



Committee for Education

OFFICIAL REPORT (Hansard)

School Restart, Examinations and Grading:
Mr Peter Weir MLA, Minister of Education

10 February 2021

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

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Members present for all or part of the proceedings:

Mr Chris Lyttle (Chairperson)
Mr Pat Sheehan (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 Ricky Irwin	Department of Education
Mrs Karen McCullough	Department of Education
Mrs Janis Scallon	Department of Education

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): Are you there, Minister, and are the departmental officials in place?

Mr Weir (The Minister of Education): Yes, Chair, we are here. Ricky and Karen are with me on-site, and Janis is joining us down the line.

The Committee has highlighted four issues, and we are happy to have a conversation about those. Do you want to take each issue separately? I am happy to accommodate whatever format you choose.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): What are your timings this morning, Minister?

Mr Weir: We are booked in until about 11.00 am.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): That is a good amount of time. Members have suggested that we might move straight to questions, if you are content.

Mr Weir: I have no problem with that. Will you take each of the four topics in turn or all of them holistically, with questions being asked? I am flexible in any direction.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): I need the Committee Clerk to remind me of the four topics. Four sounds optimistic, Minister.

Mr Weir: From our end, the four issues of interest to the Committee of which we are aware are, first, the concept of redoing the academic year; secondly, we want to follow up on questions about the qualifications and examinations situation; thirdly, there is the issue of vaccinations; and, fourthly, the specific issue of the Welsh Joint Education Committee (WJEC). Those are the four issues that were indicated to us.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): Those topics will definitely be covered in the questions, Minister. We will move to questions, and you will be well prepped on all those issues.

Mr Weir: OK, well, whatever *[Laughter.]*

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): Thank you. I will bring in the Deputy Chairperson, Pat Sheehan, to start us off.

Mr Sheehan: Thank you, Chair, and thanks for coming along this morning, Minister. I want to ask you about three issues, and I will try to be as succinct as possible: the WJEC qualifications; a recovery plan for the reopening of schools; and the vaccination programme for special schools.

On the WJEC qualifications, the narrative out there is that you felt slighted by the Welsh board not informing you beforehand that it was cancelling exams this year. The talk is that you threw the toys out of the pram. The consequence of that, Minister, is that you have reduced options for students. Some subjects are not covered by any other examination board. There was no consultation with teachers, and you have created more uncertainty at a time when there should be more certainty for students. I am really asking you to revisit the issue, unless you want to clarify it. It is important that education policy is not made on the basis of the Minister having a hissy fit.

Mr Weir: OK. I presume that you want to take each issue in turn.

The decision was not taken on the basis of any hissy fit. I feel no personal slight or, indeed, personal animus towards the issue. I will come in a moment to the issue of options being reduced. The concern is that Wales appears to be in the process of going on a solo run. It should be remembered that the position that it is taking as regards the 2021 examinations has no bearing whatever on the WJEC qualifications. The concern arose out of an examination in Wales of what had happened in 2020 and the Welsh Government report. The report recommended robust discussion and stated that this was an opportunity to move away from the current examination system. The concern is about the long-term trajectory of Welsh examinations and WJEC examinations — I will come to the point about WJEC directly in a moment — and the fact that, effectively, it appeared to be on the route of unilaterally detaching itself.

Mention was made of options and limiting choice for students. Just to clarify, the position is that anyone doing an exam or entering a course this year will not be impacted in any way. We have to issue an advice circular to schools around December/January each year on the boards that are doable. A decision was taken a number of years ago that WJEC, as regards GCSEs, was not to be adopted in Northern Ireland, so there is a precedent.

At this stage — this is under constant review — we are advising that there is a concern about entries at AS level from September 2022. That comes, I think, from the regulator. What will that mean in practice if things simply carry on as they are at present? It will mean that anyone completing AS or A levels in 2021 will be covered. Anybody entering AS or A levels under WJEC in September 2021 and, therefore, due to complete those exams in September 2022 would be covered. Similarly, anybody doing an AS in 2021 and entering A2 level in September 2022 would complete them in 2023. There is plenty of time for Wales to rectify the situation. WJEC operates under two limbs. It produces exams, which are badged under WJEC. Those exams appear to be subject to movement —

Mr Sheehan: Sorry, Minister, I apologise for interrupting you, but I am sure that you will appreciate that we have only a limited amount of time.

Mr Weir: OK. I just want to make this point. There are at least three examination boards for each course. WJEC also badged itself under a different title, which, largely speaking, provides external examinations under Eduqas. They are, effectively, Welsh examinations put through that route, and there is no bar on any of those moving forward on that basis.

As I indicated, because this will not take effect for another 19 months, if there is clarity from Wales and it can show that it will still be compatible with the wider national picture on examinations, there is still an opportunity for reinstatement, but we need to be assured of the quality of the exam process for students in Northern Ireland.

Mr Sheehan: Thanks for that. It does not really address the issues that I raised, and I ask you to consult teachers and to revisit the matter.

I want to move on to the recovery programme when schools reopen. I acknowledge the fact that you set up the Engage programme and other programmes, albeit it had a fairly limited budget and, to some extent, was only scratching the surface of the problems. However, you will be aware that Professor Siobhán O'Neill was with the Committee last week, and she agreed with the view that a tsunami of well-being and emotional problems is coming at us from among our children and young people.

We face an unprecedented crisis in our schools, and that demands an unprecedented response. We need a cohesive and integrated strategy that is properly funded and is not piecemeal, disjointed, ad hoc or made up as we go along. I listened to officials last week talking about the different bits and pieces of funding here and there, and my head was dizzy by the end of it. We need a proper integrated strategy, and the person responsible for that is you, Minister. I want you to tell us here today what your plans are for reopening schools and recovery and dealing with the emotional and well-being issues, as well as plans for dealing with kids who are falling behind in their learning. Often, those two groups are cross-cutting.

Mr Weir: OK. Thank you, Pat. There is a lot in that, but I will try to deal with it all.

The Executive will take broader decisions on the reopening of schools. Discussions are going on this week with Health, the trade union side and stakeholders, but the Executive will take a decision, potentially around 18 February or shortly thereafter. We want to be in a position to give certainty post 5 March. From that point of view, there is nothing definitive at this point because, ultimately, no decisions have been taken. I agree with you on a lot of the issues that you have raised. From an academic and a well-being point of view, the sooner we can get children safely back into school, the better.

You mentioned the situation with academic and well-being recovery. When the last Executive paper was put, it extended remote learning until 5 March, and there were three prongs to it. The first was about the extension; the second was the aim to get children back; and the third was to accept in principle that a recovery programme was needed, which was accepted by the Executive as a whole. From a financial point of view, that would need to cover an academic level of recovery with a roll-out similar to Engage, which has been successful where it has been put in place. One problem that Engage ran into was probably during this term, where a lot of schools had worked out their strategy on the basis of direct face-to-face teaching through Engage. Clearly, some of that has been disrupted by the events of the past month or so. It will need to involve a level of recovery during the summer through financially supported voluntary work by schools and other organisations. It will need to involve funding for well-being, and, indeed, a precedent was set when we got funding for a well-being scheme last year. That will go alongside the money that we have mainstreamed directly this year within budget. That is an extra £5 million from Education and £1.5 million coming directly from Health.

As for the scale of ambition, I can certainly be as ambitious as anybody. Realistically, the funding is likely to come through the COVID money for 2021-22 that is part of a broad recovery programme. As your colleague the Finance Minister will explain, at the moment, across the board, budgets have flatlined. If the Education budget is increased significantly, I can increase a lot of those programmes significantly, but I cannot get money that is not there. I will put a paper to the Executive that will deal with academic and well-being recovery and will look for a package that will be funded specifically out of COVID money, notwithstanding the fact —

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): Sorry, Minister and Deputy Chair, I need to cut across you. We are out of time on that question. Pat, can you make a concise closing comment?

Mr Sheehan: I have a final point and a final question.

I understand the financial position, Minister. It is disappointing that we face more Tory austerity, but an integrated strategy will have to deal with issues other than finance. You know that, in west Belfast, the

West Belfast Partnership carries out excellent work outside the normal school setting, and you need to utilise the community and voluntary sector and sporting organisations so that we have a cohesive, integrated strategy that deals not only with academic issues but well-being and psychological problems.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): Thanks, Pat. Minister, I am sure that you will have an opportunity to draw a bit more from other questions.

Mr Sheehan: That is OK.

Mr Newton: I welcome the Minister and his team to the meeting. I will take up three questions, if I can, Minister. I want to continue the discussion about the concept of the academic year and go a bit further on that.

The budget was mentioned, and the Deputy Chair referred to the involvement of a number of organisations. We are in agreement about that. In developing the concept, Minister, you mentioned the Finance Minister, but the Health Minister and the Communities Minister also need to be on board as the programme might be developed and rolled out. Minister, you will present a paper to the Executive. Have your officials had any conversations with Health and Communities about the roll-out of this concept? Do you want to deal with that question and then take the other two?

Mr Weir: A range of organisations will need to step up. I made a point specifically about recovery. With the summer in particular, there is a clear role. Last year, approximately 50 schools volunteered and were funded to provide academic summer activities. If we want to attain an optimum level, we would look to organisations beyond and additional to schools. There is a role for the Health and Communities Departments in supporting young people, and we will have that conversation at official level and in the Executive.

Mr Newton: To roll out such a programme across Northern Ireland is ambitious, and it may well be that parts of Northern Ireland will take it up, be extremely enthusiastic and have excellent delivery, whereas other areas will be less enthusiastic, and it falls. Some students and pupils may benefit, but others may be left behind.

Mr Weir: I do not think that that will be the case. There will be short-term interventions during the summer. As part of that, the first aim is to seek schools that will volunteer to provide interventions over the summer, and, further to that, we want to look at whether that should be confined to schools. It would be an academic, teaching catch-up, and others would contribute. The principal academic catch-up would be similar to what we have had with Engage. That would need to be rolled out during the full financial year. The driver and provider of that would mainly be schools, and it would give opportunities to bring in substitute teachers to provide the required additional teaching, as they have done under Engage. Schools might want to look at the opportunities for staff who want to do overtime, for instance.

I am conscious that it has been a tough time for teachers and that that tough time is ongoing, so, to use a football analogy, the more fresh legs we can bring on to the pitch, the better. If any form of renewed Engage programme is brought in, whatever way it is supplemented, funding will be made available to every school, and greater funding will be based on school size and in areas with the highest levels of social deprivation. It is not an absolute, but the concern is that those who are most socially deprived from an education point of view will have suffered most during COVID.

Mr Newton: I could buy in to that concept. Will you update the Committee on the vaccination programme, particularly in special needs schools?

Mr Weir: I will give a brief outline and then bring in Ricky, who has been dealing directly with that. It remains my position that I want teachers to be prioritised and, specifically, special schools. Concerns were raised by the Department of Health that it wants to ensure that whatever programme is there in general strictly follows the guidance of the Joint Committee on Vaccination and Immunisation — the JCVI; I always try to get the initials the right way round. The Health Department was resistant to the idea of something being simply rolled out to everyone, and the Executive took a view that they wanted to have consensus. The Department of Health has said that there is a range of children for whom intervention is required and, therefore, a range of staff arising out of that, as we have seen with the first cohort. I will hand over to Ricky for the up-to-date position.

Mr Ricky Irwin (Department of Education): The staff who would receive the vaccine are those who are directly involved in the care of children and young people with the most complex healthcare needs and who are deemed clinically vulnerable to the severe effects of COVID. It would be those who work in close proximity for prolonged periods, providing a range of interventions, including personal and intimate care and invasive procedures. We have a list of the clinical procedures with which those staff are involved, but it is not an exhaustive list. The current position is that community paediatrics is identifying extremely vulnerable children. That list will be finalised by the Public Health Agency (PHA) and then shared with the Education Authority (EA). The schools will be identified from that, so the staff who support those children will be identified. I have a further meeting with the deputy chief medical officers this afternoon to get an update on where they are with that process. At this point, it is a Health-led process. I am hopeful that, by the end of this week, we will be in a much better position in terms of identifying the children and staff and that we can then move forward to vaccination as quickly as possible.

Mr Newton: *[Inaudible.]* Before my time runs out, could I have an update on the Engage programme, with a particular emphasis on special needs schools?

Mr Weir: Roughly £300,000 has been made available. Special needs schools, as you know, do not directly look after their own budgets; it is done through EA.

On the broader bit of Engage, the roll-out has been considerable. As I indicated, one of the problems has been that a number of schools had plans worked out for the period from January onwards, some of which have not been delivered in their entirety. Apart from anything else, that is an additional reason to further the programme during the 2021-22 financial year. I am drawing a distinction between that and the school year because we will want to do stuff over the summer. Although the intention was always that EA would develop that separately, there will be an upfront commitment directly to special schools when further proposals are brought to the Executive for 2021-22. However, most special educational needs (SEN) children are in mainstream schools and get help there.

Mr Irwin: The special school programme has not yet started. We are subject to final business case approval. It is at an advanced stage. As the Minister said, the funding has been secured, so we hope to move forward with that as soon as possible.

Mr McCrossan: Good morning, everybody. Minister, an increasing number of people write to my office every day — indeed, the Committee has received letters as well — asking why the Department and the Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment (CCEA) did not have a ready-made contingency plan for the cancellation of exams in 2021. It was clear from last year that such an eventuality was a distinct possibility and that the ramifications would be massive. We are told that, due to the mounting levels of disruption and the lack of data, it will be even more difficult to award grades. Consequently, early ministerial direction was essential. We made that point continually to you, Minister. I get the situation that we are in. Will you explain your rationale for not having commissioned a plan B to be ready in time for the commencement of the current academic year or shortly afterwards?

Mr Weir: There are two things. CCEA was told last autumn to start to prepare contingency plans in the event that examinations could not take place. I have always indicated that the best possible route is for exams to take place. With some of the work that is required, there is a range of legal problems that need to be overcome. It is not something that you write on the back of a cigarette packet or on one side of A4; there is an awful lot of work to do. From a contingency point of view, CCEA has been working on that since last autumn. That was ready to roll when the position was indicated, which is why the detail could be revealed in January for this June. As for the other jurisdictions, Wales is still trying to sort out where it is; Scotland is still working on stuff; England is still at consultation stage; and, as far as I am aware, the Republic of Ireland's position is that it will still do exams, although I stand to be corrected on that. We have moved more quickly on that than any other jurisdiction, but it requires a considerable amount of work. Frankly, the idea that you would be able to judge in September where you will be the following June and have everything in place for September is premature. Everything is being put in place, and the work is being done in connection with that. Direction was given a considerable time ago, and that work is being brought to fruition on that basis.

Mr McCrossan: Minister, I think that we all appreciate that most schools accepted that there would not be exams, and most believe that you just did not move quickly enough on that.

Mr Weir: With respect, that is not what we got from the stakeholders when we spoke to them; indeed, for instance, when the slimmed-down curriculum ask, if you like, was revealed prior to Christmas, it was broadly supported by many stakeholders from across the system, be they selective, non-selective or from whatever sector. We have to let the facts speak for themselves, rather than [*Inaudible*.]

Mr McCrossan: Yes, but —.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): Daniel and Minister, if I can come in briefly. The report by the Secondary Students' Union of Northern Ireland on its mental health survey established that the delay in decision-making on exams caused anxiety for the pupils who responded to the survey. The decision in Wales was taken on 10 November, and our decision was taken on, I think, 6 January, so I think that Daniel's point pertains.

Mr Weir: With respect, Chair, Wales is still trying to work out what it is doing. Effectively, it has been plunged back into uncertainty once or possibly twice. A level of uncertainty has been produced by Wales. Wales made an announcement on 10 November without having anything to back up how it would do any of it —.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): OK. Let me bring Daniel back in, Minister. Thanks, Daniel.

Mr McCrossan: Minister, we are not going to agree on this, but the stakeholders, if you want to call them that, from across Northern Ireland whom I speak to are not telling me what you are telling me. They would fundamentally disagree with your account of events, to put it bluntly.

I will ask you another question. Looking back, do you think that you should have given CCEA, for instance, the resources to have such a plan in place much sooner? Will you assure us that the guidance that you will now issue on how grades will be arrived at will fully take account of the lack of hard data available for the cohorts facing GCSEs, AS levels and A levels? Will you adequately support teachers in arriving at fair grades for all our children?

Mr Weir: Yes. Full support will be given. The guidance will be issued by CCEA to schools. We have made that clear.

One of the problems in getting absolutely fair grades — we are trying to find the best solution — whether it is this year, last year or whatever, is that the disruption that has been caused by COVID has limited the available level of data. We say that there should be the maximum amount of data and of any form of evidence. That is why we are having to produce something that says, "Here is a formula, and you can take this piece of data and weight it at a particular level". Actually, holistically, the guidance will be based on professional judgement that draws from the evidence that is there. The guidance will come from that.

Sufficient resources have been supplied. There is a range of things for which, at times, you could put in all the resources in the world. It is not a question of doubling the resources and halving the time in which things can be produced. A range of things have to be gone through, work has to be done and you cannot simply draw the individuals off the shelf who can do particular things. There are practical limitations.

I certainly think that CCEA has all the resources that will be needed. Similarly, any support that teachers need will be provided. They are providing professional judgement on the basis of evidence, and that will be externally monitored by CCEA.

Mr McCrossan: OK. Minister, I want to talk about transfer tests. I am keeping an eye on the time. Now that you have seen the admissions criteria produced by 200 post-primary schools and have had the opportunity to lament the disadvantage caused to some children who are the eldest in their family, from the Travelling community or in receipt of free school meals, do you regret not heeding the SDLP's call to use the additional powers conferred on you by section 38 of the Coronavirus Act 2020 for this year only? We have mentioned this before, Minister; I have spoken to you directly about it.

Mr Weir: I am sorry —.

Mr McCrossan: You could have done that, for example, through the application of the least worst option approach that you have favoured on other occasions.

Mr Weir: You and I were on a television programme a while ago. There are a couple of complications. It would be legally dubious, at best, and would lie outside the role of the Coronavirus Act 2020 to impose conditions. When a certain well-known journalist in Northern Ireland pushed you about the criteria that you wanted to be standardised across the system, you simply said that you wanted to see a fair process and fair criteria. There is no consensus on what those criteria should be. If the SDLP is saying that a role for a transfer test means that there is that level of certainty, I welcome your Damascene conversion on that.

Frankly, there is no point in simply saying, "I want a fair process and fair criteria" without spelling out what those criteria are [*Interruption.*] Legally, you are suggesting something that would go outside the remit of the legislation. The Coronavirus Act 2020 is aimed at specific areas, and, in any attempt to go beyond that, you are asking me to impose —

Mr McCrossan: Minister, with respect —.

Mr Weir: — a solution that, at best, would be legally dubious in circumstances where, frankly, you do not have a clue what the criteria would be [*Interruption.*]

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): OK, Minister. Thanks, Daniel. I think that that means there are no regrets. Do you want to make your final comment and ask your last question?

Mr McCrossan: Thank you, Chair. With respect, Minister, you could use the coronavirus powers. They have shut down our entire society, so, with respect to you, you could use them to the advantage of children. There are a number of points. You could, for instance, have required the eldest child to be considered on a par with those who had family members already attending the school. You could have required the eldest child to be considered before those with siblings and parents who formerly attended the school. You could have required schools to accept the same percentage of children on free school meals or from the Travelling community as they currently have registered.

I also note that some schools have used criteria from the non-recommended section of the Department of Education's guidance from 2015-16. Do you have any processes in place to check whether those schools had regard to your guidance before proceeding to so blatantly disregard it? If you find that a school has not demonstrated that it had regard to your guidance, will you remove indemnification from it? You have the power to do so, Minister. Those are important points.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): Those are good questions. OK, Daniel —.

Mr McCrossan: You said that there was no easy fix to this. There is not, and we all accept that. However, there are solutions —.

Mr Weir: I do not know whether what you have just read out constitutes an SDLP proposal for criteria, but —.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): I am sorry, Minister; let me pause you. I want some degree of order to this, OK? Daniel has asked a good question. If I am not wrong, in summary, Daniel, you are asking whether the Minister regrets not directing the use of Department of Education-recommended criteria and whether he should have tried to prevent the use of non-recommended Department of Education criteria, the like of which is being seen in a number of schools. It is not about the SDLP, Minister; it is about the criteria. Do you regret not directing the use of those criteria?

Mr Weir: If I could answer the question, Chair. We made it clear to schools what criteria we recommend and what we do not on the basis that schools are using non-academic criteria. Legally, the position is that the authority and the power to set criteria lie with the schools. That is not something that the Department can simply override. Under the 2006 Act, that would require the Assembly to take a view on academic selection before any —.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): For this year and this year only, potentially.

Mr Weir: No. Strictly speaking, the powers in the 2006 Act can be triggered legally only once the Assembly has taken a firm position on academic selection and voted on it. It would not survive any form of legal challenge if we were to try to impose that.

Daniel referred to things being "on a par". The whole point of criteria is that they need to be in ranked order because you are deciding between students. Essentially, if you say, "This criterion puts you in this place, and that criterion puts you in an equal place", that does not solve the problem of who is admitted to a particular school and who is not.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): I understand that. It is safe for me to speak on Daniel's behalf. He has run out of time as well, but I think that his point was that a criterion could be sibling and/or eldest child. Your bottom-line point, Minister, is that your conclusion was that you did not have the power to direct the criteria. Discussing the criteria is using up time that we do not have, Daniel. I will allow you a very concise final point given the amount of time that has been spent on answers to you, but we need to move on. Go ahead.

Mr McCrossan: I expected the Minister to give the answer that he gave, but he must appreciate that, due to COVID, he reduced legal requirements on the Department of Education and EA to provide vital services to the most vulnerable children to a "best endeavour" status when it suited him, so why he did not, in this instance, do the same in order to ensure much greater fairness in admissions remains a mystery to us all.

Mr Weir: Maybe because —.

Mr McCrossan: You could have, Minister, if you wanted to.

Mr Weir: Daniel, the Coronavirus Act is not simply a device that you can do whatever you want with. There are clear indications — [*Interruption.*] Sorry, there are clear indications: if you read the full Act, you will see that there are clear indications that there is a purpose to it and aims for what can and cannot be done. Unfortunately, we had to be in a situation for a short while earlier in the year where there was a limitation because of certain practicalities. That is directly allowed under the Act, and it was done with a great deal of reluctance. Imposing non-academic criteria, academic criteria or criteria on schools where there is a clear legal responsibility on them would be clearly outside the Act. You asked me this: why do one rather than the other? The reality is that I was ultimately forced to do one reluctantly because of circumstances, but I had the legal power to do it; with the other, I did not.

Mr Butler: Minister, on Daniel's last point, the public record will be clear about which parties and individuals actually had the P7 pupils at heart when seeking solutions and a fair outcome.

I will not ask you any questions on the past year's cohort because people are very aware of the public discussions on that and were prepared to put up ideas. However, we have a cohort of P6 pupils who will, in September, go into P7 and possibly have the same problem ahead of them. I have a brief question, Minister. Is it your intention to do the same as you did this year, or will you look to improve and to make some clear contingencies? For instance, last year, I had one on the table that was "Bring it back to primary". I could put that on the table now, and I will try to do that if we are to be in school and doing tests. Secondly, if COVID is still a real threat and children are losing out again, will you be minded to do the same thing, or will the system be improved in order to take into consideration what we have learnt this year?

Mr Weir: Robbie, thanks for that. I appreciate that, while various ideas did not work, you were constructive in your suggestions. Part of the issue then was that schools, as they have the legal responsibility, took that advice, and most found that the routes that could involve some level of academic selection outside a transfer test were not really tenable, which is why the bulk of schools took that view. There has already been an announcement from the Association for Quality Education (AQE) — I am not sure about the Post-primary Transfer Consortium (PPTC) — that its intention is to do the transfer test in November. We all hope to be in a much better situation. Last year indicated that, in order to have an entirely fair or level playing field and something that is robust, there is not really any alternative to transfer tests if academic selection is to be used. This year has also demonstrated the difficulties in simply banishing academic selection, as some people want to do, without any alternative. I am happy to work with others, including you, on any help that can be given. There are constraints on the basis of what lies legally within the powers of school board of governors.

As I indicated, I have absolutely no problem with and have been very supportive of tests being brought back to primary schools; indeed, in my previous tenure in 2016, there was a long-standing — it may be too strong to call it a "ban", but there was certainly a memorandum to primary schools saying, "You are not to do this". That was lifted, so there is absolutely no bar on tests taking place in primary schools. However, for the organisations setting the test, there would be considerable resistance in a

lot of primary schools to the test taking place there. I know that all the main teaching unions are opposed to the test taking place in primary schools. I am more than happy to have discussions on this, but the issue with venue is that it would be inequitable if tests took place in some primary schools but not in others. That would give an advantage to some pupils over others.

Mr Butler: We are short on time, so I will agree with that, Minister. It is incumbent on all of us to remember what happened here. Of about 23,000 children transferring, 16,000 entered through AQE and GL. We affected those who, in good conscience, entered into a competition, and we did not let them see it out. The numbers stack up to be similar every year. We have to exhaust ourselves in doing the best for the children who choose, with their parents, to do that. I agree about the primary schools. I know and am friends with some of the people involved, and I am on the board of governors in a school, so I need to be careful. This is about the children. It is not about the school or an ideology; it is about those pupils having a fair crack at the whip.

We are limited for time, so I will move on, if that is OK, Minister. Sorry, Chris, did you want to come in there?

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): No. Go ahead.

Mr Butler: You are probably prepped for this, Minister, but, last week, a discussion was doing the rounds in the media and some teachers and unions were being questioned about redoing an academic year. This week the tsar in England talked about summer schools and that type of stuff. There is a fantastic article from Evidence for Learning that talks about how all the children who have been impacted will have raised anxiety levels and may have been exposed to trauma, and it says that many of them will have experienced bereavement. In Northern Ireland, in particular, we came into COVID with very poor rates of mental ill health, emotional well-being and those type of things that have obviously been exacerbated by COVID. With regard to any recovery, what scope will you give to ensuring that we put the children in the space and environment to learn? An anxious child does not learn well, and a child who has been exposed to trauma or bereavement does not learn well. What will you do to ensure that our children are in that space to learn the best that they can?

Mr Weir: I indicated that it will be a mixture of the academic and the well-being side. I will bring a paper to the Executive. Academic catch-up needs to take place, and we need to think imaginatively about what can be done on a voluntary basis over the summer, as we did last year.

Tied in with that is additional support for well-being. That additional money will need to be funded directly through the COVID side; indeed, both elements will need to be funded that way. Despite budget pressures, we will maintain the baseline element of the money that was increased this year. Prior to 2020, it was not that there was no support for mental health and well-being; it was that, as a result of the bidding that we made at the budgetary process this time last year and with additional help from Health, we have been able to put £6.5 million additional into the budget. That is being baselined and mainstreamed in the budget.

The answer would probably be fairly lengthy, so I will leave it to somebody else. From a practical point of view, there has been talk from a few people about redoing the school year. To be honest, practically, for a range of reasons and educationally, that would not be particularly sound for individuals. A small number of individuals each year will repeat a year, and there is always scope for particular individuals. In general, the educational experience with that here and elsewhere suggests that it is not, generally speaking, a good route to go down.

Mr Butler: I just have a final point. It is not a question, Chair, so, hopefully, you will not feel the need to interrupt me. Next week, we are having a session on the Blues Programme. As you said, Minister, there is already some investment in emotional well-being and mental health, and you will extend that. I ask you to extend it further in any future monitoring rounds, specifically for the community and voluntary sector in order to mobilise it while not putting the burden on teachers to provide that pastoral piece. They will restore the relationships, as they do, because it is an important part of teaching, but there are some excellent programmes out there. You could tune in next week and hear about one of them, and perhaps that might be the template for any summer schemes. If we could —.

Mr Weir: Robbie, there are two elements there. If it is largely academic, in whatever format, teachers will provide it. Generally speaking, any additional stuff will probably draw on substitute teachers in whatever format.

Mr Butler: I am not talking about the academic side.

Mr Weir: The pastoral well-being side, while not excluding education staff and teachers, will be drawn by other means. If the best way of delivering that is for schools to provide it, to some extent, schools will have the choice about how they apply the budget for it. We are also aware that, while certain schemes would be mainstreamed across Northern Ireland, given the complexity of the school-age population and of Northern Ireland, what may work for a 14-year-old from the middle of Lisburn may be different from what would work for a seven-year-old from rural Fermanagh. It is about giving flexibility to schools to provide that level of support.

Mr Butler: Just in case we are talking at cross purposes, I am not talking about the curriculum; I am talking about getting the young people into that space to do the catch-up and to get the curriculum [*Inaudible*] extended period [*Inaudible*.] Thanks, Chair.

Ms Brogan: Thank you, Minister, for your time this morning. I have a few quick questions for you. The first is on the vaccination roll-out for special schools. We all asked you to prioritise them, so we are grateful for that. However, we have been contacted by principals in special schools who have said that, since the announcement, they have been given the responsibility of choosing which staff in their school should receive the vaccine. First, do you think that that is appropriate? Secondly, in the overall context of the vaccination programme, surely the number of staff in special schools is relatively small, so would it not make sense to offer the vaccine to all staff? Will you explain why that is not the case, please?

Mr Weir: Nicola, it would make sense to offer it to all staff. That is my position. It puts special school principals in a difficult position, and I pay tribute to them for the work that they have done. I put a paper to the Executive that indicated that my preference was to vaccinate all special school staff. The Executive felt that they wanted consensus on the issue. Health made it clear that it was not prepared to support something that, it felt, went against the JCVI, and that suggested that, at this stage, that Department is opposed to something that rolled the vaccination out for everybody. Across the full range of the Executive, there was not a willingness to put it to a vote and to outvote Health, and there was a desire to have consensus.

We had discussions with Health, and it indicated that what, it felt, was consistent with the JCVI is what should be done. Would I vaccinate every special school staff member if it was left purely up to me? Yes, I would, but I do not have a stash of the vaccine, and we can work only with what has been agreed by Health. Health has identified that it believes that it is appropriate that a range of children who have particular clinical vulnerabilities have a range of interventions from staff. It has listed, I think, 16 interventions but is not saying that the list will be limited to that number, as Ricky indicated.

The issue with the next step is that if not all staff are to be identified for vaccination, which staff will be? Special school principals are put in a difficult position, and it is difficult to see where there is a way around this. If Health is saying, "At this stage, we will vaccinate only those who qualify", it would be impossible for Health to identify on an individual school basis whom that applies to. Probably the only person in a school who is in a position to identify which staff carry out those functions is the principal. That is an unfortunate position, but, to some extent, the choice about what we can get from Health is to either go down that route or to have no vaccinations at all. What is in place for special schools is the better option rather than no option at all. My position has consistently been that teachers need to be prioritised and that I want to see all special school staff vaccinated.

Ms Brogan: It is unfortunate that principals have to make that decision. Much as all teachers should be prioritised, so should all school staff, which brings me to my next point that —.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): Nicola, before you move on, can I check that we have an answer from the Department about when special school staff will be vaccinated? I might have missed Ricky's answer earlier. Can I check, Minister?

Mr Weir: I will pass over to Ricky.

Mr Irwin: Thanks, Minister. The clinically extremely vulnerable children are still being identified by the PHA. I am getting an update on the process from the PHA this afternoon. We will work with the EA to identify the schools, and the staff that support those children will be identified. I do not have a

definitive date, but I am pressing hard for one. However, I am told that, once the staff are identified, we can move to vaccination quickly.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): Are we talking days, weeks or months, Ricky?

Mr Irwin: I like to think it will be days, but I will have a better understanding this afternoon.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): Thanks for that. Sorry, Nicola. I hope that that is helpful.

Ms Brogan: Yes. Thank you, Chair.

I want to move to the next point about the vaccination roll-out for early years, nursery and childcare providers. We know how invaluable their service is for jobs and how important it will be for the post-COVID economic recovery. Can you tell me where they lie in the prioritisation of the vaccine roll-out?

Mr Weir: Again, arguably, Health could better directly answer that question. My view and the general view is that prioritisation was most needed for special schools, as they have a mixture of close contact and age spread. For example, we know that a very young child has less direct vulnerability than a teenager, and, as most special schools operate up to age 19, there is a level of vulnerability.

I indicated that anyone involved in childcare, early years and the broader level of teaching should be prioritised. The Executive took a view that we can only follow JCVI guidance and that, if a case was to be made by the Executive to JCVI, it needed to be done on a more strategic level. For example, there is a good argument for including teachers and childcare. However, it is also reasonable, if you are being strategic, to include prison officers and police officers, who also have a level of intimate contact. There will be further discussions at the Executive on that.

JCVI has indicated that it wants to get the most vulnerable in stage 1 out of the way. I have indicated that there will be a national conversation with JCVI. I see that Keir Starmer has also said that. JCVI has talked about prioritising professions in the second phase, and education and childcare have been highlighted as part of that. There was a lively debate on the vaccine prioritisation. The position is that Health is using the prioritisation given by JCVI, and, because JCVI has not put a date on that, I am not in a position to put a date on that either.

Ms Brogan: I appreciate that you cannot give a date. I have engaged with childcare and early years providers, and they feel overlooked and that their service is not being appreciated. We all know how important their service is, and that is, simply, not the case.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): Nicola, sorry to come in again, but your questions are so good today. I will make sure I give you the proper time afterwards.

I will supplement that question, briefly, Minister. Minister, are you aware that some community and voluntary sector childcare providers have received vaccination by virtue of holding contracts with the health and social care trusts? However, a wide range of other independent providers also inspected and regulated by health and social care trusts have not been vaccinated, creating a disparity in the sector.

Mr Weir: I am absolutely aware of that. Understandably, that has created a lot of waves and problems in the childcare sector.

As I understand it, Health gave a directive on what the JCVI said. In the implementation of that at trust level, some trusts took a different position from others, and there was an indication that some arguably made a mistake in doing so. For example, the Western Trust issued an email to community and voluntary sector providers and even to those beyond that with whom it did not have a contract, saying, "If you want to book a time for a vaccination, come on in". That apparently was a mistake, and it was withdrawn.

I am aware that, in the broader childcare sector, the Belfast Trust got in contact with a range of organisations, some of which were childcare providers, to offer the vaccine. That was not the case with other trusts. To be fair, I do not think that that came from the Department of Health and that it went beyond what the Department wanted to see happening. It does not help the wider situation if people feel as though they are not being treated equally. I entirely agree with you on that point.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): One of two actions needs to happen: either someone needs to issue an apology, if there was a mistake, and/or the vaccination needs to be extended on a fair and equal basis. Let me bring back Nicola back, who has been very gracious with me. Thank you, Nicola, and thank you for your questions.

Ms Brogan: OK, Chair. Thanks.

Minister, I want to ask you about the Engage programme. I have been contacted by nursery and preschool staff who feel that they should be included in the programme, and I completely agree with them. We know how important the early years stage is for children's educational, social and emotional development. Nurseries and preschools should be afforded all the resources and support that we can offer them. Do you agree with me that nurseries and preschools should be included in the Engage programme?

Mr Weir: We will look at whatever can be rolled forward for it. The problem is that the Engage programme is specifically about academic catch-up; it is about making sure that subject matters are covered on that basis. It can always be looked at for nursery and preschool, but it is arguable whether it is pertinent to them. Given that money is finite, if money goes in that direction, money would have to be taken away from other schools that are part of the Engage programme. That is the only constraint.

It is about getting the best possible delivery. The Engage programme is for academic catch-up, so it may not be best to direct it towards very young children. That is my gut feeling. I know that there are important developmental issues, but a lot of those are less about the academic bit. The damage being done to young children is due to the restrictions affecting their ability to socialise, meet, play together and do a range of things. Those issues are not on the academic side. That is where the damage is being done. It is not simply about money; it is about getting people in there. That is the point.

Ms Brogan: I have one final point. I agree with you that it might not be affecting children academically, although I am sure that it is having some effect, and that it is more about their social and emotional development, but we need to provide them with all the support and resources that we can. Thank you, Minister, for your time.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): Thanks, Nicola. Those were super questions.

Mr Humphrey: Good morning, Minister. I thank you and the officials for coming this morning. At the outset, I declare an interest as a member of the Scout Association.

Minister, if schools were to reopen in the spring, the summer months would be crucial to our young people. Last week, Professor O'Neill, the interim mental health champion, told us that the next number of months, when or if schools open, will be crucial for our young people, not just for their academic work and their learning but for their mental well-being, through doing activities that get them out and back into society in a way that they have been unable to do for months. It is not just about school but about sports and activities such as dancing or whatever. Obviously, youth and uniformed organisations are crucial in that. The summer months will therefore be crucial.

One of the questions that I put to the interim mental health champion last week was about the need for a joined-up approach to the summer. I do not believe that it is solely the Department of Education's responsibility. It is obviously relevant in the summer months, so it cuts across government. The Department of Education has a responsibility, absolutely, but so do the Department of Health, the Public Health Agency, the Department for Communities, local government, the EA Youth Service and organisations like the Scouts, Guides, Boys' Brigade (BB), Girls' Brigade (GB) and the Belfast Activity Centre that get our young people out. There is a requirement for a key person to lead all of that and put it all together. Do you agree? Has work been progressing on those issues?

Mr Weir: I will make a couple of points. You are right about the impact on well-being. It is noticeable to anybody who reads any of the medical documentation or reports on the virus as it impacts on children — not just from those involved with mental health but the Scientific Advisory Group for Emergencies (SAGE), the Chief Scientific Adviser (CSA) and the Chief Medical Officer (CMO) — that they always make reference to the fact that it is not purely about what the impact will be on COVID but that we have to take into account the damage to mental health.

While work needs to be done on academic catch-up, for a lot of children, remote learning has got a lot better, particularly this year. Consequently, there is an argument that the loss of learning may be

limited. What is a lot more difficult to limit is the loss from a well-being point of view. Children who are effectively confined to home do not have those opportunities. Holistic solutions to that are needed. It needs to go beyond simply the Department of Education.

It should be remembered that, when funding was got for COVID recovery, while the bulk of money for well-being went to schools to provide on the ground, some money, albeit a small proportion of the overall funding, was provided to the Youth Service to enable it to make interventions of that nature. The same will be the case for a second tranche of support, if we can get that from the Executive. It was critical that we lobbied for and got funding support for the outdoor activities centres, not just because they had suffered clear financial loss because of the COVID restrictions but to try to make sure that they were sustainable into the future. They cannot be a resource that is simply abandoned. Yes, it clearly goes beyond Education.

Mr Humphrey: The key thing is that it cuts across government. Many of the outdoor education centres are part of the bailiwick of the Department of Education, the Education Authority and the Youth Service. However, there is also Crawfordsburn, Lorne, Ganaway, Ballyhornan and so on: they are owned by uniformed organisations but have been mothballed for months and are losing huge amounts of money. An important thing that we need to do is identify someone to lead in this.

I always refer, particularly in my North Belfast constituency and the greater Shankill, to the "other pandemic" in respect of mental health, general well-being and suicide. It is a huge and growing issue. We hear about the tidal wave that is coming towards us. It would be good to identify someone to lead in all of that. Getting resource from the Department of Finance, the Department for Communities, local government and so on is hugely important, because you do not want to raise expectations and then not have the resources to deliver.

The other thing is that youth organisations, youth football clubs and so on will look to reboot. My scout district did our census figures just this week, and, fortunately, they were down only 2%. We were very concerned about what those were going to be. This is writ large across the United Kingdom. Those organisations will look to reboot as well. Government can come in and work with youth organisations, uniformed organisations and sports clubs to help them to reconnect with their members. Everyone is a winner in that holistic approach. The key thing is to identify someone to lead. Has any consideration been given to any of that?

Mr Weir: The wider paper, when I put it to the Executive, will talk about cross-departmental working. If we are thinking about a particular individual to give leadership, I do not think that there has been anyone identified. As for providing additional or key voices making suggestions that would be helpful on that front but who lie outside the education sector, we are keen and willing to take those on board.

Mr Humphrey: On the wider issues of mental health and suicide awareness, the interim health champion is crucial. I am not suggesting that she is the person, but she would be crucial as someone whom government should talk to. We need to have all the key people round the table not just from education but from wider learning, such as youth organisations and those who work with young people.

I have been getting messages from parents who are homeschooling. That has been difficult and traumatic for them and their children, and I know that you and others in the Department are aware of that. Those who work with young people in a voluntary capacity are also aware of it, and we need to help them to get back to some sort of normality as quickly as possible. That is good for young people and for the country. Thanks very much all of you.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): Minister, to supplement William's comments, can you offer a school return date?

Mr Weir: As I indicated, my aim is to start seeing recovery from 8 March.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): OK.

Mr Weir: Whatever I or the Department feel, ultimately the broader lifting of restrictions and a road map for recovery — that will involve Education — are something that the Executive as a whole have to take a decision on. It will be another week or two before that is finalised.

The Chairperson (Mr Lytle): OK.

Mr McNulty: Minister, Ricky, Karen and Janis, good morning. I hope that you are well.

We have had a lot of talk, Minister, about the mental and emotional well-being of pupils and rightly so. What is the mental and emotional well-being of teachers, school staff and principals like at the moment? How are they doing?

Mr Weir: They are in tough conditions. No doubt, they are trying to cope, and I think that they have coped with resilience in conditions that are not the norm, and we have seen that fluctuating throughout the year. I have no doubt that people are under stress. You are right that there has rightly been a focus on young people but it needs to go beyond that. That was one of the reasons why, when the broader funding was made available through COVID, the Department secured funding for well-being recovery from COVID-19, and we will seek funding for that next year as well. We have placed as few boundaries and restrictions as possible on what schools could spend that money on. There were direct interventions that they could make for their young people but also opportunities for them to use part or all of that money for support mechanisms for staff. Ultimately, those lie in the health field in a range of interventions. One thing that we do not want to say to schools is, "Look, here's something for the young people. Don't dare think of providing any support for your staff." Their mental health and well-being is critical as well.

From that point of view, we have looked at Engage for academic recovery because the principal model for that is, largely speaking, the school drawing in people from outside and, particularly, having the benefit of substitute teachers. However, we are acutely aware that there is a balance to be struck. In the summer, we will look for paid volunteers, rather than trying to make things compulsory for schools, as I do not think that that is a sensible route to go down. There has been discussion in England of the potential pressures for schools if they look to do something like that, which is why we are looking to lever in something for those who are keen and willing to do additional stuff rather than trying to impose it on people.

Mr McNulty: It is important that we do not forget the pressures that staff, teachers and principals have been under trying to juggle teaching kids remotely, teaching kids in classrooms and homeschooling their own children. It has been enormous and should be recognised.

Any recharge programme that I have been talking about should incorporate the well-being of teachers and staff. I want more detail on that recharge programme. I want to see how it will be implemented in coordination with teachers and staff, emotionally, socially, physically, mentally and academically. Pupils all need help to recharge. What bids have you made to the Finance Minister for a coherent, integrated programme that will be rolled out through schools when they return to full schooling as normal?

Mr Weir: To some extent, the words may be slightly different, but we are talking similar language. I am talking about Engage, mental health and well-being and a package for that. This is about the bid for COVID money for 2021-22. We can all fall into the trap in Education of looking at the academic rather than the financial year. It is not necessarily stuff that will have to wait until September. That is important.

The Executive have accepted that point in principle, and the detail is being worked through. It all depends on the Executive agreeing to a financial package ambitious and realistic enough to cover that. The detail will set the broad parameters, and it is important that we set those parameters. The summer work in particular would involve other Departments, but it is important that we do not straitjacket that to the extent that there is an exact figure that needs to be spent and a way in which it must be spent, because some discretion needs to be applied.

Mr McNulty: Sorry, Minister, but my time is running out. I hope that you are making bids for appropriate funding for an integrated and coherent programme to be implemented when schools restart.

People keep coming back on the JCVI clause. How realistic is that in special schools? I know that it has been discussed at length already, but staff in special schools have approached me, worried, annoyed and upset because they feel that they are being put in danger. They feel like second-class citizens because some staff are being vaccinated and others are not. In practical terms, that does not work in special schools.

Mr Weir: To a large extent, I do not disagree. However, Health controls the vaccination process, so, ultimately, that means that there are only one of two ways that that can be got round: either we get agreement with Health on what it is prepared to do on that or Health is overruled by the rest of the Executive. I do not want to breach confidentiality, but there is a desire amongst the Executive to see consensus on the issue, which means that they are reluctant to go into a position where Health is on a different page. That would apply if people were going to overrule Health, and the Executive would need to take a robust position against Health. There is reluctance to do that across the board.

Mr McNulty: I have one final question. Chair, bear with me.

Minister, there is a pathway for pupils who are currently in years 12, 13 and 14 regarding their examinations or what will replace them. I have been contacted by parents of year 11 pupils. You will appreciate that those pupils, then the year 10 group, were out of school for much of last year. Despite being out of school for many months, they had to choose GCSE subjects. This year, as year 11 pupils, they have been out of school for the majority of the time. Year 11 is the foundation year for GCSE exams the following year. What specific plan do you have to support that cohort of year 11 pupils this year and into next year, given that there is a plan for pupils in years 12, 13 and 14?

Mr Weir: I think that Karen is looking at that. I will pass the microphone to her. She wants to come in directly on that point.

Mrs Karen McCullough (Department of Education): I want to acknowledge that that issue was raised with us during the consultation. We have asked CCEA to examine how best to adapt its qualifications for delivery next year in order to ease the burden and, as you say, reflect that ongoing disruption to teaching and learning. It is likely that learners will not be assessed across all the units of a qualification in 2021, as it is recognised that they have not covered all the content to date. CCEA will come forward with proposals, hopefully by the end of March or soon after that, so that we can give clarity to the system.

Mr McNulty: That cohort feels as though they have almost been forgotten.

I have one very quick question about student teacher placements, Minister. How have they been impacted on in training student teachers for readiness to come into the workforce?

Mr Weir: Justin, I will get back to you on the detail of that. Student teacher training — indeed, training even for the teaching workforce — falls within the remit of the Department for the Economy. Our role in teacher training is, largely speaking, simply to set the numbers, for want of a better term, and, I suppose, to have an input on the curriculum side. We will get you a detailed answer on that. We may need to coordinate directly with Economy colleagues on that front.

Mr McNulty: Thanks very much, Minister.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): Thanks, Justin. Those are important questions.

Mr M Bradley: An awful lot of the questions that I had written down have been answered. I will bring up a couple of wee points. The Minister mentioned that the restart date really depended on the Executive taking a decision on 18 February. Can he clarify whether the actual restart date is out of his control? If a decision is taken on 18 February, will that give him enough time to contact schools and teachers to get ready for restart on 8 March?

Mr Weir: We have worked, for example, on additional mitigations that, largely speaking, have been ready to be rolled out for some time. For instance, we have already seen the first roll-out of testing and tracing in special schools. The idea is to have that in all special schools in the next couple of weeks. We have worked on, for example, signage on school gates to give reminders to parents, and that is ready. The EA is working with us. It is ready to roll out additional compliance checks on school buses. The position has been made clear on mitigations such as the use of face coverings in schools.

The Executive are due to take a position on wider matters on 18 February. Whether everything will be nailed down for education on that date, I do not know. Schools will probably need to be given a minimum of a week and a half's notice. If they are operating either largely or completely, I do not think that the restart will be a major problem for them. For instance, they moved from the situation that they were in during the summer, when they were not open other than for a very small number of children,

to a position in which they were fully open. All schools were able to deliver that for day one towards the end of August. The mechanics of it therefore should not be too difficult.

In the wider context, the Executive have to take a decision on that, as they do with a range of other matters, such as — to take a completely different example — what provisions there are for the hospitality industry. The Economy Minister will play a key role in that and take a key view on that, but it is the Executive as a whole who will take the decisions on what the restrictions are. Similarly, I would not want to and cannot be in a position in which I can simply go on a solo run on schools or anything else. I will have my views and will make those views clear to the Executive, but it is not purely my decision.

Mr M Bradley: Thank you, Minister. I had a query about vaccination, but you have already dealt with that issue at some length.

Everybody on the Committee is a representative of a political party that has input to the Executive. Can we not put pressure on our political parties to put pressure on our representatives in the Executive to put pressure on the Health Minister to roll out a vaccination programme for schools? Can we not take that back to our respective parties and fight for that to make sure that it happens for the benefit for our schools, our teachers and our education establishments? That is just a rant, and I will leave it at that.

Mr Weir: That is more a matter for Committee members than for me, Maurice.

Mr M Bradley: The lack of physical activity and social interaction has been highlighted to the Committee many times. Will the Department help schools link up with sporting bodies and cross-community organisations to help provide summer schemes, should those be for sport, drama or music? It does not matter, as long as it gets children out and gets them active. That could also be a method of taking pressure off teachers. Such schemes provide an opportunity for physical and interactive activities, allowing teachers to concentrate on education issues. Minister, [*Inaudible*] work falls on teachers. If we are to keep putting pressure on teachers to deliver, can we see a small uptake of programmes promoting summer schemes and possibly low uptake from other schools in general? How can we make sure that there is interaction between schools and sporting bodies and organisations to ensure that successful summer activity programmes take place?

Mr Weir: I know that some schools will have direct links. This comes back to the point that what happens over the summer has to be cross-departmental, involving a range of organisations. I think, to be fair, that is, generally speaking, the way in which it would be done anyway. In normal times, if you have a range of summer sports activities, they are often not necessarily channelled through the schools. It is about organisations making a summer scheme available to children locally for them to be able to sign up to it. That is one of the things that need to be looked at as well. There should not be a barrier put up just because a pupil goes to a particular school, but some schools will want to be proactive in what they provide.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): I think that Maurice is looking for facilitated collaboration between schools and community groups and sporting organisations, but perhaps that is something that we can come back to. Thanks for those questions, Maurice.

Minister, I have a couple of questions. There has been widespread dismay at your decision to remove WJEC qualifications as an option for teachers and learners in Northern Ireland. What advice did CCEA offer you regarding your decision to remove WJEC qualifications as an option?

Mr Weir: As I indicated, CCEA also expressed its levels of concern about WJEC's road direction of travel. I will bring in Karen and then come back to you, Chair.

Mrs McCullough: CCEA, from the regulation side, would have been talking to WJEC to find out what its plans were, once we had heard that exams were being cancelled. There was no clarity from it around what was going to be put in their place, and teachers and others here were not involved in the group that was being set up to advise what would be put in place. We were trying to find out what the options were for our students here. At that point, we were still doing exams, and we were trying to find out whether that was an option that it could still offer. It was the kind of liaison with WJEC. We were trying to find out, following the announcement —.

Mr Weir: CCEA also has a role as a regulator. Part of the longer-term consideration was a concern about the direction of travel that is potentially emerging in Wales. You could call it their version of the Deloitte report. As I said, the first time that the situation around choices will potentially impact on a school is in September 2022. There are therefore plenty of opportunities. We are keeping in touch and keeping the issue under review. If assurances are given on the direction of travel that WJEC is going in, something can be changed in that regard.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): You could change your decision.

Mr Weir: If it becomes clear that WJEC will remain compatible with the wider regulatory framework of the UK and does not disadvantage our pupils, we could. We have faced this before when, a number of years ago, WJEC GCSEs were taken off the table. It might well have been under a previous Minister. It certainly was not when I was Minister.

Mrs McCullough: It was in 2017.

Mr Weir: It was during the period in which there was no Minister. The argument is that, with each of the individual qualifications, there are alternative board qualifications. The issue is to what extent some schools may feel that the WJEC qualification is the best of those. There are alternatives, however.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): I will have to be rapid, Minister, because of time. A lot of teachers and learners have expressed the view that the WJEC qualifications in a number of subjects best meet their needs. Do you have contingency plans for the courses that your decisions will have removed as an option for teachers and learners?

Mr Weir: There are contingency plans in the sense that there are other options for a range of subjects. At least three education boards offer every subject. We must remember that nobody who is enrolled in a course now, who will be enrolled in AS or A levels in 2021 or who will be enrolled in an A2 exam in 2022 will be affected, so no current learners are directly affected by the decision.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): It creates more uncertainty. It is an issue for which there is widespread concern on a number of matters.

You mentioned CCEA. It has three roles: to advise you on the curriculum for schools and colleges; to develop and award qualifications; and to regulate qualifications. Is it not a conflict of interest for a qualifications provider to have advised you on the removal of those qualifications?

Mr Weir: We always do a level of review of CCEA. That is how it has been for quite a long time. If you were to break up its role in Northern Ireland, the only issue is to what extent you do so. There are economies of scale involved, and we are a fairly small jurisdiction. I appreciate the point that you make, but CCEA tries to give that advice. Three or four years ago, CCEA implemented changes to the GCSE grading system that were done specifically to ensure that, broadly speaking, choices other than those in a domestic market were available. To be fair, there was no resistance from CCEA to that, even though you could argue that, if it had a selfish interest, it could have resisted change.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): Should the Northern Ireland qualifications regulator element of CCEA be separated and made independent?

Mr Weir: As a regulator, it seems to perform reasonably well. I am open to any arguments that are made on that, but I am not sure that there is a particular benefit in breaking up that element of CCEA. There will always be ongoing reviews of CCEA. As indicated, an interim chief executive is going into post, and there will be a new chair of CCEA relatively soon.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): The regulation of qualifications is independent in England.

Mr Weir: Yes, but do not forget that broader, overarching bodies deal with England, Wales and Northern Ireland. England is in a slightly different position, owing to the size of the jurisdiction and to the fact that, internally, it has a wide range of examination boards. It would therefore be almost impossible for somebody to be the provider on that side. The issue around the JCQ —.

Mrs McCullough: The Joint Council for Qualifications.

Mr Weir: There are a lot of "Joints" and "J's" today. The overarching role of the JCQ goes beyond England. It extends to Wales and Northern Ireland, so it is wider.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): Why did you go against Department of Education recommendations to approve a development proposal (DP) at the integrated Strangford College that would have seen an increase of a mere 20 places? Did your decision go against your statutory duty to facilitate and encourage integrated education?

Mr Weir: I do not think that it is appropriate to talk too much about individual DPs. The detail of that has been highlighted in the response. I do not believe that my decision went against any statutory duty. It is noticeable in that case that the Education Authority indicated at final stage that it did not think that that was the right development proposal. It is also the case legally that, although they have to take into account all relevant factors, development proposals have to be judged entirely on their own merits. That means that it is not simply a question of a DP being put forward and then, without thought, rubber-stamped on all occasions. As with a number of things, there may well end up being a legal challenge to that. I am loath to talk too much about an individual development proposal on that basis.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): What was your departmental officials' recommendation? You referred to the EA's recommendations.

Mr Weir: All the documentation is there. I am not going to get into the detail of the information that was supplied to me, given the fact that, as I said, there may be a challenge to my decision.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): You expect there to be a legal challenge to your decision on the matter.

Mr Weir: Frankly, there is nearly always a legal challenge to almost anything that is done or not done in education. It remains a live possibility. All development proposals, from whatever source or sector, are treated on their merits. We also need to look at the duties to the wider sector and at what is seen across the board to be the best delivery for any area. We need to see actions across the board — this is why we look at strategic planning — that are ultimately joined up among sectors. That is critical as we move ahead with area planning.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): Is it accurate to say that the Education Authority is withholding planned growth money from a number of grant-maintained integrated schools?

Mr Weir: I am not aware of that. We can find out directly. Can you be a little bit more specific about growth money?

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): Planned growth money. If you are not familiar with it, perhaps that is something to submit to you in writing or as a question for written answer, Minister.

Mr Weir: I do not know the detail. I know the way in which broader growth money works in-year, where there is an increase in funding. If, for example, more pupils than anticipated stay on in a school after GCSEs, a threshold needs to be met before money is allocated. It is not simply a question of getting that money if your numbers unexpectedly increase by a small number. If you write to us about the specifics, we will get a direct answer to you.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): OK. We have discussed a children and young people's recovery programme and how it needs to cover a wide range of development areas and be cross-departmental. Key to that is the question of whether there will be the time and resources to do it. That has prompted some organisations, such as the National Children's Bureau, to ask whether a school year reset in September has been considered. You said that there are practical and educational reasons why that could not happen. Can you give us a short example of what some of those practical and educational reasons are?

Mr Weir: I will rattle off a few. If we work on the assumption that, for instance, those coming from preschool and nursery will still want to go into P1, and if there were a complete restart of all years, you would have 15 years' study as opposed to 14 years. If we were to do that across the board, it would

have major implications for transfer to post-primary school. It would have major implications for the role of further education and higher education. From a practical point of view, if you were simply to reset for everybody, you would add roughly another 23,000 students into the system, and the cost of that would likely run into tens of millions of pounds. For primary schools, for example, if additional children were coming in from the nursery side and pupils were redoing P7, you would then be trying to accommodate eight years where normally there would be seven. The cost of providing the physical infrastructure that would be needed for a lot of schools would be huge. Most schools, particularly at primary level, are in a position in which the number of classrooms matches the number of classes of pupils. They would have to find an extra two or three classrooms. From the academic point of view, two groups of pupils would be affected at present. Roughly 5,000 pupils in the system are overage, most because of particular SEN issues, or are newcomer children, who may have issues with language.

Can you give me a second to find something?

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): Minister, while you are looking for that, may I ask whether you have scoped out the possibility of transferring transition years such as year 14 on to further and higher education and year 7 on to post-primary? Have you looked at doing that as an opportunity to address our outlier early school-start age and create a second reception or preschool, year? Have any of those ideas been floated?

Mr Weir: You would still create a situation in which you had a bottleneck in the system through repeating years. International studies on repeating years have been done. Over a long period, the Education Endowment Foundation (EEF) has looked at international evidence in Europe and North America on repeating years. It has also looked at what has happened locally. The statistics show greater negative effects for students from disadvantaged backgrounds but particularly for those who repeat an academic year. On average, students who do that are more likely to drop out of school, even with the additional year. That may mean that someone repeating a year effectively has to skip a year at a later point. The academic studies suggest that, for academic attainment, repeating a year costs, on average, four months' worth of education. The education arguments do not particularly stack up.

There is the opportunity for an individual parent to make the case to the board of governors about flexibility, and, in a small number of cases, an individual pupil is allowed to repeat a year. In general, however, the advice from all the education experts seems to be that that is not of benefit to students. To make changes and create second reception years, you would need changes to be made to primary legislation, and that simply cannot be done for this September. There is a range of financial and practical reasons why that cannot be done. Janis has considerable background in the area. She is the official who has not had a chance to speak as yet.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): I would love to hear from Janis.

Mrs Janis Scallon (Department of Education): Thank you. There has been a lot of scoping out done on the idea of repeating the year. The Minister has already outlined a raft of reasons against. In the international and local research there is no concrete evidence that it is in the best educational interests of all children to repeat the year wholesale. That is not to say that, for some individual children, it is not the right thing to do; currently, that can happen anyway. If the decision is taken for an individual child to repeat a year, that is done by those who know the child best. The principal of the school and the board of governors ultimately make the decision in conjunction with the parents. If that child has a statement of special educational needs, the decision will involve the EA as well.

We have looked across the board at all the evidence from education, and there is nothing to suggest that doing that would be in the best educational interests of all pupils. As the Minister has said, some of that evidence suggests that it would potentially have a negative effect. The risk that we could be taking by adopting a wholesale approach is that children could lose out even further on their education.

Mr Weir: I think as well that —.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): Sorry, Minister. Very briefly, I presume that none of that research has been conducted in the context of a global pandemic that has disrupted up to six months' learning for entire year cohorts. I appreciate your response. If, however, that is the firm view of the Department, that suggests that, as a number of members have consistently mentioned, a children and young

people's recovery programme that focuses on academic, social, emotional and physical well-being is paramount. It must have adequate resources invested in it and have an understanding of the impact of the disruption to learning. We need further reassurance about what exactly that programme will look like and exactly how much additional funding will be given to our schools and teachers to do the difficult job ahead that they are ready to do.

Mr Weir: Chair, I do not disagree with you. The final point that I will make on a restart is this: even if you were to smooth over the transition stuff, it would have major implications. Take, for example, somebody in year 9 repeating the year. That pupil will either skip a year at a future point or, more likely, end up doing 15 years in school.

There needs to be a level of support provided. Given where budgets are at, it is clear that the route through which there can be finance for that is through the Executive and COVID moneys. That would require the Executive signing off on a programme on that basis. There is scope for levels of support. The indications at present are that, although large amounts of money have been supplied centrally to the Northern Ireland Executive for COVID this year, it is likely that, next year, although there will still be considerable amounts of money, they will be a fraction of what they have been in 2020-21. That will put some limitations on what can be got. To take Maurice's position, if members of the Committee can lobby their colleagues on the levels of financial support, I am sure that we would all very much welcome that.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): OK. I recognise the time, Minister. Would you like to make any final comment about the examination series and the alternative arrangements that lie ahead? We have CCEA next, and we will go into a bit more detail on that. Would you like to make a final comment on that matter?

Mr Weir: Things are progressing on that, but I am happy to leave the detail to CCEA. I appreciate that the Committee will want to get on with other business, so I do not have a parting shot.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): OK, Minister. Thank you for your time. Hopefully, you will be with us fairly regularly in the coming weeks and months, given the scale of the issues ahead in education. Thank you.

Mr Weir: Thank you.