

29/1/2018

**Re: Empowering Schools: A consultation on the provisions of the Education (Scotland) Bill**

Dear Sir/Madam,

Please find below our response to the above consultation on behalf of Banchory Academy Parent Council. Since we did not feel equipped to be able to answer the specific questions in the consultation, we have set out our opinion in an introduction and then in a summary of our views on each section of the consultation.

**Introduction**

On the face of it the proposed bill sounds good. However, while there are differences of opinion among our parent council members, overall there are serious concerns about all aspects of the proposed bill. The proposed bill represents major changes to the Scottish education system, changes some have described as seismic. These proposals come after a number of other major changes to our education system (e.g. new National syllabuses & exams, and just this year the removal of unit tests). We feel there is a need for consolidation, rather than more dramatic changes.

Genuine empowerment of parents and head teachers supported by necessary resources and clearly defined mechanisms might be welcomed, but we fear that the reallocation of power into regional collaboratives most likely represents a decline in real funding, a more dispersed distribution of resources and expertise, and a move away from local empowerment.

The bill seems to represent a move towards the English and Welsh education system, and not one that is to be welcomed in Scotland. Change may be necessary, even desirable, but any changes must place the education of our young people first. Education must be properly resourced. We fear that the bill as proposed here represents austerity by a different name.

We recognise that Banchory Academy is in a fortunate position and generally enjoys good support from parents and the wider community. However, in some places schools are dealing with serious behavioural and social issues that take up all the time of staff. This represents a wider social problem that cannot be addressed by changes to our schools alone, especially changes that will result in fewer resources. There is no time or resources left in some schools for pursuing parental engagement



and initiatives such as pupil councils. The wider social problems need to be addressed to enable schools to concentrate on education, though we strongly believe that schools have a big role to play in this.

## **1. Headteachers' Charter**

While it is good that heads may be able to tailor their school to meet the needs of the young people in their local community, the proposals in the bill do not empower head teachers. Rather the bill establishes extreme asymmetry in the balance of power between education authorities who, under the proposals, would hold all the employment contracts and allocate school budgets, while the head teachers would be held responsible for delivery of education outcomes. The bill is disingenuous in claiming that head teachers will gain control of funding, when in fact they will take on responsibility of the allocated budget and not allocation of funding. Furthermore, the proposals would require head teachers to take on a wide range of administrative, financial and bureaucratic roles. We would much prefer head teachers to focus on running schools and the education of our children. If head teachers are to take on more decision making and greater fiscal responsibility it is vital that they remain connected to education, and do not become, or become replaced by, administrators.

These proposals represent a paradigm shift in education and the role of head teachers. Head teachers, and their senior and administrative teams, will require proper training to deal with the substantial increase in responsibilities if the proposals in the bill are implemented. Will a lot of older heads within a couple of years of retirement just leave early rather than take all these changes on? Will it discourage other staff from applying to be heads?

If local authorities are still responsible for the overall balance of staff that they employ, yet heads will gain the power to recruit the staff mix they wish for their individual schools, how will that balance out?

It is written that local authorities and heads will need to engage in constructive discussion and that local authorities will still fulfil the role of challenging heads' decisions, but who will be the ultimate arbiter where a head and a local authority end up in disagreement? If the head has full backing from the parent body, will the school (head & parents) prevail over the local authority?

In principle we are supportive of head teachers having more control over the curriculum, staffing and spending of school budgets. But there must be safe guards in place to ensure that all schools deliver a balanced education. We want to avoid the situation where specific schools become specialist academies. We support the proposal that head teachers should take into account the views of parents in setting the curriculum, but think that ultimately education professionals are the best placed to make these decisions.

## **2. Parental and Community Engagement**



There are clear benefits of parental and community engagement, and these should be encouraged and enabled. They should not be enforced. Changing legal definitions will not change the level or impact of genuine engagement.

For heads to be meaningfully collaborative with parents, the paper indicates that parent councils need to be more representative and diverse. However, there remain huge issues in encouraging parental involvement, and even greater issues getting equal representation from across the social, economic and ethnic groups. Parent councils run the risk of being a self-selecting minority whose concerns are not necessarily the same as all parents'. The school and parent councils should try to ensure equal representation, but it needs to be recognised that this is not always going to be possible.

The challenges of day-to-day living, the fall in standards of living for some, and the worries of job and financial security mean that engaging parents and the wider community will become more difficult. It must be recognised that parents may have limited time and lack confidence or feel they don't have the necessary background to engage with schools. For example, at present the parent community in Banchory is already contributing a huge amount of time and energy to a wide range of out of school activities. It is unclear to us how much more parents can contribute. We feel that for us the biggest barriers to greater parental involvement in schools come down to time and willingness. Unless, for example, employers start giving employees paid time off to engage with initiatives like parental involvement in schools, this situation is unlikely to change.

We support the idea that parent councils should have the opportunity to influence school policies, school improvement, senior staff appointment, and curricula, and that schools should have mechanisms to solicit parental views. However, this should not be enforced; some schools may lack the parental involvement to enable this. Others may have too much involvement and we recognise that education professionals are often the best placed and qualified to make informed educational decisions.

Even where there is a good level of involvement by parents, there may be an asymmetry of perceived 'power' between some schools and their parent body. Will education professionals really treat parents as equals? For parents to be able to collaborate properly in school policies, school improvement and curriculum design, they will need meaningful support in the form of training or workshops. Parent councils would need to be funded to cover costs of training and travel, and any associated expenses.

### **3. Pupil Participation**

We would welcome greater pupil participation, but also recognise that pupils face ever growing pressures. Also, we note that while pupils have much to contribute to the discussion over their education, they might not be the best placed to make key decisions concerning their and their peers' education. We are fortunate in having



good pupil engagement and representation on our parent council, and we would recommend that parent councils try to engage with pupils, and we support the creation of pupil councils. However, we feel this should be strongly encouraged and not enforced.

#### **4. Regional Improvement Collaboratives**

Our specific concern here for Banchory Academy is that the area of the proposed Northern Alliance Regional Improvement Collaborative is a huge geographic region that encompasses significant social, economic and cultural diversity. We do not believe this would be practical or beneficial to our young peoples' education. While the existing Northern Alliance, a smaller area than the area proposed in the consultation, works well in that school and education authorities can collaborate and draw on a wider knowledge and skill base, at present this is done on a needs basis. Collaboration should be encouraged and facilitated, not enforced. We think that enforced collaboration will be detrimental, indeed enforced collaboration ceases to be collaboration.

The Northern Alliance, as it stood before, was well regarded for the work it has done. In many regards the combined areas within it have a lot in common e.g. scattered population, lots of rural schools and the challenges that brings for attracting staff and for subject provision. However, we have real concerns that the Northern Alliance Regional Improvement Collaborative is too large and diverse, and that it will result in a dilution of resources. In addition, we have concerns about how our local needs will feed into, and be met by, the Regional Collaborative. Our feeling is that regional collaboratives need to be implemented at a much more local level. Saying that, we see the benefit of there being educational experts making up the Improvement Collaboratives, rather than elected members on committees who don't necessarily have an informed educational background. Hopefully this would lead to more professionalization of education, and less politicisation.

A further concern of ours is that, with the devolution of responsibility to head teachers, while the local authorities retain budgets, and the regional collaborations potentially have ultimate responsibility, where are the safety nets, what safe guards are in place and who is responsible for these?

#### **5. Education Workforce Council for Scotland**

We do not feel that we have enough knowledge to comment in detail on this point. However, our key and overriding concern here is that the very high standards in the Scottish education system must be upheld and maintained, if not improved.

Yours sincerely

Banchory Academy Parent Council

