

Proposal for Draft Education (NI) Order

Comments by Mencap in Northern Ireland

1.0 About Mencap

- 1.1 Mencap is a voluntary organisation which provides information, support and services to children, young people and adults with a learning disability and their families. We support a membership network of over 60 local groups and campaign for an end to discrimination and prejudice.
- 1.2 We believe that people with a learning disability should have equal rights to choice, opportunity and respect, with support to meet their needs. We believe that these rights should be available to everyone regardless of age or severity of disability. We believe that support for families and carers is vital to achieving these rights.

2.0 About Learning Disability

- 2.1 It is estimated that 2% of the population – over 33,000 people in Northern Ireland – have a learning disability. The report produced by the Review of Mental Health and Learning Disability, entitled **Equal Lives**, stated that over 16,300 people with a learning disability are known to services, including 8150 children and young people aged up to 19 years.⁽¹⁾ Children and young people with a learning disability will have severe learning difficulties.
- 2.3 The **Equal Lives** report drew attention to “the link between higher prevalences of mild/moderate learning disability and poorer socio-economic status and unstable family backgrounds. This link with a severe learning disability is less clear-cut, but some research internationally does suggest a link with socio-economics status”. ⁽²⁾
- 2.4 **Equal Lives** also stated that the numbers of people with a learning disability would increase, in part because of the increased survival rates of at risk infants thanks to improved healthcare.

2.5 **Equal Lives** identified a number of growing areas of need:

- children who are technology dependant, an increasing number of whom are surviving into adulthood.
- children with a learning disability who also have autism;
- children with multiple severe and profound disabilities who requires 24-hour personal care and increasingly intensive nursing care.
- an increasing number of children from minority ethnic communities.
- an increasing number of parents with a learning disability who may require additional support.
- an increasing number of lone parents caring for children with special needs. (3)

3.0 General Comments

- 3.1 Mencap believes that the proposed arrangements for post-primary education must ensure equality of benefit and opportunity for all children and young people, including those with severe learning difficulties. We believe, too, that the proposed arrangements must address the inequalities experienced by people with a learning disability outlined in the **Equal Lives** report.
- 3.2 We believe that the proposed arrangements for post primary education must take account of:
- the problems pupils with severe learning difficulties experience when moving from school at 16 years or 19 years, as outlined in the recent interdepartmental report on transition.
 - the fact that pupils with severe learning difficulties continue to leave school without qualifications.
 - the low number of people with severe learning difficulties who enrol as students with further education colleges.
- 3.3 We believe that the Department must ensure that the proposals outlined in the consultation document reflect and are inclusive of the distinct needs of children and young people with severe learning difficulties.
- 3.4 We urge the Department to carry out full equality impact assessments into the new admission arrangements and the draft regulations.

- 3.5 We are disappointed that the new proposals do not outline links or possible collaboration between special schools and other education providers.

4.0 The Curriculum : Access for all Pupils

- 4.1 We believe that Boards of Governors should be required to ensure that the range of courses offered to pupils at Key Stage 4 include a number of courses that are accessible to pupils with severe learning difficulties.
- 4.2 We also believe that Boards of Governors should be required to ensure that the curriculum offered is accessible to all pupils, including those with severe learning difficulties.
- 4.3 We urge the Department to ensure that the specifications produced about the minimum content for each area of learning, the cross-curriculum skills required the assessment arrangements for each key stage and the qualifying courses identified do not disadvantage pupils with severe learning difficulties.

5.0 Provision of Secondary Education

- 5.1 We believe that Boards of Governors should be required, when making arrangements with other educational providers, to ensure that all pupils, including pupils with severe learning difficulties, enjoy equal access to and benefit from such arrangements.
- 5.2 We believe, too, the Department should produce guidance to assist schools and ensure that the additional support required is provided to a pupil with special educational needs, regardless of where this educational provision takes place.

6.0 Pupil Profiles

- 6.1 We note that pupil profiles are to be used to inform parents about the most suitable post-primary school for their child. We urge the Department to ensure that the pupil profile reflects the skills, achievements and potential of all pupils, including those with severe learning difficulties.
- 6.2 We believe that the use of pupil profiles should be monitored by the Department to ensure that any adverse impacts on pupils with severe learning difficulties are identified and remedial action taken, if required.

7.0 Conclusion

- 7.1 Mencap welcomed the opportunity to comment on the consultation paper on post-primary arrangements and proposal for a draft Education (Northern Ireland) Order.

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20 March 2006

Footnotes (relating to pages 1 and 2)

(1) *Equal Lives : Review of Mental Health and Learning Disability*
(N.I.) September 2005, p22)

(2) *ibid* pp 21-22

(3) *ibid*, p37