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Schools Admission Consultation:

Delivering the Children's Plan, Summary and Questionnaire

Department for Children, Schools and Families

Deadline October 2 2008

http://www.dcsf.gov.uk/consultations/downloadableDocs/3885_SchoolAdmissions_consult_aw5.pdf

A response by

The National Secular Society

October 2008

Section 2: putting parents and children at the centre of the system

2.2 New local consultation process

introduce a new requirement for 'relevant' parents and other groups with an interest in the proposed admission arrangements, for example community groups, to be consulted ...

Without a definition of what is meant by “relevant” and “community”, we must assume that these groups will, in practice, be churches, mosques and temples. If there is to be representation of the full spectrum of society, then efforts must be made to reach the large numbers of people who are to be found outside worship communities. This imprecise vocabulary consigns them to the forgettable fringes.

- We recommend that these terms be clearly defined to include a requirement to invite the fullest range of consultation partners.

... the draft Regulations require consultation to take place for a minimum of eight weeks between 1 December and 1 March to ensure that parents and community groups have the chance to respond and that consultation does not take place too early, when people are not expecting it.

We have noticed in the past that some consultations were scheduled – we can only conclude that it was deliberate - to include inconvenient periods such as Christmas.

- We recommend that the consultation period specified should be amended to 3 Jan - 1 April.

2.3 Admission Forums

In some areas Admission Forums work well but we are also aware of a number of barriers to their effectiveness – their membership can be too large making them burdensome and difficult to manage; they can uphold vested interests; and are considered by some to be toothless and unrepresentative of the local area.

Subsequent references to community and faith groups indicate that these are not considered "vested interests". Faith groups, if allowed representation as groups, already are "vested interests" and they apply their privileged influence in their own interests, which often conflict with the interests of the community as a whole. It would be useful to clarify what is meant, in this context, by “vested interests”, and include faith groups in the definition.

This would include proportional representation to reflect the local area of types of schools (for example, schools where the local authority is the admission authority, own-admission authority schools, and Academies), faith groups, community groups and parents.

The above sentence needs to be recast to make it more comprehensible. It appears to embody the principle of “to those who have the most, give them more”. It would for example assist the dominant faith group in the area to press for more places for children of that faith, even if that were not the will of the local community.

- We recommend that representation be by individuals rather than by community/faith group, precluding any one or more of them dominating the proceedings to the disadvantage of the others. (We would hope this would lead to a forum that is more varied and responsible to the community at large.)
- We recommend that while the voting may be by proportional representation, the allocation of places is such that no one bloc can gain control.

2.4.2 Ensuring transparency and reducing burdens on popular schools

*In many cases local authorities are well placed to coordinate and manage appeals on behalf of schools in their area, as they do for the schools for which they are the admission authority. Alternatively, local **religious bodies or independent bodies** might be contracted to administer appeals on behalf of groups of schools.*

We believe this should only entrust appeals to "independent bodies". The evidence points heavily to the inability of religious bodies to be impartial about appeals where the faith of the parents (or lack of it) is at issue.

We commend the Secretary of State for conducting a test earlier this year of three sample LEAs. As is well documented¹, this uncovered a scandalously high level of abuse of the Admissions Code in which religious schools, despite many already having privileged admissions criteria compared with local schools, were responsible for the vast majority of infractions. In Barnet, for instance while there were only 5 infractions in community schools, there were over a hundred in faith schools. The faith schools figure is likely to be even higher as some RC schools in Barnet had either failed or refused to provide data.

Similarly, the level of abuses of the code by schools who were their own admission authorities (mainly religious schools) was much higher (and at a totally unacceptable level) than those which are not.

More evidence of the dangers of trusting religious schools for appeals or being their own admissions authorities is provided by the bullying of the Department by religious vested interests when it released the sample test results. The headlines in *The Daily Telegraph* convey the picture: "Ed Balls launched a witch-hunt against faith schools without having his facts straight." ... Balls denies attack on faith schools in admissions row.² Mr Balls was perfectly correct to address this issue and we believe his facts were correct. The fact that no contrition was shown for the gross abuse of the admissions code shows the schools simply cannot be trusted.

- Since it is conceded that local authorities are "well-placed" to manage appeals, we recommend that the local authority should be entrusted with **all** appeals.

¹ <http://www.guardian.co.uk/education/2008/apr/02/schools.uk1>

² www.telegraph.co.uk/news/uknews/1584602/'Ed-Balls-is-witch-hunting-faith-schools'.html

2.6 Ensuring fair and lawful admission arrangements

In particular, the reports will cover the extent to which admission arrangements meet the needs of vulnerable children, such as children in care and children with statements of special educational needs or those with behavioural problems.

There is one, large, group of children whose needs so far have been comprehensively ignored in sectarian and community schools alike – those from non-religious families. In many schools they are expected to put up with religious symbolism which they may find offensive, attend religious ceremonies which they find meaningless and are, in fact imposed on them contrary to their Human Rights, and endure lessons in religious belief that present matters of opinion and belief as fact.

- We recommend that all religious tests for admission be abolished, and that in **all** schools the needs of non-religious children are adequately met.

3.0 Fair Access

... ensuring that schools in an area admit their fair share of children with challenging behaviour, and ensuring that children with challenging behaviour are entitled to the appropriate provision.

Faith schools are known to try to exclude, or avoid admitting, such children. We trust that we will no longer see examples of this after these regulations come into operation. Ensuring that these guidelines are followed and are not in practice ignored for lack of adequate programmes for these children will require additional funding, which would be more efficiently spent by the local authority on such programmes, rather than allocated to individual schools to be used *ad hoc*.

- We call upon the government to
 - end the privileged status of those schools – often faith schools – which are their own admission authority, given that this is where many abuses of the sort mentioned in this submission have been concentrated;
 - strengthen the code to make sure the abuses found are specifically proscribed;
 - require a statutory declaration of every head teacher for each admissions round that the (hopefully revised) code has been followed, with breaches being a punishable by hefty fines on the school and the individual.

4.0 Other Changes

4.1 Supporting the ethos of a school

clarification of what is meant by practical support for a school's ethos;

clarification that schools publishing such a statement can ask parents to accept that ethos when applying for a school place. This will effectively mean that priority can be given to those parents who accept and support the ethos of a school.

The two clarifications offered above are useful without a definition of “School ethos”. If the staff comply with all the requirements of fairness, equality, courtesy, and behave professionally in inculcating these values and in carrying out their pedagogic functions; if the head ensures that there is fairness and consistency in maintaining good order; then this state is surely a school "ethos" that we expect everywhere. How can there be a "distinct" school ethos except trivially?

Schools have always expected parents to support their children and the staff in the education of their children. As the text acknowledges, a school ethos, however special, is dependent on adequate support from the parents and through them the children. It is facile to suppose that an “ethos” is something that can be imposed as a management tool that parents agree to accept: they must be a party to its development.

And we all know that there are not a few parents who sign documents without caring about their responsibilities. Such agreements are useless unless they can be enforced.

In any case, we are fairly sure that the phrase “accept and support the ethos of a school” is code for parents' agreeing to a religious regime whether they are themselves religious or not - in other words, priority is given to those who accept a school's **religious** "ethos", a word which the document refrains from defining.

- We recommend that further thought is given to this question of “ethos”, and that it should not simply be regarded as a kind of educational panacea that can be administered to an ailing school, and emphatically not be equated with religious belief.

4.4 School admission numbers

It should be easier for successful and popular schools to grow to meet parental demand. We are therefore proposing to make it easier for schools to increase their published admission number,

It is casually assumed that a school that is successful with 800 pupils will continue to be successful with 1200. We should be interested to see the evidence for this.

4.5 School Charging

We welcome your views on strengthened wording in the draft revised School Admissions Code that admission authorities must not ask for voluntary contributions as part of the admissions process, or make any reference to them in their admission arrangements (which includes in supplementary forms).

- We call upon the Government to make clear that no financial commitments must be required of parents pre-admission or at any subsequent stage. Expenditure (including for security) should either be funded from public funds, if thought justified, or voluntarily from pupils' parents or other sources.