

3.10 Deputy D.J. Warr of St. Helier South of the Minister for Education and Lifelong Learning regarding plans to amend the funding formula for fee-paying schools introduced by P.41/2017 (OQ.134/2025):

Will the Minister advise what plans, if any, he has to amend the formula of Government funding for fee-paying schools that was introduced with the adoption of P.45/2017, and will he confirm that pupils at fee-paying schools are currently funded at the level of 22 per cent and 47 per cent of the average cost of pupils in primary and secondary non-fee schools respectively?

Deputy R.J. Ward of St. Helier Central (The Minister for Education and Lifelong Learning):

I thank the Deputy for his question. P.41/2017 did indeed set the percentage of the A.W.P.U. (Age Weighted Pupil Unit) 22 per cent and 47 per cent. I have no intention of changing those percentages of the A.W.P.U. to the fee-paying schools.

3.10.1 Deputy D.J. Warr:

When the fee-paying schools are on the new school funding formula, can the Minister inform the Assembly how the funding for pupils with a record of need and those with S.E.N. (special educational needs) but without a record of need, will be funded at the fee-paying schools, i.e. will they be funded 100 per cent, or at 22 per cent and 47 per cent respectively?

Deputy R.J. Ward:

If and when the fee-paying schools move on to the funding formula, records of need, as they are now, are fully funded for the fee-paying schools and non-fee-paying schools. The percentages quoted cannot be defined yet because we are comparing 2 very different things, with the A.W.P.U. and the funding formula. It is like comparing Branston pickle with jam. They do 2 very different jobs. Therefore, the percentages on those would have to be discussed in part of the ongoing process of how that will work best for everyone involved.

3.10.2 Deputy I. Gardiner of St. Helier North:

If the Minister intends to maintain the current funding model, as he indicated for the fee-paying school, will he consider granting these schools greater autonomy in finance management to reflect the reduced level of state support, and ensure that they are better equipped to meet the specific needs of their pupils?

Deputy R.J. Ward:

I think the fee-paying schools already have a great level of autonomy in funding. I think there will be a move into the funding formula, but that is an ongoing discussion that has to be got right. It would also require legislation, and that legislative process will take time. I do not think we will be ready for that before we have to end legislation in this Assembly. But I think all of the groundwork on how the funding formula will look for fee-paying schools, what the levels will be, and the type of impact that will have on their funding, can be done over the next 6 months to a year, and be ready to go after that. But that is a really important decision to be made for those schools and for the Education Department, and how effectively that works for everybody involved.

3.10.3 Deputy I. Gardiner:

There is autonomy and there is no autonomy. If we can pay state fee-paying schools compared to grant-receiving schools, grant-receiving schools get a grant and they do whatever they want, including raising fees. Fee-paying schools are restricted by several things, for example, raising fees by the department, or introduce different types of a funding mechanism to fee-paying schools. This is why I am asking if the Minister would consider to give more autonomy to fee-paying schools that might suggest different models, can save public money, and maintain their delivery.

Deputy R.J. Ward:

I think what the Deputy has raised, the complexity of the way that we fund our fee-paying schools, absolutely right. A grant and the funding for other fee-paying schools are very different. That is an issue that does need to be looked at when into the future. There are lots of models, and we have to be careful what we wish for. The Deputy will know that in 2020 there was an independent schools funding review that recognised a change in the relationship between the Government of Jersey and fee-paying schools, including offering greater autonomy and potentially means-testing support for fees, rather than offering subsidised fee-paying education as a universal benefit. That is a big discussion for us to have on this Island, so we have to enter in any discussions over changes to the way in which fee-paying schools are funded with open eyes and looking at all of the consequences. The last thing we want to do is make those legislative changes in the last minute just before an election where, dare I say, we might not be making the more sensible decisions we may do if there was a longer term. I think we have to be very careful. But those discussions are ongoing, the implications of those are ongoing, and I think one of the things we should have done when we introduced the funding formula - and we have learned from that, we have learned a great deal from the previous work - is to perhaps have a phase where it sort of overlaps so that schools know where they are. Just one more thing. As the Deputy knows, the problem we have got with schools is they go from September to September, but our funding goes from January to January. I would like to see a 3-year funding model for schools, because I think it will help them enormously. But how we do that, I am not totally sure at the moment.

3.10.4 Deputy J. Renouf of St. Brelade:

At least one fee-paying school has questioned whether the formula is being followed. Does he acknowledge that there is dispute, or some room for argument, about the details of the funding formula, and could that be improved?

Deputy R.J. Ward:

Yes, there is always room for dispute. One of the schools has questioned that. There is ongoing work with that. We are going to look more closely at that particular school and work with them over the coming weeks, and look in depth as to why they are in the situation they are in. But I do believe that the A.W.P.U. is being met. Money is given to schools, they know how much money they have, and they have to decide on spending that money. It is difficult for all schools. There are challenges across the board. We know that. But that is one of the responsibilities for the headteacher and the management team, and for the board of governors who should be holding the headteacher to account for their spend.

3.10.5 Deputy J. Renouf:

I thank the Minister for his answer. He says the discussions are ongoing with that particular school, which sounds positive. Does he think though that the funding formula could be formally and officially and publicly clarified in ways that would provide more certainty to all schools in that category?

Deputy R.J. Ward:

I think what we have is a slightly Catch-22 situation with the funding for it, because it is clear, it is 22 per cent and 47 per cent of what the A.W.P.U. was at that set time, as that is increased over time. What has happened is that the non-fee-paying schools have moved to a funding formula, which targets money where there is more need. I think putting all of our schools on to that funding formula is a good step forward, but, again, as I have mentioned before, we have to look at the genuine implications of that. That that takes account of low prior attainment, the requirement for special needs, records of need, English as a second language, Pupil Premium, and a myriad of other features that may affect the funding levels for schools in terms of their intake. We have to look very, very carefully at the impact of those formula on schools as we go forward.

3.10.6 Deputy L.M.C. Doublet of St. Saviour:

Can the Minister advise whether he is aware of the impact of the current cost-of-living crisis on parents' ability to keep their children in these schools and whether any funding formulas might need to reflect that?

Deputy R.J. Ward:

The cost-of-living crisis affects those parents, but affects all parents in our schools, because it has affected everybody on the Island; it affected different sections of our population that perhaps have not been affected before. Yes, there is a challenge for parents who pay for fee-paying schools. There are choices across all of our schools as to where young people go to. I want to see a model where every single one of our schools is a genuine option for every single parent because they are of high quality and provide the type of education that everybody wants.

3.10.7 Deputy L.M.C. Doublet:

Following on from that, is the Minister analysing the current birth rates, and the fact that there are going to be probably less children to attend schools across the board, what the model might look like, and whether we would still have private schools and state schools. What might that look like in future years?

Deputy R.J. Ward:

I genuinely thank the Deputy for this question, because it is exactly the work that we are doing. I am currently producing a document, which looks exactly at that, and I am thinking about the best way to present it, whether as a report to the Assembly and take questions, which I am very happy to do, because I want it to be a genuine open discussion about the future. Demographics will have challenges across our schools. But those challenges could be opportunities for the way in which we model our schools to open our schools up, to have more collective work across our schools, and more collaboration across our schools to give the very best education for everybody. I was at the Education World Forum a week or so ago, and these challenges are not just for Jersey, but there are solutions out there, and it is through those open discussions that we have been having with headteachers, and meeting headteachers to talk about demographics. They have their eyes open, and I think we have a positive future on that if we get it right. But we have to think long term.

3.10.8 Deputy M. Tadier of St. Brelade:

Will the Minister confirm whether or not this kind of funding formula applies to building maintenance for those schools which are fee-paying, but which receive money from Government for the maintenance of their buildings?

Deputy R.J. Ward:

Yes. The A.W.P.U., the percentage given to schools is to basically run the school, and that is the funding you have got. It is complex because of the relationship with the J.P.H. (Jersey Property Holdings), which takes care of many buildings, and it is complex. So, yes, the funding does include that, but there are also subtleties to that as well. I agree with the Deputy that these can be problems, but they can be problems across our estate, particularly as an estate ages. We have got that particular problem with our primary schools in the centre of St. Helier. A new build will solve that problem, save a huge amount of money, and have purpose-built schools for all of our children in the centre of St. Helier.

3.10.9 Deputy M. Tadier:

Is the Minister concerned, or would he give consideration to whether or not fee-paying schools should own their own buildings and that Government should not be subsidising the buildings of fee-paying schools, and certainly that this money, which should be destined towards pupils, is not going towards subsidising buildings?

Deputy R.J. Ward:

That is a very good question. I think the answer would be one has to be careful what you wish for. Buildings do become places that really do take in enormous amounts of money as we go forward. Owning the buildings may be counterintuitive for a school. I think what we need to do is to look at the structure of our school system, certainly starting for post-16 and then work our way down our school structures to see how they can best work together. Because we are the size of a reasonable-sized authority, no more than that. It is certainly not unachievable. I do not know the answer about whether they should own their own buildings to be responsible, or whether that would put schools in a worse position that they are in now. So, we have to be careful with that.

[10:45]

3.10.10 Deputy C.D. Curtis of St. Helier Central:

I thank the Minister for the letter, which has just been published to the C.E.H.A. (Children, Education and Home Affairs) Panel, which outlines all the funding to every school at the moment. Will the Minister advise whether he will consider providing S.E.N. funding above that for record of needs support to the fee-paying schools?

Deputy R.J. Ward:

The S.E.N. funding is part of the A.W.P.U. and when a school raises its money, accordingly it is expected to fund in that way. R.O.N.s (records of need) are fully funded up to the full amount of a record of need. I think the difference in funding is not huge if we were to say we will give additional funding, but then that would move the money above the percentage of the A.W.P.U. that is given to the school. So, there is a challenge there. I want to see all schools accept children according to their need, and not refuse children because of their special educational needs, and so therefore, of course, we would discuss the best way forward for that for all of our schools, fee-paying or non-fee-paying, and that is one of the biggest challenges we have got into the future.

3.10.11 Deputy C.D. Curtis:

Would the Minister consider that not supporting the S.E.N. needs of children in the fee-paying schools in the similar way to other schools is working against those children's needs?

Deputy R.J. Ward:

I simply do not accept that we do not support the needs of S.E.N. children in those schools. Those schools do raise funding. It is very clear that they have a percentage of their funding that comes from fees. Fee increases have been above inflation. Additional money, for example, was given last year because of the high wage increase, so there was additional money given to cover some of those areas. I think the choice is how in which the school is going to spend that money, how it is going to address those needs, and we can look. But I do want to open the discussion about what is the changing needs within those schools so that we can address those views, and the move to the funding formula will be an interesting move as to how that changes. That is one of the features that we have to look at in the move to the funding formula, which may well be beneficial in those terms, because it has been beneficial certainly for the non-fee-paying schools in recognition of need.

3.10.12 Deputy D.J. Warr:

Can the Minister confirm that real-term funding will cover 22 per cent and 47 per cent of the average cost of pupil to other Government of Jersey schools?

Deputy R.J. Ward:

It will cover the A.W.P.U., because we do not have the A.W.P.U. in other schools now. It will cover the A.W.P.U. as set when that change was made and followed on. So, the answer is yes in those terms.