

CIRCULATED

ITEM 7

BELFAST EDUCATION AND LIBRARY BOARD

EDUCATION COMMITTEE (SCHOOLS)

THURSDAY 9 JUNE 2005

New Admissions Arrangements for Post-Primary Schools Consultation Document – Officer Response

1 Introduction

- 1.1 The officers of the curriculum advice and support service welcome the opportunity to respond to the consultation on new admissions arrangements for post primary schools. The officers fully agreed that any new arrangements should work for the benefit of all children and should be as simple as possible for parents to use.
- 1.2 The transition of a child from one phase of their education is a time of educational importance and should enhance and consolidate the child's educational pathway. It is the view of the officers that any new arrangements should cater for the holistic development of the child and that all talents should be developed and nurtured.
- 1.3 We do note that in planning for a new educational landscape the development of educational pathways from 0-6, 7-13 and then 14-19 was not transformed into the educational framework. It is our view that the realignment of the school estate into the educational pathways would have the potential to break the current cycle of competition and autonomy.

Principles and Objectives

1 **The Department is seeking your views on whether the principles and objectives outlined provide a sound basis on which to develop new admissions arrangements.**

- The officer group welcomes the opportunity to respond to the consultation on new admissions arrangements.
- The officers welcome the proposed principles and endorse the key principle of placing the interests of the child at the centre of the decision making process. This should imply that there is no bias or indirect discrimination against any group/individuals.
- The transfer arrangements should be based on informed choice but it is not a given right that ‘informed parental choice’ will alone determine a pupil’s post-primary provision. Parents may be disappointed to learn that the expression of their choice will not always result in the securing of a preferred place. To this extent the document contributes to the creation of an unrealistic expectation that parental choice will ultimately prevail.
- The objectives outlined in section 2.3 of the document require further analysis and consideration. The department needs to indicate how the provision of a range of schools will assist ‘educational choice’. The mapping of the landscape indicates that schools will be more collaborative but it is unclear how the information can be used by parents to actually make ‘choices’.
- We do note that parental choice based on informed choice as set out in the pupil profile can be at variance with the choice based on actual or perceived parental perspectives on schools.
- It is our view that the objectives require fuller explanation and review. Preference may be curtailed by school provision in the local area particularly in rural areas.
- There is the danger in the proposals of a new principle that if you exercise “choice” you have to exercise “provision”.
- The officers would encourage further development by the Department of Education in order to provide greater detail on transparency and consistency. For example consistency may need to be qualified; eg from area to area, school to school?

- The exercise of choice should be deferred to 14 when it is educationally more appropriate.

2 The Department is seeking your views on:

(a) whether the pupil profile should be used in the way described in the consultation document; and

(b) whether there are alternative or additional ways in which the pupil profile should be used to help parents decide on future post-primary provision for their child.

- (a)
- It is our view that there should be substantive changes to the recommendations on the pupil profile.
 - We would outline difficulties in defining ‘aptitudes to learning’. Every child has an aptitude for learning, so how can we define a hierarchy which would be educationally stable.
 - The recommendations proposed will put a significant burden on principals and teachers. There would be a genuine concern that educational objectivity could be tempered by fear of litigation and challenging parental opinion.
 - We do note that if the pupil profile is to be used as an objective assessment of a child’s achievements then there may be a challenge to the ‘subjective’ opinions aspect of the document.
 - We also note the significant professional development issues raised in the document. There is an indication that all teachers would need to have training in standardised testing/profiling/use of a range of external tests. This staff development issue should be resourced through the CASS services who have significant experience in working with schools on the effective use of data.
 - The officer group suggest that the department provide a ‘model profile’ in advance, which could be used to illustrate ‘educational pathways’ to parents. Potential education and career pathways could be ‘matched’ to pupil profiles thus providing parents with a range of examples of possible ways forward.
 - We agree that parents should receive information on and have opportunities to visit post-primary schools.
 - Previous experience has illustrated that where the pupil profile is used as part of the transfer process it will be a potential source of challenge, particularly when the views of parent and teacher conflicts. The Department of Education had trialled aspects of

this process before and ‘parental choice’ and ‘advice and information, from the primary school did not bring about the expected fair and equitable decisions anticipated due to a range of factors.

- We recommend that the development of a pupil profile should be set within a process which develops capacity for the right of choice to be made. If the profile is the only document then the process could be manipulated.
- (b)
- The analysis and consultation would have been significantly enhanced by the consultation exercise had it contained examples of profiles.
 - The pupil profile would be enhanced by the inclusion of the opinion of the pupil. If the whole process is predicted on the ‘centrality of the child’ then the ‘voice’ of the child should be expressed in the profile
 - The place of ‘formative assessment’ as the ‘glue’ of the revised curriculum and assessment proposals will necessitate the pupil engaging in setting and achieving personal learning targets. The summation of this process should be catered for in the profile and the profile should not be a process “done” to pupils. The profile should encompass and provide for the opinion and learning of the child.
 - We do note and caution that when the pupil profile encompasses not just objective matters but subjective matters, then there is significant room for third parties to disagree with the manner in which the judgement is exercised and decisions reached.

3 The Department is seeking your views on the information / advice which should be available from the primary school to help parents make informed decisions.

- It is essential in the interests of informed choice that the primary school provides the fullest range of information on each pupil in order to assist the parental decision making process.
- It would be of assistance if a standardised enhanced format is used across all schools.
- The officer group would however indicate that the perspective of many primary teachers may be too confined to primary education and some teachers may not have a sufficient knowledge of the post-primary sector. There is a clear need to have supplementary information available from other sources.

- It would be possible to provide P6/P7 teachers with awareness raising training on the range of post-primary opportunities available to their pupils.
- We are also aware that the proposals will require additional time and resources to allow teachers and principals to complete the necessary administration procedures.
- The officer group would agree that primary principals should continue to offer general advice and guidance to parents and pupils on 'choice'.

4 The Department is seeking your views on:

- (a) the range of information outlined in the Consultation Document to help parents make informed decisions;**
- (b) the role of the post-primary school in advising parents; and**
- (c) whether any other information / support should be provided to parents to assist the decision-making process.**

- (a)
 - We recognise that the range of information on schools has evolved over time and we would welcome a greater emphasis on clear information on the 'school ethos'. This aspect of the proposals requires further additional review.
 - The officers support the use of open days and other opportunities for transferring pupils such as shadowing year 8 pupils.
- (b)
 - The post primary school role in 'providing advice' could be a contentious issue and lead to possible litigation. The process can be inconsistent unless we receive significant guidelines on the extent and range of information expected beyond the current headings outlined in these proposals.
 - The officer group recommend that greater clarity is provided on the access of all parties to the pupil profile.
 - We do again emphasise that the proposals will place a considerable additional pressure on arranging interviews, with teacher substitution and resources being required to accommodate the additional workload.
- (c)
 - A prospectus should include details of 'pathways' available to pupils via academic or vocational routes. The prospectus should also be available via web based information. We do note

that not all parents have the opportunity to avail of on-line/web information.

5 The Department of Education is seeking your views on the information/advice which should be available from the DE/education and library boards to help parents choose the most suitable post-primary schools.

- The officers agree that procedural guidance is important and the current provision of information for parents should be reviewed. We live in a data-rich society and an enhanced data system should be made available to parents.
- The education and library board staff are well positioned to provide objective guidance and information to all parents in order to assist “informed parental choice”. The transfer officers are responsible for admission procedures to primary and pre-school and any subsequent appeal procedures. The Department of Education will have to take account of the diverse procedures operating at the moment.
- The use of a “helpline” for parents and the further development of web-based information will require appropriate additional staffing and resources.
- The officers recommend that the current transfer booklet should be reviewed in light of the strengthened prospectuses and the further development of web-based information. All school-based information should be sourced under standardised guidelines from the Department of Education with the education and library boards providing an overview of the process. The education and library boards would still require admission criteria but the possibility of these being published only electronically should be reviewed. Relevant legislation in this area will require amendment.
- The use of the individual school link officer to inform the system about those schools who are providing particular educational “pathways” through the area of specialised school provision, or where a school makes provision through the inclusion agenda for specific aspects of learning difficulties will be an important element in the information debate. We recommend that the department makes “case study” models available to parents utilising how they can draw down information from all the recommended sources.

6 The department is seeking your views on what information/ advice should be available to assist with choices of educational pathway during post-primary education.

- The officers agree that the fullest range of information and advice should be used as a continuous dialogue between the parent, pupil and school concerning the individual child's learning pathway. More important than the advice however is the actual provision of opportunity to change a child's 'pathway' whether through changing the school or provision across a number of schools. In order to achieve this 'flexibility' schools will have to alter the current 'fixed' and set system of transfer.
- Priority can be given to accommodating a pupils' preference while allowing the pupil to remain on the original school register.
- The officers recognise that to facilitate this process the Department needs to establish complementary educational school networks which facilitates a pupil's entitlement to courses/accreditation provided by a group of schools.
- This concept of 'educational passport' will necessitate additional financial commitment from the Department of Education for all schools.
- The officers agree that education and library board personnel could maintain a register of course provision and could facilitate pupils/schools in devising pathways which incorporate contributions from more than one establishment.
- The officers also wish to indicate that they have a high degree of confidence in the professionalism of teachers to further develop their knowledge and skills in advising pupils/parents on educational pathways. We would also indicate that this area will require further training and professional development opportunities.
- The provision of a more structured and intensive engagement between schools, parents, pupils, education and library boards will require additional time and resources. The Department needs to take account of the additional consultative pressures these new proposals will place on teachers and schools.
- We support in principle the need to improve the availability and expertise of career departments and career officers currently working in schools.

- The officers do note the wording of the final sentence in 3:17 which would imply a guarantee of acceptance at the chosen school irrespective of numbers etc.

7 The Department is seeking your views on the broad timetable for the new admissions process.

- The officers note that the suggested timetable seems appropriate from the logistical viewpoint. We recognise that this will be a significant step change from the current timetable. We do acknowledge that the outcome of the timetable is to enable the ultimate ‘parental’ choice to be as late as possible but within the boundaries of realistic implementation.
- We acknowledge that the timetable set up is to cater for informed choice.
- The officers would recommend that the department provides guidance to schools on a range of induction/familiarisation processes which could inform parental/pupil choice. Such guidance could reference examples of good practice such as;
 - visits from post-primary teachers and year 8 pupils to the primary schools;
 - co-operative planning of work between year 7/year 8 teachers which would coordinate teacher understanding of learning outcomes, teacher expectations and common pedagogy;
 - buddying of year 7 – year 8 pupils.
- The officers agree that all admission timetables must be clearly established and integrated to ensure delivery. It is also essential that resources are made available and appropriate structures are put in place to permit delivery of services.
- We agree that the department should recommend the June date as the deadline for appeals. This would facilitate attendance by both the school and parents and limit the uncertainty for parents.

8 The Department is seeking your views on the types of cases which should be considered as compelling individual circumstances (see paragraphs 4.3 – 4.5)

- The officers agree that the provision for those children with compelling individual circumstances must be entirely consistent with the fundamental principle of ‘informed parental and pupil choice’. It therefore seems unnecessary to produce a definitive list of ‘types’ of cases.

- Since “compelling” individual circumstances will be dealt with via the pupil profile which will extend over the duration of the child’s educational career, is there a necessity to have the intervention of other statutory agencies? Paragraph 4.5 outlines the issue well in that the total education support system for such children will be aware of the child’s compelling circumstances.

9 The Department is seeking your views on whether pupils admitted under compelling individual circumstances should be super-numerary to schools admissions and enrolment numbers (see paragraph 4.6)

- The officer group agree that where compelling individual circumstances arise the pupils should be treated as super-numerate. We would contend that no individual child should be disadvantaged by another child’s compelling individual circumstances. We also recognise that the Department of Education needs to take account of the impact this has on class sizes, particularly practical classes where there is a maximum of 20 pupils, and the possible impact of super-numerary issues on neighbouring schools.
- We recognise that this area is problematic and we note that the procedure and timing of consideration of these cases has not been addressed in the timetable.

10 The Department of Education is seeking your views on whether individual Boards of Governors or a central panel should consider cases of compelling individual circumstances of a central panel. Your views are sought on its size and composition (see paragraph 4.7)

- The officer group would recommend that a central panel should consider cases of compelling individual circumstances. The use of a central panel could eliminate any potential for lack of impartiality and inconsistency.
- The key issue here we feel is the ‘education’ of the child. The educationalist view should be the most important aspect of the decision making with medical, social/legal expertise contributing to the best ‘educational’ decision for the child.
- The officers are conscious that a high degree of expertise is required across a number of disciplines where cases of compelling individual circumstances are being reviewed.

- The membership should consist of representation from the education, legal, medical/social areas with administrative support from the education and library board.
- The officers recommend that the Department of Education considers the creation of a regional pool of panel members which would service all boards with administration provided by the individual board in question.
- We would further recommend that all panel members would undergo common quality assured professional training. We recognise that the panel should take account of the opinion of the individual school principal / Board of Governors in question.

11 The Department is seeking your views on whether pupils with statements of special educational needs should be continued to be admitted as super-numerary.

- The officers would indicate that the role of the education and library board is to recommend a required type of provision rather than a specific school. According to the SENDO legislation all schools are expected to strive towards meeting the requirements of children with special educational needs.
- The officer group would recommend that such pupils remain super-numerary but the approach outlined in 4.10 has merit.
- The officers also wish to bring to the Department's attention, that the admission and inclusion of pupils with statements of special educational needs should not diminish the allocation of resources available to other pupils.
- We recognise that the statementing process has the potential to be regarded as an alternative means of securing a desired placement.

12 The Department is seeking your views on the family focused criteria listed and their inclusion within a menu.

- The officers recognise the dichotomy faced when the Department of Education espouses to all schools a set of principles which enshrines the centrality of the parent/child in the decision making process about educational pathways and then needs to outline an entry/gate-keeping process to the potential schools of choice.
- We agree that any admissions framework should ensure a greater degree of consistency, fairness and transparency.

- The officers acknowledge the need to establish a criteria which focuses on the ‘family education’. We note that this area requires further clarification. The ‘family criteria’ could have implications for ‘single sex schools’. The criteria ‘siblings currently at the school’ only works for the first generation of families. The criteria for ‘only child’ is based on other criteria in 5.9.
- The changing social nature of what constitutes a family means the definition of eldest child is proving increasingly difficult to define as illustrated in recent high court cases. If ‘eldest child’ is to remain as a criteria careful definition would be required, for example, we would wish to ensure that a child is not disadvantaged because an older sibling has a statement. We also note that family connections to the school for example, mother/uncle are not considered yet they have been previously the basis of decision making just as important as parishes 5.9.

13 The Department is seeking your views on the community-based criteria listed, their inclusion within a menu and how they should be defined?

- The officers would recommend that the Department of Education provides further clarity and guidance in this area. The Department would have to ensure that the use of this criterion is robust enough to withstand equality legislation. The difficulty in this area is that unless you include feeder primary schools under a geographical (locality) criteria then this criteria could be used to perpetuate exclusivity.
- We recognise that within Belfast schools an individual school can attract pupils from as many as 30 plus feeder primary schools. The notion of “educational community” requires further careful scrutiny. The development of new housing areas, the migration of population from the city of Belfast, the accessibility issue concerning transportation and the parental work journey are all complex factors in defining “the educational community”. If the issue is “choice” then defining feeder primary school lists under community based criteria will radically alter parents’ perception of “choice”.
- The officer group recognises the importance of the ‘parish’ dimension yet the arguments concerning any restriction to parish criteria are largely the same as those applied to restricting the feeder primary school issue. The national school system may have been parish yet it was confined to elementary schooling. Secondary/grammar education had more order based schools and was not confined to a ‘parish’ description.

- This criterion may be acceptable as all religious and (non religious) communities can subscribe to ‘parish’ boundaries and there are no significant gaps or anomalies e.g. one child having a choice based upon residence in 3 different ‘religious’ parishes.
- We recommend that the Department unifies guidance in these areas before defining criteria. The term ‘community’ school has been loosely interpreted in the past. It is our recommendation that we need to rigorously challenge the ‘community’ school label as currently defined in education provision and have a clarity of definition and role for such schools.

14 The Department is seeking your view on:

- (a) the geographical criteria listed, their inclusion within a menu and the most appropriate means of operating them; and**
- (b) what percentage limit, if any, should be set for places allocated by geographical criteria.**

The officers agree with the proposal that the school is an essential element of local community development. We acknowledge the social, educational and employment benefits that local schools provide in local ‘communities’.

The notion of a ‘child centred catchment’ would better reflect the key principle outlined in 2.2 that “the interests of the child is central”. We fully recognise that if a child wishes to attend a local school then this should be supported and would be particularly desirable in remote and/or rural localities.

The issue of school centred catchments brings with it the issue of postcode omissions and the danger of overlaps.

The officers have concerns that the use of geographical criteria as outlined in section 5:10 may not comply with article 29 (1) of the U.N Convention of the Rights of the Child which states: ‘parties shall respect and ensure the rights set forth in the present convention to each child within their jurisdiction without discrimination of any kind’.

The officers note that percentage limits are difficult to apply and are likely to result in an increase in appeals due to the non-transparent nature of the process.

- 15 The Department is seeking your views on:**
- (a) the tiebreakers, random selection, and proximity from home to school, as a means of admitting pupils down to the last available place;**
 - (b) the most appropriate method of operating random selection and/or measuring proximity; and**
 - (c) whether schools should be free to use different methods of operating random selection or proximity.**
- (a) The officers note that if any system is required it should be consistent across all schools. If there has to be a verifiable random system used, then a computer based random lottery selection process could be used.
 - (b) The Department of Education should set the method of random selection and its terms of operation. In order to ensure accuracy since distance from school can be contentious the ordinance survey service could be used to measure distance impartially. This process could however be expensive.
 - (c) The final chosen method should operate for all schools and the method of operation should be clearly published and circulated to all parents/pupils well in advance of the applications stage.
- 16 The Department is seeking your views on other criteria that you believe should be included in the menu, bearing in mind the principles and objectives outlined in Chapter 2.**
- It is the officer's view that key criteria outlined in the basic principles at 2.2 take precedent and priority and should minimise the need for any other criteria or processes.
 - We do however consider that a "specialist interest criterion" may be considered if schools move to "specialist status". Children with sporting, musical and artistic talents need to be acknowledged and provided for in the education system.
 - The Department may well wish to consider the issue of defining clear criteria for children living outside Northern Ireland and children living within Northern Ireland whose parents are not EU nationals.

17 The Department is seeking your views on the possible options for the menu.

- The officers recognise that there is a need to balance present or new criteria against the changing Northern Ireland educational landscape.
- There is some merit in developing a range around:
 - family focused criteria
 - the child centred catchment area
 - the 'parish' dimension
 - random selection.

18 The Department is seeking your views on whether the process for appealing the decisions of Boards of Governors not to admit a child to the school should be altered in any way.

- The officers note that if the recommendations outlined are implemented the central panel's consideration of compelling individual circumstances will impact on the present appeal process. There is a need for greater clarity on the compelling individual circumstances.
- The recommendation that appeals should be heard during May and June is a positive one although it could place additional pressures on principals at an already busy time in the academic year.

Other issues

Are there any other issues you would like to comment on in relation to new admissions arrangements for post-primary schools?

The officers recognise that there needs to be changes in the current system of transfer of children. We recognise that provision should increasingly reflect the pupil's personal choice of learning, pathway and his/her needs, aptitudes, interests, and aspiration.

We endorse previous recommendations made to the Department in our response to the post-primary review body when we indicated that a change management process is required to gradually reduce the focus on transition at 11 and refocus on 13-14 when young learners will be completing their key stage three education phase and looking forward towards more relevant learning pathways.

There are a significant number of complex, inter-related developments arriving on the educational scene. The introduction of a statutory revised curriculum and assessment in 2006, the decline in pupil numbers, the inclusion agenda, the definition of a revised pupil profile by 2009, and the introduction of the entitlement framework are only some of the major areas of change.

It is obvious that it will be difficult to ensure confidence in the capacity of the education system to cope with such a significant transition.

The officers are actively aware that it is not a given right that “informed parental choice” will determine a pupil’s post-primary provision. Parents may be disappointed to learn that the expression of their choice will not always result in the securing of the preferred place. We caution that the proposals could contribute to the creation of an unrealistic expectation that parental choice will prevail.

The officer group also wish to see a greater degree of consideration given to the increase in the ethnic minority population and the place of their choices in the education system.

In conclusion the officers recognise that it is not possible to manage a rapid revolution to the current structures. We noted in a previous report to the Department that “while there is widespread acceptance of the need for change the current diversity of provision, as well as the deep seated economic, social, political, and sectarian differences within elements of our community, make it difficult to provide a uniform system which can command universal support whilst retaining the confidence of the Northern Ireland society, its parents, and educators”.

It remains the position that in common with other European countries the physical transfer of pupils from primary to post-primary education will take place at 11. This transition is still one of the most single sensitive issues around. Education will still need to continue to adapt to serve the needs of pupils, parents, society and the economy.

The officers would wish to make further responses to the board as future proposals in this area arise.

SMcE/ST
1 June 2005