

# respondee information form

Reference No 991

Please complete the details below and attach it with your response. This will help ensure we handle your response appropriately:

Name: SCOTTISH SCHOOL BOARD ASSOCIATION

Postal Address: NEWALL TERRACE, DUMFRIES, DG1 1LW

Consultation title: **Making the difference – Improving parents' involvement in schools**

**1. Are you responding as:** (please tick one box)

(a) an individual?  (go to 2a/b)

(b) **on behalf of** a group or organisation?  (go to 2c)

**2a. INDIVIDUALS:**

Do you agree to your response being made available to the public (in SE library and/or on SE website)?

Yes (go to 2b below)

No, not at all

**2b. Where confidentiality is not requested,** we will make your response available to the public on the following basis (**please tick one** of the following boxes)

Yes, make my response, name and address all available

Yes, make my response available, but not my name or address

Yes, make my response and name available, but not my address



**2c. ON BEHALF OF GROUPS OR ORGANISATIONS:**

Your name and address as respondees **will be** made available to the public (in the SE library and/or on SE website). Are you content for your response to be made available also?

Yes

No

**3. SHARING RESPONSES/FUTURE ENGAGEMENT**

We will share your response internally with other SE policy teams who may be addressing the issues you discuss. They may wish to contact you again in the future, but we require your permission to do so. Are you content for the SE to contact you again in the future in relation to this consultation response?

Yes

No

(B)

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**Plaskowski K (Karen)**

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**From:** Jennifer Gallacher [ssba@schoolboard-scotland.com]  
**Sent:** 08 June 2005 08:27  
**To:** Reeves CM (Colin); Waterman JF (Judy); Roberts A (Anncris); Plaskowski K (Karen)  
**Subject:** 991 - SSBA Response to Consultation on Scottish Schools (Parental Involvement) Draft Bill

\*\*\*\*\*  
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I attach a copy of SSBA's response to the above Consultation.

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# **SCOTTISH SCHOOL BOARD ASSOCIATION**

**Response to**

**Making the difference – improving parents’  
involvement in schools**

**A consultation on a draft bill**

**June 2005**

# **SSBA response to Consultation on Scottish Schools (Parental Involvement) Draft Bill**

The Scottish School Board Association submits this response on behalf of School Boards and parents in Scotland.

## **1.0 ABOUT SSBA**

1.1 The SSBA was set up by parents in Scotland in 1991. It was founded in response to implementation of the School Boards (Scotland) Act 1988 which provided a legislative framework for the creation of School Boards throughout Scotland. SSBA provides representation at national level for all parents in the Scottish education system and aims to promote and encourage partnerships in education by working closely with educational stakeholders.

1.2 SSBA brings together educationalists, parents, pupils, governments at both local and national level as well as members of local communities to discuss and develop best practice which in turn leads to improved standards in schools. The organisation also provides a national policy forum for parents and other educational stakeholders throughout Scotland. Importantly, SSBA also provides School Board training for parents and teachers throughout the country.

## **2.0 ABOUT THIS RESPONSE**

2.1 The evidence to inform this response has been gathered by our elected local Executive Board members from the following sources:

Attendance at and feedback from:

- meetings arranged by the Civic Forum
- local meetings organised by Education Authorities
- local meetings organised by Executive Board members
- meetings of parents organised by School Boards

Other informal discussion with parents.

Written responses and comments received from parents throughout Scotland.

## **3.0 THE RESPONSE RESULTS**

3.1 As a result of the information gathered throughout this process it is clear that there exists among parents a common consensus. Over 95% of those whose feedback informed this response did not agree with the Scottish Executive intention to repeal the School Boards (Scotland) Act 1988.

3.2 Our respondents were, generally, in favour of some modernisation of School Boards and saw areas where improvement could be made. Overwhelmingly, however, it was felt that these aims could be achieved within the framework of the existing Act. In fact there was widespread support for the original plan outlined by the Scottish Executive whereby the 1988 Act could be 'tweaked' to take account of the fact that the legislation is now 17 years old. Parents felt that 'best practice' in School Boards identified as exemplars in the field should be rolled out across Scotland.

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3.3 It was felt that the proposal to repeal the Act did not give due consideration to all the good work which had been carried out by School Boards since 1988. There was a general feeling that those who had drafted the Bill did not understand how School Boards had evolved since their inception and how they operate today. This was a matter for much regret as it indicated that those responsible for drafting and approving the Bill – officials and politicians – had failed in their duty to understand how, in practice, School Boards now fulfilled their legal obligations.

3.4 It was felt that the draft Bill, in its present form, would not achieve the Minister's aim of improving parental involvement. Many parents feel that it may actually have the opposite effect. It is also felt that the tone of the draft bill may alienate the many parents on Boards who are already involved in school life and who help manage schools in partnership with school staff.

3.5 Parents were also at a loss to understand where the mandate claimed by the Scottish Executive to repeal the 1988 Act had come from. The 'evidence' cited in the consultation document seems to have come from a very small minority of parents and others who seem to have little knowledge of the current operations of School Boards.

3.6 The so-called George Street research quoted in the Scottish Executive consultation paper engaged only about 200 'silent majority' parents from disadvantaged groups. Little cognisance seems to have been taken of the 'silent majority' mainstream parents. The George Street research did not recommend the abolition of School Boards; it merely recommended an overhaul of their structures. Its main recommendation to improve parental involvement was an education and information campaign.

3.7 The assertion that School Boards had not worked because 11% of schools did not have one was a puzzle to parents who stated that a take-up rate of 89% would be seen as a huge success in most other areas. Moreover, the fact that only a small percentage of parents actually sit on School Boards does not imply that only these parents are represented. Most School Boards work very hard to consult with and inform the parent body, and to ensure that they provide a true reflection of opinion of the parents in their school.

#### **4.0 THE CONSULTATION PROCESS**

4.1 Many parents feel that the consultation process has been badly handled. The SSBA received many complaints from School Boards that they had been unable to obtain a copy of the consultation document from their school. Some of the documents were late in arriving in schools; others seem to have lain in schools with the head teacher and the School Board being unaware of their presence.

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4.2 The parents' leaflet which accompanied the consultation document was of very limited use. Some schools did not receive these leaflets at all, with head teachers and School Boards being unaware even that they should have had them. The actual content of the leaflet seems to have been of little help to the parents who did receive them. It gave little information. The main complaint was that it gave no information about the dates of the Civic Forum meetings, merely a telephone number to call for information. Advertising of these meetings was poor, with only a few days advance notice being given.

4.3 Parents who did attend these meetings reported that the Scottish Executive members present were paying little attention to their concerns.

4.4 Many parents were also unhappy with the form of questions contained in the consultation document, complaining that they contained leading statements. Many of the questions about 'new' duties for Education Authorities seemed to indicate a lack of knowledge that these 'duties' were already being carried out by Education Authorities.

4.5 The vagueness of the Scottish Executive proposals was of serious concern to many parents. With its attempt at flexibility, the draft Bill in its present form will actually result in less parental representation. We do not know how appointment procedures will work. We don't know how a Forum will regulate its business. We are unsure as to what information Forums may or may not request from the Education Authority. In short, there is no clarification of parents' rights.

4.6 Overall, the inefficient character of the consultation process and the ill-defined nature of the draft Bill remain matters for major concern among those parents who wish to be involved in the education process.

## **5.0 SUGGESTED AMENDMENTS**

It is evident that our respondents would prefer that there was no repeal of the 1988 Bill and suggest that modernisation could be achieved with the 'tweak' already intimated in meetings with the Executive. However, as parents are only one of the groups being consulted on this new Bill, we feel obliged to suggest amendments, which we feel would ensure parent's rights of representation, and also meet the aims stated within the consultation.

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### 5.1 Election Process

Every parent should be an automatic member of the Forum, with the core committee being elected at an open meeting properly called for the purpose. This core committee can be elected as decided by those present at the meeting; for example by a simple show of hands or by a secret ballot.

The core committee will consist of parents in the majority. Members will hold office for two years, with half of the committee standing down each year to allow new members to stand. Members will, of course, be able to stand for re-election after the 2-year period. The section re sub-committees (from 1988 Act) should be re-enforced.

### 5.2 Composition of Forums

A major strength of the current School Board system is the partnership working scenario with a range of educational stakeholders working in tandem. To achieve the best for the school, parents need to engage with the head teacher, teachers and community members. All groups are more effective when relationships have been built on trust. We do not believe that the draft Bill offers this. It is crucially important that the head teacher is retained as an advisor to the Forum. Parents should always be in the majority, but the present School Board system ensures a balanced view and is beneficial to all. Teachers, working at the front line, are an integral part of the process. So too are local councillors, co-opted members and pupils. The proposed new arrangements are a retrograde step, which will lead to less, not more, meaningful involvement for parents in schools. As we have indicated throughout the consultation process, it is our sincere contention that so-called Parental Forums will, in reality, be nothing more than meaningless gatherings if there is no engagement with all stakeholders.

### 5.3 Constitution of Forums

If each Forum is allowed to decide its own constitution and method of operation, a disparate range of structures will emerge. This will prove unworkable both for Forums and for Education Authorities. A common and co-ordinated structure is needed to ensure the support and co-operation of Education Authorities. Some flexibility within the structure could be built in to ensure that we do not have a 'one size fits all' approach. There is great concern that the proposals in the draft Bill are open to the potential development of unrepresentative groups and agendas.

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#### 5.4 Functions of Forums

Rather than an open-ended provision, which would be open to interpretation, it would be advisable to have a legislative means which would ensure that the remit of the Forum is clear to all parties. This legislation should state clearly that Forums must be consulted and engaged on all of the following areas, but not on these exclusively – school budgets, development plan, school policies, curriculum, school discipline, school uniform, improvement objectives, standards and performance. Also that the school and authority must take cognisance of the opinions of the Forum and that all aspects of school life are the business of the Forum except matters of a personal nature concerning staff or pupils at the school.

Other functions and duties would include promoting parental and wider involvement; and communicating with parents, pupils, staff and the wider community.

#### 5.5 National set-up

A system of area forums should be set up at local level. These would ensure effective practice and strengthen parental involvement.

There should also be a National Forum, consisting of members elected by School Forums. This election would ensure proper representation and accountability. This body should be independent. It should represent the interests of parents in the education system whilst working in partnership with other educational stakeholders. It may be advantageous for this body to be regulated by statute and we strongly urge that this idea should be pursued.

There should also be a parent representative on a local authority's education committee.

#### 5.6 Training

It should be mandatory for all authorities to offer training. This training will be particularly important during any transition period.

This training should be financed by the Scottish Executive.

#### 5.7 Communication

A system of e-mailing should be made available to all Forums. This would allow two way contact between each Local Authority and the Authority's member Forums and would give the Minister and the Scottish Executive and others direct contact with Forums across Scotland. This could be facilitated by the National Forum or the proposed Scottish Schools Digital Network.

#### 5.8 Parent Teacher Associations

Although not directly affected by the repeal of the 1988 Act, PTAs will undoubtedly be indirectly affected. Our feedback indicated that members are largely in favour of PTAs remaining as at present. We suggest that PTAs could choose to come under the Forum umbrella or remain as present.

Either way, all activities should be covered under Education Authorities' insurance.

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#### 5.9 Appointment of senior staff

Parents support a revised appointment system. They would wish parental participation in the interview process to continue at an early stage in the proceedings.

#### 6.0 SUGGESTED ADDITIONAL CLAUSES

##### 6.1 Conflict of interest

Section 5A of the School Boards (Scotland) 1988 Act which deals with conflicts of interest among Board members has been deleted from the draft Bill. A clause relating to disclosure of any conflict of interest should be inserted.

##### 6.2 Members not acting in the best interests of the Forum

A clause should be inserted to enable Boards to remove members not acting in the best interest of the Forum.

##### 6.3 Adequate funding

Legislation must make provision for adequate funding of the new parent bodies. The level of funding should be determined on a national basis and not left to the discretion of individual local authorities as is the case currently. Parents believe that a properly funded infrastructure which would encompass an honorarium for a clerk and the proper production of agendas and minutes is essential to the efficient and meaningful operation of the new parent bodies.

#### SUMMARY

It should be made clear that SSBA and the Scottish Executive share a common goal. The Executive consultation paper is entitled "Making the difference – improving parents' involvement in schools." Improving parental involvement in schools should, of course, be a central tenet of all of those responsible for the maintenance of a world-class education system in Scotland.

For the past 14 years SSBA has been committed to the concept of meaningful participation by parents in the education process. The key word here is "meaningful". We have serious concerns that under the proposals outlined in the Scottish Schools (Parental Involvement) Bill – vague and somewhat lacking in detail as they are – parental involvement in Scottish schools will be seriously devalued.

The feedback, which we have received from School Boards, PTAs and individual parents throughout the country, is unequivocal. There is widespread concern that the Scottish Executive proposals as they are currently drafted will do little or nothing to "make the difference" or, indeed, to "improve parents' involvement in schools". The aims are laudable. The intended legislative structure through which these aims are to be achieved is not. It is vital that there should be a clear framework within which to operate. The structure should ensure that there is no room for doubt about the rights and responsibilities of parents, school staff and Local Authorities.

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However, it has become clear, too, that parents would welcome modernisation of the existing framework. The legislation under which School Boards were originally set up is now nearly two decades old. Since implementation of the 1988 Act, the School Board system has evolved beneficially within the confines of the original legislation. Perhaps, though, the time is, indeed, right to look afresh at the present system and to fine-tune where appropriate.

Fine-tuning, however, is not what the Scottish Executive have in mind. Parents are ready and willing to embrace change so long as that change is for the better. Parents appreciate attention being paid to their views and would welcome changes which mirror their views and which lead to continued “meaningful” representation. Strengthening the proposals and clarifying parents’ rights and responsibilities will meet with favour.

Parents are anxious to ensure that the very real strengths of School Boards are retained. The fear is that the new Bill will “throw the baby out with the bath water.” This fear has to be addressed. Parents need to be assured that parental representation is moving forwards and not back. By retaining the good parts of the 1988 Act, adding greater flexibility and recognising current best practice within School Boards we can progress and achieve our joint aim of achieving better parental involvement.

The concept of partnership working which has evolved since the inception of School Boards must be retained within the new Bill. Parents have no desire to meet in isolation from other educational stakeholders. Progression means the continuing engagement with school staff and education authorities in meaningful discussion.

The Minister’s vision of greater and wider parental involvement can be met with the co-operative working of parents, schools and education authorities. Parents will embrace this vision – for it is a vision they share – if they see genuine consultation and a desire and commitment to treat them as true partners in the education process.