

21.01.19

1 Deputy L.M.C. Doublet of the Minister for Health and Social Services regarding safe opening of schools (OQ.12/2021):

Will the Minister update the Assembly on the current medical advice with regards to the safe opening of schools during the COVID-19 pandemic; and give a comparative assessment of the health and well-being effects of continuing to keep the schools open as opposed to closing them?

Deputy R.J. Renouf of St. Ouen (The Minister for Health and Social Services):

The latest advice from the Scientific and Technical Advisory Cell and the medical officer of health is that schools should remain open to pupils as the risks to the health, welfare and education, of our children from a continued absence from school outweighs the risks from COVID-19. It is widely acknowledged that negative physical, mental, emotional and safeguarding impacts of school closure on children is significant and has an effect on children and young people's life opportunities and future health outcomes. Further, it recognises the detrimental effects are greater for less-advantaged children. The question also asks about the comparative assessments of evidence and I believe that evidence of this nature was presented to the former Minister and officers in the department and included a Children's Rights Impact Assessment, which can be found on the Education pages of gov.je. In that C.R.I.A. (Children's Rights Impact Assessment) it looked at the key U.N.C.R.C. (United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child) rights that may be impacted by closure and the mitigations that might be considered in lieu of closure. It drew on evidence from U.N.I.C.E.F. (United Nations Children's Fund) and U.N.E.S.C.O. (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization). It also referenced a study drawn up by a professor of mental health in education promoting a recovery curriculum for the return of children to school. What interested me was that study drew on the experiences of Christchurch in New Zealand where schooling had been halted for a time following the earthquake they suffered.

The Bailiff:

Minister, I must ask you to bring your answer to a conclusion. You have run into 2 and a half minutes and the normal is 90 seconds.

The Deputy of St. Ouen:

I will stop there. Thank you.

10.1.1 Deputy L.M.C. Doublet:

I thank the Minister for his answer and there is indeed a lot of science and evidence in this area. While everybody is concerned about health and well-being of both staff and pupils, does the Minister believe that the science on the detrimental effects to children of not being in school, and indeed the science around how they transmit the virus to a lesser extent, does the Minister think that science has been fully communicated to the public and is understood by the public? If not, what could he do to address that?

The Deputy of St. Ouen:

It appears that there are some people who believe still that it may be better to close schools and perhaps do not understand the harms, which our medical experts continue to stress. Not just to the loss of hours in school and the education difficulties, but the longer-term relationship and trust and mental health issues by being out of what is a learning and development environment. So, yes, I

hope more can be done. This evidence is on gov.je but we must continue to promote the good sense of keeping children in school where it is safe to do so. I believe it is safe at the moment.

10.1.2 Deputy R.J. Ward:

Given that on the website it talks about COVID in schools, the testing in schools ended on 10th January. Since then, on the 15th and 16th, there have been other cases in schools. Would his comparative analysis assessment of the safety include the spread of possible new variants in schools to the wider community given that there is no social distancing in schools and the precautions that are in the workplace do not apply to schools?

The Deputy of St. Ouen:

It is the case that we must always be alert to the presence of any new variants. We have never said that cases will not occur in schools. But the testing that took place before the return of students to school did reveal only very low cases, low numbers of cases, less than 5 throughout the whole school population. Testing continues. There are extensive mitigations in schools, which my brother Deputy says are not the same as other workplaces. They are bespoke to school environments and have been put in place after a great deal of liaison with heads and teachers and unions to make schools as safe as they can be in this pandemic.

Deputy R.J. Ward:

But I also have a point of order in that answer. Because the Minister suggested that the entire school population was tested and it was not, only a small population was tested. He has misled the Assembly.

The Bailiff:

I am sorry; that is not a point of order. No, this is not a point of order, Deputy. You must place a further question to the Minister and you have the facility of a supplementary question to do that. If you wish to join in the point that you do not believe that there has been full testing then you can do it that way.

10.1.3 Deputy R.J. Ward:

Apologies, thank you. My supplementary question then: would there be an extension to the testing regime in schools to ensure that we are certain that there would not be another spread? Just as we are getting to a point where it looks more promising, where schools will be the catalyst for that because of the new variant, which we are aware is probably on the Island.

The Deputy of St. Ouen:

All these things can be considered and there is regular engagement with teaching staff. So, yes, it is the case that only 3 year groups, the 3 last year groups of compulsory schooling, were tested. The important thing is that very few positive cases arose as a result. Antigen testing is going to continue on a regular basis for those groups selected for testing because they are the ones that are most likely to carry the virus, being older people, transitioning to adults. Antigen testing will continue and then there will be a further P.C.R. (polymerase chain reaction) test in a few weeks for those to take. So this remains under constant review and the Deputy need have no fears that the schools are suddenly going to fall into the position where they become unsafe.

10.1.4 Deputy J.H. Perchard of St. Saviour:

Given the disruption caused to students' learning when they unexpectedly are sent home when cases are identified at school and the recent research into transmission rates of new variants, why is testing in order to attend school not mandatory?

The Deputy of St. Ouen:

There are ethical considerations in making testing mandatory. We have not done it in any other sphere in which we are working. Particularly difficult in the case of children. But that of course can be considered if teaching staff or other stakeholders wish that to be done. But I foresee difficulties.

10.1.5 Deputy J.H. Perchard:

Can the Minister confirm that the uptake of voluntary testing of students is approximately 50 per cent currently in schools?

The Deputy of St. Ouen:

I cannot confirm that. I do not have up-to-date details. The testing will be rolled out on the antigen testing basis, which is an easier test perhaps to administer, and percentages may increase when those tests are undertaken.

10.1.6 Deputy G.P. Southern:

Is the Minister aware of the inaccuracies of the test he is talking about, the instant-turnaround test, render them less than useful?

The Deputy of St. Ouen:

They have a use in the right context. There are limitations to them, which are well-known. But they have been recommended for this purpose by our scientific and medical experts. Further, I understand that, if any antigen test proves positive, that would be confirmed by asking the person involved to take a P.C.R. test, which we know are much more reliable.

10.1.7 Deputy G.P. Southern:

The problem is false negatives so that people, students, can be wandering around infectious but showing as a false negative and thereby acting as a source for the illness. Does the Minister consider that this is a sufficient defect to render the testing useless?

The Deputy of St. Ouen:

Not useless. The starting point is the P.C.R. tests taken at the beginning of term and even if 50 per cent was the number, that showed less than 5 teachers across our whole school community and 5 persons in the year groups that were tested proved positive. So that is a good start to tell us that there are only small amounts of infection in schools. Then the antigen testing has been recommended for monitoring that situation. So we would be able to tell by any positives that arise whether or not the rates of transmission, the increase in numbers, presented a risk. Then take further mitigating factors should that situation present itself.

10.1.8 Deputy L.M.C. Doublet:

I wonder if the Minister would commit or perhaps point to where this might already be in existence. But somewhere where Islanders, school staff, parents and Islanders, could view the relevant medical evidence that shows the differences between, for example, primary and secondary children and how the virus is transmitted and any impacts to their health and well-being.

[11:15]

Could this be available so that the public can be informed and so that we can have an informed debate in this area?

The Deputy of St. Ouen:

I believe there is a great deal of evidence on a very comprehensive website, on the Education pages. There is the health advice given by Dr. Muscat and Mr. Armstrong. There is the Children's Rights Impact Assessment I mentioned. There are all the mitigation measures and the reasons for them. That is all there on the website. In addition, I know that head teachers will be pleased to explain the protocols in the schools to parents who contacted them. I have seen how head teachers are willing and anxious to reassure parents about these processes. I would urge parents, if they have any doubts, to contact their school and talk these things through.