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CBI Northern Ireland submission to Education Committee's call for evidence on the Education Bill

November 2012

Introduction

CBI Northern Ireland is an independent, non-party political organisation funded entirely by its members in industry and commerce. Across the UK, the CBI speaks for some 240,000 businesses which together employ around a third of the private sector workforce. Our membership in Northern Ireland includes businesses from all sectors and of all sizes. It includes the majority of the top 100 companies, small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), social enterprises, manufacturers and sectoral associations.

CBI Northern Ireland welcomes the opportunity to comment on the Education Bill as part of the Northern Ireland Assembly Education Committee's Committee Stage consideration of the Bill.

General comments on the Bill

As a key part of the Review of Public Administration (RPA), the introduction of this Education Bill embodies one of the final pillars of the 2002 programme of reform. We are very much of the view that this is a welcome Bill in the sense that it should deal with the multiplicity of bureaucracy which has been a feature of our education system for too long. Too many resources have been focused on the administrative side of education and it is now imperative we focus on directing increased resources to the frontline where the focus can be put on educational outcomes.

While we can understand some of the rationale for having the old system, in the context of the era for which it was created, it is now clearly an out-dated model and one which, increasingly, is acting as a restraint on the delivery of education in our classrooms day to day.

The unfortunate delays that have been associated with the introduction of this Bill, and particularly the new Education and Skills Authority (ESA), have led to significant concerns regarding the perceived 'running down' of the existing Education and Library Boards and it is undoubted that their governance models are in urgent need of change.



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As with other key pillars of RPA, it is envisaged that the introduction of ESA will lead to savings of some £40 million by the end of this budget period. CBI Northern Ireland welcomes the savings that are associated with this streamlining reform process, indeed we were of the view in our 2010 *Time for Action* report that there was significant potential to deliver more savings than were identified in the original incarnations of ESA – we therefore welcome the increased level of savings that are now envisaged and look forward to seeing these being realised and reinvested into frontline areas where we can focus on educational outcomes.

We welcome the fact that the version of ESA as designed under this Bill will not subsume the Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment (CCEA). It is our view that placing CCEA within ESA would have led to a conflict of interests and we welcome the independence that CCEA will retain. In the context of the wider review of GCSEs and A Level's that CCEA is presently undertaking, we look forward to assessing the emerging findings from its interim reports and final report due in June. In the context of the changes to the GCSE system being proposed by Education Secretary Michael Gove MP, we are firmly of the view that Northern Ireland cannot be left behind nor can our pupils be unfairly disadvantaged in a UK context.

CBI Northern Ireland has long held the view that, much as there is duplication in our education bureaucracy, there is also significant duplication in our education system in terms of buildings. That is why we have given a qualified welcome to the area planning process that has been detailed by the Education Minister over recent months. The rationalisation of our schools estate is long overdue and it is vitally important that ESA takes on and completes the work that has already commenced. However, we note the concerns raised by school and community leaders, as well as interest groups and politicians, in terms of the progress to date of area planning and hope genuine concerns and viewpoints are reflected in the plans for both the primary and post-primary sectors as they are finalised. It is our view that area planning must not reinforce the educational divisions in our society and, indeed, must set in place a structure to eliminate them in terms of buildings, learning opportunities for all and, ultimately, bringing communities together.

That being said, CBI Northern Ireland would very much welcome any additional work for the construction sector that may arise from the area planning process. It will come as no surprise to Committee members that we remain in immensely challenging economic times and an economic boost provided by new infrastructure projects in the education sector, on top of those presently in the pipeline, would be of significant value to many of our members.

There is no doubt that we have something of a polarised education system. Many of our young people have achievements and qualifications of which they and their teachers should be proud. However too many of our young people do not. Given the importance we place on our economic recovery, and an economic recovery which places Northern Ireland in a competitive position within the world, it is vital that we have an education system that, while increasingly focuses on the STEM subjects and their further uptake at GCSE and A Level, seeks to enable the undoubted talent that exists, particularly in some of the most socially disadvantaged areas in Northern Ireland. We clearly need an education system more linked in with the needs and priorities of business in the 21st century. We also need an education system which does much more to give all of our young people a fighting chance thus fostering more cohesive communities and contributing to the needs of our wider society. It is our hope that ESA can enable both of these key goals to be achieved.

Following on from this, CBI Northern Ireland believes it is vital that, as part of the economy we wish to see develop, due regard is given to the difference between academic and technical excellence. There are a variety of means by which our young people can achieve success and that there must be no one size fits all approach – be it academic or non-academic. Our economy and society as a whole will only benefit if it has a mixture of both and the relative worth of one over the other must not be over or underplayed.

It is imperative that, whatever ESA is now or whatever it evolves to become, our teachers are allowed and enabled to teach. Much has been said about the increasing bureaucratic constraints on our teaching profession and we hope that this Bill, and in turn ESA, seek to decrease these constraints to allow teachers to do what they are best enabled to do. A key theme of a recent CBI report, *Raising ambition for all in schools*, is that of empowering teachers. There is a clear recognition on our part that, right across the UK, effective school leadership and high quality teaching matter more than anything to delivering positive outcomes within our schools. Education has been micro-managed for too long and we believe that greater power and responsibility urgently need to be devolved to the head teachers and teachers within the education system.

During the Second Stage of the Bill in the Assembly on 15 October, the Education Minister said:

'We also want to encourage more and more people to become members of boards of governors...Leading businesspeople, those in law, senior civil servants, etc, should take a look around and ask themselves where their skills as governors would be best placed'.

This approach is something that we strongly agree with. There are significant benefits in having strong linkages between local businesses and business leaders and our schools, and roles on boards of governors are one way of enabling that. As part of a desire to embed the links between schools and business, there may also perhaps exist opportunities for business people who act as governors to become mentors. This could further foster links with businesses close to schools in their geographic area and enhance cohesiveness among communities. The CBI will continue to strongly support and promote the role of school governors to our membership and will look to carry out a piece of work in relation to this during 2013.

In reflecting further on the contributions made by MLAs at the Second Stage of the Bill in the Assembly on 15 October, we are clearly of the view that this Bill must not be an enabler of politicisation in education. Our education system should and must be responsive to the needs of those groups detailed in Clause 54 of the Bill (indeed we strongly welcome this clause) but it is crucially important that this reform process does not create further division in a system which has too often found itself as a political football.

Concluding comment

Overall, CBI Northern Ireland welcomes the introduction of this Bill to the Assembly and the detailed consideration it will now be given by the Education Committee at its Committee Stage. In our remarks we have expressed some concerns with aspects of the Bill and we look forward to seeing how these can be given further consideration. A properly functioning education system is vital to our economic prospects going forward and it is incumbent on Committee members, and ultimately the Department and wider Executive to ensure that this is the case and to enable our young people to make a fuller contribution to society.

Commentary on the clauses of the Bill

We will not provide comment on all clauses of the Bill but only the selected clauses below:

Clause 2: Functions and general duty of ESA

We fully agree that ESA will have a key role in raising standards of educational attainment across the board. As noted in our comments above, it is vital that we have a system which acts as an enabler of our young people to achieve their undoubted potential.

Clause 38: Duties of Board of Governors in relation to achievement of high standards of educational attainment

We believe that Boards of Governors have a key role in the promotion of high standards of educational attainment by pupils at our schools. It is our view that business leaders and representatives should continue to put themselves forward for governor roles and indeed that this should be furthered. We would fully support any moves on the part of ESA to enhance the linkages that schools have right across Northern Ireland with businesses in their locality.

Clause 54: Discharge by the Council of its functions

As noted, we welcome the independence that CCEA will retain from ESA as part of this Bill. We note that, in this clause, CCEA should, in the discharge of its functions, have due regard to the requirements of industry and commerce, as well as other key stakeholders. CBI Northern Ireland very much welcomes this as we believe it is of fundamental importance that our education system is geared towards the needs of business over the medium and long-term. We look forward to seeing in action how CCEA plan to take this on-going process of consultation forward.

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