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To: Parental Involvement Bill

Subject: 292

Response from the Parentzone - Parental Involvement questionnaire

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Responding as: On behalf of a group or organisation

Individual: Yes

Confidentiality: Yes, make my response, name and address all available

Behalf of groups: Yes

Sharing responses / future engagement: Yes

Question 1: We agree with placing a duty on EAs to promote parental involvement. From our experiences of the Race Relations (Amendment) Act 2000, such duties can generate action where required or intensify action in authorities with good practice in this area already.

CERES welcomes the opportunity to respond to the Scottish Executive consultation on the draft bill on Improving Parents' Involvement in Schools and is supportive of the Scottish Executive's recognition of the need for greater parental participation in children's education and initiatives in support of this.

This need was amply demonstrated in CERES' recent research into Minority Ethnic Pupils' Experiences of School in Scotland (MEPESS)

(<http://www.scotland.gov.uk/library5/education/mepess-00.asp>),

which looked in depth at parental perceptions and found lack of parental access to and involvement with teachers and schools among parents' key concerns. Much of the data presented in this response will be based on findings from that piece of work.

Question 2: Our most recent research Minority Ethnic Pupils' Experiences of School in Scotland (MEPESS)

(<http://www.scotland.gov.uk/library5/education/mepess-00.asp>) would suggest that minority ethnic parents do not feel sufficiently involved within their children's schools or within their EAs. Therefore while agreeing that new SPIs would be helpful, there is a need to be clear about how information how these new strategies are devised, who is consulted and how implementation is monitored and evaluated.

Clearly, it is in the interests of parents/carers to be informed of processes and channels for communication, but more thought needs to be given to how such these can be equality-proofed and made appropriate to all the communities and individuals they serve.

Involving local Race Equality Councils or similarly relevant agencies, for instance, may go some way to ensuring the interests of ethnic minority families are represented. This is

especially important in areas where there is a small ethnic minority presence whose wishes and rights are easily overlooked.

It is equally important that parents of children with mixed race backgrounds or who are easily marginalised such as Gypsy/Traveller parents/carers are not missed out.

The consultation paper makes no mention of the need to encourage a shift in parental views to convince them that their participation is welcome and indeed essential. The prevailing culture in Scottish education is of minimal contact between parents and teachers, and this is particularly the case where differences of class, ethnicity or language are seen as barriers to communication. Any serious attempt to challenge parental perceptions of schooling and engage their participation will require a determined effort on the part of the Scottish Executive to publicise the benefits and potential of parental involvement. Such an initiative would have to be mindful of a range of issues which may impact on parents'™ desire and ability to involve themselves:

- o Sense of disenfranchisement
- o Lack of opportunity / time
- o Sense of not having anything to offer
- o Discomfort/isolation/ alienation from rest of parent and/or teacher body
- o Culture of submission to school's™ authority
- o Lack of familiarity/ease with formal structures and procedures
- o Lack of fluency in spoken / written English
- o Difficulties of access

Question 3: Our concern is that it is not clear to agencies like ours who work within public policy and equality issues how other areas such as equality which are already meant to be part of the Annual Statements of Improvement is currently being addressed. If we are not even clear about an area that should be in such Annual Statements of Improvement since 2000, how can parents/carers in communities be clear about progress in relation to new strategies for parental improvements? Equally, not all schools hand out school development plans to parents!

Perhaps this issue which is of interest to all parents could be communicated to parents through council newsletters, websites, school newsletters as well as the Annual Statement of Improvement and School Development Plans.

So while we have no objection for including these strategies as part of the Annual Statement of Improvement, the proof of the pudding will be in the implementation and monitoring of such strategies.

Question 4: We welcome greater fluidity and flexibility in the home-school interface and concur that the separate formats of School Board and Parent Teacher Association have not maximised the potential of parents to participate in their children's™ schooling. A less rigid structure (as envisaged in the Parent Forum) which permits greater movement within and into it therefore is more likely to enable a wider range of parents to involve themselves provided they are persuaded that their input is possible, manageable, valued and of benefit to their child(ren).

However, we are very concerned that in setting up any new template, that such templates are inclusive from the start. Measures and principles should also be put in place to prevent ethnic minority parents from being marginalised or 'silenced' by the sheer momentum of the 'majority'. Systems which are decided locally on surface appear extremely democratic. However they could be inclusive, creative and enabling or they could be restrictive, inward looking and discriminatory- so there has to be checks and balances put into place to guide the principles, values, processes and outputs of such forums.

Question 5: Given the history of minority ethnic under-representation on School Boards and PTAs (and indeed the failure, in the main, of school communities to perceive this as a concern), it appears unlikely that parents who have hitherto been unheard and unseen will suddenly emerge ready for action. Any establishment of a Parent Forum at this stage is therefore likely to continue to be dominated initially by a vocal minority (however well-intentioned). In order for parents to decide "what suits them and their school best", therefore, a transition period may be required which allows time for reflection and sees capacity building and participation across the parent body.

There is a concern that any decisions taken now as to the shape and format of a Parent Forum, will not be easily amended, and will not be the result of genuine participation from the whole parent body. A temporary PF whose role, remit, composition, etc is revisited in a year's time, when it has had time to test the waters might address the question of representation more accurately.

¶ The scope of activity proposed for Parent Forums is rightly wide and likely to vary significantly from school to school and indeed authority to authority. Whilst some areas such as governance and fundraising may prove relatively uncontroversial, agreement in other areas such as pastoral or curricular issues may prove less straightforward. Setting an agenda which reflects the priorities of ALL stakeholders is therefore likely to be a challenge. The demography of Scotland means that in many parts of the country, especially in rural areas, the voices of ethnic minorities will not be heard if decisions are directed by a white parent majority (and supported, presumably, by a predominantly white teaching body).

Question 6: See our response to Section 1

In addition:

Schools which anticipate parents' needs and initiate communication rather than react to difficulties as they arise, tend to be viewed more favourably by parents. Whilst this is likely to hold true for most parents, it is particularly the case for members of groups who are socially excluded and vulnerable. For schools to engage the participation of all and foster goodwill across the parent body, there must be commitment at all staff levels to ensuring that

- oParents can contact teachers when they need to
- oTeachers will make time to engage meaningfully with the parents
- oContact between home and school does not only take place in response to problems; instead parents are consulted and informed as a matter of course
- oParents and teachers feel respected and responsible in caring for the child
- oContact between home and school is supported by using appropriate means of communication
- oAn ethos of respect is supported by all members of the school community

Good practice of this kind will go a long way towards establishing a climate of partnership and dismantling barriers.

Question 7: We do not see any reason why 'composite' parent forums could not be formed if this suited the local situation.

Question 8: We would agree with this as it would provide a degree of consistency in relation to standards, values framework, purpose. It could also assist in the setting up of accountability frameworks.

Question 9: We would suggest that any constitution be developed under an education authority scheme

Question 10: The precise composition of the parent forum is for the body itself to decide. However, CERES would advocate a framework flexible enough to permit easy access to meetings for ALL parents, regardless of whether they are regular members of the parent forum. For many parents time constraints significantly impact on their ability to commit themselves to regular activities; moreover, a structure which allows easy access is less threatening and may open doors for some parents who would otherwise be hesitant or feel unable to participate.

Informal access to information and contact may be perceived as less threatening and more manageable to many parents, and particularly those unfamiliar with organisational structures. There must be scope for those who do not or can not join in to be fully informed and enabled to voice their opinions; this means an environment where communication is not restricted to formal formats such as a PF but allows for informal exchange.

More clarification is required about co-opting individuals. The input / involvement of specialist or supportive race equality agencies may be appropriate in certain schools where the number of minority ethnic parents is especially small, although more thought would need to be given to the level and nature of their involvement and the appointments process.

Question 11: Do you have a view as to how the needs of looked-after children should be addressed and catered for in the Bill?

We feel strongly that the rights and voices of looked-after children are marginalised if not unheard. It is very important that there is provision for those who look after 'looked-after' children can have a say within Parent Forums. The guardians/carers or EA providers of 'looked' after' children act as their 'parents' so should be allowed under that role to be part of the Parents Forum. If this is not accepted, we would strongly urge that a mechanism be created to enable the needs and rights of 'looked' after' children to be met within the responsibilities or functions of the Parents Forum

Question 12: This would seem sensible. However, we would advocate that forums and therefore members of Parent Forums should adhere to equality and anti-discrimination legislation which means racist behaviour, language, incidents would not be tolerated. There must be mechanisms in place to tackle parents whose views contravene the spirit and aspects of all equality and human rights legislation

Question 13: Parent forums are not policing forums. They should provide voice for parents and carers but equally they should be mechanisms from which genuine equitable partnership with the school and education authorities should can be strengthened. Therefore we would wish to encourage the headteacher and another member of the school senior management team

in particular to attend. Their role should be to listen, to develop ideas, to advise rather than to 'direct' proceedings.

Question 14: We **STRONGLY RECOMMEND** that the entire Bill requires to be equality proofed-clearly we now have two pieces of legislation, the Race Relations (Amendment) Act 2000 and related legislation linked to Disability which need to be taken into account. There will be a forthcoming gender public duty which will also need to be considered. In considering these functions, there is need to consider how these functions should take into account issues of equality proofing.

Question 15: It can be both. There should be open-ended provision to enable issues wish to discuss to be placed on the table. However, to enable quality enhancement within schools, some issues discussed should be ones of direct immediate importance to the school or ones which may emerge through national policy directives

Question 16:

The issue of insurance should be looked into further however as an agency working on race equality issues, we would suggest it would be in the best interest for the promotion of race equality and developing anti-racist practice if the forums were 'agents' of the education authority rather than as independent groups. It may also be easier to get parents to become members of the forum if they know they will be protected by insurance and frameworks which will reduce risk

Question 17: Though this question deals mainly with financial and procedural obligations, we feel it is important that authorities can pro-actively assist parent forums become inclusive. The status quo at present is that those who shout loudest or have the highest confidence become involve. Authorities should work with parent forums to enable the range of parent voices and perspectives to be heard. This of course is premised within an equalities and anti-discrimination framework. How can there be an obligation that is written into the forthcoming Act that enables an EA to be proactive in relation to its duties under equalities legislation?

Question 18: We agree that there should be financial support AND support in kind. Forums need to be careful that in seeking finance from elsewhere that they are not obligated to the requirements of monies received other than those from public funds

Question 19: We agree that there should be a duty to provide advice and information on request.

However, we are concerned about the use of language employed in the consultation document which proposes a parental right to "advice and information" and then goes on to speak of "real partnerships within schools". The terminology betrays a one-way system whereby knowledge is held by the school and imparted to parents from above. It is unlikely to persuade parents that their opinions, preferences or concerns are truly respected. Whilst we welcome the principle of a duty on education authorities to parents, we propose that a genuine partnership between home and school consists of a two-way exchange of perceptions and information as to the child's development and welfare. We would welcome the Bill indicating that individual parental knowledge of their child or the child's own view about their learning should have weightage in any educational considerations.

Question 20: This is a sensitive issue for lay organisations like ours to respond to. This is one we would leave to our colleagues in the teaching unions to take up.

However, we do ask that consideration be given to parent forums working with EAs to form question frameworks that could cover issues of partnership with parents, equality and inclusion and other relevant issues

Question 21: See above

Question 22: The draft bill proposes that education authorities establish a complaints procedure to deal with representations about the authority's exercise of its functions under the Bill. There is no question that a formal complaints procedure is essential. Nor that it needs to be well advertised and readily available in different languages / formats and its effectiveness monitored and evaluated. It is therefore of concern that the draft bill limits itself to stating that education authorities only need to give as much publicity to the procedure as they consider appropriate.

The consultation document makes no mention of the precise nature of such complaints procedures and more detailed examination is required of their contents, of authorship, of accountability and recourse to further instances of assistance. If complaints procedures vary significantly from authority to authority, there may be a case to be made for a procedure that holds at national level but is administered locally.

The consultation paper does not address directly possible deterioration in relationships among parents who may or may not be members or non-members of the Parent Forum. Given the diverse composition of the parent community in schools and the scope for controversy, it seems important to examine how Parent Forums may be helped to manage differences and held accountable by parents, and what avenues are available to the latter in order to formally raise their grievances, either as individuals or as groups.

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