

802

Piaskowski K (Karen)

From: Alyson Cameron
Sent: 06 June 2005 23:19
To: Parental Involvement Bill
Subject: 802

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I attach my response to the proposals for parental involvement in schools.

ALYSON CAMERON

Responding as an individual. My name and response can be made available but not my address. I am happy
yo be contacted further by the SE.

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OBSERVATIONS IN RESPONSE TO SCOTTISH EXECUTIVE CONSULTATION ON “MAKING A DIFFERENCE”

1. The basic intention behind this consultation and the draft Bill – promoting parental involvement in the education of their children and the schools they attend – is admirable. The current arrangement centred on School Boards does not work. However the Scottish Executive proposals are fatally flawed.

Weaknesses of current system

2. The current school Board system contains many weaknesses. The most significant is the lack of clarity over the role of the board and the rules of operation. For example, the legislation sets out the high level responsibilities of Boards such as their role in Head Teacher selection and on the school budget. However it is not at all clear what is its role on more routine matters. For example it is possible for a Head Teacher to dismiss suggestions on routine issues as “not a School Board matter”. Currently there are no guidelines on such matters and advice from local authorities to resolve such issues is often less than helpful.

3. Secondly it is not at all clear what rights ordinary parent representatives have to raise particular issues. The existing arrangements lodge substantial powers in the Chair of the Board who, because there are so few guidelines, can run the Board as they wish.

4. The Consultation document also notes that few parents participate in formal activities such as membership of School Boards. When even the largest schools of over 1500 pupils have only 7 parent members on the Board and these parents are elected for 4 years, this is hardly surprising.

Pre-requisites of any alternative system

5. Any new system needs to address these deficiencies. New arrangements need to set out clearly what can be discussed in parent forums and I accept that the paper makes some progress here although there needs to be a statutory requirement to consider the School Development Plan. This is the best opportunity for parents to be involved in determining the future direction and priorities of their school. Secondly, there need to be clear rules on how the new arrangements operate. It is here that the Executive’s proposals are weakest. It appears to assume that parents are a homogeneous group who can work together to achieve decisions under rules they have agreed themselves. This is naïve. There is simply no reason to believe that school board politics are any less driven by ideological dispute, petty politics and a desire for power than the politics of Holyrood or Westminster. Parents must therefore operate within clear sets of rules set out by the Executive.

Weaknesses of the Executive’s Proposed Approach

6. The Executive propose to ask parents to set up not only their preferred mode of forum but to work up its rules. This is doomed to disaster. Those with sufficient

interest in participation may be prepared to devote their time to developing constitutions, electoral mechanisms etc even at the expense of consideration of substantive matters. The vast majority will simply be turned off by such debate and vote with their feet. As a result the Executive will not achieve its aim of increasing the level of parental involvement. The proposals also place local authorities in an impossible situation. The paper gives the impression the Executive cannot think of a suitable model for parental involvement and have just pushed the problem on to local authorities. At present the local authority supervises the operations of a relatively homogeneous set of school boards. In future there will be greater variety in the types of involvement undertaken by parents with different electoral arrangements for committees etc. If local authorities are, for example, to supervise the elections of forum committees and each school has different election arrangements there will be a massive increase in bureaucracy to questionable benefit. It seems to me likely that, to avoid this, an authority will pick its own model for a 'forum' and put this forward to all schools.

7. The approach adopted towards community representatives is welcome. It is essential that such people are excluded. Why should someone with no school connection and who is unelected have the same rights as parent members? Similarly, teachers have no place on a parent board. The current arrangements under which community representatives who may never enter the school other than for Board meetings and the teacher's representative can ally with one parent representative to defeat the majority of parent representatives is an affront to the principles of parental involvement. It is however vital that local councillors are invited to meetings of parent forums.

8. The Executive's proposals to continue parental involvement in head teacher etc appointments are wrong. There is no reason to suppose that parents have any expertise in appointment processes and no evidence that they bring anything to the process. It is not right that the careers of professional teachers should be affected by amateurs in this way.

Conclusions

9. The Executive's aim of encouraging parents to get involved in the operation of schools is admirable as is the idea of giving them greater power. In that sense the delegation proposed in the Bill is desirable. However it is not clear to me what the Executive actually wants parent forums to do. 'Parental involvement' sounds good but what does it mean? What areas of school life will be appropriate for a forum to consider? Furthermore, no thought seems to be given to how the headteacher and the education authorities will interact with a forum. Will they have to listen? The Consultation document talks about the forum making representations but it says nothing about how the authorities will respond to these.

10. The Executive must set out clearly the system it wants, formulate constitutions, put forward clear guidance on the role of a forum then implement it. It cannot pass the buck. The Bill does not do this and as a result the Executive has failed to give the necessary leadership in these matters.

Scottish Executive Questions

1. Agree
2. Agree
3. Agree, but these must be competent business for parents forums
4. No, "flexible" system is recipe for chaos and conflict at local level.
5. No. I strongly oppose the Executive's proposals here for the reasons given above
6. Agree
7. Agree
1. Agree
2. Strongly disagree for reasons given above
3. Agree on both counts
4. No
5. No
6. Pointless to have meetings without head teacher who should be required to attend and desirable to have councillors.
7. All should be obligatory and should also include School Development Plan
8. Agree but should be an obligation on Forum to report objectively the results of such initiatives.
9. No views on agents issues but role of forums and PTA are different and should be kept apart
10. No. The local authority should be responsible for ensuring that forums operate fairly and give all parents an opportunity to be involved. That means enforcing central rules of operation.
11. Yes.
12. Yes
13. Bill should remove parents from any involvement in these matters
14. See comments in main narrative.
15. Strongly support but local authority needs to do more to supervise smooth working to ensure that a complaints procedure is only used in exceptional cases.

ALYSON CAMERON
Member of Trinity Primary School Board