

EDUCATION, CULTURE AND SPORT COMMITTEE

Wednesday 8 December 1999
(*Morning*)

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EDUCATION, CULTURE AND SPORT COMMITTEE 11th Meeting

CONVENER:

*Mrs Mary Mulligan (Linlithgow) (Lab)

COMMITTEE MEMBERS:

*Karen Gillon (Clydesdale) (Lab)
*Ian Jenkins (Tweeddale, Ettrick and Lauderdale) (LD)
*Mr Kenneth Macintosh (Eastwood) (Lab)
*Fiona McLeod (West of Scotland) (SNP)
*Mr Brian Monteith (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
*Cathy Peattie (Falkirk East) (Lab)
*Michael Russell (South of Scotland) (SNP)
*Mr Jamie Stone (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD)
*Nicola Sturgeon (Glasgow) (SNP)
*Ian Welsh (Ayr) (Lab)

*attended

WITNESSES:

Dorothy Baird (Steiner Waldorf Schools for Curriculum Choice in Scotland)
Andy Farquharson (Edinburgh Rudolf Steiner School)
Elizabeth Henderson (Aberdeen Waldorf School)
Alistair McCulloch (St Mary's Episcopal Primary School, Dunblane)
Paul Nelson (St Mary's Episcopal Primary School, Dunblane)
Mike Palmer (Steiner Waldorf Schools for Curriculum Choice in Scotland)
Cath Prescott (St Mary's Episcopal Primary School, Dunblane)
Gordon Scott (St Mary's Episcopal Primary School, Dunblane)
Catriona Watt (Edinburgh Steiner Schools Trustees)

COMMITTEE CLERK:

Gillian Baxendine

ASSISTANT CLERK:

Alistair Fleming

Scottish Parliament

Education, Culture and Sport Committee

Wednesday 8 December 1999

(Morning)

[THE CONVENER *opened the meeting at 09:33*]

The Convener (Mrs Mary Mulligan): Before I invite our witnesses to speak, I have a housekeeping matter to deal with. Does the committee agree that we will go into private session to deal with item 4 on the agenda, the national arts companies inquiry?

Members *indicated agreement.*

Improvement in Scottish Education Bill

The Convener: We have two sets of witnesses this morning, the first from St Mary's Episcopal Primary School, Dunblane and the second from Steiner Waldorf Schools for Curriculum Choice in Scotland.

I welcome our visitors from St Mary's Episcopal Primary School, Dunblane to the meeting. I will explain our approach: you will have an opportunity to make your introduction on aspects of the draft improvement in Scottish education bill. Committee members will then have the opportunity to ask you questions. I believe that Alistair McCulloch will make the opening statement. Mr McCulloch, could you introduce the other members of your team?

Committee members may indicate who they wish to answer their questions, or they may leave it up to you to decide who answers.

Alistair McCulloch (St Mary's Episcopal Primary School, Dunblane): Cath Prescott is the head teacher at St Mary's; Paul Nelson is an elected parent on the board of management and the chairman of the school's finance committee; Gordon Scott is the vice-chairman of the board and an elected parent. I am an elected parent and the chairman of the board of St Mary's.

I would like to thank the committee for inviting representatives of the board of St Mary's to give evidence on how we believe the improvement in Scottish education bill will impact on our school. Eight of the 32 sections of the bill relate exclusively to the removal of the self-governing legislation. Its removal will hand the management of our school to Stirling Council.

The board recognises that the concept of self-governing schools is politically and ideologically unacceptable to many members of the Parliament. In practice, however, it has been the ability of the school to manage its own affairs over the past four years which has made it so successful.

The board of St Mary's is committed to the principles outlined in the foreword of "Improving our Schools", the consultation document on the improvement in Scottish education bill: to raise standards; to be responsive to local needs; to

"give every child the best start in life so that they can have the best opportunity for life";

to involve parents and the local community in the school; and to aim for

"excellence in schools and never accept second best."

Why does the board believe that the school is succeeding? As was highlighted in the latest publication by the education statistics division, 97 per cent of our children attained the appropriate five to 14 level for reading, as compared to 73 per cent for Scotland and 74 for Stirling district. The figure for writing was 97 per cent for our pupils, compared with 60 per cent for Scotland and 62 per cent for Stirling district. Our figure for mathematics was 97 per cent, compared with 76 per cent for Scotland and 77 per cent for Stirling district.

Our children are realising their academic potential. We are a positively socially inclusive school. The children have a wide variety of social, physical and emotional challenges. The child is at the centre of all our decision making. We are highly responsive to local needs, our board is widely represented by the community of Dunblane, and we are more accountable than most schools because parents and staff elect the majority of board members.

Our costs are low. The cost per pupil is significantly less than the average for other comparable primary schools. Our school is at capacity, and we have a long waiting list at almost all stages. We believe that our success is due to our ability to manage our affairs unhindered by local authority interference and bureaucracy and free to make our own decisions.

We are not funded preferentially, but we are free to use our resources where we feel the need is greatest, for example, in the funding of increased staffing for support for learning. That gives teachers, pupils, parents and board members a communal feeling of ownership, which fosters a strong sense of ethos, allegiance, pride and responsibility.

St Mary's is a small school with only three composite primary classes and a nursery, yet, by any yardstick, our school is highly successful, and offers parents a choice, which many have taken.

The board realises that the self-governing legislation will be removed, but is it logical, sensible and right to undermine a school which is succeeding so well?

The Minister for Children and Education, in the foreword to the consultation document, states:

"Education will be our highest priority with the stated intention of earning a world class reputation for the Scottish education system."

We believe that the removal of St Mary's ability to manage its own affairs will lead to a lowering of standards. Aside from the increase in bureaucracy, the handover of a substantial part of our funding to Stirling Council would undoubtedly lead to cuts in staff, which would, in turn, lead to a worse adult-pupil ratio. That would result in less support for those who need it most. Ultimately, it will be the children who suffer, especially those children with special educational needs.

The Scottish Executive can, however, achieve its stated aim of removing the self-governing legislation, while allowing our school to manage its own affairs, by giving us grant-aided status such as is presently enjoyed, with great success, by Jordanhill School in Glasgow. We believe that such a solution would recognise and support the success that is St Mary's, and yet be politically acceptable.

Cathy Peattie (Falkirk East) (Lab): This question is probably for Mr McCulloch, but if any of the other witnesses would like to answer, please do. I have read through your document, and accept what you say about the quality and standards that you have achieved. However, in the section under the heading of "The effects of St Mary's losing its current management status", there is a list of very negative statements, and no positive statements. Do you feel that there would be no positive benefits for the children or for the school if you came under the control of Stirling Council?

Alistair McCulloch: I will answer that by referring to my initial statement that we would lose a proportion of our funding. As you will understand, St Mary's is funded by a grant from the Scottish Executive. It is divided into two pieces: one is school level expenditure, the other is central costs. That is fundamental to the impact of any change in status.

We spend 5 per cent of our grant on administration. Central costs represent about 14 per cent of our grant, but we do not use 14 per cent on administration, so most of that goes on staffing. If we lose our current management status, we will lose that 14 per cent immediately; that is what happens. That will have an immediate impact, and we will have to lose staff—a lot of staff. In effect, we will go back to having our three

core teachers, with perhaps a little secretarial support, but that would be it.

If we go to Stirling Council, we are told that we will be part of its quality assurance framework; we already have a quality assurance framework in our school. We are told that we will be part of its in-service staff development programme; we already have an in-service staff development programme. All the other programmes are already in place in our school. I therefore find it difficult to see how a change could be positive. At the moment Stirling Council is saying that we are overfunded, so is it likely that it will say to us: "Don't worry about the 14 per cent. You can just keep it"?

Paul Nelson (St Mary's Episcopal Primary School, Dunblane): It is not for us to define what the benefits would be of going back under council control. In consultation with the Executive, our local MSP, Dr Sylvia Jackson, has defined the benefits. In a letter to the school board on 24 September, she said:

"You are also seeking clarification of reasons why the Scottish Executive and myself believe that the School should return to local authority management. Aside from it being an election commitment in Scotland, the advantages of the range of support services and professional expertise offered by the local authority is important.

"For example, Stirling Council's Quality Assurance Policy Framework deals with the key areas of: school development planning; audit/self evaluation; and targets for improvement. The staff development programme includes: quality assuring in-school programme; staff development and review; sharing good practice; peer group support and cluster planning. Advice and support services include: ICT policy and strategy; support for children . . . ; access policies . . . ; support for parents . . . ; and primary/secondary liaison."

We do not feel that any of those things would suffer as a result of St Mary's keeping its current status. If you cared to ask our head teacher, she could go through some of the areas in which our school development plan is working at the moment.

Cath Prescott (St Mary's Episcopal Primary School, Dunblane): I would like to reiterate what was said. We have a school development plan well in advance, which we update every six months in conjunction with the staff. The pupils have an input. There is a school council that has an input, which reports to the staff. Using the Scottish Executive document, "How good is your school?" we analyse and evaluate the school, and then change the school development plan according to our needs.

09:45

We recognised, for instance, that we have a lot of children with special needs in the school. Therefore, we put it to the board that we should increase our learning support teacher's time. That

was done. Before we were self-governing, our learning support teacher came for one morning every two weeks. She now comes for a whole day every week. This is why our results are as good as they are: if we recognise a need, we can address it, using the funds that we have.

If we were to go back to Stirling Council control, I would have absolutely no say in how much time with a learning support teacher our children would have, who that teacher might be, when she would come, how much support for learning areas I would receive or how much school-helper time I would get. We are able to use our resources directly for the benefit of the children, according to our needs. That is the school development plan.

For the staff development and review, we access staff development from Perth and Kinross, Fife and Stirling Council, as well as from commercial firms such as NFER-Nelson. We receive a lot of staff development of all kinds. People that we pay as consultants come to the school, and we go to various places. We are well up on educational developments.

We share good practice. For instance, at our last staff development exercise, in August, two other local primary schools came to our school and we shared the payment of a consultant. We receive peer group support and the children are well supported. There is a school council, monitors and a buddy system. The children feel that they are part of the school and that they have an input. Everything is discussed, therefore we have no real discipline problems at all.

Child protection, attendance and substance use were mentioned in the letter. I have been on a child protection course. We are well aware that we must take those issues on board, and we do so. We have updated all the school's policies and we are aware of educational developments. All the press cuttings that I gather I circulate to the board, so that board members are constantly updated on developments.

Cathy Peattie: You say that you have a high proportion of children with special needs, which requires special support. Could you give me a percentage of the children who need that kind of support?

Cath Prescott: There are 66 pupils in the school and 27 children in the nursery. We are part of Stirling Council's staged intervention scheme. Part of that requires us to fill in forms for state intervention to access resources. I filled in 22 state intervention forms, which account for a third of the pupils in the school. Some of those cases are minor—the children have speech and language problems—but concern must be registered at the first stage of the impact on classroom learning and teaching.

A lot of parents have chosen us because we are a small school with a caring ethos. They feel that that environment would be better for a child who has special needs. We are therefore sought out for our ability to cater for children with special needs.

Nicola Sturgeon (Glasgow) (SNP): I have visited your school and would not dispute the standards that you have achieved. We can all understand your anxiety over the fact that what you have achieved over the past few years might be undermined.

In your submission, you state what you believe would happen if the school were transferred back to local authority control. Have there been any discussions between the school board and Stirling Council about the possibility of the school returning to local authority control? Have you expressed your concerns to the council and heard its views? If we are to believe that it is not in the interests of the local education authority to jeopardise high standards in any school, surely you must be able to seek reassurances from the council?

Paul Nelson: Shortly after the general election, the Scottish Office asked us to discuss the school's position with Gordon Jeyes, the director of education of Stirling Council. He was not able to give us any guarantees whatsoever about the future of the school.

Nicola Sturgeon: What guarantees did you ask him for?

Paul Nelson: We asked him to guarantee continuity of the school, first. He was not able to give us that guarantee. We asked him for continuity of funding. He was not able to give us that guarantee.

Nicola Sturgeon: There have been no further discussions with the council since the publication of the draft bill?

Paul Nelson: Not formally, on that level.

Nicola Sturgeon: Clearly, one of your concerns is not the potential closure of the school but its potential transformation from a primary school into a pre-school centre. Did you discuss that with the director of education?

Paul Nelson: No.

Gordon Scott (St Mary's Episcopal Primary School, Dunblane): The visitor of schools and Margaret Doran came to the school last summer. They were not interested in the school; they wanted a nursery. They were interested to know how we thought that the building could be used as a pre-school centre: that was the basis of the discussion.

Cath Prescott: Two other board members and I had a meeting with Gordon Jeyes a while ago, at

which he told us that Stirling Council does not fund according to need, as we have been trying to do. That makes me believe that our children with special needs would not receive the funding that they require.

Nicola Sturgeon: I have a final question. The situation is hypothetical, but I am interested to hear your views. How would you react to the suggestion that you become an independent school?

Alistair McCulloch: By "independent school", do you mean outwith the state system?

Nicola Sturgeon: Yes.

Alistair McCulloch: That has never been discussed by the board. That has never been on our agenda. We are a highly successful state school. Nobody has come to us so far and told us that we are not successful according to the various criteria that have been established by the Scottish Executive or anybody else. Nobody disputes that we are a successful school. We are a state school. We do not charge. Our admissions policy is standard. There is no examination to enter the school. We have a normal cross-section of children in the school. We have no wish to be a non-state school.

Paul Nelson: We could go further, and say that we are proud to be a state school.

Alistair McCulloch: Absolutely.

Cath Prescott: When I talked with Stirling Council about partnership funding for the nursery, the council wanted to put me with the private partnership group in its meetings. I refused, as I regard ours as a state school with a state nursery. Our parents, the board and the staff are drawn from all political parties. The will is not there to become a private school. We want to be a state school and stay as we are.

Ian Jenkins (Tweeddale, Ettrick and Lauderdale) (LD): You say that you are a state school. I accept that. I am sympathetic to your viewpoint. However, as a state school you must recognise that the state has an overview, and that no school is an island.

I am interested in your relationship with the other primary schools in Dunblane, the way in which your school is perceived by other people, how you relate to the other state secondary schools, and so on. I take on board what you say about your school, but I wonder what the knock-on effect on other schools would be. That is part of the ideological difficulty that I have with private education as it operates in England—it is divisive, causes rivalries between schools, and so on. I am not making a judgment; I am asking about those kinds of issues.

Alistair McCulloch: There are, as you know, three primary schools in Dunblane—two larger schools and our small denominational school, St Mary's, which has not been mentioned. About half of our children are Scottish Episcopalian. We provide the choice—which some parents want—of a Christian ethos within the community. St Mary's is also a small school, which some parents feel is better for their children and which is another element of the choice that we offer.

We have very good links with the other two primary schools in Dunblane. Small and large schools are needed. As one of three feeder primary schools, we also have very good links and regular meetings with Dunblane High School. We are not isolated; we are a state school—part and parcel of the state education system—that happens to be managed differently.

As the committee is aware, Dunblane is growing. There is no end in sight to that growth and demand for primary school places will increase. We provide a much-needed resource within the community, but we do not see ourselves as separate or isolated. Does that answer your question?

Ian Jenkins: To a degree it does, but do you accept that Stirling Council must consider how to deal with the whole population? Do you further agree that, if your school was part of the system and the council was in control, the council would be able to think about providing places in St Mary's if there were a need for extra school places? The council would be able to take a strategic overview.

Alistair McCulloch: We are part of the system.

Ian Jenkins: In that case, Stirling Council should have some say in what you do.

Alistair McCulloch: We have regular contact with Stirling Council.

Ian Jenkins: It does not sound very regular.

Alistair McCulloch: We must have regular contact, because, as you are aware, Stirling Council has certain statutory responsibilities. We regularly consult the council on issues such as transport and special educational needs. The head teacher of St Mary's also has regular meetings with other head teachers and with officials from the education authority. Discussions go on all the time. If there was a problem with educational provision in the area and Stirling Council felt that we ought to be involved in solving that, there would be no problem in including St Mary's. We welcome discussions at any time. The difference is in how our school is managed.

Mr Brian Monteith (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): The Scottish Executive is fond of pilots for this or that initiative. St Mary's is not a pilot for an

initiative, but is the result of a change in education legislation. However, if it was treated as a pilot for greater devolved management, what lessons have been learned that might be applied to other schools?

Alistair McCulloch: As you said, St Mary's is not a pilot. However, I understand that there is a pilot learning community in Glasgow at Eastbank Academy, which is run by Glasgow City Council. There, clustered schools have, effectively, been given self-governing status. Without being political or trying to flag up any issues, I think that there are a number of lessons to be learned from that.

As I said earlier, we spend 5 per cent of our total revenue grant on central administration, whereas in Scotland the total spent on that is 27 per cent. Stirling Council spends 16 per cent on central administration. That means that of our total grant more taxpayers' money is going into the classroom. There are five Stirling schools that are the same size as ours whose school-level expenditure is greater than our total expenditure—which is central costs plus school-level expenditure. However, we can still provide a high level of service for our children because we have lessened our administration costs and diverted that saving towards teachers and pupils.

If somebody wanted to use us as a pilot, that would be fine. We believe that our school works and is successful. If it works, why change it merely for ideological reasons?

10:00

Mr Monteith: Yours is a small school and small schools are traditionally more expensive than larger schools. However, your per-pupil costs seem not only to be lower than those of comparable schools, but lower than those of many larger schools. What enables St Mary's to drive down its per-pupil costs?

Paul Nelson: Unfortunately, our costs per pupil are limited by the amount of money that the Government gives us. As Alistair McCulloch said, our Government grant is £65,000 less than what Aberfoyle Primary School spends on school-level expenditure for 78 pupils. We have, therefore, to cut our cloth, but our major savings are made on administration costs. We do not have the heavy back-end administration costs of a council, and we are able to devote any savings to the education of our children.

Cath Prescott has mentioned that the support that we get from Stirling Council for special needs education is somewhat limited. We provide additional special needs support from our own budget.

Mr Monteith: You have mentioned the fact that

Dunblane is expanding. Do you have any plans for changes to the school in terms of teacher numbers in future?

Paul Nelson: Indeed we do. In May 1999, the board put a proposal to what is now the Scottish Executive to expand St Mary's teaching staff by employing a primary 1 teacher and creating a reception class of 12 or 13 pupils. That would be of benefit because more attention could be paid to earlier intervention, class sizes could be smoothed out from primary 2 to primary 6, the school roll would be increased from 66 to 88 and overall costs per pupil would be further reduced.

Alistair McCulloch: At one of our regular development meetings, the head teacher expressed concern about the fact that the composite infant class was growing. The situation was becoming difficult because a number of the children in that class had a variety of needs.

We are managing, but it is always possible to improve. The head teacher's view—based on some studies that have appeared recently—was that a favourable teacher-pupil ratio at an early stage has great spin-off benefits in literacy and numeracy later on. She suggested that if we could get funding for a fourth teacher to teach only primary 1—which would be a smaller class—not only would that lead to more pupils, and hence to a lower cost per pupil, but it would give the children who need it the terrific start that would benefit them later on.

Gordon Scott: In one classroom, we have currently three different year groups. The fourth teacher would help to bring that down to two year groups per class all the way through the school.

Mr Monteith: I would like to ask for a little more detail on a point that you made at the beginning of your evidence, which was that if St Mary's reverted to council management, there would be less support for those who need it most. Can you explain why?

Cath Prescott: The support-for-learning teacher would go back to doing what she did before—working one morning every two weeks instead of one whole day per week. We have 10 support for learning hours for a boy in my class with Asperger's syndrome. At the moment I am talking to Stirling Council about increasing those hours, because I feel that the child needs them—he can be very disruptive. In the meantime, the board has made provision in our budget for extra hours of one-to-one teaching for the child. We would not be able to do that under Stirling Council. We might have to tell the parents that we cannot continue with the placement, because if Stirling Council does not increase the number of SLA hours that it gives us, we cannot fund them from our budget. That has a direct impact on a child with special

needs.

In another case, Stirling Council felt that a child in our nursery had profound problems that meant that he needed to be placed at a unit attached to a mainstream school. The parents fought against that, and he is now in the same class. He is doing fine—he is progressing intellectually and socially.

We need the extra hours for those children, but we would not be able to pay for those hours out of our budget if we were with Stirling Council because we would have no say in what we fund—no flexibility or leeway.

Ian Jenkins: When you say that you are meeting Stirling Council, presumably you are not paying for its time, but the rest of the community is. Every time that you go to Stirling Council for this, that or the other, somebody pays for it. When it comes to the proportion of management costs to central costs, there is not exactly a level playing field.

My second point is slightly off the subject, but I want to raise it. I am interested in issues such as maintenance of buildings. Has less been spent on the school buildings recently and might not that hit you later on? That happens in other schools. Have you put the emphasis on teaching provision—which is desirable—and will your failure to maintain your buildings catch up with you one day?

Alistair McCulloch: I will deal with the first point; Paul Nelson may want to deal with the second.

We do not get 100 per cent funding—we get just under 100 per cent because Stirling Council has certain statutory obligations, so some of the money is removed. The departments of Stirling Council that are responsible for special educational needs—transport and so on—get a share of our budget for that. When we have meetings with Stirling Council, usually others are present. We are part of the community and if the council wants to bill us for its time, it can do that. It has not yet done so, but providing that the charge was reasonable, we would examine that. However, I do not think that Ian Jenkins's comments are entirely fair.

Paul Nelson: I want to comment on finance. Of the total amount that we should be allocated, 3.2 per cent is retained by Stirling Council to cover the retained items—partly the items to which Ian Jenkins referred, and partly the items to which Alistair McCulloch referred.

The school has additional costs because it is self-governing and there are areas of inefficiency because the school is small. One such area is insurance costs. St Mary's must insure its buildings, so our insurance costs are much higher

than those that the local council allocates to schools. In truth, we spend as much on our school buildings as others do. Since the school's refurbishment, some items have not been included in the capital costs and we have had to pay for them from our maintenance budget. I do not believe that we are spending any less on the buildings now than we would spend on an older school.

Gordon Scott: May I comment?

The Convener: I will bring you in again in a moment. We are already running over time, but three members still have questions and I am keen that they should ask them. Please keep questions and answers fairly succinct, so that we can fit everybody in. I am aware that our other witnesses are waiting to speak to us, so members should bear that in mind, although I will try to bring people in.

Mr Jamie Stone (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD): I have three questions. They are quite short, and they arise from my visit to your school some months ago. I thank you for your hospitality.

First, I am an Episcopalian and I have experience of an Episcopalian Church school in Inverness being faced with closure. Why have there been comparatively few representations from the Church?

Secondly, during my visit to St Mary's I outlined the Dornoch Academy situation. That is seen as something of a success in terms of a school coming back under council control. Since I visited your school, have you had any contact with Dornoch Academy or its representatives?

Thirdly, although I appreciate what you say about the director of education, the council is, or should be, the master—although some might disagree with that. What contact have you had with elected representatives, particularly the representative who covers the ward in which the school is located?

Alistair McCulloch: We are a denominational school and we have the support of the Scottish Episcopal Church's education committee. We also have the support of the local vestry and of the bishop. In his letter, the Bishop of St Andrews says:

"Why can't the politicians abolish future opting out, if they wish, but leave St Mary's to get on with doing a first class job?"

That is fairly succinct.

Some time ago I had regular contact with Dornoch Academy, but that contact petered out. Dornoch had its own agenda and, as you are aware, the situation in Dornoch was peculiar

because it was not a full secondary school with all years from 1 to 6. Its reason for becoming self-governing was totally different from ours.

What was your third question?

Mr Stone: What discussions have you had with elected members?

Alistair McCulloch: Dr Sylvia Jackson MSP has visited the school and we have regular contact with her. We know that she is listening, but she has not indicated any support for our cause.

Mr Stone: I am sorry; I was talking about discussions with councillors.

Alistair McCulloch: I beg your pardon. We have not contacted any councillors; however, the children's committee met recently and said that it would favour our return to local authority control.

10:15

Fiona McLeod (West of Scotland) (SNP): I want to explore two issues. In many ways, St Mary's school could be the ultimate example of devolved management of resources, which is a policy that the bill will encourage and extend. However, do you have any fears about special needs provision if the school is taken back into the fold? Special needs funding is based on the number of pupils in a school who have such needs. Under the current devolved management of resources, a head teacher can use those resources to increase his or her allocation of special needs support time. I am rather disappointed by your negative view of what will become of the school under Stirling Council.

Cath Prescott: I asked a friend of mine who is a head teacher in the Stirling Council region whether she had any say in her support for learning areas or school helper time allocations and she said that she did not, even though she is involved in the devolved management of resources scheme. However, she has a say in visiting teachers and in her own head teacher relief. Learning support teachers are allocated by a co-ordinator who is part of the support for learning areas network team. Learning support teacher and SLA support allocations are based on an annual audit into special needs provision in the area.

Fiona McLeod: I am not familiar with Stirling Council itself. Ms Prescott, what is your experience of being a head teacher with devolved management of resources within the state sector?

Cath Prescott: Although this is the first time that I have been a head teacher, I have worked in placements in four different local authorities, the most recent of which was in Scotland, and I worked in England at a time when a scheme that I think was called devolved school management

was being implemented, which was far in advance of what has happened in Scotland. As a result, I have seen the matter from many different angles.

Fiona McLeod: As Cathy Peattie said, you seem to have a very negative view of the school's future. I hope that the future will not prove to be so negative; perhaps, after four years out of the system, you are not au fait with the amount of control you will have.

Paul Nelson: I want to relate that comment to a chat that I had with our director of education at an educational conference in Edinburgh. He said to someone else that the school had done a good job but was going to be closed. Afterwards, when I pointed out to him that the school was not going to be closed, he said that he would have done it. He will deny that comment, because he made it only to me. He has closed other small schools.

Alistair McCulloch: Could I comment—

The Convener: I am aware that I cut off Mr Scott. Did you want to add something, Mr Scott?

Gordon Scott: Stirling Council sometimes takes as long as seven months to address issues that we raise. The board of the school can address issues much faster. The delay causes us concern, as we are used to getting on with things.

Alistair McCulloch: A number of members of the committee have suggested that we are negative about Stirling Council. I understand that many members of the committee feel that education is best run by local authorities but I suggest that that attitude is too rigid. Nobody has told us that our school's standards are not high—we are achieving high standards. Can the committee guarantee that our standards would not only remain as they are but improve if we were to return to local authority control? If we remain as we are, I am sure that they will improve.

The Convener: No member of the committee has questioned the function that you perform or the standards that you achieve. You should not assume that the committee is coming at this issue from any particular standpoint. The point of inviting witnesses such as you to the committee is to have discussions about the issue. Please do not assume that members have already made up their minds.

Mr Kenneth Macintosh (Eastwood) (Lab): You say that you think that you will lose a teacher because of additional bureaucratic costs. How will rejoining Stirling Council affect the ethos of the school, which relates to the activity of the school board and the head teacher and to the participation of parents and pupils? Why do you think that the ethos would be damaged?

Alistair McCulloch: Ethos is a wonderful word, but difficult to define, as we all know. St Mary's

has always had a strong ethos, even when it was under local authority control. We believe that the ethos has been reinforced by the fact that we are a small denominational school that runs its own affairs. With that comes great responsibility. Meetings of the school board were always sparsely attended but meetings of the board of management are always well attended by parents and others and there is a high level of accountability. We do not take our responsibilities lightly and are always aware that we are dealing with the future of our children. Such considerations create the school's ethos and would be lost if we returned to local authority control.

Paul Nelson: We are not paid managers of the school; we are committed to the school. The board is not committed to roads, parks, lights, the police or to anything else; it is committed to the school.

Mr Macintosh: Why would you not be committed to the school, if Stirling Council ran it?

Paul Nelson: We would not have the authority.

Mr Macintosh: You would still be parents of the children at the school, though.

Paul Nelson: Our parents are committed to the school—our parents association is also extremely committed and will continue to be so. However, we would not have the authority and the responsibility.

The Convener: I want to wind up this part of the meeting but I will allow brief points from Cathy Peattie and Nicola Sturgeon.

Cathy Peattie: There is no question of the witnesses' commitment, which has been demonstrated by what has happened so far. It might have been helpful to have had someone present this morning from Stirling Council—it is difficult in the council's absence to discuss what might happen to the school. If we consider this matter further, we must involve the council.

Nicola Sturgeon: I detected from Mr Nelson a fear that I am sure all the witnesses share—that Stirling Council's intention is eventually to close the school. The school's current roll is 66, but what is the school's capacity? Under current legislation, if a school is more than 80 per cent full, any decision on closure has to be referred to the Minister for Children and Education.

Paul Nelson: I believe that the capacity is 60. Is that correct, Alistair?

Alistair McCulloch: I cannot answer that, because it depends on where in the school we can squeeze in the desks and whether they are small or large desks. I am not being flippant—we are pretty well at capacity and cannot take many more pupils.

Nicola Sturgeon: In that case, it is almost certain that any decision to close the school would

not be taken by Stirling Council—the matter would be referred to the Minister for Children and Education.

One of the central elements of the bill is to place an obligation on authorities to implement devolved school management schemes. Do you think that devolved school management of St Mary's would go a long way towards offsetting some of your concerns about the school being brought back into local authority control?

Alistair McCulloch: I will respond to the second point. It cannot be denied that the minute we are returned to local authority control, we will lose nearly 14 per cent of our grant. No organisation can lose 14 per cent of its money without that having a huge impact. It does not matter whether one is part of a quality assurance programme or whatever—if one loses 14 per cent of one's money, the only way in which to make the budget balance would be to get rid of people. That fact is quantifiable, and no one will tell us: "Don't worry about it. You can just keep that money for devolved school management."

Can you repeat your first point?

Nicola Sturgeon: I made a factual point about the capacity of the school in relation to the current roll, which would have a bearing on any future closure decision.

Alistair McCulloch: The school is denominational, so any decision about closure would have to go to the Minister for Children and Education in any event. Our fear is not one of closure—we fear change of use. We know fine well that there is spare capacity within the other two primary schools, one of which is a new school. Because we are such a small school, those schools could take our primary pupils. However, there is an increasing shortage of pre-school capacity, because of the demand for places for three and four-year-olds. There is no logical reason why we could not be used as a pre-school centre, although Dunblane is growing and, in time, all capacity will be required.

10:30

Paul Nelson: I will answer the question on devolved school management.

The Scottish Executive's target for devolved school management is that 85 per cent of educational expenditure is to be devolved to schools. According to the Chartered Institute of Public Finance and Accountancy rating review, the current average for Scotland is 71 per cent. Therefore, councils are falling behind by some 14 per cent. The projections for this year raise the average to 73 per cent, which means that 27 per cent of educational expenditure—some £700

million—is not devolved to schools.

The Convener: Thank you for answering our questions today—we found your evidence helpful. When the bill is returned to the committee, we will discuss this issue further. As Cathy Peattie said, it might have been useful to have had someone from Stirling Council here to comment on the situation. We may wish to pursue that further and, if so, we will keep you informed.

I will suspend the meeting for a couple of minutes, while we change over the witnesses. I ask members not to disappear, as I will be starting again soon.

10:32

Meeting suspended.

10:36

On resuming—

The Convener: We will reconvene now. I apologise to the witnesses for the delay—we had told them that we would be ready for them at about 10 o'clock. As they were here, they will be aware that they have been delayed because we wanted to investigate as many matters as possible with the previous witnesses.

If the witnesses wish, they may make a statement. I understand that Dorothy Baird will say a few words to add to the written submission, which the committee has had the opportunity to read. Members of the committee will then ask questions. I would be grateful if Dorothy Baird would introduce the other witnesses.

Dorothy Baird (Steiner Waldorf Schools for Curriculum Choice in Scotland): Good morning. Andy Farquharson is acting chairman of the Edinburgh Rudolf Steiner School, and an upper school teacher of geography. Elizabeth Henderson is a teacher in the lower school at Aberdeen Waldorf School, and a parent of a child there. Mike Palmer is a civil servant, but is here as the parent of a child at the Edinburgh Rudolf Steiner School. Catriona Watt, too, is a parent of a child at the Edinburgh Rudolf Steiner School, where she is also chair of the trustees. I am the parent of three children at the Edinburgh Rudolf Steiner School.

Thank you for inviting us to give evidence. We are very encouraged by the policy of open consultation, which allows people such as us to be so directly involved. We are here as teachers or parents of children at the Steiner Waldorf schools in Scotland. We ask the committee to support our proposed amendments to the improvement in Scottish education bill. Those amendments would enable the Scottish Parliament to support actively the principle of pluralism in education by including

Steiner Waldorf schools in the maintained sector. That principle has received considerable support from MSPs of all parties. We will hold an all-party parliamentary launch on 19 January.

Steiner Waldorf education has existed since 1919. The Edinburgh Rudolf Steiner School has been here for 60 years and, with the schools in Aberdeen, Glasgow and Forres, forms part of a network of 780 schools in more than 50 countries. It is the fastest-growing education system in the world, as more and more countries recognise its unique qualities. In many of those countries, including in most of Europe, Steiner Waldorf education is funded by the state. It is a proven and validated system of education and, as such, offers a complementary alternative that enriches each country's school provision.

In Scotland, the schools have hitherto been part of the independent sector and have received no funding. However, we are part of the independent sector by default and not by volition. We do not wish to be part of the independent sector. We strongly believe that there is a place for Steiner Waldorf education within the maintained sector, as happens in most of Europe.

The schools are non-selective and non-denominational, and it is their stated aim to be open to all children whose parents wish them to go. Currently, however, there are parents whose children are excluded on financial grounds alone, and attempts to ensure equity of access are made to the detriment of teachers' salaries, which are considerably lower than those in the state sector.

Steiner Waldorf schools deliver high academic standards. They also foster in their pupils all the key qualities that are promoted in the education bill. They do so through their unique holistic curriculum and approach to teaching. The curriculum is extremely broad and provides—for all pupils—a balance of the academic, the artistic and the practical, which promotes in children of all abilities the less easily measurable qualities of self-confidence, a fully rounded outlook, emotional balance and enthusiasm for learning. Those are goals that the bill aims to achieve but does not specifically address.

The Steiner Waldorf curriculum and approach to teaching offers a fresh perspective on education; we seek recognition and support for that curriculum. Such a move would bring the following advantages to Scotland: it would promote social justice for parents who are currently excluded by their inability to pay; it would bring us into line with most countries in Europe where pluralism is already well established and respected; it would stimulate educational research and debate and allow Scotland to take the lead in educational thinking in the United Kingdom; and—most important of all—it would create the possibility of a

fruitful partnership with mainstream education, so that best practice could be shared and ideas cross-fertilised.

Scotland has a tradition of enlightened education. The inclusion of Steiner Waldorf schools in the maintained sector would continue that tradition. It would contribute much to securing improvement in Scottish education and so deserves to take its place in the bill. As Dr Joseph Weizenbaum, a professor at Massachusetts Institute of Technology in the United States, says:

"Being personally acquainted with a number of Waldorf students, I can say that they come closer to realising their own potentials than practically anyone I know."

The Convener: Thank you very much. Do committee members have any questions?

Fiona McLeod: I want to get straight down to the nitty-gritty—funding. If you want to be part of a pluralist education system in Scotland and to get funding from the state, there will always be basic standards—laid down by the state—that you will have to meet. Do you think that you will have to conform to such an extent that you might lose much of what Steiner education offers?

In Ireland, you have just about achieved status within the education system, but that will depend entirely on two things—the teaching of Irish and the fact that there is a graduate-entry teaching profession. At the moment, Steiner in Ireland is not able to offer that. If you want to become part of the system, the system will probably demand changes of you.

Mike Palmer (Steiner Waldorf Schools for Curriculum Choice in Scotland): We recognise that we need to be accountable for our expenditure of public money if we are funded by the state. We therefore fully accept that we need to measure up to performance indicators to satisfy local authorities. We recognise that the Government makes certain demands of local authorities and that that is as it should be.

We feel that the performance indicators that look only at academic attainments are relatively narrow and mechanistic but, in the 5 to 14 age range, we feel extremely confident that we can deliver satisfactory results, although at a slightly different age.

We would ask that there be some variation in the age at which pupils are expected to attain the various levels of performance. We feel that, by the time they reached their teenage years, our pupils could deliver on those indicators without any problem—indeed, that they would be above average compared with pupils from state schools.

We are trying to foster a much wider vision of educational development. We would like to go beyond the fairly narrow performance indicators

that we sense are being concentrated on in the draft bill. Perhaps Betty can say a bit more about that.

10:45

Elizabeth Henderson (Aberdeen Waldorf School): We feel that the performance indicators are important but only a small facet of education, which is much broader. The indicators fit a mechanistic view of childhood and picture of education. If teaching is seen as being about imparting knowledge and skills, and children are viewed as empty buckets who need to be filled with that knowledge and skill, performance indicators can be used to tell whether children are retaining what is being put into them.

Government policy at the moment seems to view children as empty buckets, but anyone who has ever had a child knows that they are not. They come with many talents and skills and a love of all sorts of things. We see it as our job as teachers to ignite the fire that is a love of learning that lasts a lifetime. We do not therefore put the same emphasis on performance indicators as the Government does. We would be happy to be measured, but by our own timings and with our own yardstick, so that we start from a level playing field. We have documents that we can leave here that tell you about our aims and methods and about quality development.

To answer your question about graduate entry teaching, in the Aberdeen Waldorf school, 80 per cent of our staff are graduates and have state teaching qualifications and—if necessary—could be registered with the General Teaching Council tomorrow. A similar proportion of staff has both state teaching and Steiner Waldorf qualifications. I am one of those—I am a former state school teacher who has become a Steiner Waldorf teacher. I do not think that we have a problem with the graduate question.

The Convener: You answered in relation to Aberdeen; does the same apply to the other three schools?

Elizabeth Henderson: Because having a state teaching qualification is not essential for being a Steiner Waldorf teacher, the proportions will fluctuate between schools; they will not necessarily be the same.

Andy Farquharson (Edinburgh Rudolf Steiner School): I cannot give you an exact figure for graduates in Edinburgh, but it is probably also about 80 per cent. We do not have the same percentage of state trained teachers, but those who do not have state training have the Steiner Waldorf educational qualification.

Dorothy Baird: We are beginning to make

representations with the GTC. It is a case of the will to be slightly different. It is helpful to look at models abroad to see how they address the problem. In New Zealand, for example, where there is 100 per cent funding for Steiner Waldorf schools, if the teacher is not state trained but is already working in a Steiner Waldorf school, the state will assess them after two years of teaching and register them retrospectively, based on their obvious quality.

Catriona Watt (Edinburgh Steiner Schools Trustees): We appreciate the concerns about accountability; if money is being given to schools to be in the state system, there have to be rules and regulations about how we perform. Some of those rules and regulations will be mechanistic—exams and so on—and, following on from what Mike said, we would want to discuss further exactly how we would be measured. There would be no point in joining the system to be the same as other schools. Our argument is that we want to come in to be an alternative. There is a point at which we would have to say that we are different.

Fiona McLeod: That is what I was trying to get at. How much of your ethos would you be prepared to shift on? We talked about performance indicators. We learned only last night that we may have dates on which children will be tested from a young age. That goes against your ethos. You will have to persuade us, or perhaps not all of us but the Executive, that there are other ways of measuring performance.

Catriona Watt: We have thought about that issue and discussed it in meetings with civil servants and directors of education, for example. We have experienced an HM inspectors of schools inspection and we do not see that there is any reason why we cannot negotiate with HMI and other appropriate bodies to have specific criteria against which the Steiner schools are measured. It should perhaps be done at a different age or in a different way.

Elizabeth Henderson: It is also important for the committee and the Executive to understand the stress that having to comply with these performance indicators puts on children. My question would be, what are we trying to do to children? The Mental Health Foundation has just published a booklet called "The Big Picture". It states that

"one in five people, aged from four to twenty, is estimated to suffer from mental stress."

It talks about the stress that children experience in schools. Why are we stressing our children? Ultimately we will have to pay for that through health, or perhaps they will end up in young offender institutions because they cannot cope.

We must nourish children in the right way and

meet their needs in the right way. The performance indicators will not give us what we need.

Ian Welsh (Ayr) (Lab): As a former teacher, I want to know a little more about what makes your curriculum distinctive. What different types of teaching approaches do you have?

Dorothy Baird: I am not sure that we have enough time to cover that as there are so many differences. One that springs to mind is that formal education is delayed until the age of six. The kindergarten, or nursery stage, is from three until six, which is in line with mainstream practice on the continent. Languages are introduced at the age of six. Two modern languages are taught.

The curriculum is much more holistic. A class teacher will follow the class for eight years—from the age of six until 14—and will teach what is called the main lesson, which is a block of nearly two hours. That two-hour lesson takes place every morning. It allows the class to study a subject for that length of time for three or four weeks at a time.

For example, they might have a main lesson on building when they are nine years old and then they might have a main lesson in, for example, English—studying particular poems. There are main lessons in surveying further up the school. That system allows much greater in-depth study than is the norm. It also allows the class teacher to make connections across the curriculum. As they are following all the subjects and going through the different years, they can help the children to see the connections.

When children go into the upper school, they stop having the class teacher and have a guardian, who is responsible for their social welfare for four years. In the upper school, the main lesson system continues, with the result that regardless of their exam specialisation, all the children—because there are mixed ability classes in the main lesson blocks throughout the school—have an extremely broad curriculum of sciences, artistic subjects and craftwork. Therefore, when they leave school they have studied topics such as history of drama, history of architecture, history of arts, sciences, languages, craftwork, metalwork, pottery and woodwork. It is a very broad, cultured education.

Ian Welsh: What about the teacher and the teaching approaches? Are you confident that you can guarantee a high degree of skill? How do you monitor teaching quality?

Elizabeth Henderson: Are you talking about teacher quality?

Ian Welsh: How do you ensure that the teacher is skilled enough to deliver the curriculum?

Elizabeth Henderson: In our school we have a mentoring system—more experienced teachers share their knowledge with new teachers on an individual basis. A new teacher meets their mentor once a week to discuss what is happening in the classroom. The mentor keeps tabs on how the children and the teacher are doing. We also have a college of teachers—we run the school as a group. If anyone is having problems, we try to help. We have our own in-service training and sometimes we take part in local authority service training.

Ian Welsh: One of the problems in mainstream schools is dealing with children with special needs and those with behavioural disorders. How do you deal with such children in your schools?

Elizabeth Henderson: I have accepted in my class five children from state schools who, for different reasons, were not thriving. One child was being bullied, another was very bright and had seen one worksheet too many, another was not socially settled and the other two had learning difficulties. Over the past four years, they have all settled into my class very well.

The children who have learning difficulties are referred to the care group, the learning support teacher and the school doctor; together they consult on the child's difficulties. The child will be referred for learning support or one of a variety of therapies that we introduce in school, such as speech therapy, movement therapy and painting therapy. Painting therapy is particularly helpful for children who are emotionally blocked. We have a wide range of therapies to offer children who have difficulties. We do very well with children who do not thrive elsewhere.

Andy Farquharson: Although Betty is mainly talking from the Aberdeen perspective, the situation is similar in all the schools.

Dorothy Baird: It is very important that the class teacher works with the whole group of children. They stay together as a class unit for eight years. The teacher tries to create a social unit, so that each child learns to respect the differences in the others. The mixed ability and approach—the academic, artistic and practical aspects, which the children study together—allow the children to appreciate the qualities of every child. That is fundamental to the ethos of the school. Even children who are potentially disaffected, or who have academic problems and might feel a sense of failure in another school, are supported and appreciated by the rest of the class.

Elizabeth Henderson: We recognise that children have multiple intelligences—we took that approach before it became a catchphrase. We recognise that children have many things to offer that go beyond literacy and numeracy skills.

Last night I spoke to Mike Palmer about doing geometry in my class. We try to bring beauty and form together in everything that we do. I taught my class of 10-year-olds how to use compasses and to divide a circle into many different parts. I then encouraged them to bring beauty to the form, teaching them how to shade and use colour to make the form dynamic.

Ian Welsh: I am just showing my doodle to the rest of the committee—it is remarkably similar.

Elizabeth Henderson: Yet without the colour.

One of the children said that they could not get the hang of the shading. I picked up two books and held them up to show the children how to do it. One of the children at the back of the class asked whose books I had picked up. I gave the names of the two children and the class burst into spontaneous applause. I had to stop for a moment, to ask myself what had just happened.

I realised that I had picked up the books of the two dyslexic children in my class. The other children, recognising the struggles that they have, celebrated the fact that they could produce such beautiful work. That is what our education is also about: recognising and respecting other individuals and their self-worth.

11:00

Nicola Sturgeon: Fiona McLeod identified one of the biggest challenges: how to retain your ethos while meeting the requirements that a local authority and the Executive would undoubtedly ask you to meet.

I have been looking through the latest HMI report on the Edinburgh Steiner school, dated 1998. The report identifies a number of things that HMI considers it only fair to say about the school—some strengths but also important weaknesses. In the report, the things listed under the category of fair include the structure of the curriculum in the lower school and assessment as part of teaching. The next two things relate to what you have just been talking about, Elizabeth: effectiveness of learning support and implementation of special educational needs legislation.

Do you think that the criticisms are fair? If not, why not? Does that reflect on the HMI's methodology? If you agree that they are fair criticisms, what action have you taken since the report came out to rectify some of the weaknesses?

Andy Farquharson: I was teaching when the HMI report came out: I was standing, nerve-wracked, when my class was sitting, writing away.

We recognise that there are some weaknesses;

we do not claim that we have everything perfect. We are continually working on it. The phrase we like to use is quality development—trying to increase the quality of what we do. Before HMI came, we were working on assessment and other areas. We have changed, or are in the process of changing, some of the areas that HMI identified, including the main lesson structure and the lower school curriculum. It was said that perhaps not enough time was spent on the literacy hour or the numeracy hour, but literacy and numeracy are integrated in lessons throughout the day, so that was not clearly defined for HMI to see. In Edinburgh, we have now extended our main lesson time specifically to cover what it suggested.

We are always trying to get the other areas that were assessed in the report as fair up to the next level—I cannot remember what it is called. We expect a return visit from the inspectorate any time now. We have things in hand, but we are aware that we are not perfect in every area.

Catriona Watt: As chair of the trustees, I met the inspectors at a meeting to discuss the draft. It is said to be possible to have changes made at the draft stage: it is actually impossible. At the last conference for governors and trustees that I attended, Archie McGlynn told the audience what a fantastic school ours is—it was interesting how that came out.

From our point of view, and from that of many schools, inspections provide a learning experience. They can help identify weaknesses; improvements can be made. We appreciated some of the weaknesses being identified. As trustees, it is our job to ensure that the management of the school is implementing what HMI is asking for and identifying. There have also been specific changes in learning support.

We have worked hard over the past year and a half to change or improve in specific areas. However, there is a point at which—almost like the question that Fiona McLeod asked earlier—we start to talk a different language. When I was in that meeting, we were talking a different language. We sat talking to the inspector, who drew up the five to 14 guidelines on what is good about a main lesson.

When we received the report, although we appreciated the fact that it identified some weaknesses that we wanted to address, we also took with a pinch of salt what was said. If a main lesson block lasts four weeks, it is impossible for an inspector who comes in for only one day to assess it and tick the boxes authoritatively. However, we could not get anywhere with that argument, which is why—in answer to the earlier question—I said that, although some areas would be the same for assessment, we would have to be measured against ourselves and what targets we

can meet. The inspection was fair in some ways but unrealistic in others.

Andy Farquharson: We used their criteria on the inspectors as well, and agreed that their inspection was fair.

Mr Monteith: You have already mentioned your response to the General Teaching Council and the HMI inspection. I take it that you would be willing to find a solution that would make HMI and the GTC happy and comfortable with your becoming part of the state sector. The witnesses are nodding, which I take as a yes.

Catriona Watt: Yes.

Mr Monteith: That leads me to my question. We have heard from representatives of St Mary's, who fear entering into a new relationship with their local authority. In becoming part of the state sector, state funding would be received, and there might be many ways in which that might be handled and the school might be managed. That is a separate matter from the curricular issues, which we have covered quite well. You might be comfortable with some of those ways of management, although some might involve quite radical changes—in the appointment of staff, for instance. You may come to an agreement with the GTC that allows you leeway with which you are comfortable, but that might not fit in with the normal procedures that are followed in local authorities for contracting and so on.

Have you had discussions with schools of similar size in the state sector, to find out how they are managed and whether they perceive any difficulties? If you have not, would you be willing to do so? Have you had discussions with local authorities about the way in which they manage schools, which might be different from the way in which your school is managed? If you have not, would your schools in Edinburgh and Aberdeen be willing to initiate those discussions? Finally, do you think that there would be a limit to the concessions that you would be prepared to make on management—for instance, in the appointment of a head teacher? A local authority may say that such an appointment is normally its domain. I am anxious to explore where the hurdles might be, so that we can consider how they might be removed.

Andy Farquharson: We have not had talks with the GTC, but we have made preliminary inquiries, which are on-going. We have not come up with anything concrete on that issue, however, but we would have no objection to such discussions.

In Edinburgh, we have not talked with state sector schools specifically about management, and I do not think that any of our other schools have done so. We talk to state sector schools all the time about education and learning issues, but not necessarily about management. To do so was

a good suggestion, for which I thank you.

What was the other question?

Mr Monteith: Are there certain aspects of the way that you manage your schools that you would not be willing to give up?

Andy Farquharson: As Betty alluded to earlier, our schools are managed on a non-hierarchical basis. The teachers who have been there at least a year have equal responsibility for the running of the school. I was introduced as the chairman of the group that is known as the college; every year someone is—in effect—elected to be its chairman. Fortunately—or unfortunately—it is my turn this year.

We would have to think seriously about that, and discuss it frequently, if that was to change fundamentally. However, on a day-to-day basis, each school runs a small group—which is called the management group at the Edinburgh school—which decides the major policy of the school and the nitty-gritty management stuff, and reports back to the college. In effect, there is a head teacher, except that it is three people.

Some Steiner schools are advertising for educational managers, who—considering the job description—would be very much like head teachers, but who would be responsible to the college. We would explore those issues and think seriously about them. We would not say, “We do it this way. Therefore, that is the only way.”

Mr Monteith: This is not so much a question as an observation. If you were to come into the state sector, you may find that, given that there is no cost disincentive to parents, you might need to expand. That might mean not only expansion to your existing schools, but that there would be a demand for schools to be set up where they do not currently exist. It strikes me that the committee should consider that issue. You should perhaps consider discussing that not just with individual local authorities, but with the Association of Directors of Education in Scotland, because it would have an impact throughout Scotland. I presume that you have not done that yet, but it is something that you could do.

Mike Palmer: We had a meeting with the director of education at the City of Edinburgh Council. The message we got was that the council would be content to enter into negotiations with us about taking over the school and including it in mainstream provision. We did not get into detail about the trade-offs that might be necessary for that to happen; the council said that it could not begin to consider that until the Executive had indicated that it was happy to encourage more pluralistic schools provision in local authorities.

We are here today because of the signal that

was given to us by the council. We felt that we needed to go to people like yourselves and, via yourselves, to the Executive, to endorse the principle of pluralism. Our understanding is that, having done that, we will be in a much better position to go to local authorities and that they will feel that they can engage with us in the practical nitty-gritty—which they do not feel at the moment. I can sympathise with them on that.

Sorry, what was your second question?

Mr Monteith: I think that you have covered it.

The Convener: The second question was about how you would deal with expansion, should that arise.

Mike Palmer: We have thought about that. One of the reasons we are here is that many parents are excluded from sending their children to our schools because they do not have the financial resources to do so.

We would expect an increase in demand, but we feel that any increase could be managed in a controlled fashion. That could be done in a number of ways. One could, for example, treat the four schools that exist in Scotland at the moment as pilot schools and use their experience over the next few years as the basis for an admissions policy that would enable us to manage demand. We have not looked into the details of the admissions policy that would be necessary. However, one of things that strikes us about the management issue and many other practical issues is that this has been done many times before overseas. There is great deal of best practice from which we can learn, not only on the continent of Europe but in Commonwealth countries whose approach to education is similar to the one that is taken in these islands.

The short answer to your question is that this is one of those practical, nitty-gritty issues that we would get down to with the local authorities once the principle of state funding had been established.

11:15

Mr Monteith: It occurs to me that there might be a difficulty if, say, growth in Edinburgh was such that a second school was needed. That could lead to the setting up of catchment areas—something that local authorities are very familiar with. At the moment catchment areas are unnecessary because your four schools are disparate and do not take people by selection. What I am describing would be a problem of success; no doubt, you would rather face that than the problems of failure. However, it is something that you might have to discuss with local authorities.

Do you have any thoughts about catchment

areas and the impact that they might have, even now? People might notice that they were living somewhere in Edinburgh that allowed them to send their children to a Rudolf Steiner school whose performance in league tables was better than that of their local school. You could find that there was a growth in applications almost immediately.

Elizabeth Henderson: The pattern in European countries is that, once state funding is granted, there is often a fivefold increase in applications within a decade.

It is important to clarify a couple of things first, so that members do not get the wrong end of the stick. We are not a private school, we are independent. The majority of parents at Aberdeen Waldorf School earn less than £15,000 a year; very few earn more than that. Many of our schools abroad can be found in townships and favelas. We do not have to be located in a nice, cosy little suburb. We can practise anywhere and be successful. We do not have any problem with where a new school is sited.

Dorothy Baird: The teachers at Edinburgh Rudolf Steiner School have been considering the possibility, if there were an increase in demand, of setting up a school in an area such as Pilton for children who are less advantaged than those that come to the Colinton site.

I would like to broaden the discussion a little. As Mike was implying, we are focusing very much on the nitty-gritty, which I can understand, but the bill is about securing improvement in Scottish education. One of the things that people often do is look to Europe and other countries to serve as a benchmark for Scottish education. It is important to realise that in virtually all countries in Europe—bar five, including Britain—Steiner Waldorf education is funded by the state. In Holland, for example, schools receive 100 per cent of funding for running costs and the local education authority meets their capital costs. Holland has 96 Steiner Waldorf schools and they are generally recognised as having a very high standard of education. In Denmark, similarly, 80 per cent of running costs are met. In Sweden, where there are 39 schools, the figure is 100 per cent. In Finland, where there are 18 schools, there is 100 per cent state funding. In Norway, there is 85 per cent state funding.

You can see that the countries that are often held up as examples of good standards have pluralism and state-supported Steiner Waldorf schools. The spin-off is that the ideas and methodology that are used in Steiner Waldorf are fed out. We can share, and people can learn from what we do. There is too much to go into now, but those of you who have visited the schools may understand their uniqueness, which is effective for children of all abilities. It is important to underline

the fact that children of all abilities, and not just academic children, come to Steiner Waldorf schools. They all leave school with self-confidence, a sense of self-worth and an ability to think creatively, which is thanks in part to the artistic element of the curriculum. Business now recognises that those qualities are far more important than meeting a percentage of the performance indicators. That is why we are here.

Ian Welsh: In countries where the schools are fully funded, what has been the experience of tension between the Steiner Waldorf approach and a national system of examination and accreditation?

Dorothy Baird: Children in Steiner Waldorf schools also sit the national exams. In those countries there is national accreditation, as there is here. Children at schools here also sit highs, standard grades and, in some cases, A-levels. The systems coexist.

Elizabeth Henderson: We have found that for entry into further education, colleges, universities and so on, our children will also be accepted on a portfolio, because people recognise that they are very creative thinkers, are very independent, and have a love of learning.

At its 44th international conference, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation invited Steiner Waldorf schools to hold an exhibition and to share their practice. I have a quote here from a UNESCO booklet, from Dr Arthur Zajonc of Amherst College in the United States. He said that, by the time Steiner Waldorf students

“reach us at the college and university levels, these students are grounded broadly and deeply and have a remarkable enthusiasm for learning.”

In Australia, one can be admitted to a university medicine course on the strength of a portfolio from a Steiner Waldorf school.

Ian Jenkins: You have just covered some of what I wanted to say. I am interested in the idea of pluralism. I particularly enjoyed the way in which you dealt with children in the kindergarten. As nursery education for three and four-year-olds is becoming statutory it seems to me there is a danger of people starting to teach kids to read in nursery schools at the age of three to four. There is a place for a different philosophy somewhere in a state system to allow us to see it in action.

There is a debate to be had about early education. At the moment Steiner Waldorf schools are not seen as part of mainstream thinking, so the debate is not being conducted in the proper terms. Therefore, I would be interested in drawing in Steiner schools in some way as pilots or models. We should let the two sides inform each other in the debate. I am less convinced by some

of the practices for older children, but more so by your ideas of where we start: starting languages early, and so on. Many things will not be discussed by state schools until you are seen as part of the mainstream.

Elizabeth Henderson: We are currently sharing our practices with local education authorities. I recently gave a course on early years learning at Summerhill in Aberdeen. Our local education authorities are very happy to learn from our practices. There is a lot to learn. Childhood is valuable and must be treated in the right way, particularly for three and four-year-olds.

Ian Jenkins: Dorothy Baird spoke about cross-fertilisation, but that means that there is a two-way process.

Dorothy Baird: I was going to add that to what Betty said. We are not saying that we have all the answers. There is much in the state sector that we could learn from. We would like the two systems to coexist on a par with each other. That would raise the standard of Scottish education, because ideas would be out in the open and would be discussed, instead of us being seen as an elitist private or independent school.

Ian Jenkins: You said that nations provide different levels of funding. What level of funding would be good for you? Would 50 per cent be good?

Dorothy Baird: Given that the average wage for a full-time Steiner Waldorf teacher, no matter how many years of experience they have, is £12,000, we would be grateful for anything.

Mike Palmer: The situation reflects the commitment and vocation of Steiner Waldorf teachers. It is astounding that they show such a level of commitment for that amount of money when, for example, Elizabeth could work for double that amount in the state sector.

Ian Jenkins: I should declare that I am a member of the Educational Institute of Scotland. I do not support a lot of its thinking on many things, but I am horrified that people are earning only £12,000.

Elizabeth Henderson: But it is the only way that we have been able to exist.

Catriona Watt: The view of the board of trustees is that we can only pay our teachers out of the income that we have. As Betty said, the percentage of families in her school that are in the £15,000 and under bracket—

Ian Jenkins: Most of them are teachers.

The Convener: I am aware that time is catching up with us. I will take a final question from Ken Macintosh.

Mr Macintosh: Like Ian, I welcome the holistic and pluralistic attitude to teaching in the education system that you say would accept Steiner teaching, particularly at kindergarten level on which there is much debate. There is a lot to be said for postponing formal education until the age of six or seven.

You want to amend section 8(a) of the proposed bill, which is about inspections. Am I reading this correctly? You think that you should not be inspected by HMI, but only by people who are accredited by Steiner Waldorf.

Dorothy Baird: No. We have never drafted amendments before. We suggest that as part of the HMI team there should be a representative from the Steiner Waldorf Schools Fellowship in London, which is the crediting body that has prepared the levels of attainment, or the Scottish Association of Steiner Waldorf Education, which is the Scottish branch of that body.

Mr Macintosh: So Steiner Waldorf representatives would be in addition to, not instead of, HMI inspectors.

Dorothy Baird: Yes.

Andy Farquharson: One of the difficulties with the HMI inspection in Edinburgh was that even though we spoke to the inspectors prior to the inspection about the aims, philosophy and so on of the school, the work load of HMI means that it is hard for them to take in the information.

Mr Macintosh: I understand that.

Andy Farquharson: It is difficult at times. It would be good to have someone who knows what we are trying to say.

Mr Macintosh: Absolutely. You are not locking HMI out of the schools.

Dorothy Baird: No, not at all.

Perhaps we should amend the amendments.

Mike Palmer: The aim is to help.

Mr Macintosh: My second question is about costs. What would it cost the state system to adopt all four Steiner schools?

Catriona Watt: We do not have a complete figure. The cost is hard to quantify, because if the state were to start funding us, you might want to make changes to things such as salaries and pensions. The turnover of the Edinburgh Rudolph Steiner School is £800,000. We own all of our buildings. Our basic salary is £10,800.

Mr Macintosh: Are all four schools roughly the same size?

Catriona Watt: No. We are the main school. We have been in Edinburgh for 60 years, so we are

longer established than the other schools, and our pupils range from three to 18, which is not the case in any of the other schools.

Mike Palmer: We think that there are about 500 pupils in the four schools. We would not dream of asking for more money per pupil than state schools currently get, as that would create double standards. That is an important principle.

11:30

The Convener: Thank you for answering our questions. As you have heard, we will be considering the draft bill when it is returned to us by the Executive, and we will keep you informed about our deliberations.

Special Educational Needs

The Convener: On item 2, the clerk has circulated a paper outlining the issues relevant to special educational needs. Are there any questions?

Mr Monteith: I have read the paper all the way through and there are a number of points that I would like to mention. I still foresee a difficulty that I have spoken about before. One of the recommendations that the Scottish Executive has already accepted is for a change to the funding method for the national centres of excellence. The Executive is quite entitled to accept that recommendation, but I am concerned that it has already decided to make that change from 1 April next year—before this committee will have reached any conclusions on the whole issue of special educational needs. It would be useful to invite one of the ministers to a committee meeting to explain why they are keen to move so quickly and whether it might be possible to delay that change to the funding mechanism.

I have already declared an interest, in that I have lodged a members' business motion on the subject. None of the schools that will be affected by the change are in the area that I represent, and all the local authorities in my area therefore have to send children outside the area to attend those schools if they cannot be integrated into mainstream schools.

Higher still was delayed, by the previous Government and by the current Administration, for two years because of genuine concern. Even then, it was phased in. If we cannot interview one of the ministers, we should have the opportunity to hear from a representative of the seven schools about the phasing in of the funding change.

The Convener: Members of the committee share your concerns. Although the Executive indicated during the consultation process that the

change would be implemented in April 2000, that has not been affirmed and that time scale may slip. I think that we should take up your suggestion of inviting the minister to respond, either in writing or as a witness to the committee, to our concerns.

Gillian Baxendine (Committee Clerk): Although the Executive has made a fairly firm proposal, it is still consulting on it and will have received representations from the schools and from other interested parties. The best time to hear from the minister might therefore be at the end of the consultation process, which will be in January.

Mr Monteith: That is rather worrying. If the consultation process is to end in late January or early February, April is not far away if the Executive decides to proceed. I certainly support the convener's idea of inviting the ministers to write to us or to appear before the committee as witnesses. We should also write either to all the schools or to a representative body of the schools, to ask about the time scale. We can discuss the change of funding separately and in a more dispassionate way, but the timing particularly concerns me.

The Convener: We should write to the minister seeking clarification. If we feel that the response is not satisfactory, I will be quite happy to ask the minister to attend the committee to discuss the matter further. We should ask specifically about the time scale at this stage, but we may want to go on to discuss the issue more widely later. Is that agreed?

Members indicated agreement.

The Convener: Are there any other questions?

Mr Monteith: Under the heading "How the reports relate to the proposed inquiry", the final sentence reads:

"The inquiry could produce information which will assist the Committee in its scrutiny of this aspect of the *Improvement in Scottish Education Bill*."

I understood that our inquiry would go beyond the time scale of the bill itself. Why does the paper state that the inquiry could provide us with useful information? Much of the useful information may emerge only after our scrutiny of the bill.

The Convener: Gillian, would you like to give us an outline of the timetable?

Gillian Baxendine: We still do not know the timetable for the bill, because the bill has not yet been introduced. If, as we expect, it is published in January, stage 1 would be complete by the written evidence deadline, but stage 2 would barely have begun. There will therefore be an opportunity for the clerks and the information centre to take from the written evidence the information that is

relevant to the committee's consideration of the bill.

Mr Monteith: So that information may not be available at stage 1, but it will be available at stage 2.

The Convener: That is right. Some confusion has arisen because we are not sure of the time scale for the bill.

Mr Monteith: Nor, it would seem, is the Scottish Executive.

The Convener: The timetable has already slipped somewhat, so I am sure that we will be able to comment on the bill at stage 2.

Mr Monteith: That is a helpful answer. However, amendments at stage 2 might be ruled out of order if they challenged the principles of the bill. An amendment that challenged the principles of the bill would be deemed a wrecking amendment, as the principles would already have been passed at stage 1. We may fall foul of the slip in the time scale, and I do not see how we could do anything about that.

Gillian Baxendine: It is also open to the committee to take evidence specifically on special educational needs at stage 1. There is no need to wait for the inquiry.

The Convener: Are there any other questions?

Mr Monteith: Under the heading "Diversity", the document states:

"Information produced by the inquiry will provide an up-to-date 'audit' of educational provision for children with special educational needs across Scotland."

That is an admirable aim, but it seems rather ambitious. Would the inquiry really be able to achieve that?

The Convener: We are nothing if not ambitious.

Mr Monteith: I am pleased to hear it.

The Convener: There are inconsistencies across Scotland and that is part of the reason for holding an inquiry. We can learn from best practice. I hope that that will be one of the outcomes of the inquiry.

Mr Monteith: If that is our ambition, there may be resource implications of which we will have to be aware and to which we will have to commit ourselves.

The Convener: We need to discuss that now. We previously discussed the possibility of appointing an adviser to assist us with the inquiry. My understanding—and Gillian may correct me—is that we have to approach the Parliamentary Bureau for permission to do that, although, at this stage, we do not have to identify any individual or organisation.

Gillian Baxendine: That is right.

The Convener: Would it be appropriate, Gillian, for committee members to make suggestions on advisers?

Gillian Baxendine: Shall I tell the committee how the process works?

The Convener: Please do.

Gillian Baxendine: In principle, the bureau has to give its approval before we can appoint an adviser, but it does not get involved in choosing the person who is appointed. That is a matter for the Scottish Parliamentary Corporate Body, although the committee will want to make recommendations and influence the decision. If the committee agrees today to appoint an adviser, we can then get the agreement of the bureau and go ahead with drawing up a specification and putting together some names. The aim would be to have someone in place in time to start assisting with the written evidence.

Mr Monteith: I have one concern. Although it may be an advantage to have a person with a great deal of experience, to avoid a conflict of interest, that person should not have worked on either of the reports that we are considering.

The Convener: Yes, I agree.

Ian Welsh: Do you mean that the person must not have worked on those reports exclusively?

Mr Monteith: Indeed.

Michael Russell (South of Scotland) (SNP): When would the adviser be required? We are setting dates for looking at written evidence, and the cost of the adviser could come mostly out of next year's budget. However, there is some money available this year, and it might be useful to spend money now to allow the adviser to tee up the process.

The Convener: Yes.

Michael Russell: Any request to the bureau would therefore have to straddle two financial years. The bureau does not make the financial decisions—that is for the SPCB—but it has to make the administrative decisions. Gillian Baxendine is right to say that the bureau has no involvement in the decision on who the person will be, but a well-structured application that considers the use of resources across the two financial years would be useful.

Ian Welsh: Could Gillian Baxendine—or, as he is here, Mike Russell—tell us whether the adviser would work on a consultancy basis, or would he or she be seconded from another organisation to which we would pay the cost of the salary?

Gillian Baxendine: All the advisers who have

been appointed so far have worked on a consultancy basis, and have been paid a daily rate for a certain number of days. The advantage of doing that has been that we have been able to get people who might not have been willing or able to work full time, but who could make some time available. However, we are open to discussion on that, because as yet we do not have much experience in appointing advisers, and different committees will have different needs.

Ian Welsh: I would be disappointed if the Scottish Executive, or the Parliament, went down the road of simply appointing consultants every time a special adviser was needed. I would much prefer short-term secondments to be considered as another possibility.

Michael Russell: I think that great care would have to be taken that the organisation from which the person was seconded did not have a material interest in the outcome of the inquiry.

Ian Welsh: Of course.

Michael Russell: I am sure that what Ian Welsh suggests could be done, but obviously there is a clearer relationship with a consultant, especially as he or she can be appointed speedily. However, as there is no particular rush—we are talking about February at the earliest—I think that the suggestion of seconding someone should be considered sympathetically.

The Convener: All right. Does the committee agree to ask for permission to appoint an adviser?

Members *indicated agreement.*

Visits to Schools

11:45

The Convener: The next item on the agenda is committee visits to schools.

Fiona McLeod: I suggest that we communicate the information about our visits in written submissions. We could blather about visits for a long time. It might be more helpful to focus our thoughts in writing.

The Convener: I am happy for members to do that. I assume that everyone has managed to attend at least one school. Is that correct?

Members *indicated agreement.*

Michael Russell: I assume that the committee is writing to the head teachers and others to thank them for generously including us in their daily rounds.

The Convener: Yes.

Michael Russell: Can we club together to buy a

new bucket for Darnley Primary to catch the rain that was coming through the roof?

The Convener: That shows a lack of ambition, Mike. You should be clubbing together to buy a new roof, not just a bucket.

Michael Russell: Mary, you are a much more practical person than I am.

Karen Gillon (Clydesdale) (Lab): It will be impossible to discuss the submissions before the holidays. I suggest that we discuss them at the first meeting after the holidays. [MEMBERS: "It's a recess."] It is Christmas, so it is definitely a holiday.

The Convener: If we want to discuss submissions then, they will need to be with the clerk before the recess. That gives members next week to do them.

Karen Gillon: Can we discuss them at the second meeting after the recess?

Michael Russell: Technology being what it is, can we not simply e-mail one another our submissions—short or long—and copy them to the clerk?

The Convener: I am happy for members to do that.

Fiona McLeod: That means that the submissions will not be recorded.

The Convener: We will copy the submissions to the clerk and she can record them. We will put discussion of the submissions on the agenda for the first meeting after the recess. We will agree on a date for that meeting later.

Mr Monteith: My point is not about committee visits to schools, but neither is it about the national arts companies inquiry, which is the next agenda item, so I did not know at what other time it would be appropriate to raise it.

We have just received a submission from Rudolf Steiner schools. Does the committee agree that we should write to the General Teaching Council and to Her Majesty's inspectors of schools to ask whether they have considered the changes that may need to be made to the criteria if the Executive agrees to include Rudolf Steiner schools in the maintained sector? That would be preferable to inviting them here, as we have enough to do.

The Convener: That is a reasonable point, which flags up a deficiency in the way in which we handle such matters. Perhaps the committee should take a few minutes to discuss whether it wants to receive further evidence after we have taken submissions. Cathy Peattie raised a similar point about Stirling Council's input into the situation at St Mary's Episcopal Primary School.

We should ask Stirling Council to comment. Similarly, we should ask the GTC to respond to us in writing about the issue that you raise, Brian. I will bear that in mind for future deputations.

Fiona McLeod: I have a few points about how we do our business. One is that we do not have a way of tracking the progress of business once we have made decisions. Two issues come to mind: Hampden and the tickets for the Scotland-England match. If we do not remember to put such matters on to the agenda a good day in advance, we do not deal with them. Could we have an agenda item for progress of business? It would be called "matters arising" if we had minutes, but we do not.

The Convener: I know that you have discussed that matter with the clerk. We could have an item on the agenda for updates on outstanding business so that members know that issues have not been forgotten and that progress is on-going. If the committee needs a substantial update, there will be an item on the agenda.

Fiona McLeod: I am conscious that, when the committee is in private session, we do not have a report of the debate and we do not minute our decisions. That can make it difficult to revisit matters. Is there some way in which we can at least minute the decisions that are made in private?

Gillian Baxendine: If the committee makes substantive decisions in private session, they will be recorded in the formal minute of proceedings. If you mean that you want a record of points made in the discussion, I can do a clerk's minute, which can be circulated to members.

Fiona McLeod: That would be useful. The reason that I raise the matter is that I was trying to track our decision to take written rather than oral evidence from the Scottish Youth Theatre. The decision fell into a black hole because we discussed the matter in private. There is no record of when the decision was made. As a result, I was surprised last week when SYT was not here.

The Convener: I take that point on board. We need to be quite clear about what the committee has decided to do. Members will get copies of the decisions taken.

The next item on the agenda is the inquiry on national arts companies, which we agreed at the beginning of the meeting to take in private.

11:50

Meeting continued in private until 12:25.

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