



Northern Ireland
Assembly

**COMMITTEE
FOR EDUCATION**

OFFICIAL REPORT
(Hansard)

**Successful Post-Primary Schools
Serving Disadvantaged Areas**

14 December 2011

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

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Successful Post-Primary Schools Serving Disadvantaged Areas

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Members present for all or part of the proceedings:

Mr Mervyn Storey (Chairperson)

Mr Jonathan Craig

Mrs Jo-Anne Dobson

Mr Phil Flanagan

Mr Trevor Lunn

Mr Conall McDevitt

Miss Michelle McIlveen

Mr Daithí McKay

Witnesses:

Mr Adrian Arbuthnot)

Dr Chris Hughes) Department of Education

Mr John McGrath)

The Chairperson:

We will move to trying to get some sense of the Department's response to the two important reports that were carried out under the previous Assembly. One report, which was carried out by the previous Education Committee, was on successful post-primary schools serving

disadvantaged communities, and the other issue is the response to Dawn Purvis's report entitled 'Educational Disadvantage and the Protestant Working Class: A Call to Action'. John has stayed with us, and we are joined by Adrian and Chris. You are very welcome.

Mr John McGrath (Department of Education):

We are grateful for the opportunity to come and talk about both reports, which the Minister and the Department welcome, because they continue to reflect the focus that the Minister and his predecessor put on raising standards and tackling underachievement as the fundamental core purpose and work of the Department of Education.

Standards remain at the heart of John O'Dowd's agenda, as he said in his statement on 26 September, and everything we do in the Department starts with asking whether it is about raising standards and closing the gap, and, if it is not, why are we doing it? We have seen continued improvements in standards across our system in recent years. The number of schoolchildren leaving school with at least five good GCSEs, including English and Maths, has risen from 53% to 59%, which is a considerable improvement, but it is still saying that 40% of our kids do not

leave with at least five good GCSEs, and that is not a tribute to the system here.

In the past two years, the inspectorate has valued the provision as being outstanding or very good in 143 schools. In 2010-11, 26 out of 32 schools had shown an improvement between initial and follow-up inspection. However, significant challenges still remain, particularly to raise standards and close achievement gaps between the most and least disadvantaged. We argue that it is evident that there is considerable scope to improve.

The chief inspector's report for 2008-2010 identified the fact that, in one third of primary schools — around 300 — standards and achievements were not good, and they need to focus on developing literacy and numeracy. In one quarter of primary schools — over 200 — the leadership of the principal was not good enough. In half of primary schools — over 400 — the use of self-evaluation needed to improve. In one third of post-primary schools — around 80 schools — the leadership and management needed to improve. The quality of teaching needed to improve in one fifth of primary schools and more than one in four post-primary schools.

Those are quite telling figures based on the Education and Training Inspectorate's (ETI) work and inspection report. They show the scale on which we are not delivering for kids, but they also show the scope to improve by bearing down on the issues flagged up in inspection and the mechanisms we put in place under Every School a Good School and refinements to that, which the Minister heralded in his September statement.

There has rightly been increased focus on underachievement among those from Protestant working class backgrounds, particularly Protestant boys. That is highlighted in the work of Dawn Purvis and her colleagues, and has been highlighted over the years. It is not new, but it is helpful that there is a focus again. The issue is that we cannot have a focus on it every three or four years but no significant action. At the same time, although a higher proportion of Protestant boys fail to achieve five or more GCSEs at A to C, including GCSE English and maths, the actual number of Catholic boys failing to achieve at that level is greater.

We also have a problem of underachievement among girls. One striking factor that has come up in a lot of research is that a child's educational attainment can be predominantly influenced by

the mother's educational attainment. We must be concerned about a gap of almost 15 percentage points between the proportion of female Protestant and Catholic leavers entitled to free school meals who achieve five or more GCSEs at A to C, including GCSE English and maths. Free school meal Protestant female leavers are at 26.6% and free school meal Catholic female leavers are at 41.7%. That is a worrying gap.

However, all of the evidence suggests that the biggest influence on achievement is socio-economic background. School leaver data for 2009-10 indicates that entitlement to free school meals has a much bigger effect on outcome and achievement than gender or religion alone. Evidence also suggests that the link between underachievement and socio-economic background is stronger here than in other OECD countries, yet we also have evidence, both locally and internationally, that the link can be broken.

The solution to improving outcomes for all pupils, regardless of their background, lies in improving the quality of school leadership and the quality of teaching in all our schools. However, there is an issue, which is flagged up in Dawn Purvis's report, about the wider

community take on education, the value that local communities place on education and the whole issue of aspiration. There is a clear problem in some communities of low aspiration leading to low achievement, which contributes to low aspiration. When answering questions for oral answer the other day, the Minister heralded the fact that he has asked us to do work on a wider public education campaign, similar to work done in recent years, particularly by the Public Health Agency, to improve all our communities' understanding of the need for education and individual family members' responsibility, to empower them to be part of the education community so that they feel comfortable engaging with their local schools. Work on that campaign, which will be a long-term campaign, is being taken forward urgently in the Department.

As I said, the Minister and the Department are determined to take action to break the link between disadvantage and educational underachievement through encouraging schools to set high expectations for their pupils and supporting, and, where necessary, challenging schools to improve. We welcome both of the reports and want to continue the focus on the issue and identify the steps that can be taken towards improvement. The figures that I gave earlier from the inspection report identify the areas within the additional system where we can drive improvements. It does not cost any more to bring a child out after 12 years with five good

GCSEs, including English and maths, than it does for them to come out with deficiencies in literacy and numeracy. It costs the taxpayer the same. There is an issue underpinning that about value for money for the taxpayer.

The draft Programme for Government, which is out for consultation, sets out DE commitments for 2011-15 to increase the proportion of young people from disadvantaged backgrounds who achieve at least five good GCSEs at grades A to C, including English and Maths; to improve literacy and numeracy among all school leavers, with additional resources targeted at areas of educational underachievement; and, critically for us, to establish the Education and Skills Authority (ESA), which will have a key pivotal role in driving forward standards and adopting a uniform approach to standards and underachievement across the school system.

The Minister set out a range of policies and drivers that he wishes to take forward. School improvement policy is a pivotal element of a wider coherent set of policies to improve outcomes for young people and to remove barriers that prevent them from realising their full potential. In

his statement of 26 September, he set out a number of measures to drive forward those policies, all of which have the aim of raising standards and tackling underachievement. Through that programme of action, the Department will continue to progress the actions being taken to address the recommendations that were made in the Committee's report and the Purvis report.

The Chairperson:

Thank you, John. Clearly, this is a huge issue. Unfortunately, it is not a new one, and it has been around for a long time. The Department has tried different approaches, methods and policies. However, there has never been a consistent policy approach. Policies are binned after a few years, and there is a new policy. A simple example of the impact that that has on schools is the Interactive Computerised Assessment System (InCAS). Because it is coming to the end of its contract with Durham University, the Department is dumping InCAS and is going to bring in another new assessment model that will involve more training and taking more teachers out of school. That is not the fault of poor leadership in schools; it is the fault of the system that cannot keep something consistently in place. I have given InCAS only as an example, and nobody has been able to tell me that InCAS was wrong. Most teachers tell me that it was a good system that could be used; it gave the Department the information that it wanted; and it gave you a pupil

profile. We are now putting it in the bin because the contract is coming to an end. That is what is most frustrating.

We can then look for other reasons as to why there are difficulties. However, we all — myself included — have to rethink our views on education, because, if we stay in the same place we will continue to get the same outcome. One thing has occurred in a number of papers from the Department, and I notice that it is also in your document, on page 5, where it states:

“Guidance will be provided on the managed growth of popular, over-subscribed schools.”

What does that really mean? You have a situation where parents are making choices, and they are saying, “This school is better than that school”. Your document clearly states that guidance will be provided on “managed growth” of popular schools. Is the Department going to assist popular schools, and will those that are not popular be closed and got out of the way via a method of finance and failure? Is that a blunt way of saying what the Department is about?

Mr McGrath:

That is part of the area planning exercise and of reshaping the system in the same way that

schools with falling enrolments reflect the fact that the Minister said that people are already voting with their feet if enrolments are falling. You need to take account of the fact that other schools could expand. For area planning purposes, we should not necessarily rule that out. In his statement, the Minister referred to managed growth, and, where there is a problem to which that could be the solution, we would not rule it out. He made it clear that that was an issue to be addressed in the area planning process.

The Chairperson:

We could all give examples. However, I want to give members as much time as I can on the issue, and we also want to hear from Dawn and her colleagues. Nevertheless, I have a big worry. In my constituency, a school with 300 pupils is in difficulties and is struggling. Now, those 300 pupils are not pieces on a chess board that we can lift and move around. We cannot say, “I will tell you what we will do. We will just close that school and wipe it off the map, because it is terrible, awful and bad. Then, we will just scatter those 300 children like confetti.” If we did that, there would be some schools — I am being quite honest about this — that would not want them. That is the sad reality. There would be an element of social snobbery involved, which I think is totally unacceptable, and other reasons why they would not want them. Those young

people — not all of them — have major problems and educational and social issues. The problems of individual pupils need to be addressed, as opposed to issues with bricks and mortar and the school itself, because those problems will follow them. It does not matter what the name of the school is or which colour blazer they wear, their problems will follow them unless they are dealt with. I do not see anything in this document to deal with that issue.

Mr McGrath:

I suspect that I have some sense of what a school is. However, even if I did not, I know that the issue is really about whether there is a need for a school in a particular area or whether the kids should be moved. Area planning should address that. If a school in an area where there is need has failed, the answer may be to put it under new ownership rather than to close it and distribute the kids, especially in an area where — never mind the issue of snobbery that you raised — there might not even be the physical capacity.

The issue of failing schools is predominately about leadership, management and the quality of teaching. In some cases, the answer in the future will be to re-engineer the school rather than to

move it. The institution is less important than the children's education. If there are failures in leadership, management, colleague teaching or governance, and if there is a need in that area, we should be able to address those failures without shipping kids out. Area planning should be about addressing what sort of schools and what type of education we need in which areas. It is about schools following the need, not kids following the schools.

I think that we need to be more inventive in the future about finding answers. If a school is closed, the answer may be to find a way to open it up again under new management for the start of the next school year rather than to distribute the kids elsewhere. That just picks up on some of the issues that the Minister raised in his statement. He made the point that putting pupils first is fundamental to tackling school performance, planning the school estate and raising standards.

Mr McDevitt:

I just want to drill down into some of the specifics. Recommendation 3 of 'Educational Disadvantage and the Protestant Working Class: A Call to Action', Ms Purvis's report, states:

"Parents and local communities should be encouraged to become more involved in education and schools. Initiatives

which seek their involvement must also seek to understand parents' values and motivations."

In response to that recommendation, you told us that you would seek to encourage schools to involve parents in the work of the school and to ensure that schools are aware of parents' rights and responsibilities in relation to their children's education. What progress have you made on that?

Mr McGrath:

As I said, the Minister envisages a long-term education campaign, targeted in particular at communities where there is a lack of engagement with the education system, where there is low aspiration and where, perhaps, there is not profound *[Inaudible.]* of individual families and pupils' rights in the education system and their responsibilities in the education system.

Mr McDevitt:

So can you point to any product at this stage?

Mr McGrath:

Not as yet. The Minister, in answer to a question for oral answer the other day, said that we are working on a long-term campaign. We will look at whether there are, in certain communities — not just disadvantaged Protestant communities — fundamental issues of disengagement with the education service, a lack of understanding about the service and, perhaps, a lack of empowerment to challenge why children are not being well served. We will also look at the transparency of inspections.

Mr McDevitt:

I can read what you wrote there, John.

Recommendation 5 states:

“More must be done to support, encourage and reward exceptional teaching and leadership in schools.”

Recommendation 5.a, which is related to teaching placements, is:

“Offer meaningful incentives for excellent principals, emerging school leaders and teachers”.

You gave a commitment to explore that suggestion with DEL. What progress have you made on that?

Mr McGrath:

A lot of work is being done with DEL on the outworking of the teacher education review, in particular on the fundamentals of teacher education. Inspection reports may highlight issues with leadership or the quality of teaching, which is the main determinant of the quality of educational outcome. If there are issues, those need to be tracked back to see whether they come from the way in which teachers are trained in the first place.

Mr McDevitt:

I understand. However, the recommendation was on teacher placements. What specific progress have you made with DEL to offer meaningful incentives to excellent principals?

Mr McGrath:

I do not think that we have made significant progress since that. Remember that this response was made just before the summer.

Mr McDevitt:

I understand that. I am just trying to figure out where we are with things.

The last recommendation that I want to pick up on is 5.f, which states that:

“where a school enters ‘special measures’ under the Every School a Good School process, employers should have the opportunity to appoint a fixed-term principal with authority to take action to facilitate better parental and community involvement.”

In its response, the Department stated that it is:

“working with the ELBs and CCMS to agree arrangements for supporting schools in the formal intervention process with particular problems around leadership, which would include the option of appointing a mentor or fixed-term acting principal to provide leadership”.

That does not seem to me to be a fundamental policy decision. Has any progress been made on that?

Dr Chris Hughes (Department of Education):

Yes; very good progress has been made on that. In fact, it is already happening in practice. On a

case-by-case basis, where the leadership requires support, the education and library board, working with the CCMS where appropriate, has already put in place either full-time or part-time support from existing high quality principals to provide mentorship to help to support the leadership and make a formal intervention.

Mr McDevitt:

So the mentor bit is happening, Chris. Is that correct?

Dr Hughes:

Yes.

Mr McDevitt:

Have any fixed-term principals been appointed yet?

Dr Hughes:

Yes.

Mr McDevitt:

How many roughly?

Dr Hughes:

Only a handful.

Mr McDevitt:

I will leave it on that positive note.

Mr Craig:

I want to go back to your response to the Committee's report. At point 13(v) on page 4 of your

briefing paper, you state that you are:

“Focusing clearly on support to help schools improve – with more formal intervention”.

I do not disagree with that. You have clearly made a lot more formal intervention right across the board. As you outlined, you have given clear assistance to leadership skills in schools. What other assistance do you give a school that goes into formal intervention? You have talked about teaching skills in that school, which is almost a given. No matter where you go into formal intervention, there will be an issue with teaching skills in the school. That will lead to a lot of training requirements for teachers in the school. What assistance do you give that school to retrain or give additional training to the teachers? There is a bit of a contradiction in the system. Budgets are being slashed, so those schools will not have any finances left to allow for additional training for teachers. Does the Department give any assistance towards that?

Dr Hughes:

The way that it works when a school goes into formal intervention is that the school is required to produce an action plan to address the areas for improvement identified by the inspectorate. That action plan is drawn up between the school leadership and the education and library board. The education and library boards' curriculum advisory support services (CASS) is funded to provide support to schools. The quality of the action plan is assessed by the Education and Training

Inspectorate, specifically by the reporting inspector who led the inspection, so that it is assured that the actions will address the areas for improvement that were identified during the inspection.

CASS then works with the school to build capacity and address the areas that were identified in the plan. Therefore, CASS provides that intensive support to the school to address the areas for improvement that were identified.

Mr Craig:

Who funds the missing teacher in the school?

Dr Hughes:

What missing teacher?

Mr Craig:

The teacher who needs to be re-educated.

Dr Hughes:

That support is provided by the CASS. If there is an absence management issue, that is done in the normal way. There is no additional funding for that. All of this is done from within existing resources, except in cases in which there is a principal mentor. The evidence is that this works. Eleven schools have been in formal intervention and have exited. The point of the process is that the education of children is best served by improving, as quickly as possible, the standard that they get and the position. We have seen that work.

Mr Craig:

In reality, there are a lot of additional people who will give all of the advice under the sun in retraining, but if that retraining requires taking a teacher out of the classroom, there is no financial support for them.

Dr Hughes:

There is existing support for schools within their own budgets and from the CASS budget. The existing resources are aimed much more at the schools that would benefit most from the intensive

support. The idea is to build capacity —

Mr Craig:

Does CASS fund the missing teacher? If you look at school budgets over the next three years, there is no additional funding left for the school to do this. So who funds them?

Dr Hughes:

It is funded from within existing resources — those given to the school through the aggregated schools budget and CASS.

Mr Craig:

In paragraph 14(vi), you talk about increasing engagement between schools, parents and communities. I must admit that I am very interested in that. What has the Department done in that regard? I sat in a meeting yesterday in Lagan Valley, where the Health Department is

engaging with local communities and funding projects to try to assist with that. One thing that I noted in that meeting was the absence of anyone from the education sector. I was deeply disappointed about that. There were plenty of people there from health and from the local communities, but there was no one from the education sector. That is a fundamental flaw in what they are trying to achieve, which is to improve educational underachievement. Has the Department formally engaged with others around that issue?

Mr McGrath:

We are continuing to engage with other Departments and agencies. The other day, the Minister was engaging with the Public Health Agency to see what he and we could learn from the work it does in campaigns to tackle such issues as suicide and mental-health issues. We are also looking at some of the work that has been done on road safety, where there have been quite significant results.

I cannot comment on the example that you gave, because I do not know what it was. I do not even know whether anyone from the education side was invited. If they were, and nobody turned

up, I would share your concern. Government is complicated. Not everybody always knows which meeting is on and which to go to. However, the Minister has made it clear that he wants to tackle the wider issue of engagement with wider communities to raise the understanding of the value of education in certain communities, and to enable communities to constructively challenge the education system and not to be daunted by professionals of whatever hue with regard to their children's education and future prospects. Perhaps it is something that the Department needs to do, but schools need to do it as well. A lot of these issues are with schools. Schools have budget responsibility.

I want to pick up on the point you made about a failing teacher. Failing teachers should not need to be uncovered by the inspectorate; they should have been identified before that. There is an issue of management. The inspectorate might come along and confirm what is already known. It should not be saying that teacher x or teacher y is not good. If such a matter is a surprise to a principal and a board of governors, there has been a failure of leadership and governance.

Mr Craig:

I will stop you there, John. Stop digging. You are 100% right on that issue. I went to the bother

of reading through your departmental procedures on teachers and senior management in a school.

One thing that it says clearly time and again is that, if you identify someone who is underperforming, you, along with the employing authority, which in most cases is the board, have the responsibility to seek additional training or retraining for those individuals before you can move into any formal procedures for their removal. Now, that costs money, which at this point in time, is just not in the school budgets. There is a conundrum here.

Mr McGrath:

I can understand that, but the money is not anywhere else, that is the problem. We are stripped bare. The Chair's opening remarks reflect that. There are no kitties. To protect the school budget, we are abolishing a lot of budgets that were earmarked, to ensure that most of the money is available for schools and principals to utilise as they see fit to meet the needs of the kids. We do not have any kitties left. The Minister has asked us to have another look at existing budgets to see if we can squeeze out £5 million, £6 million or £7 million. The straitened circumstances mean that we need to get improvements out of the mainstream funding. We are still spending the best part of £2 billion on the education service. We need to sweat the best value out of that. I take the point that we need to look at a lot of our procedures for dealing with unsatisfactory

performance. I am not sure that we are as modern, professional and nimble as we need to be.

There are workforce issues that need to be addressed in the next four or five years if we are to be fit for purpose.

Mr Craig:

I plead with you to go and speak to the Department of Health, because it is in the process of putting major funding into local communities across Northern Ireland to try to turn the situation around. Education is a key player in all of that and needs to engage with the Department of Health in that process, so I ask you to do that.

Mr McGrath:

I take your point; it is well made, and I entirely agree.

The Chairperson:

It is not only the Department of Health. Let us be honest, John, The Department for Social Development (DSD) is funding projects. You know my gripe on that — nurture classes. Chris and Adrian were with me and the Minister a week ago. There was a plan to deal with numeracy

and literacy, but the Department said no. It was not costing the Department one penny. All it had to do was to give approval, but it said no, it could not do that, because the plan did not fit some piece of paper somewhere. I was less than satisfied, and the schools were less than satisfied. However, we are still waiting on the Minister to come back, hopefully with an answer.

Mr McGrath:

I will not stray into that —

The Chairperson:

But it is an example of the frustration that is out there. It is very easy to criticise the teachers, and there are issues with leadership, you can see that. But in the schools that I am referring to — Chris and Adrian know what schools they are — the leadership was exceptional. They have a plan for what they want to do in an area of social deprivation, where there are children in receipt of free school meals and where achievement is poor. There is a plan, and what they want to do is additional. The Department argues that it is not additional, but I argue that it is. The Department said that it does not fit and it is not going to do it.

Mr McGrath:

I do not know the detail of that, so I am not going to comment. I do not have an issue that it is —

The Chairperson:

I know, but I am using it as an example. DSD —

Mr McGrath:

— better co-ordination. You know that, from my previous post, I am very familiar with a lot of that.

The Chairperson:

You were very helpful on nurture classes or nurture schools in Ballysally, so we will give you credit for that one.

Mrs Dobson:

John, in point 10 of your briefing, it is very worrying that there are no literacy and numeracy targets. Why, when we all know the benefits of raising those standards, are there no targets in the Programme for Government? It simply refers to significantly improving those targets. It is on page three of your briefing.

Mr McGrath:

There are targets.

Dr Hughes:

They are at the back, in the annex.

Mrs Dobson:

There are not enough targets. Do you feel that there should be greater co-operation between further education colleges and schools, as they are tackling the issues from both ends?

Mr McGrath:

There is co-ordination. It is a failure of our system that kids end up having to go to further education to tackle issues of literacy and numeracy because the education system has not equipped them. Further education is doing remedial work that the school system should have been able to address. We should not have children leaving school with weaknesses in literacy and numeracy.

Mrs Dobson:

We still do.

Mr McGrath:

Yes, and we should not. That is the point, and that is why we have targets to drive that home. Last week, we discussed with the Committee the point that, one way or another, we spend huge sums on education. Most of the money is spent in the classroom. It is a nonsense notion that literacy and numeracy is not a core purpose of teachers in the seven or eight hours a day that they have children with them and that it is not a core purpose of the homework that children do. That

is what the school system is there for, and, in a sense, we have lost sight of some of the fundamentals. Over the years, the Department did not help by giving little bits of money for literacy and numeracy. What do children go to school for? They go to school to have the most added value. There is enough evidence from many prime examples of schools, whether in disadvantaged areas or not, that you can tackle those issues if you have the right approach, leadership, management and discipline.

Mrs Dobson:

Do you not feel that we have that now?

Mr McGrath:

That is what we are aiming for. To go back to the Chairman's point, we are trying to keep this simple. We are not trying to clutter it by producing a lot of policies. It is about standards, standards, standards. It is about closing the gap, and we and the Minister are quite determined to keep that focus and not get distracted too often. I will not make a virtue out of the budget, but it does mean that people need to focus on what the core purpose of the education system is: it is to

add value to kids' lives, particularly those who may face struggles because of their socio-economic background. There is no reason why that cannot be done. There is enough evidence, which Chris will go through, of schools that are performing wonderfully in difficult areas. The real question is: if they can do it, why can others not?

Mrs Dobson:

In the Department's letter in response to the Committee's inquiry into Dawn Purvis's report, Mr Leonard states that the Minister is committed to taking the recommendations into account. It is a very good report, but how much influence does it have on thinking in the Department on the issue?

Mr McGrath:

As I said earlier, the Minister welcomes the report.

Mrs Dobson:

Are you taking it seriously?

Mr McGrath:

It is being taken seriously. The report is about fundamental issues of historical underachievement and low value being placed on education in certain communities. Our policy is to tackle issues of raising standards, not to have kids' life chances dictated by a postcode lottery which means that where you are born dictates what your life prospects will be. That is advanced in the report.

Mrs Dobson:

So you are taking it on board?

Mr McGrath:

We take the report and its recommendations seriously. We will continue to bear down on this.

Raising standards and tackling underachievement is the fundamental focus of the Department.

Everything else is in support of that.

Mrs Dobson:

The report was conducted during the previous mandate when I, for one, was not here. There is little point in the Committee holding consultations if nothing concrete is going to happen, so, John, I welcome your comments that you are taking it on board.

Mr McGrath:

We take on board all contributions. That is why I said at the start that we welcome both reports. We are all on the same territory, and we all share a belief that children should be well served. I add that taxpayers should not be asked to pay for a child's not being valued by the education system. It costs the same.

The Chairperson:

Phil, you are next.

Mr Flanagan:

Thank you, Chair.

The Chairperson:

Sorry, Trevor, I was not sure whether you wanted to come in.

Mr Lunn:

I did not know how to indicate that I wanted to ask a follow-up question. I was doing my best.

The Chairperson:

Members, we are beginning to run a bit behind time, so I would appreciate your help.

Mr Lunn:

Jo-Anne said that there are no targets for this in the draft Programme for Government, but you said that there are. Are there definitely, because, in a straw poll, we did not think that there were?

Dr Hughes:

In the most recent document that I saw, those were right at the back, in the annex. The targets are exactly aligned with those that are in 'Count Read: Succeed', the literacy and numeracy strategy.

Targets are set in that both for the entire system and for children who are entitled to free school meals, a measure of disadvantage. The targets that we sent into the draft Programme for Government were exactly aligned with the trajectory for those.

Mrs Dobson:

As far as I am aware, the draft Programme for Government refers to significantly improving those standards.

Dr Hughes:

I would need to go back and check, but, if I recall correctly, the detail of the targets is in an annex at the back. It gives year-on-year progress.

Mrs Dobson:

Can the Committee be furnished with those details?

Dr Hughes:

I would need to have a look.

Mr Lunn:

We probably have the draft programme already and can have a look at it. Are there separate targets for Protestant boys in disadvantaged areas? Are the targets as specific as that?

Dr Hughes:

No; the targets are kept at an overall level.

Mr McDevitt:

Colleagues may remember last week — you will not, Chair, because you were not here — that

Ms Godfrey clarified that those targets are the same targets that have been in place for the past six years and that you are simply committing to your 2020 target. So, they are not new targets, rather a reassertion of existing targets.

Dr Hughes:

The point about a long-term target is that it is a long-term target, so we expect it to stay the same.

The targets were revised upwards in 'Count, Read: Succeed', where we had made better progress towards meeting the original ones, which were set two years previously in the 'Every School a Good School' school improvement policy.

Mr McDevitt:

Let us be honest about it: those are not new numbers in this Programme for Government. It a reassertion of existing targets.

Dr Hughes:

Yes; it is trajectory towards the long-term targets.

Mr McGrath:

They are challenging targets.

Mrs Dobson:

Are the findings from Dawn's report taken on board in your targets?

Mr McGrath:

These are high-level, long-term targets that have come out of the literacy and numeracy strategy.

Dr Hughes:

The targets in the literacy and numeracy strategy were set after looking at a range of evidence, including the international performance of other school systems at the end of lower secondary education. So, it takes on board the performance of our existing system. We looked at how other school systems that typically get 90% or more of children to the end of lower secondary

education provide a bundle of education that includes the home language, maths and a couple of other subjects. We think that the targets are very defensible but also stretching.

Mrs Dobson:

They were set six years ago, as Conall has said.

Dr Hughes:

They were revised upwards in the spring. They are long-term targets that go to 2020.

Mr Flanagan:

Three targets are outlined in the departmental briefing that has been provided, and they are very broad and vague. Does the draft Programme for Government include SMART targets or does it use phraseology such as “increasing the proportion” and “improving literacy and numeracy” without going into any detail on figures? Is there further detail in the Programme for Government?

Mr McGrath:

Yes.

Mr Flanagan:

So the targets in the Programme for Government are SMART targets?

Mr McGrath:

They are milestones. The discipline around the Programme for Government is not to have woolly, vague targets but to have SMART ones. So, the monitoring mechanism can hold us to account.

Mr Flanagan:

I just wanted clarification on that. Point 5 in the departmental briefing says:

“Evidence suggests that the link between underachievement and socio-economic background is stronger here than in

other OECD countries.”

Point 6 says:

“Yet we also have evidence, both locally and internationally, that the link can be broken.”

What work has been done to look at what is being done in other parts of the world to break that link? Has any of that evidence been taken on board and implemented here?

Dr Hughes:

Yes is the short answer. When the ‘Every School a Good School’ policy was being developed, a lot of international evidence was looked at to see what makes a difference. That identified the four characteristics of a good school as strong leadership, good teaching, strong links to the community and a pupil-centred approach. So, the international evidence has informed all our policies, and, on an ongoing basis, people will keep in touch with what is coming out of the various countries and the OECD in particular, as it does an awful lot of work on how systems manage to raise standards.

Mr Flanagan:

In fairness, I do not think that any of that provides evidence that the link can be broken.

Dr Hughes:

There are a number of different bits of evidence. There is the local evidence, where the ETI identify good practice in breaking the link. Sorry, Chairman, I am going to mention scatter graphs again —

The Chairperson:

We are not going back to them.

Dr Hughes:

The scatter graphs show that some schools that serve pupils of similar degrees of disadvantage do extremely well and others do not. Finally, at system level, the OECD looks at a vast number of educational systems around the world and finds effective systems. It is a fact that, for disadvantaged people, some education systems out there do not affect the educational outcome in

the same way that the system does here.

Mr McGrath:

Schools in difficult areas here perform at the top end. Chris is right: only two post-primary schools here got outstanding reports in recent years, and one of them was St Colm's in Twinbrook, which is in a severely disadvantaged area and is performing at an outstanding level.

That is the link being broken.

Mr Flanagan:

Is what those schools are doing being rolled out and shown to other principals and teachers?

Mr McGrath:

That is what we are trying to do. For all that we have said, it is actually quite simple. At the absolute core are leadership, management and quality of teaching. Everything else — the technology and all the rest — supports that. That is why we are bearing down through inspections and through Every School a Good School. Other factors include support from the

community. It is quite simple, and that is the point that I made in the exchange with Jonathan. It is about raising teacher performance, raising leadership and having an inspection regime that bears down and focuses on those issues and is stark in its messages. I hate to say it, but it is not rocket science. That is why we will look at the quality of teacher training and the performance of schools.

You are quite right that there are lessons to be learned. Schools must ask themselves whether there are lessons that they can learn from the school up the road that is doing well. Boards of governors need to ask why their school is not doing as well as the school up the road that caters for the same socio-economic cohort, and why the results in geography, for example, are not great for the same pupils who are doing well in all of the other subjects. There is a need to test and look critically at performance management. There is evidence that we have deep-seated problems in some communities. We need to bear down heavily on that in schools, support schools and look for people to give leadership.

Mr Adrian Arbuthnot (Department of Education):

Best practice is disseminated under Every School a Good School. Schools that receive outstanding or very good inspectorate reports are inviting to showcase what they do well through ESaGS.tv. That allows other schools to benefit and learn.

Mr McKay:

What is your assessment of how the funding formula mechanism has addressed the needs of those pupils who receive free school meals? How much does the funding formula need to change? How much of a focus will be put on that? When budgets are allocated to schools, how do you hold them accountable for how they address the needs of children in poverty through their allocations?

Mr McGrath:

The current formula takes account of targeting social need (TSN) and there are elements in that for addressing underachievement. We are just about to put out the terms of reference for the review of the common funding formula to check whether it supports departmental policies, rather

than going against them, and whether it gives sufficient weight to TSN. That was an issue that the previous Minister was concerned about.

The formula might give a school in a disadvantaged area an additional £20,000 because of its TSN factor, but that school would not be able to do an awful lot with that amount of money. We will look at the sensitivity of the formula and whether it strikes the appropriate balance between the primary, post-primary and nursery sectors. We will also consider whether it funds sixth forms sufficiently to reflect the sophistication that is needed at that level, and whether, for example, funding should only be provided to sixth forms beneath a certain size, so that we can drive up scale. The review will take a very broad look at the formula, but TSN and underachievement will be at its core.

The review will be open. Its terms of reference will be taken forward and no one will know what the outcome will be. Clearly these are not the easiest circumstances in which to conduct a review, but the need for a review is fundamental. It is a funding formula. We send cheques out, we do not have contracts with schools. In his statement in September, the Minister said that the

review might explore ways of linking funding to outcomes. In this day and age, very few public services are funded on the basis of simply getting a cheque. Commissioning is the more common model for public services, in which bodies are given money but are expected to give something back. A formula that simply distributes money and does not have any linkage is a wee bit outdated. For example, the review might find that schools should get allocations that they can flex. That could mean that, if their results are good, they get a top-up, but if they are not so good they will get a diminution at the margins. There could be some degree of incentivisation, but that is all to play for.

Mr McKay:

The public education strategy sounds interesting. What will it consist of? Will it be television adverts and highfalutin things? How will you bring it to the grass roots and the communities that it is aimed at?

Mr McGrath:

We have had some thoughts on that. In recent days, the Minister has had some presentations on the approach of the Public Health Agency and others. He has referred to that. We still have to

work that out. It cannot be posters and TV. The Minister is particularly keen that it is focused on the communities and individuals who are disengaged with the education system and who have low levels of aspiration. Some grass roots element may well be necessary. When we get further thoughts on that, I am sure the Minister will want to share them.

The Chairperson:

Thank you for attending today's meeting. You are welcome to stay to hear comments from Dawn and her colleagues who are coming in now. If we do not see you before Christmas, I wish you a happy Christmas.