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## **PARLIAMENT EDUCATION COMMITTEE RESPONSE TO CALL FOR EVIDENCE ON EDUCATION (SCOTLAND) BILL 2015**

**SPTC welcomes this opportunity to submit evidence to the Education and Culture Committee of the Scottish Parliament on the Education (Scotland) Bill 2015. In preparing this response, the parent and teacher directors of SPTC, and its executive, have considered the Bill and also taken on board the opinions of parents who responded to a short survey on the topic.**

### **1. SPTC Background**

SPTC is a long-standing parent-led charity and membership organisation providing help, advice and support to parents up and down the country. Our focus is on making parental engagement with education as good as it can be, by supporting parents and working with local authorities, schools and other stakeholders to build and share good practice.

We have had both formal and informal contact with thousands of parents and carers over recent years: they have responded to our surveys, emailed and phoned with their queries and worries, spoken to our team as we work with them face-to-face at our information sessions. Our membership comprises almost 2000 Parent Councils and/or PTAs in state schools, representing tens of thousands of parents and carers.

### **2. Committee questions**

The Committee asked respondents to consider a number of questions, which we seek to address below.

## **2.1 Attainment**

While as a general principle we agree with the premise that local authorities should be taking action to reduce inequalities, and be able to report on the impact of what they are doing, this element of the Bill offers nothing substantive regarding what local authorities should actually do. Further, there is a lack of precision in the language used around attainment, achievement, inequalities, disadvantage, deprivation and outcomes.

In our view the Government must ensure:

- there is greater clarity and a common understanding of the objectives it is seeking local authorities to pursue, and measures to be used
- local authorities focus on and implement evidence-based activities

In general, we are troubled that the content of the Bill is vague and has great potential to be meaningless in changing how well schools meet the needs of our children. We are concerned resources are driven towards gathering information and reporting rather than substantive action. Further, it is difficult to envisage a system of sanctions which would have a meaningful impact and not simply act as a drain on resources.

## **2.2 Gaelic Medium Education (GME)**

The Government has a significant commitment to Gaelic Medium education which it is seeking to strengthen through these proposals. While recognising this, and also the enthusiasm of some parents for GME, we believe the Government should take cognisance of a number of factors:

- In our short member survey (completed by 87 parents) 8% expressed themselves specifically interested in GME or English as an Additional Language (EAL)
- 62% of respondents disagreed with the GME element of the Bill

- Local authority budgets and the resultant impact of education services is a matter of significant concern to parents across Scotland. Many of the comments received from parents made reference to the financial implications of these proposals and the resource local authorities would have to allocate to this process
- Other areas of concern relate to the threshold of five families – is this too low? - and to areas around equity in relation to speakers of other languages, faith or cultural communities who may also like to see their child’s specific needs being met in their local school

We are aware that a significant limiting factor on the development of GME is the availability of suitably qualified teaching staff. We believe this fundamental factor requires to be addressed as a precursor to further action on promoting the potential of a service which cannot then met.

### **2.3 Additional Support for Learning**

SPTC is generally in agreement with this proposal and see the recognition of capacity in young people with disabilities as a positive step in principle. 67% of our survey participants agreed with this proposal. We support the Government’s proposals to leave some rights with the parents alone.

However, we are cautious about the mechanism(s) which will be utilised in order to establish capacity: we believe this should be established by a professional or professionals out-with the local authority.

We are also aware that the implementation of this proposal will require a significant investment to build a responsive support system around ASN and Equalities references to the tribunal service, as this is already stretched to the limit and beyond. It would be wrong to create an expectation which cannot be met.

## **2.4 Chief Education Officer**

SPTC is in support of this proposal and it was backed by 87% of our respondents. Over recent years local authorities have adopted a 'corporate' approach to service management which in our view dilutes the knowledge and understanding of educational legislation within the senior management structures of departments which often combine a wide range of services such as Children & Families, Justice or Leisure. We have seen on a number of occasions that those at a very senior level can lack a clear understanding of, for instance, parental involvement legislation. This can have a direct impact on the way in which parents are engaged at a local level.

We would anticipate that this proposal would not require the appointment of an additional member of the senior management team: it simply identifies the designation and requirement for a member of that team to be suitable qualified and to have the role outlined.

## **2.5 Complaints**

SPTC is in agreement with the proposal to amend the framework around Section 70 so the process is clear and time-bound. The existing system allows local authorities to procrastinate at every step, leaving families in limbo and impacting directly on outcomes for young people. In some instances, cases have fallen simply because they have run so long that the young person has left school.

We believe there should be absolute clarity as to which issues will be considered by ASNTS and which should go to Ministers, and our interpretation of the Bill is that this would be the case.

## **3. In Conclusion**

This Bill attempts to cover a great number of policy areas, some of which have been consulted upon previously, but the headline theme around the attainment gap has neither been consulted upon nor, it appears, thoroughly considered. We understand

there is to be extensive consultation on the guidance and frameworks which will come later: it is disappointing that the detail is as yet un-developed and we hope the Government will take seriously the need to take cognisance of the views of all relevant parties as it moves forward.

In relation to this element of the Bill, we also believe local authorities should focus on evidence-based measures which recognise the significant role of parents and families in supporting the learning of young people.

Eileen Prior  
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