

# ASSEMBLY QUESTION

*To be dealt with IMMEDIATELY and not placed with other papers.*

Please return to Machinery of Government by: Tuesday 13 November 2001

DATE FOR ANSWER: Monday 19 November 2001

AQO 406/01

ORAL NO 9

Full oral + written  
response required

**Mr Gerry Kelly (North Belfast):** To ask the Minister of Education what measures have been put in place to deal with the trauma suffered by the pupils of Holy Cross Primary School.

**IMPORTANT:** Please remember to use the word processing account number given below.  
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Mr Whyte	8/11
Mr Finlay	9/11

Referred For Action To:	Date
Dr Brown	14/11

Answer to be Co-ordinated by: \_\_\_\_\_

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DATE FOR ANSWER: Monday 19 November 2001

AQO 406/01

**Mr Gerry Kelly** (*North Belfast*): To ask the Minister of Education what measures have been put in place to deal with the trauma suffered by the pupils of Holy Cross Primary School.

**Martin McGuinness**

I have on many occasions expressed my deep concern about the situation surrounding Holy Cross Girls' Primary School and the disruption and anxiety caused to teachers, pupils and parents in both Holy Cross and Wheatfield Primary Schools. Every pupil has the right to travel to school unhindered and to be educated in a safe and secure environment that is conducive to learning.

Following extensive discussions between my Department, the Belfast Education and Library Board and the Council for Catholic Maintained Schools I announced on 25 October a support programme for Holy Cross and the nearby Wheatfield Primary School. The funding, which totals £154,000, will be used to support the measures which the schools themselves have identified as necessary to meet the needs of pupils and staff. These include additional substitute teachers, classroom assistants, curriculum support for P7 pupils, including those taking the transfer test, and respite activities for pupils and staff. In addition the Belfast Board will continue to provide ongoing support services for Holy Cross and any other school in its area that requires assistance.

While my Department, along with the Belfast Board and CCMS, will continue to support the schools, the situation at Holy Cross can only be resolved by dialogue between the local communities. Once again I would urge local representatives to come together to resolve the issues.



## **Background**

1. This question follows from those asked by Mr Kelly and Mr Maskey on 15 October. A copy of Hansard is attached, tabbed A.
2. Holy Cross is a Catholic maintained primary school for girls which is located in the Ardoyne area in North Belfast. The enrolment is 213.
3. The Key Personalities at the School are:-
  - Chair of the Board of Governors - Father A Troy; and
  - Principal - Mrs A Tanney.
4. The attached information tabbed B is an update of the situation from the Belfast Education and Library Board.

## **Attacks on Buses**

5. The Belfast Board have confirmed that they have had no attacks on Board buses recently. However Translink, in a Press Release issued on 14 November, has stated that in the past 4 months in Belfast there were 20 reported assaults on bus drivers and 80 attacks on vehicles. On average, 5 windows are broken per day, a total of over 600 in the period. The number of reported incidents has risen by 86% compared with the same period in 2000. Passenger injuries have also risen by 64%, with 41 passengers injured since July 2001. More worrying perhaps is that many more instances of violence may go unreported.

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## **Supplementary Questions**

**Q. Have similar arrangements been made for other schools in the area where the children are also victims of daily occurrences of unrest?**

A. The situation at Holy Cross and Wheatfield is exceptional and requires a response which meets these particular circumstances. The Belfast Education and Library Board will continue to provide support services to all schools in its area which require assistance.

I am fully aware of the problems currently being faced by schools in North Belfast and beyond which are closely monitored by my Department and the relevant education authorities. Where difficulties arise, the situation is assessed and appropriate steps taken to ensure the safety and well being of pupils and the quality of the education they receive.

**Q. What arrangements have been put in place to ensure (Protestant) children can travel safely to and from school, particularly Belfast Boys Model School, Belfast Model School for Girls, Castle High School, Glengormley High School and Newtownabbey High School, all of which have been attacked in the past few weeks?**

A. Attacks on school buses are absolutely despicable and deplorable. I have issued countless statements calling on those responsible for the attacks and intimidation of school children to bring their activities to an end. Community and political representatives have a responsibility to make clear their opposition to the ongoing abuse of children. It does not matter which section of society, school, or school bus is involved; attacks, intimidation, threats and abuse of children are totally unacceptable and our community, as a whole, must make this clear.



**Q. What arrangements were made to ensure those children who were sitting the Transfer Test were able to do so in a stress free environment?**

A. I previously reported that the Department and the statutory education authorities would be doing all they could to ensure the children were able to sit the test in a stress-free environment. In the week prior to the test the situation was assessed on a daily basis and arrangements were made to provide an alternative venue for the children had it been necessary. I am pleased that the protest was suspended on the morning of the test and the children were able to take the test in the familiar environment of the own school. A similar approach will be taken to the next test on 23 November 2001 but I earnestly hope that the situation will have been resolved before then.

**Q. How many children in Holy Cross Primary School sat the Transfer Test?**

A. 16 pupils sat the test.

**Q. Have similar arrangements been put in place for children sitting the Transfer Test from any other school in the North Belfast area?**

A. In recent weeks all primary schools in the North Belfast area have been visited by officials from the Education and Library Board to discuss arrangements for pupils undertaking the Transfer Test. The particular needs of each school has been assessed and the education authorities will continue to monitor the situation on a daily basis.

**Q. What will be done to take into account the detrimental effects on candidates' performance in the tests arising from the protests?**

A. Within the transfer arrangements there are special circumstances provisions under which parents who consider that their child's performance in the tests has been effected by illness or other problems can, where a grammar school place is being sought, provide documentary evidence to that effect. In such cases the primary school can provide information on the child's performance. Grammar schools must consider such information in taking admissions decisions, although they are not obliged to accept the child.



A

**Mr G Kelly**

asked the Minister of Education what steps he is taking to protect and vindicate the rights of children and parents travelling to and from Holy Cross Primary School.

(AQO 295/01)

14.

**Mr Maskey**

asked the Minister of Education what steps he is taking to bring an end to the daily attacks on the schoolchildren of Holy Cross Primary School.

(AQO 294/01)

**The Minister of Education (Mr M McGuinness):** A Cheann Comhairle, with your permission, I will take questions 1 and 14 together as they both relate to Holy Cross Girls' Primary School in north Belfast.

I am concerned about disruption and attacks on pupils at any school. I am therefore concerned about the situation surrounding Holy Cross Girls' Primary School and the disruption and anxiety caused to teachers, pupils and parents. All parents have the right to escort their children to school free from impediment, and children have the right to be educated in a safe and secure environment that is conducive to learning.

The protest is unacceptable and must end immediately. The Department of Education will continue to support the board of governors, the Council for Catholic Maintained Schools (CCMS) and the Belfast Education and Library Board in their efforts to ensure that that is achieved for the pupils attending Holy Cross Girls' Primary School and the nearby controlled school, Wheatfield Primary. Departmental officials are in regular contact with the relevant education authorities and are monitoring the situation closely.

Additional support has been provided to Holy Cross Girls' Primary School and, along with the CCMS and the Belfast Education and Library Board, the Department is considering what further assistance may be required by the two schools. In addition, the Executive have established an interdepartmental liaison group of officials and have appointed a senior liaison officer who works from an office in north Belfast that is accessible to all sections of the community. That group has been established to provide regular reports to the Executive on the situation, and the Department of Education is represented on that group at a senior level.

While the Department of Education, along with the CCMS and the Belfast Education and Library Board, is providing that support, the situation at Holy Cross Primary School can be resolved only by dialogue between the local communities. I have repeatedly urged local representatives to come together to resolve their issues.

**Mr G Kelly:**

Will the Minister tell the House what support has been put in place for the Holy Cross Primary School teachers and pupils?

**Mr M McGuinness:**

Additional staffing has been provided to Holy Cross Primary School, and further support for both schools is under consideration by the Department of Education in conjunction with the CCMS and the Belfast Education and Library Board. Funding and approval for two exceptional closure days was given to support the residential course for the teaching staff, and that was used to assist them in dealing with trauma.

**Mr Maskey:**

I thank the Minister for his response so far. Notwithstanding the present review of post-primary provision — which it is hoped will bring an end to the transfer test — will the Minister be able to do anything to ensure that the children of Holy Cross Primary School will not be disadvantaged by their present trauma while sitting the transfer test?

**Mr M McGuinness:**

It is vital that pupils sitting the transfer test can prepare properly and are able to sit the test in a stress-free environment. It is hoped that the protest will have ended by 9 November, the date of the first test. Funding has been agreed to enable the teachers to provide additional curriculum support to pupils at Holy Cross who are taking the transfer test this year. The Department has also been in touch with the school authorities, who will take appropriate steps to ensure that the children can take the transfer test in a calm and orderly atmosphere. The Department and the statutory education authorities will do all that they can to help the school achieve that.

**Mr B Hutchinson:**

Has the Minister implemented any initiatives in other schools, particularly the Belfast Model School for Girls, the Belfast Boys' Model School, Castle High School, Glengormley High School and Newtownabbey Community High School, all of which have been attacked in the past few weeks? I spoke to officials from Translink today, and there has been somewhere in the region of 146 attacks since 3 September. Are any initiatives being implemented to ensure that Protestant children can travel to and from school without attack? Are teachers being given advice on how to help with that?

**Mr M McGuinness:**

My feelings on the situation in the north Belfast area have been made abundantly clear during this period, which has been so detrimental to the pupils, their parents and society.



Attacks on school buses are absolutely despicable and deplorable, and the Department keeps all of this under constant review. Recently I have issued countless statements calling on all those responsible for the attack and intimidation of schoolchildren to bring their activities to an end. Community and political representatives have a huge responsibility to state their opposition to the ongoing abuse of children. It does not matter which section of society, school, or school bus is involved; attacks, intimidation, threats, and abuse of children are totally unacceptable.

The Assembly has an important role to play. Several Assembly Members have recently made positive efforts to encourage dialogue within the community to have this resolved. I commend them for their initiative. They must be supported by Members from other political parties. There is a responsibility on everyone in the House to ensure that we play as constructive a role as possible. We can make it perfectly clear to everyone that it is unacceptable to attack children and that it should end immediately.

**Mr A Maginness:**

I welcome the Minister's reaffirmation of the right of parents to bring their children to school safely. Fr Troy, the chairman of the school board of governors, has suggested that parents may choose to bring their children to school by car or bus given the current onset of inclement weather. At the same time, they can maintain the right or the option to walk their children to school. What is the Minister's reaction to that suggestion?

**Mr M McGuinness:**

Fr Troy and Anne Tanney, the principal of the Holy Cross Girl's School, have played heroic roles in the defence of children and their right to education. I salute their leadership and the way in which they have managed a difficult situation.

The right of access to all schools must be maintained; it is vital that people have right of access. However, it is for parents to decide how their children will get to school. Parents will have my fullest support whatever their decision. That is the only basis on which we can proceed. People have the right to bring their children to school; they have a right to decide what transport they will use.



B

## North Belfast Emergency – Summary of Board Response

An Emergency Management Team was formed in the late summer in accordance with the board's Emergency Implementation Plan to address concerns about the tensions in north Belfast and the impact on young people and staff.

This team consists of information officer, property services officer, health and safety officer, security adviser, school's liaison officer, assistant senior education officer, and is chaired by the chief administrative officer.

It co-ordinates the board's contacts with schools and addresses issues such as: visits to schools, professional support for teaching and non-teaching staff, specialist support for pupils, communications, security, and work with other organisations.

For the month of September, this team met daily, but it now meets three times a week. Members of the team are in contact with each other frequently each day to monitor the situation and share information.

Linked to the Emergency Management Team, is a multi-disciplinary team which has been set up in the education department to identify and respond to the education needs of pupils and schools. This team includes officers from CASS, Youth, Psychology, Special Education, Education Welfare and Behaviour Support. This group is chaired by an assistant senior education officer, who is a member of Emergency Management Team.

### Visits to schools

Board officers have consistently made visits to schools in the area. This support has been welcomed by teaching, non-teaching staff and pupils.

- Second-tier officers have visited all schools and have spoken to all staff (teaching, and non-teaching) at Holy Cross Girls, and Wheatfield Primaries.
- Second tier officers visit the area every day to assess the situation.
- Education advisers visit all schools in the North Belfast area on a rota basis.
- The board's welfare officer has visited both teaching and non-teaching staff in schools.
- Senior library staff monitor the situation in local libraries.
- The multi-disciplinary team has visited Wheatfield, Holy Cross, and St Gabriel's, and continue to assess their needs.
- Youth officers have been in contact with youth providers in the area and have ensured co-ordinated youth activities to divert young people from potential conflict.
- The transfer officer visited all the primary schools in North Belfast on two occasions in the run up to the transfer test to provide support with the arrangements for the transfer procedure tests and was in constant contact with the principals. She also spoke to children in various classes in Holy Cross and in the particular the P7 pupils.



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### Security measures

Throughout the past five months the board has put in place security measures to ensure the safety of pupils and staff and protect property.

- Additional security measures have been installed at Our Lady of Mercy Girls' School and Holy Cross, Wheatfield, and Ballygolan Primary Schools. Work has also been carried out in a number of other schools when the need has arisen.
- Contingency plans have been put in place for the emergency evacuation of primary schools in the area.
- Agreement of joint evacuation plans between Cedar Lodge and Hazlewood College have been put in place and physical changes to security barriers have been carried out to ensure speedy exit of pupils and staff if needed.
- Transport has been an important issue. The team has been in liaison with schools to provide support when required.

### Communications

The emergency team has set up communication networks to share information between different departments within the board and schools.

- Emergency contact numbers (mobiles) for three board officers on the Emergency Management Team have been distributed to school principals.
- Schools have been encouraged to contact officers if they need assistance, and to report all incidents.
- In addition, a security e-mail address has been set up for schools to report these incidents. (E-mail Security@BELB.co.uk)
- All information is fed through to the information officer to co-ordinate the board's media response.
- The information officer has advised relevant schools on how to deal with the media.
- A series of press statements were issued by the board and chief executive regarding the impact the situation was having on the wider education community.



3

**Working with external organisations**

The Emergency Management Team has been working with a number of key partners to ensure maximum support for the education community in North Belfast.

- A member of the education department's multi-disciplinary team sits on the CCMS co-ordinating group.
- A bid has been made to Department of Education for additional funding for education resources and building/security work at North Belfast schools.
- The Emergency Management Team has informed the DE of all incidents.
- The chief administrative officer visited schools with the senior officers from the Department of Education.
- The chief administrative officer and chief executive have spoken to the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister's representative, based in the Everton Centre.
- A meeting was arranged in board headquarters with school principals, senior youth workers and youth officers, senior librarians and other educational staff
- The chief executive and chief administrative officer met with Ardoyne Concerned Parents representatives, in board headquarters
- The chief executive and chief administrative officer met with Bryce Dickson – NI Human Rights Commission, in board headquarters.
- The chief executive and chief administrative officer met with Upper Ardoyne/Glenbryn representatives, in board headquarters
- The chief administrative officer and the board's security officer met with Superintendent Woodside, Antrim Road RUC Station
- The chief administrative officer, transport officer and security officer met with post primary principals regarding transport issues
- The chief executive and chief administrative officer met with representatives of political parties in North Belfast to encourage dialogue.

**Special Arrangements**

- A new road with traffic calming measures has been constructed at the rear of Holy Cross Primary School, in the grounds of St Gabriel's Boys' School. This ensures access for the teachers and those parents of Holy Cross Primary School who wish to use this route.
- All schools in North Belfast closed for the week 29 October 2001 – 2 November 2001. This was to ensure pupil safety and to allow a window of opportunity for political and community leaders to enter into discussions.

**BM/PMcC****5 November 2001****updated 13 November 2001**

TOTAL P.04



## **Update on the Transfer Test Arrangements at Holy Cross**

### **Record of telephone call with Margaret Marks**

- **Tuesday 6 November 2001** - Margaret Marks, Transfer Officer, BELB visited Holy Cross Girls' Primary School to meet with the Principal, Mrs A Tanney to discuss the arrangements for the first Transfer Test. In the course of the discussions an alternative venue was suggested however neither the parents nor the Principal were in favour of this approach. It was therefore agreed that the situation would be kept under review on a daily basis. While at the school the officer met with the children and in particular the P7 children.
- **Thursday 8 November 2001** - A request was placed with the Assistant Chief Constable asking that the use of helicopters for observation duties in the area of the school be suspended for the duration of the test. He agreed, security situation permitting.
- **Friday 9 November 2001** - Margaret Marks was at the school prior to the commencement of the test to ensure all the arrangements were in place. Some of the children were picked up by the Principal and driven to school by car. Everything went smoothly and there were no reports of any disruption. Sixteen children sat the test. The helicopters did not fly!

### **Arrangements for the Second Test**

- The same arrangements are in place for the next test and the Saturday morning tuition for the P7 pupils continues at St Gemma's.