

**South Eastern Education and Library Board
Board Meeting
6 July 2006**

Draft response to Bain Review

Context

- 1 The South Eastern Education and Library Board (SEELB) welcomes this opportunity to make a response to the initial draft of the Bain review and in particular welcomes the commitment to:
 - Protecting the different ethos of schools
 - Retention of specific sector dimensions
 - Collaborative planning and provision
 - Reasonable parental choice
- 2 In a period of significant change, both in terms of the demographic downturn and the changing emphasis in the curriculum, it is important for the planning process to balance the long term objective of ensuring that the estate is fit for the future with the need to make adequate provision for pupils who are currently going through the Education system.
- 3 We believe that any review also needs to take account of the increasing need to make adequate provision for children from other ethnic backgrounds. This will mean challenging the traditional model of education in Northern Ireland.
- 4 The role of education in promoting integration in society is an important aspect of planning for the future and the report recognises that this role is one that is shared by all schools, not only those which carry the integrated label. Indeed, it is notable that many schools within both the Controlled and Maintained sectors are integrated in all but name in that they welcome children from all sections of the community. This is encouraging, in that it indicates that parents will often place a higher importance on other values within a school, such as educational outcomes, pastoral care or even proximity of the school to their home, rather than choosing solely on the basis of community background.
- 5 The special position of the Education and Library Boards should be recognised as the largest single owner of the schools estate and the main bodies which will transfer ownership to the new Education and Skills Authority (ESA). The schools that will be transferred from the ELBs are essentially open to all denominations and many actively promote integration within the community.
- 6 The SEELB would also like to place on record its concern about the delays that are frequently encountered between making a decision about a future capital build and actually commencing work. Delays can be caused by a variety of factors and have a very detrimental impact on schools including:
 - Lack of maintenance leading to poor conditions in the interim
 - Parents choosing alternative schools due to uncertainty
 - Falling enrolments in the school(s), leading to later concerns about the original economic appraisal on which the scheme was based.

- 7 One of the main factors that contribute to delay is difficulty with obtaining planning permission. If a more strategic approach were adopted, it may be possible to work more closely with the planning authorities to ensure that this period of uncertainty is reduced.

Objectives

- 8 Before setting out any strategic approach to the management of the schools estate, it is necessary to clearly establish the objectives of the education system and paragraph 10 of the review articulates these objectives.
 - i. "Provide all pupils with high quality educational opportunities and experiences in terms of curriculum, learning and teaching, through which they achieve high standards in terms of their attainment, personal growth and social development and achieve their potential."

SEELB concurs with this objective, but would comment that the actual school building can only make a minor contribution towards its achievement. The main factor that contributes to this objective is the quality of the staff within the school and the leadership of the Principal and senior management team. This is recognised in paragraph 14 of the review.

Nevertheless, it is the view of SEELB that with careful change management, it is possible to bring together an excellent management team from schools that are being rationalised, thus providing a new school with both good leadership and high quality accommodation.

The importance of managing the change could be reflected by providing a small change management support team to assist them with the practical elements of the change management process, thus releasing the Principal and senior staff to focus on developing the combined ethos for the new school. The change management support team could be provided by the ESA and would therefore be in a position to develop expertise to assist in a smooth transition and to collate and share good practice for the future.

In this context, the continued availability of early release packages for staff in schools that are being rationalised is very important, in order to maintain high staff morale throughout the process and to ensure that the new school is served by well motivated staff. Any changes to the arrangements for voluntary early retirement of teachers should consider the potential impact of the major rationalisation that is required in the schools estate. In addition, adequate provision must be made for ancillary staff in schools and similarly, the proposed changes to the NILGOS pension scheme should be timed to facilitate the rationalisation process.

Planning for the future should also include succession planning for teaching staff. This will require a fundamental review of the age profile of existing staff and consideration of the number of teachers that will be required to be trained for the future. Further consideration of this issue is beyond the scope of this response.

- ii. “Be vital to social and community well-being, contributing effectively and appropriately to broader social and economic goals and progress.” This is further amplified in paragraph 11, stating that “it is a seminal purpose of the Northern Ireland Education system to promote a culture of tolerance and reconciliation and, for schools, to do so in keeping with the particular ethos and circumstances within which they operate”.

It is the view of SEELB that this can only be achieved by adopting an incremental approach to change, with due regard to the strongly held views of stakeholders.

- iii. “Accommodate reasonable parental choice in relation to the values and ethos of the school, with due regard to the use of public funds.”

As previously stated, SEELB welcome the retention of reasonable parental choice. We recognise the difficulties of providing choice in every geographical area, as many areas cannot sustain provision in each of the sectors.

We therefore propose the following model:

In areas where there are sufficient numbers to support separate provision, including fully integrated or shared provision, this should be retained where this is the expressed preference of stakeholders. In areas where this is not possible, a shared model should be adopted. A number of possible shared models are explored in paragraph 13. Parents who are unhappy with the shared model in their local school would have the choice of sending their child to a school in another locality.

Consideration would have to be given to whether or not transport would be provided in this instance. There is a range of factors that should be considered:

- If Government as actively promoting integration in education, it may be seen as counter productive to facilitate parents who wish to opt out of this objective
- Failure to provide transport could be seen as discriminatory to lower income families, effectively reducing their choice
- Rural areas would be less likely to offer a variety of provision than urban areas, again giving rise to potential discrimination against children in rural areas.

- iv. “Provide equitable access for all pupils.”

SEELB believe that the issues of equitable access must be considered along with the issue of equitable funding. Under the current Common Formula Funding (CFF), additional funding is provided to support small schools. This results in considerably more per capita funding being directed to small schools than to larger schools, which is inequitable. In addition, even with this additional funding, some small schools are still unable to live within their LMS budget allocation.

SEELB therefore believe that a critical outcome of the Bain review should be a specific recommendation on the normal minimum size for a school. This should be based primarily on educational grounds, backed by relevant research. However, financial viability should form an element of the decision, to address the current

inequalities in funding. Exceptions should be made for schools serving a rural community, where it can be demonstrated that the pupils attending the school are drawn from the rural area. The definition of a rural area should be defined in terms of the distance to the nearest alternative schools.

In the paper entitled "The Strategic Management of the Controlled Schools Estate, SEELB used a figure of 85 pupils in Primary and 350 pupils in Post-primary. These figures were set at a low level to reflect the current configuration of existing schools. It could be argued that the figures should normally be considerably higher than this (perhaps 180 for Primary and 500 for Post-primary). These figures allow for a single class base for each year group to be the normal configuration in primary schools, but would still require collaboration between post-primary schools and FE colleges to meet the requirements of the 14 – 19 curriculum.

The figure of 180 would allow a normal Pupil Teacher Ratio of approximately 26. Such schools are usually financially viable at present, and the reduction in the number of small schools receiving additional funding would enable more resources to be allocated to larger schools, which would further improve the financial position of these schools. The school's enrolment figure would be set at 210, allowing for the number in each class to rise to 30. This would enable popular schools to increase their enrolment, thus providing reasonable parental choice. A school with an enrolment figure of 210 would not be considered to have excess surplus places provided the enrolment was at least 180 (see paragraphs 17 to 19 below).

In an urban setting, a two stream model may be a better option for primary, as there is currently considerable difficulty in obtaining sites in these areas.

Specific responses to the matters raised

- 9 In relation to developing mechanisms and processes for successful planning, SEELB believe that it should be the role of the Department of Education (DE) to produce clear, research-based, strategic guidelines in the following areas:
 - Normal minimum size for a viable school
 - Criteria to be used to determine when schools that are smaller than this are required to meet rural need
 - Conditions to be satisfied in relation to sharing of resources (see comments under 6 (iii) above for an example of how this could be constructed).
 - How statistics on long term enrolments are to be calculated
- 10 DE should also require that all grant-aided schools comply with these guidelines.
- 11 It will be the role of the ESA to produce area plans, based on these guidelines and to undertake consultation with sectoral advisory bodies, Boards of Governors, parents and staff.
- 12 It is recommended that all rationalisations be based on involving all schools in an area. Where the recommended action is to be delayed for a period of time, perhaps because the existing schools are low on the priority list based on suitability and condition survey information, consideration should be given to interim solutions that will meet the needs of the existing schools. In some cases this could include bringing schools together on

existing sites, although this is generally unpopular with parents who do not want their children to be disrupted twice. In some instances additional funding for schools may be required to meet the educational needs of children in the school, during the interim period.

13 Further research, extensive consultation and pilot studies would be needed before it would be possible to arrive at definitive models for sharing facilities and resources. This could possibly include looking at models that have been developed in Scotland. However, an initial analysis would suggest three possible models:

- Two separate schools, retaining individual ethos would be established on a shared site. The two schools would share elements of the building including for example technology suites, PE facilities and dining facilities. It may also be possible to share other resource areas. Some members of staff could also be shared including, for example, building supervisors, cleaners, catering staff and secretarial support staff. It would also be possible to share responsibility for specific areas of curriculum development and specialist teaching staff. It is anticipated that this model would be most suitable where the total number of pupils in the school was reasonably large and fairly balanced between the two communities.
- One school would be established, sharing all facilities and the majority of teaching staff. Individual ethos would be maintained by making special arrangements for the teaching of specific areas of the curriculum and assemblies. It is anticipated that this model would be most suitable where the majority of pupils are drawn from one community or the overall number of pupils is very small.
- Federation between existing schools may be a suitable model where there is no immediate requirement for new premises. This could include a joint Board of Governors for two or more schools, sharing of a non-teaching Principal and sharing of other resources (e.g. support staff, individual teachers taking lead responsibility for parts of the curriculum etc). This model would encourage a joint approach, which would facilitate future shared working on a single site at a later stage. Appropriate funding arrangements would have to be put in place to support this model.
- All of these models have the capacity to accommodate children from ethnic minorities, with additional specific provision being provided as required.

14 In some instances the local community may express a preference for a fully integrated school. These schools already include recognition of the needs of all sides of the community. This model may be the most suitable where there is significant representation from other ethnic minorities, who do not fit into either community.

15 It is the view of SEELB that the following factors should be taken into account in estate planning:

- The size of the proposed school
- The sustainability of the local population
- The distance to alternative schools
- The condition and suitability of existing schools
- The population mix (see 13 above).

16 SEELB also note that it is important that all new schools be designed flexibly to accommodate, as far as possible:

- increases or decreases in enrolment
- possible shared use by the community
- changes to the recommended minimum classroom and resource area sizes
- possible use as part of the extended schools programme.

17 The issue of the appropriate level of surplus capacity raises an interesting point on the definition of surplus capacity. At present this is defined in relation to the DE enrolment figure for the school and the actual enrolment. However, in some cases, if the DE building handbook guidelines were to be adhered to, the school would not be sufficiently large to accommodate the notional enrolment. Often this “surplus” space is being effectively used by the school as resource areas, which would otherwise not be available in the school.

18 It may be useful to look at research in other countries on the level of surplus capacity that is necessary to maintain a reasonable level of parental choice. It is interesting to note that SEELB currently has a notional surplus capacity of approximately 25% in the primary sector. Even with this very high level of surplus capacity, a small number of pupils did not gain admission to the school of their first choice.

19 If the SEELB recommendations in relation to school size in the primary sector were to be adopted, it would be possible to establish schools with a minimum enrolment of 180, which could be extended to 210, without breaching class size limits. This equates to a notional surplus capacity of approximately 14%.

20 The question of how post-primary and Further Education provision can best be planned together to provide access to the curriculum was extensively explored in the Costello report. As far as possible Secondary schools, Grammar schools and Further Education (FE) colleges should be located in the same area, to facilitate sharing of resources. It is recognised that the relatively small number of FE colleges will make this impossible in some areas.

21 It should also be noted that early pilots of the Costello clusters were difficult to implement, due to the lack of clear leadership and the need for cross-departmental input. The needs of the new curriculum may be the driver that is needed to provide the impetus to make these arrangements work effectively, but it is essential that all sectors work together and no individual school is able to opt out of a cluster because they are sufficiently large to provide all of the curriculum requirements independently.

22 The final point regarding promoting a climate conducive to integrating education is clearly the most significant challenge in Northern Ireland. As previously noted, stakeholders have very definite views and these are, to some extent, incompatible. There are very strongly held views on such issues as:

- The role of small schools
- The role of the Grammar schools
- The need for a particular ethos to permeate every aspect of the curriculum

23 While SEELB strongly support open dialogue, sharing of views and attempting to arrive at a consensus view, this may not be a realistic way of moving forward in the short term. SEELB would therefore propose that, having taken into account the views of all sides, it is necessary to arrive at a conclusion that is supported by research and meets the needs and aspirations of the majority of stakeholders. Future funding would then be dependent on adhering to the principles that are determined as a result of this consultation. In order for this to be effective, it is necessary that these principles retain as much flexibility as is possible, while complying with the over-riding need to promote good practice and provide efficient and effective use of resources.

Other issues

24 The concept of the school as the heart of the community is often quoted as a justification for retaining small, currently unviable schools. SEELB believe that if such schools are to be retained, it is essential that there is specific recognition of this factor and that funding be secured from sectors other than education to support this.

25 On the more general point of community use of schools, it should be noted that the costs of community use cannot be carried by the education budget and proper frameworks should be developed to ensure an equitable sharing of costs where the premises are used by the community for other purposes. There are already several examples of facilities being shared between schools and others (e.g. Sporting facilities at Laurelhill Community College), and these could form the basis of a generic model for cost sharing.

26 There is a lack of research into what funding is actually needed to provide a quality education. Past reviews have placed emphasis on maintaining historic levels of funding in Primary/Post-primary and retaining the differential, which currently assumes a higher level of investment per pupil in Post-primary. The opportunity should be taken to base any new funding mechanism on objective evidence.

27 In particular, SEELB believe that the option of removing teachers' salaries from LMS should be considered. At present, a school with a settled teaching staff is expected to accommodate salary progression within the budget of the individual school. This can present budget difficulties for such schools. If teachers' salaries were funded centrally, there would be a reasonable expectation of turnover of staff, with some higher paid staff leaving and being replaced each year. This is not always the case for an individual school.

Conclusion

28 This is an initial response, prepared in a very short timeframe. SEELB look forward to meeting with you and to the opportunity to further develop proposals.

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