

Christine Chapman AM
Chair
Children & Young People Committee
National Assembly for Wales
Cardiff Bay
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13 June 2012

Dear Christine

**Children & Young People Committee – request for additional evidence on the
School Standards and Organisation (Wales) Bill**

Thank you for your letter of 1 June and for the opportunity to respond to the questions in writing. Please find attached the response to the list of questions.

I am happy to add clarification if there is any further need to do so.

Yours sincerely

Ann Keane

Ann Keane
Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of
Education and Training in Wales

Children & Young people Committee

School Standards and Organisation (Wales) Bill

Part 5 – Miscellaneous School Functions

Annual Parent's Meetings

Why do you believe the proposals set out in the Bill which remove the requirement on governors to hold an annual parents' meeting and replace it with a system that places the onus on parents to request will improve parental engagement? Is there a danger that placing the onus on parents to request a meeting will further exclude parents who are already disengaged?

What are your views on the suggestion (made by Granada Learning Group in its response to the Welsh Government's White Paper on the Bill) that annual parents' meetings are a means of holding governing bodies to account and, as such, they should not be dependent on parental time and motivation?

Estyn's response

There is little hard evidence to suggest that parental engagement will necessarily be improved by the proposed changes. However, the present system of mandatory annual meetings is not successful in many schools (where it is successful, the practice will still be able to be continued) and there is a strong argument for saying that giving parents the right to call meetings would increase 'ownership' of the process. Hence overall we would agree that giving parents the right to call for a meeting with the governing body, within the given limitations, is likely to improve parental engagement and reduce burden on schools.

As the current system is not working particularly well, it is worth trying the proposal an alternative, although the impact of the change should be monitored closely to ensure that there are no unintended consequences. If subsequent evaluation shows that parental engagement has worsened as a result, then the proposal would need to be reversed. An alternative would be to pilot the proposal in the first instance.

School based counselling

Do you believe that there is a need for school based counselling for all primary school pupils? If so, do you believe that they duty on local authorities to provide independent school based counselling should be extended to primary schools or, given the existing "financial constraints" do you think it is more important for counselling to be targeted at secondary age pupils?

Estyn's response

It is important to make counselling mandatory before transferring money to the Revenue Support Grant - otherwise there is a danger that the service might not be continued.

While we feel that the need for counselling within the secondary schools has been recognised, needs within the primary sector have yet to be addressed. We therefore welcome the flexibility in the Bill that gives the Minister the power to make subordinate legislation and regulations on counselling provision in primary schools.

The proposals will require local authorities to provide a 'reasonable' level of counselling with 'some level of service' in every maintained secondary school. We agree that transferring the funding to the Revenue Support Grant would provide greater flexibility for local authorities. This would enable the service to be directed towards schools at an appropriate level to meet learners' needs. The mandatory counselling service should be targeted at the learners in greatest need – whether in secondary or primary school.

Although the extent of the need is less than in secondary, some access to counselling in primary schools would be useful now – there are many situations in which younger learners could benefit from counselling. More and more primary schools are attempting to respond to pupils' needs by providing some form of counselling from within their own staff members, who usually are not trained counsellors.

Free school breakfasts

In your written evidence you say that you welcome the requirement for a local authority to provide free school breakfasts at a primary school it maintains if the governing body of the school has made a written request, and go on to say that breakfast clubs promote "a calm start to the day and can help to raise standards of Welsh language development in English-medium schools". What evidence do you have that breakfast clubs can help to raise standards of Welsh language development in English-medium schools?

Estyn's response

It is important to make ensure a legislative underpinning for free school breakfasts before transferring money to the Revenue Support Grant - otherwise there is a danger that it might not be continued.

The evidence we quoted in our original submission to the committee was based on an analysis of a sample of a hundred inspection reports. A small number of English-medium schools say that the breakfast club promotes a calm start to the day and helps raise standards of Welsh language development, but there is no suggestion that this is a major factor.

Costs

Do you have any estimates of the costs and financial savings that would arise from earlier intervention in schools causing concern and the proposals in relation to a more streamlined school organisation process?

Estyn's response

Estyn does not have access to the costs of current local authority interventions in schools. We have criticised local authorities in inspection reports for not evaluating the impact and value for money of their school improvement initiatives. Without such cost benefit analyses by local authorities Estyn cannot give any realistic estimates of projected costs and savings.