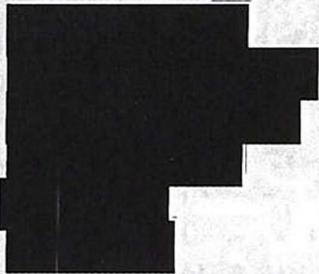


DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
from the Minister, Martin McGuinness MP MLA

COR 1109/1999



5 January 2000

Dear 

Thank you for your letter of 9 December.

I was disappointed at what happened at a number of schools, but I have been greatly encouraged by the general level of support which I have received since my appointment as Minister for Education. I can understand that people may feel concerned during this momentous period of change. I am, however, totally committed to the fair and equal treatment of all the children here and will strive to ensure that they receive the best education possible.

I wish you very success in your chosen career and my sincere good wishes for the future.

Yours sincerely

Martin Mc Guinness

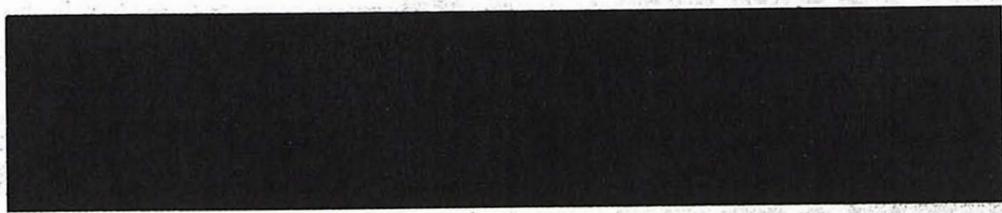
MARTIN McGUINNESS MP MLA
Minister for Education

Rathgael House, 43 Balloo Road, Bangor, Co Down, BT19 7PR
Tel: (028) 9127 9303 Fax: (028) 9127 9271

ACK'D A/B

REFERRED TO

Dr Browne



Mr. Martin McGuinness,
Minister for Education,
Rathgael House,
Balloo Road,
Bangor,
Co. Down

RECEIVED
14 DEC 1999
PRIVATE OFFICE

Thursday, December 9th, 1999

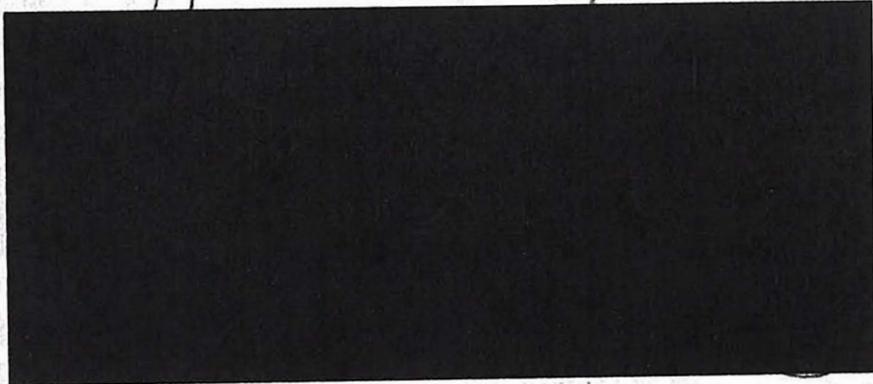
Dear Mr. McGuinness,

As a pupil of [redacted] who is pro-Agreement, pro-Executive and supportive of you in your new post, I would like to apologise for some of the pupils of my school in the light of today's protest against you therein. It was an act which could have been peaceable, but degenerated into supreme senselessness and I completely disassociate myself from it. The one redeeming feature of the whole event was our headmaster, [redacted] s calm and pragmatic control of the business, which could have turned very nasty indeed. I hope you can find it in you to forgive these people who perpetrated such an incident, as I don't believe that they are being lead by anything other than indoctrination from the pessimistic surrounding world.

At this juncture, I wish to express my wish that neither my name, nor the name of my school be used in public with regard to this letter.

I wish you well in your new job, and I would also like to wish you and yours a very happy Christmas and a bright and prosperous new year and new millennium.

Sincerely,



12/99



REPORT ON VISIT TO KILKEEL HIGH SCHOOL IN AFTERMATH OF PUPILS' DEMONSTRATIONS

I visited the school on Wednesday 8th December and had a full discussion with Mr. Cunningham, the principal. The principal welcomed the visit and the opportunity to give an account of the events from the school's perspective.

1. THE SCHOOL'S ACCOUNT OF THE SEQUENCE OF EVENTS

- On the day before the demonstrations, the staff had picked up some vague rumblings about possible action. However, management judged that these were not sufficiently threatening to warrant any pre-emptive action.
- The principal was attending a course on the morning of Wednesday 1st December and was not in school until lunchtime.
- A group of c. 30/40 pupils did not return to class after break but went to the school gates and demonstrated against the appointment of the new Minister of Education. The staff sought to persuade them to return to class but they refused. The pupils were quickly joined by other adults who were not linked to the school.
- The staff observed the action but, after their initial efforts to intervene had been unsuccessful, they decided that it was best not to provoke a confrontation by further action.
- Between break and lunchtime, some efforts were made by the demonstrators to rally further support - some went around the school interrupting classes to call other pupils out. There was little or no response to this action.
- At lunchtime the original group of demonstrators was joined by other pupils; the numbers swelled to c. 70/80.
- The principal was back in school at lunchtime. He stressed that he was not "called back" to school and he stated he was completely satisfied that the VPs had managed the situation effectively.
- The principal was approached by adult outsiders who tried to arrange a deal by which the pupils would return to school on the understanding that the principal would close the school early to allow all the pupils to go to a protest meeting in the nearby leisure centre. The principal refused to deal with any of these outsiders.
- The local DUP member - Mr. Wells - came to the school and also sought to intervene - again, the principal distanced the school from the action and refused to make any deals.
- Eventually, the pupils [and others] who were protesting went to the nearby leisure centre and held a protest meeting.

2. THE SCHOOL'S REACTION

The principal pointed out that the school has had to work within a difficult political situation for a long time; that it has always sought to be non-sectarian. He described its approach as one of inclusion and co-operation rather than exclusion and confrontation. The school has sought to work with the range of political opinion in the area rather than to alienate it. He is very conscious that the school has to go on working in the community after this affair has passed.

When the initial demonstration took place, the management [the VPs] tried to persuade the pupils to return to class. When this was unsuccessful, they decided, especially given the number of "outsiders" who joined the demonstration, that confrontation would be counter-productive. The staff had already suffered some abuse and it was felt that any further efforts to exercise discipline would result only in a further undermining of their authority and dignity.

The staff concentrated on keeping the rest of the school working normally. It is worth stressing that the protesters represented only a minority of pupils. As mentioned above, some of the demonstrators tried to rally further support by going around classes - the staff successfully minimised the impact of this action.

The school considers that the increase in numbers of demonstrators at lunchtime did not indicate a growth in support for the aims of the demonstration, but put it down to pupils who would be more likely to "cause trouble" joining in "the fun".

The staff concentrated on ensuring that the rest of the school functioned as normally as possible and that the pupils left the premises in an orderly manner at the end of the school day. By this time, the demonstrators had adjourned to the leisure centre for their meeting.

The school carried out a detailed check on the pupils who had been out of class after break and who had not returned to class after lunchtime. The school was keen to ensure that the resultant list of pupils was accurate therefore the check took some time and was not completed until the following day. Management decided that exercising disciplinary procedures such as detention [for c.80 pupils] would be counterproductive and would only serve to prolong and possibly exacerbate the problem.

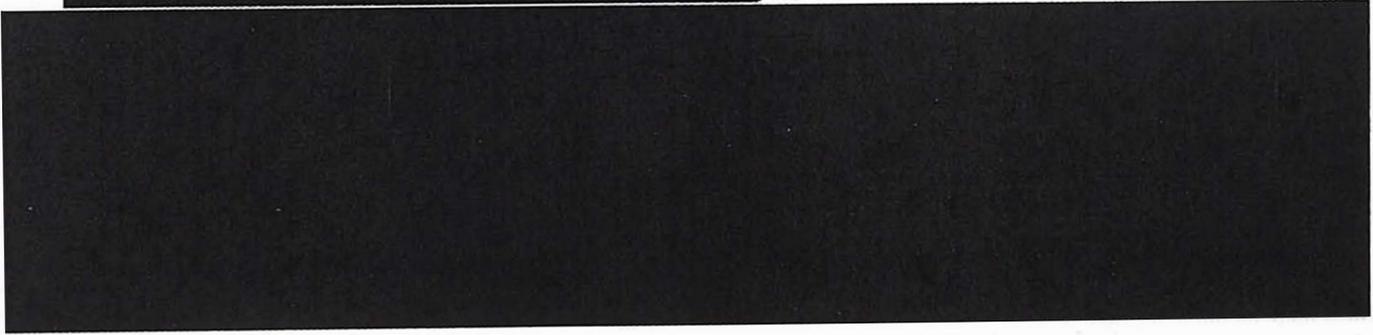
The principal decided to write a personal letter to the parents of all the pupils expressing his regret at the events and reassuring them that the school neither encouraged nor condoned the pupils' actions. An additional paragraph was inserted in the letters to the parents of pupils who had been on the demonstration pointing out that they had left school without permission and that the school did not condone their action in any way and asked the parents to support the school.

The principal reiterated these sentiments at a whole school assembly on the following day. In addition, he met with the ringleaders of the demonstration and, while acknowledging their right to express an opinion, he pointed out that it was totally inappropriate to involve the school in any such activity. He reported that the pupils acknowledged this point.

3. IMPACT ON THE STAFF

The events have placed a considerable strain on the staff. Several teachers considered that their authority has been challenged and that the offending pupils should be dealt with severely. The events had an adverse effect on other teachers' morale. The principal held a staff meeting to deal with the staff's feelings and he is pleased to report that morale has rallied. In addition, the Board of Governors have endorsed the school's approach.

The principal reported on the intense media interest in the events. He has kept a record of all enquiries and telephone calls. On the first day he was contacted by 11 representatives of the media - local and national - BBC, UTV, newspapers etc. He had to take a further 13 calls on the following day. He commented that the media was insistent and was not particularly helpful when he refused to make statements. A further stressful and unfortunate by-product of the events has been phone calls to the school by "cranks" or people with particular political axes to grind and the receipt of abusive letters and insulting phone calls. The principal has a record of all the calls and letters. On a more positive note, there have been several supportive replies to the letter sent to parents. Managing all of this has been a stressful and at times very unpleasant experience for the principal, however, he has coped well and he is determined to ensure that the work of the school will not be interrupted. He made a point of stating that the SELB had been supportive.

4. 


5. CONCLUSION

The school has had to carry out a difficult balancing act in responding to these events. It is conscious that there are strong feelings within the local community about recent political events and it is conscious of the need not to alienate important elements within the community. Yet, throughout it has sought to distance itself from the actions of the minority of pupils and their supporters and has stressed its central role of providing high quality education for all the children of the area.

It has been a stressful experience for all the staff and especially for the principal. He has received considerable support from colleagues within the profession and I judge that he has coped well without compromising his principles. While there are some concerns that there will be a repeat of the action, at the time of my visit, the school was functioning normally and the principal hopes that it can put the recent events behind it.

