



Ulster Farmers' Union

Established 1918

Dunedin, 475 Antrim Road Belfast, BT15 3DA

Tel: 028 90 370222 Fax: 028 90 371231

E Mail: info@ufuhq.com

Website: www.ufuni.org

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Post Primary Support Team
Department of Education
Rathgael House
43 Baloo Road
BANGOR
BT19 7PR

Dear Sir or Madam

CONSULTATION ON NEW ADMISSIONS ARRANGEMENTS FOR POST-PRIMARY SCHOOLS

The Ulster Farmers' Union (UFU) is the largest farming organisation in Northern Ireland, representing nearly 13,000 farming families. As such, we welcome the opportunity to provide our views on the above consultation paper.

The UFU has given consideration to this report and have acknowledged that some change is necessary to the current system. The UFU comments are as follows;

1. Principles and Objectives

The Ulster Farmers' Union supports the Principles and Objectives outlined in the consultation paper. In particular we agree that the new admissions arrangements should be 'fair and free from any bias or indirect discrimination against particular groups or individuals' however the UFU believes that as it stands, some proposals in the consultation paper will disadvantage children living in rural areas therefore do not fit with this objective/principle. This is unacceptable and the UFU would ask for assurance that the needs of the rural community and farming families are fully addressed.

2. Pupil Profile

The UFU supports the principle of parents having as much information as possible about their child's education however are concerned that the idea that parents will make 'informed choices' is idealistic. The UFU feels that Pupil Profiles must be made available to Post Primary Schools to allow them to cater for the needs of individual pupils. The Pupil Profile could be used to select pupils for certain schools.

We are concerned that the development of a pupil profile will lead to disagreements between parents and teachers and that teachers will face excessive pressure from parents to give favourable results particularly in smaller schools. The Ulster Farmers' Union are also concerned that the development of pupil profiles will add to the workload of teachers. In our opinion teachers are already burdened with administration and this distracts from the time that they devote to lesson planning and teaching.

3. Admissions criteria for oversubscribed schools

Family Focused Criteria

The UFU believes that the use of this criteria is relevant and could be used to select children for an oversubscribed primary school.

Community Based Criteria

The UFU welcomes the acknowledgement that schools generally serve a local community and that there are historical feeder schools to post primary schools however the UFU feels that there needs to be further clarification presented on how this proposal will work in practice. There is concern that schools located in more rural areas will feature further down the list of feeder schools and due to the small numbers of pupils moving to post primary schools from such rural schools may be not be classified as feeder schools.

There is also concern that once feeder schools are identified by certain post primary schools, parents may move children to such schools to ensure places to a certain post primary school. This could lead to declining numbers in smaller rural schools and may result in school closures which would cause problems for those living in rural areas. If such a situation is created, these defined 'feeder' primary schools may have to introduce their own selection criteria due to oversubscription, which may include 'proximity to pupils homes' which will further disadvantage those living in rural areas.

Geographic Criteria

The UFU agrees that there are some benefits in children attending their nearest school in terms of practicality and cost, however costs should not be the determining factor in that the school which is the most suitable for a child should be the top priority rather than the cost of sending/transporting him/her there.

The UFU feels that the use of 'geographical admission criterion' proposed as a means of selecting pupils for post primary schools is totally unacceptable. The UFU believes that this will disadvantage rural children and must be removed from the admissions criteria. Children should not be selected according to where they live. This criterion would not allow for children to attend their most suitable school. Children living in the country must not be disadvantaged because of the distance of their homes from the school. Their skills, talents and achievements must hold the same value to those of urban children.

The UFU are aware that some schools are at present using this criterion in their selection procedure however under the new system proposed, this criterion will be used more often and in time may become the dominant determinant. This admission criterion goes against one of the outlines principle 'fair and free from any bias or indirect discrimination against particular groups or individuals'.

The UFU have already heard reports that some families living in rural areas are considering moving house in order to be within the catchment area of a certain school; farming families are not in a position to move house due to the nature of their business. Other reports have suggested that families may register children as living at an address near a preferred school.

Tiebreakers

As stated above the UFU is totally opposed to the use of 'proximity to pupils homes' criteria. This would discriminate against children living in rural areas, as the majority of post primary schools are located in towns. The only fair alternative to the proposed criteria is to randomly select pupils for admission to schools once they become over-subscribed.

Other Points

The proposals in the document may lead to a rise in the number of independent schools leading to further social division. The present system allows each child to stand on its own merit and qualification for Grammar School is not dependent on social status or parental income. We believe that the social division that would result from the increase in independent schools would be much worse than the present situation and more unfair for children from disadvantaged backgrounds. Low farming incomes (average farm incomes have been below the National Minimum Wage since its introduction in 1999) would not allow for children from many farming families to be able to attend such independent schools and would therefore create further divisions between the farming and non-farming communities.

We would be concerned that under the proposed arrangements more parents and pupils will be dissatisfied and disappointed that children are not admitted to the school of their choice.

The Ulster Farmers' Union welcomes the proposal of increased co-operation and co-ordination between schools but is concerned that this will add a further layer of administration which will ultimately need more funding. We feel that funding would be better targeted at improving the delivery of education. The proposal that pupils may be moved from different schools to allow them to experience a greater range of subject etc is in theory an acceptable idea however for schools in rural areas this is impractical and much already precious time would be wasted in travelling. At present 48 % of Northern Ireland's population lives in rural areas. There is concern that these proposals will have a profound affect on small rural schools. The requirements around the 'entitlement framework' may result on rural schools being unable to offer the requirement number of subjects etc therefore forcing them to close or pupils forced to travel longer distances

Rural children already have longer journeys to and from school, more travelling during the day is unacceptable and would be disruptive for pupils. We would also be concerned about the safety and supervision of children moving between schools. The suggestion that classes could take place via video link or other such technology is also impractical and costly.

The current Transfer Test should only be ceased to be used to select pupils for post-primary education when there is a suitable replacement system found that would adequately cater for the education needs of pupils in Northern Ireland. The UFU are concerned that there is not yet a suitable alternative to the current Transfer Test.

Under the newly proposed system, schools must be provided that match the diversity but also build on the strengths of the existing format. There have been excellent results from many schools in both sectors. At present, Secondary and Grammar schools in Northern Ireland are achieving high standards; these must not be lowered however the standards of lower achieving schools need to be raised. We are endanger of changing and destroying what is an already good education system and replacing it with a radical system that has not been tested elsewhere.

A full and proper consideration of all the responses is essential. The UFU is concerned that the Department did not take full account of the responses received during consultation on the Burns report. The UFU must be assured that the consultation process on this issue is meaningful and will take account of all the responses received.

I trust these comments are of use to you.

Yours faithfully

AILEEN SMITH
POLICY OFFICER