

The Association for Quality Education Limited,
Unit 3,
Weavers Court Business Park,
Belfast BT12 5GH
16th November 2012

Dear Mr. McCallion,

May I thank you for this opportunity to comment on the education bill which especially is being considered by the Education Committee.

At the outset I would say that AQE Limited believes that the bill in its present form should be withdrawn. It is far from satisfactory. While AQE has no issue with the reform of public administration and the streamlining of public services to save money, it does not appear that such a laudable aim can be met by setting up a new authority with much greater powers than the sum of the powers of the authorities which it is replacing. Yet that is exactly what is proposed with the setting up of the Education and Skills authority.

If the legislation confined itself to the amalgamation of the current Education and Library Boards and the Council for Catholic Maintained Schools into one authority with the same powers and obligations as those of the Education and Library Boards and the Council for Catholic Maintained Schools, then that would be satisfactory and indeed would undoubtedly effect significant savings. However, to set up a new authority with not just the powers which the authorities it replaces had, and to vest in that new authority powers which have hitherto have been exercised on a voluntary basis by the members of Boards of Governors of many schools just does not seem to make sense in the context of the reason for the legislation. The Education Bill proposes to set up an authority which will be the employer of 50,000 staff, the largest single employer of educational staff in western Europe, with little prospect of effecting savings so that a greater proportion of the education budget can be made available in the front line, in the classroom where it is most needed.

Further, the proposals in the Education Bill are contrary to the current trend of education thinking in England. There it has been concluded that the best interests of schools and of their pupils is served by devolving powers from the central government (or from the local authorities) to the Boards of individual schools. Those boards are best equipped to decide what is in the interests of the schools and how the powers of management of the schools should best be deployed.

Accordingly, instead of enlarging the bureaucracy, an education bill should be brought before the Assembly which allows for the devolution of power from the current Education and Library Boards and the Council for Catholic Maintained Schools to individual Boards of Governors in the controlled and maintained sectors, and that the present arrangements for voluntary grammar schools should be left untouched. Accordingly we propose that the legislation be amended so as to provide for what is outlined above. We shall be pleased to appear before the Education Committee to speak to these issues.

Yours sincerely,

Stephen Gowdy

Chairman AQE Ltd.