



Northern Ireland
Assembly

**COMMITTEE
FOR EDUCATION**

OFFICIAL REPORT
(Hansard)

**Inquiry into Successful Post-Primary
Schools Serving Disadvantaged
Communities**

2 February 2011

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

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Disadvantaged Communities**

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Members present for all or part of the proceedings:

Mr Mervyn Storey (Chairperson)

Mrs Mary Bradley

Mr Jonathan Craig

Mr Trevor Lunn

Miss Michelle McIlveen

Mr John O'Dowd

Mrs Michelle O'Neill

Witnesses:

Mr John Mulholland

)

Monsignor O'Byrne

) St Pius X College

Mrs Edwina Toner

)

Mrs Mary White

)

The Chairperson (Mr Storey):

I invite representatives from St Pius X College to come to the table. If the room gets too cold, the heat can be put on again, and if it gets too warm it can be turned off.

Mr O'Dowd:

That sounds logical.

The Chairperson:

Yes, and there is not often logic. Are members and guests happy with the temperature of the room? If anyone gets too cold, just put your hand up.

I welcome Monsignor O'Byrne, the chairperson of the board of governors; Mary White, the principal of the college; Edwina Toner, the vice-principal; and John Mulholland, who is also a vice-principal. I refer members to their papers. I thank the school for providing the Committee with an informative and useful document, which members will find on their desks. Thank you for taking the time to host the Committee today. I ask Monsignor O'Byrne to make a presentation.

Monsignor C O'Byrne (St Pius X College):

Thank you. I will give the Committee a few facts about the school. St Pius X College was opened in 1964 when it was known as St Pius X Secondary Intermediate School and was built, like so many others, after the 1947 Education Act. As the Chairperson has said, education has changed a great deal since those schools were established. We had a refurbishment and a newbuild at the beginning of 2000, although we had been agitating for it for about 10 years. We eventually got started, and the present school is the result. It looks very well and has great teaching and technical resources. The refurbishment took about three years, and we had the official opening in November 2003.

As you know, it is a co-ed maintained college, and the catchment area is within a radius of approximately 10 miles. When the school opened in 1964, it enrolled about 400 pupils. At the moment, our enrolment is over 900. We have a teaching staff of 64, with 22 classroom assistants. Of our 900 pupils, 53 are statemented pupils. Although the school is in the North-Eastern Education and Library Board area, 40% of its pupils come from the Southern Education and Library Board area. The school stands very high in the community and has third-generation pupils, whose parents and grandparents also attended the school. It is a great opportunity for pupils to develop their talents to the full. That is a brief account of the college.

Mrs White will begin our presentation, followed by Mrs Toner, the vice-principal, who will then be followed by Mr John Mulholland, the second vice-principal.

Mrs Mary White (St Pius X College):

I have been principal of St Pius X College for six years. My management team includes my two vice-principals who are with me today, and three key stage co-ordinators. Monsignor O’Byrne has been very supportive as chair of the board of governors for many years. Our governors play an important role in taking forward our focus on standards and improvement in our college.

We thank the Committee for the opportunity to make a presentation, and I am pleased that our pupils will also have an opportunity to present their views later today. They are our future, the foundation on which every developed economy is based, and it is right they should have a voice. It is also noteworthy that the views of schools in rural areas are being sought and I commend the Committee for that.

The Committee received our written submission last term. I will identify the key ingredients that we believe are pertinent to our submission to the inquiry. My colleague, Mrs Edwina Toner, will outline strategies that we employ to promote our engagement with parents and the wider community. Mr John Mulholland will address under-achievement through curriculum provision in Key Stage 4 and sixth form. Our presentation will conclude with some challenges we face.

Although we are dividing our presentation for the purposes of the meeting, we, as a team, work closely together. The pastoral and curricular domains are closely linked. We believe that that approach is fundamental to our success. We are fortunate to have an excellent building and resources, but those are useless unless the quality of learning and teaching is evident. Our staff are our most important resource. We care for the welfare of our staff, who go that extra mile to ensure that our pupils get every opportunity to succeed. Our mission statement, “to promote partnership, develop talents and encourage participation”, underpins everything that we do.

Continuous professional development of staff, appropriate to the needs of the college and the individual, is encouraged and facilitated. We provide quality INSET days for all our staff based on sharing good practice. Our open-door policy facilitates sharing, and all respond well to that approach. We support the universities by providing learning opportunities through student placement. We support our newly-qualified teachers. Our pastoral vice-principal and INSET co-ordinator ensure that strengths are recognised and perceived weaknesses supported at all levels.

We have invested heavily in ICT. Last year, we were awarded overall winner in the “best whole school” category for Northern Ireland at the Becta ICT excellence awards in Birmingham. The award recognises the imaginative use of technology to enhance lessons and support all college activities. Everyone connected with the college had an input in that achievement and take great pride in it.

Introducing sixth form to our college seven years ago has added to our success. Those pupils provide positive role models, in particular for Key Stage 4 pupils, who strive to “wear the black uniform” of sixth form. That motivates them to succeed at GCSE as they are made aware that places are limited. Our sixth form continues to grow and we provide a quality education for them all.

In ‘Every School a Good School’ the Minister states:

“My vision for the future is one that sees schools as vibrant, self-improving communities of good practice, meeting the needs and aspirations of individual pupils through high quality teaching and learning.”

That is the reality for us. However, we do not remain complacent. Our college recognises that good leadership is second only to classroom teaching in raising standards. The model that we employ is shared leadership. I pay tribute to all staff, in particular to leadership and middle-management teams, which work in partnership to set high expectations for all aspects of experience for our pupils.

Our college is, first and foremost, child-centred. We believe strongly that every pupil deserves the same opportunity. Everyone at the college buys into that. Our senior and middle managers have clearly defined roles and responsibilities. We are open to ideas and encourage staff to take on responsibility. We recognise the work and contribution that everyone makes to our college community. We work together to ensure effective governance and management of the college at all levels.

Our vision is achieved through college development planning, and all who work in the college have contributed to, and implement, the plan. Teamwork is an important dimension of our work.

We believe in “united we stand”, and we work together in promoting the needs of our pupils. Our plan is in the second year of a three-year cycle. We used Every School a Good School and quality indicators from the Together Towards Improvement strategy to inform our decisions, and I welcome the revision of that resource as it is a helpful tool for self-evaluation.

Clear channels of communication are vital in raising achievement and supporting learners. Our open-door policy extends to all stakeholders, parents, staff and pupils so that they are kept informed. We host daily meetings for our leadership group followed by a staff briefing that facilitates individual input from staff members. Our special educational needs co-ordinator (SENCO) also has a daily meeting with the classroom support team to ensure that everyone is aware of what is happening in the college.

Celebrating success is another aspect of our work. Our e-learning co-ordinator strives endlessly to update our website to share information and to recognise and celebrate the college’s many achievements. Weekly assemblies with individual year groups also focus on celebrating success. We schedule monitoring meetings to review the action plans of all post holders, and that provides them with a platform to inform the discussion about future planning and meeting the diverse needs of our pupils.

Our school’s success criteria are based on value added in all domains. I will provide some statistics that show the strength of that success. This year, in Key Stage 3 English, 68% achieved level 5 and above and 30% achieved level 6 and above. In maths, 67% achieved level 5 and above and 28% achieved level 6 and above. At GCSE, 76% of our pupils achieved A* to C grades in five or more GCSEs. Those results are already above the short-term and long-term PSA targets. At GCSE, 65 students achieved A* to C grades in three or more subjects. Each year, many of our students are ranked in the top three across Northern Ireland at GCSE and GCE level. Ninety-six per cent our leavers progress to further and higher education. In all cases, we are well above the Northern Ireland average.

As I said earlier, we cannot become complacent. To sustain success we need support and more clarity on the way forward. The future of children is paramount. I will ask Mrs Toner to speak to the Committee for a few minutes about engaging parents and the wider community.

Mrs Edwina Toner (St Pius X College):

Good morning. My address will focus on how our pastoral care system and our engagement with parents and the wider community have contributed to our college's success and ensured that our students get the best opportunity to develop to their full potential.

Pastoral care in the college is very strong, and we are renowned for our positive and caring relationships within the college community. Our ethos is built on respect and achievement for all, and all stakeholders buy into that. Visitors and Education and Training Inspectorate (ETI) reports have paid tribute many times to our very open, excellent and caring approach. Pupils are at the heart of all that we do. Our pastoral system has been pivotal to our success and, as the principal mentioned, has a high profile in our school development plan. It takes account of the uniqueness of pupils and their holistic needs; pastoral, religious, social, health and academic. Students' learning is catered for through the commitment, dedication and hard work of all staff, who are the key resource to our strong pastoral care. Many programmes and projects are set up to support pupils' learning.

We promote positive discipline through an effective code of conduct and reward schemes. Pupils with specific behavioural needs follow individual behavioural plans that are drawn up in consultation with the pupils and their parents or guardians. We seek support from many other organisations such as counselling support, Youth Service, the EOTAS scheme and Choices.

Data analysis, target setting and value added are used to promote improvement in all aspects of a pupil's development. We have high expectations of pupil performance and use a range of testing mechanisms including MidYIS, YELLIS and Assessment Manager. We use schools information management system modules, and data and comparative analysis tools to gauge student performance and to set in place intervention programmes, such as mentoring schemes and individual education plans (IEPs) in order to promote success.

The college openly embraces an inclusive approach to education. We currently have 53 students who hold a statement of special educational needs ranging from physical, emotional to learning. The very high number of statemented pupils reflects the high esteem and recognition in

which our college is held, especially as it is parents who choose to send their children to our college. Our SENCO effectively manages the college's provision for pupils with learning needs through the use of the code of practice, IEPs, relevant INSET for all, consultation with parents, the team of 22 classroom assistants, external support agencies to include educational psychologists, care team meetings, occupational therapists and literacy teaching and support service (LTSS) support. Literacy and numeracy standards are raised through specialised programmes such as fun maths, Lexia reading delivered through ICT and Toe by Toe, which is a one-to-one phonic programme. Access arrangements are put in place to allow pupils with specific learning needs to access exams while not compromising the assessment procedures. All efforts are made to ensure that pupils with specific learning needs are fully integrated into college life.

As I mentioned earlier, pupils are at the heart of all that we do. We try to ensure that they are happy and content in the college, and, as a result, we have many programmes in place to make sure that that is the case. We have organised induction and residential programmes that promote team building for the new intake, which is extremely important as we have pupils from over 20 feeder primary schools. Our Key Stage 3 co-ordinator manages that programme and liaises with our feeder primary schools on all aspects to ensure that we are fully prepared for the new students who will be in our care. All Key Stage co-ordinators ensure that ongoing support is available for pupils so that their needs and aspirations are catered for. That includes transition programmes and outreach support from agencies such as Sentinus, Young Enterprise and Tree of Knowledge, which develop life skills and promote self-esteem.

Our extended learning and healthcare co-ordinators provide an extensive and diverse range of opportunities and extra-curricular programmes to promote health and well-being and positive self-esteem and to develop talents. The activities include many types of sport, dance, drama, ICT and fitness clubs, to mention but a few. Pupils engage fully in those over break, lunchtime and after school.

Parental involvement is a very high priority. We fully engage parents in all aspects of college life through meetings, home school link programmes, paired reading programmes, online evaluations and intergenerational programmes — for example, afterschool ICT and cookery

classes. Parents are fully informed about all aspects of college life, using various methods, including meetings, school diaries, our college website and truancy call to promote attendance.

In addition to our college community triangle of parents, pupils and all staff, we have extensive wider community links. Our schools co-ordinator manages the development of collaborative links with schools in the community. We work closely with our feeder primary schools and have established strong links with the development of initiatives to include sports coaching, STEM-related competitions, tutoring in modern languages and the use of virtual learning environment for project work. Our links with post-primary schools are also well established through the Magherafelt learning partnership programme, which Mr Mulholland will talk about in more detail. We are also part of the shared education programme scheme, which offers many courses to develop pupils' life skills and talents at post-16. It provides enrichment to students, and choices include online university courses, computer courses and introduction to law, health and safety and aromatherapy.

We have strong links with the business community. It provides support to us and, in turn, gets future expertise. School involvement takes the form of work placements and project work for vocational studies, especially STEM-related studies. We want our pupils to achieve and develop the necessary skills that will support business in the future.

Education at primary and post-primary years is invaluable to future generations. All pupils, irrespective of their abilities and background, deserve to get the best. We are continuing to strive in the college to meet the PSA targets as set out in 'Every School a Good School'.

Mr John Mulholland (St Pius X College):

As curriculum vice-principal, I will provide an overview of our curriculum provision at St Pius X College and then outline curricular initiatives on which we have focused in addressing underachievement.

Our overall curriculum planning reflects the aims of the school and the priorities outlined in the school development plan. The school has a clear, coherent plan for all areas of the curriculum, which effectively guides the outstanding work of our heads of department and

individual teachers.

At Key Stage 3, our curriculum is infused with thinking skills, personal capabilities and the cross-curriculum skills of communication, using mathematics and ICT. At Key Stages 4 and 5, our broadly-based, balanced and flexible curriculum is tailored to meet the needs of individual pupils and ensures appropriate curriculum progression routes. It is important to stress that we promote a socially inclusive curriculum that ensures participation in education for all our pupils.

Curricular initiatives used in addressing underachievement include the following: banding; these arrangements enable pupils with differing abilities to be taught in ways and at speeds suitable to their abilities, thus enhancing the progress of all our pupils; an increase in our vocational and applied portfolio of courses at Key Stages 4 and 5, for middle and bottom band students, has provided greater breadth and balance; the introduction of the new ACETS qualification, which encompasses employability, essential skills, occupational studies at Key Stage 4 and certificate of personal effectiveness at Key Stage 5. Those qualifications are more consummate with a pupil's ability in middle and bottom bands. Innovative timetabling has created more opportunities to create more practical experience from middle and bottom band pupils, especially boys, at Key Stage 3 and Key Stage 4.

The aim of the careers education, information, advice and guidance in the college is to help our pupils develop their knowledge, understanding, skills, and experiences of opportunities in order to manage their career development and make relevant informed choices, ensuring successful transition into education, training or employment.

Our college is actively engaged in trying to use STEM education in promoting an integrative approach to learning and teaching that draws on the foundation of each individual subject area in order to form a cohesive course of instruction. STEM initiatives continue to help all our pupils, especially boys, gain a solid foundation of critical thinking skills that then can be applied in other areas of learning.

Quality INSET provision across departments has provided the opportunities to share good practice and showcase new IT technologies and teaching methodologies.

In relation to raising achievement, our staff always convey and set realistically high expectations which challenge and inspire the pupils. They use and build upon pupils' ideas, interests and prior learning, and staff use an appropriate range of teaching and learning strategies that motivates pupils and engages them purposefully in their work, collaboratively or independently.

Departmental improvement strategies in place for tackling underachievement include quality learning and teaching. There is less focus on chalk and talk and greater variety in our lessons. There are more practical activities and greater emphasis on the development of the skills-base curriculum; the incorporation of ICT, new software, whiteboard technologies and Learning NI as a home-tuition resource. The introduction of new vocational courses such as essential skills and occupational studies have offered greater qualification choice and flexibility. We have after-school, mid-term, revision programmes, coursework clinics, and the development of a homework club which utilises the use of ICT facilities.

At St Pius X College, literacy and numeracy initiatives have been widely used to tackle underachievement. They have included: greater discussion across all subject areas; the introduction of drama at Key Stage 3, in order to provide role play opportunities for our boys; and greater variety in the use of text, with more fiction-based texts in order to engage boys as well.

Banding and setting of pupils at Key Stage 3 has allowed us to provide a fast-track approach and a better foundation for the teaching of GCSE and our 'A' level provision. Timetable arrangements facilitate pupil movement at Key Stage 4 for mathematics and English classes.

Achievement strategies adopted at St Pius X College with a particular focus on boys include the use of personalised learning programmes, individual behavioural intervention programmes, the role of academic tutoring and community mentoring. We have also just-for-boys assemblies, specific careers advice, and the use of short-term targets in the classroom environment.

The entitlement framework guarantees even greater choice and flexibility for all our pupils. It provides the pupils with access to a wide range of learning opportunities that are suited to their

needs, aptitudes and interests. The recent education and library board audit, which was completed in 2010, shows that St Pius X College is meeting the entitlement framework at Key Stage 4. The college is on schedule to meet the Key Stage 5 entitlement framework quota by 2013, as 30 subjects were offered, in collaboration with the Magherafelt learning partnership, to our year 12 students, 12 of which were applied.

The role of collaboration in relation to tackling underachievement cannot be understated. The college is an active member of the Magherafelt learning partnership, which includes St Mary's Grammar School, Rainey Endowed School, Magherafelt High School, Sperrin Integrated College, the Northern Regional College and Kilronan Special School. It aims to extend curriculum opportunities for all pupils of the Magherafelt area.

The college is already in a strong position to provide pupils with an extensive choice of courses in sixth form in a range of general and applied subjects. Indeed, our range of courses has further increased through that collaboration. However, it is important to note that our college has made an invaluable addition to the portfolio of applied subjects on offer through the learning partnership. St Pius X has received national acclaim for excellence across business, health and social care and ICT on an annual basis.

School-to-school collaboration has been a powerful means of strengthening the capacity of the college, especially to address the demands of the entitlement framework. Collaboration has widened opportunities and helped to address the needs of certain disadvantaged groups of learners at the college. Some 26 pupils at year 14 study across eight subject areas within the partnership. We have 51 students at year 14 who study across 12 subject areas. Boys at year 13 and year 14 now have access to BTEC qualifications in engineering and construction, as a result of collaboration with the NRC. That has been instrumental in us retaining boys in sixth form. Our students now have access to a broader range of academic specialisms. It has provided access to a more broad and balanced curriculum and increased enrichment opportunities for all our pupils.

At key stage 4, collaboration with the NRC has allowed for more personalised learning programmes for some of our pupils who have selected an occupational pathway to follow. In

conclusion, the curricular provision at St Pius X has been designed to ensure that all our pupils have opportunities to receive a broad and balanced education through teaching and learning that has a clear focus on raising standards in literacy and numeracy and allows all our pupils to develop their knowledge and skills in all areas of learning.

Mrs White:

Over the years, through strategic planning, we have maximised our budget allocation to ensure that we have teacher resources, pupil resources, ICT facilities and child-centred initiatives in place to promote pupils and to make sure that pupils get the maximum opportunities to succeed in life.

Our main concern is that, with the proposed Budget cuts, our ability to sustain success and contribute to developing the provision that is currently in place could be hindered. We are about building gaps and developing pupils' holistic needs. We fear that those will be seriously compromised with the proposed spending cuts.

This presentation is only a snapshot of what we do. It is impossible to cover all avenues that contribute to our success. The college, parents, pupils and the wider community working in partnership based on mutual respect is the cornerstone of our success. Thank you for listening to us.

The Chairperson:

Thank you for those contributions. To set the other witnesses at ease, we do not expect them to have the level of detail that was in that presentation. It was a very worthwhile presentation. I ask members to keep to time because I am conscious that the school has lunch arranged for us, and we do not want to overrun. There was so much in that presentation that we could spend most of the day here. However, we are dealing with what are the ingredients of a successful school. Are there any practical difficulties because your school straddles two education and library boards? The Monsignor referred to the fact that 40% of your pupils come from the Southern Board.

Does that create any managerial problems for you on a practical basis?

Mrs White:

Yes, very much so. Transport is one issue; free schools meals is another. However, addressing the behavioural needs of our students is a particular problem.

The Chairperson:

Are there different standards in the two boards?

Mrs White:

Yes, and that presents difficulties.

The Chairperson:

I do not want to go into too much detail about this, but, by way of comment, I suspect that concerns were raised when the commission brought out its report about the proposed merger or amalgamation. Is that issue still being considered? What is this school's view? Some Committee members went to an event at St Mary's some time ago, but that was prior to the commission's announcement.

Monsignor O'Byrne:

There is ongoing collaboration between all the schools, but more particularly between St Mary's and us. A decision has yet to be taken on that. At the moment, the idea of academic selection is not a problem for our school. In fact, it does not involve the school at all. Collaboration within Magherafelt learning partnership is very strong, and the collaboration between the two schools, particularly on the cutbacks and LMS, is making that even stronger. However, we are taking things year by year.

The Chairperson:

I want to go to members' questions as quickly as possible.

I notice that you have a feeder primary school co-ordinator. Do you believe that that is a key component for feeding into the transition from primary to post-primary education and establishing the various progression routes, be they banding, innovative timetabling or academic mentoring, which John mentioned? If that co-ordinator were not in place, given that the post is

probably subject to budgets and that we are facing extremely challenging times, would that impinge on or impede the streamlined transition from primary to post-primary?

Mrs White:

That appointment was made just a year ago to promote integration and engagement with parents and the primary schools. Prior to that, we and the Key Stage 3 co-ordinator made and kept in close contact with the primary schools. Given that we are in a rural area, we engage with primary schools quite a bit. The budget cuts would not, therefore, present us with a problem. Do the rest of you agree?

Mrs Toner:

Yes. Mrs White was talking about preparing for pupils before they arrive, and that is vital. We need to be well ahead of the game so that we can prepare for those children, particularly because many of them are statemented and have a variety of needs. We, therefore, need to prepare for them well in advance of their coming to the school. We bring them in around June of their p7 year to break down any anxiety that they may have before transferring.

Mrs White:

As I said, our SENCO plays a big role in visiting primary schools prior to children's transferring. Our school is large, so we do that work to help those children who come from very small primary schools.

Mrs Toner:

Needs are much greater now, and more diverse children are transferring, so it is important that we are able to deal with those diverse needs.

The Chairperson:

This is my final question about that transition. By and large, the feeder schools are in rural areas, so your school gets not only rural pupils but rural parents. I notice that the school has a policy of engagement with parents and that you seek and acts on their views. You also talk about the engagement of parents. Has that improved or increased? There is a difference between the engagement of parents and parents having an association with the school. They could believe in

their heart that this is the school for their child but have no engagement with the school beyond leaving their child at the school gate. How has that been developed and worked on? What is the key to making that the success that it seems to be for the school?

Mrs White:

First and foremost, parents want their child to be at the school. As Monsignor O’Byrne said, we have third-generation children here, whose parents and grandparents are past pupils. Their contact with the school, and the contribution that the school made to their lives, is such that they want their children to go to the school. They know us and we know them. So, it is important to have knowledge of the community. Some of our staff reside in the community, which is important for us as well. We do get good support from the majority of parents.

Mr Mulholland:

Engagement has been a great thing in that parents are more informed about their entitlement. The questions about curriculum provision and the benefits of banding and setting would surprise the Committee. We also have our liaison teacher, and our year 8, and we have our Key Stage co-ordinator regularly striking a chord with the primary schools. They and the SENCO work with parents when they come into the school. People’s fears can be allayed at an early stage. A big thing about the school is that we are open to engagement with people. At a lot of open nights we give parents feedback and discuss the success of the night. We also seek their opinions about our policy statements. Parents have a big voice at St Pius’s and that is one of the school’s selling points.

Mr Lunn:

In what year was the school rebuilt?

Monsignor O’Byrne:

The rebuilding started in 2000 and finished in 2003. The official opening by the Minister was in November 2003.

Mr Lunn:

Most schools that we visit give a similar presentation. I am not saying that they are by any means

identical but the objectives for activities, outreach, community involvement and parental inclusion are pretty much the same. However, some schools seem to perform better than others, which is why we are holding this inquiry.

Without wanting to give you an opportunity to congratulate yourselves, why do you think that St Pius X College does so well compared with the averages? I asked about the newbuild because the inspection report that we have is dated 2004, which was just after the new school opened. Do you think that facilities are a factor?

Mr Mulholland:

Although there were three separate presentations, the sum of the parts makes the place work. We spoke about effective leadership and the vision of the school, the pastoral arrangements and the curriculum initiatives that we have taken on board. The strength of the school is when all those are embodied and all the practices put in place.

The answer to your question about facilities is yes. They have provided a major upturn in attracting students. Not only that, they have raised the motivation of staff coming to work. If you walk down the corridors, we have an open-door policy in the school. With regard to learning resources, we are well-kitted with ICT and there has been major investment in that. The staff are embracing the utilisation of new teaching methodologies incorporating all that ICT. That has been a major selling point for the school.

Mr Lunn:

You spoke about attracting pupils. Obviously, you are in competition with the grammar school that we all passed on the way here. That school still operates an academic selection process. Does it have a transfer test?

Monsignor O'Byrne:

Yes.

Mr Lunn:

Are you still able to compete with it for pupils? That seems to put you at a further disadvantage

and makes your performance all the more spectacular in that you have a grammar school so close that, presumably in theory at least, is creaming off the best of the intake. Yet you are still performing well.

Mrs Toner:

We have always been used to reaching out to all abilities and are about being value-added. So, that is not new to us.

Mr Mulholland:

Our school and probably Oakgrove Integrated College and Ballycastle High School have to work exceptionally hard, especially with regard to the curriculum provision in the selection of courses for the kids to follow so that they can attain a measure of success. That is the big thing, and it is a major variable.

Mrs White:

The school sells itself. The public are aware of what we do, and the children still come to us.

Mrs Toner:

We are concerned with sustainability. What we do now, we do well, and we do it with the current budget and the resources that we have. Therefore, we are concerned about cuts to the budget, and being able to provide smaller class sizes and the broad range of courses.

Monsignor O'Byrne:

The school had a very good standing in the locality even before the rebuild. The rebuild and the resources, particularly in the ICT field, have grown immensely since then. We are lucky, in as much as there are pupils in the area. This has been a great growth area for education. Not only do we have our grammar school, there is a second grammar school, which takes in pupils from both sides of the house. Some pupils who come here have passed the transfer test and have made the choice to come here. There has been a great caring community and a great relationship between pupils and teachers since the school opened, and that caring and going that extra bit by teachers is appreciated by pupils and parents.

Mr Lunn:

That has come through in your presentation and in your documentation. Do you have a non-catholic intake?

Monsignor O'Byrne:

No.

Mr Lunn:

The Committee's figures, which are a few years old, indicate that there were no transfers from here into higher or university education. Is that still the case?

Monsignor O'Byrne:

Sorry, what did you say?

Mrs White:

Ninety-six per cent of our students go on to further and higher education.

Mr Mulholland:

Sixth form has been in place for about seven years and has been very successful. We started with 24 students, and we now have 79 students in year 13 and 67 in year 14.

Mr Lunn:

What percentage of pupils goes on to university?

Mrs White:

Ninety-six per cent of students go to university.

Mr Lunn:

I have completely misread the figures.

Miss McIlveen:

Thank you for your comprehensive presentation. We will have to read the Hansard report to get a

flavour of all the details that have been presented. I want to touch briefly on the comments made about banding. You referred to academic selection, although that does not necessarily affect the college. You work on academic results for the banding stream. How do you go about banding, how aggressive is it, and do you see a discernable difference between the genders?

Mr Mulholland:

In year 8, the students are banded on the standardised scores that we set with them in line with MidYIS data. We have roughly 80 students in the top band, 40 in the middle band and 30 in the bottom band. From an early stage, we promote an ethos of promotion between the bands. As pupils move from year 9 and year 10 we set within a band a top class and a second class for certain subjects such as maths, which I touched on earlier. That is in preparation for GCSE and A level exams.

We are rigorous with regard to the bands themselves. However, the underlying current that we try to promote among the students is the fact that there are opportunities for the kids in year 8 who might start off in the bottom band to move through the spectrum by the time they get to their GCSEs. One thing on which we congratulate ourselves is that one student who was in our bottom band in year 8 left school last year and took up a position on a multimedia course at Queen's University. If there is any qualification for value added, that is essentially what St Pius X is about.

Miss McIlveen:

Are the pupils banded when they come into the school?

Mrs White:

Yes.

Miss McIlveen:

Co-operation with primary schools is obviously critical.

Mr Mulholland:

Yes. The nature of the curricular provision is that in year 8 there is more practical provision for

bottom band classes in that we offer opportunity for design and technology, ICT and art and design. In order to engage the students, we find that they enjoy more practical-based activity, and it also minimises a lot of behavioural issues.

Miss McIlveen:

Is that not academic selection?

Mr Mulholland:

No. Children still have the facility to move, and there is an ethos of promotion. They have an opportunity to move to the next band and up to the top band.

Miss McIlveen:

What relationship do you have with parents regarding banding? Are there instances where there might be objections to it?

Mrs Toner:

At times, concerns have been expressed, and we work well with the parents on that. As John pointed out, it is not rigorous in that the initial scoring puts a child in a particular placement. That is not the case. It is done simply to get the children settled in and started off. Beyond that, we work closely with parents, and they are very supportive. Children move up, and, in some cases, move down. However, we do not promote it as moving up or down. It is moving across the various spectrums.

Miss McIlveen:

You both mentioned mentoring schemes and community mentoring. Will you develop that and explain what that means?

Mr Mulholland:

We run two programmes with year 11 and year 12 boys in particular. Academic tutoring is essentially for staff involved in mentoring a student. The student selects a teacher, and it may not necessarily be one who has taught them. It may be somebody with whom they have struck an accord during their time at the college. That teacher will work closely with the pupil and look at

their performance at Christmas and their examinations, talk about their study skills and how they set aside revision work and suggest strategies so that they can improve their performance.

We have also been involved in community-based mentoring. We have brought in past students of the college who have gone on to become social workers and community workers in Magherafelt. Quite often, we find that some of the boys who do not necessarily engage with academic tutoring will open up more to community mentors because they see them out and about. They may be people in Gaelic or those in the community who run their own businesses, and the children aspire to be like them. As a result, it breaks down the pupil/teacher barrier. Those people tell the pupils that they got to their position through hard work and discipline. They sit with the pupils, set targets, review targets, and, if need be, the period of remediation can last longer.

Miss McIlveen:

Are boys more inclined to need additional mentoring than girls?

Mr Mulholland:

It works with certain boys. Other boys have difficulty opening up. There is still this laddish thing that it is not cool to do school work, and so it is about breaking down that stereotypical boyish behaviour. We have also invited some role models to the school. Brendan Donaghy, who is an all-star footballer for Armagh, came in to talk to the boys about being brought up on a farm and about not placing any value in education until he got older. You could see that some boys aspire to be like those sportsmen, and, quite often, that can be a great vehicle for breaking down those barriers.

Miss McIlveen:

Do boys require more of that type of attention?

Mr Mulholland:

It is possibly one of the reasons why the boys do well.

Miss McIlveen:

Just to go back to banding, is there still a gender-mix in the bottom band, or is it mostly one gender?

Mr Mulholland:

There are more boys.

Mrs White:

Yes.

Ms McIlveen:

What are the proportions?

Mr Mulholland:

It is hard to put a figure on it because the numbers change.

Miss McIlveen:

Is it around 60% to 70%?

Mr Mulholland:

Yes.

Miss McIlveen:

Thank you very much.

The Chairperson:

Are there different bands for different subjects?

Mr Mulholland:

At GCSE, different bands allow us to facilitate a bigger range of subjects. That has been one of the reasons why our band 2 students at GCSE perform very well. They get additional teacher-contact time with respect to class teaching. In the vocational and applied courses especially,

which have a large percentage of coursework, pupils have a greater body of time to do them within the school under the guidance of the teacher. We find that that has been very beneficial in performance at GCSE.

Mrs O'Neill:

As a representative of Mid Ulster, I am delighted that the Committee is here today and is taking evidence from you. Mary said at the start that good leadership is sure leadership, and that is very evident from your presentation.

I want to pick up on the issue of boys as well. We are all very aware that boys sometimes have lower attainment levels than girls. Are you able to measure the work that you have done, particularly with boys, through qualifications achieved? Perhaps that is not the way it is done.

Mr Mulholland:

If you mean qualitative data, then I am unable to give you a breakdown. However, we could certainly get the figures.

One major thing that we have taken on board is the benefit of the ACETS qualifications that were developed especially through CCEA. That is one of the advantages that schools such as ours have. We can sometimes break away from traditional boundaries and look at that sort of course.

When they were introduced some years back, I sat around a table with about 12 people in a hall where 80 delegates were present. After a 10-minute introduction, there were only six people still sitting: George Beattie from the Boys' Model and I were the only two left at our table, because the element of coursework alienated a lot of schools. George and I sat thinking: this is one way in which we can engage the kids. The nature of the programmes is important. They do exactly what they say on the tin. They provide the knowledge, understanding and skills that the kids can bring into the work environment. We have found that there is a major rise in the uptake of vocational courses: health and social care, IT, construction, engineering. That is where the students are performing well, especially the boys.

Mrs O'Neill:

I am not sure whether it was you, John, or Edwina who stressed that collaboration is vital in tackling underachievement. We are all aware of barriers to collaboration. What is the biggest problem for your school? Mary mentioned transport. The problem of having two education and library boards is also a problem for you. Timetabling may be one as well.

Mr Mulholland:

Timetabling was a fundamental problem, to the extent that the five schools in Magherafelt did not run on a common timetable. Magherafelt High School was out of synch. It runs on a one-week timetable, whereas the other four schools were all on two-week timetables.

We had to establish a two-week timetable and then we set aside a common or collaboration block, at an agreed time throughout the course of the working week. That placed pressures on timetabling in the school, but we weighed that against the pressures of having to move around certain teachers and classes, the benefits of collaboration and the additional breadth and balance that it offers to the students. As I said earlier, our kids are able to avail of the expertise of the NRC and the delivery engineer. It has been crucial to have engineering available. We can bring boys back into our sixth form, so that has been a major plus. Some of our kids who are keen to take a more academic pathway can now follow those academic specialities, possibly at Rainey Endowed School or at St Mary's Grammar School. If anything, it has strengthened our hand.

Mrs White:

It is a two-way process. All of the schools work together. Everyone benefits, and it is lovely to see students come to our school from other post-primary schools and see our pupils go to their schools. It has been a great benefit.

The Chairperson:

Have there been cost savings from collaboration? One benefit of collaboration is to expand the abilities and opportunities for pupils. In the current climate that we are probably heading into, collaboration will be looked at as a silver bullet for reducing costs. Have you seen practical cost savings from not having to provide a subject in your school because it is provided somewhere else, whether that is at Rainey Endowed School, St Mary's Grammar School or Magherafelt High

School?

Mrs White:

No, not at the moment, because there is give and take among the schools that are collaborating. However, we are looking at optimum classes, small classes and so on, and, as you say, we have to bite the bullet and move forward and timetable only those classes that are viable. We all realise that, not only in collaboration but in our schools, that that has to be future for class sizes in Key Stage 4 and sixth form in particular.

The Chairperson:

I welcome Mary Bradley.

Mrs M Bradley:

Apologies.

The Chairperson:

We tabled your apologies earlier, Mary, and we are delighted that you have made it here safely.

Mr O'Dowd:

Thank you for your presentation. How do you measure the success of an individual pupil, a Johnny or Jane who arrives with you at 11 and leaves when they are 16, 17 or 18? When that young adult leaves the school, how do you measure their success?

Mrs White:

For me, success is different for each child. In some cases, it is when a child who comes to the school with low self-esteem is then able to be on our football team or in our musical or is able to go out and face the world. For others, it is coming to the school as a failure and leaving with good examination results. Success is individual to each student. Obviously, there is academic success, but success is measured by the holistic development of the child.

Mr Mulholland:

The living proof is that two of our senior students who you met this morning were deemed as

failures as part of the transfer procedure before their arrival here. Today, I see them as outstanding young citizens who will leave us with an outstanding set of qualifications.

Mr O’Dowd:

I suppose that I got the answer that I expected. I know that it is difficult to judge each of your 900 pupils over the past number of years. For me, this inquiry raises the following questions: what is education about? What are we trying to deliver to our young people? In a previous evidence session, the question was asked as to whether a grade D at GCSE was a failure. Should we be espousing the value-added aspect so that we should say well done to young people who have tried their best and left school with a GCSE grade D?

Mrs White:

Yes, I agree with that. The results table is a very raw tool of measurement, but, unfortunately, it is used, so we have to aspire to doing well on that. In this school, it is the value-added aspect that matters, not the grade that the child gets. Obviously, if a child wants to go down a route, he or she has to get the grades to do so, but the child also gets the value-added aspect through the experience and opportunities that are important in this school. We are only a sandwich between primary school and moving on, so we prepare that child for what they will meet in life.

Mr O’Dowd:

That is a good point. John talked about schools creating and helping in the development of the good citizen. The debate needs to take place about what education is about. We cannot measure children on a series of exam results, and we should always encourage a child to move forward.

I am going back to the league tables again as regards results, but we have heard evidence from other schools that as grammar schools take in a wider range of pupils, their results fall, which is not a true reflection of the school. Have you found that?

Mrs Toner:

Not at present, but it is a concern. As we said earlier, we have been well used to pupils of mixed ability coming through our doors, and we have always been oversubscribed. As Monsignor O’Byrne pointed out, we have been very lucky in that population transfer has not been an issue, but I do not doubt that it may be a concern. My greatest worry is about possible reductions in the

budget, but we have expertise, and we have had it for years, in being able to manage that. As we said, it is about value added, so we have always worked with these pupils.

Monsignor O’Byrne:

Schools develop the potential of their pupils. That potential could be in different fields and not necessarily the academic field. Our college and many other schools lift the self-esteem of the child, even if it is not in the academic field, because everybody has strengths and weaknesses.

Mr O’Dowd:

That is a fair comment.

Mrs Toner:

You mentioned the best way to measure success. It is to provide a pathway for pupils at the end of their fifth year. Our careers department works well at ensuring that pupils who do not return post-16 have alternative pathways.

Mr O’Dowd:

I noted in your presentation that you referred to pupils aspiring to wear the black jacket of the sixth formers. Is their uniform deliberately different?

Mrs White:

Yes, it is.

The Chairperson:

How do you package the value-added aspect? I do not subscribe to the idea that a person is a failure unless he has qualifications. I think that there is a real problem with that. That is why we are looking at grades as part of this inquiry. John referred to the successful pupil and his or her qualifications, but if a pupil does not have qualifications, how do you package, present and give to that pupil added value for when they leave the school for the wider world in which they are going to have to live and work?

Mrs Toner:

It is about making them aware of opportunities. Our pupils recently attended a special needs conference that was designed specifically to show them that there are avenues for them in the workplace. A lot more needs to be done in that particular area.

The Chairperson:

We have heard evidence from businesses, and, a year ago, we had a presentation from Wrights in Ballymena. We were told that school leavers were coming to work for them; however, literacy and numeracy classes had to be set up to help those school leavers to do basic skills in the company. There is a clear failure in the system if young people are leaving post-primary school without core competences. We all know that there is a problem in respect of the transition from primary school, but we have challenges in relation to young people who are leaving post-primary schools without core competences.

We have listened to you, and you are to be commended for many of the elements that you have put into your school, but how can we ensure that in respect of the value-added aspect, employers and society know that pupils will have the core competences essential for them to be successful in whatever they decide to do when they leave this school?

Mr Mulholland:

Our curriculum has changed vastly over the years, to the extent that we have made a big drive on essential skills. We had a number of year 12 students in the bottom band, and a percentage of those were boys, and they were studying things they were never going to use, such as algebra, trigonometry, quadratic equations and maths. So, we made a conscious management decision to go down the road of essential skills when boys would look at the surface area of a lecture theatre and work out how many carpet tiles would be needed for it.

That set well with the transition that we bought into as regards essential skills communication because that dealt with young people and how to fill in CVs and application forms. As a result, we insisted that that group of students did a key skills qualification in ICT. Alongside that, we have worked in tandem with the NRC in occupational studies where the girls have access to hair and beauty or business administration and the boys have construction. Even our bottom band

students are now leaving with level 1 and level 2 passes in those areas and I think that we have prepared them well for their future career pathways because those will obviously be along the occupational route as opposed to the vocational or, indeed, academic one.

Mrs Toner:

That links well to Trevor's query about a grade D being seen as a failure. It is not: it is a level 1 category, a level 2 —

Mr Lunn:

Please do not get me wrong. I totally agree with you.

Mrs Toner:

Yes, I know.

Mr Lunn:

A grade D should be more highly regarded.

Mrs Toner:

It is a case of changing that mindset: it is level 1, level 2 and level 3.

Mr Mulholland:

Grades Ds are paramount for a lot of our kids for entry into the NRC for programmes such as likes of job skills because they equate their points to that. On that basis, we celebrate their grade Ds.

The Chairperson:

This is all about terminology.

Mr Mulholland:

Yes, exactly.

The Chairperson:

We live in a society in which if you say a certain thing to certain people it will ignite in them joy and elation or else you will be their worst enemy. We all have terminology that we use, and we need to rethink radically how we use that terminology because, in reality, it is not exactly what it means to be.

Mr Lunn:

Just to clarify: I asked about transfers into higher education. I was looking at the figures before you had a sixth form. I should read more carefully.

The Chairperson:

Is there a sixth form at St Mary's, Rainey, the High and Sperrin?

Mrs White:

Yes.

Mr Craig:

Mary, I listened with interest about banding. I was doing a bit of mathematics because I was working out how long ago I went to a secondary school. It was 34 years ago when I first went there and they had the exact same system. It would be regarded in my area as one of the best secondary schools in the country so maybe that is a tribute that that system does work.

I am interested in the level of parental involvement in the school. I need to ask a sensitive question because I think the issue plays a huge part: what percentage of single-parent families are in your intake area? What percentage of children coming to the school is from single-parent families? I find that that tends to be a huge problem for a school. Is that an issue for you; do you have a large percentage of them; and how do you deal with parental involvement with regard to those families? In fairness, it is much more difficult for a single parent to get heavily involved with a school.

Mrs White:

My answer to that is I could not answer your question because we do not label our parents as

single parent families or dual parent families. We treat people as individuals and work with them. If issues arise, we contact the parents and work with them. If a parent is not supportive, we keep working with him or her until we get that support. However, I do not know how many single parents we have.

Mrs Toner:

It has never been an issue. It is not something that we would need to look into.

Mr Craig:

It is not?

Mrs White:

No.

Mr Craig:

Well, I do not think that any school keeps a record of it but, would you have a fair idea of the level?

Mrs White:

I would say that it is increasing. There are difficulties within families, particularly during the recession, because building plays a big part in this community. Obviously there is a recession. We just make ourselves aware of that.

Mr Craig:

How do you get those parents heavily involved in their child's education? You talked about encouragement, but you also talked about enforcement. I am intrigued with both words.

Monsignor O'Byrne:

On open nights, or parents' night, the school will be packed. The parents come to see the school, and they get an opportunity to talk to the teachers. It is never a half-empty occasion. We had to run two sessions of the open night recently, although not all those pupils will come here. We also have an open night for parents for the different key stages, and 96% of parents usually come. A

few parents will not come, but the percentage that does come is very high.

Mrs White:

We have a very strong pastoral system. The form teacher is pivotal in that and will contact the parents of the children with whom we would have concerns. I do not see that there is an issue. Do either of you two?

Mrs Toner:

No, and that is because we engage with them right from the start, even during the transfer process. We have an open day in June when parents and pupils come along and see round the school. It is an open invitation, and they feel very welcome. They support us.

Mrs White:

They are part of the triad, and they are told that from the beginning. It is the unsaid message in the school.

Mrs Toner:

The school is also opened up to the community for various outside functions, and people see this as their school.

Mr Craig:

I have asked this question of all schools because I find that there is an intriguing difference between the controlled and maintained sectors. Parental involvement in the maintained sector is much higher than in the controlled sector, and that may be a reflection of the link with the Church. It has been admitted that it is a much bigger problem in the controlled sector, which might go a long way to explaining your incredible success in this area.

The other thing that intrigues me, and John has preached it almost to death today, is how the school deals with pupils who are not academically inclined. I commend him for the efforts, and this is where a lot of schools fall down. Do you link yourselves heavily with the technical college as it would have been called in my day?

Mr Mulholland:

Yes. During the inception of the sixth form, we met and liaised with Tony Barnhill, who held the admissions tutor role at the University of Ulster, and Liam Barton, who had been at Queen's University. Both gentlemen were instrumental in moving us forward in sixth-form provision. We were conscious of our geographical setup and the schools with which we were competing for sixth-form provision. We wanted to know what else we could bring to the table and what our students needed to do. Obviously, they will be coming out with three A levels, but maybe not with as high grades as some of the students elsewhere in the town.

Tony and Liam said that we needed to look at our enrichment opportunities and build up a portfolio of additional qualifications that could be added, so that our year 14 pupils would have a plethora of extracurricular experiences and an accreditation that they could talk about. That was instrumental in our putting together a structured and detailed enrichment programme, which runs post-16 as well. That allowed our students to not only deal with people in black and white as regards qualifications but bring additional accreditation and a greater range of skills to the table.

We liaise closely with the Northern Regional College in Magherafelt, and we have work programmes in years 12, 13 and 14 with the college. It has played a vital role in the strength of the Magherafelt learning partnership.

Mr Craig:

Another thing intrigues me. A levels are not the only way to get into university. Do you encourage certain pupils to go down the HND route?

Mr Mulholland:

We have students who leave with two A levels plus a certificate of personal effectiveness (CoPE), which is worth 70 UCAS points and is essentially a C grade at A level, as an add-on and an enrichment alternative. We say to those people that — we package it like this — it would be best to go down the HND route, even though it may take them another year to get to university, because that is more commensurate with their ability. This goes back to the point that I made to Michelle about banding. I can stand over that statement, because we offer subjects within each band that are in keeping with the kids' ability needs.

Mr Craig:

I appreciate that.

Mr Mulholland:

We pride ourselves on that.

The Chairperson:

Mary, Edwina, Monsignor and John, thank you very much. That was extremely useful