

## **Local Education Boards: Implications for Special Education Policy and Provision**

Ireland's educational system - apart from the Vocational Educational committees established in the 1930s - has been characterised by centralised administration. The proposal to create an Intermediate Tier of Local Educational Boards, with their potential for flexibility and optimal sharing of resources has been generally acclaimed. From a special education perspective, however, some particular issues need to be carefully addressed.

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### **BROAD WELCOME FOR AN INTERMEDIATE TIER**

I wish first of all to state my position with regard to the notion of an Intermediate Tier, or Regional Education Councils (or as they have been termed in the White Paper "local educational boards"). I wish to state immediately that I welcome such a proposal. I have always felt that there is not much point in individual schools having a vertical relationship with, the Department of Education, but no horizontal relationship with schools next door to them, or in the same parish as them, or in the same county as them. I think the need to have contact with other schools is particularly relevant and essential for special schools. I propose to examine the position of Regional Education Councils from two points of view; firstly to look at their role from a broad philosophical or policy point of view, and secondly to look at some specific areas of application which such councils might have.

### **KEY ISSUES: FLEXIBILITY AND CHOICE**

In many recent documents, proposals or reports involving special education, two key words have emerged. The first word is *flexibility* and the second is *choice* and indeed there is a definite relationship between these two concepts. In 1992 the



Department of Education's Green Paper, when considering plans for children with disabilities, outlined the following position. "Dealing with this problem effectively involves a recognition that there is a very wide variety of different needs and that the needs of individual children will change from time to time. Consistent with this, the approach would be committed to having as many children as is appropriate in ordinary schools, backed up by a range of facilities including special schools which children could draw on as necessary. The greatest possible *flexibility* would be aimed for, with children moving from ordinary schools to special schools and back again as their needs dictated (*Green Paper*, 1992, p.8).

The Green Paper referred to the work of the Special Education Review Committee in this regard but I can find no evidence of the "practical details of this approach" being worked out by it. Perhaps it did not consider it to be particularly workable. Without doubt, to achieve this flexibility, I believe there would have to be Regional Education Councils. In fact this position was similarly endorsed in the Report of the National Education Convention, where it states "to provide choice and flexibility for children with disabilities and their families, there would need to be co-ordination at a local level". (*Report of National Education Convention*, 1994, p.124). Similarly in the broadest sense, the word flexibility appears again in the Minister's position paper on Regional Education Councils when she states "intermediate structures will contribute to an improvement of the quality, efficiency, relevance and flexibility of the delivery of educational services". (*Position Paper on Regional Educational Councils*, 1994, p.10).

### **PROBLEMS OF POLICY IMPLEMENTATION**

An interesting situation may develop, if we consider whether or not there should be equal flexibility on policy matters. What I mean by that is, will policy be exclusively drawn up by the planning group within the Department of Education? Will policy become a national matter, or could we find that individual regional councils will have the power to vary the policy which has been prescribed or laid down at national level? I think inevitably there will be some tension between the national policy makers and regional policy implementers. Within the area of special education there could well be particular problems regarding policy matters. In special education over the past two decades, the major policy matter has been the integration issue. I believe that now, thankfully, the hoary and wasteful and rather crude argument of integration versus segregation seems to have been resolved. The National Education Convention's Report states: "if the option of integrated education is to present a real choice it has to mean more than simply getting the child into an ordinary school. It is clear from all contributions



that unsupported, unresourced integration is not a satisfactory option. Real integration involves identification of the child's needs, an appropriate curriculum, resources such as support staff and in-service education for all individual teachers" (Report of National Education Convention, 1994, p.123).

### **MULTI-CATEGORY SPECIAL SCHOOLS : A BARRIER TO PARENTAL CHOICE?**

This refinement of opinion on integration, now encapsulated in the Report of the National Education Convention, owes much to the sustained argument of a number of groups and individuals over the past year. It is stated as follows: " In their presentation, the representative group for people with disabilities - the Forum for People with Disabilities - declared that their preferred policy was an education programme based on the principle of choice; integration into ordinary schools for those children who along with their families want it, and improved staffing facilities and minimum standards or certifications in special schools if chosen by or for other young people. This position is identical to present government policy as stated in the Programme for a partnership Government" (*Report of National Education Convention, 1994, p.122*). However, there may be a problem when we look at how the matter of flexibility and choice will apply in a local or regional way. For example if parents is to be given a real choice one must assume that the range of options are available within a particular region or locality. Will the development of all these educational options be a matter for the local Regional Council, or will that Council oversee the development of what is referred to in the Report of the Special Education Review Committee as "multi-category special schools"? "Special schools will in future enroll pupils from different categories of disability and will become more in the nature of regional multi-category special schools, serving pupils with severel types of significant special needs" (*Report of the Special Education Review Committee, 1993, p.23*). This may appear to be an administrative convenience within a region, but I believe it could be extremely damaging for individual children. I believe that a change in the service provided by our schools, from what has been, up to now a specialist service into a hotch-potch multi-category service may result in an inadequate service being provided to a wider range of children. Again I am not clear as to whether or not this would be a national policy matter or a regional policy matter. Could we find that once a national policy has been laid down, some regions may be more active in setting up such a range of options than others, and would this be acceptable and tolerated?



## **NEED FOR NATIONAL POLICY ON SPECIAL SCHOOLS**

In making decisions on matters such as these, I think it was regrettable that representatives from special education interests were not invited to participate in the Roundtable Discussions on the Minister's proposals. The report of that discussion states "the envisaged role for the R.E.C.'s with regard to special education was welcomed in submissions received" (*Report on Roundtable Discussions on Regional Educational Councils*, 1994, p.13).

However I can find very little reference specifically to special education in the Minister's proposals for Regional Education Councils. Yet, other minority interest groups were able to have a direct impact on the Roundtable Discussions. Thus, the Educate Together Movement and the Gaelscoileanna were able to have the following enshrined in the Roundtable Report, "while minority religions, the Educate Together Movement, and Gaelscoileanna would co-operate with R.E.C.'s if established, there was a national dimension to their needs for which special provision would need to be made supplemental to the role of the R.E.C.'s" (*Report on Roundtable Discussions*, p.7). Surely the same could be said for special education? Surely there is a national dimension to the needs of special schools? Surely it would be important to ensure that there is no variation in policy regarding special education provision from region to region? Matters such as these need to be resolved, as their implications for special schools could be quite considerable.

## **PSYCHOLOGICAL SERVICE: ROLE OF REGIONAL COUNCILS ?**

The second area of concern to me as a school Principal would be some specific issues which may come under the umbrella of Regional Education Councils. I welcome readily the devolution which would allow for greater and more relevant input on matters such as curricular provision and give it a local orientation, on redeployment and substitution panels, and on other areas such as the development of a school psychological service and school transport. It is particularly with regard to these last two matters that I wish to make some comments. The Report of the National Education Convention when discussing Intermediate Tiers reports that: "a strong emphasis was placed by many at the Convention on the co-ordinating support and service role which such structures (Intermediate Educational Tiers) could play. Among the services proposed were: the organisation of in-service education for teachers and other staff, psychological, medical, paramedical and social services (in association with the local Health Board) education for special needs,...transport services etc" (Report of the



National Education Conventionm p.19). It is clear that psychological, medical, paramedical and social services will be provided in association with the local Health Board and very often these would be coterminous geographically with the proposed Regional Education Councils. However, there are very specific proposals with regard to the school psychological service. In the Minister's Position Paper it is stated that "visiting teacher, remedial and psychological services would be co-ordinated and provided through the school psychological services in the R.E.C.'s. This service would carry out psychological assessments on students referred by individual schools and would report and advise on remediation strategies. This schools' psychological service would include a number of staff seconded from the Department of Education for a fixed period" (*Position Paper*, p.18). Also it is stated that "the Minister sees considerable merit in the majority view as reported at the National Education Convention that teachers would be employed by their Boards of Management and that support staff such as psychologists and counsellors should be employed by the intermediate tier" (*Ibid*, P.14). I am not clear as to why this is so and why there would not be some provision whereby psychologists might indeed be employed by existing Boards of Management of special schools. After all we know that some of the very large and often independently financed special schools do just that and, do so very effectively.

### **PSYCHOLOGICAL SERVICE : VARIATIONS IN REFERRAL POLICY**

It is with regard to the role of the psychological service that I have some specific questions to ask. part of the function of the psychological service is to provide an assessment of the child's needs. Here I would like to quote from a previously published article which I wrote: "Assessment of its nature would provide a statement of the child's abilities and needs. The crucial issue for parents may well be - where and how those needs can be met, so that the abilities can be most profitably developed. At this point a recommendation or referral must be made and this process is not always as straight forward as it may appear. Who makes the recommendation and to whom is it made? What sort of information is required to make the recommendation and what use can be made of this information? Is it to be made by one person making a particular part of the assessment , such as the psychologist, whose views on special education may be very different from those of another psychologist or should it be by all involved with the assessment including the parents"? (O'Keeffe, 1993, p.69). The reason that I raise this matter is that I am aware of the fact that there are instances, and I have been so informed by parents, that in having their child assessed by a particular psychologist they are more or less likely to have that child referred to a



special school, than if the child is assessed by another psychologist. Is it possible that Regional Education Councils will allow this level of variation in psychological services, or will a psychologist have the responsibility to make recommendations in accordance with national policy? Or should we not be moving to a situation whereby the recommendation is made not just by the psychologist but by all relevant parties including parents, teachers of the child in his present location and the teachers or representatives of the alternative location to which the child may be referred?

### **REGIONALISING SCHOOL TRANSPORT POLICY**

Finally I wish to refer to the school transport service. In the report of the Minister's position paper, it is stated that "ultimately it is envisaged that each Regional Education Council would be responsible for the provision of school transport serving all primary and second level schools within its area. Funding would be provided to each R.E.C. on the basis of nationally defined criteria. For geographical reasons it may be necessary for neighbouring R.E.C.'s to co-operate in the provision of some transport services" (*Position Paper*, p.18). I must extend a warm welcome for such a proposed development. I know that for many of my colleagues as School Principals, and particularly the Principals of special schools there has been no more demanding issue in the months of September and October than matters relating to school transport.

I wish to instance as an example of the bizarre manner in which the system operates at present. My school is located in Portlaoise; ten miles away there is the town of Portarlinton. At any given time I may have a child referred for admission to our school from Portarlinton. It is clear from the psychologist's report that that child is immediately suitable and meets the criteria for admission to our school. I have met with the child's parents and both child and parents are very happy to accept a place. I am aware that the bus serving the Portarlinton area passes by this child's home, each morning and evening. I am aware that there is room on this particular school bus. The problem now arises, how do I get this child onto this bus, and the following is the procedure: I must write to my School's Inspector, making application for transport for the child. The Inspector will then send that request to the Department of Education. The Department in turn will pass that on to Bus Éireann headquarters in Dublin. They will then send it to their regional office in Athlone. They will instruct their Bus Inspector to visit the child's home to ensure that the child is living in that home, that his date of birth is correct and that his father's and or mother's name is correct on the form. The Inspector will also report that no extension is required to the service and that there



is room on the bus. He will then send that report back to his regional office in Athlone; they in turn will send that on to their headquarters in Dublin, and they in turn will notify the Department of Education, who will authorise the issuing of a ticket. Word will again be passed on to the local Bus Éireann office in Athlone, who will then send a ticket to me and I will then make contact with that child's family, perhaps four or five weeks after the time of my meeting with them, when all I needed to was walk to the gate of my school and ask the bus driver if he would collect the child immediately following the parent's consent to have him admitted. There must be a better way to do this!

I very much welcome the Minister's stated commitment towards the provision of helpers on school buses. Might I point out however, that one of the greatest difficulties under which we labour with regard to school transport is that we are classified as primary schools. This problem was also adverted to in the report of the Special Education Review Committee. Its implications are that as we are classified as primary schools, more children can travel on a bus than would normally be allowed to travel to a post primary school. This, despite the fact, that in almost all our schools the vast majority of our children are of post primary age, but will be crammed into a bus of smaller size because they are deemed to be attending a primary school. I would suggest that this is also a matter requiring urgent attention.

## CONCLUSION

In conclusion, I repeat that I welcome the development of Regional Educational Councils, or, as they may be described in the White Paper 'Education Boards'. There will, inevitably, be some teething problems, and it will be some time before these new bodies become really effective. I also hope that limited financial resources will not be unduly directed towards administrative and bureaucratic aspects of the structures. I believe that our Special Education system can now look forward, with more confidence, to the next century. I also believe that if adequate resources are made available to ensure that the System allows for the promised flexibility and choice, then the children, whom we are privileged to serve will be the real beneficiaries.

*This article is based on an Address given at the Annual General Meeting of the National Association of Boards and Management in Special Education, Athlone, October 15, 1994.*



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