

CASE to brief Parliament on objections to Education Bill

CASE will be briefing members of the Commons and the Lords about its opposition to parts of the Education Bill, which was introduced into Parliament in December, and is in Committee Stage in the House of Lords at the time of writing.

CASE has huge concerns about the loss of governors' accountability in the proposals to abolish the Governors' Annual Report to parents and replace it with the School Profile, written by the DfES, which will not explain what governors have done or how they have spent the school's budget.

Ending this and the requirement to have an annual meeting with parents is a hugely retrograde step, especially when school governors are responsible for large sums of public money.

When Baroness Walmsley moved an amendment to the clause removing the requirements for governors' reports and annual meetings, a succession of Peers spoke out against the Bill. A notable intervention came from Lord Taylor of Blackburn who said:

"As the chairman of the committee that introduced the Taylor Report in the 1970s, which created school governing bodies, I have been reluctant to join in this debate until now, but to do away with an annual general meeting in the way that the Government propose is ridiculous.

"We need every support to encourage parents to serve on governing bodies. If you do not give them an opportunity to come to an annual meeting and to read an annual report,

they will be less interested than ever. I plead with the Government after what has been said from all sides of the House this evening to take the proposal back and think again."

Baroness Walmsley herself said: "I believe that it is vital that parents should be involved as much as possible with schools and that, for many reasons, everything possible should be done to encourage parents to do that."

She went on to say that, "If parents do not become interested in schools and do not have regular opportunities to visit schools, they will not be sufficiently interested to become governors."

Governors will not be involved in any central way in the new Ofsted inspections and they will no longer have to produce an action plan after the inspection. Self evaluation will be the key.

Governors will need to be fully involved and ensure parents and children are too as there will be no parents' meeting before the inspection nor any requirement to consult children, yet their views about the school are clearly very important.

CASE will be contacting Peers and, later on when the Bill moves to the Commons, MPs on these issues in particular.

The Bill can be read, with explanatory notes and proposed amendments, on the Parliament web site at www.parliament.uk

Peers and MPs' email and other contact details are also on the site if CASE members wish to write.

Will Kelly listen to parents' voice?

CASE is writing to the new Secretary of State for Education, Ruth Kelly, to request a meeting.

Following on from talks with former School Standards Minister David Miliband last Summer on giving parents a voice, officers are especially keen to discuss the subject with the new Education Secretary.

CASE has been campaigning for an effective voice for parents as part of its *Their Schools or Ours?* campaign, launched in 1996, and through work with Parent Governor Representatives. So it was encouraging to hear Ruth Kelly, in her recent speech to the North of England Education Conference, ask the question: "How do we give parents a voice in shaping the education agenda for the benefit of their children?"

She also spoke of parents having "rights to a top quality education for their child and to a voice in how that education is delivered". Her speech went on to list ways in which the Government proposed to extend parental choice rather than voice, but CASE hopes that she will also have proposals to make on ways of making sure that the voice of parents is heard more clearly.

CASE will also be watching how Ruth Kelly handles issues relating to selection in the light of another promise in her speech that, "under this Government there will be no free-for-all in admissions or the setting up of new grammar schools — we want parents to choose schools, not schools choose parents."

Visit CASE at the Education Show

CASE will be sharing a stand with CACE (the Advisory Centre for Education) at the Education Show 2005, which takes place at Birmingham NEC from March 17th to 19th.

The show is the biggest public event on the education calendar and there will be more than 600 education suppliers and organisations taking part in the exhibition.

In addition there is a comprehensive programme of seminars over the three days. Free tickets for the show can be booked on line at www.education-show.co.uk Seminar tickets can also be reserved on line, or by phoning 0870 429 4580.

A less than comprehensive debut

Ruth Kelly gave her first speech as Secretary of State for Education and Skills at the North of England Education Conference in Manchester. Richard Harris was there to hear it.

In my view, the press got it about right on the lacklustre speech of Ruth Kelly in which parent power dominated but comprehensive education was not mentioned once.

In fairness to the Secretary of State she had to follow inspirational presentations by Peter Senge and Benjamin Zander. However, whomever she had followed she would have seemed lacklustre. Delivered in a monotone, with little energy, and from where I sat I could not detect shining eyes, the speech gave us reassertions of the Charles Clarke legacy. Using “downward spiral language” we were told of “radical reductions in the numbers of failing schools and more specialist schools with improving standards”.

While making sure she praised the professionalism of frontline staff in making a significant difference to people’s lives, she also moved fairly quickly to what parents want and behaviour in schools, supporting exclusions and pupil referral units.

Continuing the theme of what parents want Ruth Kelly went on to personalised education and then choice. To quote: “We all know choice builds commitment and engagement and we know choice helps

develop a truly personalised offer and keeps providers on their toes.”

My own evidence would rather contend that it is sending your child to the school in your community with the children you meet every day which truly builds commitment; I am still happy to call that comprehensive education.

She soon moved on to say that increasing parental choice means an increase in providers of “diverse independently-minded local schools that play to their strengths and respond to the diverse needs of parents and pupils”. This inevitably led her to Independent Specialist Schools and academies.

tion was never mentioned. Schools as part of their communities did not feature, but rather schools chosen by empowered parents.

My experience, as both a local councillor who has had responsibility for schools and also a governor of long standing, is that what guides parental choice, especially among the middle class, has more to do with class than quality of learning in a school. This, of course, is never a reason articulated.

For me there was a clear message: that those of us committed to comprehensive education, with clear partnerships between LEAs, governors, parents, students and the

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Expanding popular schools under parent power leads to winners and losers. What about the parents who do not have 4x4s to drive their children across cities or rural areas? She wants local authorities as champions of parents and children, but no statutory powers over independent schools on such areas as the admission of difficult to place children.

Parents were mentioned over 50 times but only once in her speech of 3,913 words did she mention governors — and that was parent governors. Comprehensive educa-

community in which the school is located, have to keep on campaigning.

The Secretary of State ended her speech by stating that part of her agenda was, “parents and individuals at the heart of how we think about and deliver our services and given a real voice in shaping the agenda”. I reflected that a previous, well known MP, who held that post, went on to say that it is individuals that count and there is no such thing as community! CASE is needed now more than ever!

Richard Harris is a CASE member and Chair of the Lifelong Learning and Training Scrutiny Panel of Southampton City Council. He writes here in a personal capacity.

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Membership

To join CASE please send £15 (£5 unwaged) with your name, address and telephone number to CASE (address above).

Internet

The CASE web site can be found at www.casenet.org.uk
The Say No to Selection campaign has its own site at www.casenet.org.uk/sayno/

Comment

It is no surprise that the draft of the new Education Bill includes proposals to abolish the statutory annual meeting with parents and the annual report leading up to it.

For years headteachers and others, citing poor attendances at the meetings, have urged the Government to drop what they saw as a failed idea. This is dangerous nonsense and in sharp conflict with the stakeholder model of school governance embodied in the Taylor Report.

Is it really relevant how many parents attend the meeting? There are varied reasons for low attendance — in many schools the report is no

stimulus to interest because it is undertaken without enthusiasm, which shows, and rarely offers any open questions for discussion. It tells readers instead of sometimes asking for views. In general little attention has been given to making it more interesting and participatory.

But isn't it also irrelevant how many people attend the meeting? A good report may be an

end in itself. Parents may not want to discuss it as well — that is their right. If it is dull they are also entitled to vote with their feet. But much more serious than abolishing the meeting, even, is removing the obligation to submit a report with prescribed content.

Parents are stakeholders. As tax and community charge payers they help fund the school and, even more importantly, its

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quality is of unique significance in their family life. They have a right to information on the discharge of this awesome responsibility.

Wouldn't there be an outcry if companies did not issue annual

reports to shareholders? Are those meetings well attended? Of course not. But the slightest suspicion of anything being wrong would see them packed. Just as worrying is the suggestion that there should not necessarily be a meeting with parents in preparation for an Ofsted inspection. They provide a vital perspective.

Joan Sallis

When specialist schools don't offer a choice

Ministers like to portray the development of specialist schools as a way of increasing the choice available to parents, but it does not always prove to offer that in practice.

Take the case of a CASE supporter who is seeking a secondary school place for her child in rural Leicestershire. Here the school system has separate 11-14 and 14-18 schools, so parents have to go through the equivalent of secondary transfer twice.

The 11-14 schools are not funded to take on a specialist subject, but the 14-18 schools are and do. In this case, the nearest upper school is 11 miles away and has chosen to specialise in technology, not an area which appeals particularly to our supporter or her child.

Some alternatives exist — even further away — but transport would have to be at the parents' expense as the local authority will not pay unless the choice is on religious grounds. Short of establishing a

new church which devoutly believes in children being taught the entire National Curriculum, there seems to be little or no solution to hand.

Our reader notes that Leicestershire is one of the worst funded LEAs in the country and would like to know if there are other parents — in Leicestershire or similarly afflicted areas — who are interested in challenging the present "take it or leave it" situation in which they find themselves.

Queries about choice for select committee

By Ron Glatter

The Commons Public Administration Select Committee, chaired by Tony Wright MP, is currently holding an inquiry into "Choice, Voice and Public Services".

Perhaps predictably, given the current political obsession with choice, only two minutes of their 100 minute session on education in January focused on voice — the rest dealt with choice.

Dr Philip Hunter, the Chief Schools Adjudicator, argued that you can't improve poor schools through choice, but only through well-resourced support programmes: in the last resort closure may be necessary.

By contrast Professor Harry Brighouse of the University of Wisconsin-Madison had little faith in the ability of governments to lift up poor schools. He advocated "progressive" or "loaded" vouchers, involving a heavy subsidy to state schools teaching high-need children.

Variants of this approach are found in the Netherlands and Milwaukee, USA. He endorsed as a version of this system the proposal by his father, Professor Tim Brighouse, the Commissioner for London Schools, that low-income children should receive 300% of the regular per-pupil funding.

Martin Ward, Deputy General Secretary of the Secondary Heads Association, said that his association was unconvinced about

the need for diversity between schools but it believed diversity was needed within them.

He agreed with Gordon Prentice MP that what parents were given was "the illusion of choice" in that, for example, the key decisions about specialist schools were made by "the educational establishment" not parents. It was very doubtful that the arrival of these schools gave parents an enhanced perception of choice.

In evidence to the Committee following the session I asked that they look at the potential impact of the current policy to expand greatly the number of schools becoming their own admission authorities as either foundation schools or academies.

Research suggests this will increase social segregation and it will create an even more complex and confusing situation for parents.

Should state schools have this right at all, and is it ever fair for some to have it and others, with which they are in competition, not to?

And why are policy makers so fixated on between-school choice and diversity when there is little evidence of public demand for them?

The Committee is expected to report in March.

Ron Glatter is Visiting Professor in Education at The Open University and the University of Warwick

Groups hold meetings on secondary issues and privatisation

The Secondary Umbrella Group meets on February 28th from 11am to 3pm at the NUT, Mabledon Place, London to discuss *The Future of Secondary Education — policy alternatives*.

Representatives of the political parties, John Dunford from SHA, Fiona Millar and a speaker from the newly formed ESSA (English Secondary Students Association) have been invited to contribute.

Any organisation or individual interested in secondary education can attend. Contact Helen Hill at the NUT, 020 7388 6191.

- The CASE privatisation group, which was initiated by CASE over two years ago, meets three or four times a year.

It brings together a number of education organisations to discuss the growing privatisation in education. PFI, local authority outsourcing, academies and advertising in schools are some of the issues raised.

The group enables a useful exchange of information and identifies any action which might be taken.

Newest strategy has 10 year view

The Government published its 10 year strategy for childcare in December 2004.

The intention is that there will be a children's centre in every community so that all families will have access to a range of integrated services and good quality early years education and childcare.

Extended schools will provide childcare for older children between 8am and 6pm during the term and in the holidays.

The document is entitled *Choice for parents; the best start for children* and can be downloaded from the Treasury web site www.hm-treasury.gov.uk (follow link for Pre-Budget Report and then select Associated Documents).

The real cost of sending children to school

Researchers have found that it costs an average of £736.22 to send a child to a state school in England.

The amount parents are paying ranges from an average of £562.41 a year for a girl at primary school to £973.09 for a boy at secondary school.

School meals and uniform take the biggest share, but 79% of parents of secondary school children and 47% of primary parents are asked to contribute towards the cost of materials for a range of subjects. The actual amounts vary widely between subjects.

The report of the study also gives details of contributions to school trips and school fund.

The Cost of Schooling costs £4.95 from DfES Publications, 0845 60 222 60. It can be downloaded free from www.dfes.gov.uk/research/

News in brief

Giving information

THE FREEDOM OF Information Act came fully into operation on January 1st 2005. It requires schools, along with all other public organisations, to provide any information in the format required within 20 working days of a request.

Governing bodies will be responsible for ensuring that schools meet the requirements of the Act. The DfES has provided guidance to help schools and governors. Parents are entitled to ask for any information. Exemptions are identified in Section 36 of the Act.

Details and the guidance can be found at www.teachernet.gov.uk

Parents involved

A SURVEY OF more than 2,000 parents in England has found that 89% feel fairly or very involved in their children's education.

Research carried out by NOP Social and Political for the DfES asked parents about their contact and communications with their child's school, how much they helped with homework and about their views on behaviour and attendance.

The report *Parental Involvement in Children's Education* costs £4.95 from DfES Publications, 0845 60 222 60. It can be downloaded free from www.dfes.gov.uk/research/

Useful advice

A USEFUL EDUCATION handbook for parents has been published by the National Teaching Advisory Service.

The book explains the basics of the education system from pre-school to university admission and offers valuable information on subjects including admissions, exams, attendance, exclusion, homework and special needs.

There is also advice on getting the most out of parent-teacher interviews and making a complaint.

Education — A Parents' Handbook can be ordered, priced £8.99, from the NTAS web site at www.ntas.org.uk

Primary care

NETWORK EDUCATIONAL PRESS has published a Right from the Start handbook on promoting the well-being of primary school children.

A range of specialists offer advice, strategies and activities to help children develop intellectually, socially and spiritually in a safe school environment.

Promoting Children's Well-Being in the Primary Years is available, priced £18.95 + £2.95 p&p, from Network Educational Press, 01785 2255 15, www.networkpress.co.uk

Committee takes Clarke to task over academy costs

On December 1st the Commons Select Committee took Charles Clarke (then still Education Secretary) to task over academies.

Amongst other things, committee members wanted to know what evidence the Government was using to justify introducing 200 academies. Mr Clarke was vague, partly because the decision was made "before my time".

He cited the "different aspects" of evidence — significant capital investment, relative independence in determining how to run the school and the push of the private sponsor in driving it forward.

He said: "I do not know the detailed research evidence, but in each of the areas there is evidence. I will take the new buildinging example as it is the most dramatic one. There is evidence that a brand new buildinging does actually improve educational performance and that was before the academy programme." The chair suggested the

Government could try putting money into non-sponsored academy type schools so as to judge the impact of sponsorship.

Mr Clarke replied: "Can we get the scale of this right? You correctly described the average capital spend on a particular new academy as £25 million or so. The capital programme next year is £5.5 billion for schools throughout the country . . . 25 million is not so enormous in what we are trying to do."

So we are none the wiser about the "evidence" or why we cannot have schools developed without sponsors as a research "control". But since we are only spending some £25 million per academy, perhaps it doesn't matter?

PriceWaterhouse Coopers' interim evaluation of academies should be available in February. The full transcript of the Select Committee (Education and Skills) is on www.parliament.uk

Judy Harrington

New briefing to aid campaign against academies

CASE has produced a new briefing on academies. The A4 leaflet explains the status and operation of academies — publicly funded private schools which the Government wants to see 200 of by the end of the decade.

The briefing also outlines CASE's objections to academies and suggests steps that can be taken to campaign for proper consultation when they are proposed.

It can be read on line on the CASE web site, or downloaded for campaigners to print out and copy. Printed copies are also available from the usual CASE address or phone number.

• Also on the web site is the full text of the CASE response to the Government's recent consultation on encouraging foundation schools and easier expansion of popular schools.

Major changes ahead for school leadership

Pat Collarbone, Director of Leadership Programmes at the National College of School Leadership (NCSL), was the final keynote speaker at the North of England Education Conference in January.

She identified the major changes that will be seen in the leadership of schools in the next five years.

There will be a new order of school where collaboration will be expected not only with other schools but with other agencies, voluntary organisations and the wider community.

She said workforce remodelling will result in devolved leadership with more people taking responsibility. Teachers will become facilitators and schools social centres providing a range of services for parents and families and developing better relationships with them.

Personalised learning will be the norm to ensure the needs of every child are met. The focus will be on children. Leadership will depend on building trust, redesigning jobs, changing structures and cultures and releasing new energy.

CASE campaigns for the right of all children to the best in state education, regardless of their race, gender, home circumstances, ability or disability.

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The views expressed in this newsletter are not necessarily those of CASE.