

Briefing Paper for Education Committee Northern Ireland Assembly

20 January 2021

Background to the Association

The Association of School and College Leaders (ASCL) is a leading professional body representing more than 20,000 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.

School Closures

It has been the stated position of ASCL that where and when it is safe to do so, the best place for our young people is in school. Our members and their staff have worked hard to provide enriching, productive and supportive learning environments for their pupils. During the autumn term we were aware of a significant variation in

the impact of Covid 19 on school attendance, with some schools experiencing significant disruption while others saw little impact on the attendance of staff and pupils. We have seen an excellent response from teachers in providing for the different needs of pupils through a range of blended learning approaches and pastoral care, and they should be commended for their industry, flexibility and resilience.

In late November, our President made it clear that ASCL Northern Ireland

“supports keeping schools open as much as possible, including around the Christmas period”, but suggested that “consideration could be given to affording school leaders and governors the discretion to close if their circumstances are such that a local circuit breaker would be advisable and that the schools impacted are in a position to offer effective remote learning”.

Since late December the public health landscape changed significantly, and we were supportive of the Minister’s decision to open schools in January for the children of key workers and vulnerable pupils only. Such a decision, taken in the interests of public health, inevitably has other significant consequences, not least the impact on GCSEs and A levels during 2021.

Examinations

During the autumn term ASCL NI argued that, despite the challenges facing our young people, and with appropriate mitigations in place, modified examinations were the fairest option. Our proposed solutions included elements of optionality in the assessment process, particularly for the AS and A-level examinations. The intention was to create the most even playing field for all students, including those impacted at different times and in different ways by Covid-19. We made this point clear to the Education Committee in relation to the 2021 examinations when we gave evidence on 3 June 2020:

“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."

Following the Department of Education's decision on 16 December to make adjustments to examinations for 2021, we commented:

"We appreciate that different views exist over how students should be assessed in Northern Ireland next year in the wake of the coronavirus pandemic. However, ASCL Northern Ireland has consistently supported the decision to go ahead with exams, as long as this can be done in a way that is as fair as possible to students.

"We welcome the package of measures announced today. They provide clarity for teachers and students, and include a number of actions which recognise the vastly different extent to which students have been affected by the pandemic. We believe they constitute an approach that is as fair as it can be in these very difficult circumstances.

"Schools have worked tirelessly to help students catch up with lost learning over the course of this term, and are wholly focused on ensuring that these young people are prepared for their exams, and are able to progress to the next stage of their lives. We wish them and their students well in the months ahead."

Following the significant change in the public health situation since late December, which led to the closure of schools to most pupils, we commented further:

"It has become apparent that, as the public health situation has changed and we have entered another period of remote learning, further disruption to exams and assessment is inevitable.

"ASCL will work with the Department of Education and CCEA to inform thinking as to the best way forward. It is essential that there is public confidence in the system which replaces exams, and that we all pull together to achieve that end.

"In the middle of all of this are young people. They need grades which reflect their efforts fairly and consistently, and which enable them to progress to the next stage in their lives."

Last week ASCL met with senior CCEA officials in order to consider how best to award grades to students and how schools can be supported in their work with the young people.

Our stated position is that there needs to be *an emphasis on reaching a solution which is pupil-focused, teacher-led and data-conditioned.*

Prior to the 2020 examinations result fiasco we advised this committee as follows:

“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”.

The use of an algorithm was always problematic as ASCL consistently pointed out and so we welcome the decision not to apply such a strategy in 2021. In 2020 all schools were more or less at the same place but this year, with varying impact of COVID-19 this is not the case. In coming to an assessment of pupil potential each school will have a different range of data to draw on

We would support the view that grades submitted to CCEA must reflect a fair, reasonable and carefully considered judgement of the most likely grade a student would have achieved if they had sat their exams and completed any controlled assessment.

We argue that the *“process will only work if the profession works together in a consistent, fair and ethical way.”*

We support the view that the evidence to inform assessment should be wide-ranging, and not too prescriptive. It is important to note that with schools now closed until mid-February at the earliest, the amount of time in school to undertake assessments is now already very limited. This is exactly one of the reasons why we supported the provision of a reduced diet of examinations in June as opposed to the staged assessment model which was to be implemented in Wales and has now had to be abandoned.

We should also be aware of the unintended consequences that internal assessments conducted by schools may have. They will inevitably reduce still further the amount of time available for teaching, which will make it more challenging to cover specifications (as the Minister has said we should do). We also need to be aware that, as these assessments will be used to determine grades, they will be high stakes. Pupils have already had a difficult time during the pandemic, and we need to be sensitive to the anxiety caused by the uncertainty they are facing.

There needs to be an effective strategy of standardisation with schools being asked to provide evidence where grades are outside expected performance for that centre. Students in schools where there was not significant grade inflation in 2020 through the use of CAGs cannot be disadvantaged because the processes used in reaching

Teacher Professional Judgements were more robust than in other schools. Once again, it will not be appropriate to use performance data from this year or last year to judge a school's effectiveness.

Careful consideration needs to be given to the process of appeals for 2021 in order to be fair to the students and to protect schools from speculative or vexatious claims. It needs to be recognised that the events of last year damaged the confidence that school leaders had in the system, as they were left exposed when they had been given assurances that they would be protected.

Prepared on behalf of ASCL Northern Ireland by



A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Robert Wilson".

Robert Wilson
ASCL Northern Ireland Regional Officer

14 January 2021