



**SDLP Response to the Consultation on the New Post-  
Primary Admission Criteria**

## INTRODUCTION

The SDLP welcomes the opportunity to respond to the Department of Education consultation on *New Admissions Criteria for Post Primary Schools*. We believe that access to high quality education as a human right. A well-resourced education system is a powerful tool in tackling poverty, creating equality of opportunity and enhancing social cohesion. The system should enable every student to maximise his or her potential, in academic, vocational and creative terms. Schools should be a hub of the community and must be resourced to help prepare young people to play an active role in society as citizens with rights and responsibilities, equipped with the skills necessary to find work, contribute to the economy and live as independently as possible. The SDLP firmly believe that every child has the right to equality of opportunity in education and we are committed to enhancing educational standards across all areas.

## PRINCIPLES & OBJECTIVES

The SDLP is in broad agreement with the Principles and Objectives outlined in Chapter 2. However we would propose minor changes:

- 2.3 - we propose that the word 'better' is replaced with 'well informed' to read – *Ensure that parents have a clear role in the process and are well informed to make key decisions for their children.*
- 2.3 – we propose that 'some priority' should be replaced simply by 'priority' to read - *ensure as far as possible that the admissions criteria of schools in a local area are complementary, so that each child is given priority under at least one set of admissions criteria in that area.*

## CHOOSING A POST PRIMARY SCHOOL

The SDLP is opposed to the Pupil Profile being **sent to** potential post-primary schools before a pupil has firmly accepted a place in a particular post-primary school.

### 3.5.2. Pupil Profile

It is important that the pupil profile should be utilised to inform parents in a way that will be of help in deciding which school will best meet their child's needs. The SDLP is opposed to the Pupil Profile being sent to the post-primary school before a pupil has firmly accepted a place in a particular post-primary school. The aim of the Pupil Profile is to inform parental and pupil choice. If it is available to post-primary schools before a pupil has firmly accepted a place in a particular post-primary school there is a danger of the Profile being used as a tool for selection. One of the purposes of the reforms is to move away from selection to parental choice. The SDLP is adamant that everything possible should be done to ensure that the function of the profile is to inform parents so that the choice of

post-primary school remains theirs and is not handed back to the post-primary schools.

### **Advice from the Primary School**

The SDLP believes that the Pupil Profile should be the basis of discussion between parents and the principal and or teachers on the future educational needs of the child. We believe that the Profile will provide an objective source of information which will add to parents' knowledge of their children to inform them as to how their child's needs can be best met in post-primary education. The parents' knowledge of their child augmented with the information contained in the Pupil Profile and its discussion with the principal or teacher combined with information available from the prospectuses of post-primary schools will enable parents to make an informed choice of post-primary school for their child. Principals or teachers should not recommend specific schools.

### **Advice from the Post-Primary School**

#### **Range of Information**

The SDLP agrees with the range of information and formats of presentation, (open nights, prospectuses, websites and, where necessary, discussions with parents) which should be available from prospective post-primary schools.

#### **The School Role of the Post-Primary in Advising Parents**

We believe that it is important that schools' admissions criteria should be clearly highlighted and explained to parents. This could help to reduce confusion and help to reduce the number of appeals.

The SDLP is opposed to the Pupil Profile being available in advance of parental meetings with post-primary schools; parents may take the profile with them to such meetings but only if they so wish. We must seek to ensure that the pupil Profile does not become an alternative instrument of selection by the post-primary school.

#### **Other Information or Support**

Post-primary schools should provide any other information that parents might reasonably request.

#### **Advice from DE/Education and Library Boards**

The SDLP agrees that the structures and formats outlined here to provide advice and support to parents are adequate. There may be a need for ELB officers to visit primary schools during year 6 to speak to parents' meetings to explain the Pupil Profile and the roles and responsibilities involved. We believe that it is important that parents are made aware of the role of schools' admissions' criteria at such meetings and also of the way in which the appeals' mechanism works.

### **Continuing Advice During Education Post-Primary**

The widest and most up-to-date careers' information must be available to pupils and parents through a variety of formats. Pupils should be given opportunities to assess realistically their own progress and aspirations – their strengths and weaknesses, likes and dislikes - in relation to various forms of work and to evaluate how these will come into play in the work setting.

The SDLP is in general agreement with the contents of this section but believes that the careers' provision within schools should be strengthened and improved as well as being given more support by the ELB and DEL careers services.

### **TIMETABLE FOR ADMISSIONS PROCESS**

The SDLP welcomes the timetable for New Post-Primary Admissions process, which seems sensible and logical.

### **PUPILS WITH COMPELLING INDIVIDUAL CIRCUMSTANCES OR A STATEMENT OF SEN**

The SDLP agrees that children with compelling individual circumstances should include children who are looked after and children who have a serious medical illness. We would agree that there should be strong documentary evidence to support individual cases. In relation to the category of serious medical illness we believe that documentary evidence should be by a medical practitioner of the standing of a consultant.

Whilst we agree that it is not possible to provide a definitive list of such cases we would propose that a competent sub-committee of a central panel could adjudicate objectively contentious cases.

In relation to paragraph 4.5 we agree that it is important that parents ensure that the education authorities are made aware of compelling individual circumstances early in the child's primary education. Where these circumstances develop later, especially in years 6 or 7, it will be important that they are highlighted in transfer documentation given that in the case of an appeal, information not included in the original transfer documentation cannot be then used.

### **Effect on school admissions and numbers**

The SDLP agrees with the view that children with compelling individual circumstances should be included in the school's admission numbers before the transfer process begins. Given that this may involve small numbers of children, schools will be able to plan ahead on the basis of the actual numbers they would be allocated. Only those for whom compelling circumstances arise after the transfer process has begun, would be counted as supernumerary.

## **Central Panel**

The SDLP agrees with the concept of a Central Panel as a means of resolving special circumstances claims in an objective, fair and transparent way, informed by the necessary expertise. The members of the Central Panel should have necessary seniority in their field of expertise. The panel should be comprised of a senior medical consultant, a senior social worker, a consultant psychologist and a senior educationalist.

## **Pupils with a Statement of Special Educational Needs**

The SDLP believes that children with special educational needs should be treated as supernumerary to the school's admission numbers before and after the transfer process begins. This would ensure that children with special educational needs could gain a place at the school of their choice.

## **ADMISSIONS' CRITERIA FOR OVERSUBSCRIBED SCHOOLS**

### **Family Focused Criteria**

The SDLP agrees with the Family Focused Criteria being included in the New Admissions Criteria as we recognise the family as the basic building block of society. We believe that it is important to keep families together.

SDLP accepts that priority should be given to applicants whose siblings are currently at the school including half brothers and sisters. Some recognition could be given to applicants whose siblings formerly attended the school although at a lower level of priority.

SDLP supports the eldest or only child (or in the case of single sex schools the first child in the family eligible to attend) as a criterion which would help ensure that pupils without older siblings would not be disadvantaged

### **Community-Based Criteria (Feeder Primary Schools / Parish)**

The Party supports the use of attendance at feeder primary schools as a criterion for admission as it supports the notion that schools serve local communities. The SDLP agrees with the proposal that there should be guidance from the Department in relation to designation of feeder primary schools and parish areas to ensure that these criteria are effective, fair and transparent.

Despite the proposals to ensure that all schools guarantee a wide range of opportunities for all children, it must be anticipated that in the years while the system beds down, there will be a lingering attachment to what are currently grammar schools. The SDLP would therefore stress that during this phase the list of feeder schools would need to remain geographically expansive for all schools otherwise the perception will be that those living in furthest from an existing grammar school are being disadvantaged by the new system. We would

nonetheless hope that within a short time, as parents gain confidence in the new system, they would more routinely opt to send their children to their 'local' school.

### **Child-Centred Catchment**

SDLP supports the use of Child-Centred Catchment as it seeks to give every child priority in at least one school – that closest to the pupil. This criterion would seem to be particularly suitable to the integrated and Irish-medium sectors where provision is not at the same level as it is in other sectors.

### **Tiebreakers**

In the event of over-subscription after all the criteria have been applied the need for a tiebreaker comes into play. The SDLP believes that in such cases computerised random selection is the fairest and most objective solution. All schools should use the same means of computerised random selection according to guidelines outlined by the Department and administered by a Central Panel.

### **Format of Menu**

1. Feeder Primary Schools
2. Siblings Currently at the School / Eldest Child / Only Child
3. Child-centred Catchment Area
4. Tiebreaker - Computerised Random Selection

### **Admissions' Appeals**

The SDLP considers the present system of admission appeals to be effective.