

6. Questions to Ministers without notice - The Minister for Education, Sport and Culture.

6.1 The Connétable of St. Mary:

This follows on from the questions that were asked earlier. I was pleased to attend the presentation of certificates to Les Quennevais students last week and was amazed at the ... not amazed but really gratified by the high level of achievement they demonstrated, and also to find out what they are doing now. I was very pleased to see a good number of the students now working either in the construction industry or following construction programmes at Highlands. This good news does not seem to be getting down to even Members of this Assembly. Will the Minister continue to celebrate and to enable the celebration of the value and diversity of our students?

Deputy P.J.D. Ryan of St. John (The Minister for Education, Sport and Culture):

I would like to thank the Constable for bringing this subject up. Her final question was will I continue to celebrate the diversity and achievements of our students and, of course, the answer is as the Minister for Education, absolutely. She mentioned the Trackers apprenticeship scheme earlier on in her question. Trackers apprenticeship scheme has been a huge success. We have already achieved our targets virtually for the 3 years in about 18 months to 2 years. I would like to see the Trackers apprenticeship scheme expanded not only in terms of width and breadth of the opportunities for young people, I would also like to see it extended in terms of numbers. There will be a financial implication to that and I certainly am already working on the next Medium-Term Financial Plan with regard to a growth bid. The most important part of the Trackers scheme that everybody seems to agree is fundamental is this question of mentors, and so I would be very much looking in the next M.T.F.P. to expand the number of mentors and by doing that I will be able to expand the number of apprentices.

6.2 The Deputy of St. Martin:

Does the Minister support the hockey club proposals for better facilities at Les Quennevais?

The Deputy of St. John:

The new sports strategy is currently in the progress of asking for business plans from all the different sports clubs and associations that there are. I feel sure that the hockey club will be in the process of formulating that business plan. If on examination it is robust then I feel sure that as part of the new sports strategy we will be able to assist that particular club.

6.2.1 The Deputy of St. Martin:

I think we all know the importance of organised and structured activities outside of school and the downward effect on antisocial behaviour but if the hockey club are going to get exclusive access to the AstroTurf at Les Quennevais will the Minister guarantee to replace 100 per cent that lost area for the young people of Les Quennevais?

The Deputy of St. John:

I do not want to see any of the facilities at Les Quennevais overall reduced in one way or another. I think the answer to the Deputy's question is that I would support anything that expands the opportunities for out-of-school activity for young children. He is absolutely right. It is key to the development of young people and to avoiding them getting into difficulties because they are bored. So, yes, I would support it.

6.3 Deputy M. Tadier:

The Minister will be aware that we have a highly selective education system with various tiers of selection, which cut across financial and academic criteria. Does the Minister believe that this system is ultimately sustainable and if not what steps is the department taking to review the pros and cons of our system?

The Deputy of St. John:

The performance of our education system, particularly at secondary level, is quite good when compared and benchmarked against other systems. However, the Deputy is right in that there are elements of the current structure that are socially divisive, and I think most people in this Assembly appreciate that. He will also know that a Ministerial Oversight Group was formed some 9 to 12 months ago to inspect and to look at and think about the structure of our secondary education. At a recent meeting we have opened that out to include Assistant Ministers. There are 5 Ministers, the Assistant Ministers have now joined. At the last meeting I proposed successfully that we carry out 2 reviews. One internal and one external. The internal one will be carried out by the department and the reason that it is going to be internal is that I do not believe that by making it external, which was the original thinking, we will learn anything new about the structure of our secondary education.

The Bailiff:

Minister, I appreciate this is a complex topic but I think you must wind up.

The Deputy of St. John:

This is a very complex topic, Sir. I will try to be ... there are 2 reviews if someone wants to ask me another question I will answer exactly what I think they are going to be.

6.3.1 Deputy M. Tadier:

I am glad to know the internal inquiry will now be conducted internally. That has reassured me. Will the Minister say which are the elements that are socially divisive? He said that there are elements that are socially divisive; what are they?

[12:00]

The Deputy of St. John:

I think the Deputy already knows the answer to this, as again many Members of this Assembly, I have said it on several occasions. We have probably one of the most selective systems certainly in Europe if not the world and there are some commonalities in Guernsey as well in that system. But maybe not quite so much as there is in Jersey. The degree of selection that we have is good in some ways in that it gives extra parental choice. I believe that it does do very well. We do very well for the most able students and I think we do very well for the least able students. I think our special educational need provisions are very good. Where there may be difficulties and where there are areas that we need to think about is in the whole central section of ability range in our students.

6.4 Senator S.C. Ferguson:

Given that we seem to be conducting reviews on reviews on reviews, when can we expect to see the results of these reviews because education is one of the most important things that we have got and we cannot just carry on like this? What about looking at the ideas that are coming out of Michael Gove where he talks about making the State schools as good as the public schools? What on earth is going on in the department? We were promised these reviews in 2012, what is happening?

The Deputy of St. John:

You can expect them in time for the next election. Education and its structure needs to be a major debating point in the next election. These 2 reviews: one will be on the structure of our current system. That will be the internal one. The other one with some external help will be around what is becoming increasingly a focus of all education systems around the world.

The Bailiff:

I think the question was the timing and you have answered that, Minister, so perhaps we can move on.

6.4.1 Senator S.C. Ferguson:

Supplementary. Has the Minister not thought of asking the Members of this Assembly who have a very varied educational background for some thoughts from them?

The Deputy of St. John:

The education system will need political input and there will need to be political choices. The evidence can be produced in an internal report but at the end that internal report cannot tell this Assembly what to do. There will need to be difficult political choices that will be around that education system. So it will, I feel sure, come to debate at the earliest point in the next political cycle.

6.5 Deputy G.P. Southern:

I will try and be brief. When will the Minister come to the House with a plan or proposals for the long-term funding of higher education students since the results of a recent report and survey is done on the issue?

The Deputy of St. John:

The U.K. grant system is up for review in 2015. It is not yet clear what will happen to higher education costs in the U.K. It would therefore be premature for me to come to this Assembly with new proposals before I know what that will be. We have already changed the higher education grant system in many ways. In the M.T.F.P., the one that we are currently in, the department applied for increased funding to increase the thresholds and to adjust the thresholds in various ways. This Assembly turned that down. In the next M.T.F.P. I believe that the next Minister, certainly if it was me, would be applying again for increased funding to adjust the grant threshold.

6.6 Deputy J.M. Maçon:

Now that the results of the raising minimum standards in mathematics has been produced from the department, can the Minister advise whether a proposal to provide bursaries and grants to local students to take on mathematics and teaching courses to come back to the Island for a minimum period in order to fill the deficit that is currently present with regards to the expertise in mathematics, has that proposal been considered and if not, why not?

The Deputy of St. John:

I thank the Deputy for that question because it enables me to answer what the second review will be, which is on how we retain and train, and what are the terms and conditions and all sorts of things around the excellence in teaching and retaining the best teachers. What we need to do in this Island to make a major step-change in that area. Most education systems around the world have now recognised that of all of the things that are affecting education systems the quality of teaching is perhaps the most important element.

6.6.1 Deputy J.M. Maçon:

My question was focused on individuals getting into the profession not only to retain them, but also to get them there in the first place and we know there is a global shortage of mathematic teachers and we need to do things in order to encourage that.

The Deputy of St. John:

The Deputy is absolutely right, and the review that we will be doing with external help around the quality of teaching will address the very things that he is talking about and we should get the results of that in, I would say, September.

6.7 Deputy S. Power:

During the last States sitting the Minister kindly attended a lunchtime presentation by the Jersey Amateur Swimming Association on a 50-55 metre pool project. Has he given any thought to the value or validity of the suggestion to carry out a feasibility study on that pool?

The Deputy of St. John:

Yes, I did attend that. It was a very interesting presentation, and I agreed that we would look at the feasibility of the fundamental thing that they were suggesting, which was that the AquaSplash could be modified into 2 by 25 metre pools with booms down the centre. That is an interesting suggestion. There would need to be a lot of work done on the financial implications. Can I just say though that, without wishing to raise expectations too much, of all of the Island Games competitors there is only one, that is Bermuda, that has a 50-metre pool. All of the other islands use 25 metre pools, and for training purposes it is a 25-metre pool which is the most important, and that is an area that our sports department are looking at, as part of the sports strategy.

6.7.1 Deputy S. Power:

May I ask a supplementary on that? Would the Minister not subscribe to the theory that irrespective of the number of jurisdictions within the Island Games competitors that have a 50-metre pool, it would be to underwrite Jersey as a centre of sporting excellence for swimming or it to seriously consider a project such as this?

The Deputy of St. John:

There are about 10 50-metre pools in the United Kingdom. The swimming governing body in the United Kingdom says that to be viable they need a catchment of at least 500,000 people. The economic impact or the opportunities that might come from a 50-metre pool in Jersey are not in Education's remit. That is something that we would need input from the Economic Development Department as well.

6.8 Connétable D.W. Mezbourian of St. Lawrence:

What responsibility does the department have for children's safety when they are being dropped off or picked up by car on the school premises?

The Deputy of St. John:

The department has a responsibility but it is a shared responsibility with Transport and Technical Services. Of course children's safety is paramount. Teachers do whatever they can to assist but ultimately T.T.S. is responsible for safety on the roads, ultimately the Education Department is responsible for children's safety, and that is a paramount concern, while children are on school premises. We do however, try to work together as much as we possibly can.

6.8.1 The Connétable of St. Lawrence:

What advice does the department give head teachers on traffic management within and around their schools?

The Deputy of St. John:

Each school has a 'Safe routes to school' programme and plan. So the school heads develop their own but with assistance from the police and T.T.S.

The Bailiff

That brings questions to the Minister to a close.