

Education and Lifelong Learning Committee

THE LEARNING COUNTRY: THE FOUNDATION PHASE 3-7.

Memorandum prepared by Pupil Support Division for the Education and Lifelong Learning Committee

Introduction

1. This paper seeks to set the context for the presentation that will be made by Susan Davies and Shân Richards who are both seconded to the assembly because of their expertise in early years.

Background

2.1. In the document '*The Learning Country*', Jane Davidson, Minister for Education and Lifelong Learning proposed that Wales should consider how best to integrate the existing Desirable Outcomes with Key Stage 1 to develop a curriculum for a new statutory Foundation Phase that would extend from 3 to 7 years. The object would be to progressively improve the support for, and promotion of, children's rounded development and give them a flying start in life. The proposal received wide support.

2.2. As a result, Shân Richards was appointed as an Expert Adviser to work with Assembly Officials to develop proposals for the Foundation Phase. These proposals for a statutory Foundation Phase were discussed with a wide range of key stakeholders and a consultation document, '*The Learning Country: Foundation Phase 3-7 years*', was published on 12 February 2003.

2.3. The consultation document sought responses to a set of questions based on the content of each of its chapter. These questions formed the main questionnaire for the consultation process.

2.4. In addition the Welsh Assembly Government held seminars on the Foundation Phase in each of the 22 LEAs across Wales between 8 April and the 5 June 2003. Advantage was also taken of invitations to speak to a number of other groups and organisations. Well over 2,500 individuals were consulted in this way.

2.5. During the seminars a short questionnaire was distributed. This questionnaire was designed to stimulate debate and to give those present an opportunity to respond to the consultation document if they had not done so previously. The six questions included in the questionnaire had been selected from the 19 questions contained in the main questionnaire.

The Consultation Responses

3.1. The consultation period was completed on 30 May 2003. The response was overwhelming! We received 644 responses in total. Of the responses received:

- 536 are responses to the main questionnaire. The majority of responses to the proposal to create a statutory Foundation Phase, (96%) were supportive;
- 75 are responses to the six seminar questions. The majority of these responses were supportive of the proposals; and
- 33 are letters containing a range of comments. The vast majority were in support of the proposal to introduce the Foundation Phase.

3.2. This clearly demonstrates the overwhelming support that exists for the Foundation Phase although naturally with any such initiative there are always concerns about the detailed implementation of it.

Responses to the main questionnaire

4.1. A total of 536 responses were received in response to the main questionnaire. The table below sets out an analysis of the responses to question 1 which deals with the principle of the Foundation Phase.

Category of response	Yes	No	Unclear	Total
Diocesan representatives	3 (100%)	0	0	3 (100%)
Governors and school Governing Bodies	51 (94%)	3 (6%)	0	54 (100%)
Higher Education Institutions and students	16 (94%)	1 (6%)	0	17 (100%)
Local Authority staff	57 (98%)	0	1 (2%)	58 (100%)
Nurseries and Nursery Assistants	16 (100%)	0	0	16 (100%)
Schools, headteachers and teachers	343 (95%)	13 (4%)	3 (1*) (1%)	359 (100%)
Organisations	17 (100%)	0	0	17 (100%)
Others	10 (91%)	1 (9%)	0	11 (100%)
Total	513 (96%)	18 (3%)	4 (1*) (1%)	535 (100%)

* number of respondents who did not answer this question answers

4.2. The comments contained in the responses to the main questionnaire are mostly about what constitutes good early years practice and suggestions about ways of moving forward during the implementation stage. However, some respondents expressed concerns about individual aspects of the proposals suggesting that they should not be implemented or that the approach suggested in the consultation document should be adapted. Information about each of the responses can be seen in Chapter 1.

4.3. Ninety six percent of respondents welcome the proposal to introduce a statutory Foundation Phase in Wales. The Foundation Phase will introduce a developmentally appropriate curriculum that places emphasis on children learning through play, active involvement, interaction with peers and adults and solving real life problems. There was a strong demand from respondents for a curriculum that moved away from the structured, content led approach evident in the current National Curriculum at Key Stage 1. Respondents emphasised the need for the new Foundation Phase curriculum to retain the principles and practice of the early years for all children from 3 to 7 years and that the new curriculum should not be overly influenced by Key Stage 1.

4.4. Three percent of respondents were opposed to introducing the Foundation Phase. They believe that education had undergone a number of changes over the last decade and that another change was not required. Some individuals felt that the proposed changes would lead to a lowering of standards while others felt that introducing the Foundation Phase would cause unnecessary paper work for teachers as they would need to rewrite their policies and curriculum plans.

4.5. Almost all respondents who supported the introduction of the Foundation Phase were anxious to see the implementation appropriately resourced. They expressed a belief that the success of the initiative depends on having adequate accommodation, resources, well-trained teachers and assistants and good ratios of adults to children that would allow small group work and individual attention to be given to those children who require it.

4.6. There was also great concern expressed by almost all respondents about the transition from the new Foundation Phase to Key Stage 2. Respondents were almost unanimous in their desire to see a review of provision in Key Stage 2 that would lead to a less content driven curriculum and place greater focus on the development of pupils' skills.

Responses to the seminar questionnaire

5.1. A total of 75 responses were received. Eighty five percent of the responses are from schools or individual teachers and headteachers. The remaining 15% came from a cross-section of stakeholders and individuals with an interest in the education and care of young children.

5.2. Most of the responses to the questionnaire are supportive of the proposal to introduce a statutory Foundation Phase. Respondents believe that the proposals 'in The Learning Country: The Foundation Phase 3-7 years' would improve the quality of provision for young children and provide a curriculum that would be more appropriate to the way they learn. Where concerns are expressed, they relate to the need for appropriate funding of the proposals, well planned training for staff and the need to review the content of the Key Stage 2 curriculum in order to ease transition between the two phases.

Responses by letter

6.1. Thirty-three letters were received in response to the consultation document 'The Learning Country: The Foundation Phase 3-7 years'. These are almost all in support of the Foundation Phase. Respondents welcome the introduction of an appropriately developmental curriculum that would cater for the needs of all children and believe that the proposed changes are 'the most exciting and innovative' of the last decade.

6.2. Where concerns are raised they are linked to:

- the lack of support for a seventh aspect of learning, particularly the need for children to experience more activities through the medium of Welsh which could be divisive, place additional pressure on teachers and cause Wales to become too parochial;
- too much emphasis placed on children learning through play that will take Wales back to the child centred methods of the 60's and 70's; and
- the amount of space required to implement this approach to learning.

6.3. Almost all respondents emphasise the need for the Foundation Phase to be appropriately resourced and for staff to receive good quality support and training in order to introduce the Foundation Phase successfully.

The way forward

7.1. The vast majority of responses were in support of the proposal to introduce a statutory Foundation Phase in Wales for children from 3 to 7 years. They also support the changes to the current arrangements that were proposed in the document 'The Learning Country: The Foundation Phase 3 to 7.'

7.2. The Welsh Assembly Government will set up a Project Board to undertake the strategic management of the implementation of the Foundation Phase. It will include individuals who are recognised as experts in the field of education, research, finance, statistics and publicity from both within and outside the Assembly.

7.3. A full list of the actions to be undertaken to support the introduction of the Foundation Phase is currently being developed. A detailed action plan will be prepared following the publication of this response document.

**Pupil Support Division
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