

EDUCATION, CULTURE AND SPORT COMMITTEE

Wednesday 16 February 2000
(*Morning*)

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EDUCATION, CULTURE AND SPORT COMMITTEE **6th Meeting 2000, Session 1**

CONVENER

*Mrs Mary Mulligan (Linlithgow) (Lab)

DEPUTY CONVENER

*Karen Gillon (Clydesdale) (Lab)

COMMITTEE MEMBERS

*Ian Jenkins (Tweeddale, Ettrick and Lauderdale) (LD)

*Lewis Macdonald (Aberdeen Central) (Lab)

*Mr Kenneth Macintosh (Eastwood) (Lab)

*Fiona McLeod (West of Scotland) (SNP)

*Mr Brian Monteith (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)

*Cathy Peattie (Falkirk East) (Lab)

Michael Russell (South of Scotland) (SNP)

Mr Jamie Stone (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD)

*Nicola Sturgeon (Glasgow) (SNP)

*attended

WITNESSES

Mrs Judith Gillespie (Scottish Parent Teacher Council)

Ms Ann Hill (Scottish School Board Association)

Ms Jackie Welsh (Scottish Consumer Council)

CLERK TEAM LEADER

Gillian Baxendine

SENIOR ASSISTANT CLERK

David McLaren

ASSISTANT CLERK

Alistair Fleming

LOCATION

Committee Room 2

Scottish Parliament

Education, Culture and Sport Committee

Wednesday 16 February 2000

(Morning)

[THE CONVENER *opened the meeting at 09:38*]

Standards in Scotland's Schools etc Bill: Stage 1

The Convener (Mrs Mary Mulligan): We should make a start. Other committee members have indicated that they are on their way and will join us as soon as possible. However, I do not want to keep the witnesses waiting. Before we invite them in, I should explain the procedure for the morning. First, representatives of parents will give evidence on the Standards in Scotland's Schools etc Bill. Later this morning, adults and children from Save the Children Fund will discuss the children's view of the bill; we will do that in informal groups and in private session.

Fiona McLeod (West of Scotland) (SNP): Although we will be in private session, will we still take some sort of official record of what the young people say?

The Convener: Yes, there will be a record. We are doing it informally so that it is not too daunting for the young people. I am sure that it will not be, but we did not want to risk putting anybody off.

There are a number of areas that we should cover in discussion with the parent witnesses: the improvement framework and school development plans; child/pupil involvement; parental involvement, including the role of school boards; placing requests; and the General Teaching Council proposals. Please feel free to add any other areas.

I invite the witnesses to come in.

Good morning and welcome to the committee. Unfortunately the weather has delayed some of the committee members, but they hope to join us later. I know that you have been told that you have two minutes for an opening statement but, as that is quite short, I promise not to cut you off mid-sentence.

Ms Ann Hill (Scottish School Board Association): Good morning. I will be briefer than two minutes as I believe that you will get more from asking questions than from a statement.

In general, the Scottish School Board Association welcomes the bill; we have been heavily involved in its development. The SSBA sent out the questionnaire "Parents as Partners" more than two years ago, so we know what parents are thinking on the bill.

We would like to see changes made to some sections. We want school boards to be added to section 4, which is headed "National priorities in education". Section 5 says that local authorities will consult bodies that are

"representative of teachers and parents",

to which we would like the words "school boards" to be added. Again, section 7 makes no mention of school boards.

We are in full agreement with section 8 on delegation schemes. Section 23, on raising standards and supporting head teachers who manage the school, is particularly important to us because, in general, school boards welcome the idea of supporting head teachers rather than actually running schools.

Section 25 deals with vacancies on school boards. In circumstances where by-elections are not required, allowing parents to call for one confuses the issue. That is an unnecessary evil.

We welcome section 26, which clarifies the role of councillors on school boards. Section 27 deals with the short leet for the appointment of a head teacher. We have heard no evidence that that should be changed; in fact, school boards welcome the opportunity of not simply being consulted, but of being partners in perhaps their most important role. Our only other objective is a school board in every school.

Ms Jackie Welsh (Scottish Consumer Council): The Scottish Consumer Council welcomes the chance to contribute to the development of the Standards in Scotland's Schools etc Bill and appreciates the opportunity to attend this meeting.

Although we were broadly supportive of the draft bill at the consultation stage, we had a number of concerns, most of which have now been addressed. The bill now has some very significant strengths. However, we have a few remaining concerns, some of which—such as accessibility to schools and parental choice in placing requests—are serious. Although other proposals on consumer involvement and the composition of the General Teaching Council are much better than before, we will take this opportunity to suggest some improvements. I will be happy to answer questions on any aspect of our responses.

09:45

Mrs Judith Gillespie (Scottish Parent Teacher Council): We very much appreciate this opportunity to address the committee. Furthermore, it is nice to sit where the bottles of water are instead of in the cheap seats on the side of the room.

The Scottish Parent Teacher Council has a few points of principle to raise in the discussion. We do not agree with raising standards through setting targets, which reflects the Government's ideology—we believe that there are other ways of improving education. A detailed reading of the response document "Improving our Schools" suggests that school development plans will be either overcrowded or totally dominated by the Government's targets. We are concerned that schools will have such a massive burden of consultation and evaluation that there will be little time for teaching or that teaching and planning will happen in different spheres and will rarely connect.

We had hoped that the pattern of parental involvement would have been made more inclusive. Under section 23, boards are being turned into agents of the Government, with a duty to deliver the Government's improvement agenda. Furthermore, we are concerned that, in pages 28 and 29 of the response document, home and parents have been placed under the direction of Scottish ministers, which raises an extraordinarily important point of principle about how far the Government writ runs into the home.

Although we accept the general thrust of changes to placing requests, we feel that they are badly expressed. We agree with the position of the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities, as stated last week, and will offer a proposal for a specific change in the future.

We also agree with COSLA that children should have a two years' entitlement to pre-school education, instead of the current situation in which the youngest—the most vulnerable—children get only four terms. We are unhappy that, despite our representations, the deferred year has not been picked up in the bill.

We have no argument with the evidence given two weeks ago by Douglas Osler that school inspections are helpful, but we challenge the conclusions that Her Majesty's inspectorate has drawn from those inspections. We raised our objections with Graham Donaldson when we had the opportunity to meet him. Furthermore, we feel that Mr Osler was slightly disingenuous when he suggested that the guidance offered by inspectors was optional.

On the GTC, the principle that teacher competence should be judged consistently across

Scotland must be observed, and we welcome the fact that the Advisory, Conciliation and Arbitration Service has picked up on this issue. As comparisons have been drawn in previous evidence between the GTC and the General Medical Council, the Harold Shipman and John Appiah cases might provide lessons such as making available evidence of previous wrongdoings.

Lewis Macdonald (Aberdeen Central) (Lab):

In your closing remarks, Ann, you mentioned the laudable objective of having a school board in every school. Given that we are a long way from achieving that, why do you think that it is necessary for the bill to include specific references to the school boards as consultees and for it to include the school boards, as distinct from other representative bodies, in the consultation process?

Ms Hill: School boards are elected representatives of parents; they are made up of parents, teachers and members of the local community. The inclusion of school boards will give the process more clout.

Lewis Macdonald: I understand your point. Your submission says that, although the bill states that appropriate organisations should be consulted, you feel that it is important that there is a specific reference to the Scottish School Boards Association. How do you think that the role that you envisage for your organisation should relate to the role of other bodies that represent parents and teachers?

Ms Hill: It is important that as many people as possible are listened to. The Scottish Parent Teacher Council, the Scottish Consumer Council and my organisation might have different views, but they must all be considered. If that is done, it will be found that we are all working in partnership.

Lewis Macdonald: Do the other organisations have a view on that point?

Mrs Gillespie: As I said, our position is that the parental role should be opened up considerably. School boards were born out of a particular circumstance: they were designed as embryonic boards of management. The format is not attractive to most parents, as can be seen by the fact that boards draw their membership only from the top social groups. Although we recognise the good work that many boards have done in terms of policy making in the school, the system should be more open and each school should be able to draw up its own plan for the involvement of parents. We do not think that the bill should refer to the inclusion of any specific group. We want the fact that parents are not a uniform group to be recognised.

Ms Welsh: We would be happy for specific

reference to be made to school boards. Regardless of the origin of the school board legislation, we have always believed that school boards could enhance parental involvement in schools. Like parent-teacher associations, they have a role in the promotion of partnerships. However, many parents will be involved in neither organisation and it is important to consider their views.

Cathy Peattie (Falkirk East) (Lab): I am sure that you will forgive me for this question, as I am the ex-chair of a school board. Do you feel that school boards are still relevant or should we consider a wider forum in schools and education authorities? I am particularly interested in ways of reaching the hard-to-reach parents—those who find it hard to walk into a school, let alone go to a parents evening or answer a school board questionnaire.

Ms Hill: Given the situation that obtained in schools 10 years ago, I think that school boards have brought about an improvement in the level of parental participation. In a sense, I have had two families: I have a 27-year-old son and, 10 years after he was born, I had the first of three more children. I remember well the closed school gate, which is now open.

The School Boards (Scotland) Act 1988 says that the school board should encourage the establishment and support of parent-teacher associations. We push that at every turn. Although some school boards have willing parents who come from the middle and higher classes, we are not just talking about those people. Members of school boards come from all classes; that is something that we should encourage. There is no reason why the school board and the PTA cannot work together to reach the rest of the parent body. However, we have to accept that some parents do not want to be involved and we cannot force them to be.

Ms Welsh: School boards have created a culture in which parents can get involved. Parental involvement and partnership with teachers is crucial—it makes a significant difference to children's education. Obviously, the majority of parents will not be directly involved with the school board, but the board has a specific remit to promote involvement and communication with parents.

We have been calling for improved mechanisms to tap into the views and experiences of parents who would not normally get involved in school boards or PTAs. School boards may use those to strengthen the partnership between parents and schools.

Mrs Gillespie: In 1987, there were 8,000 responses to the school board consultation and 64

school boards responded to the consultation on this bill. There has been a shift, although I am not sure in which direction.

It is important to recognise that, for most parents, the point of contact with the school is their child and the parent-teacher meeting. We would like parental involvement to grow from the real point of contact. We need a more flexible system that would allow parents to come in and out. When a school considers a policy, instead of taking it to a small committee, it could allow people to participate in an open-ended discussion according to their interests.

Like me, Cathy Peattie has been a member of a school board. What is strikingly obvious is that, as children move through the school, their parents' interests shift. As one's children move further up the school, one's focus becomes more fixed on the top years of the school. It is important to recognise that. We want mechanisms to allow schools to discuss how to take on the good ways in which the school boards have opened up the system; we want the system to be more parent-friendly, so that many more people can participate in those policy areas that are of interest to them. We want a more open mechanism.

Cathy Peattie: Do you think that the current school board legislation is a barrier to that?

Mrs Gillespie: It is certainly a barrier to wider participation because it creates a very formal process. Many people are nervous about the formal election process and the requirement to write a personal statement. It is not like being a politician, who can hide behind the party manifesto and who, if they do not get elected, can say, "Well, I was never going to get elected in this ward anyway." It is devastating not to get elected to a school board because the rejection is totally personal. Most boards make behind-the-scenes arrangements so that the process does not have to go to a formal election.

The four-year commitment is also off-putting. Although one can resign from the board, many people cannot predict whether they have four years in which to serve in that capacity. The whole process is extremely daunting to everyone except those people who feel comfortable with a formal committee system. That excludes many people from the process.

Local authorities and central Government have used school boards as the limit of their consultation with parents. We have a running argument with the Scottish Executive because it does not look beyond school boards. The consultation on McCrone, for example, was sent out only to school boards. When we asked whether we could have enough copies of the McCrone consultation document to distribute to

PTAs, we were told that the public purse could not support the cost of 1,100 copies. It was only when we jumped up and down on the end of a telephone line that we got them.

Similarly, a lot of PTAs and parents are interested in the issue of section 28, but the letter from the minister was sent only to head teachers and those parents on school boards. This week, we are distributing the letter to PTAs. At an official level, there has been an exclusion of the wider parental body, and we have a constant argument with Government about that. The more that such exclusion is written into legislation, the more that it will continue.

10:00

Nicola Sturgeon (Glasgow) (SNP): My question follows on from Judith Gillespie's comments. I do not think that anyone would disagree with the objectives of having a school board in every school and of increasing and widening participation on school boards. However, as Lewis Macdonald said, that is some way off and it cannot be brought about by legislation.

If, as Ann Hill wants, the bill contains a specific reference to school boards, is not there a danger—as Judith alluded to—that parental participation will be reduced? Where there are schools without school boards, local authorities might feel they are off the hook in terms of consulting the wider parent body, and that formal consultation will occur only in places where there are school boards. While a large number of schools do not have school boards, to insert in the bill a reference to school boards, rather than a more general reference to parents, might work in the opposite direction to the one in which you want to go.

Ms Hill: If the dream of a school board in every school is achieved, a reference to school boards in the legislation would ensure that there is parental participation. The SSBA sometimes has difficulty getting information from Government, as does Judith Gillespie. There is no guarantee that local authorities will consult school boards or PTAs. Consultation may be a case of, "I have half a dozen parents together, therefore I will ask them what they think." At least by going through the school board, the board can be encouraged—and more and more school boards are doing this—to ask its parent body what it thinks. At least then we are ensuring that we have a parental perspective. If school boards are doing their jobs well, they will be working with their PTAs to ensure that the parental voice is heard.

Nicola Sturgeon: I am anxious to address the point not so much about school boards and PTAs working together, but about how we ensure

consultation with parents in schools where there is no school board. I know what the objective is, and I sympathise with it, but for a period some schools will not have a school board, so how do we ensure consultation with those parents who are not on school boards?

Ms Hill: Previous consultation was with local authorities and representative bodies. There is nothing to stop that continuing where a school does not have a school board. Local democracy means that, if a school does not want a school board, it does not need to have one. The inclusion of a reference in the bill to school boards, without removing reference to the other forms of consultation, would mean that local authorities would still be able to consult a school that did not have a school board or a PTA.

Fiona McLeod: We are talking about ensuring that all stakeholders in education have a part in the process. We are not talking about pupils, but I hope that we will do that. At the moment, we are talking about the parents or adult carers of children at school. Perhaps that is a more appropriate way of looking at this matter.

If school boards are written into the legislation, how can we avoid the problem, which Judith Gillespie has just illustrated, of the school board being regarded as the body that represents parents? Ann Hill's submission says that the SSBA

"would further suggest that the time has come for a review of the legislation as set down in the School Boards (Scotland) Act 1988."

If school boards are given a statutory right to be consulted, how do we ensure that the school boards are truly representative of the community? Ann Hill said that the parental right to call for by-elections, which is provided for in section 25, was unnecessary. I think that that right needs to be made stronger. If it is not, we could end up with a co-opted board for four years, which would represent only those people who knew one another.

Ms Hill: I agree that the by-election process is not right. Either it should be taken out completely, or it should be strengthened, as Fiona McLeod suggests. I think that the legislation should be examined more fully. I am glad that we have got rid of the provision on opting out, which was one of the biggest burdens on school boards. We now have an opportunity to consider partnership. Replacing what currently happens with what has been suggested in the by-election stage would lead to total confusion. I agree that there should be restrictions so that we do not have hand-picked school boards. The beauty of school boards is that they are the elected representatives of parents—that must never change. A restriction on the number of co-opted members would probably

answer your query. The proposals on by-elections do not go far enough. Either the provisions should be taken out or we should work out something better.

Ms Welsh: I understand the concern that, if it is specified that local authorities should consult school boards, some local authorities will opt for the bare minimum and will consult only school boards and not the wider parent body. I agree that we have to examine ways of ensuring that that does not happen. Some heart can be taken from wider movements, such as the movement towards best value. Local authorities are realising that there is more to consultation than they originally thought. There are right and wrong ways in which to consult service users—there are many more wrong ways than right ways.

If school boards are not used, local authorities might have to carry out proper research in the parent body in its area every time that it had to consult, which is a big undertaking. Some school boards have developed techniques for discussing issues with parents, and there may be ways in which that expertise can be shared more widely. We can perhaps learn from school boards about consulting parents.

We have to take seriously the issue of involving parents. It is not just a matter of opinion polling or sending surveys to parents, as the questions that one asks determine the answers that one receives. Research with individuals is a specialised area. That is why we have been examining ways in which to improve how we gather parents' views and experiences and how we use that information at a policy level. Many issues still need to be discussed, but school boards have a role to play, as they have specialisms and an ability to promote partnership.

Mrs Gillespie: I wish to make several points. First, elections are no guarantee of representativeness, as parents avoid elections like the plague and fewer than a fifth of school boards are elected. The by-election process would not, therefore, guarantee representation.

The importance of not putting too great a burden on school boards, or on any parents group in schools, should also be recognised, as their members perform their functions in their spare time. Nobody can predict when a family member will be taken seriously ill and any spare capacity that one had is immediately required in another direction.

None of those voluntary groups can be given too formal a part in the process, which is why I object to the way in which the response document writes parents in as if they have a formal part in the process. The system is the system; parents participate in the system, but they do not have a

formal role in it.

Consultation is seen as important from the Government's perspective, but it is not considered quite so important from the parents' perspective. It is often hard for parents to get their issues on to the agenda. If one asks in any school what is the one thing that people want most of all, it is more time to talk meaningfully with teachers. Where is that included in any piece of legislation that is shifting the time factor? Most legislation is about management processes. What parents are mostly concerned about is that the management works. Their issues are far more fundamental; they want a reasonable opportunity to discuss with teachers how their youngsters are getting on.

By chance, I recently had the opportunity to talk to a number of special school head teachers. They said that they get half an hour to discuss a child's progress with parents. What luxury. For most parents, it is five rushed minutes, with a good chance of getting lost going from A to B. Those are the issues that parents are involved in. It is important not to impose on parents a role that satisfies Government and the consultation process and lets everyone feel happy that they can say that parents have been consulted, while that consultation process gets only 64 responses from 2,500 school boards. I do not think that that response to the bill is an indictment of school boards; I think it is an indictment of what is being asked of parents and of how far the Government is failing to recognise the genuine point of interest of parents in the school—their child. That is legitimate.

Fiona McLeod: If we want to ensure that parents' legitimate and fundamental interests are considered, do we need to include that in legislation so that they are not avoided?

Mrs Gillespie: Not at all. The more strictures are laid out in legislation, the more people are forced down the route along which they are currently going. We do not want that sort of thing in legislation at all. People do not want specific references; they want a more open-ended, non-specific thing that allows people to participate and does not rule anybody out.

Fiona McLeod: I understand your sentiments, Judith. My worry is that if we go on encouraging participation and do not ensure that it can happen, we may be saying nice words without achieving anything. We are focusing on the school board, which already exists in legislation and can therefore be included in new legislation. If we are to have legislation that talks about stakeholder parental involvement, let us ensure that we get it right so that we do not end up with school boards that are unrepresentative or with schools that do not have school boards. I would like the witnesses to tell the committee whether we need to explore

the matter further.

Mrs Gillespie: The COSLA and Association of Directors of Education in Scotland proposals suggested that a duty should be imposed on the authority to take account of parents' wishes, leaving schools with the flexibility to make arrangements for systems that suit them. There is a huge difference between the time and expertise available in a large, inner-city, magnet secondary school and in a small rural primary school.

There is such a range of schools that there is not one system that will suit all schools ideally. Therefore, the bill should place a duty on authorities to take account of parents' views, in the same way as it requires schools to set up school councils for pupils. It does not specify the format of those councils, it simply says that there should be school councils. Different schools will have different mechanisms for evolving those councils. That kind of process would be more inclusive and would take account of the wide variations in schools throughout Scotland.

10:15

Ms Hill: One of the biggest problems that we have come across is the lack of commitment from local authorities, not only to school boards but to parents in general. For an example of that, you just need to look at the amount of money that is given to a school board to carry out its functions. For a primary school, we recommend £770, plus 35p per pupil, which allows a differentiation between a small rural primary school and an inner-city school.

We have just done a survey of local authorities to see how much money they actually put on the table. The worst offender—I will not name the authority—gives £190 a year to run the school board. That does not even allow the board to pay a clerk; how could it afford to pay for any school board training? The commitment simply does not exist. Only one council gives more money than the figure we recommend, and another is fairly close; but the rest of them give only about £300 or £400. That is not enough, and it does not show a commitment to school boards.

Ian Jenkins (Tweeddale, Ettrick and Lauderdale) (LD): Do you take any comfort from the fact that local authorities are now going to be inspected?

Ms Hill: Yes.

Ian Jenkins: Without doubt, one of the things they will be asked about is how they consult parents. That may eliminate some of the worries that underlie what we are talking about.

Ms Hill: Yes.

The Convener: I am conscious of the fact that we have spent a lot of time discussing school boards, but it is appropriate to do so at this stage. Brian, was your question on school boards as well?

Mr Brian Monteith (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): My point has been covered partly by what Fiona asked, but I would like to ask about one particular aspect. I have anecdotal evidence of the disregard that not only local authorities but head teachers show towards school boards. In one example, a head teacher was temporarily replaced and school boards were initiated because the new head teacher believed in them. However, the old head teacher came back and made efforts to reduce the influence of the boards. Ms Hill, have you similar evidence of the fact that it is not only local authorities but head teachers that are wary of involving parents through school boards? Is that, in part, why we are talking today about including school boards in the bill?

Ms Hill: At the beginning, we found a lot of reluctance to accept school boards. I was one of the ones who was reluctant. When we did a survey, we found two reasons why school boards were failing: one was that parents did not want the power to opt out; the other was a lack of local authority support. When there is a school board that is not working very well, or when the school does not have a school board, we find, in the main, that parents are quite keen but that the head teacher is still a bit iffy. I am glad to say that that is changing. Head teachers are becoming more comfortable with the fact that school boards no longer exist to pose a threat of opting out, but exist as a method of supporting the school, but we have a long way to go.

We provide school board training all over Scotland. It is interesting that getting school boards along to training sessions—if they have the money—is not a problem. We also run training courses for head teachers and teachers, to help them work with school boards. The take-up for those courses is much less. The attitude is, "Oh, I don't need to do that—I've had a school board for years." However, when people have been on the training course, the initial reaction is always, "I wish I'd done this years ago." School board training lacks priority and the necessary money.

Mr Kenneth Macintosh (Eastwood) (Lab): Funding is quite important. Judith, in your submission you talk about the need to make funding more widely available. I do not know how important you think funding is to the current status of school boards and their success so far. There are several other systems that I would like to ask Jackie about in a minute, but do you think that school boards are the vehicle that can encourage greater parental involvement in schools?

Mrs Gillespie: No, because they are broadly unattractive to the mass of parents.

Mr Macintosh: Could they change? Could they broaden their base?

Mrs Gillespie: There could be a system of policy committees in schools, which would not be far removed but would strip away the aspects of school boards that people find unattractive. People find the very formal arrangements unattractive. The election process is costly; quite a lot of money is tied up in sending out mail to people, to tell them that they are on the school roll. For example, a husband and wife who live in the same household will each receive several postal communications from the authority, confirming that they are on the school roll and asking them to check.

The whole electoral system is expensive for only a small number of elections, and the election process is unattractive. It was necessary, because boards were seen to be moving on to the business model of a board of management, for which a much more formal arrangement was necessary. However, for the role that boards normally fulfil in schools, such a complicated arrangement is not needed to get a board. Boards do not make life or death decisions over youngsters; their involvement is more participatory. A more informal system would not only be cheaper; it would be more attractive to a greater number of parents and would encourage more people to get involved.

It is interesting that, in any one school, PTAs tend to include more parents than the board. We advise our members, if they want a constitution, to involve a range of people so that they can keep going in the lean years when people are not very interested. They should never turn away anyone who is interested, and if they need to expand their PTA committee to 25 members, that is fine: they are lucky to have 25 people who are willing to come on board. That kind of flexibility—taking into account the formal arrangements and the formal matters that boards discuss—would allow for greater participation, and the money that would be saved on the election process could be turned to better use in schools.

Parents do not like money to be wasted; they do not like glossy documents. They always say, "How much did this lot cost?" They know how the money should be spent in schools—on the children.

Mr Macintosh: Without blowing your own trumpet, do you think PTAs are a better vehicle? There are two different priorities: the first is the participation of parents in the education system; the second is the participation of parents in the policy-making process. Those seem to embody two conflicting aims.

Mrs Gillespie: They should not, necessarily. Quite often, the policies that are of most interest to

parents are those that relate most directly to their children. For example, parents are interested in getting involved with bullying policies in schools, as they recognise a direct impact on their children. That kind of policy making is part and parcel of the way in which parents can participate.

I return to the point that the real issues that concern parents often do not make it to the agenda. We have already discussed the parent-teacher evenings. Another issue on which there can be animated discussion is the format of the school report. Many people feel that it is designed to serve the Government's purpose, particularly the five to 14 report, which is closely tied to levels and strands. It is a very complicated document that tells a parent about the levels and strands, but often does not tell them whether their child is doing okay. Quite often, people want to hear whether their child is mixing well with other children. That is a much wider issue that people want to know about, which does not appear in the reports. Such issues do not get on to the agenda.

Another matter that does not get on to the agenda—we proposed it in our submission—is the transport issue. It should be sorted out. The setting of the level of free transport is a mess. Such things do not get on the agenda because the Government is so much more concerned with management processes—that is true of previous Governments as well. It is time we turned that round. If the system were more open, more people would become involved because they would see that they have a vested interest.

Consider the contrast between the first election under Mandela in South Africa, when people queued for hours to vote, and local government elections in this country. Participation by ordinary people depends in large part on whether they think their participation will have any effect. If they think it will not, they will not participate, but if the questions are the ones they want to answer and the answers are really listened to, they will participate a lot more. A good example is the school board consultation in 1987, which attracted 8,000 responses. Nothing like that response has been achieved again.

Mr Monteith: My experience of school boards is completely at odds with Judith Gillespie's. My children are at a primary school where every school board election is contested and parents take a very keen interest and are involved in head teacher appointments and discussion of budgets.

Judith spoke about the different models of parental involvement and concluded by making the comparison between local government elections and South Africa and talking about levels of participation and the degree of interest relative to the power available. That sounds to me like an argument for giving school boards more power

and authority. For example, at St Mary's in Dunblane, where the board has more authority, participation is even greater than is my experience at the Royal High Primary School. Do you think that school boards need more authority—possibly the authority to set the agenda in the manner that you would like?

Mrs Gillespie: I think that we differ on the board format. We would always argue for parents to have a bigger say, but the formality of school boards is deeply unattractive to most parents. I suspect, with respect, that your children attend a school that can be classified as middle-class, where people are comfortable with that kind of committee system.

Mr Monteith: They would not think so in Piershill and Craigtinnny.

Mrs Gillespie: In many areas, people feel alienated by the formal arrangement. We are not denying what school boards have done to open up the agenda but we are saying that it is not an agenda that engages most people, partly because it rarely comes down to the level at which they want to participate.

Ms Welsh: I think it is a mistake to look only at the composition of school boards and the small number of parents involved in that way and say it cannot be representative, because school boards have responsibilities to promote home-school communication and partnership within the school. They can help the head teacher and teachers to look at how they approach communication with parents. It is crucial to keep that aspect in mind.

Ms Hill: I am probably at odds with Judith and in league with Brian—I am not sure whether that is good. I see a lot of support for school boards. Obviously, I would say that, but the SSBA's membership has increased year after year. There is still a lot of work to be done, but the partnership is worth the fight.

Cathy Peattie: I am interested in how school boards are involved when an HMI inspection takes place. Does Ann Hill believe that school boards are involved enough? I am also interested in wider parental involvement in an inspection. Does Judith Gillespie think that PTAs are involved enough? Does Jackie Welsh feel that the wider parent body and the kids are involved in those inspections? How can we improve that, if they are not involved?

10:30

Ms Hill: I think that tokenism is involved when the school board chairman is involved in a school inspection. School boards are not involved enough in inspections, but involvement should not be restricted to a questionnaire and talking to the school board. I would like inspectors to talk to the

PTA and the wider parent body. They should go to a parents evening, at which they can hear about the issues that are important to parents, such as how their child is getting on at school and how she is doing compared with the person next to her.

In the four years we have been doing school board training, we have rewritten the roles and responsibilities training scheme to include a piece on what to do if a school is inspected and is not up to standard. How does the school board ensure that the matters pinpointed by the inspectors as problems are taken care of not only by the head teacher, the management team and the teachers, but by the local authority? Often, the problem is a lack of resources rather than bad teaching systems, so more funding is needed. I have mixed views on inspections.

Ms Welsh: HMI and the inspection teams could learn a lot if they spoke to parents about what affects their child's learning at school. There are lots of ways of doing that; a school should not wait for an inspection once every seven years or so to get parental views.

Mrs Gillespie: Douglas Osler gave a fairly accurate picture of school inspections. It is open to everyone to fill in and return the questionnaire that goes out. Although the inspectors ask for only a sample, everybody can put in a return and talk to the inspectors if they wish. That is an accurate picture of what happens.

One concern is that the inspectors expect parents to make themselves available on their timetable rather than the inspectors making themselves available on a parent's timetable. There is no obligation on inspectors to make themselves available in the evening—it is assumed that parents can come to the school during the day. We recognise that that is a work problem and there are great strains on the inspectors, but it is a dilemma.

The new form of inspections, which has just started, means that there is a follow-up to inspections and the local authority is required to put in place a recommendation as to how it will deal with problems that have been identified. It has been made clear to us that that recommendation is for the parents so that they can see what steps are being taken to address any problems. The inspectorate does not require that recommendation, because the inspectors will go back to the school 12 months hence to see what kind of follow-up there has been. A lot of progress has been made on school inspections. Our only reservation is that there should be a requirement that the inspectors fit in better with parents' timetables.

Nicola Sturgeon: I would like some general comments from each of the witnesses on the

improvement framework laid down in the bill; the national priorities, local improvement objectives and school development planning. Do the witnesses think that the balance of that is correct? To use Judith's phrase, has obsession with management structures taken precedence over substantive issues?

Mrs Gillespie: I am really glad that you recognise that parents have an interest over and above parental involvement in schools, because the target-setting process is of vital concern to parents. We totally accept the idea of true national targets. For example, the aim of universal literacy should be upfront. However, attention might then shift from schools to groups such as children in care and travelling folk, which would create an entirely different focus.

Targets have become a numbers game and priorities are now defined numerically; the current aim is to come top of various national league tables instead of serving youngsters' needs. One of our major concerns is that numbers are impersonal to children. It does not matter which children fill the quota, but that some children do, which can be very damaging as teachers might focus attention on marginal groups of pupils who can be shunted up into the target position. As a result, children become the mercury in the thermometer that indicates the health of the system, which we do not think is right.

National target setting also assumes that children learn steadily and continuously, but parents know that children learn erratically. Children go up in steps, plateau for ages and, just when parents think, "My God—they will never learn any more," shoot off again. The system must be flexible enough to take account of that and to allow children to fall off the escalator and get back on it.

There are also problems with how numbers are arrived at. We should not set a national target that is then divvied down for schools; instead, we should allow schools to set their own targets and collect those figures from the bottom up. It is a different approach to the matter. For example, the most discussed and examined target is the percentage of youngsters who get three highers or more in fifth year, but that figure is based on the year's population in September in fourth year. As a result, if a child leaves a school at the end of fourth year, goes to a college and gets three highers, those highers do not count for the school—the child counts as being at the school and as having achieved nothing.

Furthermore, local circumstances might not be taken into account. For example, many youngsters leave West Lothian schools at the end of fourth year and move into jobs in high-tech industries. As one of the functions of education—we are told—is

to qualify us for work, it is ironic that schools are then castigated because pupils are not staying on and achieving more qualifications. There are other ways for people to receive an education. Youngsters who leave school and go into those industries should not be regarded as having finished their education; indeed, many of them might return and take part-time courses in FE colleges. However, West Lothian schools are still being criticised because children are moving out of the system in that way.

Ms Welsh: I agree with much of that. Our problem is not with target setting as such, but with the targets that are set. For example, one of the major ways to have an impact on children's learning in school is to improve housing conditions. The schools cannot make those improvements but the Government could begin to. It is important that we start by asking people what they want to know, why they want to know it and what they want to measure. We must ask what is the best way of gathering the information that people want, rather than starting by asking what we can currently measure. The range of information that is needed is much broader than was originally suggested in the consultation.

Ms Hill: We all agree that it is important that any type of target setting or league table is focused on how that best suits schools' achievements. There are national league tables, and when we advise schools on those, we suggest that they might use them for comparison, but that it is more important that schools examine last year's results against this year's results and those of the year before it.

If targets are to be set, schools should start from where they are now. The aim should always be to improve. If there is no improvement, schools must find out why there is no improvement. They must know whether that is because of a lack of resources, whether it is because of the school's location or whether it is the fault of half a dozen disruptive children. We will support the setting of targets and the strategy for improvement as long as they add to the quality of education in schools.

Mr Monteith: I was, surprisingly, in agreement with much of what Judith Gillespie said in response to the previous question. I was particularly interested in the example from West Lothian, with which I am familiar. Will you comment on the idea of resources being used to try to keep pupils who have employment prospects in school? Surely it would be better to use such resources for lifelong learning, which could be undertaken in conjunction with employers.

Mrs Gillespie: I could not agree with you more. It would be better to find a way to negotiate an agreement with employers to set up classes in factories than to spend money on keeping kids in schools. If we want youngsters to continue to

learn, we must take the learning to them rather than taking them away from what it is that they want to do. It is also important to engage the youngsters in a form of learning that will, perhaps, be more attractive to them at that stage in their lives. We must keep them hanging in there so that when they are about 25 years old they will realise that they want to take their lives more seriously. I know many youngsters who have come back to the straight and narrow at about that age.

Lewis Macdonald: I would like to explore an area in which there may be disagreement. Ann Hill said that the Scottish School Board Association advised that schools' aims should always be to improve. I am inclined to agree with that and I am interested in exploring Judith Gillespie's concern that improvement is a matter of ideology.

Improvement is fundamental to the approach of the bill. In the consultation, the Scottish Parent Teacher Council said that it was not happy with the idea that the fundamental objective of the bill should be to oblige ministers to secure improvement by constantly raising standards in education. You suggest that, as an alternative, we should aim for high-quality education and that we should remove the dynamic aspect. Is there anything wrong with there being a fundamental driving ideology that says that we should constantly try to improve education?

Mrs Gillespie: It is a matter of whether such ideology is included in the bill. A bill should not be a moving object. Bills become legislation against which we measure improvements; a bill should not be a train that is rushing along. We said that there should be high standards—that means that individual schools can work towards high standards, which are undefined.

We do not think that the aim should not be to do what is best for the kids, but what is best for the kids will vary considerably from school to school. There are schools that have literacy problems and there are schools that have no literacy problems, but which have problems in other areas. When we responded to the consultation, we were conscious that it was about a piece of legislation rather than about a piece of guidance.

What is important is that a piece of legislation should stand, although I have to say that the track record shows that legislation does not stand for very long. There are an awful lot of amendments in the bill that come from previous legislation that is not that old. I understand from the Sunday paper that it is still all right to fire a bow and arrow at a Scotsman on a Sunday in York—or something like that—so there are some things that perhaps have stood on the statute book for rather a long time.

Ian Jenkins: It depends which Scotsman you

fire at. [*Laughter.*]

The Convener: Let us move on to the General Teaching Council.

10:45

Nicola Sturgeon: The bill extends the remit of the GTC into the area of teacher competence, although it does not go so far as to give the GTC the same power in competence cases as it has in misconduct cases. It leaves the GTC dependent on a local authority taking dismissal action. I am interested in a parent's perspective on further extending the role of the GTC to give it a role in competence cases that is independent of the local authority so that a parent who is frustrated by an action on the part of the local authority can go to the GTC. Obviously, there would have to be built-in safeguards against frivolous or vexatious complaints.

Ms Hill: No matter what is at the top, whether it is the GTC or something else, there is a question of how to prove that a teacher is incompetent. If it is a question of conduct—if, for example, a teacher has whacked a kid around the head—it is easy, but competence is the problem. We deal with a great many complaints about teachers and their competence. Our advice to parents is always that the school board is not the place to discuss competence. The problem should be discussed with the head teacher. If the complaint is about the head teacher, it should be taken to the director of education—that is what they are there for.

Generally, it is lack of communication that is the problem. Perhaps half an hour for parent-teacher discussions, instead of the usual five minutes, would solve that. The association is not sure whether the General Teaching Council would be the right vehicle. We think that it might be, but we are not totally sure. We are certainly looking forward to participating in ACAS, if it is decided to go down that line. It has been mentioned that there will be a lot of consultation with parents before any decision is made, and I welcome that. In the surveys that we have conducted, parents have said that they did not want to have anything to do with the disciplining of teachers. I am talking about school boards in that role. There is a lack of information for parents.

The worst case that we have ever seen concerned a teacher whose dismissal was recommended by the head teacher and the director of education. The appeal went to the education committee and 11 members of that committee interrogated two 14-year-old children. That is worse than a court of law. That sort of thing must be stopped so that children are not put in that position. The education committee overturned the recommendation for dismissal, the teacher

went back to work and the parent had no right of appeal. Now we are saying to parents: "You decide. If you are so worried about it, it may be an assault charge. Go to the police."

Ms Welsh: There will be occasions on which parents will have legitimate concerns about teachers' competence. There must be ways of addressing those concerns, ways for parents to pursue complaints. The present system is not clear to many parents and it can be difficult to pursue complaints. To be honest, we are neither here nor there as to whether it should be the local authority or the General Teaching Council that handles complaints. Whichever one deals with those complaints, the system should be easy to understand and logical.

Parallels have been drawn with the Law Society, which handles competence problems with lawyers. We have conducted research among clients who took their complaints to the Law Society. Large numbers of them were unhappy with the way in which their cases were handled because they did not trust the self-regulatory system. There are general principles that must be considered. If they can be sorted out and the system made clear so that people can trust it, the principles are more important than who handles them.

Mrs Gillespie: There is an issue of consistency. If directors of education operate to a different set of standards than the GTC, areas such as Edinburgh, which is attractive to teachers, might end up with a much higher level of competence than an area that finds it harder to attract teachers. It would be worrying if someone who was deemed not competent in Edinburgh were judged competent by the GTC and went to work in another authority's area.

I was interested to hear that Ronnie Smith of the Educational Institute of Scotland said at last week's committee meeting that a mechanism that allowed parents to bypass educational authorities already operated with regard to conduct, but that it was a filtered system. That seems to be the right way to go about it. I support the view that was expressed earlier by MSPs that the GTC would hear a lot of malicious complaints unless there was a filtering system.

The most important consideration is that there should be consistency throughout the system. I am not sure how the system of split responsibility will work out. I thought that it was complacent of the GTC to assume that everything would work out all right.

Mr Macintosh: I noticed that the three of you took rather different positions on the placing requests.

Jackie Welsh, you said that you have some doubts about the parts of the bill that deal with

placing requests. Is that because you are against the principle or the mechanics of what is happening in the bill?

Ms Welsh: We have always had reservations about placing requests. Having said that, we are unequivocally supportive of parents' right to exercise choice in regard to their children's education. The draft bill proposed to add a restriction relating to the effects on later years, but judging the effect on later years is such an imprecise art that the proposal seems unfair. At what stage would we stop the guesswork? Two years? Five years?

Mr Macintosh: Judith Gillespie made that point in great depth in her submission.

If some parents are able to place their child at a certain school, the choice of other parents is restricted, obviously. Are you against any restriction on parental choice?

Ms Welsh: We are concerned only about that particular restriction.

Mr Macintosh: Mrs Gillespie, do you think that the proposals in the bill are an improvement in any way? The bill has been welcomed by others.

Mrs Gillespie: It is open to a great deal of misunderstanding. It is not clear. People will appeal to sheriffs and, as I do not think that any sheriff will say that a school's population will be static for two years—it will not be, because children will come and go—I imagine that there will be many appeals and that those appeals will be granted.

We recognise what the Government is trying to do, but it is doing it in an extraordinarily bad way that is so imprecise and poorly understood by most people that there will be a lot of appeals to sheriffs. I do not think that all education decisions should end up being decided in the law courts. It is an extraordinarily expensive procedure. If bad drafting leads to the involvement of the law courts, it should be ensured that the drafting is right in the first place.

It is vital to recognise that there is a tremendous advantage in allowing youngsters the right of access to their local school. There is always conflict between different groups of parents, which cannot be resolved, and the kind of balance that the system achieves at present is probably as good as we can get. The principle of placing requests must be stated in clear terms, so that people understand the issues.

Mr Monteith: In the submission from the Scottish Parent Teacher Council, you say that

"the current proposal will be disastrous."

You are not mincing your words. Do parents prioritise their placing requests above class sizes?

Mrs Gillespie: No. I shall explain briefly why the proposal would be disastrous.

By primary 4, a three-stream primary school can accommodate 99 children. In primary 1 there may be three classes of 25 and one class of 24. A parent may point out that, as the limit on a primary 1 class is 30, and as there are extra places, that school could admit their child. The authority will say, "No, we cannot let your child in, because the school cannot accommodate more than 99 pupils by primary 4." The parent may then say that not all the children will stay—some will move out—therefore, their child could be accommodated.

There will be a turnover of the population, that is true, and sheriffs would support parents in that judgment, as it is reasonable. If, on the other hand, it was stated clearly that the school could accommodate only 99 children, it would be up to the school to decide how those children were divided into classes. That is the principle that we support. The current proposal would be disastrous, as it will be poorly understood by parents. They will think it frivolous and unreasonable that, if a class has only 25 children in it, their child cannot be admitted.

Mr Monteith: I accept that explanation, which seems entirely rational. I return to my point. Does it not say something about parents' priorities that they would want their child to attend a class of 29, 30 or 33 because of the perceived quality of the school?

Mrs Gillespie: I do not think that you can judge what parents say. They are utterly inconsistent. They would do anything to get their children into a magnet school, but would do anything to stop a school closure, saying that it is a nice wee school. Parents are completely inconsistent, and you cannot draw any firm legislative conclusion from what they do.

The Convener: As a parent, Brian Monteith knows that we are all inconsistent.

Mr Monteith: Perhaps Ann Hill could say something on the matter, as the SSBA seems to take a different view.

The Convener: You have the view in front of you. Please read it, and speak to Ann about it on another occasion. I am conscious that other witnesses are waiting.

That discussion has been very useful, and I thank our witnesses for this morning's session. We could have continued discussing the issues a lot longer. I thank you for the evidence that you have provided this morning.

That is the end of the formal meeting of the committee. If people move to one end of the room, to allow us to reorganise, we will bring in the next set of witnesses.

Meeting closed at 10:58.

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