

- 1 Mr Jennings
- 2 Private Office

BACKGROUND INFORMATION FOR LORD ELTON'S REPLY TO MR HAROLD McCUSKER MP

CLOSURE OF SCHOOLS AND ABSENCES OF TEACHERS DUE TO UNREST AT TIME OF DEATH OF HUNGER-STRIKERS

1. The letter from the "anonymous catholic" alleges that some schools in Dungannon, Coalisland and Carrickmore allowed staff off on the occasion of the funerals of hunger-strikers and at the same time ensured that they received full salaries.
2. The schools/teachers' branches scrutinise very carefully the explanations given by school authorities for school closures and teachers' absences. If the school authorities closed the school in the interests of its safety and the safety of pupils and staff the Department is prepared to approve the closure as exceptional: (some school authorities may choose to use an optional holiday to cover the event - if all optional holidays have not already been used). In these circumstances teachers are entitled to their salary.
3. However if school authorities indicated that the school was closed as a protest the Department would ask them to make the day up and ensure that the school is in operation for the required minimum number of days in the 1980/81 school year. Teachers' branch would not automatically disallow salary.

If teachers absented themselves as a protest (which may have forced school closure and an optional holiday is not being taken) salary will be disallowed in the case of those teachers (eg Carnhill Secondary School) for the days in question. Teachers Branch and Schools Branch liaise closely on closures and teachers' absences.

Schools in Dungannon, Coalisland and Carrickmore

Seven schools in Dungannon/Coalisland were closed on 7 May in the interests of safety; they were not closed on 15 May.

Twenty teachers (10 for $\frac{1}{2}$ day) absented themselves on 15 May for the funeral. They lose salary. None of the Carrickmore schools were closed or had teachers absent - per school return.

4. Sixty-six schools were closed on the occasion of hunger-strikers' funeral (7 May) and seven on 15 May. The evidence shows that school authorities generally have been dealing very sensibly with difficult situations where they have occurred and have shown exemplary devotion to the interests and safety of their pupils. Some have resisted threats and intimidation and refused to close schools.

Mr Clark and Mr MacDonald have already submitted a draft reply. Private Office await our comments. I think we might elaborate a little as per draft attached.

6. Mr McLennan (Trs Branch) told me that Mr McCusker asked a PQ about the number of teachers absent on the occasion of the hunger-strikers' deaths and for information comparing absences in May 1980 and May 1981. I understand that the answer given on 8 June was that the complete information was not available at that time.

P J Higgins

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