



Committee for Education

OFFICIAL REPORT (Hansard)

Restart Issues, Curriculum Delivery, Examination
Contingency and Budget 2021-22:
Mr Peter Weir MLA, Minister of Education; and DE Officials

9 December 2020

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

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Members present for all or part of the proceedings:

Mr Chris Lyttle (Chairperson)
Ms Karen Mullan (Deputy Chairperson)
Mr Maurice Bradley
Ms Nicola Brogan
Mr Robbie Butler
Mr William Humphrey
Mr Daniel McCrossan
Mr Justin McNulty
Mr Robin Newton

Witnesses:

Mr Weir	Minister of Education
Mr Gary Fair	Department of Education
Mr James Hutchinson	Department of Education
Mr Ricky Irwin	Department of Education
Mrs Karen McCullough	Department of Education

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): I welcome Peter Weir MLA, Minister of Education, and the following Department of Education officials: Gary Fair, director of finance; Ricky Irwin, director of inclusion and well-being; James Hutchinson, Restart director; and Karen McCullough, director of curriculum, qualifications and standards.

The Committee is glad that you are here to answer questions and provide an update on a number of extremely important and urgent issues relating to the work of the Department of Education and the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. I advise the Minister and officials that the session will be reported by Hansard. I invite the Education Minister to provide us with a brief opening statement before taking questions from members.

Mr Weir (The Minister of Education): As you have already introduced the team, I will not take up time by introducing them again. The Committee is familiar with them. Thank you for the opportunity to brief you on the wide range of issues facing the education sector.

When our schools reopened in August, some people were uncertain whether that was the right thing to do. However, with the hard work and professionalism of our dedicated school workforce and the contribution of parents, we have achieved an awful lot during that period. It is undoubtedly the case that children across Northern Ireland have benefited from that face-to-face return to school.

The pandemic has impacted on all our children and young people but particularly on vulnerable and disadvantaged children. Many children with disabilities and complex needs receive therapies and support while in school. We know that many of these families have been struggling during the pandemic and miss the benefits and protections that a school routine brings. As we reopened in August, it was obvious to everyone that there would be challenges. From my conversations with school leaders, it was clear that they had dealt with a wide range of difficult and exceptional circumstances. I publicly thank principals, teachers and school support staff, who met these challenges with calm and resolved determination. Thanks to their efforts, our children have been able to return to school.

During the pandemic, we asked all schools to have contingency plans in place to deliver remote learning in the event of school closure or, more frequently, should a class or group of pupils need to self-isolate. In theory, the power was there to make schools do this, the Department has not gone down the road of a mandatory or legal approach. I do not want to place any sort of additional legal burden on our schools, and I believe that we are in a space where we do not need to. The feedback from the Education and Training Inspectorate (ETI) indicates that all schools surveyed have contingency plans in place, and the majority have enacted them at some point.

The context of the school is very significant. What works in one type of school or area may not be suitable for other kinds of school. My key priority is to keep our children in school wherever and whenever possible but also to support and empower schools to deliver high-quality remote learning when required. My Department has provided schools with detailed guidance on remote learning and curriculum planning for 2021. Further guidance materials and case studies have been produced by my Department's continuity of learning project. The Education Authority (EA) has developed a menu of online professional learning sessions for teachers that focus on remote learning and mental health and well-being. Last week, all schools were provided with a checklist of readiness for remote learning. EA and the Council for Catholic Maintained Schools (CCMS) have developed the checklist in conjunction with principals to support schools to plan and reflect on their remote learning: what they have in place and the key areas of development. To support schools, reduce the bureaucratic burden and free up time for curriculum planning, I have relaxed a range of other statutory requirements, such as those related to school development planning.

In Northern Ireland, we are fortunate that schools have access to the Classroom 2000 (C2k) centrally provided IT system, which is not available in a number of other jurisdictions. C2k has supported online access to school services from the beginning of COVID-related school closures. In recent months, additional funding has been provided to continue to improve the services available, including additional learning applications and an upgrade of the bandwidth. My Department's scheme to provide IT and Wi-Fi access to our educationally disadvantaged and vulnerable learners has distributed almost 10,000 devices and remains open to new applications.

The Northern Ireland curriculum is designed to have limited legal prescription and give schools as much flexibility as possible in what they choose to teach, for how long and how often, and it allows schools to use the approaches that best suit their pupils. That meant that the Department did not need to suspend or disapply the curriculum when schools reopened. Rather, the Department helped to empower schools to know that they have, with minimum entitlement to the statutory curriculum, the freedom to develop content that they believe is best for their pupils within their own school community and environment. School leaders and teachers can use their knowledge and professional expertise to adapt original plans and practice to suit their unique circumstances. Our key message across the system is that this year's aim is to support and motivate students to become skilled and independent learners. We have also stressed the importance of ensuring that children have good emotional health and well-being, are engaged and motivated to learn and have the tools and skills that they require for learning.

Coping with the high level of uncertainty and change presented by COVID requires adaptability and psychological resilience, and that has underlined the importance of the whole curriculum thinking skills and personal capabilities, which are at the heart of the Northern Ireland curriculum. In the rapidly changing environment of the 21st century, an emphasis on skills for an unpredictable world, such as communication, collaboration, informed decision-making, creative problem-solving, adaptability, empathy and emotional intelligence, is vital.

At the same time, my Department has supported schools with additional funding, such as the Engage programme to provide additional teaching support, a mental health and well-being fund, and a scheme to provide laptops and digital devices to our most vulnerable learners. The Engage programme of £12 million is providing that help to primary and post-primary schools. The programme is delivering child-

centred, one-to-one small group or team teaching support by qualified teachers to pupils who require additional support to re-engage in learning.

I turn to the important issue of public examinations. I believe that the experience of 2020 has shown that exams remain the fairest method of assessing pupils and awarding qualifications. Right across the UK and, indeed, much of Western Europe, we have seen that, despite every effort and good intention, other forms of assessment are likely to be more inequitable. For example, we know from research that non-examination assessment can be subject to bias and result in bright disadvantaged students or students with special educational needs suffering the most. My priority is therefore to ensure that public examinations go ahead. It is extremely important that, following the cancellation of examinations last summer, young people are given the opportunity to demonstrate their knowledge and skills through the examination process. Exams are the best way of giving young people the opportunity to show what they can do, and that is why it is so important that they take place next summer.

I have already agreed significant changes to Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment (CCEA) qualifications, making a range of public health adaptations to ensure safe delivery and reducing the number of exams that pupils will need to take. Those measures, set out earlier in the academic year, offered a sensible and pragmatic route through the initial wave of COVID disruption. However, I am considering a range of further contingency arrangements and mitigations that will take account of the ongoing disruption. I have received advice from CCEA, and my officials are discussing potential options with school leaders before final decisions are made. I hope to be in a position to make an announcement early next week.

I am considering adjustments for individual candidates to take account of differences in the loss of face-to-face teaching time and wider systems-wide adjustments to qualifications to reduce the assessment burden on all our young people. Contingency arrangements will be required to cover all eventualities in case exams are missed during the summer. However, I want to make it clear that I will not cancel examinations.

Although Wales and Scotland have cancelled some public examinations, it now appears that, in Wales, young people will face externally set examinations, which I think that you highlighted, and those will be taken earlier than usual. There is much uncertainty across the Welsh system about what will happen. I am reluctant to criticise other jurisdictions but concerns are emerging about the lack of clarity on what the classroom teaching proposed will involve, how fairness will be ensured, why the tests are being held so early in the school year, given that pupils have missed so much education, and whether English universities in particular will treat Welsh A-level students on a par with their English and Northern Irish counterparts. Most examinations have been honed and perfected over many years. During a pandemic, the Welsh Government have chosen to start a completely new system from scratch, with no past papers to help people and no mark schemes, and pupils are very unclear on what to expect. Therefore, although, on the face of it, simply cancelling examinations might seem, to some, to be a good approach, I do not believe that that is the right approach for our young people. Such an approach would also put significant tension on teacher-pupil relationships. Some schools have called for centre-assessed grades, and I understand their position. Equally, many schools feel that cancelling examinations would put school leaders and teachers under terrible pressure and put schools at risk of numerous appeals and litigations. In recent days, I have also heard from many young people who want examinations to go ahead.

I am quite sure, however, that it will not be business as usual. I know that our students are facing unprecedented disruption to their learning. That is why our exams will be different this year, although I will take exceptional steps to ensure that they are as fair as possible in the circumstances. Schools can be confident that my Department and CCEA have chosen to make the summer 2021 exams fair and that young people in Northern Ireland will not be disadvantaged.

In conclusion, I thank the Committee for the opportunity to address it on these many issues. We are working hard to make sure that we take into account the effects of the pandemic, make the best contingency arrangements that we can and make sure that exam results are fair and command public confidence. Again — I want to reiterate this — I commend our school leaders and teachers for their efforts. Unfortunately, we continue to face many challenges. Equally, we have seen innovation and opportunities right across our system. The integration of information technology in education has been rapidly accelerated by recent events. Our schools have embraced the possibilities of IT in exciting ways. My Department will work with school leaders to consider the role of technology in supporting education and qualification delivery. Its rapid spread has demonstrated the importance of building resilience. It is also an opportunity to remind ourselves of the skills that students need in an

unprecedented world — skills that are at the heart of the Northern Ireland curriculum. Our aim must be to give our students the ability to work, to think, to learn, to evolve, no matter what challenges await them tomorrow, and to unleash their potential to benefit the world. Thank you, Chair. My team and I are happy to take whatever questions you may have.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): Thank you, Minister. It is my understanding that you are available until 11.00 am, so we will all — members, the Minister and officials — have to be as concise as we possibly can with our questions and answers. I echo your thanks and recognition of all teaching and non-teaching staff across Northern Ireland for their dedication and innovation throughout this extremely difficult time. I also thank the Department and you for all the measures that you have endeavoured to put in place to support teaching and non-teaching staff and pupils during this time. However, I have profound concerns about a number of issues, and I want to raise those with you today. I genuinely feel that, if they are not handled better, they pose the risk that you will register a record of delayed, disengaged and morale-sapping decision-making. You have an opportunity to rebut that analysis today, and we can do that constructively.

The first issue is school closures. Early cessation of school-based learning has been discussed since the summer. Diane Dawson, the principal of Braniel Primary School, made a public call for an early cessation of school-based learning as long ago as 17 November. You are now at risk of being to the right of the Conservative Party, which today announced that school-based learning will cease on Thursday 17 December.

I will read you a short piece of correspondence that I received in this regard:

"Dear Chris

I am a dedicated principal who works very hard to meet the needs of my pupils, their families and my staff. I do this with enthusiasm and love because I want to make a difference. I think I do this most of the time. We are underfunded, but I have a lot of heart and it goes a long way. Last week, I tested positive for COVID-19. I am sure I caught it at school because I do not get to go anywhere else.

Today, I received a letter from the Education Minister telling me that I had to continue to do more to keep operating on a face-to-face basis unless the school boiler broke or someone died. I have been very ill. Hospitalisation could still be a possibility. What if something happens to me or a member of staff or a pupil? I truly believe we can do better than this. No one wants closure, just a short period of remote learning for people who want that choice. I speak with the wisdom of personal experience: no one wants COVID-19 for Christmas".

Minister, in that context, why have you not planned some sort of short, early cessation of school-based learning?

Mr Weir: Thank you, Chair. I have not done that for a number of reasons. You made a comparison with England, which is talking about having one day on which there are internal workings within the school. Effectively, its schools will finish a day early, but do not forget: England did not take the extra week at Halloween that we took. From that point of view, we are in a different position from England.

There are a number of issues with school closures. Although a lot of good work is happening through remote learning, it is undoubtedly the case that face-to-face teaching is better for our pupils. Remote learning, by its nature, will always be second best. Although some parents will make an individual choice on the basis of what is happening in their family, closing schools early would create enormous complications for the tens of thousands of parents throughout society who would either have to take time off work, even though some, for instance, will just be resuming after furlough or are dependent on that work, or have to find some form of emergency childcare.

There is also the health issue. There are risks in every situation, but, when this issue was discussed, the analysis from the medical experts was that the impact of any form of school closure would, at best, be uncertain and may even be counterproductive. This has been acknowledged by a number of health experts. Tom Black, for example, who has not been the greatest supporter of the Executive and has always wanted the Executive to go further, has said publicly that the right thing is for schools to continue. If you put a third of a million children into the community, with the behavioural issues that will be there in the direct run-up to Christmas, it is likely that you will increase the R rate to a greater extent than you would through keeping schools open. It is naive to assume that we should simply send

children home. We have seen, for example, that the biggest outbreaks of COVID, particularly those involving children, have been through widespread socialisation. It would send out a signal that this is, effectively, a time simply to relax and let the guard down. From a health point of view, that would be counterproductive. That is why there has been no pressing from anybody on the health side, whatever their views on other occasions, for any early closure of schools.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): OK. I suspect that other members will want to come in on that, and my time is short. When is the final day of school-based learning for schools across Northern Ireland?

Mr Weir: Schools have a level of flexibility in setting their timetables. Some may start their term a little later. For most schools, the final day will be Friday 18 December. A small number of schools, because they have a set number of days in mind, will probably go on until Monday or Tuesday of the following week. It is not absolutely uniform across the system.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): Do you think that it is appropriate for teaching staff, non-teaching staff and pupils to be in school in the week commencing Monday 21 December?

Mr Weir: It is appropriate if the school has organised that. The reality is that self-isolation will kick in much earlier. It is appropriate that schools have their full complement of teaching days. Schools that go on later into the year will be compensating for days taken in other parts of the year. It is important that, as much as possible, all children get the same amount of tuition and schooling. I was at a seminar last week or the week before with representatives of the Public Health Agency (PHA). They said that, while there has been adult-to-adult spread, there is very little evidence of any level of spread between children and teachers.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): OK. I find it astonishing that you have not planned some short cessation of school-based learning prior to Friday 18 December, but I need to move on to examinations.

Minister, your data on the week commencing 12 October 2020 showed that 87·4% of pupils were in school. By my vulgar calculation, as many as 50,000 pupils were not in school that week. An NAHT survey of 89 primary schools in November found that, on average, as many as 37% of P7 pupils had experienced a COVID-19-related absence since the start of term, yet considerable uncertainty remains regarding post-primary transfer, GCSE and A-level end-of-year examinations in 2021. Other jurisdictions of the UK have made decisions, either cancelling examinations or providing examination guidance for schools. You have indicated repeatedly that CCEA is working on contingency options and that details would be shared shortly. Can you now end the confusion, put pay to speculation in schools and tell the Committee what your contingency plans are for examinations in 2021?

Mr Weir: I have said that exams will go ahead. I have already announced some of the contingencies, such as those for GCSEs. Indeed, our level of assessment reduction at GCSE goes well beyond that in England. Other jurisdictions still intend to cover the entire curriculum by way of assessment, which is probably unrealistic. I have indicated that we are at the final stages and that I hope to be in a position to make an announcement next week. I will not jump the gun. We have a range of final considerations to take into account. If we are in a position that we can finalise that by early next week, I will make a statement directly to the Assembly. The aim must be to try to get this out before Christmas, to have it out next week. We are on track to do that, but the proper way to do that is to have everything in place before the announcement is made. We are not quite there yet.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): OK. Do the contingency options that CCEA is considering include the use of moderated centre assessments?

Mr Weir: We are not aiming to go down that route. At this stage, there is not much point in my saying that I hope to give the full announcement next week and then starting to unpick elements of what is on the table and what is being discussed.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): OK. Do you accept that there is urgency?

Mr Weir: Absolutely.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): Indeed, I contend that your position on the issue is becoming increasingly untenable.

Mr Weir: Let me give an indication of one thing that is clear and that may give some level of reassurance. People have been talking about a level of parity. It is clear that, whatever contingencies or adaptations are put in place, we need to ensure that examination boards across the UK operate on a similar basis. Consequently, as part of the announcement that was made in England, they have indicated that, from the point of view of the examination boards, the level at which things are being pitched for grading will be at the 2020 standards to make sure that students this year are not disadvantaged when compared with students last year. That will apply across the UK and will involve CCEA to ensure that it is on a similar basis. That will mean that there is an equality between students in Northern Ireland, because, as the Committee knows, roughly 20% of our A levels and a smaller percentage for GCSE are done through boards outside Northern Ireland. All those pupils will be based on the more generous situation of the 2020 level rather than a 2019 or 2018 level.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): OK.

Ms Mullan: Thank you, Minister, for that update and thank you to everybody who is attending this morning. I will start off by welcoming and congratulating Barry Mulholland in his new role of chair of the Education Authority and wishing Sharon O'Connor, the outgoing chair, all the best.

Minister, I will pick up on a number of the topics that the Chair has covered. Like you, I agree that face-to-face learning is the best option for our children and young people. However, throughout the pandemic, we have needed to put options and contingencies in place. On this occasion, it was not about the blanket closing of schools, but it was allowing our school leaders to come forward with options and for you to engage with and consult them. Some schools have already done this, and it is going to cause inconsistency across our school estates.

On the point that the Chair made about the closing dates, I have been informed that there are concerns that the Public Health Agency (PHA) and the EA advice lines are to close on 23 December. If cases are picked up that week, particularly on Christmas Day and the days around it, who do principals contact to support them through the tracking-and-tracing process?

Mr Weir: Karen, I was not aware of the date for the PHA, but we will take that up with colleagues and get a detailed answer. Something needs to be put in place for emergency situations generally, whereas that is a dedicated line for schools. One would assume that, for track and tracing and where people can get tests, there would need to be some level of emergency cover provided over the Christmas period. It is always likely that, over Christmas, any public health group will operate on a skeleton staff. We will pursue that issue, and I am sure that the fallback of calling the general PHA line will be available.

Ms Mullan: I would be grateful if you would do that and support that and if you would speak to the unions and get that information out to the unions and to the school leaders on the support that they need over the period of closure. I am sure that they will be involved in tracking and tracing.

Minister, on the examinations, you may have heard in the news this morning that St Cecilia's College and Lisneal College in my constituency have cancelled some modules in maths and English GSCEs in January. Daniel, the Chair and I met students from St Cecilia's a number of weeks ago, and the reality of what students are going through came across to us at that meeting.

I will follow on from the Chair. However, I must outline a conflict of interest. My daughter, Niamh Lamberton, is in year 12 and had full attendance — I think that I told you that before — but, since she returned to school, she has had seven weeks off, including two periods of self-isolation. Last week, on her first day of returning after four weeks off, she sat her Christmas exams. She missed out on four months last year, and, now, she has missed out on seven weeks. She is trying to catch up on last year's work. We see now that St Cecilia's and Lisneal have come out with their decision today, which, as a parent, I welcome.

Minister, all along, up until now, I have been telling her that CCEA, you, your Department and the Committee are working very hard to provide clarity and support and that that would be with them long before Christmas. It is disappointing to hear from you today and yesterday that we will have to wait and that you hope to bring out more clarity on that next week. I met CCEA a number of weeks ago, and it outlined some of the options. Why is it taking so long? Can you please outline for me today and for Niamh and her fellow students what mitigations will be in place to support her as she faces her GCSE exams when she goes back to school in January?

Mr Weir: We will be in a position to outline any of the stuff next week. You asked why it has taken a length of time. To be honest, I do not think that it is helpful for schools to go on a solo run as regards the curriculum, because, when it comes to whatever tests, mitigations and adaptations can be put in place, but it is not as if some schools will have different GCSEs from other schools. That could potentially leave schools that take their own action at a disadvantage for their pupils. So, I warn against that.

Mitigations will need to take account of the system's wide situation and where there will need to be individual circumstances. It has taken so long because, first of all, we want to try to make sure that it is got right. It is not just engagement with CCEA. We have had ongoing meetings with stakeholder principals, and some work will be happening directly with pupils. As you are aware, there is a range of options. We have to make sure that the best option is not only one that is fit for purpose but that we get buy-in from qualifications across the UK. One thing that we have to avoid is a scenario where we plump for a particular option where, for instance, universities take a view that it is not acceptable or, alternatively, regard our pupils to be on a different level from everyone else.

A range of connections and discussions have been taking place in that regard, and, to some extent, there is a level of restriction because, as a very small jurisdiction, we always think of ourselves as very special people, and, in many ways, we are, but we cannot be in the same position as a national Government in London or in Dublin who, largely speaking, can set precisely their own agenda without having a great deal of cognisance about what is happening elsewhere. It is important that we give that certainty to people and that that happens very quickly, and I think that we are on track to do that.

Ms Mullan: Minister, the longer that you leave this going into next week, the less time that schools and pupils will have together to prepare for two weeks of being off school and being at home trying to study. As I said, I have a conflict of interest. My daughter was sitting at the kitchen table crying, and I do not want to see that over the Christmas period. She is someone who needs to be in school; she is dyslexic and needs support, so she cannot be left. We have heard that from many students. I will ask you again. I know that you said that you have engaged. I have asked you to meet with the Secondary Students' Union, and I ask you to do that over the next week.

Mr Weir: There is a meeting with students today in connection with that. I have left my officials to deal with that.

Ms Mullan: Finally, it is a priority to keep schools open. What discussions have you had to add school staff to the priority list for vaccinations?

Mr Weir: Karen, I am very much in favour of that and will make those representations to Health. The one restriction that we have in connection with that relates to where prioritisation is determined. I think that it makes good sense that school staff, in particular, should be pushed up the agenda. Prioritisation is actually decided by a UK-wide team from the health end. All four UK nations are involved in it. Therefore, there is limited, if any, freedom for Northern Ireland to manoeuvre directly at present. It will agree the priorities. At the moment, it seems that the principal priorities focus largely on age rather than professions. As I have indicated, I will ask the Minister of Health to raise the issue of the prioritisation of school staff. However, that decision lies outwith Northern Ireland as a whole.

Mr Newton: I thank the Minister and his staff for being with us. It is appropriate that we mention the recent figures for primary-school pupils' achievement in the field of maths. I extend my congratulations to you, the Department, the Education Authority and, indeed, right down to teaching staff, principals and support staff, because those figures have given quite a fillip and kudos to pupils in Northern Ireland. It is right that they be recognised.

I refer to a letter dated 3 December that you sent from the Department with an update on the childcare sustainability support fund. It outlines the amount of money that is being allocated. The final paragraph is headed "Further funding". You indicated that your officials were currently working on a further funding scheme that would address temporary closures during the period from September to December and that it would be announced in due course. Minister, on such an important issue, can you give us an update on your thinking on the childcare sustainability support fund?

Mr Weir: Robin, there are two strands to that. One is the broad sustainability side of it. We bid successfully for £8.5 million of COVID funding for sustainability and ongoing recovery. I think that everybody realises that, understandably, many childcare facilities are operating under a much more constrained regime because of some of the health requirements. There would be additional costs. Consequently, there is that £8.5 million.

On the closure side, we also bid successfully for £2.8 million. Added to that was around £800,000 that was left over from the previous recovery fund. Therefore, there is a package of £3.6 million. COVID may be less prevalent amongst very young children, but the aim of the temporary closure scheme is that if, for example, a childcare setting — there is provision for childminders as part of that as well — had to be closed for a period on a weekly or fortnightly basis because of, for instance, close contacts or an outbreak, funding would be available. On the closure side, for childcare facilities, that would ratchet up — off the top of my head — in allocations of around £500 initially for each batch of eight pupils as they are added on. I think that, ultimately, it would go up to a cap of around £10,000. That would be the maximum amount for large childcare settings. We want to make sure that there is a reasonable level.

That will cover all the things that are not covered elsewhere. For example, I know that there will be some direct finding through Health for a particular childcare facility or whatever else. It will cover the mainstream side. The two funds are there to cover general sustainability and those that are hit specifically with closures.

Mr Newton: Can I push you a little further? You answered a question from the Deputy Chairperson on the vaccine and the vaccination roll-out programme. Will you outline what you are seeking to achieve there? I make the point that it is not just the staff who are directly in contact with pupils on a day — the teaching staff. The other support staff and those who are in and out of schools may also need to be included if you felt that you could achieve designated key worker status for those folks.

Mr Weir: As far as I am aware — it lies with Health — the UK-wide position is not to focus on key workers. The available batches will largely be allocated on age grounds, and it would be difficult for any of us to make an argument that people in the broader school environment, of whatever nature, should take priority in the batch that is aimed at the over-80s, for example. It would be very useful if there was a prioritisation of key workers.

The way that the vaccine is likely to be rolled out, in the UK as a whole and Northern Ireland with its share, is that we will get certain batches with the idea being to use those up in their entirety. There is a good argument for staff in schools and for the very young with particular medical vulnerabilities to be included in that.

I suppose that the point that I am making is that I will argue the case for that. The one restriction is that I will have to argue the case directly with the Department of Health and it will act as a proxy in the UK-wide bit. I do not want anybody to criticise the Department of Health because, to be fair, the order of prioritisation for the vaccine will not be its decision. There is a UK-wide group that is trying to ensure that the roll-out is done as uniformly as possible throughout the UK. Therefore, even if Northern Ireland was to make an argument that such and such should be the case, it would be a question of trying to persuade everybody else towards that position.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): OK. Robin, that is time. OK?

Mr Newton: OK. Sorry.

Mr McCrossan: Minister, I thank you and your officials for being with us. As you will realise, our schools, teachers and young people face serious issues and challenges. I am extremely concerned, not just as a member of the Committee but as an MLA for West Tyrone. I see the huge impact of decisions or indecision from you and your Department and the impact that it is having on schools and young people in all the constituencies in Northern Ireland.

It is good to hear you say, "Thank you" to our teachers and young people, but those are words, and, to many, they are meaningless, given that you have continually ignored those same people and continue to ignore them, as was shown particularly with what happened with examinations in the summer. Many have said that they feel as though you are standing in the wilderness with your hands over your ears refusing to listen to anybody.

I think that you would struggle to find many who agree with you on your present agenda on examinations. There are huge issues. The Commissioner for Children and Young People, the mental health champion and all the teachers, principals and young people whom I have spoken to have all spoken out against your agenda. Your inaction and indecision are having a hugely detrimental impact on the well-being of our young people, and your ignorance of the reality of COVID and how it is impacting on our children's education is unjustifiable and unforgivable.

The "Go compare" nonsense that continues to come from your mouth in the Chamber and in statements is entirely unhelpful. We cannot compare ourselves to Scotland, Wales or England, although you continue to. Scotland and Wales have moved. It is not an ideal situation in Wales, but they have moved. Scotland has moved significantly into a very positive position. England is an entirely different situation from ours; there is a considerable difference in how they are educated, particularly given the mitigations that are in place to protect young people and that, in some instances, the course has been taught a year earlier. What you are doing is entirely without precedent. In the current situation, you are going to leave a lot of people very badly let down. I fear for those young people. I fear that, unfortunately, you have not learned the lessons of the summer, which is unforgivable, given the impact on our young people and children.

I go further: you use words such as "fair". There is nothing fair about that agenda. I understand that the situation is not straightforward and that you do not have a blueprint or rule book, but I would like to believe that you have learned something from what happened in the summer. I have also spoken to CCEA, as the Deputy Chair related. The attitude in CCEA is much different from the one prior to the crisis in the summer that emerged from the actions that you took.

Minister, I said this to you yesterday in the Chamber, and I say it again: you are in the bad books of a lot of teachers, young people and students across Northern Ireland. I am making a plea to you to recognise the reality that we and our young people are in and to cancel GCSE and A-level examinations this year. Do not talk to us about England, what Wales are not doing or anything else. I want to hear about the actions and decisions that you are taking to protect our young people.

That brings me to a few questions, Minister.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): You have used half your time, Daniel. Be careful.

Mr McCrossan: I have only a few. Do you not accept that the real catalyst for the stress levels has been your indecision, Minister, around how assessments will operate? Secondly, is it not the case that Ministers in other jurisdictions have decided to either abolish exams or put in place a fresh raft of mitigations to relieve the pressure on their young people while you have sat on the fence? Do you not think that you should now apologise, meaningfully and absolutely, to our young people and teachers for scapegoating them and for dithering on the very serious issue of the futures of our young people? Why have they been left dangling? Ultimately, you are going to have to make a decision, particularly in January.

Mr Weir: Thank you for that. I detected a couple of questions at the end of that level of diatribe. Let me make it clear: there is not a lack of decision. We want to try to make sure that all information is —.

Mr McCrossan: Minister, what I have said to you is a reflection of all of the various correspondence that I have received from teachers. I will gladly tell them that you described such as "diatribe". That will not go down well. That is the issue.

Mr Weir: Daniel, do not put words in my mouth. I described the soap opera-like way in which you put things forward as a level of diatribe.

Mr McCrossan: It is no soap opera.

Mr Weir: I am not attacking —.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): Minister, pause for a second.

Mr Weir: With respect, Daniel —.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): Please. I am chairing this meeting: let me intervene momentarily. I do not think that "diatribe" is appropriate.

Mr McCrossan: It is not.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): However, Daniel, you are almost out of time for your questioning. Can I bring you back to a concise response, Minister? We are almost out of time for Daniel.

Mr Weir: We are trying to take into account all of the information, including the work that is being done by Deloitte in terms of the 2020 situation. It is important that that is taken into account when final decisions are reached. You talked about indecision: I have made it absolutely clear that examinations will take place. We want to make sure that the adaptations are the correct ones. It takes a little time to do that. You said that it is wrong to compare us with England. As regards our A-level situation in particular, England represents over 80% of the market in terms of students. Those are the people whom our people are competing against directly for university places. We also have the situation where the exams of English boards, which are under the control of the Westminster Government, will be done by, roughly speaking, 20% of our pupils. The idea that we can simply be in some hermetically sealed bubble in Northern Ireland as regards examinations is not correct. We are listening to people. We are working closely with our panel of principals from across a wide range of schools, grammar and non-grammar, and from across a range of different sectors. It is also about listening to what they are saying. We will come to a common position with CCEA, and we will make sure that everything is done to protect our pupils. Do not misinterpret that. Simply because you are not getting the decision that you want does not mean that we are dithering. We are trying to make sure that all the information is taken into account so that we can have proper adaptations and mitigations as we move ahead.

Mr McCrossan: Could I make a very brief point?

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): Daniel, your time is almost up. I will allow you a very brief supplementary.

Mr McCrossan: Minister, thank you for your answer, but if you look at the situation in A levels, you will see that Scotland and Wales have already moved, and they did not consult us about whether our universities will accept their students. Why are you continuing to use this as an excuse to prevent decisions being reached in the interests of our young people?

Mr Weir: Scotland, largely speaking, has its own exam situation. It has always had a very different set of exams. Let us face it: Wales is backtracking. It is doing examinations by a different name, but they are still examinations. That is not just my view. The National Association of Head Teachers (NAHT) in Wales said that they are examinations. Where we can peel through the uncertainty in what Wales is doing, the proposals show that Wales is doing external assessments that are externally set and externally marked. Presumably, if those are going to be fair to every student, they will have to be done on the same basis for each student, which means examination conditions. If you are doing an external assessment that is externally set and marked in exam conditions, how is it not an examination? You can call it something else, but it is still an exam situation. It is bogus, from that point of view. Let us not throw Wales in as an example of a place abandoning exams, because it is doing exams.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): However, Wales has also appointed an independent panel to ensure engagement with the sector, and Scotland has gone further and cancelled Nationals and Highers.

I need to move us on, Minister.

Mr Butler: Will you guys clarify that you can see and hear me? My signal is pretty poor.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): We can see and hear you loud and clear.

Mr Weir: I can hear you loud and clear as well, Robbie.

Mr Butler: Thank you, Chair and Minister. My remarks follow on from most of what has been covered, but I hope that you can maybe give some clarity to things, Minister. I agree that you have made statements on examinations and school closures, but your rationale for doing so is missing. For instance, I understand and accept that school closures are not simple, because there are impacts on vulnerable pupils; for example, those with SEN or medical conditions that need to be taken into

consideration. However, your rationale for that has been lacking. At the start of your briefing, you hinted that the Department of Health was not contributing or was not coming to you with an ask. I do not believe that it is for that Department to ask. You are the Minister for Education. Is it not fair, then, to suggest that what is missing are the details on how and why you are coming to those decisions? Let us take the first one, for instance, which is the closure or non-closure of schools at the end of this week.

Mr Weir: Robbie, we try to make the information as clear as possible. You are right in that a decision does not lie with the Department of Health. However, that Department, in the broader bits of regulations, has said, "Here is our assessment of the impact of the opening or closing of a particular sector". It has fairly consistently given an indication, while saying that other factors will outweigh this, of the impact on the R rate of schools being open. I have to be careful here; I do not want to breach too much of what has been said in the Executive. However, it is fair to say that the principal people have said that the impact of closing early will at best be uncertain and may even be counterproductive. It is not simply about what happens in schools but about what behavioural aspects replaces that. The biggest single outbreak that we had was in Craigavon, and it was fuelled by socialisation that took place towards the end of the Halloween break. It was about what was happening outside school. There is a real concern — I have heard this from quite a number of principals — that, particularly in the post-primary sector, if you simply close schools early, the level of engagement with remote learning in what would, effectively, be the week before Christmas, may be somewhat limited.

Actually, there is a real concern that teenagers in particular will see that as a longer period off and that behavioural aspects would actually drive up the R number to a much greater extent than it would if they were in school. As for younger children, they may well spend a good deal of that week simply being taken around shopping centres by their parents and out into the community.

There is the health side of it as well as the educational side, and there is also the impact on parents to consider, which is why I have also had a lot of correspondence, saying, "Please, whatever you do, don't close the schools early."

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): Robbie, will you grace me with a very quick comment? I will factor it in. Minister, I do not think that this is about just the R rate; it is about giving teaching, non-teaching staff and children a Christmas with loved ones after a brutally difficult pandemic. I will leave it at that.

I do not want to use Robbie's time. Robbie, do you want to come back in?

Mr Butler: Yes —

Mr Weir: Yes, but, sorry, Chair —.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): Sorry, Minister, you are having fair time. I need to let Robbie come back in.

Mr Weir: No, you cannot just throw out a comment and not let me respond.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): OK, be brief, then. Go ahead.

Mr Weir: OK, I will be brief. The R rate is so important because if people are catching the virus through different means or exposing themselves by close contact, that will also impact on families and prevent people being able to spend Christmastime with loved ones. If everybody was going out of school and simply remaining in their home for that period of time, not going out and operating in a form of bubble, that may be a different situation from a health point of view, but that is not the way that the behavioural aspects will happen.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): Robbie.

Mr Butler: Thank you, Chair, and thank you, Minister. To be fair, the interjection by the Chair and your response, Minister, go to the root of my position and my point. You stated those things to the Committee today, but the discussion has been raging for certainly more than a week.

I think that people in Northern Ireland, whether they are students, teachers or parents, have the capacity to understand information when it is given to them. If you can back up your position with fact

or if you have asked the Department of Health for that information, that is probably forgivable. What is difficult to understand is when there is just a statement that says that the schools will remain open. People could factor that in if there was a scientific and medical reason for it.

Mr Weir: What has been said by the medical people, Robbie, is that the impact if you were to close early would, at best, be uncertain. While there may be other times of the year that you could do it from purely a health point of view, with everybody remaining at home, we would have a clear reduction in the R rate, albeit that it may be outweighed by other factors. They are saying that the behavioural aspects in the run-up to Christmas are uncertain and, in the best-case scenario, may have a marginal benefit, and, in the worst case, may be counterproductive. That is what is being said. Conversations take place in the Executive, and it would be inappropriate to give the direct detail of those.

However, that is the sense of where things are on that issue. Believe me, even if a different view was taken across the Executive, if the Department of Health took a view that the right thing was a particular course of action, it would not be short in at least making that recommendation and making clear that that is its position.

Mr Butler: OK. When these fundamental questions are raised, it is important for you, as the Minister, to deliver the rationale behind a decision. Some of that is there today, but it has been missing up to this point. It gives some clarity, even if it does not give the answers that some people require.

I will move on briefly to the examinations for next year. Rather than go over all the ground that has been covered, I will concentrate on what may be the case. I heard you say in the Chamber and on the TV something that I disagree with. You pitched the options as either doing the exams as normal, saying that that is the fairest way, or by ongoing testing and assessment on a monthly basis, saying that it would be unfair to subject pupils to that. I would agree, if it was a binary option, but you and I know that this is not a binary option and that multiple options are on the table. One of those is moderated centre assessments. They could be undertaken by schools under examination conditions. Teachers and teaching bodies have already expressed their ability to do that, and they could be moderated by CCEA. Will you update us on any talks that have been going on about that as a contingency or option?

Mr Weir: First of all, moderated centre-assessed grades will still require a large number of tests, because a school will not want challenges or even to face the possibility of a parent taking a legal challenge against it. I think that one of the impacts of that will be that schools will constantly be testing pupils. You cannot get away from that.

You mentioned moderated assessment grades that are done under examination conditions. If you are putting a child into an examination condition in which they do an assessment, how is that not an examination?

Mr Butler: I am not suggesting that; I am saying that it is another option given that so much classroom time has been lost. You pitched it, Minister, as though there are binary options between constant assessment or examinations at the end, when what we have been asking for are contingencies to examine all the possibilities, and I am suggesting that there is another option [*Inaudible*] pitching one against the other, and that is unfair.

Mr Weir: Robbie, what has been developed through CCEA is a wide range covering all the options that have been there. I think that we are narrowing it down to what the likely result will be. The point with that bid is that examinations test the individual so are not subject to any form of subject —. I think that there are a number of flaws with the centre-assessed proposal. First of all, if schools are to feel confident in what they are predicting, I do not think that you can get away from centre-assessed grades leading to an increased level of testing. If, as I said, that is testing under examination conditions, it strikes me that you will then end up with the worst of all worlds and in a situation that is less robust and fair while creating the stress of examinations. Therefore, I think that you end up with the worst of all worlds with that cocktail of combinations.

Also, from the point of view of moderation, there simply will not be the people with the qualifications to be able to moderate each centre-assessed grade. Who will be the people who will do that? You are talking about tens of thousands of children doing this and assessing whether — it would apply, presumably, some form of rank order — some people are moderating more leniently than others. I think that that is just human nature. I do not see a particularly robust and fair way in which you could have that moderation. However, again, it is one of a wide range of options that are on the table. It is

not one that I think is particularly valuable, because there is a danger that it creates the worst of all worlds in every sphere.

Mr Butler: I disagree with you on that point, but that is probably where we will be.

One of the things that you are probably running into difficulties with, and you are right, is running out of goodwill. That is because when you look at how the assessors and moderators, who, for many years marked and moderated papers, were treated you see that they were disrespected at the end of the process last time so they will not be there next year. We are going to run into difficulties in that way if examinations do not run forward due to COVID.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): OK, that is —.

Mr Butler: As a last question, Chair, I asked you this before, Minister, but you talked about —.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): Robbie, sorry, I will have to stop you there. We are well over time. If I have time at the end, I will bring you back in, OK?

Mr Butler: Thank you, Chair.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): Is William Humphrey there? I know that there was some issue with IT. William? [Pause] No. I will come back to William.

Ms Brogan: I thank the Minister for providing that update. First of all, thank you for welcoming that teachers worked very hard to get schools reopened in August. I certainly echo that.

On the point of vaccinations, we know that, by being in schools, teachers are putting their health and that of their family at risk, so I urge you to ask the Department of Health, or whoever it is, to make our teachers and school workers a priority for the vaccination.

You have been over GCSE, AS and A-level exams. We have been engaging with BTEC students, who have some serious concerns about their workload and coursework. Will you briefly comment on the direction of travel for supporting those students in terms of adjustments or alternative arrangements, please?

Mr Weir: Sorry, Nicola, can you repeat the last bit? You faded out a little bit.

Ms Brogan: Yes. Can you comment on the direction of travel in supporting BTEC students in terms of adjustments or alternative arrangements?

Mr Weir: OK. First, on the vaccine side, I do not want anybody to think that I am in any way criticising the Department of Health if this is not successful. I will make that argument to the Department of Health. To be fair to the Department of Health, and, indeed, the Executive, it is not in their gift to be able to deliver on that, because the decision will be taken in a wider context outside Northern Ireland.

As regards the BTEC, I will pass you over to Karen.

Mrs Karen McCullough (Department of Education): Hopefully, I can answer your question. If not, I will come back to you in more detail. The qualifications sit in the Department for the Economy, but, obviously, they are delivered in schools. The CCEA regulator has been working with the other regulators on further flexibilities and adaptations in those vocational qualifications. On 3 December, Ofqual announced that further changes to the vocational and technical qualifications will allow awarding bodies to reduce the number of units that are being assessed and to implement further flexibilities in, as I say, assessment and awarding, as will be the case for other general qualifications. That is being taken forward, as far as I am aware.

Ms Brogan: OK. Thank you for that update. Finally, Minister, I want to ask you about the childcare support fund. There were complaints that the previous fund was too complex and slow to allocate money. What assurances can you give to the childcare sector that a more efficient and timely allocation of funding is now in place?

Mr Weir: There have been two sets of childcare funds. The first one was run by the Business Services Organisation (BSO), and, yes, I think that there was a lot of criticism of it, because only a small percentage was progressed in time. To be fair, the more recent one that was run by the early years organisations resulted in — you always slightly overpitch it to ensure that you have enough money — more than 90% of the money in the budget being claimed directly. As I say, you will always overestimate. The second one saw much more rapid movement and was a much more efficient system. Some lessons were learnt from the problems created by the first fund, which was, I think, overly bureaucratic. Indeed, there were attempts to help and support BSO, but there was not a great deal of interest in that. Early years organisations did a much more efficient job in delivering the funding, so there is confidence that there will be delivery on this one. Given that the amounts involved are relatively straightforward, it is not an overly complex process, so there is confidence that the money will be got out.

Ms Brogan: Hopefully, that is the case. The last announcement was that — correct me if I am wrong — the fund will cover from September to December, but it opened for applications only last Friday, 4 December. When should applicants expect to receive payments?

Mr Weir: As soon as possible. I do not have an exact date. Nicola, we are happy to provide further information to the Committee on the timing.

Ms Brogan: No problem. Thank you for that.

Mr Weir: I should point out that one of the reasons why it is a bit later is that we got the money through only in, I think, November, when a range of additional COVID allocations were put in place and agreed by the Executive. We had been bidding for that money for some time, but we got the green light only at that point. Sorry, it was 29 October when there was agreement at the Executive to allocate that money. The process has been running from that point.

Ms Brogan: OK. Thank you, Minister.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): I will bring in Justin McNulty. I advise William Humphrey that, if his internet is working, he should try to get a message to me or the Clerk to bring him back in.

Mr McNulty: Thank you, Minister, and thank you, Ricky, Gary, James and Karen. I second what others and the Minister said about what teachers, principals and school staff are doing, what they have been through over the past number of months and the lengths to which they have gone to try to ensure that children's education is disrupted as minimally as possible, often at medical risk to themselves. That is to be commended. We need to recognise the work that our teachers are doing.

Minister, how will principals get a break for Christmas, when some schools will remain open until 22 December? They worked tirelessly to get the schools back open in August, and they were contact tracing over Halloween. How do you expect them to be on call for five days after the schools close? As I said, many of the schools will not close until 22 December in line with the EA holidays, so that will take them to 27 December. During the holidays, you expect them to read the 68-page revised COVID-19 restart document, respond to the special educational needs consultation, which closes in January, then implement the legislation alongside the implementation and oversight of contact tracing, time budgets, Engage money and well-being money. When will they get a break?

Mr Weir: The SEN consultation was extended to allow people a bit of extra time. Extending a consultation is never a particularly bad thing, provided that we get it right. A lot of hard work has been going on. The additional element of funding through Engage and other opportunities relating to mental health have been there for some time and have been allocated. I suspect that a lot of those decisions will already have been made.

You mentioned documentation. It is always the case that there will be constant iterations of advice from public health. The general principle with any advice is that it will, largely, remain the same, but we always have to have a little bit of a refresher due to additional pieces of information. Changes in that are relatively small in the grand scheme of things, so they should not make too much of a direct impact.

I appreciate that you had a question down for yesterday but that it was not able to be taken in the Chamber. We are working with the PHA on an initial pilot with a couple of schools in Limavady on a

more rapid testing regime. If that works out, it will be helpful. It could be major advantage to schools in minimising disruption and in ensuring that students can be in place. Good work is going on there.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): Justin, I will come in very briefly. Minister, Justin asked you a clear question: what level of break are principals and teachers going to get over this Christmas holiday? How many days? What is your understanding of the break that they will get?

Mr Weir: My understanding is that, largely speaking, they are getting their normal holidays. It will be according to the normal dates that are put in place for schools. All of us are facing additional burdens because of COVID. There is no getting around that. I am sure that all of us will be doing things over the Christmas break that, normally, we would not be doing. The break will be the same as it normally is.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): Justin, do you want to come in on that?

Mr McNulty: That does not really wash, given the extra burden that there has been on principals and teaching staff over the past number of months — almost a year. It is extraordinary to think that they will have to continue to work on contact tracing after the schools close. That needs more interrogation.

Mr Weir: Contact tracing will continue until we have a much wider testing regime. Irrespective of whether dates are moved, there would still be some activity. Most school principals will not have to do any contact tracing. Inevitably, however, there will be some risk of that happening, whatever dates may be in place. Unfortunately, many of us will find that things crop up over the Christmas period that will have an impact on all of us. There are complications arising from COVID-19 and from the wider public health situation.

Mr McNulty: As Karen said earlier, some pupils are now in their third period of self-isolation, and that is having an enormous impact on their mental health. They are concerned about the impact on their examination performance when they have had less face-to-face time with their teachers and their peers. In the short term, I am concerned about what will happen if there are confirmed COVID-19 cases next week. The Minister will understand that one case in a GCSE year group can cause 40 pupils to have to self-isolate. If that happens next week, there will be pupils who will be unable to join their families over Christmas. What is your perspective on that?

Mr Weir: Let us remember what represents close contact: it is if you are within two metres of someone for more than 15 minutes. People are sitting in the same places each day and in most cases where there has been an outbreak it has been down to one individual. There is no reason why there should be 40 contacts with one individual.

Mr McNulty: Teachers have told me that that is happening. One case in a classroom —.

Mr Weir: Sometimes that can be down to interpretation. Close contact is defined as being within two metres for more than 15 minutes.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): Yes, but it is also more than that, Minister. It can also be one metre for less time than that.

Mr Weir: That is if there is close contact. The point should be that if people are in different parts of a room, it is not the case that the entire room is suddenly in close contact. The figures suggest that that is the case. Different people will interpret that issue differently, but that is the guidance from the PHA.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): Yes. Five hundred pupils from one school are self-isolating at the moment. Justin, I will —.

Mr Weir: Not all those pupils have been identified as having been in close contact. They are self-isolating largely because the school has taken the view that, rather than having a mixture of remote learning and face-to-face learning, it was easier to ask them to self-isolate.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): To have remote learning; yes, that seems sensible.

Mr Weir: There was a very large outbreak in that school, part of which was linked to social contact at an 18th birthday party on the Saturday before the outbreak. That shows the danger of community transfer and the need for all of us to be vigilant, not just over Christmas but beyond it.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): Agreed.

Mr McNulty: All of us on the Committee have concerns about the impact of isolation. The greatest impacts are being felt by kids from disadvantaged backgrounds and kids who have special educational needs. They are being left behind, and the attainment gap is growing because of the pandemic. That has to be addressed. Is 10p per pupil per day enough to address the lost learning and the effect on the emotional well-being of our primary-school pupils as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic?

Mr Weir: With respect, we have a budget from the Executive. This is not just about the Department; it is about the Executive as a whole. The Engage programme, for instance, uses people who are on the substitute list to carry out certain duties. If you are saying that it should be £1 per day, we would need £120 million. If the Executive are willing to give me £120 million, believe me, there are ways that I can spend it. I may not be able to find Engage personnel, for instance, to do all of that. We would all like to do more, but there are limits to the budget. The investment in the Engage programme has been widely welcomed, and it has had a good reception from schools that I have visited.

Mr McNulty: Minister, I am concerned about that. You are saying that we are giving all the resources necessary to ensure that no kids are left further behind as a result of the pandemic. You are telling me that 10p a day for Engage and well-being — [*Interruption.*]

Mr Weir: No. I am saying something slightly different; I am saying that we are giving all the resources that are available. That is a different from "all the resources that are necessary". If the Executive were to give me £100 million, I could spend £100 million —

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): OK. We have made those points. [*Interruption.*] We need to stop you.

Mr Weir: — but there are massive pressures on public finances.

Mr Humphrey: I join others in thanking our school leaders, teachers and staff in schools and, indeed, those governors who have had to make very difficult decisions throughout this unprecedented year. We need to give some consideration to the decisions that all Ministers make because all Ministers make difficult decisions, and, sometimes, politicians are very keen to criticise Ministers who are outwith their parties. We need to bear that in mind.

I join others in welcoming Barry Mulholland and wish him well in his appointment as chair of the Education Authority. I thank Sharon O'Connor for her contribution.

Speaking as a governor and having spoken to principals in my area, I know how important it is, as we go into the new year, that early decisions are made. The quick and effective sharing of information is crucial for school leaders. I want to tease out a bit more what you were saying about advice from CCEA and school leaders. Can you expand on the sort of advice and consultation that you have been carrying out with them on those issues?

Mr Weir: CCEA drew up a long list of options, on which there have been discussions and iterations. We have a stakeholder group of school principals representing all sectors. This has been talked through with them on a number of occasions. The menu will change a bit, and, sometimes, there is an iterative process as a result. I agree with you about early decisions, and, where possible, we always try to make early decisions. Sometimes, however, they are things that DE does not necessarily have full control of.

The other point that I should make succinctly, because I omitted to make it earlier is, to join others in welcoming Barry Mulholland as chair of the EA and to thank Sharon O'Connor for her years of service with the Education Authority and to wish her all the best.

Mr Humphrey: Having spoken to our party colleague, Nicola Verner, who is a local councillor and manages integrated services in greater Shankill, and to school principals over the last number of weeks, I am becoming increasingly concerned about general well-being and mindfulness. We all know that it is a huge problem. In my constituency of North Belfast and greater Shankill, it is the other

pandemic. What work is being done by government agencies and the community in response to those issues?

Given the huge pressures and the significant change of life that COVID-19 has brought to many homes across Northern Ireland, which is not, for the most part, positive, we need to focus in a joined-up way on those issues. What work is your Department doing with the Department of Health, the Public Health Agency, communities, local councils, and the wider community on consulting governors, for example, on general mindfulness and well-being? It is a huge issue.

Mr Weir: I agree. There will be ongoing work. There are two interventions. One has happened already, and one is due to happen. Funding of £5 million was made available in response to COVID-19 on broader mental health and well-being. Two hundred and fifty thousand pounds of that went to youth services, and the remainder went directly to schools.

There is flexibility, so it can be spent on mindfulness, among other things. Money has been allocated in the budget and will be rolled out annually. Health contributed about £6.5 million that will be mainstreamed in the budget and can go on mental health. Part of the issue is that there is no one-size-fits-all solution for individuals, as you will appreciate.

In many of the schools that I have visited, the staff have said that the general resilience of the children has been amazing. However, that may mask some individual cases, and those cases may not necessarily involve people known to Health or Education. We also need to tackle what happens in families behind closed doors.

Mr Humphrey: OK. Chair, that is me. I have to leave the meeting shortly for reasons that I outlined to the Clerk earlier. Thanks, Minister.

Mr M Bradley: I thank the Minister and his team for being here today. The questions have been a wee bit robust, so I will not go into a preamble or an attack. I will just say to the Minister that the greatest asset that any organisation has is its staff. They are often overworked and overlooked but are, nonetheless, our greatest asset. I echo the previous member's gratitude to our teachers and helpers for their exceptional work [*Inaudible.*] Minister, as you know, while I remain in favour of the transfer test, I have concerns about it and believe that its delivery needs to be reformed. However, given that we are in the midst of a pandemic, will the Department support those who are organising and taking the transfer test, including providing guidance to boards of governors, to ensure safety?

Mr Weir: Yes. Guidance has been issued, and, as was raised in the Assembly yesterday, it has been indicated that they should have a wide range of criteria in place. That is due probably at the end of this week for schools, although it is their choice. Advice has also been given on health and safety. We have written to the schools that will be hosting tests and to the test providers, and there is an expectation that the range of health mitigations that need to be put in place will be the same for all examinations — the transfer test, GSCEs, A levels, etc.

Mrs McCullough: Two letters have been sent to the providers of the test about the need to follow the public health guidance and, specifically, about how to deal with pupils from different primary schools and class bubbles. We wrote again last week to advise the test providers that they must ensure that they are complying with the requirements of the health protection legislation; outlined that they need to be able to provide the detail of the advice that they sought and the assessment of risk undertaken by them in schools; and said that they should make sure that they are clear in advising parents of the steps that they have taken and the mitigations that have been put in place.

Mr M Bradley: I have one final question, Chair. Will the Department provide additional support or guidance to help teaching staff to carry out track-and-trace measures to ensure that tests are done in a safe manner?

Mr Weir: Do not forget that, ultimately, these are private tests. When schools are providing this, we have given them advice on what they need to have in place. However, as I say, these are private tests, and the responsibility will lie with those who have made a choice, if you like, to hold the tests. Consequently, they have to ensure that all the proper measures are put in place as well.

Mr M Bradley: Thank you, Minister. That is me, Chair.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): Minister, is it possible for the tests to be delivered in accordance with public health guidance?

Mr Weir: Yes. Do not forget that we are talking about, on any one occasion, accommodating roughly 10,000 pupils; whereas, on a normal school day, there will be about a third of a million.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): Some may not leave their bubble for the whole day. Have you sought the advice of the Chief Medical Officer?

Mr Weir: The test organisations will have to follow the public health guidance and ensure that the children doing the test do so within the legislation. Everything will be complied with. The guidance that we have issued is to ensure that all public health guidance is complied with.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): OK. You have obviously sought guidance on the impact of the R rate on an early cessation of school-based learning. Have you sought advice from the Chief Scientific Adviser and the Chief Medical Officer on the impact that setting these tests might have on the R rate?

Mr Weir: Well, given the fact [*Interruption*] — what was that, sorry?

Mrs McCullough: The duty of care is on the providers.

Mr Weir: First, the duty of care is on the providers. You ask whether we have sought advice on the impact on the R rate. Health advisers, particularly at the Executive, will always assess how various aspects of life will affect the R rate. Issues were raised on a range of measures — not just in schools but beyond them — for the R rate. That will be constantly reviewed. The duty is there.

As for the R rate, generally speaking, on a test day there will be gatherings, across a wide range of settings, of about 10,000 pupils, whereas on a normal school day a third of a million pupils will be gathering. However, the risk assessment is, ultimately, one for those conducting the tests.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): A final question from me, as I realise that you have given us quite a bit of your time. In terms of the consideration of any cessation of school-based learning prior to Friday 18 December, did you even scope different options? You have the stakeholders' forum, the practitioners' forum and the secondary students' union available to you. Have you even scoped a one-day or two-day cessation of school-based learning, with special schools or schools for key workers remaining open? Have you scoped any of those options, or are you adamant that schools will remain open as late as the week commencing 21 December?

Mr Weir: Chair, given where periods of self-isolation would be, it is hard to see what difference one or two days would make. Schools already have some flexibility in deciding the school year. The important thing is that schools remain open for their pupils and that they provide face-to-face learning. I have made it clear that I think that schools need to remain open. That has been my consistent position.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): OK.

Mr Weir: Chair, I appreciate that, at various stages, there have been different views expressed by me and by Committee members, but, since this is last time that I will be before the Committee prior to it, I wish all Committee members — even those biting at me — a very happy Christmas. I hope that everything goes well for everyone.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): You said that you hoped to make an announcement next week about examinations.

Mr Weir: Yes.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): Hopefully, it will not be the last time we see you before Christmas.

Mr Weir: No, no, it would be —.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): I thoroughly enjoy our interaction, Peter [*Laughter.*]

Mr Weir: Obviously, I should have said, "In this forum".

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): Genuinely, Peter — [*Interruption*] — go ahead.

Mr Weir: If members want to email me privately with what each of them wants as a Christmas present [*Laughter*] I am sure —

Mr McCrossan: Mine is already away [*Laughter*.]

Mr Weir: I know that Danny may be sending Santa in the Department of Education a long list, probably involving issues with examinations and a range of other activities. I will see you at the Assembly next week, and I wish everybody a happy Christmas.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): Minister, we have set out clearly and consistently what, we think, are some of the key issues for you to take action on in weeks rather than months. We look forward to getting greater clarity from you next week on examinations.

We have made our views clear on the importance of ceasing school-based learning adequately in advance of Christmas to ensure that teaching and non-teaching staff and pupils, who have sacrificed much recently, have the Christmas that they deserve. We sincerely wish you and your departmental staff rest over that period. Thank you.