

**REPLY BY THE PRESIDENT OF
THE COMMITTEE FOR EDUCATION, SPORT & CULTURE
TO QUESTIONS ASKED PURSUANT TO RULE 14 OF THE RULES OF
PROCEDURE BY DEPUTY BARRY PAINT**

Preamble

I have been receiving complaints from parents, grand-parents and some children regarding teaching in our schools in relation to certain topics. Some of the individuals who have contacted me allege that the teaching of some subjects lacks balance and objectivity and is an unnecessary or unwelcome cause of anxiety and fear to some children. Of particular concern is the teaching about climate change and its possible effects. One grand-parent described the teaching of their grand-child as being something akin to brain-washing with another remarking on the world wide paranoia caused by the claims of certain climate change activists.

Question 1

In the light of the concerns expressed to me on this topic and bearing in mind that the teaching of other subjects, such as religious education and sport, may not always accord with the preferences of parents and carers, would the President of the Committee for Education, Sport & Culture confirm whether or not parents and carers of children have the ability to ensure that their children are not involved in certain lessons and, if so, how they can go about making sure that their preferences are known to the relevant school and given effect?

Answer

It is important to remind ourselves that the purpose of formal education is to equip us with knowledge that is broader than the knowledge we might gain from our parents and carers. Education equips us with the kind of knowledge that enables us to predict, explain and envisage new alternatives. With this purpose in mind, in general terms it is neither possible nor desirable to tailor the curriculum to cater for parental preference.

There are currently three exceptions to this. Parents and carers can request that their child is withdrawn from collective worship, religious instruction and from those aspects of sex and relationship education that do not form part of the science curriculum.

An important part of education is to be exposed to a wide range of ideas and to have one's suppositions held up to scrutiny. This is why critical thinking lies at the heart of our Bailiwick Curriculum. If there is a child who encounters nothing during their time at school that challenges or disagrees with something they have seen or heard elsewhere, that child would have been very poorly served by our education system.

It is incumbent on those providing education to ensure that children have access to the various intellectual disciplines used for discerning fact from opinion. For example, educators must ensure children learn about the scientific method, and acquire the knowledge that will enable them to think critically about a wide range of issues.

However, schools have the responsibility to ensure that our children learn so much more than specific content. Children also need to learn about the decisions behind how knowledge gets to become part of the accepted corpus of each subject. This 'disciplinary knowledge' is how balance and objectivity are ensured. It involves learning how knowledge was established, its degree of certainty and how it continues to be revised by scholars, artists or professional practice. This might be through empirical testing in science, argumentation in philosophy or history, logic in mathematics or beauty in the arts. Disciplinary knowledge describes that part of the curriculum where pupils learn about conventions such as what constitutes evidence, argument or good practice in that subject. The provision of education that actively promotes disciplinary knowledge ensures that concerns of 'brain washing', such as those expressed by your parishioners, cannot be substantiated. It ensures that what is taught in our schools represents an objective account of the thought of academics, including the degree of certainty or otherwise with which things are held to be true.

When learning about something such as climate change, science and geography teachers are beholden to share, in a way that is mindful of the age and stage of development of their students, what the academic communities of geographers and scientists agree the evidence shows. This will include sharing the degree of certainty behind any conclusions and the extent of academic disagreement. The content of lessons is not derived from the views of activists. Discussion of the ways in which activists seek to respond to scientific findings would legitimately take place within citizenship lessons, but always with due regard to the fundamental values of respect, tolerance, individual liberty and the rule of law.

It is also important to keep in mind that in the secondary phase of education, learning is influenced, to a large extent, by selected examination boards and their chosen programme of study. To allow parents and carers to insist that their children opt out of elements of the curriculum at that stage would be to risk putting those children at a disadvantage when it comes to the attainment of formal qualifications.

Question 2

If not, would the President confirm that the Committee will review the issue of opting out of certain lessons, or parts of certain lessons, and adopt a suitable policy that will provide parents and carers with effective choices which they may exercise on behalf of the children for whom they are responsible?"

Answer

Although, for children aged five to 16, formal education is mandatory, it is open to parents and carers to educate their children at home should they choose to add this to their other parenting responsibilities. However, it must be remembered that Government has responsibilities towards our children too. Government's responsibilities include ensuring that children who are educated within its schools are exposed to the very best of human thought, including the different ways in which humans have sought to establish facts and how accepted knowledge can be challenged, superseded or rendered obsolete. This responsibility would be fatally undermined were parents and carers able to pick and choose what lessons, or content within those lessons, their children were permitted to participate in, beyond the three narrow, long-established exceptions referred to above. We must remember that when our Government funds education, it is not doing so to provide a menu of options for parents and carers to select only that which they prefer or agree with. To do so would be to misunderstand the purpose of education. Education is an ongoing conversation about the quest for truth. A conversation we seek to equip our children to take part in as confident and informed participants.

As is entirely appropriate, our schools are communities where the moral, social and intellectual development fitting for a democratic society takes place. Our schools are places where children are respected as individuals who come together to benefit from a shared learning experience. It would be entirely inappropriate, unrealistic and unworkable for schools to become places where parents and carers can insist upon a bespoke educational product for each child.

The Committee therefore has no plans to review the extent of its curriculum 'opt out' policy.

Date of receipt of the Question: 25th September 2019

Date of Reply: 10th October 2019