

Respondent: John J Pollock [Chair of Education Committee ATL N.I. Branch]

Association of Teachers and Lecturers (ATL) Response to the Department of Education Consultation on New Admissions Arrangements for Post - Primary Schools

**Principles and Objectives provide a sound basis on which to develop
new admissions arrangements**

**Q1 - ATL supports the principles and objectives for the new admissions
arrangements subject to the following comments**

- ❖ welcome that these will be transparent, consistent and easily understood by parents **and all concerned** in the admissions arrangements
- ❖ acknowledgement of the work, expertise and professionalism of the teacher that will ensure parents and pupils do have 'informed choice'
- ❖ need for funding to allow arrangements are equitable and uniform across NI.
- ❖ Schools serve local communities not just 'normally' [last bullet point]
- ❖ Every child should have equality of opportunity regardless of background

Objective are worthy, however

If the arrangements are to be followed by school throughout NI then admissions criteria should be standard, transparent, consistent and easily understood to ensure equality and fairness so there is no need for the third bullet point regarding 'admissions criteria being complementary'

Concern over schools having sufficient flexibility in setting their criteria to reflect their local circumstances - this flexibility would be recognised as a minor subset of the 'standard admissions criteria' and applied after standard admissions criteria have been acknowledged.

Choosing a Post Primary School

Q2 -

ATL has a number of concerns about the detail of the pupil profile and how it will be used.

To support the development of the pupil profile evidence needs to be gathered - **time** is needed for teachers to sift the evidence in terms of standards and moderation procedures.

Precise, accurate **training and resources** are needed in evidence-gathering and in analysis and interpretation of this to ensure that the decision in choice of post-primary school is 'correct' for every child.

Both teachers and parents **must have confidence** in these 'assessment techniques'

How are the '**soft skills**' to be 'assessed' and recorded in a pupil profile?

Time needs to be set aside for teachers to carry out these judgements [to prevent overburdening] and time is needed in building up to the introduction of the profile - so **CCEA needs to move more quickly in their development work of the profile.**

Careers education should be a curriculum component in Primary school.

A valid **pupil-profile** that will create an accurate and comprehensive picture of the whole child compiled throughout the primary school and kept for all concerned to view and identify the development of the pupil and to make their decisions on. The development of this should be given a **wider and fuller consultation** within the education sector and teachers in particular so that the final document is meaningful, manageable and usable.

If this background in terms of resources and training for all teachers is provided then there is **no need for a system of quality assurance.**

Why use standardised tests for comparison purposes - academic suitability is an outcome of standardised tests, if such emphasises in the revised curriculum is being placed on the 'whole child' to include attitudes, aptitudes and interests -

ATL is of the view that the Pupil Profile, a formative document, should not be shown or given to prospective post-primary schools before the child has been accepted by the school. The Pupil Profile must be a robust document informing parents of their child's strengths, weaknesses and interests and they should be in a position to ascertain from the post-primary school whether or not it is a suitable place for their child. The post primary school should not have access to the Profile before the allocation of places.

Advice from Primary School

Q3

The role of the primary school is to advise parents on the strengths, weaknesses and interests of their child. It is not the role of the primary school to advise parents on the merits or otherwise of individual post-primary schools. In order to ensure openness and transparency and to reduce confusion or potential conflict the advice from the primary school to parents must be clearly defined and understood

by schools and parents. It is parents who make the choice of school for their child, not the primary or post-primary school. The advice must be the subject of consultation and agreement with the teachers' unions to ensure the process is clear and the rights of all, pupils, parents and teachers are protected within it.

Advice from Post-Primary School

Q4 -

ATL would accept the current requirements for inclusion in the post-primary school prospectuses. There is a need however to evaluate the structure of post primary open days/ evenings to truly reflect the 'workings' of the post primary school - not just be an exhibition of what 'might' take place. Attempts should be made to encourage post-primary schools to move away from 'marketing'.

ATL accepts that interviews are extremely important to establish what is best for the child there is concern about the workload implications and practicalities of all parents having access to individual meetings with post-primary schools. There will be a need to monitor such meetings as to their manageability, effectiveness and usefulness.

ATL wishes to stress the point already made - that the Pupil Profile should not be given or shown to prospective post-primary schools before the child has been accepted by the school. Guidance must be provided, following consultation with the teachers' unions, to post-primary schools in advising parents in their choices.

Advice from DE/Education and Library Boards

Q5 -

ATL supports the continuation of the current procedures in the DE/ELBs on providing advice to parents but calls for research into how valuable the information contained in present booklets really is and what use do parents make of this information.

ATL would emphasise that DE should be the honest broker providing factual and procedural advice, and that this advice is equitable across NI.

ATL suggests that given the importance of the 'movement' from primary to post-primary school public meetings given by DE personnel along the lines of the 'Burns' rolling information evenings would assist parents and would help to emphasise to parents that the 'perceived best school' may not be the best school for their child.

Advice to assist with choices of educational pathway during post-primary education

Q6 -

ATL suggest

that the Pupil Profile needs to be moderated and validated to give consistency across NI and to enable both teachers and parents to have confidence in it

that 'Career guidance' needs to be of the highest quality and delivered by trained staff and outside facilitators

that the final decision about the pupil's future educational provision rests with the parent and pupil and that the school has a very important role to play - but who will monitor what is happening?

ATL would support a panel of independent personnel to observe and evaluate all procedures - a Central Body with responsibility for the whole of Northern Ireland.

Timetable for Admissions Process

Q7 -

ATL supports the suggested timetable for the transfer of pupils from primary to post-primary schools given that the whole operation is based on informed parental choice. However the year 7 curriculum must be robust and challenging given that this year is a 'bridging' year bringing primary schooling to a close and putting in place an induction programme and state of readiness for post-primary schooling.

ATL would support a centralisation of pupil profile data with DE and/or ELB on a yearly basis in order that it would not be amended without due explanation after the decision to transfer has taken place.

Compelling Individual Circumstances or a Statement of Special Educational Need

Q8

ATL supports the proposed arrangements for pupils with compelling individual circumstances provided that these are identified by the pupil's own teacher - we do know that the present public examination system is open to mal-practice given that parents are as nervous as the student taking the examination and will readily claim special circumstances and special consideration. Of course everything is relative and if you can pay to have an 'expert' opinion then maybe your case will be listened to - We must rely on the professional judgement of the child's teacher who has been working with the child on a day to day basis. Of course evidence is needed to support any claim for special consideration, and it is understood that the arrangements will apply in few and only exceptional circumstances.

Q9

ATL is of the view that pupils admitted under special circumstances should not be supernumerary but considered first outside of the normal admissions' criteria.

Furthermore **ATL** would stress that all children with compelling circumstances that may include behavioural problems and ADHD and SEN must have the backup resources in terms of classroom assistants and specific resources so that all

children in mainstream education will benefit and not suffer from the 'inclusivity' of all children.

Q10 -

ATL supports the introduction of a **central panel** of independent experts in determining the application of compelling individual circumstances. The panel should be made up of various interests, Professional Bodies, teachers, parents, ELB. The criteria to be used in reaching these determinations should be the subject of meaningful consultation with the education partners. This will ensure consistency, fairness and transparency and that everyone has ownership of the dilemmas and possible solutions.

Pupil with a Statement of Special Educational Need

Q11

ATL supports the retention of the current system for placing pupils with Special Education Need in schools with the following amendments - 'Statemented' children should not be supernumerary - there should be a fair allocation across all post primary schools with appropriate funding and in addition all SEN funding to schools should be 'ring-fenced'. It may be appropriate at this time to redefine what is meant by the term 'a child with a statement' and this must be kept under review in the context of SENDO from September 2005

Admissions Criteria for Oversubscribed Schools

ATL supports the view that the criteria to be used should be centrally administered and monitored, kept simple and uniformly applied across all post primary schools in Northern Ireland. In applying this process

ATL supports the use of **Family -Focussed Criteria**. **ATL** accepts the school as an extension of the 'family / community' and the school is there to serve all siblings - even if the older children have left the school. We also appreciate that the eldest/only child needs to be looked after.

ATL supports the use of **Community-Based Criteria**. Feeder primary school historically is one criterion for determining admissions to an oversubscribed school. The guidance on determining the Feeder Schools for the post-primary schools should be the subject of meaningful consultation with the education partners. The guidance should ensure that in determining feeder primary schools to individual post - primary schools a socially balanced intake of pupils is achieved, that the catchment area of a post-primary school does not be redrawn each year and that openness and transparency is evident in all cases.

ATL does not support the use of parish as a criterion.

ATL supports the use of school-centred and then pupil-centred criteria as the third and fourth criteria to be applied, respectively. The guidance in identifying this criteria must recognise in **Geographical Criteria** the existence of the overlap of family - focused, community-based geographical criteria. May need additional criteria to cater for children who are in the 'gaps' between differing spheres of influence. Questions arise as to what maps will be used and at what scale and will straight line distances or route distances be used? Who identifies the sphere of influence of the school - should a panel be made up of school governors, teachers and parents to ensure no **one** school be put at an advantage or disadvantage and that transparency is evident.

Percentage limits should not be necessary using the above approach.

Qu 15 Tiebreakers

ATL supports the view that random selection and proximity from home should be used but randomness needs to be authenticated and given to schools by a Central Body in order that consistency, fairness and transparency is operating across NI. Schools should NOT be free to use different methods of operating random selection or proximity.

Q16 Other Criteria

ATL is of the view that the criteria should be kept simple and applied uniformly across all post-primary schools in Northern Ireland by a Central Body. This Central Body should draw up the criteria and the guidance on how it applies. Both the criteria and guidance should be the subject of meaningful consultation with the education partners. The Central Body should be representative of the social partners.

Format of Menu

Q17

ATL supports Option 4 - Compulsory Categories and Compulsory Order.

ATL is of the view that the criteria should be prioritised in the following order -

- 1 Feeder Primary schools
- 2 school - centred
- 3 child centred
- 4 Random Selection

ATL would reiterate the need for a Central Body to draw up the criteria , to issue guidance in the application of this criteria and to have a 'quality-assurance' role to ensure all criteria and guidance is followed.

Appeals

Q18

ATL supports the retention of the current system of appeals. The Central Body for the whole of the province would oversee an agreed appeals procedure - All appeals should be completed by May so that children can avail of the induction programme set up by the post primary school.

ATL is opposed to the introduction of legal representation in the appeals process.

Q19 Other issues -

ATL welcomes the ending of the 11+ in 2008

ATL supports the concept of An Entitlement Framework.

ATL holds the view that pupils at the age of 14 are in a better position to make choices.

ATL supports the development of pupil profiles to be used to provide a holistic picture of the individual child. Pupil profiles are to be used to inform decision-making. They must not be used as a mechanism for rejecting or selecting pupils by schools.

ATL would welcome greater openness, transparency and dialogue in the development of pupil profiles.

ATL stresses the major implications for teacher training that will arise as a result of the new Pupil Profile and Assessment for Learning Initiatives.

ATL supports the development of a Central Body - representative of all education interests and partners, to oversee the implementation, moderation, review and evaluation of these New Admissions Arrangements for Post Primary Schools.