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From: Scottish Methodist [scottishmethodist@scottishchurcheshouse.org]
Sent: 06 June 2005 17:51
To: Parental Involvement Bill
Cc: Bill Reid
Subject: 691

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To: THE SCOTTISH EXECUTIVE EDUCATION DEPARTMENT

Thank you for the opportunity to respond to the draft bill to improve parental involvement in Scottish Schools. While the Methodist Church broadly supports your objectives it has serious reservations over the detail of the proposed bill, especially the disestablishment of school boards before adequate provision is in place to replace them where they already function effectively. These reservations and further comments are set out in the attached response, which answers the questions you set out in the consultation.

You will see from our response that key aspects we feel need further attention include:

1. A transition strategy that would include allowing for the retention of School Boards where they are still seen to be the most effective means of involving parents.
2. While it may be attractive and potentially useful to introduce a more flexible system for parental involvement the good features of School Boards should be retained. There will always be a need for structured relationships between parents, head teachers, other staff, the local education authority and representatives of the wider local community. The parental forums described in this proposed legislation would introduce a free for all approach which is highly likely to be much less effective than the current provisions through school board legislation. There must at least be firm guidelines setting out a structure within which effective communication can take place.
3. The proposed legislation would allow local education authorities to interpret their responsibilities as they see fit. The responsibility of each and every local education authority should be made clear in the legislation and should not be allowed to become the way for the education authority to save money. The legislation as framed has the potential for education authorities to not only disengage with local communities as a whole but break down lines of communications between all interested parties, including parents, to the detriment of schools overall.
4. A particular concern of the Methodist Church would be if the legislation further isolated local churches from the schools in their communities. This contact at present is often maintained through school boards.

Overall, we believe the legislation proposed would benefit from a thorough re-examination to ensure that what takes the place of school boards and parent teacher associations provides better rather worse parental involvement in the education of our children.

William Reid

Dr W M Reid
Connexional liaison Officer
The Methodist Church in Scotland

PLEASE NOTE: THE ABOVE MESSAGE WAS RECEIVED FROM THE INTERNET.

23/06/2005

**PROMOTING PARENTAL INVOLVEMENT IN SCHOOLS –
METHODIST CHURCH IN SCOTLAND’S RESPONSE TO COSULTATION**

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

In what way can this be construed as a new duty? Is it not already an explicit duty of education authorities? It was already in the legislation setting up School Boards – the School Boards (Scotland) Act 1988. It was also implicitly spelt out in the Standards in Scotland’s Schools Act 2000 by obliging education authorities to include in their Annual Statements of Improvement Objectives an account of the way in which they seek to involve parents in promoting the education both within and out with schools. It seems slightly obtuse that while explicitly making it a legal obligation the nature of the obligation seems to have been opened so wide that almost any situation pertaining to a “Parent Forum” would seem to be acceptable under the new legislation. While the current legislation and its implementation can undoubtedly be improved, to abolish School Boards before adequate provision is in place to replace them seems somewhat counter productive and a possible step backwards, which in some Schools might be a difficult situation to recover. A clear transitioning improvement strategy is surely required, which is seen to build on what is good from previous arrangements and moving forward rather starting all over again.

The proposed bill is set to promote parental involvement in school education what about the stated objective of involving parents in their children’s education in the wider sense – how is this to be carried forward? Would parent’s forums have a wider remit than education within Scottish Schools?

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

Again this question seems to imply that education authorities do not already have a strategy for parental involvement and that that both School Boards and Parent Teaching Associations do not exist. In terms of the timeline for implementation it seems some what “chicken and egg” that while education authorities must seek the views of “any parent forum” established (before there is a strategy in place to create these) it seems to have no obligation to consult with School Boards or PTAs some of which will be scrapped before the education authorities formulate their “new” strategy. Some thought should be given on how to take into account the views of School Boards and PTAs and effecting a smooth transition from existing arrangements towards what will replace them.

Q3. Do you agree that incorporating these strategies in existing Annual Statements of Education Improvement Objectives (ASoEIOs) and School Development Plans (SDPs) (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?

While the strategies once fully formed should at least be referenced in the ASoEIOs and SDPs this is surely not the vehicle for setting out the education authorities intentions for parental involvement. The strategies should be formulated through a process of consultation before being incorporated perhaps as an annex to ASoEIOs and SDPs.

Q4. Do you agree that the current system of parental representation, ie 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?

No, unless a far clearer definition of what constitutes “ a parent forum” is first established. While a more flexible approach might be seen at first as parent-friendly it will not necessarily encourage the involvement of a wider range and number of parents nor an improvement in the quality of that involvement in the education of all the children in a school. As they are defined “parent forums” can be almost anything: from one parent to the whole parent body; from groups functioning along the lines of a School Board to a completely unstructured, unregulated and possible unrepresentative talking shop. It will be difficult for education authorities to know how to react to and support each of these multifarious models of “forum”. There must also be more thought given to modes of communication between education authorities, the schools, teachers/staff, parents, pupils and the wider community. To an extent School Boards help bring this communication together under existing relationships. However, the proposed legislation focuses solely on parents. How is it proposed that these lines of communications with the wider education community are maintained and improved. It will not be progress if parent bodies are compartmentalised and the education authorities’ relationship with the parent forums becomes a means of fulfilling a statutory obligation rather than the wider communications and dialogue that should be undertaken.

Q5. The Bill does not prescribe the means of appointing to the new forums (elections to Boards are mandatory) but provides for parents to decide this locally. Do you agree?

No. While there can be scope for some flexibility there must be a mechanism whereby, even if formal parent representation is not essential, the representativeness of the forums are assured. If it is left to be decided locally how this is to be achieved it is likely the forum under what ever model will become a confusing mess liable to swing from one individual hobby horse to another individual hobby horse. For the sake of continuity and good order there is a need for a degree of structure in the approach followed.

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?

Only where these forums are better defined than under the proposed legislation and where the level of support to be provided clearly set out and properly resourced. This should not become or be seen to become a cost cutting exercise for education authorities.

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, but not necessarily just as an alternative to forums within individual schools. Much could be achieved by periodically (once or twice a year for example) organising composite/area/cluster forums so that parents from schools, with or without their own parents forum, in a geographic area might share experiences, learn from good practice, be informed by the education authority and perhaps even learn to work better together for the improvement of their children's education.

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, how else might the parent forums get off the ground especially in schools where School Boards have in the past been unsuccessful, which must after all be a specific high priority target if parental involvement is to be significantly improved overall. There must also be an obligation to continue to support and foster the parent forums in the long term with at least as much resource as was provided to School Boards. The education authorities must also ensure that effective lines of communications with other interested parties are established from the outset. Education authorities must retain responsibility to ensure parents' forums once set up do not "come off the rails" by veering away from their principle and properly constituted objectives.

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?

While it is appropriate to leave the fine tuning of the constitution to be determined locally surely these should be based on education authority templates which in turn should be based on Scottish Executive guidelines. If this is not the case then there is likely to be an unmanageable hotch-potch of relationships evolved, wastage in resource and an unfair sharing of resources between differing forum operating in what could be dramatically different ways. For example should there not be some mandatory, some optional and some locally determined functions defined for each forum. Budgeted resourcing needs to be based on some basis of equity.

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?

By its nature parents should always be in the majority on a “parents’ forum”. However, in addition to co-opted individuals who could bring specific perspectives and skills from the wider community it would seem counter productive to miss this opportunity to use the forum to interface with head-teachers, possibly other staff, the education authority and local councillors. While they may not be considered to be members of the forum these other interested parties should have both a duty and expectation to be represented.

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 parents’ forum should be open to guardians/carers for looked-after children. The local council should have a duty to ensure the interests of looked-after children should always be taken into consideration.

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?

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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 individuals by invitation?

No. There is need for clarity in the relationship between the head teacher and the parent body. This should be more clearly outlined in the legislation. Using the term “rights of attendance” sounds somewhat provocative and could be viewed as confrontational. Surely an approach whereby the head teacher, local councillor and other specific key representatives of the community could expect to be an integral part and encouraged to take an active part in the forum or be represented would be far more productive, how else are sound healthy relationships to be developed. Any constitution should be written in a way that ensures these key figures are engaged by the forum with the option for the parents being able to ask them to leave on the rare occasion that their presence is likely to inhibit productive discussions or lead to embarrassment.

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

The examples set out of the functions and financial powers of a parent forum (sections 7 and 8) highlight the folly of creating a compartmentalised forum for parents without some thought being given to the lines of communications with education authorities, local councillors, head teachers, teachers/staff, pupils and the wider community. While the parent forum can gather the views of parents on matters of interest these will be useless unless they can be communicated effectively to the other parties involved in the education of their children and the place of the schools in the wider community. Parents cannot raise quality and standards in schools on their own nor support those managing the school without these formal lines of communications.

Q15. The Bill has been drafted to allow the parent forum to find out and report the views of parents in the school on 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?

An open-ended provision for seeking parents views is appropriate but the wording of the question should be clear that it is only on those issues of interest or concern to the parents as a whole (ie discerned through the forum or by other means) rather than concerns of a single or possibly unrepresentative few parents.

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?

There are clear advantages for any such forum being covered by education authority insurance but the practical aspects of this could be a legal minefield unless the scope and purposes of “parent forums” are not more clearly set out. It would seem inappropriate and impractical to define many of the wide range of possible models as agents of the education authority (eg those focussing on fund raising and others specifically choosing to act as a pressure group especially when this is aimed at other agents of the education authority). Again more clearly defining the scope of parent forums should help to clarify the requirement for insurance. It may be that either education authority insurance policies will need to be broadened or a scheme to specifically insure parent forums introduced.

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

and

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?

The obligations set out are overly self restricting but also not well enough defined. For example, overly self restrictive by restricting the availability of head teacher and staff to give advice on “what is being done to promote parental involvement in education” what about wider issues relating to other issues in the schools (ie can advice on the activities in the school not directly related to this legislation be sought). Not well defined by restricting the definition of funding to “a reasonable level to meet expenses” without some effort to better scope what specifically might or might not be funded and how. For example how much secretarial support, administrative expenses, training and other activities would be reasonable? Would the funding be channelled through each school or would the “parent forum” be expected to run their own financial affairs or would some other arrangement be put in place? Left to the discretion of education authorities the level of support is likely not to be very consistent across the country. The education authorities should be obliged to fund the level of support to at least that support provided to School Boards otherwise rather than being seen to be an “improvement in parental involvement” it is likely to be seen as a cost cutting exercise.

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?

Is this not already an inherent obligation on education authorities? By spelling it out in the Bill one possible outcome is that a few very proactive parents might use up a lot of resource in addressing their particular children’s issues that more rightly should be shared out among all children. Safeguards must be built in preventing a few unscrupulous parents high-jacking such a provision.

Q20. 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?

While a review of current procedures seems overdue and a degree of more flexibility built in leaving the appointment procedures of senior staff to be at the discretion of individual education authorities does not seem sensible. Surely, if the procedures are to be modernised and improved there should be either legislation or firm guidelines from central government to encourage a best practice approach and to minimise accusations of impropriety. It is also difficult to envisage how parents’ views will be taken into account or how they might influence appointments without being more specific on what mechanisms/procedures are to be used.

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 appointment processes, please give your reasons.

Parental involvement is essential if the appointments of head teachers are not to be seen to be simply at the whim of the education authority. The difficulty with the proposed legislation is discerning what that involvement might be.

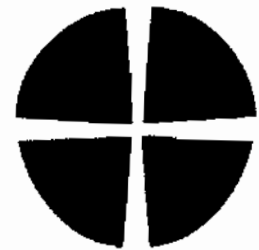
Q22. Do you agree with the proposal to require education authorities to establish complaints procedures in relation to the way they exercise their functions under the Bill?

Yes, but why restrict the scope to the way the education authority exercise their functions under the Bill? Also the proposed legislation does not just apply to parents but anybody the authority feels may have an interest. Would this not have been the opportunity to spell what the procedure should be for parents complaining about wider issues beyond the restricted immediate scope of "parental involvement in schools".

DR W M REID
Connexional Liaison Officer
The Methodist Church in Scotland
Scottish Churches House
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DUNBLANE
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**THE METHODIST CHURCH,
CONNEXIONAL LIAISON OFFICER
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EDUCATION

6 June 2005

Parental Involvement Bill Consultation
Scottish Executive Education Department
Schools Division
Area 2-B North
Victoria Quay
Edinburgh
EH6 6QQ

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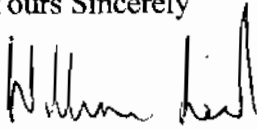
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Yours Sincerely



W M REID

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Parental involvement is essential if the appointments of head teachers are not to be seen to be simply at the whim of the education authority. The difficulty with the proposed legislation is discerning what that involvement might be.

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?

Yes, but why restrict the scope to the way the education authority exercise their functions under the Bill? Also the proposed legislation does not just apply to parents but anybody the authority feels may have an interest. Would this not have been the opportunity to spell what the procedure should be for parents complaining about wider issues beyond the restricted immediate scope of "parental involvement in schools".



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