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**From:** BeersJ@northlan.gov.uk  
**Sent:** 02 June 2005 16:29  
**To:** Parental Involvement Bill  
**Subject:** 449 - North Lanarkshire Response to Parental Involvement Draft Bill



Response - SEED.doc (49 KB)

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Please find attached the North Lanarkshire Council Education Department response to the Scottish Schools (Parental Involvement) Draft Bill.

If you require any further information please do not hesitate to contact me.

Jim Beers  
Quality Improvement Officer

<<Response - SEED.doc>>

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North Lanarkshire Council's Web Site <http://www.northlan.gov.uk/>

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## North Lanarkshire Council

### Response to 'Making the difference - improving parents' involvement in schools: a consultation on a draft bill'.

#### Introductory Comments

North Lanarkshire Council welcomes this opportunity to respond to the Scottish Executive's consultation document 'Making the Difference - Improving Parents' involvement in Schools'. The council is supportive of any initiative aimed at increasing parental involvement, acknowledging that such involvement can produce positive and lasting benefits for both the school and the child.

The main proposal of the draft bill, the removal of School Boards and their replacement with parent forums is contentious but may well be a significant step forward if it leads to greater and more effective levels of parental involvement.

It is clear that many parents have not seen the boards as something for them or something they would wish to join. Those parents put off by the formality of School Boards with their attendant election process have been able to join a parents' association or work as helpers in the school. The level of parental involvement in parent associations and PTAs, which do not carry the official stamp of boards, has generally been good. The reduced formality and increased flexibility of the draft proposals is therefore likely to encourage wider participation among parents and carers

The document raises questions about key aspects of the proposed forums, particularly the Executive's intention to allow parents the freedom to decide locally on their composition and constitution. Following the consultation period it may be appropriate for the Executive to provide some guidance on the extent of choice available to parents when deciding the structure of their particular forum. These points are addressed more fully in the authority's response to the direct questions in the consultation document.

One area the document does not consider is the potential consequence of the fact that the proposed forums, like School Boards, will be statutory bodies. It may be that the lack of parental interest in boards will transfer to these new groups and they too will be seen by some as formal, restrictive and exclusive. In that event, it is very likely that in many schools voluntary groups such as parent associations and PTAs will continue to flourish rather than being subsumed into the new forums.

The authority response to the formal questions in the consultation document is as follows:

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

Agree. The proposed new duty reiterates the Standards in Scotland's Schools Act 2000 Section 5(2)(a) which already requires education authorities to include a statement on parental involvement in their Annual Statement of Improvement Objectives.

#### **Question 2: Do you agree that education authorities should be required to prepare new Strategies for Parental Involvement (SPIs)?**

Agree.

#### **Question 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?**

Agree. Incorporation of parental involvement strategies in the existing education authority Annual Statement of Improvement Objectives and individual school development plans as set out in the Standards in Scotland's Schools Act 2000 is entirely appropriate.

**Question 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?**

There is undoubtedly a clear need for reform of certain aspects of school boards. Nevertheless, over the last 15 years, boards have developed into invaluable consultative forums for parents, head teachers, education authorities and the Scottish Executive itself. Therefore, if boards are to be replaced by parent forums, it is important that the new forums maintain a similarly strong, consultative role.

While acknowledging that there are potentially positive benefits in allowing some flexibility and local decision-making in the creation of the parent forums, it may be unhelpful to allow an infinite variety of models. Accordingly, the number of models presented to parents for consideration by authorities could be limited.

It is possible that none of the proposed models would be suitable for a parent body but it is likely that this would only occur in the most exceptional of circumstances.

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

Agree in principle. However, as in 4 above, it would be appropriate to limit the options available. It is likely, for example, that some parents will choose to retain an election process and therefore that option should be retained.

Clearly, the issue of appointment to the new forums cannot be properly considered without reference to their size and composition. Any local decisions on appointments should therefore be within an agreed national or authority framework.

**Question 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?**

Agree. This proposed new duty would simply replace the similar existing duty to promote the establishment of school boards and to support their operation.

**Question 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?**

It is very unlikely that there would be any significant parental interest in such composite forums unless schools were amalgamating. In that instance, it would seem appropriate to replicate the model of the interim school board with two or more parent forums coming together to discuss business related to the new school. Additionally, it should be noted that school boards already have the potential to meet on an area or cluster basis. There is no reason why parent forums could not do the same.

**Question 8: Do you agree with the proposal for the involvement of education authorities to get the initial parent forum off the ground? If not, what alternative would you suggest?**

Agree.

**Question 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?**

A significant part of the parent forum's procedures would be determined by standing orders. These standing orders would almost certainly be based on, if not identical to, an exemplar model provided by the local authority. However, the devolution of all aspects of the constitution to a forum is a different matter. Unless there was clear guidance as to certain minimum requirements of a constitution there would undoubtedly be potential for serious internal problems over time, particularly concerning individual interpretation of the constitution.

Clearly, the size of a parent forum will impact on its effectiveness. A single parent forum would not be representative of the parent body and should not be offered as an option. At the same time, there should be a maximum size to the forum to ensure that business can be conducted efficiently. Presently, for example, the maximum number of members of a school board is thirteen and that is in the largest schools. Many forums will want to agree quorums for meetings but if the membership of a forum is too big the quorum may be very difficult to achieve.

The parent forums will be statutory bodies therefore there should be a legal requirement to elect a chairperson and vice-chairperson. There should also be a requirement to maintain minutes of meetings.

As it is proposed that the forums will have financial powers, similar restrictions on membership as are presently in place for school boards should be applied. This would lead to the disqualification of certain individuals by virtue of sequestration, bankruptcy, or criminal conviction.

It is helpful that the Executive is aware of the need to issue parent forums with specific guidance on the discussion of matters of a personal nature relating to a named individual. Such a discussion is inappropriate for school boards unless it relates to the appointments process and it should be equally inappropriate for the proposed forums.

Parents will undoubtedly welcome the opportunity to define the name of their forum, as there are likely to be some who will wish to retain the title 'school board'.

**Question 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?**

One of the most valuable aspects of the school boards has been the breadth of their composition. This representation from the parent body, the school, the community (including the Roman Catholic Church in denominational schools) and even in some cases the pupils has been a visible reminder of the school's partnership aims. It would be appropriate to ensure that a similarly inclusive structure is put forward as one of the proposed forums models for parents to consider.

Parents are presently in the majority on School Boards and it would seem entirely appropriate for parents to retain this majority on parent forums.

**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?**

Perhaps rather than focusing on the parent forum as the main avenue for consultation with foster parents and carers, it may be more appropriate to encourage a specific forum for these groups on an authority wide basis.

**Question 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?**

Disclosure checks should only be required by those engaged in activities defined under the Protection of Children (Scotland) Act 2003. Mandatory checks might simply put up additional barrier to parental involvement. The nature and purpose of each individual forum will determine whether or not Disclosure checks are required.

**Question 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 by invitation or do you believe the headteacher should have the right to attend, with the councillor or other individual by invitation?**

A parent forum should be discussing issues, which are of interest to the local school community or to parents generally. School Boards are open to the public and the minutes of board meetings are a matter of public record. This level of public accountability should be maintained for the proposed parent forums.

The significant input of head teachers to school board meetings should not be underestimated. Much of the focus of existing board meetings is a direct result of the head teacher's input. Presently, the head teacher is principal adviser to the school board but is not actually required under the terms of the School Boards (Scotland) Act 1988 to attend meetings. Nevertheless, the great majority of head teachers choose to attend almost all board meetings. It would therefore be appropriate to allow for a similar provision for parent forums.

For the purposes of good partnership working, local councillors, education authority representatives and the head teacher should have the right to attend and speak at parent forum meetings.

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

The proposed functions are generally appropriate and mirror similar functions in school board legislation. However, some of these 'functions' are merely aspirational aims e.g. those listed in section 7(1)(a), (b) and (c). The general failure of school boards to achieve similar 'functions' appears to have been one of the main reasons for suggesting they be abolished. If we wish to avoid another failure by parents' groups to deliver such worthy aims then SEED should clearly outline how they think they could be best achieved.

It is appropriate that the parent forum is consulted on the school development plan each year. Therefore, in the Standards in Scotland's Schools Act 2000 section 6(2)(a) the words "School Board" should be replaced by the words "Parent Forum".

It is to be welcomed that forums, unlike boards, will not have the right to approve part of the school budget, control use of the school premises out-of-hours or to fix occasional holidays. These functions served no useful purpose and apart from budget approval were seldom exercised.

**Question 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?**

The forum should not discuss or investigate any complaints from parents about the school, the head teacher or the staff. As with boards, forum members should always direct parents to the head teacher in the first instance.

**Question 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?**

Yes. Like school boards any proposed parent forums should be designated 'agents' of the authority.

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

Yes. The proposed obligations reflect the requirements presently placed on education authorities in their relationships to school boards. However, it should be noted that the obligation which suggests 'that the head teacher and staff are available to give advice and information to the parent forum' would be guaranteed if the head teacher had a formal role as adviser to the board and staff members were able to join the forum. (See response to Question 13 above).

**Question 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?**

Yes, assuming the level of support is roughly equal to that already provided to school boards.

**Question 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?**

Agree.

**Question 20: Do you agree that education authorities should be enabled to replace the current system of appointing head teachers and deputy head teachers with more modern, flexible processes and procedures?**

Agree. The retention of parental involvement in the appointment process is welcomed.

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

N/A

**Question 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?**

Agree. North Lanarkshire already has a well-established and well-publicised complaints and enquiries procedure for parents.