

23.07.17

4 The Connétable of St. Brelade of the Minister for Children and Education regarding the teaching of French (OQ.159/2023)

Will the Assistant Minister outline his policy regarding the teaching of French in Island schools and advise whether he will be considering employing French assistants, as in the past?

Connétable R.P. Vibert of St. Peter (Assistant Minister for Children and Education - rapporteur):

French is the first-named language in the Jersey curriculum. The curriculum describes learning a language as the liberation from insularity and an opening to other cultures. As such, the teaching of French across Island schools continues to be a priority. French is the first language taught after English in all our government primary schools to pupils aged 7 to 11. I am happy to confirm that we certainly employ a number of language assistants who are deployed to secondary schools across the Island in line with the languages chosen at G.C.S.E. (General Certificate of Secondary Education) and A-level. There are currently 2 Spanish and one French assistant in this position working across 5 schools. In addition, we have a longstanding and valued relationship with Alliance Française to provide additional French assistants' hours to schools which are funded from the Education budget. This year this has increased to 34 hours of teaching per week and a budget of more than £40,000.

4.4.1 The Connétable of St. Brelade:

There seems to be some doubt as to whether this support is being provided to the Alliance Française and I would just like the Assistant Minister to agree that starting children's exposure to other languages, especially that of our nearest neighbour, is so, so important, not only in cultural terms but also commercial terms given that these children may well be the business people of the future.

The Connétable of St. Peter:

I am a little surprised at that question because I have already confirmed that in primary schools French is taught to all children. In a secondary school it is taught in the first year and then children have an option of choosing a language. Should they wish to specialise in French they can opt for French but they can opt for many other languages which may, in their opinion, be equally important. So we have not forgotten the importance of French, and that is demonstrated by the fact that it is the primary language that we speak that we teach in primary schools. However, we do have a more diverse Island now and I think that is important to recognise.

4.4.2 Deputy S.Y. Mézec:

Could I ask the Assistant Minister if it is a stated aim in their policy on this to improve the proficiency of French speaking among Jersey's young people going through our education system, given the importance there is to the Island's culture and heritage and of course our links with our nearest neighbour? If that is the stated policy of the Education Department, how do they measure the success of that policy and whether the proficiency of French speaking among Jersey's population is improving or not?

The Connétable of St. Peter:

I have not got anything in front of me that says it is the stated aim; however, I would have hoped from what I have already said that it is a genuine aim of the Children and Education Department in that we put the most resources into teaching French, in that other languages are not taught in

primary schools nor in the first year of secondary education. If he wishes to get confirmation of what is the stated aim then I am happy to get that for him.

4.4.3 Deputy S.Y. Mézec:

The second part of the question was about how, if at all, they measure whether or not that policy is a success and whether we are seeing improved efficiency at French speaking in our population. Other jurisdictions that have stated aims on language teaching, like the Manx language in the Isle of Man or the Welsh language in Wales, they have their ways of measuring how many more people are able to speak because of that. So could the Assistant Minister outline whether that exists in Jersey for French language?

The Connétable of St. Peter:

Sorry, again, I do not have that information in front of me, so that is something that I would have to get for the Deputy.

4.4.4 Deputy M. Tadier:

Would the Assistant Minister confirm how the number of assistants for French in primary schools compares with what it used to be only a number of years ago, including what the funding difference is for that?

The Connétable of St. Peter:

I know specifically about the additional assistance we had from the Alliance Française and I believe previously they were funded for an amount of £60,000, so there has been a reduction in the number. I do not have that detail in front of me; I do know the amount that we have given you. However, that has been replaced in schools by the French Experience, and that has been taken up by 19 out of the 24 government primary schools who have delivered the French Experience programme where they have been supported by French specialist teachers to develop and consolidate the teaching of French across the school. So that is where the budget previously paid to the Alliance Française, the additional £20,000, is being spent.

4.4.5 Deputy M. Tadier:

I might be wrong but my recollection is that the French Experience used to run parallel to the language assistants and that the language assistants' budget was removed ostensibly during COVID and it simply was not replaced, so I would ask the Minister to go back and check what he has just told me. But if I could ask a supplementary, which is on the same theme. The Assistant Minister will know that our Assembly is a member of the Assemblée Parlementaire de la Francophonie. One of its aims is not just to promote French speaking but it is also to promote multilingualism both for the Assembly and for wider society. Does the Assistant Minister agree that for many in this Assembly and in wider society it is seen as regressive that a second language, full stop, is no longer compulsory at G.C.S.E.? Does he share that concern that maybe a second language at G.C.S.E. should be reinstated and, if so, what kind of resources might be needed in order to get our education system back to that point?

The Connétable of St. Peter:

Certainly a second language can be very beneficial. However, there will be some students whose interests do not necessarily include speaking a second language and who have decided on careers where they do not consider that necessary but other qualifications are necessary. I think we give our students the option of either speaking French, another language or if they do not feel that languages

are for them and they want to pursue another career, then they can opt not to do a language. I think that is an entirely valid way of teaching. We are still promoting languages but we are giving children the option if that does not suit their career or their future career that they do not have to undertake a second language.

4.4.6 The Connétable of St. Brelade:

Would the Assistant Minister confirm that sufficient funding for the French assistant provision through the Alliance Française will be made in the upcoming Government Plan to enable the Alliance to survive and continue its valuable work?

The Connétable of St. Peter:

I am not aware that there is any suggestion that the current amount paid to the Alliance would be cut. I have already said that is around £40,000 a year. The way in which we spend money has changed. I will check about the French Experience but I acted on information that I was only given this morning because I asked a specific question about what had replaced the French assistants and I was told it was the French Experience. Thank you very much.