

EMPOWERING SCHOOLS - CONSULTATION ON THE PROVISIONS OF THE EDUCATION (SCOTLAND) BILL

Response from Scottish Parent Teacher Council

Executive Summary

We believe that the role of the Head Teacher in setting the culture and ethos, particularly around parental engagement, is of prime importance. When working in collaboration with excellent teachers and engaged families, school teams can make a significant difference to children and young people as they collaborate on school improvement. Parents are mostly in favour of high levels of autonomy for Head Teachers but feel most of the proposals are unnecessary as the powers exist at the moment. They want Head Teachers to work in partnership with other school leaders and services to combine their resources.

Parents want to see clearly both the accountability and the impact measures of the proposed changes. They feel disconnected from the Collaboratives, which are already running despite this consultation. They wonder how meaningful this process is?

Parents do not want to run schools but they want to be partners in the education of their children, and to have a say in school improvement – and the Collaboratives.

Funding for schools is a key concern: parents do not want governance changes to draw money out of the school system and create another layer of bureaucracy.

The Government's own International Council of Education Advisors 'advised against becoming too focussed on changing the structure of the education system when, arguably, the more important aspect are the culture and capacity within the system.' We would support this recommendation wholeheartedly.

1. Introduction

SPTC is pleased to submit this response to the Government's consultation on the forthcoming Education Bill.

SPTC is a long-standing independent parents group and a registered charity which provides support to parents and carers all over Scotland. We provide membership services to individual Parent Councils and PTAs, as well as offering advice and information to individual parents who have concerns about any aspect of the education of their child, or the wider education system. We support education professionals in developing their skills and understanding around effective partnership working with families and the wider community.

To inform this response, we have asked parents for their reaction to key aspects of the consultation, spoken with and listened to the feedback from parent groups and taken into account the comments of individual parents, as well as consulting with our volunteer parent and teacher directors.

SPTC has consistently argued for greater creativity, innovation, leadership and flexibility within our education system. We want our children to have opportunities suited to their needs which help them achieve the best they can, parents productively involved with their children's learning and school staff who have vision and passion about the shared endeavour which is education.

This document maintains this approach and summarises our response to the various aspects of the consultation. We trust this will be helpful to Government in the development of the Bill.

2. Headteachers' Charter

Strong and effective school leadership is a significant in-school influence on the success of that school: school leaders who work collaboratively with excellent teachers help to create a positive, creative and supportive culture for pupils and staff as well as families, and positive outcomes for young people. They also play a critical role in the approach and ethos around parental engagement, which then has an impact across the school. From the perspective of promoting parental engagement this role is pivotal.

There is evidence that there is a strong correlation between school autonomy and school performance, and our consultation with parents confirms that they wish to see head teachers having autonomy.

However, parents also tell us that in their school they see head teachers who already has much of the autonomy described in this plan, within the current governance arrangements and, crucially, without legislation. Parent responses to SPTC – and therefore likely also to Government – reflect this varied and confusing picture and the experience they have of leadership in their own school. In essence the differences in our system currently stem from the different approaches across local authorities.

Our survey responses demonstrate that parents are generally in support of the key aspects of the Head Teacher's Charter, particularly in relation to:

- Joint working with parents and staff, between schools and Collaboratives and the wide range of services and supports that work within communities, including health, social work, Youth Work and Community Learning and Development
- Responsibility for recruitment and structure of the school staff team
- Responsibility for curriculum design and school improvement (as part of a community approach)
- Joint working with local authorities around placement of students and probationers

This support is however tempered by specific areas of concern:

- Excellent teaching is the prime in-school influencer of positive outcomes for children and yet excellent teaching is not referenced in this plan, nor effectively facilitated.
- To whom will Head Teachers be responsible and accountable, and how will that work in practice?
- Do Head Teachers, and establishments, currently have the capacity to adapt to a new governance model?

- How will Head Teachers be supported in this new role, particularly in areas where – historically – support has been poor.
- We would like to see Head Teachers share a responsibility for building the strength and capacity of clusters, ensuring shared approaches across the learning experiences of young people
- Parents know there are many good Head Teachers: they also know there are inadequate Head Teachers. Parents want to understand how this will be addressed under the Charter.
- Authority and autonomy for Head Teachers must not translate into authoritarian or autocratic approaches. SPTC's experience in recent months is that there is a noticeable trend towards Head Teachers adopting an overbearing style towards Parent Councils – a matter of great concern.
- Similarly, we are concerned that Head Teachers ensure that the principles of inclusive education and equity are retained in all of our schools.
- Parents feel strongly that Head Teachers should not become business managers and will need robust business management support if they are to be effective leaders of learning.
- The potential conflict between the proposals and existing teacher contracts and employment law, particularly since teachers will continue to be employed by the local authority.

3. Parental Engagement

Parents are supportive of the proposed duty on Head Teachers to work in co-operation with Parent Councils in relation to school improvement and policies, and the requirement to work in partnership with the PC and the Parent Forum.

Parents also agree strongly that parents should feed in to school improvement plans. However, parents tell us that they do not wish to run schools, but to be seen as co-educators alongside teachers, tutors and coaches. This requires collaborative approaches across the whole school community and engagement of families and children in the planning and evaluation of learning.

SPTC's experience currently is that Head Teachers' experience and capability in this area is extremely variable. In some parts this is a result of improvement plans often being largely dictated by local authority imperatives (and therefore not capable of being influenced), but in others it is because Head Teachers do not have the skill set necessary to ensure school improvement is a collaborative process involving the whole school community.

Specifically, parental engagement activity is not seen as being a part of school improvement: this is a critical change needed in the system and in the thinking of senior leaders in school and the wider system.

The majority want to see early years settings included within the scope of the Parental Involvement legislation and support the principle of schools having home school link workers.

Parents want to see Parent Councils have a clear understanding of their role in terms of being representative of the entire parent forum and being mindful of equalities legislation.

Supporting families and family learning should also be a central plank of the role of the Parent Council, working in partnership with school staff and the wider parent forum. The government's intention to ensure parents and schools are supported by a Home/School liaison worker is a positive plan if it is adequately resourced.

4. Funding

SPTC has submitted a response to the earlier consultation regarding school funding. Put simply, parents want to see adequate funding for their children's school, wherever they are and whatever their circumstances.

5. Regional Collaboratives

Parents are seeing Regional Collaboratives being established now, ahead of a Bill which (it is hoped) will clearly define how they will work in relation to both schools and local authorities. There is a cynicism that Government is consulting on something it is already enacting and question how valid this consultation is?

Parents have told us that they feel disconnected from the Collaboratives: the geographical combinations make no sense to them. They struggle to see where they and their school fits within the groupings which have been formed.

Of critical importance to parents are:

- The roles, responsibilities and accountability of the Collaboratives in relation to local authorities and schools. Where is local democracy in this structure?
- There must be no additional bureaucracy in the system which draws funding out of schools
- Parents want transparency around funding for the RICs and specific assurances around the funding of RICs and the re-shaped Education Scotland: whatever happens they will not accept the movement of funds away from the classroom and children.
- The mechanisms by which the voice of parents will be heard by Collaboratives: as highlighted earlier, if parental engagement is a critical part of school improvement (which we believe it is) and Collaboratives are responsible for supporting improvement, there requires to be a mechanism for the Collaboratives to gain an insight into the parent perspectives across the region.
- Collaboratives should report annually on their activities and, most importantly, on the impact they are having on outcomes for children.

6. Pupil Participation

90% of the parents who responded to our survey agree that children have the right to express their views – and to be heard – about their own education and in the running of the school they attend. They also agree that this should be a requirement in the Head Teacher's charter.

We believe it is important that young people understand and exercise their rights, regardless of age, gender, ethnicity and background. Teachers, school leaders and families should work together to help them to do this.

7. Education Workforce Council for Scotland

SPTC wants this new Council to offer independent registration for individuals working within Scottish education. We also want parents to have access to a rigorous procedure through which they can raise concerns where standards fall below professional practices agreed and outlined.

The exact nature and structure of this organisation is not a matter of substantial interest to parents (other than those points made above) but, once again, parents do not want excessive bureaucracy or expenditure or restructuring of systems and organisations where this is not necessary in order to meet the needs of a new structure.

8. Conclusion

The Scottish Government has a declared aim of disrupting the education system in order to achieve positive change, which will have positive outcomes on children and young peoples' outcomes.

It has consulted repeatedly on its proposals, and parents tell us they are struggling to both understand and respond in an informed way. They also feel that their responses are then roundly ignored – for instance the Collaboratives have started work, ahead of the change in legislation and in the face of concerns from many.

Further, there is no hard evidence of the success of the Collaborative model nor clarity about how success is to be evidenced. Parents want to understand how attainment and achievement will be improved by Collaboratives, when the evidence is that it is excellent teaching and effective parental engagement that make the difference.

There is a strong argument that governance and structure does not change outcomes for children: improved outcomes come from strong leadership and collaborative working across the school community, particularly with families. The Government's own International Council of Education Advisors 'advised against becoming too focussed on changing the structure of the education system when, arguably, the more important aspect are the culture and capacity within the system.' We would support this recommendation wholeheartedly.

Parents want to see leadership and collaboration as the key focus points of the government's concern, not system change which will inevitably result in resources and energy moving away from the teaching and support of children.

Scottish Government must recognise that parents are interested in improving outcomes for the children who are in the classroom now. They will not be content to setting for long term improvement.

On behalf of Scottish Parent Teacher Council

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Executive Director

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