



Southern Education and Library Board

Response To

**Department Of Education Consultation Document On
New Admission Arrangements for Post Primary Schools**

June 2005

Introduction

The Southern Education and Library Board welcomes the opportunity to respond to the Department of Education consultation document on New Admission Arrangements for Post Primary Schools (January 2005) since there are implications for primary and post primary schools, as well as for the support services provided by Board personnel to schools and parents in respect of this important aspect of a child's education.

The board agrees that it is vital that parents have access to sound advice from all the participants in the process, that parents are aware of the role that they themselves and others have to play in the process, and that the process is transparent and clearly understood and accepted by all particularly in the climate of change that lies ahead.

The need for adequate resourcing and training of school personnel, governors and board services is equally important to ensure that the proposals can be effectively implemented.

Within the Southern Board, the Two Tier System is unique, with children being subject to the application of admissions criteria not just at Year 8 but also at Year 11 when application is made to the Senior High Schools. Schools within the Craigavon "Dixon Plan" specifically requested that a statement be included in the Southern Board's response to the consultation that the Board of Governors of these schools are happy with the arrangements that presently exist for their schools and do not want these to change. The board would strongly emphasise the high level of satisfaction of parents with the Two Tier System (as evidenced by the small number of children whose parents opt out of the System) and would wish to put on record their strong view that any changes to the admission arrangements for post primary schools should not destabilise the Two Tier System.

The board's response to the consultation document is detailed below in the order contained in the response booklet.

Because of the significance of the proposals for pupils, parents, schools and the board a number of discussion sessions were held with primary and post-primary school representatives. These were not designed to achieve consensus on the proposals but rather to provide opportunities for school authorities to discuss the proposals in detail and to encourage schools to respond individually to the document. A summary of the comments from these sessions with the schools is attached at Appendix A.

NEW ADMISSION ARRANGEMENTS FOR POST PRIMARY SCHOOLS

RESPONSE FROM THE SOUTHERN EDUCATION AND LIBRARY BOARD

Q1 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 board agrees with the principles and objectives outlined. In order to achieve these it is necessary to identify some of the weaknesses within.

- It is a fallacy to think a reduction in the number of pupils will reduce pressure on ‘popular’ schools.
- If schools are given sufficient flexibility to set their criteria it is unrealistic to expect that each child will be given priority under one set of criteria within a particular area.
- The existing transport policy militates against maximising parental preference.
- It is important to ensure that parents have confidence that all schools are good enough for their child, however, the Capital Building programme, New Curriculum, Entitlement Framework along with an overall reduction in numbers will not by themselves ensure this objective. The government must be prepared to identify and take remedial action against schools which parents perceive are not yet ‘good enough’. The current number of first preference applications are an indicator of parental perceptions.

Q2 The Department is seeking your views on:

(a) whether the Pupil Profile should be used in the way described in the Consultation Document;

It is essential that Pupil Profiles are completed honestly and objectively and reflect the child’s educational needs, interests and aspirations. There is concern that if used as part of the Transfer Procedure the Pupil Profile will become a legal document which will be contentious and could lead to litigation against the primary school principal. Honesty and objectivity could be tempered by fear of litigation and the need to appease demanding parents.

(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.

There should be more of a partnership between parent and teacher in completion of the Pupil Profile. If there was a section where parents could identify additional information (eg activities the school are unaware of) this

could encourage parents to 'buy in' to the system and emphasise that the Profile is not used as part of the selection procedure. The board would query how/when the information from a child's P7 year is included in the Pupil Profile, particularly when many children (especially boys) develop/mature significantly in this final year of their primary education.

Q3 The Department is seeking your views on the information/advice which should be available from the primary school to help parents make informed decisions.

The information identified in the consultation document is sufficient providing the post-primary sector make available all relevant information to primary schools to enable them to pass it on to parents.

At present schools are allowed substitute teacher costs to provide cover for the period of the Transfer interviews. The new proposal requires interviews in P6 re the Pupil Profile and interviews in P7 to nominate preferences. The government should be aware of the increased bureaucratic burden placed on schools and be prepared to fund this additional expenditure in order that teaching time does not suffer.

The board would agree that primary school principals should continue to offer general advice to assist parents and pupils but not recommend specific schools.

Q4 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.**

The board agrees with the information as suggested apart from one-to-one meetings with post-primary school. As the rationale for the meetings is disputed the board reserves comment on whether or not such Pupil Profiles should be provided in advance of any such meetings. The present system allows for meetings to take place informally, where necessary, if formalised into the procedure parents could feel pressurised into attending these meetings as well as attending Open Nights/Days. Each post-primary school would have to arrange interviews for all potential preferences with nugatory effect thus creating a massive burden on schools. It could also result in raising parental expectations that in the case of oversubscribed schools cannot be realised. This proposal could result in a substantial increase in the number of appeals particularly where principals make comment on the suitability/non-suitability of the school for individual pupils.

There should be a strengthening of information currently available in prospectuses *before* a parent chooses preferences eg school policies, guidance on the amount of homework etc.

Q5 The Department is seeking your views on the information/advice which should be available from DE/ELBs to help parents choose the most suitable post-primary school.

A Helpline and web-based information would have to be resourced and staffed at an appropriate level and not as an 'add-on' to existing commitments. The boards are also responsible for admission to primary and pre-school and the subsequent appeal procedure. Account would have to be taken of the diverse procedures operating throughout the course of the year.

The board feels that the current Transfer Booklet should be reviewed in light of strengthened prospectuses and development of web-based information. All school based information could be obtained directly from the school with the Education and Library Boards/Department of Education providing an overview of the procedure. Education and Library Boards would still require admission criteria but the possibility of only publishing electronically and thus saving printing costs should be examined (currently evidenced by number of 'hits' on Board websites). This would require an amendment to relevant legislation.

Q6 The Department is seeking your views on what information/advice should be available to assist with choices of educational pathway, during post-primary education.

With reference to Paragraph 3.17 the board would question where independent advice would be sourced and how board staff could give qualitative advice regarding 'alternative settings'. The wording of the final sentence would imply a guarantee of acceptance at the chosen school irrespective of numbers etc.

Q7 The Department is seeking your views on the broad timetable for the new admissions process.

In the first year of operation there will be an overlap whereby the board will have to manage existing and new procedures alongside open enrolment primary and pre-school procedures and appeals. All admission timetables must be clearly established and integrated to ensure delivery. It is essential that resources are made available and appropriate structures are put in place to permit delivery of services.

Timetable:

- The board would suggest that Admission/Enrolment Numbers need to be agreed by April
- The board would express concern at the overlap of appeals and information gathering of admission criteria (traditionally two very time demanding periods for the Transfer Section)
- The board would also express concerns about the tight deadline for gathering information, publishing and distributing Transfer Booklets however, if earlier recommendations re format of Transfer Booklets were implemented these concerns would be alleviated.

- November: 4 weeks would not be long enough to provide time for discussions with parents and pupils. Again, if previous recommendations implemented this would not happen.
- Timetable tight for receipt and processing of Transfer Forms (especially with the proximity to Christmas)
- The timetable should include consideration of Compelling Individual Circumstances.
- The board welcomes June deadline for appeals. This should facilitate attendance by both school and parents and curtail uncertainty for parents.
- The possibility of schools sending out acceptance letters (as in the primary and pre-school sectors) rather than Boards should be explored. (Schools currently send out letters re induction arrangements, uniforms etc). This would eliminate duplication and reduce costs.

Q8 The Department is seeking your views on the types of cases which should be considered as Compelling Individual Circumstances

The board agrees with paragraph 4.4 but feels it is not possible to produce a definitive list.

Compelling Individual Circumstances should be a case that dictates attendance/non-attendance at a particular school(s) on grounds of personal safety and should not include educational arguments.

The board queries whether there is any right of appeal against the decision of the Central Panel/Board of Governors?

Q9 The Department is seeking your views on whether pupils admitted under Compelling Individual Circumstances should be supernumerary to schools' admissions and enrolment numbers

The board has differing views on whether such pupils should be supernumerary. One view is that no individual child should be disadvantaged by another child's Compelling Individual Circumstances and that admission should be supernumerary but only in the year of enrolment. If such children are supernumerary they should not be part of the admissions criteria.

The opposing view is that they should not be supernumerary because of their impact on class size, practical classes and possible impact on neighbouring schools.

The procedure and timing of consideration of these cases have not been addressed in the timetable.

Consideration should be given to the impact on numbers, if supernumerary of: Compelling Individual Circumstances, Children with Statements, Children admitted on Appeal. Whilst each category may be small in number the combined total of these children could be significant, year on year for some schools.

The decision as to whether or not such pupils are to be classified as supernumerary should be considered in the context of inclusion generally and the SENDO legislation which is to take effect later this year.

Q10 The Department is seeking your views on whether individual Boards of Governors or a Central Panel should consider cases of Compelling Individual Circumstances. If a Central Panel, your views are sought on size and composition.

The board believes that there should be a Central Panel for the reasons outlined. The panel should be comprised of three members: legal, medical/social and educational background plus clerk. There should be a pool of Panel Members which would serve the Five education and Library Boards but clerked on an individual board basis. However the board acknowledges that the existence of a Central Panel could be perceived as diminishing the role of the Board of Governors in determining who should be admitted.

The timing is crucial, these cases have to be dealt with before other applications are considered regardless of whether they are supernumerary or not.

Q11 The Department is seeking your views on whether pupils with statements of special educational need should continue to be admitted as supernumerary.

The board would prefer such pupils remain supernumerary because of difficulty with current statementing timetable/transfer timetable. However schools should be able to take account of the presence of the pupil when considering admission requests to the year group.

Q12 The Department is seeking your views on the family-focused criteria listed and their inclusion within a menu.

The board support the concept of admissions criteria which relate to a sibling at the school. There are practical and ecological reasons why a family with pupils at a particular school should be given preference and encouraged to keep children at the one school. Why the eldest child should be given priority over a child whose family had attended the school but because of an age gap had left is not clear and where schools have used this second criterion parents with siblings previously at the school have found the logic difficult to comprehend.

The changing 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 criterion careful definition would be required. The board would also want a reassurance that no child is disadvantaged because an older sibling has a statement.

Q13 The Department is seeking your views on the community based criteria listed, their inclusion within a menu and how they should be defined.

Experience at appeals shows the use of parish boundaries are difficult to define. In some cases there is more than one post-primary in a parish. Current practice shows that the parish dimension is largely restricted to the maintained sector.

The board broadly supports the concept of feeder primary schools provided guidance is given from the Department of Education as to the designation of feeder primary schools. The Department would have to ensure that the use of this criterion is robust enough to withstand equality legislation.

Q14 The Department is seeking your views 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 board would not support school centred catchments which equates to admission by postcode. Whilst perhaps contributing to the concept of children attending their local school this could potentially distort enrolments and disadvantage children whose parents were unable to move house to the 'right area'. There is also the potential for overlap where there are a number of schools within close proximity. The child centred concept is more in line with principles of the document as each child would have one nearest suitable school.

Percentage limits are difficult to apply and likely to result in an increase in appeals due to the non-transparent nature.

Q15 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**

Random selection by surname would be the preferred option of the board for the reasons stated in paragraph 5.14 of the document, but care would be required with M's and Mc's.

The use of distance is contentious and expensive if Ordnance Survey is to measure, can only delay decisions for schools.

Random lottery is not transparent.

Q16 The Department is seeking your views on any other criteria that you believe should be included in the menu, bearing in mind the principles and objectives outlined in Chapter 2.

If eldest child is used as a criterion it is essential that a child with an elder sibling who has a statement is not penalised.

Criteria for children living outside Northern Ireland should be clearly defined by the Department of Education in consultation with the Immigration Department to address the uniqueness of children from the Irish Republic seeking admission as well as children living in the province whose parents are not EU nationals.

A decision should be made regarding whether or not children moving into an area should be given any special consideration as they will not readily meet the criteria listed.

Q17 The Department is seeking your views on the possible options for the menu.

The board has no comment to make on whether or not any category should be compulsory, or whether the categories should be applied in a particular order. However, the board does query how either of these scenarios can be balanced easily against the principle of a Board of Governors having the flexibility to set its own admission criteria. Furthermore, how will this flexibility be managed if the admission criteria of various schools in an area are to be complimentary and who can monitor, let alone guarantee that every child will receive priority in at least one school's admission criteria.

Q18 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.

If implemented the Central Panel's consideration of Compelling Individual Circumstances will impact on the present appeal process. There is a lack of clarity on how appeals relating to Compelling Individual Circumstances will be dealt with.

It is recommended that a review of the appeals procedure should take place after revised procedures have been implemented/established.

Some consideration should be given to zero-rating pupils admitted on appeal, at least in those schools which lose a significant number of appeals or where there is a pattern of lost appeals.

Other Issues

The procedure for Transfer between Schools (Years 9-14) will have to be reviewed as well as any implications for the Two Tier System within the Craigavon area.

Do you think any of the issues contained in the Consultation Document would have any adverse implications for any of the Section 75 categories?

The criterion using feeder primary schools could potentially impact on persons of different religious belief.

Conclusion

The board acknowledges that the proposals contained in the document will require a change of culture on the part of stakeholders in the process. The board would emphasise that any new arrangements should promote what is good for the child and that it would wish to see every opportunity availed of to move forward in a spirit of co-operation with this vision in mind.

NEW ADMISSION ARRANGEMENTS FOR POST PRIMARY SCHOOLS
SUMMARY OF RESPONSES RECEIVED SCHOOL WHICH ATTENDED
THE
CONSULTATION WORKSHOPS – MAY 2005

Advice

The Pupil Profile will vary depending on whether or not it is used as part of the selection as opposed to informing choice e.g. containing academic & non-academic information

Primary schools largely hold the view that the Pupil Profile should be sent after the selection decision has been made or schools could infer selection decisions (risk of 'selection by back door').

Concerns raised that if the Pupil Profile is available before selection is made that it would become a proxy for Transfer Test. Opposing view that if it is not available prior to selection then what is the point of its existence? No transparency if entrance examinations were to be introduced.

Pupil Profiles should at the very least be available to the receiving school after the decision on who to select for admission has been made. Is valuable document to give school a starting point with child. Pupil Profile could possibly be used for banding/streaming.

Need for standardisation of Pupil Profile and for there to be a fair and consistent appraisal of the pupil that gives a 'picture of the child'

How will Pupil Profiles be moderated? By whom?

Pupil Profile should present a picture of the individual child and include assessments/comments on both the academic and social abilities of the pupils

Anticipated difficulty with parents accepting the profile where it does not fully reflect their perception of their child's ability or realistic aspirations

Giving neutral advice is a dilemma for primary schools. Reluctance of Principals to make comments that might be legally challenged could result in the statements being made to play safe and thus become meaningless. Comments are likely to be tempered from P1. All advice to be available under Freedom of Information Act

Pupil Profile has resource implications from P1

Pupil Profile must be child centred but also have a high level of objectivity.

A family's financial circumstances could influence the out of school activities that may be recorded in the Pupil Profile

Principals should give the advice that reflects their professional view of what is most suitable for the child but then "let go" and leave it to the parent(s) to make their decision.

Parents need to attend Open days/Open evenings

There is a need for an information campaign from DE to inform parents about what education today means in terms of enriched curriculum, revised curriculum etc

Specifically in relation to the Craigavon "Dixon Plan" schools present made a request for a statement to be included that the Board of Governors of these schools are happy with the arrangements that presently exist for their school and do not want these to change.

The timescale proposed for the availability of the Pupil Profile/meetings with schools does not allow for maturity in P7. Some children (many) really do mature/excel at this stage.

How useful are end of Key Stage tests if decisions have to be reached by end of P6?

Parental choice exists only on paper not reality. Transport policy is a restrictive factor.

Information in prospectuses should be standardised e.g. results should take account of drop out rates.

Timetable

Principals were concerned at the potential impact of the changes in timescale for the teaching of P6 pupils particular. Principals also felt there were knock on effects for P5.

Pupils progress at different rates. Particular concerns were identified regarding the implications of the early decision making on boys who will be less well developed at this stage and could lose out.

Concern was also expressed that the amount of time required to administer the process at Primary School level would be high.

There were also concerns that there would be a need to involve both the class teacher and the Principal in the interviews and in drawing up the profile which would have significant cost implications. This would be particularly significant in small two teacher primary schools.

There would also be a knock on effect for the SEN Reviews which may need to come back to end of P6

Concerns were raised about interviews with post primary schools and parents - short timescale.

Suggestion made that Open nights should be held at the end of P6. Do parents value open nights?

Need for guidelines for parents/schools for conduct of interview?

General elongation and smoothing of timetable welcomed

Compelling Individual Circumstances

Need to ensure that this does not become a proxy for extending the Special Needs

Need to keep it very tight initially and to ensure that it was only applied where very specific evidence could be provided to ensure that the specific named school was essential for the particular pupil in terms of a specific medical or other issue.

Principals considered that Looked After Children should be supernumerary but also agreed that there needed to be a clear understanding of what the definition of Looked After Children included. Supernumerary /statemented children – difficult for planning, classes set and then school required to take extra pupils which ‘do not count in statistics’. Welcome debate.

There are benefits to having a central panel e.g. consistency and independence but these must be balanced against the need for Board of Governors involvement in the process.

Need for Educational Psychology to agree with criteria (academic, physical, social behaviour)

View held by some that Compelling Individual Circumstances should only be considered for physical reasons or be tightly defined otherwise category, could become biggest group due to range of issues e.g. short term fostering/long term fostering, marital breakdowns

Where do physical/medical needs fit with Statementing Procedure? Child may be in process of being statemented in P7

Would children whose parents work in the security forces constitute Compelling Individual Circumstances?

Social problems tend to dominate secondary schools – teachers are dying of ‘pastoral fatigue’

Need for clarity on how Primary Schools are to be involved in Compelling Individual Circumstances

Circumstances can change so quickly

Timescale to be clarified for Compelling Individual Circumstances

How does Compelling Individual Circumstances fit with inclusion? Inclusion says special cases should not be made.

There is a need to consider some special circumstances regarding migrant children but the category of Compelling Individual Circumstances is probably not the answer.

Will it be possible to have Compelling Individual Circumstances clarified/verified by outside agencies within the required timescale?

Admissions Criteria – Family, Community, Geography, Tiebreakers

Some schools are not unduly concerned about having to apply admissions criteria – not a current problem but may change

Some would like to see a common set of criteria for all schools in an area.

How will grammar schools set their criteria? Proposals have significant implications for grammar schools.

If status of school changes to ‘specialist’ school criteria will have to reflect this.

Demographics – need to adjust grammar admissions numbers or secondary schools will be emptied by default.

Will existing preference system continue/change?

Transport is the main factor in a rural area.

Influences affecting choice: other children, primary principal, grammar school, neighbourhood

‘Parental attitude’

Disadvantages outlying schools

Need consistency in approach e.g. tiebreaker of distance: front door, back door, new estates

Tie breaker of age is arbitrary. Distance supports concept of local school.

Opportunity to clarify issues e.g. eldest in split families

Recipe for judicial reviews – potential to be very unfair

Will be admission by postcode as houses are built near grammar schools

Comprehensive system through the back door

More community/local 'feel' to secondary schools

Admission Criteria – Menu Options

Pupil profile is not the problem – but is criteria and this will not work unless criteria are compulsory. Needs structure to work

If compulsory categories then some schools may close

The new arrangements will get bogged down in keeping system as close as possible to what it was.

Menu option will require transition by grammar schools

Appeals

There should be a financial penalty to schools which lose appeals/lose a number of appeals over time so that the number of appeals can be reduced.

General Comments

The new arrangements should focus on the child not the system

Ambiguity exists. What does the future hold?

Specialist schools – different sites? Common curriculum?

Comprehensive education by back door? How is the system to be managed?

Presumes that there will be a change in academic spectrum

Grammars are not specifically local schools

Will still be selective schools based on social/economic backgrounds.

Status of secondary schools compared to grammar schools

Will Government priority/devolved government/Political preferences change the proposals?

How will SENDO Legislation impact on the whole process? Personnel, modification to buildings, practicalities, lifts?

Transfer – gave equal access to high quality education to those who couldn't afford it based on perceived ability.

All schools should be community colleges. Resources invested and schools not utilised to full in evenings, holidays.

How are the needs of the increasing non-national population to be addressed?