by employers. That is the key thing.

So, there is a range of courses. The courses that you would be most familiar with will generally be classified as general courses, such as GCSE English, maths, geography, history and French. The applied courses will take you into territory that includes ICT and some of the more vocational elements, such as travel and tourism, sport and leisure and a number of other courses that would be accessed through the FE college.

Another thing that we have been doing with colleagues in DEL is making sure that the qualifications infrastructure is communicated in a way that makes more sense, particularly to parents helping their children to choose. We know that when children are making choices about subjects, their parents will still be the most influential people in helping them to make those choices. It is important that parents have reassurance that, if their child is doing course x, that will give them something that is recognised, that recognises the work that they have put into the course and that an employer will see as a good qualification in two, three or four years' time. That has been the particular issue.

The other element that I mentioned was that we are looking at some of the courses to make sure that the definitions are right, because we have traditionally tended to use a definition of "applied" that links a subject into a particular professional or vocational area. We are testing whether that still makes sense if you are aged 14, 15 or 16. You may not know at that point what particular area you want to go into, but you may be doing or accessing a course that requires you to apply your knowledge in a different way than is expected in some of the more academic courses. That is precisely why we are testing the definitions with principals and teachers in schools.

Mrs Dobson:

Are schools currently involved in conducting an audit of future requirements in their provision for implementation of the framework?

Mrs Godfrey:

We expect all schools to be looking at that. Through the Western Education and Library Board, we carry out an audit every year that looks at the courses that each school is offering. That allows us to see the extent to which schools are increasing their offer. It was from that that I was able to get the figures looking back at 2007-08 and at what is available to pupils today. There is an audit every year.

We also use that for funding purposes, because we continue to give schools a bit of extra funding, recognising that offering extra courses carries cost implications. We also expect that, at the level of area-learning communities and at school level, any school will look at its pupils and their profiles and be planning its curriculum not on what it suits the school to deliver or what was right for the pupils 10, 15 or 20 years ago but on what best meets the needs of pupils today.

Again, we have seen some very interesting examples. I was talking to a principal recently, and he was telling me that he had tracked his pupils five or six years on. A lot of them had done a certain subject, and he was not convinced about their employment prospects from that subject. By taking it through to university, however, they had done very well but were not getting jobs in the way that he thought that they would. That caused him to stop and pause and to look at the subject and the opportunity. He stopped offering that subject and offered something different. He continues to track his pupils and sees them go into jobs, because the course he offers is much more relevant to the Northern Ireland of today and to its economic needs. That is just one example of how schools increasingly look at where children go on to, what they need and what schools can provide to meet that need.

In Craigavon earlier in the year there was a conference for all staff in the post-primary schools. Employers were brought in to talk to staff about what they thought young people should need when they were leaving school. From talking to some of the teachers afterwards, I gather that that had a huge impact on them. Teachers had been looking at the problem from within the

confines of their subjects, but what they heard from employers was the value that they attached to some of the skills that are inherent in the curriculum and that we perhaps do not talk about as often as we should. Those are the skills of communication, being able to work with people, having a work ethic, having the discipline to follow instructions to get through a day's work and getting on with other people. Those were some of the things that employers valued as well. I know that the principals who I talked to found it hugely useful that their staff heard those messages directly from local employers.

Mrs Dobson:

Have the audits flagged up additional funding requests due to changes in trends in the choice of subjects?

Mrs Godfrey:

The audit gives us the information that allows us to give extra funding to schools that are providing more subjects. If they are providing an increased number of subjects, particularly in collaboration with further education, where very real costs are involved because the FE colleges charge the schools, we will give them an extra degree of support to help fund that. We will also give them extra support to help them to collaborate with another school to offer an applied subject. We know that schools will offer their core curriculum, but the provision of new opportunities to pupils will result in some costs that will have to be faced. We have said that we will continue to support schools by providing some contribution towards those costs, and we therefore use the funding, that is, the audit, for that purpose. That means that you will see changes from year to year. So, if a school introduces a new applied subject in collaboration with another school, it will see the benefit of that in extra funding support.

Mr McKay:

Katrina, obviously one of the aims of the entitlement framework is to reduce levels of underachievement. You outlined the progress that has been made in the 104 schools that are offering 24 subjects at Key Stage 4. Can you give us some sense of how that breaks down for non-selective post-primary schools and those where there are high levels of pupils entitled to free school meals, etc? Are some sectors making more progress than others?

Mrs Godfrey:

We have been looking at that, and, interestingly, as part of the post-primary review, the Catholic managed sector has particularly been looking at tracking the progress made by its own schools. We have seen that the vast majority of schools are increasing the offer for young people. We have seen some areas where there has been less progress on the applied offering for young people, and that has been a challenge. That has also been why getting the qualification structures right for that is important, so that, if a school is offering a course, it feels that young people are getting something credible at the end of it. I do not have the detailed breakdown of sectors and schools with me. Geographical area is certainly not an issue, because all areas are making progress. You tend to find that, in area learning communities, some schools are working together. A lot of it is down to relationships and to the mindset of whether you see something as a barrier or as an opportunity to be overcome and taken forward. It is very clear that there has been progress in all parts of Northern Ireland. It should be possible for us to give you a more detailed breakdown of the progress. That might be a more helpful way of doing it.

The Chairperson:

I would like the suite of documents that you are going to get for members to include a copy of the Dinsmore report. That would be useful.

Mr Flanagan:

It might be easier for you to send a DVD. I might look for a copy of it too; there is a lot of information to process. How does the deadline of September 2013 for the entitlement framework fall in with the rationalisation of the school estate in line with the sustainable schools policy?

Mrs Godfrey:

That has certainly been a key consideration for us, because, in making sure that young people have more equitable access to a range of courses, it certainly raises issues about the pattern of provision, not least in sixth form, where young people are naturally starting to specialise more after compulsory schooling. It certainly raises questions. The Minister has already signalled his intent to look at that area in the context of the implementation of the sustainable schools policy to make sure that our pattern of provision reflects the context in which we find ourselves, that we are using the resources that we have to best opportunity and that it is provided in a way that gives

young people the maximum opportunity possible to access the full range of courses. That will be the real challenge. You are quite right: the financial context, the pattern of provision through the sustainable schools policy and the delivery of the entitlement framework come together in a very powerful way in the next phase of implementation.

The Chairperson:

Katrina, thank you very much. I appreciate that you have been here for a considerable period of time and have taken the two sessions together. If there are particular issues that we raised, we will follow them up with written correspondence so that we have them on record.

Mrs Godfrey:

We will get you a full pack. You may, of course, regret that when you see it.

The Chairperson:

I look forward to quizzing the members after the summer recess to see how well they get on with the colour-coded information.

Mrs Godfrey:

I will get those to you. Thank you very much, Chair.