

2020.05.12

11 Deputy C.S. Alves of the Minister for Education regarding free broadband for school children (OQ.110/2020)

Will the Minister explain what actions, if any, are being taken to support those students who do not have access to their own internet-enabled devices at home?

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

I am pleased to inform the Deputy and Members of a wide range of support offered to students who do not have internet-enabled devices at home. In some cases parents are using their devices to download and print resources; in other cases parents are collecting resource packs printed by the schools. I am confident that the lack of a device does not mean a lack of support. Some students have a preference for printed learning despite having a device. Schools have also loaned out over 300 iPads, notebooks, laptops and Wi-Fi dongles. They have done everything they can to provision online where required and printed material is made available for anyone that requires it.

4.11.1 Deputy C.S. Alves:

Has any consideration been given to ensure that all schools use the same virtual teaching and learning platforms as school access across the Island are currently using a variety of different platforms and this can cause issues with device compatibility?

Senator T.A. Vallois:

As I am sure the Deputy will know, the difficulty in terms of standardisation requirements, there is a thing called autonomy, teachers will be providing what they feel is correct in terms of the education for their children from their schools. They understand them; they know them, and are able to provide the support they feel is best for them and they are doing that on an ongoing basis in an unprecedented and a pretty difficult situation.

4.11.2 Deputy R.J. Ward:

Does the Minister feel that one standardised platform would enable greater sharing of resources so that teachers are not reinventing the wheel for each other and therefore greater efficiency in the delivery of education resources?

Senator T.A. Vallois:

The Department have provided an online home-learning website with access to different types of resources, which can be shared and accessed for all students, parents and teachers. The issue with some form of standardisation is of course children at different levels; we need to ensure that we are helping each individual to reach their own potential in the right way. But we have provided that home learning online site so that there is access to some form of standard resource.

4.11.3 Deputy R.J. Ward:

Can the Minister confirm that Microsoft Teams is the preferred platform for virtual learning environments?

Senator T.A. Vallois:

All Government of Jersey maintained schools have Microsoft Teams but not all teachers are as yet trained, so teacher email accounts need to be migrated to Office 365 before they get full integration

between email and Teams and this is underway currently. So the wider use of the functionality in Teams is being rolled out across schools.

4.11.4 Connétable R.A. Buchanan of St. Ouen:

Could I ask the Minister to issue or be able to remind all head teachers that, in situations where pupils have financial difficulty in obtaining laptops and other devices, all Parishes have access to charitable funds so that they can help in difficult cases. If the teacher could approach us we can consider those cases in pretty short order in the current circumstances.

Senator T.A. Vallois:

I am grateful to the Constable for providing that further information. As I have stated in a previous question to Deputy Morel, we are assessing the current gap and we are attempting to resolve that as soon as possible, but I will keep that in mind and make the Department and all head teachers aware.

4.11.5 Deputy C.S. Alves:

The Minister mentioned that staff needed training in the area of Microsoft Teams. I just wanted to ask whether the Minister can confirm that teachers currently do not have remote access to their resources, which may be stored centrally or on the school network, as this has been an ongoing problem for many years and could be getting in the way or making it difficult for teachers to produce resources for those children that need it the most at the moment?

Senator T.A. Vallois:

I agree with the Deputy in terms of we have had some issues historically and still continue to with regards to I.T. infrastructure. There have been advances made by staff in recent years with the adoption of Office 365. We have an excellent small I.T. team who look after a vast estate of infrastructure but I recognise the points and the issues that the Deputy has raised, which is why we are always seeking to improve, but we will be carrying out an infrastructure review later this year, particularly in response to the post-16 Scrutiny report recommendations by the Education and Home Affairs Scrutiny Panel.