

Department of Education Policy Paper 19: SELB Response

ESTABLISHMENT OF THE EDUCATION ADVISORY FORUM

Background:

The SELB welcomes the proposal to establish the Education Advisory Forum as outlined in Policy Paper 19 representing as it does a structured approach across all sectors to providing a unified advisory interface between the Department and the education sector.

The comments relating to more effective ways of providing a voice for parents and young people are noted but the paper fails to outline the strategy for effective engagement of young people in the process. The work of the Youth Service on effective engagement of young people could provide a mechanism to ensure their voice is heard.

The commitment to have a wider engagement with education stakeholders is encouraging as it will address a potential weakness in relation to local input and reflect circumstances that apply in different geographical locations in Northern Ireland.

The SELB notes the assertion within the paper ‘that the review will lead to more direct engagement with Boards of Governors, school principals and teachers to ensure that their views are considered.’ It is the view of the SELB that the development of new mechanisms to deliver effective engagement with these groups will be essential to the success of the Education Advisory Forum.

Approach to the Review:

The SELB recognises the difficulties in finding an ideal template for the Education Advisory Forum and hopes that the comments contained in this paper can contribute to finding the best possible model.

Role of the Education Advisory Forum:

The fact that the special advisory role is set in statute is welcomed by the SELB. While recognising that there will be occasions when non disclosure under Freedom of Information is essential, the SELB would hope that in the interest of transparency this will be the exception rather than the rule. The commitment within the paper to continue consultation with other interest groups is welcomed.

Status of the Education Advisory Forum:

The SELB considers that the decision to establish the Education Advisory Forum as an advisory, non-departmental public body is a correct one since it should strengthen the independence of the advice offered.

While acknowledging the practicalities relating to the secretariat, the fact that the secretariat will be made up of staff seconded from DE could impact on the perceived independence of the Forum.

Relationship with DE and accountability to the Minister:

The need for all involved to have a clear understanding of the relationship between the Education Advisory Forum, the Department and the Minister is considered to be paramount to the success of the Education Advisory Forum. It is therefore important that a clear definition is provided of the relationship between the Education Advisory Forum and both the Minister for Education and the Minister for Employment and Learning. This definition should also recognise the different governance arrangements that apply to the Department for Education and the Department of Employment and Learning. The Department of Education, under the new arrangements, is a policy body with the Education and Skills Authority being the delivery body while the Department of Employment and Learning is both a policy and delivery body.

Structure / Membership:

The SELB welcomes the acknowledgement of the need to obtain a balance between the customer and the supplier side of education but would like to see geographical balance also included.

The SELB recognises the difficulty in ensuring the proposed membership contains a fair and broad representation of the interests in the education sector and would ask that the following issues are considered:

- Specific representation for the Pre-School sector;
- An increase in the Voluntary Youth Representation to 2 to reflect the Uniformed and Non-Uniformed sectors;
- The need for, and methodology of appointment of 2 International Perspective representatives;
- The potential for the inclusion of representatives of the Department of Education and the Department of Employment and Learning on the forum to impact on the perception of the independence of the Forum; and
- The role of the representative from commercial organisations on the Forum. Consideration could be given as to whether their contribution should be achieved in a different way such as consultancy on the area under discussion.

Research:

The need for the Education Advisory Forum to carry out research will be paramount to its success and the SELB welcomes the inclusion of this responsibility in the remit of the Forum. It is considered important that the Education Advisory Forum will have independence and freedom to commission its own research.

Status of advice by the Education Advisory Forum:

The commitment to include a copy of advice provided by the Forum to the Minister with an indication of how the advice provided by the Forum has influenced the policy is welcomed. As highlighted earlier in this paper, it is essential, in the interests of transparency, that this information is available to the wider education sector. It is recognised that there may be occasional circumstances when due to the nature of the matters under discussion that this may not be possible.

Values:

The aspiration to the values outlined is commendable and if fully delivered will contribute to the success of the Education Advisory Forum. The SELB considers that changing “*achieving better educational outcomes*” to “*continually improving educational outcomes*” in the second value statement would strengthen that statement.

Operating Principles:

The SELB considered it is important that forum members can influence both the agenda and the agenda setting process. The current proposed arrangements do not allow for this.

Measuring Performance:

It is considered essential that the performance of the Education Advisory Forum demonstrates added value to the education sector in the field of policy making and resulting practice.

Review:

The commitment to ongoing review of the Education Advisory Forum is essential to ensuring it is operating in the most effective manner for the benefit of the education sector. Clarification is needed on who will carry out the review.

Conclusion:

Policy Paper 19, with the proposed amendments provided in this response, is considered to provide a sound basis for the development of the Education Advisory Forum and the SELB looks forward to it becoming an effective body assisting the development of the education sector for the benefit of all children and young people throughout Northern Ireland.