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Students Participation in Decision Making Is Key To Inclusive Schools

Response from the Centre For Studies on Inclusive Education to the Department for Education and Skills consultation on the draft guidance to Local Education Authorities and schools, 'Working Together Giving Children and Young People a Say'

A welcome initiative

CSIE's experience over 20 years of working towards inclusive education has confirmed that participation of children and young people in decisions which affect their education is a key component of developing inclusive schools. In our view this involves giving equal priority to participation by children and young people both in decisions about their own education and about their school as a whole. The *Index for Inclusion*, written by Tony Booth and Mel Ainscow and published by CSIE, incorporates pupil participation in all main aspects of the self-review process for developing inclusive schools - creating inclusive cultures, producing inclusive policies, and evolving inclusive practices. We therefore very much welcome this initiative by the Government to ensure that children and young people participate more effectively in educational decision making

However, we are aware that schools in England have been slow to catch up with what has been a long tradition in many other countries of listening and involving children and young people in decision making in schools. In view of this slow start, it is crucially important that the opportunity is now fully grasped by the Government to give a clear message to schools that they are expected to have in place structures and procedures which make sure that pupils' voices are listened to, respected, and taken into account and for Government to provide appropriate advice and examples about how to go about this.

CSIE's concerns

Our main concern with the guidance, as currently drafted, is that it comes across as too flexible and vague to the extent that local education authorities and schools may receive the impression that it can be ignored. In our view the guidance needs to be set out in a much more strategic, positive, and authoritative fashion, to emphasise the pressing importance of children's rights to be involved in making decisions and exercising choices.

It could be that the low-key tone of the guidance is intended to acknowledge how important it is that the structures and procedures schools develop to support pupil participation in decision making are 'owned' by all members of the school community. We would suggest that an effective way of promoting local involvement and accountability would be to propose that schools set up their own working parties involving representatives of all aspects of school life, particularly pupils, to audit, plan and monitor how children's rights to participation in educational decision making can best be implemented and upheld in their own settings.

Such a process of self-review mirrors the *Index* process for developing inclusion relevant to local settings and could be usefully merged with it. In this context, the role of the Government guidance becomes to clearly set out the 'why' and 'what' of schools' responsibilities regarding pupils' rights to participation in educational decision making, as well as providing examples and alternative ways of fulfilling those responsibilities. The preferred route and details of implementation could then be decided locally based on the guidance. If it was felt that the *Index* process would be useful to schools in developing pupil participation in decision making, a reference to this in the participation guidance would be compatible with earlier references to the *Index* in the DfES guidance on inclusion

Another major concern with the guidance is the lack of emphasis on how to ensure that disabled children and others vulnerable to exclusion can play their full part in the educational decision making process. Access needs for vulnerable children need to be given much more priority.

We would also suggest that a focus on decision making in education is made in the title of the guidance instead of a general reference, as at present. For example: 'Working together: Giving children and young people a say *in education*'.

The following is a summary on how the guidance on pupil participation in education could be developed to take into account CSIE's concerns.

- 1 Clear statement on schools and LEA's responsibilities regarding pupils participation in educational decision making, as set out in Articles 12 and 13 of the 1989 United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child.

- 2 The principles of children and young peoples' participation in educational decision making (based on page 3 of the draft guidance).
- 3 The legal and policy framework (based on pages 1 and 2 of the draft guidance).
- 4 Guidance on setting up pupil participation working parties in schools to audit, plan, implement and monitor the necessary procedures and structures for ensuring pupils' rights to participation in educational decision making are upheld (new section).
- 5 Examples of alternative models of procedures and structures for pupil participation in educational decision making (based on pages 4, 5 and 6 of the draft guidance). This section also to include new examples and discussion on how to overcome any barriers to participation for disabled pupils and other pupils vulnerable to exclusion and referring to the section on pupil participation in the SEN Code of Practice.
- 6 Details of website including facilities for schools to share information.

References

Booth, T. and Ainscow, M. (2002), *Index for Inclusion: Developing Learning and Participation in Schools*, (Bristol:CSIE).

Department for Education and Skills (2001), *Inclusive Schooling Children with Special Educational Needs*, (Nottingham: DfES Publications).

CSIE, November 2003.