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Sent: 02 June 2005 14:51
To: Parental Involvement Bill
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Subject: 445

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Please find attached East Ayrshire Council's response to the Consultation Document "Making the Difference – Improving Parents' Involvement in Schools".

<<Response to Parents Consultation Bill.doc>>

I hope you find this to be helpful.

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EAST AYRSHIRE COUNCIL:
Department of Educational and Social Services

RESPONSE TO CONSULTATION DOCUMENT ENTITLED:
“MAKING THE DIFFERENCE – IMPROVING PARENTS’ INVOLVEMENT IN
SCHOOLS : Consultation on Draft Bill”

INTRODUCTION

East Ayrshire consulted widely in preparing a response to this document. A working group consisting of field professionals was formed and they provided feedback and comment. A series of Parent Seminars were held across the authority for parents to attend and discuss the issues; approximately 75% of schools were represented at these seminars. Further, the Education Committee considered the summary authority response at its May 2005 meeting and approved this response.

- 1. Do you agree with the placing of a new duty on education authorities to promote parental involvement?**

We agree in principle, but question whether this requires to be a statutory duty. The vast majority of education authorities are already fully committed to promoting parental involvement. The key issue is that consultation and involvement with parents should be integral to the work of the authority and embedded in its culture and ethos; the use of a statutory instrument will not, of itself, promote such an ethos.

- 2. Do you agree that education authorities should be required to prepare new Strategies for Parental Involvement (SPIs)**

We agree that education authorities should prepare SPIs. However, these should build upon, and adapt, current procedures and policies.

- 3. Do you agree that incorporating these Strategies in existing Annual Statements of Education Improvement Objectives and School Development Plans (as set out in the 2000 Act) is the right way for education authorities to set out their intentions? Or should this be done in some other way?**

East Ayrshire’s Education Improvement Objectives already take account of support and development of parents; however, the new SPI should be included as part of the Local Improvement Objectives and School Improvement Plans.

- 4. Do you agree that the current system of parental representation, i.e. School Boards should be replaced by a more flexible system of parent forums, as decided locally by the parents, in a way which suits them and their school best?**

Within East Ayrshire, currently every school has a functioning School Board. However, we recognise that this is not the case in every authority and, thus, there may be a need for a more flexible approach. While recognising the need for change, the more relevant and best parts of the current arrangements should be retained and should not automatically be rejected.

A number of parents have suggested that the current School Boards system could be improved in a number of ways, but need not necessarily be completely replaced. It has also been suggested that PTAs may wish to continue as separate bodies and not necessarily wish to be subsumed within the new Parent Forum.

If flexibility is introduced, there needs to be clear guidance on such matters as the size of new forums, the appointment or election process. There would require to be consistency within each authority and, preferably, nationally. If there is not guidance on such matters, then this could lead to considerable diversity and inconsistencies across the country in terms of implementing the new Parent Forums.

5. The Bill does not prescribe the means of appointment to the new forums (elections to Board are mandatory) but provides for parents to decide this locally. Do you agree?

We have a concern that this proposal may have the opposite effect and that numbers may reduce instead of increasing. The removal of the election process would potentially remove the representative nature of the Forum. Further, by not having an election process, this may devalue the importance of the Forum.

Alternatively, a simplified election process or an appointment process could be created. There needs to be a clear and valid mechanism for parental nomination or appointment. It may be possible to suggest that all parents are members of the Forum, but that there would be an annual election for office bearers (eg at an AGM). There is also the possibility of encouraging representatives from each year/house group within a school. Given that there is a wide range of potential models for appointment to the new Forum, there needs to be consistency within the authority and, preferably, at national level. Parents should be involved at a local level in considering the means of appointment in consultation with the authority. However, on balance, the move away from the formal election process of the current School Board will probably encourage a greater number of parents to become involved.

6. Do you agree that education authorities should have a new duty to promote the establishment of a parent forum in each school and to support their operation?

We agree with this proposal in principle. However, if every school was allowed to have a different arrangement for the Parent Forum then this would be very difficult for the authority to support. Hence, there needs to be consistency within an authority.

7. Should the Bill provide for 'composite' parent forums where this is the preferred option of parents in each school in a combined school or cluster of schools?

We would strongly support the principle that each school should have an individual Parent Forum. However, there should also be the facility for schools to combine and cluster as required. There may also be a desire for schools within a Learning Partnership or cluster to create a Parent Forum in addition to those based in individual schools.

8. Do you agree with the proposal for the involvement of education authorities to get the initial parent forum off the ground? If no, what alternative do you suggest?

We strongly support the proposal that education authorities support the initial Parent Forums. It will be essential that a structure is produced by each local authority to support the new bodies. Further, as already stated in responses to previous questions, the new

bodies can be more effectively and efficiently supported if there is a consistency of approach within the authority.

9. **The draft Bill leaves the forum's 'constitution' to be determined locally, either by the parents or initially under the education authority scheme. Do you agree with this approach? If not, what alternative would you suggest and why?**

We do not believe that the "constitution" should be determined at local school level. This will lead to inconsistency within each authority and across authorities. It will also mean that parents are engaged in the time consuming task of creating "constitutions" and dealing with other procedural matters rather than being more meaningfully involved in the education of their children. Parents within the authority had a strong view that such "constitutions" should be determined by the authority in consultation with parents.

10. **Do you agree that membership of a parent forum should be confined to parents (the broad definition) of children attending the school or individuals co-opted by the parent forum? Should parents always be in the majority?**

Membership should be confined to parents and co-opted members. Parental participation should be encouraged and it should be possible to increase the number of parent representatives compared to the current School Board structure. However, there remains the issue of having a manageable number of parents participating within the Forum meeting and this will need to be taken into account. Parents should be in the majority within the Forum.

There is also support for an increase in the number of co-opted members. Consideration should be given to pupil representation as well as additional adult representation. Co-opted members have brought a great deal of experience and expertise to the operation of School Boards and we would wish this to be continued within the new Forum.

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

This should be fully addressed by the education authority and parents in the setting up of the Parent Forum.

12. **Do you agree that the Bill should not result in parent forum members being subject to automatic disclosure checks but that members, like any other parent, should only be checked when engaging in activities defined under the Protection of Children (Scotland) Act 2003?**

We agree with this proposal.

13. **On balance, do you agree that 'rights of attendance' for certain non-members of a parent forum should not be a part of the new arrangements? In other words do you agree that non-members of the parent forum should attend only be invitation or do you believe the Head Teacher should have the right to attend, with the Councillor or other individual by invitation?**

We believe that certain individuals should have 'rights of attendance' at the new Forum. The Head Teacher and local councillor should have the right to attend and contribute to meetings. There should also be staff representation on the Forum. Parents expressed a strong view that unless the Head Teacher was present at the Forum, then the exercise may be largely pointless.

- 14. Do you consider these functions appropriate to parent forums? Would you suggest removing or adding any, or making obligatory and others optional?**

We agree that the proposed functions are broadly appropriate to Parent Forums. However, there is no need for the Parent Forum to have any additional powers or functions compared to the current School Boards. Similarly, if the functions and powers of the new Forum were significantly reduced compared to the current School Board, then the new body may have reduced credibility and status.

- 15. The Bill has been drafted to allow the parent forum to find out and report the views of parents in the school on any matters which are of interest or concern to them. Do you agree with this open-ended provision or would you suggest defining the areas of interest more restrictively?**

We would suggest that the areas of interest are defined more restrictively, to respect confidentiality of individuals and to ensure that the Forum does not become a channel outwith with the normal complaints procedure. It will be important that the Parent Forum does not discuss individual pupils and parents will need to be made aware of this.

- 16. Do you agree that the Bill should designate parent forums as 'agents' of the education authority for the purpose of their dealings with third parties, and that the issue of insurance should be looked into further? Or do you take an alternative view?**

We believe that this requires further investigation and a number of concerns have been raised about the new Forum being an 'agent' of the education authority, including the potential impartiality of the Forum. Issues related to insurance should be further investigated.

- 17. Are these the appropriate obligations to place on education authorities in relation to their working with parent forums?**

We believe that these are the appropriate obligations. However, the authority also has a vital role in supporting the new Forums and in ensuring that appropriate and relevant information is provided to the Forums.

We would welcome further discussion with parents in terms of ensuring that there is an authority developed model for each Forum in order to support these obligations and that local variations are discussed directly with the parents involved.

It is also important that representatives of the education authority are available to attend meetings of the Parent Forums as appropriate and relevant in order to fully engage with parents.

- 18. Do you agree with the provisions requiring education authorities to provide financial support or support in kind to parent forums or would you suggest alternative arrangements?**

Financial support should continue to be provided by the authorities. This financial support should be formula driven, based on factors such as pupil population and other relevant matters. The use of these finances should be clearly defined within the agreed scheme for the implementation of the Forums within each authority. Parents have

suggested that additional financial support should be provided; we would ask that the Scottish Executive provides sufficient funding to authorities to support the new bodies.

Within East Ayrshire, we will continue to support parental involvement in schools. We would also continue with the equivalent of our School Board Steering Group and would work with existing School Board and parent representatives to evolve the new model.

19. Do you agree with the proposed duty on education authorities to provide advice and information to individual parents on request, on matters relating to the education of their children?

We agree with this proposed duty, although we would point out that current legislation already covers this. The legislation would need to refer to the age of legal capacity etc and ensure consistency across the country.

20. Do you agree that education authorities should be enabled to replace the current system of appointing Head Teachers and Depute Head Teachers with more modern, flexible processes and procedures?

We strongly support the involvement of parent representatives in the appointment of Head Teacher and Depute Head Teachers. While the current system is determined by School Board representation, we would wish to develop a model which continued the current good practice of parental involvement. Appropriate training should be continued to be provided to parent representatives involved in such appointments.

21. If you do not agree that the principle of parental involvement should be retained by the involvement of parent forums in new senior appointments processes, please give your reasons.

Not applicable.

22. Do you agree with the proposal to require education authorities to establish complaints procedures in relation to the way they exercise their functions under the Bill?

This proposal should be incorporated within the existing complaints procedures of authorities.

OTHER COMMENTS

In summary, the proposals contained within the consultation document and the draft Bill are very unclear and inconsistent. They do not provide clear guidance for the replacement of School Boards on a consistent model and could lead to considerable diversity and inconsistencies across the country. Parent representatives were particularly strong in their view that while the current School Board arrangements could be improved, these proposals would not improve matters. We would ask that SEED reconsider the proposals contained in the document.