

2.6 Deputy K.C. Lewis of St. Saviour of the Minister for Education, Sport and Culture regarding negotiations between himself, head teachers, and parents of fee-paying school children:

Will the Minister provide Members with an update of talks between himself, head teachers and parents of fee-paying school children?

Deputy J.G. Reed of St. Ouen (The Minister for Education, Sport and Culture):

On 28th September I met for the first time with all Chairs of Governors to explain the rationale for the department's proposed savings and initiate further discussions. Subsequently I have visited each fee-paying school with officers from my department to explain the proposal to reduce the subsidy and to ask them to consider the implications for their school and advise me accordingly. A number of schools have now done that. I have arranged to meet once again with the Chairs of Governors in order to agree timescales for further consultation and discuss how it can be constructively taken forward. I am hopeful that we will be able to reach agreement on that very soon. Once I am more familiar with the implications of the proposal for each school, further discussions will take place with the individual school's governing bodies on how the outcome of the consultation and particularly the findings of any independent review will be presented to parents. This will allow all stakeholders the opportunity for a more informed and constructive debate about the issues.

2.6.1 Deputy K.C. Lewis:

I am glad to hear that things are progressing, but the Minister must be aware that parents are still deeply worried. Last week, in answer to my question, the Minister made assurances that no child would be excluded from fee-paying schools because their parents were unable to pay the increased fees. As the Minister is no doubt aware parents are still extremely distressed. All States Members are receiving emails on a regular basis. Will the Minister undertake to meet with school heads and parents to allay their fears once these deliberations are concluded?

The Deputy of St. Ouen:

I am absolutely prepared once, and I repeat, once I am more familiar with the implications of the proposal, to arrange and organise with the governing bodies to make myself available to meet with parents if invited to do so.

2.6.2 Deputy J.A. Hilton of St. Helier:

I think the Minister may have just answered the question I was going to ask. Basically what I was going to ask was would the Minister consider meeting with the parents of all the schools involved in this rather than one meeting? I think it would be better if he could do that.

The Deputy of St. Ouen:

I do not believe it appropriate at this time to meet with all parents from all schools, because each school are obvious individuals in their own right with their own individual issues. A number of them are States fee-paying schools, others are totally private and as such I have no control or jurisdiction within those schools. Therefore it is important that I work with the governing bodies of those school and then discuss the implications of the proposals with the parents whose children are at those schools.

2.6.3 Deputy P.J. Rondel of St. John:

Given that there is a Town Hall meeting for parents on Thursday of this week and the Minister's response, would he reconsider attending that meeting? Will he also give us confirmation that he does intend to answer all the emails that we have been receiving over the last several weeks? Because we are now getting to the point where the frustration of the parents is such that it is getting totally out of hand and we need some ... some of those emails need ... well, all of them need to be responded to. Thank you.

The Deputy of St. Ouen:

I accept that Members have been sent a number of emails from certain parents. I acknowledged this and I made sure that a letter was circulated to all parents outlining how I am proposing to move forward with this issue. Not only that, I also responded to a number of questions that individual parents had raised. I am mindful of the fact that we have approximately 2,500 parents who currently have children at fee-paying schools. As such, I thought it more appropriate to convey and communicate directly with all of them rather than a select few. However, I will aim and I do aim to respond to the individuals who have personally contacted me.

2.6.4 Deputy R.G. Le Hérisier:

Would the Minister not acknowledge that there is this impression that he is hiding behind the Boards of Governors, while he is doing excellent work with them? If he were to relate to the parents directly, maybe in co-operation with the Board of Governors, it would defuse the situation and start putting information in the public domain.

The Deputy of St. Ouen:

This process started, as I said just now, on 28th September. I have made a large amount and provided a large amount of information, not only to States Members, but to the media and others. It is important, as I said before, to allow this process to properly follow its course. I do not want to make any decisions prematurely. That is why, and I will stress that is why, I need to follow this process. The governing bodies of the schools, I will underline, are responsible for those school and to the parents. As such, I am working constructively with them. Thank you.

2.6.5 Deputy M. Tadier:

Moments ago the Minister said that he would consider a meeting with parents when he was familiar with the implications of what he is proposing. Does that mean that the Minister has proposed something at a very high level without knowing what the implications are?

The Deputy of St. Ouen:

No, this is a proposal that needs to be discussed, quite properly, with the schools to identify what the changes are to those schools and how it may or may not impact on the parents. This process needs to be followed if we are to make any appropriate and proper decisions. I am extremely mindful that there are children that I would not wish to put in a particularly difficult position. It is only by talking to these private schools and the fee-paying schools that I will properly understand the situations that they face and then be able to deal with them appropriately.

2.6.6 The Deputy of Grouville:

Similar to Deputy Tadier, I am alarmed to hear the Minister say that he will only meet with the parents once he has considered the implications of the proposals. Surely the

Minister considered the implications of the proposals before making them and causing mayhem among parents of these schools.

The Deputy of St. Ouen:

I do not believe I have caused mayhem at all. I believe I have started a period of consultation that needs to be completed before any final decisions are made. As such, I will continue to follow that process. I appreciate there are individuals who seek to circumvent that process, but it is one that is required to be followed if we are going to ensure that the proper provision is made for our fee-paying schools to continue providing the valuable service that they do to this Island.

[10:15]

2.6.7 Deputy K.C. Lewis:

To allay parents fears, will the Minister give States Members a timeline when he hopes these negotiations or consultations are complete and, further to a written answer to a question this morning to Senator Perchard, the Minister stated that 2 States secondary schools are in fact full. Which schools will these schools be? Would the Minister state which secondary schools are in fact full?

The Deputy of St. Ouen:

The timeline that I have set, but it needs to be in discussion again, in agreement with the school governing bodies, is that I would like all the consultations to be complete by the end of December. With regard to the secondary schools, presently the 2 secondary schools that are full are Les Quennevais and Le Rocquier.

The Deputy Bailiff:

We now come on to question 7, which the Deputy of St. John will ask of the Minister for Planning and Environment, but I understand it is to be answered by the Assistant Minister.