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Plaskowski K (Karen)

From: lorraine.speed@falkirk.gov.uk
Sent: 07 June 2005 15:10
To: Parental Involvement Bill
Subject: 687 Falkirk Council's Response



Attachment

Falkirk

Information. (555 B...response.doc (73 KB)

This email has been received from an external party and
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Please find attached Falkirk Council's response. Diane Cherry Communications Officer Education Services
McLaren House Polmont Falkirk FK2 0NZ
Tel: 01324 506602
Fax: 01324 506601
E-Mail: Diane.Cherry@falkirk.gov.uk

Parental Involvement Bill Consultation Response

Q1. Do you agree with the placing of a new duty on education authorities to promote parental involvement?

Yes.

Support for parental involvement in education provided to children in schools is currently in place and this will continue to be a high priority for Falkirk Council. This is done through various channels as currently set down in the Communication and Consultation Strategy and Parental Participation in Schools Policy as well as through School Boards.

However, the Bill should make clear exactly what is meant by the new duty applying to 'not only in the education provided in schools but also in education in a broader sense'. As an education authority we are able to support parental involvement within schools. We need to be equally clear in relation to any other responsibilities. Expressions such as 'in a broader sense' are not sufficiently explicit.

Q2. Do you agree that education authorities should be required to prepare new Strategies for Parental Involvement (SPIs)?

Yes.

The preparation of an agreed SPI which parents and parent forums, among others, are consulted on key issues is wholly appropriate and good practice.

Q3. 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?

Yes.

Partnership working with parents, and representative parents' groups, is already well established in Falkirk Council and is already inherent in our annual planning processes.

Q4. Do you agree that the current system of parental representation, i.e. School Boards should be replaced by a more flexible system of parent forum, as decided locally by parents, in a way which suits them and their school best?

Current School Board legislation is in need of change to make Boards more open and flexible and to encourage greater involvement by all parents. Certain aspects of the current legislation, such as the formal, off-putting election process and the 'one size fits all' rule which necessitates Boards to have a fixed number of staff, parents and co-opted members to create a quorum, are inflexible and uninviting to many parents. It is important that whatever structure is set up seeks to communicate with all parents within the school.

However, the decision to repeal the current Act entirely, thereby abolishing School Boards and replacing them with a new body has been construed by some parents as sending out the wrong message. Comments received from our own School Boards to date indicate that some Boards may feel that their services are being dispensed with. This is an unfortunate consequence, given the amount of hard work they have carried out in the past. The onus for deciding the arrangements for these new bodies to be placed on parents within each school also introduces an element of uncertainty. There is a danger that some Board members may choose to discontinue their work on School Boards rather than see through the process of such a radical change.

Many existing Boards have stated that they would like help in shaping their new parent forum. They have also shown some anxiety that they may be asked to make decisions on the form of their new forum without the help of some 'model' structures to pick and choose from. It is important that, at least initially, there is further guidance issued on the 'model' structures that are possible, even if the forum then decides to make changes locally to fit their school best.

Q5. 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?

Yes.

Existing elections are administratively cumbersome, overly formal and off putting to some parents and therefore Boards are not as open to all parents as they could be; for example, the requirement to produce a written election statement creates difficulties for parents who are unable to produce one for whatever reason or may have language difficulties such as English being a second language.

However, it would be helpful if a list of possible election methods could be produced and given to the new parent forum to enable the members to make a choice from the various possibilities of electing parents that best suits their school – e.g. by invitation, by simple ballot, by drawing lots if the spaces available are over subscribed, or, if the constitution is so worded, it may be that all volunteers will be accepted. It is important to give further guidance on this.

Q6. 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?

Yes.

The authority should have a duty to promote the establishment of a parent forum within a school where none exists. The authority currently promotes the establishment of a School Board where none exists by attempting to form one at election time every two years.

If Boards are set up in diverse ways and become less formal, e.g. do not have minutes taken at meetings, it is going to be more difficult to support their operation in the same way as the authority does at present. Currently, minutes are the main method used to keep track of Board members, office bearers, issues being raised and when meetings are taking place to enable authority representatives to attend. It is important that a degree of formality is retained to allow the authority to continue to provide support and keeping minutes of meetings and electing office bearers is especially important.

The education authority should continue to be the first point of contact for advice on procedural, administrative and legislation queries.

Q7. 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?

Yes.

It is anticipated that most schools will want their own forum but this provision will allow a choice to be made.

Q8. 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?

Yes.

Many forums may need guidance on the options available to them in setting up the new forum and assistance with practical issues such as drafting a constitution. This assistance should be provided at the request of the parent body. Possible 'models' should be provided but the final decision should rest with the parents including the decision not to have a parent forum.

Q9. 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?

Yes.

If the form of the parent forums is determined locally as the Bill suggests then the constitution should also be determined locally with some assistance from the authority to provide a 'starter' constitution which could then be modified to suit that individual forum.

It should be noted, however, that the level of individualisation within each forum may be such that it will make it difficult for authorities to give any general advice and support. The diverse names that parents may attach to the legal bodies known as 'parent forums' may add to the confusion of parents already uncertain what group of representatives they should approach.

Q10. 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?

Yes.

In any parent forum, parents should be in the majority and should be able to co-opt non-parent members as they wish. However, it is important that the headteacher, the staff of the school and local members are also represented on the forum as their input is very useful in providing relevant, additional information.

Q11. Do you have a view as to how the needs of looked-after children should be addressed and catered for in the Bill?

The authority parenting role is addressed via the authority's management of the school. The headteacher, as the principal authority representative on the forum, would be acting 'in loco parentis' in these cases.

Q12. 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?

Yes.

Parent forum members should only be checked when engaging in activities defined under the Protection of Children (Scotland) Act 2003.

Q13. 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?

No.

Currently, all parents can attend the Board meetings and speak, if invited to, by the chair. This allows parents to see what is happening in their School Board and avoids it appearing to be shrouded in secrecy. It is important that this openness should be central to the new parents' forum.

The headteacher is currently the principal education advisor to the Board and should continue in this role with regards to the parents' forum. The headteacher can give immediate advice on the authority position and also take some matters forward in the school on behalf of the Board. They should consequently have a right of attendance.

The valued support that elected members and, in the case of denominational schools, religious representatives, currently give to School Boards means that they should also have a right to attend and speak on matters affecting the school and local community.

A representative of the local authority, distinct from the headteacher, should also have the right of attendance at the forum to provide any relevant information and/or to advise the forum on any issue. It is important that if the local authority has a duty to support forums they also have a right to attend the meetings.

Q14. Do you consider these functions appropriate to parent forums? Would you suggest removing or adding any, or making some obligatory and others optional?

While it is appreciated that the new Bill is designed to introduce a freer, less prescriptive approach to parental partnership with the school and education authority thereby allowing more parents to become involved, some guidance is necessary to avoid the possibility of confusion and to clarify how these new roles can be carried out by the new parent forum. The prescriptive nature of the previous legislation meant that Boards were quite clear about what their duties were and they consequently felt more secure in carrying them out.

Finding out the view of parents at the school about quality and standards at the school, how the parent forum is carrying out its functions and any other matters of interest and concern to parents.

This is appropriate as Boards are doing this currently.

Reporting the views of parents at the school to the headteacher, education authority or another party.

This is appropriate, although it must be stressed that any parents can approach the headteacher or authority at any time without having to go through the parent forum.

Making representations to the headteacher and education authority about their arrangements for promoting parental involvement in their own children's education and more generally.

This is appropriate. It means that the parent forum will keep headteachers and the authority informed about their activities which promote parental involvement.

Reporting to parents on its own activities annually.

This is appropriate and is a continuation of current practice. To ensure authorities are advised of any issues the parent forum is communicating with parents, it would be helpful if copies of any reports to parents etc. from the parent forum are also sent to the education authority.

To seek to raise quality and standards in the school.

This is appropriate. Raising standards in schools is clearly an issue in which every parent will have a genuine interest. However, it would be helpful if more guidance could be given to parents' forums on how they might become meaningfully involved in this area.

To support those managing the school in developing the personality, talents and mental and physical abilities of each child to their fullest potential.

This is appropriate. However, as these issues are seldom straightforward, it would be helpful if more guidance could be given to parents' forums on how they might become meaningfully involved in this area.

Promoting contact between the school, current and prospective parents, the local community and other individuals or groups.

This is appropriate and is an extension of what Boards do currently.

Amending its constitution.

This is an appropriate option for the parent forum. There must be a requirement for a parent forum to provide a copy of its current constitution to the authority to enable the authority to provide any support required.

Q15. 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?

Whilst we are generally supportive of the principle of freedom of discussion, we feel that this freedom should be restricted in certain instances. The parent forum should be allowed to raise concerns about any issues regarding the fabric of the school, any school or authority policies under discussion or any other general whole school issues. They should not be allowed to raise any issues relating to, or be involved in discussing, any individual staff member, pupil or parent in such an open forum.

Q16. 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, parent forums should be designated ‘agents’ of the education authority.

There would need to be further investigation to ensure that appropriate insurance cover is maintained at all times.

Q17. Are these the appropriate obligations to place on education authorities in relation to their working with parent forums?

Yes. See individual sections below.

Comply with any reasonable request for information from a parent forum (which would also be expected to comply with similar requests from the education authority or headteacher)

This is appropriate. This duty is enshrined in the Freedom of Information Act so the procedures are already in place.

Ensure that the headteacher and staff are available to give advice and information to the parent forum on what is being done to promote parental involvement in education in the school

This duty should not simply say that staff should be ‘available’. The headteacher in particular, and school staff in general, should be given statutory rights to attend meetings or be members of the parent forum. If the local authority has a duty to support the parent forum, the authority should also have a right to attend the meetings.

Make available a reasonable level of funding for the parent forum to meet expenses for administration, training and other activities, and have the option of offering services or accommodation

This is appropriate and reasonable as funding is presently provided.

Inform the parent forum about the school’s arrangements for consultation between parents and teachers

This is appropriate and reflects current practice.

Ensure that parent forums receive replies to any representations made to the authority or headteacher

This is appropriate. Procedures are currently in place to ensure that this happens within a reasonable timescale

Q18. 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.

It is appropriate that education authorities should continue to provide a level of financial support and support in kind to parent forums in the same manner as has been the case for School Boards.

However, to ensure that the authority can be confident that any funds are used appropriately a treasurer to the forum would need to be appointed and accounts submitted annually to be audited by the authority.

Q19. 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?

Yes.

This reflects current practice. Also, parents can request personal information about their child under their rights enshrined in the Data Protection Act.

Q20. Do you agree that education authorities should be enabled to replace the current system of appointing Headteachers and deputy Headteachers with more modern, flexible processes and procedures?

Yes.

The School Boards Act is very prescriptive and inflexible in this area. Some flexibility is welcome in the forum involvement in the appointment process. It is essential that the principle of forum involvement should be retained in some manner.

Q21. 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.

Not applicable. The principle of parental involvement should be retained.

Q22. 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?

No.

There is an existing complaints procedure in place within Falkirk Council designed to accommodate all formal complaints. To introduce a separate procedure for complaints under this Bill will introduce confusion and an additional administrative burden.