

Briefing Paper for Education Committee Northern Ireland Assembly 3 June 2020

The Association of School and College Leaders (Northern Ireland Branch) was invited to present evidence to The Northern Ireland Assembly Committee for Education on matters arising from the current COVID 19 pandemic.

In advance of its evidence session, the Association was asked to provide a briefing paper for MLAs on the key areas to be addressed.

Background to the Association

The [Association of School and College Leaders](#) (ASCL) is a leading professional body representing more than 19,500 members, including education system leaders, heads, principals, deputies, vice-principals, assistant heads and business managers of state-funded and independent schools and colleges throughout the UK. ASCL members are responsible for the education of more than four million young people in more than 90 per cent of the secondary and tertiary phases, and in an increasing proportion of the primary phase. ASCL works to shape national education policy, provide advice and support to members and deliver first-class professional development across the sector.

In Northern Ireland, the Association has approximately 200 members in more than 80 post-primary schools, across all sectors, the total enrolment of which equates to almost half of all pupils in secondary education, and includes some of the largest schools in the Province. As a branch of the national association, ASCL(NI) is able to contribute independently to the debate on education in the Province on behalf of its members and the children it serves. We work to shape education policy, provide advice, and support to members and deliver high quality professional development across the sector.

The Association's strapline is '*We speak on behalf of our members; we act on behalf of our young people.*' It is these young people in our charge that are the focus of our concerns.

The current situation regarding public examinations 2020

As an association, we were proactive in our efforts to seek a pupil centred solution to the current examinations' situation. Following the Minister's announcement, we commented:

"We welcome that the Department of Education has made a decision for the grading of A levels, AS levels and GCSEs in Northern Ireland following the cancellation of exams. We must all recognise this is a system forged in extremis. It is about making the best out of a difficult situation to ensure that students in Northern Ireland are treated fairly in circumstances beyond their control. We wanted a process which allows students to progress to the next stage of their lives without hindrance. Now that a decision has been made, we call on all to back the approach. We are confident that the plan is a fair and consistent way of grading these qualifications in these circumstances. The Minister has made it clear that teachers will have a key role to play. Pupils can be assured their schools know them well and will assess their work with the utmost diligence".

We have continued to engage with CCEA throughout, not least in having discussions enabling it to produce its Technical Guidance/Frequently Asked Questions.

Current concerns

These can be categorised as follows:

1. Cohort Variation

We have grave concerns that in Centres where there has been significant improvement in pupil attainment with this particular (2020) cohort that the efforts of these pupils, and their teachers, will not be recognised. This could lead to a real injustice and act as a severe blow to the school improvement agenda. Principals are being asked in their declaration to state that the Centre Assessment Grades (CAGs) 'honestly and fairly represent the grades that these students would have been most likely to achieve if they had sat the exams' while at the same time agreeing that 'if the profile of the centre assessment grades are different from what might be expected based on my centre's past results, and the prior attainment of this year's students, the grades for my centre will be adjusted to bring them into line with overall standards'. We believe this to be a contradictory declaration if a centre has irrefutable evidence to demonstrate that the 2020 cohort is stronger (or indeed weaker). The logical conclusion is that these students, regardless of what the centre says, will not receive the grades that they would have been mostly likely to achieve if they had sat the exams. Our concerns in relation to cohort variations are particularly critical in minority subjects where there can be significant variation, even in one centre, from year to year. Such variations will undoubtedly mean that a standardisation process using data from the last three years, could result in major disadvantage for some pupils.

As an association, we have strongly promoted ethical leadership and firmly believe that in making Centre Assessment Grades all staff need to be objective and honest. We are on the record as having stated that "this process will only work if the profession works together in a consistent, fair and ethical way. The students affected by this deserve nothing less". Of course, we would expect schools to be honest and to reflect fairly the attainment of its current cohort, even when that overall attainment is significantly down on previous years.

To ensure fairness it should be possible for CCEA to have appropriate levels of tolerance, using its statistical calculations and where the variation with the Centre Assessment Grades (CAGs) is within tolerance, to accept the CAGs. If CAGs are outside tolerance, CCEA could seek additional information – (CATs/ALIS etc) which supports why grades are higher than previously, before finalising decisions. This would require all schools to know that they must have adequate data additional data which may be sought to support CAGs awarded to all candidates provide a case with sufficient supporting data. A process which maintains standards within the system does not necessarily correlate with supporting standards within schools. It is not possible to draw a parallel between comparative standards under normal examination conditions with the current CAG approach.

Question

What guarantees can be provided to ensure that no individual candidate, who is fairly assessed by his/her centre will not be disadvantaged, by not being awarded the grade he/she deserves and is reflective of his/her ability, by any statistical adjustment to bring results in line with previous cohorts?

2. Appeals process

ASCL has responded to the CCEA Appeals Consultation and can broadly accept the logic of the process, in most respects. In the area of adjustment of candidates' grades, we have grave concerns. Ofqual has decided that 'exceptionally, for this year we consider we should prevent exam boards putting grades down where errors affecting students other those named in an appeal are discovered through the application of the appeals process.' In contrast CCEA is proposing: 'the centre rank order is integral to the statistical process, and therefore to ensuring standards are maintained in the interests of fairness to all candidates. If the rank order is changed for a candidate in a centre in the post results period, it can have an adverse impact on the statistical outcomes and therefore standards across the cohort. It is therefore in the interests of standardisation across the cohort, and fairness to all candidates, that if a rank order position for one candidate in a subject is changed as a result of an appeal, it should affect the other candidates' rank order in the centre to take account of this change. This may mean a change of grade for those displaced in the rank order as the result of an appeal.'

The issue of the change of grade for one candidate potentially impacting adversely on other candidates from the centre is totally unacceptable. This would mean that no result is finalised or valid until the entire appeals process is concluded. It is unworkable because of the need to potentially recall and reissue results for large numbers of candidates. It is grossly unfair to all the other candidates affected. Rank orders are determined within grades. We would argue that if a candidate appeals a grade and they move from C to B, then they should go in at the bottom of that rank order, thus ensuring that no other candidate is adversely impacted by their outcome. Not only do we think this is unfair, but we believe it opens up an avenue for subsequent appeals/litigation from candidates who find that they have been moved from an awarded B to a C because someone else in the cohort appealed. There is no justification for this. We would contend that the rank order as determined by schools is inviolate. Teachers' professional judgment in determining rank order is crucial to the process.

Question

Can CCEA guarantee that the grades of students other than those named in an appeal will not be adjusted where errors have been detected in application of grades by appellants?

3. Re-opening Schools

There appears to be some understanding, based on comments made by The Minister of Education, that schools will reopen to pupils other than children of Key Workers and vulnerable children in late August. Clarity for schools about what 'late August' means is crucial. Schools need to be given clear direction in a timely manner to ensure that the inevitable reopening of school, at whatever stage, can be best managed. Significant planning and physical adjustments will have to be undertaken in schools and this will require input from both support staff and teaching staff. It is important that clarity is provided, based on the scientific evidence.

While school closures have been an essential component of the national strategy to control COVID19, it is important to consider fully the negative effect on all aspects of children and young people's progress and development, as well as their wellbeing. That is why we support a strategy to enable as many pupils as possible to return to schools at the earliest date it is safe to do so, based on the appropriate scientific evidence, alongside consideration of the other harms caused by ongoing restrictions.

We note the decision in Scotland that teachers and other education staff will return in June so they can prepare and plan for the new ways of working. It would be helpful if there was clarity from DE if this is going to happen in Northern Ireland. The inevitable 'blended learning' approach that will require to be implemented upon any reopening will require detailed planning and preparation. Schools are waiting for guidance about school reopening, yet the reality is that schools will have to work out for themselves the detailed plan for their school within the framework and guidance given.

We note and welcome the establishment, by DE, of a Practitioners' Group, made up of principals as well as ongoing work on the Restart Programme. Urgency, well ahead of the end of June is essential if effective planning is to be completed for late August. We see real value in a reopening of schools but only if we can provide confidence and clarity to staff, pupils, and parents that a 'reopened' school can be purposeful.

We note current variation in definition of social distancing requirements and that, even if the 2m distance was reduced, class sizes will have to be reduced and pupils will not be able to attend every day. There will be a significant impact upon school delivery and curriculum provision. The curriculum will be inevitably be significantly curtailed. There will be no trips and visits, including geography fieldwork. All practical subjects will prove challenging (including the sciences, drama, music, Food and Nutrition). Teaching strategies which promote engagement and effective learning such as working in pairs or small groups will have to be curtailed. We will not see the interactive, creative and exploratory learning environments that have been developed. We fully acknowledge that changes to how schools will operate in September are inevitable, but we have significant concerns for the delivery of the curriculum and assessment in 2021.

Question

Can schools get a guarantee that they will be provided with clear direction, by mid-June, at the latest, on the Department of Education's plans for the wider reopening of schools at the earliest safe opportunity?

4. Exams 2021

The impact on all pupils, not least those currently in Year 11 (halfway, by this stage through their GCSE course) and current Yr 13 (A level) pupils, of the current situation, and the anticipated changes to school provision next academic year, is significant. GCSE, AS and A-level examinations in 2021 will have to take account of the disruption caused by lockdown and the phased return to normality. It cannot be expected for schools, and their pupils, to cover the same content as they would in a normal schooling context, and in some subjects, where there are particular specification requirements (for example Health and Social Care), it will be impossible to do so. Urgent thought needs to be given to both the content of examination specifications and the modes of assessment. Areas which could be considered, showing pastoral concern for the young people affected, include changes to the regulations around the supervision of coursework and controlled assessment preparation, and a reduction in the content of specifications and changes to the assessment (for example providing questions which are optional...select either question A, B or C etc....) of the 2021 GCSE and AS and A Levels.

As teachers are now (and over the summer) preparing materials for the next academic year, Awarding Organisations should endeavour to address this matter quickly. When the current Yr 11 and Yr 13 pupils return to school the first question they will be asking of their teachers is 'what about my exams in 2021.' Indeed, school principals are already frequently receiving this and similar questions from anxious pupils and parents.

Currently school leaders are unable to provide any advice or help alleviate genuine fears.

Question

Can CCEA confirm that Subject Officers are engaging in detailed research, and consultation with principals and Heads of subject Departments about possible changes which will require to be implemented to the 2021 assessments at GCSE, AS and A level, and, if so, can schools be given assurances that such information will be made available well ahead of the commencement of the new academic year?

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