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The Committee Clerk
The Education Committee
Room 241
Parliament Buildings
Ballymiscaw
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Belfast
BT4 3XX

15 November 2012

Dear Sir

EDUCATION AND SKILLS AUTHORITY LEGISLATION

The Board of Governors of Friends' School Lisburn would be grateful if their concerns about the ESA Bill could be considered by the Education Committee.

I write to express the concern of Ulster Quarterly Meeting of the Religious Society of Friends and of the Board of Governors of Friends' School Lisburn about the Education and Skills Authority Legislation before the Assembly.

Since the foundation of the School in 1774, those governing Friends' School have enjoyed the independence not only to make decisions quickly and efficiently, but also the freedom to guide the School in accordance with the values and aims of the Religious Society of Friends. The Board of Governors reports to Ulster Quarterly Meeting of the Religious Society of Friends, and ten members of the Board are appointed by Ulster Quarterly Meeting. Indeed, all members of the Board uphold the school's values and beliefs. Under the governance arrangements proposed in the Bill our distinctive ethos and traditional independence will be severely compromised. We believe that the proposed legislation will have a significant and detrimental impact on the future education of our children and on the character and ethos of Friends' School.

Our Board of Governors represents the educational aims of our Founders and also reflects the concerns of Ulster Quarterly Meeting, the Staff, the Parents and the Pupils. In the proposed centralised model of accountability the ethos and values of our school will be severely undermined by the new controlling body (ESA) and its political masters.

While we accept that there are certain benefits to some of the changes in the proposed Education Bill, there are many areas of major concern which directly threaten the autonomy of Friends' School and other voluntary grammar schools. The Bill will give the Education and Skills Authority (ESA) unprecedented command and control over all aspects of education in Northern Ireland, including Schemes of Management, Employment Schemes, Property and Financial Management.

The Bill excludes any form of recognition or representation of the voluntary sector on the ESA Board. If implemented, the legislation will strip the Board of Governors of the responsibility for recruitment and employment of all staff, including the Principal and Senior Staff. The primacy of this relationship is integral to the sense of school community. It is also the most efficient and least bureaucratic process for the effective management of resources.

It is well known that in England the shift is in the opposite direction giving greater independence to schools to manage their own destiny.

At present members of the Board of Governors are able to take decisions quickly and efficiently without having to involve any additional bureaucratic layer. Our decisions reflect many important aspects of school life e.g. staffing, curriculum, estate management and development, relationships with other schools, and with the local community. In order to remain solvent, we have been over many years effective and prudent using sound financial management practices. Under the proposed new Bill the power and flexibility to take all these important decisions will be removed.

The proposed legislation undermines the fundamental right of the Voluntary School Principle and the right of parental choice.

We are aware that the GBA has proposed specific amendments to the Bill which we fully endorse. We believe that the voluntary sector schools should be given the option to self-govern where they have the proven ability to do so.

We are extremely concerned over these developments in education and are relying on your Committee to take the appropriate action to ensure that the Bill is amended to alleviate our reservations and fears as outlined above and those of the GBA.

Yours sincerely



Aidan D Pearson
Vice Chairman, Board of Governors
On Behalf of
Margrit E Grey, Chairman