



6th March 2006

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

Dear Sir or Madam,

CONSULTATION ON PROPOSAL FOR A DRAFT EDUCATION (NORTHERN IRELAND) ORDER

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 draft order.

1. Principles and Objectives

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 restates that as it stands, some elements of the proposal will disadvantage rural children therefore not corresponding with this objective/principle. This is unacceptable and the UFU emphasize the importance that this Education Order recognises and accommodates the needs of the rural community and farming families. We therefore strongly believe that it is essential that a rural proofing exercise is completed.

2. Pupil Profile

The UFU continues to support the principle of parents having as much information as possible about their child's education however we are concerned that the development of a pupil profile may lead to disagreements between parents and teachers. Teachers may therefore face excessive pressure from parents to give favourable results. In Rural Areas teachers are often part of the community and frequently teach the same children for a number of years so disputes with parents could make their job very difficult. There is concern that the development of pupil profiles will increase the workload of teachers, particularly in rural areas. Already excessive bureaucracy distracts from the time they devote to lesson planning and teaching.

3. Admissions Criteria

The UFU feel this is the most critical element of the new Education Order in determining equality for all. We would ask for consideration of the following points;

- The UFU appreciate that the current system of education has evolved and changed over many years, effectively serving the educational needs of all children. UFU are concerned that a radical change will cause irreversible damage to a proven, respected and fair system.
- We recognise that the current 11+ selection procedure is not wholly satisfactory, putting undue pressure on children and schools. We feel that this problem should be addressed without dismantling a proven successful system.
- The Ulster Farmers Union is adamant that each school, primary and secondary, must consider the needs of rural children in its catchment area when drawing up admissions criteria. It would be grossly unfair if the educational needs and achievements of rural children were not rated on a par with the educational needs and achievements of urban children.
- The proposals are in danger of destroying the rural nature of our province. Parents will relocate to towns to gain entry to better schools then rural schools will close due to falling pupil numbers. Farming families are unable to move because they are tied to the farm business. So where will these children go if their school is forced to close?
- The UFU is concerned that proposed changes to the system of Post-Primary Education in Northern Ireland will lead to an increase in the number of fee paying places and of independent schools, reinforcing social exclusion and inequality in our society. Children from farming families, many with a lower than average income, would thus be at a disadvantage. This does not happen at present.

4. Entitlement Framework

The Ulster Farmers' Union continues to support the proposal of increased co-operation between schools only if funding is fully provided for the associated administration.

The proposal that pupils may move between neighbouring schools to allow them greater access to courses is in theory acceptable but is impractical in rural areas. At present 48% of Northern Ireland's population live in a rural areas. Pupils from rural areas will not have feasible access to the Entitlement Framework. In reality, rural schools may not be able to offer the required number of subjects for 'entitlement framework' forcing them to close or pupils may be forced to travel longer distances.

The UFU believes that the proposal that DARD may charge people fees for attending courses of education or instruction that it provides, is totally unacceptable. This would disadvantage children wishing to pursue an agricultural career as a free course would be the more attractive and more viable option.

The Ulster Farmers Union questions whether teaching children through Information Technology would be effective. We feel that this method of teaching children must be properly evaluated and proven before it could be adopted as common practice.

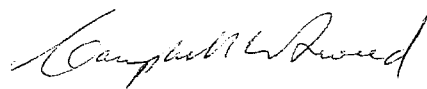
In Conclusion

The Ulster Farmers Union represents farming families across Northern Ireland. We value an education framework that has catered for the educational needs of our children regardless of social class, parental income or location. The Department must recognise current reality that rural children are already disadvantaged spending more time travelling to and from school than urban children; this is as it always has been. The UFU is concerned that the proposed changes will disadvantage rural children further. A country child must be able to secure a place in the school of their choice as easily as a child living in the town or city.

The UFU requests that serious consideration is given to all of our responses as we feel very strongly about these issues and must be assured that the consultation process is meaningful. We hope and trust that the Department will endeavour to resolve these issues.

I trust these comments are of use to you.

Yours faithfully



CAMPBELL TWEED OBE FRAgS
Ulster Farmers' Union President