

2020.05.12

3 Deputy K.F. Morel of the Minister for Education regarding laptop computer access for school pupils (OQ.114/2020)

Is it the Minister's assessment that all school pupils have access to a laptop computer in their homes to enable home-schooling, and if not, will she inform the Assembly what steps, if any, she is taking, to ensure that they do?

Senator T.A. Vallois (The Minister for Education):

As per my answer to Written Question 164 posed by Deputy Morel, it confirms my assessment that not all school pupils have access to internet-enabled devices. This of course includes laptops. I do not believe that laptop computers are the only way to enable home schooling but I do believe it is essential that we ensure all school children are given an equal opportunity to education.

[10:15]

We must ensure a continuity of teaching to all children no matter what their circumstances in these difficult times. That is why I have asked officers to assess the need for devices so I can ensure any remaining gaps are resolved as soon as possible.

4.3.1 Deputy K.F. Morel:

We are now 6 weeks to 2 months into Jersey's aspect of this crisis and would the Minister please explain why it has taken so long to have got to the point where her officers are now simply assessing the lack? Why was this not done sooner?

Senator T.A. Vallois:

At the beginning the question was asked of officers about the accessibility in terms of laptops, *et cetera*, required. Some schools went out to carry out parent surveys to identify the needs at the beginning and were proactive. We have approximately over 300 devices that have already been loaned out. This is an ongoing feat and we continue to work directly with the schools, and I have directly spoken to teachers myself who have concerns around the remaining gaps and we are trying to plug that hole at this moment in time.

4.3.2 Deputy L.M.C. Doublet:

Forgive me if I have missed this, I have still got glitchy sound. Has the Minister considered the cost of Wi-Fi connections in families' homes? I have heard anecdotally that some families are having to consider rationing food because they are paying for additional top-ups on mobile phones to enable a data connection in the absence of any Wi-Fi connection in the home.

Senator T.A. Vallois:

There was a combined effort between Digital Jersey and the telecoms providers who have now put a scheme together where families can apply for vouchers from their school to have broadband provided free of charge. Some parents have taken this up. I believe one of the issues is the ongoing cost in terms of line rental or where they do not have a landline to fit in that broadband, which continues to be a particular issue.

4.3.3 Deputy L.M.C. Doublet:

Where the family does not have a landline is the solution for families to buy the data top-ups or are the family required to install a landline?

Senator T.A. Vallois:

I am sorry, I missed some of that question. Could the Deputy repeat?

The Bailiff:

I think the question related to the solution. Is it your answer that the solution is for families to buy data top-ups or to put in a landline?

Senator T.A. Vallois:

The precise solution is not decided as of yet. I think there is an issue in terms of whether these families could be supported in terms of if they are on low income households, in terms of the income support side of things, there is going to have to be further discussions, particularly with the broadband provider, the scheme that has been put in place, about how we can overcome this particular situation.

4.3.4 Deputy R.J. Ward:

Is this inequality in access to I.T. (information technology) and indeed Wi-Fi access not simply a reflection of the inequality we have in our education system, including funding per pupil, which is significantly different in different schools? Is it not this issue that is underlying that needs to be addressed in the longer term if we are to genuinely deal with future situations that may occur?

Senator T.A. Vallois:

It is quite clear there is inequality in our education system. That has been the case for a very long time. Something that we were trying to resolve in terms of the school funding review, which has not been completely followed up just yet because of us dealing with the COVID-19 situation. But the Deputy will know from his post-16 report that I stated that I advocate the improvement of the infrastructure of I.T. in schools and better use of information and learning technology to promote different learning behaviours and improved outcomes. We need to get to the point where we can make our education system as equal as we can but it is not going to happen overnight.

4.3.5 Deputy R.J. Ward:

Is it not the point that inadequate headroom funding means that schools in the best of times cannot meet the needs of their students in terms of equipment, *et cetera*, and when we have a crisis like this it is clear that that situation is going to be amplified and that we need to address that headroom funding and the amount of money available to schools as a matter of urgency?

Senator T.A. Vallois:

Absolutely. The Deputy is aware of my views and my concerns around the issue with headroom funding, hence the reason why we supported the amendment for the Common Strategic Policy, and it is a piece of work that we have been working on for a long while now. I would like to ensure that any further attempts to reduce the budget within Education is considered properly and that we do not create further structural deficits when trying to support our children's education.

4.3.6 Deputy K.F. Morel:

In her initial answer the Minister said that laptops are not the only answer, and that is correct, but could the Minister confirm that the Education Department would not allow any individual school pupil to rely on the use of a smartphone as their means of access because if for no other reason than the health problems associated with eyesight? Would the Minister confirm whether the Education Department has turned down any offers of laptops from external organisations?

Senator T.A. Vallois:

I would not advocate reliance on smartphones. As the Deputy has pointed out, the issue in terms of the small devices and the ability to do the appropriate work would cause undesired effects. Also with regard to approaches from outside organisations with regards to laptops, I am not aware of any but I can go back and find out and inform the Deputy as soon as possible.