

Submission to the NI Assembly Committee for Education by the Association of Controlled Grammar Schools

Committee stage consideration of the Education Bill

The Association of Controlled Grammar Schools welcomes this opportunity to offer comment on the Draft Education Bill currently before the Education Committee.

Introduction

As an Association we strongly support the aim of this reform “*to improve outcomes for all young people... and to streamline education administration to ensure that much needed resources can be directed to supporting front-line services*”. However we have concerns that the Bill, as currently drafted, does not necessarily deliver the additional financial resources required in schools nor the “*maximised delegated autonomy for schools*” originally suggested.

The Association wishes in this submission both to draw attention to some aspects within the Bill which require greater clarity and to make some other points for consideration by the Committee.

Roles and Responsibilities

We note that ESA will become the single employing authority for all staff within all grant-aided schools and note that the staff in our schools had always been employed by the Education and Library Boards and the proposed single employing authority should ensure an equality of treatment across Northern Ireland.

Employment Schemes

The Association welcomes the proposed change to the legislation which currently operates within the controlled sector, namely the opportunity for schools to make all appointments to posts at the school without reference to a Teacher Appointments Committee.

Clearly given the diversity of schools within ESA, some Boards of Governors may wish to specify posts whereby the appointment may be carried out by ESA but it is envisaged that many schools will welcome the opportunity not to specify posts within their employment scheme and thus allowing the appointment of senior posts to be made by Boards of Governors of the individual School.

We note that the Department of Education may, with the approval of the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister, issue guidance on schemes of employment, including model schemes, and contend that these must take account of the varying levels of autonomy which will be demanded by the diverse range of schools within our education system. The Association contends that the autonomy offered to voluntary grammar schools in clause 12 re payment of salaries and contributions should be made available to all schools who wish to operate their own payment system.

We also welcome that all decisions in regard to the staff complement will be determined by the Boards of Governors as these Boards are best equipped to decide what is in the best interests of each school to enable them to best meet the needs of the pupils within the school. However we trust that there will be increased flexibility for Boards of Governors in controlled schools than is currently the case, particularly with reference to job descriptions where some generic specifications do not necessarily provide an appropriate basis upon which to make appointments.

Other Functions of ESA

The Association has concerns re the all embracing power envisaged for ESA within clause 22, “*ESA may do anything that appears to it to be conducive or incidental to the discharge of its functions.*” We believe that it is important to have protection in legislation against micro-management of schools by a centralised body.

Area Planning

The Association supports that ESA has a duty to ensuring that “*providers of educational services in an area*” must be involved in and consulted in area planning. We welcome the introduction of a sectoral support body for the controlled sector but believe that if sectoral bodies are to be involved in, and consulted on, area planning that the bodies involved must be capable of representing the views of all schools. In addition the Association believes that it is essential each individual school is consulted directly regarding area plans that may impact their school.

Clarification needs to be provided on clause 28(3) as to what criteria would be used by ESA to “*determine that the changes to the plan for the area are not of sufficient importance to warrant the involvement and consultation mentioned in that subsection*”. What ESA may determine to be “*not of sufficient importance*” may be of significance to a particular school and the community it represents.

Schemes of Management

The Association would seek clarification on clause 34 on the “*model schemes regarded by the Department as suitable for particular descriptions of schools*”. We recognise the diverse range of schools and that different schools will seek varying levels of autonomy and flexibility within the Scheme of Management. However it is essential given the recent findings of the CBI which concludes that the process of decentralisation of schools in England be accelerated that the legislation here reflects that and provides “*maximised delegated autonomy*” for those schools which wish it and have demonstrated the ability to manage their affairs.

Promotion of Attainment

The Association supports wholeheartedly the promotion of high standards of educational attainment, as evidenced within our schools currently, but would request clarification on how this should be measured.

It is imperative that an effective value-added measure be delivered to allow for meaningful comparison of attainment to be made across a wide range of schools. This will obviously require the need for robust and verifiable benchmarking data prior to transfer to Post-Primary.

Appointments to Boards of Governors

In ensuring the maintenance of ethos in our schools the importance of clause 39(4) that it is “*the duty of ESA in making appointments (of governors) to appoint persons appearing to ESA to be committed to the ethos of the school*” cannot be overstated.

Inspections

The Association fully recognises the need for accountability within Schools but would suggest clarification is needed in the change of nature of inspections as defined in the legislation. Clause 45, in particular, appears to suggest a lack of trust between ETI and schools which we, as an Association, do not feel represents the situation which exists currently.

Sectoral Bodies

The Association welcomes the draft Bill’s intention to support sectoral bodies, but is concerned that the legislation does not provide enough assurances as to the remit and function of such bodies. It is important, that whilst providing support to sectors, that significant funds are not released to do this in a way which would create duplication of provision thus reducing the monies available for front-line services.

Conclusion

The Association contends that while much of the aims of the Bill are laudable and desirable that it is essential that the Bill delivers “*maximised delegated autonomy*” to schools and increased funds for front-line services in order to maximise the benefit for all of our young people and therefore ensuring that the limited resources that are available to the Department are utilised in the most effective and efficient manner.

In opening the debate on the Education Bill, the Minister for Education said “... *we already know what good schools look like. They have strong, effective leadership from their board of governors and senior management team; they have a strong sense of belonging to the communities that they serve; they each have an ethos that pupils, parents, staff and governors support; and they have the autonomy and the support that they need to manage their day-to-day affairs. I wish every school to be like that.*”

It is imperative that this is what the Bill delivers to ensure that schools can deliver the best possible outcomes for the young people in our country.