

ANGUS COUNCIL
EDUCATION COMMITTEE
11 JUNE 2002
THE NATIONAL DEBATE ON EDUCATION
REPORT BY THE DIRECTOR OF EDUCATION

1 RECOMMENDATIONS

It is recommended that the Education Committee notes the enclosed summary of parental views which is being submitted to the Scottish Executive in order to contribute to the "National Debate on Education".

2 BACKGROUND

- 2.1 In March 2002, the Scottish Executive launched a National Debate on Education. Briefing Packs and videos were sent to the Head Teachers of all Scottish schools. Parents, staff and pupils have been encouraged to participate in this "National Debate on Education."
- 2.2 As intimated to the Education Committee at its meeting on 30 April 2002, the regular May meetings with School Board/Parental Representatives were used to give parents in Angus an opportunity to contribute to this "National Debate."
- 2.3 The enclosed summary highlights the points raised by parents at these two meetings – held on 14 and 15 May 2002. Some members of the Education Committee were also present at each of these meetings.

3 CONCLUSIONS

- 3.1 It is proposed that the enclosed summary should be sent directly to the Scottish Executive as a contribution to the "National Debate."

4 HUMAN RIGHTS

- 4.1 There are no Human Rights Implications arising directly from consideration of this Report.

5 CONSULTATION

- 5.1 In accordance with the Standing Orders of the Council, this Report has been the subject of consultation with the Chief Executive, the Director of Finance and the Director of Law & Administration.

Jim Anderson
Director of Education

No background papers, as defined by Section 50D of the Local Government (Scotland) Act 1973 (other than any containing confidential or exempt information) were relied on to any material extent in preparing the above report.

APPENDICES

JAA/CJ

ANGUS COUNCIL

“NATIONAL DEBATE ON EDUCATION”

**Summary of issues raised at meetings of School Board/Parental
Representatives on 14/15 May 2002**

Why?

- General agreement that schools must reflect the society in which they operate; in our democratic society, therefore, the principal purpose of education should be to prepare children and young people to play a part as confident and competent citizens in a democratic society.
- Recognition that schools have the principal responsibility for teaching core skills.
- Strong view that schools ought to be contributing towards the development of more effective social skills.
- Strong view also that schools ought to have a part to play in developing awareness about Health & Physical Activity.

What Should Children Learn?

- Basic numeracy and literacy.
- As far as possible, core skills should be learned in primary schools.
- There is some support for a gradual reduction in the proportion of the curriculum which is compulsory as children move through secondary school from S1 to S6, although no clear consensus about when and how widely genuine subject choice should be available to children and young people.
- The way in which additional subjects seem to find their way into the curriculum and the way in which all other subjects seem to remain is an issue which should be addressed.
- Some parents express a point of view that we should ask ourselves whether or not RME should really be a compulsory subject; other points of view recognise the desirability of developing a greater awareness in our young people of different belief systems and different cultures.
- Some parents express strong support for “life skills” type subjects whilst questioning what some appear to see as inappropriate attempts to make such subjects more “academic” (Home Economics was given as an example of this).
- The desirability of improving our nation's ability to communicate with people who use other languages was stressed, with some parents expressing the view that the earlier children begin the study of a foreign language the better.
- There was strong support for the role of schools (in partnerships with parents) in developing a better awareness within our young people of Rights and Responsibilities.
- Some parents believe that Social Education topics such as Drugs and Sex may be being introduced at too early an age, whereas others support the concept of educating children sufficiently prior to the same children having to address difficult issues during adolescence.

There is strong support for society to further encourage greater physical activity in our children and young people, coupled with a recognition that schools are unable to take sole responsibility for this.

- Some parents would welcome a greater level of Careers Advice being available to children from quite a young age.
- There appears to be a strong parental view that the education system needs to do more to engage parents more effectively in the education process (and also that parents themselves ought to be encouraged to participate more proactively in this partnership).
- The desirability of making some changes to the way in which education is delivered to enable something akin to a “core plus options” model to be pursued received strong support, particularly in the context of better engaging children and young people in activities whose relevance both they and society can most readily see.
- In the context of pupil disaffection, there is mounting concern about what appears to be a growing trend of disaffection in young males and a perceived associated gender gap in performance.

How Should We Best Teach Children?

- The idea of “certification for all” is clearly well-embedded, but some parents are asking if certificates should be more meaningful with some emphasis given to personal qualities and skills as well as to academic achievements.
- Some parents feel that pupils have too many teachers in S1/S2.
- The place of vocational qualifications attracts considerable discussion, and many parents would wish to see developments in this area.
- Some parents recognise the importance of children acquiring skills rather than simply qualifications.
- All parents acknowledge the benefits of positive interaction between teachers and pupils, welcome the fact that children are more confident in attending school and appreciate consultation about learning activities and about how the school is to be run.
- There is no parental consensus in favour of setting or streaming of children by ability until the latter stages of secondary education, although the potential benefits of group work are acknowledged, from the point of view of learning in and through teams.
- Current discussions within Angus about Effective Learning & Teaching, and in particular the role of Formative Assessment in that process, are generally endorsed by parents, notwithstanding some remaining, but healthy, scepticism about the desirability of considerable reduction in the use of marks and/or grades in feeding back information to pupils.
- Parents appear to recognise and support HMIE’s concerns about the lack of pace in learning in S1/S2.
- Parental concerns are also in evidence about what appears to be an excessively fragmented approach to curriculum delivery in secondary schools, and the way in which current regulations about teacher training and teacher registration (via the GTC) seem to reinforce that fragmentation.
- Some parents are anxious that children and young people in Scotland are subject to too many examinations and to too much testing. The stress which some pupils can derive from this is seen to be unnecessary.
- On the same theme, the value of Standard Grade at the end of S4 is beginning to be questioned.

When?

Pattern of School Year

- There is some support for a radical overhaul of the pattern of the school year, although this support is far from unanimous. In general, most parents would support some attempt to reduce the current variances in the lengths of school terms, and would possibly also support a slightly shorter summer holiday. Educationalists' concerns about the increasing numbers of parents taking family holidays during term time seem to be caused at least in part by the huge variation in prices for package holidays abroad at different times of year, although it is by no means clear that a re-configuration of the school year would necessarily improve this position.
- There is a recognition of the inconvenience which can be caused by neighbouring Councils adopting a different pattern of school holidays, although there is also a counter view that such an arrangement is desirable for a number of reasons, not least of which is the potential it offers for spreading demand across the whole year and thereby obviating price differences in package holidays!
- There is clearly, however, some support for a more standardised school year across Scotland, and a recognition that the only way in which this could be achieved would be for the Executive to take powers to fix school terms and holidays, or at least to fix more rigid parameters within which Councils can set school terms and holidays.

Pattern of School Day

- No major criticisms were offered of the current arrangements, although many parents seemed to be supportive of attempts to look more radically at the way in which school buildings could be used for children and young people; possibly a re-configured formal school day (say 8.00 am to 2.00 pm) followed by an informal afternoon (2.00 pm to 5.00 pm?) whereby the school buildings could be used by school pupils (supervised by either non-teaching staff or volunteer teachers) to engage in a range of activities over which a significant degree of choice for the individual is available.

Statutory School Starting Age

- No clear consensus emerged, although a significant number of parents seem to have some anxieties about excessively formal education being offered to children at too young an age.

School Leaving Age

- Given the significant increase in recent years of staying-on rates, parents generally would support a more flexible approach to the application of the School Leaving Age, including:
 - an ability for any child to engage in full-time education (for the last year of compulsory education?) in a setting other than a school (eg FE College)
 - an abandonment of the current arrangements whereby there are two leaving dates; to be consistent with a single school starting date, parents believe that a single school leaving date (eg after a child has completed 11 years of compulsory schooling) would be helpful
- Parental views about the timing of In-service Closures Days remain, and – from parents' point of view – these days would clearly be better taken at the start or the end of a holiday period.

Where?

- Parents believe that school is the best place to learn as it provides the best means for the development of social skills and good discipline.

- It is clear that parents accept that Inclusion is in everyone's best interests although it is acknowledged that for some children inclusion may not be appropriate.
- Schools should be opened up to the community in the evenings as learning centres/activity centres, and there is also a strong feeling that a "community school" approach involving other services would be desirable.

Who?

- Once again, the importance of home-school partnerships is stressed.
- There is strong parental support for the concept of Classroom Assistants, coupled with some residual concerns that this initiative may conceal a long-term plan to replace teachers; the need therefore to build in safeguards about future direction and future standards should be emphasised.

The above summary represents the views of 30 Angus parents (primary and secondary) who attended meetings on two consecutive evenings in May 2002.