



Belfast City Council

Report to:	Strategic Policy & Resources Committee
Subject:	CONSULTATION - "EVERY SCHOOL A GOOD SCHOOL: A POLICY FOR SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT"
Date:	Friday 26th February 2008
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Relevant Background Information

Purpose

To bring to the attention of the Policy & Resources Committee details of a consultation by the Department of Education on its new draft School Improvement Policy entitled 'Every School a Good School'. This is an important policy area aimed at improving school performance and follows a review of the Department's current School Improvement Policy. The consultation runs from 21 January 2008 to 31 March 2008.

Background

The School Improvement Policy (SIP) was launched in 1998 and is aimed at tackling low achievement in specific schools whilst also raising standards for all. It has a number of separate but related strategies, including:

- The School Support Programme (offers a period of intensive support to individual schools);
- A strategy for the promotion of literacy and numeracy, including early intervention strategies and training for teachers to improve literacy and numeracy teaching;
- A strategy for promoting and sustaining good behaviour in schools;
- Guidance for schools on the development planning process including measures to improve the quality of school leadership;
- The development and dissemination of good practice in schools, including schools in areas of social need; and
- Guidance on target-setting as an integral part of development planning.

The purpose of the review was to assess the extent to which the current SIP was successful in terms of raising educational standards and to make recommendations as appropriate. The consultation document provides an analysis of the current system, highlights the issues which still need to be addressed and sets out a new draft school improvement policy.

Summary of the Consultation

The consultation document considers the overall performance of schools in Northern Ireland and the associated challenges. These can be summarised as follows:

- The number of schools where fewer than 40% of pupils obtain 5+ GCSEs A*-C (or equivalent) has been reduced significantly and the number of schools where fewer than 20% of pupils achieve this level has reduced by half.
- However, there is a gap in performance between the top performing schools (at primary, selective and non-selective post-primary school level) and those that perform less well. This view was reinforced by inspection evidence which indicated that as many as 12% of schools inspected had significant weaknesses or weaknesses which outweighed their strengths.
- NI schools generally perform better than those in England in relation to English and mathematics at Key Stage 2, GCSE level and at GCE A level. However, our performance in both these subjects has slipped behind England at Key Stage 3.
- In 2005/06, 63% of pupils achieved 5 or more GCSEs Grades A*- C (or equivalent). However, when English and mathematics are taken into account, this falls to 51% (i.e. 5 or more GCSEs including English and mathematics) – a gap of 12 percentage points;

- Whilst the overall NI performance level at GCSE is positive, a significant number of NI pupils - 37% or 9,158 pupils - left school without this recognised qualification level (5+ GCSEs or equivalent at A*-C).
- In the case of socially disadvantaged pupils only 37% achieve a Level 2 qualification (i.e. 5 GCSEs Grades A* - C or equivalent) – a gap of 26%
- There is also a gap (12%) between the performance of girls and boys obtaining 5 GCSEs at A* - C (girls achieved 69%; boys achieved 57%).

The consultation outlines the strengths and weaknesses of the current approach to school improvement and suggests that it requires change because:

- The existing legislative framework lacks clarity in terms of the respective roles and responsibilities of the school and its Board of Governors; the Education & Library Boards; the Employing Authority; and the Department. Consequently. There are also issues in relation to accountability;
- School improvement is perceived to apply only to certain schools – schools not performing at an optimum level are not identified and are therefore not involved in the school support programme;
- Intervention powers are limited and there is a lack of effective interventions for schools which show little or no improvement;
- There is still insufficient emphasis across the system on raising standards; and
- There are weaknesses in target setting and the use of data. There are also deficiencies on the range of data available.

Key Issues

Key Proposals within the Consultation

The Department developed the new draft policy in consultation with education bodies and principals and pupils from across Northern Ireland. The Department has provided a detailed response booklet, and specifically seeks comments on the proposed:

- (i) Key characteristics of a good school;
- (ii) Key issues to be addressed by a School Improvement Policy;
- (iii) Key principles underpinning the new policy for school improvement;
- (iv) Roles, responsibilities and accountabilities for the school improvement policy;
- (v) Actions to improve self evaluation and school development planning;
- (vi) Actions to improve leadership in schools;
- (vii) Actions to improve parental and community involvement;
- (viii) Actions to improve target setting and effective use of information;
- (ix) Development of a set of quality indicators; and,
- (x) Initial set of indicators for primary and post-primary schools.

Further Details

The consultation paper and a response booklet can be found on the Department's website, www.deni.gov.uk. While the Department will accept hard copy responses to the consultation, it is encouraging responses by email to: SchoolImprovementConsultation@deni.gov.uk. All responses should be forwarded to the Department by 31 March 2008.

Resource Implications

n/a

Recommendations

It is recommended that the consultation document be referred to the Party Groupings on the Council for individual consideration and comment, in line with the Committee's decisions and approach to previous Department of Education consultations.

Key to Abbreviations

SIP – School Improvement Policy

Documents Attached

N/a