



Northern Ireland
Assembly

**COMMITTEE
FOR EDUCATION**

OFFICIAL REPORT
(Hansard)

Raising Standards

1 June 2011

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

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FOR EDUCATION**

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Members present for all or part of the proceedings:

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

Witnesses:

Mrs Katrina Godfrey) Department of Education
Dr Chris Hughes)

The Chairperson:

Katrina and Chris, you are very welcome to the new mandate of the Committee for Education.

Mrs Katrina Godfrey (Department of Education):

Thank you.

The Chairperson:

Chris and Katrina previously attended what we will call the “old” Committee, and this is a much younger Committee in both age and experience. Katrina, I ask you to make your presentation to

the Committee.

Mrs Godfrey:

The Committee will have had an opportunity to read the section on raising standards in the departmental briefing document, and I know that many members will be familiar with the key points. For the record, it is important that I make it clear that the Department has a very clear focus on working to raise standards for all young people and on closing the gap in achievement that persists, particularly between young people from the most and least affluent backgrounds. In other words, our focus is both on raising the bar and on closing the gap; we do not think that it is enough to focus on just one of those aspects. You will have seen from the paper that the evidence shows that we have made quite a bit of progress, particularly in recent years. However, the paper also confirms that there is absolutely no room for complacency and that much more needs to be done. A key and early message that has come from the new Minister of Education is that progress is welcome but the work must go on to try to ensure that every child can be supported to achieve his or her full potential.

The latest statistics show some encouraging increases in, for example, the percentage of young people achieving five or more good GCSEs, including English and maths. We use that as a measure at the end of compulsory schooling, as it acknowledges a broad degree of achievement from pupils and reflects the importance and centrality of good literacy and numeracy skills, which are what employers look for when young people go into the world of work. That has risen from around 54% in 2007 to 59% this year, which is encouraging. However, the Committee will know that we think that it could go much higher. There are still too many young people leaving school without that benchmark level of qualification, which they need in order to access further education, sixth form colleges, higher education or the world of work.

Members will also know that we have some particular groups in our sights. We are concerned about the level of achievement among young people from the most disadvantaged communities. A lot of the evidence, including from some schools that perform very well, indicates that we should aspire to a much higher level of achievement from particular groups of young people; for example, those from poorer backgrounds, looked-after children or those who face other barriers to learning. That is an important area of focus for us.

Members will have seen other welcome but modest increases; for example, in the achievement rate of boys from Protestant working-class areas. That is a particular area of importance, as outlined in the report that was launched by Dawn Purvis's working group in the previous mandate. We must ensure that the work of a school in a community is supported by that community and that it sends out the signal that education is important and that having a good education and doing well at school is to be encouraged and supported. That is another key element for us.

Some members will be aware that we also now benchmark ourselves internationally through the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) survey of 15-year-olds. In the previous mandate, the Committee had asked us to consider participating in the Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS) survey, which looks at mathematical performance. As of this year, we will take part in TIMSS and the Progress in International Reading Literacy Study. That will help us to benchmark our performance at the primary level in an international context, to show how our children are performing at the age of nine compared with children in other Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) countries. That is important because we are very conscious that, when our young people leave education, they are going into a world in which they are competing for jobs in an increasingly global economic context. They are competing not just with their peers in their school but with young people from other countries.

We also know that other countries attach huge importance to how they perform internationally. We should have similar aspirations to be among the best-performing countries in the world. Even in an economic context, and looking at the work of the new Executive in developing a new economic strategy, that is highly relevant. The evidence from the PISA survey shows that we are still performing significantly above the average in science, but the performance of our 15-year-olds is distinctly average in reading and maths. We believe that we can and should aspire to do much better than that.

I will say something about what the Department is doing. Members will be aware that the revised curriculum, which was phased in between 2007 and 2010, is now past the implementation

stage and is being embedded in schools. It is clearly making a difference. The feedback from teachers is that its flexibility allows them to make connections between topics in ways that reflect the interests, aspirations and nature of their pupils. It is starting to have an impact on the extent to which young people can see the relevance of what they are learning and how they can make connections between different areas.

I will talk about the entitlement framework later. Again, it offers considerably broader choice for pupils than would have been the case a number of years ago. There are new opportunities for young people to engage with their education and to achieve and do well at school. Members will be aware that new assessment arrangements are to be put in place next year to support the revised curriculum, with a particular focus on literacy and numeracy and, a year later, ICT. That focus will be on making sure that pupils' progress and performance is assessed on those three key areas consistently and robustly. It will focus not only on knowledge but on pupils' ability to apply that knowledge in the everyday settings that they will face throughout their education and their life in general.

The school improvement policy that we introduced a couple of years ago is continuing to be implemented and is gaining traction. Through inspection and other evidence, we are seeing that it has increasingly brought a much sharper focus to the whole process of self-evaluation in a school; that sense that improvement is best driven when a school recognises its own strengths and weaknesses and puts in place arrangements to build on the strengths and tackle the weaknesses. We have also seen much firmer and sharper action to support and, where necessary, challenge schools in which provision is simply not good enough.

The formal intervention programme, which is one aspect of the school improvement policy, is currently supporting around 18 schools where inspection has found educational provision to be simply not good enough. The focus of that support is on helping the school itself to identify areas for improvement and to do something about them for the benefit of pupils. That is an ongoing process, but one where we believe the sharper focus on improvement is really starting to have an impact on the quality of education that children are accessing in the classroom.

The new literacy and numeracy strategy was launched just before the end of the previous

mandate. It was developed with very close input from the independent literacy and numeracy task force that the previous Minister appointed, which gave evidence on a couple of occasions to the previous Committee. It is designed to improve the quality of teaching and learning in the classroom. Its focus is on the classroom, recognising that good teachers delivering effective teaching and learning are the means by which pupils will achieve and improve their literacy and numeracy skills.

We are also conscious that the focus on raising standards does not just stop with the curriculum, the school improvement strategy, the literacy and numeracy strategy and the assessment arrangements, because the work in other parts of the Department is hugely relevant. The foundations that will be laid with the new early years strategy will be very important in making sure that young people can access the curriculum and have the best possible start.

The work that is continuing on supporting children with special educational needs and other barriers to learning is an integral part of the Department's focus on raising standards and closing the achievement gap. That is why, for example, we are directly participating in the work that has been under way in the Department for Employment and Learning to look at a prevention and support strategy for those not in employment, education or training, making sure that the preventative role that we can play through the schools system is played to its full effect.

The focus of the Department of Education is clear. It is on improving outcomes for pupils, improving attainment among those groups currently underachieving and, through that, enhancing not only the life chances of individual pupils but the Province's future economic success. That is why we see the raising standards agenda as being a significant contribution to the wider economic strategy, as well as to the well-being and welfare of individuals and communities.

The Chairperson:

Thank you, Katrina; that is useful. You mentioned a variety of things in relation to where we go as far as raising standards is concerned. I welcome the fact that the Department has taken the decision to use TIMSS. As new members will probably discover, just as there are many issues and opinions politically in relation to education, there are many issues and opinions educationally. There is a debate between those who believe that the measures used by the OECD

should be interpreted in a certain way and others who say that they are not a fair and accurate reflection. That is welcome, because it should give some balance.

Although we welcome the work that has been done on the issue of underachievement among working-class Protestant boys, there still seems to be a huge issue regarding primary-school children moving to post-primary schools. There are new assessment arrangements, to which you referred. What focus is there on the primary school sector? Over the past few years, we have repeatedly heard comments from post-primary schools that they are being asked to pick up the pieces for a variety of reasons. There are those who will say that that is because of children who have been traumatised through transfer. I think that a very small element of children fall into that category.

The statistics on children leaving primary schools to go to post-primary schools show that one in four or, perhaps, one in three children have not reached attainment level 4. What is the Department doing to address that problem?

Mrs Godfrey:

You are right that GCSE is the initial measure that we tend to use post-16, but it is a progression. If children are underachieving at the age of 11, it is much more difficult for them to make up the ground and access a post-primary curriculum if they do not have the level of communication, literacy and numeracy that they need.

Figures suggest that around 20% of young people move from primary into post-primary education without achieving the expected level in Key Stage 2 literacy and numeracy. The other thing that we are conscious of, which you pointed out, is that post-primary principals will often say that they see a disparity between children's levels as reported by the primary school and the experience that they see on the first day, week or month. That is what the new assessment arrangements are trying to ensure we get right, because a key feature of those will be the idea that it will not just be teacher assessed; it will be moderated.

Young people will be expected to be able to do a set of tasks that will demonstrate their knowledge and skills in communication and using mathematics. They will be assessed by the

teacher. We think that that is very important because a central part of any teacher's responsibilities and professionalism is the assessment of young people and the reporting. That is why we want to keep the teacher at the centre of that and make sure that the teacher is correctly assessing children's progress.

However, for the extra reassurance that teachers need and that the system needs and wants, there will be some external moderation of those assessment arrangements so that when children move up into post-primary education, post-primary principals can have a degree of confidence about the results being passed from the primary school. That will be because the focus will be on children having knowledge and the skills to apply that knowledge. The assessment will still be done by the teacher, but moderation will provide a greater assurance of consistency across different classes in different schools. That will be important.

The other big change will be that what we will ask young people to demonstrate at the end of Key Stages 1, 2 and 3 is arguably more challenging than what they have to demonstrate at the moment. That is because there will be a focus on, for example, taking the mathematical knowledge that they have gathered and applying it in situations. It will not be as simple as adding together numbers. It may be, to take a simple example, a challenge to work out the change having paid for an item. That is a much more relevant skill that we all use in our everyday life than sitting down and doing, for example, a page of sums. That sense of taking the knowledge and being able to apply it in different settings will be a feature of the new assessment arrangements.

We hope that that will deal with the measurement, but the real question is how we make sure that the teaching and learning is giving young people the skills that they need. That has been the focus of the new literacy and numeracy strategy, 'Count, Read: Succeed'. Chris will give a quick overview of what that is designed to do, particularly in the primary classroom.

Dr Chris Hughes (Department of Education):

As Katrina said, around 20% of our children are not achieving at the expected level by the time they leave primary school. The 'Count, Read: Succeed' strategy sets a target to reduce that to under 10% by 2020. It sets out much more clearly how teachers are to be supported in addressing

underachievement when it occurs, preferably as early as possible. It sets out the roles that people in the education sector will play in supporting teachers to address the needs of children when they are in the classroom.

The strategy is particularly about underachieving. It is about using data to identify as early as possible when a child is not meeting their potential, so that teachers can then be supported in using a variety of strategies to address that. One of the things that the strategy makes clear is that there is no silver bullet for addressing either literacy or numeracy development. There has been a concern that fashions come and go on what approaches are taken. In fact, the international evidence is that a range of approaches is best. Not all children learn in the same way and teachers need to be supported in having a number of evidence-based approaches, so that if they try something with a child that does not work, there is another option and they try again. However, the focus is very much on the teacher taking responsibility for meeting the needs of the child and although there is an expectation that phonics will play its part, teachers will use their professional judgement to decide which approaches are taken. The aim and expectation is to halve the number of pupils who are not achieving at the expected level at the end of Key Stage 2.

The Chairperson:

I am glad to hear a departmental official say that not all systems will be appropriate for all children. We seem to go through fads in education based on an expert in some part of the world producing a report that, all of a sudden, leads everybody to think, “Well, this is a wonderful thing, this will transform education”. We go through that for five years, then discover that the figures are not as good as they could have been, and we go back to what we had been doing previously. And the poor teacher is caught in the middle of all that.

With the Department’s help, we will provide the new members of the Committee with the coloured charts that we got. I am tempted to ask the continuing member of the Education Committee to explain those charts, which were all based on assessment. We just got them in a folder one day from the Department , and I am not that hard to confuse on a good day, but I was absolutely dumbfounded by how a teacher is able to comprehend that assessment process; it is extremely difficult.

Miss M McIlveen:

Particularly if they are colour-blind.

The Chairperson:

Yes, particularly if they have that difficulty.

Is there enough flexibility in the revised curriculum to ensure that it can deliver the intended outcome? I get the sense that the revised curriculum is a developing process. In its early stages it was very rigid and set as to what it wanted to do, but are we beginning to see flexibility in the Department? My view is that it is not a case of either all formal education or the revised curriculum; it may be a combination of both.

Mrs Godfrey:

Flexibility should be one of the strengths of the revised curriculum. At the same time, which is where the colour-coded charts that you all love come in, it is important that we set out some things that we think the vast majority of children ought to be able to do by certain key stages in their education, particularly in areas such as literacy and numeracy. It would be remiss of us not to do so, and that is where the charts come in. They state things such as in P4, at the end of Key Stage 1, we expect children to be able to read, write and order numbers up to at least 100. We expect them to have quick recall of number facts up to 10. There are things that any of us, as parents or in any other capacity, reasonably expect that children should be able to do at certain stages.

The levels of progression are designed to set out for teachers what we think most kids should be able to do at certain stages of their education; at the end of Key Stages 1, 2 and 3. The real trick in that is how a teacher uses his or her professional judgement and skills, combined with the characteristics of their pupils, to help those children reach the objectives. That is where Chris's point is key: we have said in the literacy and numeracy strategy that different children may need differing approaches. Therefore, the early embedding of phonics in P2 and P3 may be hugely effective for 80% of children. There may be two children for whom it is not the only way to help them learn to read, so a teacher will need to know that he or she has the support to use their judgement to introduce different ways to meet the needs of children. That came across in some of

the research evidence that Chris was looking at; for example, the research about the different ways that children learn to read.

Dr Hughes:

Yes —

The Chairperson:

Sorry, does that include the different approaches to phonics? Both of you will be aware that there is a huge debate around phonics.

Mrs Godfrey:

The key message in the literacy and numeracy strategy is that teachers are best placed, and no one will prescribe a particular option. There are evidenced-based methods, and there are teachers who talk very convincingly about why they think linguistic phonics work best and others who opt for synthetic phonics. I am not an educationalist, but I know that that is a debate that you frequently hear among primary school teachers.

The key thing is for teachers to be able to look at the method, the evidence base behind it, why it appears to work, and apply that to the children in their classrooms and see whether the two things come together. That is the message that we have been trying to get out. Chris has been doing a lot of work communicating the new strategy to teachers, and it has gone down very well. There was a concern that some teachers felt that they had to use option x, and we were able to reassure them that the key thing is making evidence-based interventions that work for the children in their classrooms.

Mrs Hale:

As a new member of the Committee and having worked in primary schools for the past 10 years, especially with Key Stage 1 children, I am concerned about how teachers are supported when teaching linguistics, either through sight learning, Jolly Phonics or Letterland. If a teacher is in charge of a class of 28 six-year-olds and has no support from classroom assistants or extra teachers, how will they be able to recognise what works best for a child? Can we afford to have more systems in classes where they are needed, especially at the early stages?

Dr Hughes:

The new strategy very clearly sets out how teachers will progress through the escalating range of support that is available to them. First, it is all about good, high-quality, whole-class teaching. We know that that is the most effective strategy that will get most of the children to where you want them to be, and it allows for differentiation where appropriate. Once a children is identified as starting to underachieve, the teacher will see whether there is another strategy that they could deploy, using some of the methods that you mentioned —

Mrs Hale:

Sorry to interrupt. Teachers do that, but the problem is time management. Teachers are so busy that children fall through the net, and I have seen that happen. Teachers have so much pressure on them to achieve targets, such as P1 pupils knowing 100 high-frequency words, and are so focused on getting most of the class to achieve that, that the younger children fall through and there is just not the help in place for them. We need additional help in classrooms.

Mrs Godfrey:

In such cases leadership is absolutely critical. A teacher must feel that they are supported to deal with all the children in their classroom. It cannot be left entirely to classroom teachers; they require the support of Key Stage heads and literacy co-ordinators, for example, and particularly of principals and governors. Interestingly, that issue also arose in post-primary schools, and one of the messages that we clearly put into the strategy was the need for the heads of English and maths departments to have more time to provide support. It is clear that they have a pivotal role in driving literacy and numeracy standards throughout the whole school, but if they are not being given the time that they need to plan, work with other teachers and look at the progress of pupils, they will not make the improvements that they want to make. That applies equally to Key Stage 1 and Key Stage 2. We have consistently heard the same point as you made: teachers tend to be pretty good at knowing what is needed. However, they need the extra support and the time and the space to be able to apply that professional judgement for the benefit of all the children in their class. That is where the leadership and the school governors must come in.

Dr Hughes:

The strategy sets out five different stages of the support available to teachers to address underachievement. I covered two of those already. The third is that when a teacher tries another intervention that is not working, they should seek help from within the school from a literacy or numeracy co-ordinator, a special educational needs co-ordinator a vice-principal or a teacher mentor, who will help them to devise another approach to a child's set targets, which is time limited. If that does not work, the school will then have a range of evidence about what it has done and evidence that the child is continuing to underachieve. At that point, it can seek help from outside the school; for example, from the education and library board. At that point, the support would be based on the evidence of the continuing underachievement and the approaches that have been taken. That is then provided to the teacher, so that they are able to skill themselves up to help meet the needs of that child and children who are in similar circumstances in the future.

From September, the education and library boards will roll out a range of evidence-based training to support teachers in taking that role, and that support needs to be developed. We see it as a focused, structured support to teachers in classrooms to enable them to do exactly what you referred to earlier, which is to deploy the range of interventions and help the children to achieve.

Mrs Dobson:

My question relates to raising standards in socially disadvantaged areas. The Department for Social Development (DSD) funds neighbourhood renewal projects that operate in Craigavon, which is in my constituency. Does the Department have statistics on the success rates coming out of those initiatives in relation to the additional costs incurred and their impact on the educational achievement of the students and children of families taking part?

Mrs Godfrey:

We monitor very specifically the attainment levels in all schools that take their populations predominately from neighbourhood renewal areas. In the previous mandate, we had, through DSD, specific public service agreement targets on the attainment level of schools where 50% or more of the children are drawn from neighbourhood renewal areas. We monitor the progress of those schools very carefully because we are aware that they often face a range of other challenges

and complexities that make it difficult for teachers to ensure that children are achieving to their full potential.

Increasingly over the past number of years, we have worked more directly with colleagues in DSD at the time when a project is being considered, so that we can look at it in the context of education policy and our focus in the curriculum and standards. That allows both Departments to be satisfied that there is a good fit and that it is not duplicating something that is already happening in a school, thereby ensuring that it is designed to do what we think needs to be done and that there is much greater partnership. The other area where we see that is in the extended schools programme. One of the criteria for inclusion in the extended schools programme is linked to neighbourhood renewal, and we know from the last inspection report of extended schools that having that series of extra support and extra activity outside school is starting to have a clear impact on children's attainment in school, which, of course, was the purpose of doing it in the first place. There is not much point putting resources into something if it is not going to have that purpose. However, the inspection report suggests that with things such as the extended schools activities, we are certainly on the right track to help young people overcome some of the barriers that they face.

Nevertheless, the other issue, which you will know from Craigavon and many other parts of Northern Ireland, is the link between the school and the community. We made it a specific part of the school improvement strategy, so that the community is actively supporting the school and sending out messages about the importance that it attaches to education. That means that the school feels that it has a connection with the community that it serves and that it is being supported by it.

Neighbourhood renewal and programmes such as extended schools have been hugely important in forging links between schools and communities and in sending out the signals that increasingly need to be coming out of communities about the importance of getting a good education. The extended schools programme and the joining up of the way in which we work with DSD colleagues has been really critical. For example, a DSD colleague now sits with us on the working group looking at Achieving Belfast and Achieving Derry schools. We also had a DSD observer on the literacy and numeracy task force to help us make sure that we were not

missing links that could have been made. We are much better placed for joining up what can reasonably be expected of a school with the support and encouragement that needs to come from the community, and for building the capacity within the community to give that support.

The Chairperson:

On that point, there is another element in relation to DSD. The previous Committee visited nurture facilities in schools in Londonderry and Coleraine, and I am aware that there is a Nurture Group Network. Nurture is another key element, and I know that one of the Department's documents has referenced it and talked about it being recognised. However, it is the age-old problem of the Department saying, "Yes, we know that it is out there, but somebody else is funding it". The funding was coming from DSD, from neighbourhood renewal and other sources. Will that be included in the overall discussions with DSD? I will take Ballysally as an example. I know that the staff there have no difficulty with our making public reference to it. They have every reason to be very proud of what they have achieved, as have those in Londonderry. Let us look at the specific outcomes of the school in Ballysally. It sits in one of the most socially deprived areas under the Noble indices and in practice. Last year, it saw no referrals to the psychology service in the North Eastern Education and Library Board, having made 10-plus in the years before. I think that that is an indication of a programme that works. It is also tied in with the community and the involvement of parents. Will that still be considered, and not just given tea and sympathy by the Department?

Mrs Godfrey:

The short answer is that I do not know. I will need to check that and come back to the Committee. I will do that specifically in relation to the nurture units.

The Chairperson:

Do members have any other questions on this issue? I suggest that we take a briefing on numeracy and literacy after the recess. I have suggested that to the Committee Clerk.

Over the past number of years, teachers have been bombarded with policies and initiatives. We are now at the beginning of a phase in relation to the revised curriculum, Every School a Good School and the numeracy and literacy strategy. Perhaps my question would be better asked

of the Minister next week, but to be forewarned is to be forearmed, so you can take this back to the Minister. Are we going to see a halt to the new initiatives and new policies? We have concerns about some of the policies, and we will tease those out over the weeks and months ahead, but will the approach be to stick with them so as to ensure that we get outcomes, rather than deciding that they are not working and should be scrapped and that another initiative should be looked at, thus starting the treadmill again?

Mrs Godfrey:

I think that that question may well be more appropriately dealt with by the Minister next week.

The Chairperson:

You can forewarn him.

Mrs Godfrey:

I will. I know that his commitment is very much to making sure that there is a focus on good teaching and learning in classrooms. You are right: we have always said that the revised curriculum requires a period of embedding after the period of implementation. I do not doubt that that will be a key factor in his considerations.

Mr McKay:

Will you give us an overview of how the formal intervention programme is bedding down? What sort of experiences have schools had? How have they found it?

Mrs Godfrey:

That is an interesting one. It was a very conscious new aspect of the school improvement programme, and, because it is new and different, it has attracted a fair amount of interest, including media interest, which is something that schools have not always found easy. The main purpose of the programme is to make sure that schools get the support that they need to make improvements after an inspection. A school goes into the formal intervention process if, after an inspection, its provision is found to be inadequate or unsatisfactory. The process is not punitive; it is designed to make sure that a school that finds itself in that position gets the tailored support that it needs to improve the quality of education for its pupils. The main focus is always going to

be on the quality of education. That is the positive aspect of the process.

Chris might want to say something about the feedback from schools. We have found schools that have very much appreciated the assistance with identifying areas for improvement and the tailored support. They have taken a proactive approach of wanting to do as much as they can, as quickly as they can, to make things better for their pupils.

Dr Hughes:

We are coming up to the second academic year of implementing the Every School a Good School policy, of which the formal intervention process is a part. Already, seven schools have gone into the process and left it again because they have improved. The idea is that improving the education that children receive where they are is the most effective approach, rather than closing schools or anything like that. We want to raise the standards in the school as quickly as possible, and the evidence is that that is taking place.

To broaden the issue out, under the Every School a Good School policy, every single inspection report now gets follow-up action from the Department, not just those on schools where provision is found to be less than satisfactory. If the inspectorate identifies any area for improvement, the school has to produce an action plan that goes to the reporting inspector, who quality assures that, and those are then followed up. Although the schools that are in the formal intervention process attract quite a high profile, schools where provision is found to be satisfactory or good are also followed up with action plans to ensure that the areas for improvement are all addressed. There is an awful lot going on in the background that does not make the press, but it is all about driving improvement, and the schools appreciate the specific focus on the areas that the inspectorate identifies when it visits.

Mrs Godfrey:

Our main aim in the longer term is that schools do not ever find themselves in the position that the inspectorate finds unsatisfactory provision. Ideally, the school will have the skills to self-evaluate and to identify its own areas for improvement and, more importantly, to do something about them. Increasingly, the education and library boards will play an early challenge and early intervention role, where they start to spot early warning signs that may suggest that things are not

as good as they could be. Increasingly, they are making sure that they are providing support to schools before they ever get to the point where provision is unsatisfactory. The real success will be when we are at a point of maturity in the policy and schools take the action that they need and the inspectorate does not find provision to be unsatisfactory. It might find provision recognised by the school as inadequate and an action plan already in hand to address it. That is the focus of the policy in the longer term.

The Chairperson:

A lot of the ultimate responsibility for the governance of the school lies with senior management staff and the governors. Are there occasions when the problem with schools in the formal intervention process might have been identified if appropriate questions had been asked at the right point? As Members of the Assembly find, the answer that is given all depends on the questions that are asked. I say that with no disrespect to the officials before us. If a principal is not being asked the appropriate question and other information is being given to the board of governors, there can be a perception that all is well, and then, all of a sudden, something happens and there is a crisis and everything goes into free fall. They then realise that, if they had asked the right questions, they could be in a different position.

Chris mentioned the seven schools that went into the formal intervention process and came out, and I know that, even now, the Department is aware of a number of schools that are having particular difficulties. Along with the role of the inspectorate, the boards and the Department, is a set of key questions or key indicators needed? We are talking about indicators for pupils and for teachers. Is some sort of colour-coded toolkit needed to help boards of governors?

A personal view that I have rehearsed a number of times is that, sometimes, there is too cosy a relationship between the principal, who is the secretary of the board of governors, and the chair of the board of governors. That relationship needs to be challenged more. All members who sit on boards of governors declare an interest. Is that relevant and something that the Department is aware of?

Mrs Godfrey:

It is, Chair. In conversations I have had with governors, they have said that sometimes the most

powerful thing that they have taken from it is the fact that it is perfectly reasonable for them to ask a set of questions. That might sound desperately basic, but it is a fact. A governor recently said to me that a simple thing that we could do would be to have every governor ask a set of 10 questions at least once in every school year, which is the sort of thing that you are talking about. That is something that we will be taking back and looking at.

We provide schools with a lot of information. Every year, we provide them with benchmarking data that allows them to compare themselves with other similar schools. However, if that data is not being presented to the governors and if governors do not know that it is there and do not know that it is all right to ask about it, there is an issue. That takes us back to the key purpose of data. Data never gives you any answers, but it always gives you questions to ask. If a governor knows that their school's performance is low and that the school down the road is performing better, the data might not tell them anything, but it will allow them to ask, "Why are we performing here? Is this the best place for us? Why are they up there and we are not?" and to satisfy themselves that they are getting answers. However, that takes not only a skill set but governors to be assured that part of their job is to ask those simple questions.

The Chairperson:

I have one final question. How many schools are in the formal intervention process at the moment?

Mrs Godfrey:

I think that 18 are.

The Chairperson:

Are those 18 schools unsatisfactory? Chris, you referred to a school being —

Dr Hughes:

I referred to schools being either inadequate or unsatisfactory; it is just those two categories.

The Chairperson:

Is that when a formal intervention is made?

Mrs Godfrey:

Yes, a formal intervention is made when schools are either inadequate or unsatisfactory. The other point is that a school might be satisfactory, so it will not be in the formal intervention process, but it will still have a degree of follow-up.

The Chairperson:

Do they still have to produce an action plan?

Mrs Godfrey:

Yes, that is quite right.

Dr Hughes:

The list of schools in the formal intervention process is live. When an inspection finding comes in, it is acted on, so the number varies. At the moment, there are 18.

The Chairperson:

So, 18 out of 1,200 schools are in the formal intervention process?

Mrs Godfrey:

Yes.

The Chairperson:

OK. I think that Chris is leaving us now, so thank you. Katrina, just before we move from this to the next session on the entitlement framework, will you pass on the information that you gave to us at the beginning of the briefing so that members have that?

Mrs Godfrey:

No problem at all.

The Chairperson:

I know that new members are probably being bombarded with a whole host of information from

other Committees, but it would be useful to get a set of the current policies, such as Every School a Good School and the special educational needs policy. There is a list of those policies in the report from the previous mandate. Will you provide that or should we go through the Business Office? Between the Department and the education office, we will provide that for members.

Miss M McIlveen:

Are you carrying out any other reviews or consultations within the next number of months?

Mrs Godfrey:

None immediately comes to mind. As the Chair pointed out, our focus is now very much on implementing and embedding the strategies on literacy and numeracy, school improvement, the curriculum and the new assessment arrangements. Those have all been consulted on and are in the process of being put in place.

Miss M McIlveen:

That is OK. I put that question to John McGrath last week, because I wanted the Committee to have a list of what is currently being looked at, and I just wanted to take the opportunity to ask you the same question.

Mrs Godfrey:

I will probably remember something after I go out.

The Chairperson:

We will formally write to the Department about that.

Mrs Godfrey:

I think that the Department is compiling a list to go to the Committee, so hopefully you will have that quite soon.