

Suspension and Expulsion Procedures: Proposals for Change

**Findings from the consultation exercise
with Parent Focus groups**

**Submitted to the Department of Education
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by the Parenting Forum [NI]**

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Context and rationale

In Autumn 2002, the Department of Education set up a working group consisting of representatives from the Department of Education, the Education and Library Boards and the Council for Catholic and Maintained Schools to carry out a review of the arrangements for suspending and expelling pupils. The legislative and legal framework used in the suspension and expulsion of pupils had remained largely unchanged since 1995. The Department had recognised the need to review this framework against the increased emphasis on the rights of children in education, the duty on statutory organisations to promote social inclusion and current best practice in the management of pupils with challenging behaviours. Following completion of the review by the working group, the Department of Education published a consultation document entitled 'Suspension and Expulsion Procedures: Proposals for Change' which outlines the changes it proposes to make. However, changes will not be made until it has feedback from all the people who could be affected by the proposed changes including parents, pupils and the schools.

The Department of Education recognised that parents are an important stakeholder in relation to suspensions and expulsions of pupils. It therefore wished to consult with parents as a part of the overall process. In this context it approached the Parenting Forum [NI] and asked it to carry out a consultation exercise with parents across the five Education and Library Boards. Consultation with parents is an integral part of the work of the Parenting Forum [NI] and, as such, the organisation has developed effective methodology to carry out such consultations. To facilitate the consultation process a short programme was designed lasting approximately 2 hours for use with a number of parent focus groups throughout Northern Ireland.

This consultation serves to impact on the final shape of the arrangements for the suspension and expulsion of pupils throughout Northern Ireland and ensures that the all important views and opinions of parents are considered in the changes that are made.

The Consultation Process

In April 2004 the Parenting Forum [NI] commenced the task of carrying out a consultation exercise with parents on behalf of the Department of Education. The Parenting Forum has considerable experience in carrying out such exercises: it has contact with a network of parents and parent support groups throughout Northern Ireland on a daily basis and is well placed to carry out real and meaningful consultations with parents within a tight time frame-work.

The initial plan had been to enlist the co-operation of schools in setting up the focus groups. However, this proved problematic on several counts. Some schools did not respond to the initial written request for their school to host a focus group, some declined to take part because they were involved in a dispute which they felt precluded them from becoming involved in this extra-curricular activity, some declined because of the time of year and others did not want to take part because they felt that suspensions and expulsions were not an issue. As a result of this, there was a change of focus in how groups were chosen and this resulted in several meetings taking place outside a school setting. The impact of this was threefold: slightly fewer focus groups took place, fewer parents were represented because of the nature of the groups and thirdly, the groups facilitated contained more parents who had had a direct experience of suspension and expulsion. Eight groups in all contained parents who were able to speak from first hand experience of suspension and/or expulsion.

The Parenting Forum used their own internal facilitators for the majority of the focus groups. External facilitators were members of the Parenting Forum and all attended a training session prior to facilitating a focus group. Consultation with parents requires highly skilled and experienced facilitators who are capable of working sensitively with diverse groups and facilitators were chosen accordingly. Parents clearly valued the opportunity to be consulted on the document and readily contributed their views and their experiences.

Consultation Methodology

A consultation pack was designed to ensure a uniform approach across all the focus groups in collecting and collating the information. The pack also aimed to give parents an insight the overall purpose of the review

and into the rationale for each proposal. User friendly materials were designed in order to present the proposals to the parents in a way that would encourage debate [see Appendix 1]. Focus groups were used as the data gathering method because they brought parents together in a way that allowed them to share their experiences and their opinions about the new proposals and to identify issues of individual and common concern. The Parenting Forum was aware of the need to consult with parents across all five Boards and with parents whose children attended both Primary and Secondary schools. The balance, however, was in favour of Secondary schools given the higher number of suspensions and expulsions that currently take place within post primary education. The focus groups also contained parents whose children attended different types of schools: controlled, Catholic maintained, voluntary grammar, integrated and alternative provision such as EOTIS.

13 focus groups were set up and 99 parents were accessed by the consultation exercise. These parents cared for a total of 236 children. It was not possible to carry out the consultation with the thirteenth group as no parents arrived.

The groups were located as follows:

- Twinbrook
- Larne
- Downpatrick
- Carrickfergus
- Dundonald
- Dungannon
- Lurgan
- Strabane
- Lisburn
- Newtownabbey
- Carrickfergus
- Ballymena
- Newtownards

Focus groups were held at times that suited the majority of parents and transport and childcare costs were met to ensure accessibility.

Each facilitator compiled a report based on the 4 exercises carried out and any other comments contributed by parents. The responses were analysed by an independent consultant. She was responsible for writing this report

which presents the views of parents both quantitatively and qualitatively. Key issues are identified in the recommendations.

Parent Focus groups: the Findings

Findings from the parent focus groups have been analysed under the questions provided in Appendix C of the consultation document.

a. All schools should use the same scheme for the suspension and expulsion of pupils

All the focus groups agreed with this proposal. However, there were a number of comments:

- The scheme should take into account health and safety issues
- The system must be fair to everyone
- Schools should stick to the system, follow the ‘rules’ and not make allowances for some pupils
- Suspension should not be seen as a holiday
- The scheme should be used fairly for similar ‘offences’
- The scheme should detail the necessity to discuss the proposed suspension or expulsion with parents before it is imposed
- The system should be fair and free of confusion
- 1 group felt that schools should be issued with a framework but that schools should have the freedom to make individual decisions based on the presenting problem
- 1 group felt there should be a separate scheme for children with Special Educational Needs
- One group felt there should be a different system for primary and secondary schools

The overall themes emerging throughout many of the focus groups were the need for a scheme which demonstrated fairness and that parents should be consulted before suspension or expulsion is imposed.

b. The Department of Education should issue guidance on the proper use of suspension

All the groups agreed with this proposal. The following comments were made:

- The schools should keep records and talk to the parents concerned

- The Department should issue a list of the grounds for suspension with guidance on the appropriate length of suspension to fit the situation
- It seems like schools at present make up the rules and that rules change for different pupils
- Concern was expressed about bullies and that it is unfair if the victim of the bullying has to leave the school: some schools deny bullying is an issue
- Schools **must** adhere to the guidance
- The system must be equitable
- Concern was expressed about the current number of unofficial suspensions and how these might be prevented

Once again a common theme was the need for fair and equitable guidance which was adhered to by all schools.

c. The Education and Training Inspectorate should monitor schools' suspension arrangements

All the focus groups agreed with this proposal and had some comments on how this process could be made effective:

- Inspectors should talk to parents about their experiences whilst monitoring
- Inspectors should send out feedback questionnaires to all parents whose child has been suspended in a given year
- Inspectors should randomly sample parents whose child has been suspended
- For monitoring by the Inspectorate to be effective it needs to be more than once every 3 years
- Primary and Secondary Advisers should have an input into monitoring
- Lay people should be involved in monitoring

The key theme emerging in this discussion was the need for effective monitoring procedures that include seeking the views of the parents who have had experience of the process

d. A school is responsible for the education of a pupil while on suspension

Seven groups agreed with this proposal, one group disagreed and four groups were split in their opinion. Overall more parents agreed than disagreed. Comments were:

- Pupils need to be given work to do at home otherwise they may consider suspension as a holiday
- Suspension needs to be an effective sanction: suggest pupils are given double the work they would have completed had they been at school
- What work is provided for the pupil could depend on the length of the suspension: concern about teacher having the time and resources.
- Suggested there should be a go between similar to the EWO with the responsibility for providing ongoing education for the suspended pupil: DE should resource this
- The Education Board should provide this service not the schools
- Issuing work is not sufficient: pupils need teacher's help and support during suspension
- Ongoing education needs to meet the pupil's needs: home tutors are not always the best option as they take too long to set up
- It is the DE's responsibility not the schools
- One group suggested a re-habilitation unit for suspended pupils so teachers can concentrate on those pupils who do comply with the school's requirements
- Parents need to be supported by the school in the continuing education of suspended pupils
- As the teachers may not have the time the EWO could be utilised

There was no consensus on this proposal with a variety of views being expressed about the arrangements for the continuing education of the suspended pupil.

e. There should be no formal right of appeal against a suspension

Two groups agreed with this proposal, eight groups disagreed and two groups were split in their opinions. This question produced strong views about the right of appeal:

- 'No appeal' would deny children's rights
- Appeals are common in many other aspects of life: suspensions may still be unfairly applied in spite of guidance
- Limit the number of appeals and the time framework for appeals
- It would be fine to have no appeals if the system could definitely be fair
- Parents should have the right to challenge a decision they see as unfair
- Communication is vital: need to involve the EWO early on

- Concerns expressed that guidance may not be followed: parents should have open access to files on their child
- No appeals would be fine if monitoring procedures are effective

Parents overall seemed to be mainly in favour of an appeal's process with many groups implying that whatever system is put in place there will always be situations in which unfair decisions are made and therefore a need for an appeal's process. Several groups saw this as a right's issue.

f. DE should prepare an information leaflet for parents about the legal position on suspension

All the groups agreed with this proposal though one group suggested a separate leaflet for the parents of pupils with Special Educational Needs.

Comments made were:

- It should be in plain English, have no jargon and be simple to understand
- It should include a statement of the process and parent's rights in relation to expulsion
- It should be issued at the beginning of the school year and be posted out to parents
- EWOs should carry copies and distribute them
- It should be issued again as a reminder when problems arise
- A teacher should have the responsibility to talk through the leaflet and to answer any concerns
- Use other channels as a method of distribution

The overall message emerging from feedback is the need to make a user friendly information leaflet accessible to all parents and to have a dedicated person within the school who could answer queries about suspensions.

- g. There should be a single 'expelling authority' for all schools**
- h. An 'independent assessor' should represent the interests of a pupil during a proposed expulsion**

These two questions were presented as alternatives to the parents as this is how they present in the main body of the consultation document. The majority of the groups felt that a single 'expelling' authority would be the preferred option in facilitating a fair and equitable process for all pupils. A small number of felt that there could be in independent person

representing the interests of the pupil on the panel. The following comments were made in relation to the two proposals:

Expelling authority

- The expelling authority should include a parent, child psychologist and perhaps a youth leader
- The expelling authority should be independent of the school
- The expelling authority could include representatives from the Church, youth groups and the Parents Advice Centre or other relevant voluntary group
- Appropriate membership of the expelling panel is vital
- There should be a balance on the panel
- It should include parents
- The members need to understand young people
- Concern was expressed about the time it would take to get the members together for a 'hearing'
- How would a school react if ordered to take a pupil back?
- The expelling authority could be intimidating
- There should be transparency about its make-up

Independent person:

- If an independent person he/she should have a legal background
- The person should be appointed early on in the process
- The individual should not just sit in on the hearing but should get to know the young person and his/her circumstances
- It's too much responsibility for one person

The major concern in the discussion on these two proposals was that the membership of the 'expelling authority' would be appropriate, understand the needs of young people and be detached from the school. Practical suggestions were made as to who might become a member of such a body.

i. DE should prepare an information leaflet for parents about the legal position on expulsions

All the focus groups agreed with this proposal and the comments mirrored those made in the earlier proposal suggesting an information leaflet on the legal position regarding suspensions. Comments were:

- This should be issued every year
- It should be in 'plain English'

- It should contain a list of grounds for expulsion
- It should explain who has what responsibility so parents know where they stand
- It should explain what children are entitled to during an expulsion
- It should be simple to understand for both parents and children
- It should explain the time framework
- It should reflect parents' and schools' needs
- There should also be someone to talk to about the process within the school [not the Principal]
- Parents should be involved at all stages of the process
- EWO should carry the leaflets and be a source of information
- Leaflets are not always read so 1 person suggested a Departmental Expulsion adviser

The responses emphasised the need for a user- friendly leaflet backed up by a nominated person who could be available for clarification. Suggestions were made about aspects of the process which should be clearly detailed in the leaflet to ensure the process is clear for all.

j. New guidance on the consultation process should be issued before an expulsion decision is made

The groups were unanimous in agreeing with this proposal. The following represent their comments:

- This is fair: everyone knows what is expected
- There should be a teacher specially trained on expulsions for each school
- Guidance should emphasise open communication between all the parties
- It should emphasise the importance of keeping parents informed at all stages
- The guidance should include helping pupils understand the implications and what will happen to them
- Concern expressed about what form the guidance would take
- If guidance was in place then a child would just not arrive home expelled
- Guidance should state in what circumstances expulsion is appropriate
- Parents should be consulted on the guidance prior to its issue

Parents from the groups emphasised in their discussion that the guidance needs to focus on the communication process between parents, children

and the school. Overall the issuing of guidance was felt to be a very positive proposal.

k. Expelled pupils should not be out of education for longer than 15 school days

All but two groups agreed with this proposal. The remaining 2 groups were split evenly in their opinions. In one group two parents felt 15 days was too long. Some parents who had agreed with the proposal suggested also that a shorter time span would be preferable. Comments made were:

- If education is not continued expelled pupils may see expulsion as a holiday
- There should be an alternative place for expelled pupils to go to continue their education
- Appropriate education is the most important thing
- Education should continue as quickly as possible
- Concern expressed that roll-on suspensions could be used ie pupils are suspended for a series of continuous periods
- Many of the pupils are already behind with their work so no more than 15 days
- It's harder for pupils to re-adjust back into the school system if they are out of education so they need to be re-integrated as soon as possible
- There should be home tuition whilst children are expelled
- 5 days maximum 'out of education' would be ideal
- It was commented that this proposal is in contrast to the situation in which pupils have been suspended for 45 days

l. A regional independent expulsions appeals process should be established

The groups were split in their views on this proposal. 6 groups agreed and 2 groups disagreed with the remainder of the groups being divided in their opinion. However, considerably more parents thought that there should be a regional independent appeals process. Comments made provide additional information:

Against regional panel:

- Independent and fair is important: suggest a regional representative on a local panel to ensure this

- Regional could get complicated: need joined up thinking between departments anyway
- Concern that regional appeals would take too long
- Local appeal's process would be more manageable

For a regional panel:

- Regional appeals would provide a uniform process
- This would be independent and fair

Other comments:

- Need a time limit for appeals to be heard
- Appeal's process should not apply to children with Special Needs
- What is meant by 'local' and 'regional'?
- The important thing is that any process is independent and fair
- Persons involved in the process would need to have knowledge of the area
- Any process needs to take into account widely differing and complex issues associated with appeals' processes

Whilst the overall balance was in favour of the regional appeal's panel, the main concern of the focus groups was that any process was fair, independent and took place within a specified short time framework.

m. New guidance should be issued about the application of the Special Education Needs Code of Practice to behavioural problems

All the focus groups agreed with this proposal. Several comments were made during the discussion:

- Teachers, Principal and EWOs should be trained on the Code
- Several parents commented that they had never heard of the Code but hoped the school were aware of it and its implications for services
- Need to properly resource the application of the Code: some children are waiting up to 18 months to see the educational psychologist
- Set a time-framework for the implementation of the 5 stage approach

The discussion on this proposal focused on the need to ensure that school staff were properly trained on the Code and that it was properly resourced to ensure its effectiveness. The issue of parent's lack of awareness of it would suggest the need to highlight it in parent information leaflets issued by the DE and the schools.

n. Pupils with special educational needs should not be expelled

Only 4 groups agreed with this proposal although a fifth group agreed with the exception of one parent. 4 groups disagreed and the rest were divided or qualified their response. One group felt that children attending a special school should not be expelled.

Comments:

- Depends on the special need
- Everyone in mainstream schools should follow the same rules and be treated the same
- If other pupils see some being treated differently it could lead to problems
- Treating pupils differently within the same setting may cause disruption
- Each case should be looked at individually
- A child with a special need, who, for example sells drugs, should be treated the same as other pupils
- Children with special needs need alternative provision such as a specialist unit: expulsion is inappropriate for them
- The system needs to be fair to everyone
- What is meant by Special Educational Needs?

The overriding comment made in this section is that the system needs to be fair. A lot of parents felt there was a need to have the same rules for everyone placed in mainstream education irrespective of whether they have a special education need or not.

o. Applications for admission to schools, outside the normal period, should be determined within 15 school days

All the focus groups agreed with this proposal.

Comments:

- Less than 15 days would be preferable: children's education is suffering
- Principal should keep weekly records of the numbers attending and not deny they have spaces
- 15 days is a good safety net which would ensure pupils don't fall through the system

- Onus should be on the school/DE to find a school or provide home tuition
- Parents shouldn't have to make the application to another school
- Parents should receive a written decision within 15 days
- 1 group queried whether there were particular circumstances where the school could deny admission to an expelled pupil

The main reason the parents agreed with this proposal is that it minimises the disruption to a pupil's education.

p. Schools working together as a voluntary admissions cluster should be facilitated

The majority of the groups agreed with this proposal, 2 groups disagreed and 1 group was split though most parents in this particular group disagreed.

Comments:

- Depends on what they are expelled for whether another cluster school should admit them. Schools should not be forced to take them
- Concern expressed that one school could become a 'dumping ground' for difficult pupils
- Schools in clusters should take turns in taking expelled pupils: schools should keep records and the DE should monitor this
- Clusters are a good idea because it would reduce the time it takes to place a pupil
- Schools should limit the number of expelled pupils they take in a given period
- Need more alternative provision for children with special educational needs
- If expulsion has been used as a last resort then another cluster school may not be the answer: there needs to be more alternatives
- EOTAS provision is limited to year 12 pupils in our Board: this could be used as alternative provision

Overall clusters were seen by many parents to be a positive idea but a range of alternative provision needs also to be available, particularly for children with special educational needs. Parents felt it would be unfair if some schools ended up taking a higher proportion of expelled pupils.

q. ELBs, CCMS, schools and other interested parties should use information about suspensions to plan services and target support

All the focus groups agreed with this proposal and the following comments were recorded:

- Yes, this would help Boards identify problems more easily
- Parents should be made aware of this information
- Support needs to be targeted more effectively as there is a gap in available support for under 14s
- Parents should be consulted about what services are needed and where
- Information should be used to target social need
- Prevention and early intervention is important

A final open-ended question was asked of the parents:

How do you think schools and the education authority can best support children who are at risk of being expelled and also the parents of these children?

Facilitators were asked to encourage participants who had either positive or unhelpful experiences to share these. The following comments were made:

- Specialist staff are helpful and the following were cited: educational psychologist, EWO, pastoral staff, counsellor, 1:1 support
- Open communication with parents
- Talk to parents as early as possible and let them know what support services exist
- Early intervention strategies
- Put parents in touch with the EWO early on when problems arise
- Give information about other groups who could be supportive: PAC, Relate, mediation services, counselling services and help lines were cited.
- Parenting skills training
- Written reports to parents when problems arise and a plan for improvement agreed with parents
- Endorsement system with parents notified of every endorsement
- Training for teachers and principals on managing challenging behaviour
- A team approach involving all interested parties

- Parent support groups for parents whose children are at risk of suspension or expulsion
- SEN units set up
- EWOs details placed in the school prospectus along with a description of their role
- Pupil support centre on site could eliminate most suspensions and expulsions

From this list it is clear that parents have a variety of ideas about what services could support them and their children. Two phrases that were commonly reiterated were: inform parents early and provide information about support services. Parents also frequently mentioned the need for specialist training for teachers and principals to better equip them to provide support to challenging children and their parents.

Other comments:

At the end of the consultation parents were asked had they any other comments to make. The following comments were recorded:

- Parents were surprised that there is no universal scheme for suspensions and expulsions and feel it is long overdue
- The profile of the EWO should be raised: this could limit the number of suspensions and expulsions
- Parents should be able to self refer to an EWO
- Parents want feedback on the final document on suspensions and expulsions
- Schools tend to be prejudicial towards the siblings of expelled pupils
- 1 group which had considerable experience of the suspension and expulsion process felt that the best support they had had was from one another: they had ‘lost faith’ in the education system
- Concern was expressed that whilst there would be 1 scheme there could be differing standards between schools
- Annual reviews are needed by the DE as a part of their self-monitoring process
- It was suggested that each school contribute some of their budget to having a SEN unit in their area

Conclusions

Parenting Forum [NI], a project within the Parent's Advice Centre, has developed and successfully implemented a methodology for consulting with parents on their views in relation to the proposals contained in the Department of Education's document, Suspension and Expulsion Procedures: Proposals for Change. The organisation is in a unique position to carry out such consultations because of its links with a huge network of parents and parent support groups throughout Northern Ireland. The organisation consulted with 99 parents from 12 groups spread across the 5 Education and Library Boards. At least 8 of the focus groups contained parents who were able to speak from direct experience of the suspension and/or expulsion process.

Not only has the consultation exercise provided useful quantitative information, it has also produced a range of useful comments. Some of the comments were mentioned frequently by many of the parents and these can be found in the recommendation's section of this report.

The key themes emerging from the discussion with parents are the need for:

- user friendly information for parents on suspension and expulsion
- a dedicated person within the school to answer parent's queries relating to suspension and expulsion
- open communication with parents at all times
- a fair and equitable approach in all aspects of the suspension and expulsion procedures
- transparency
- early intervention strategies, which involve parents, aimed at preventing the need for suspension and expulsion
- access to support services for children at risk of suspension/expulsion and also for the parents of those children
- additional resources eg alternative educational provision
- specialist training for school staff eg on managing challenging behaviour and the Code of Practice
- effective monitoring of the new procedures

Finally, parents clearly welcomed the opportunity to be involved in this consultation and participated with enthusiasm. They were surprised that there is currently no universal scheme for suspensions and expulsions and welcomed the Department's proposal to provide one.

Recommendations

1. There is a need for a clear definition of Special Educational Needs
2. Information leaflets produced for parents on the new arrangements for suspension and expulsion should be user friendly and jargon free
3. Schools should have a dedicated person who is available to clarify issues relation to suspension and expulsion for parents
4. Teachers should receive specialist training to help them support children with behaviour difficulties
5. A range of preventative strategies and alternative provision should be made available to support those children at risk of suspension and expulsion
6. Parents who are experiencing difficulties relating to their child's schooling should be made aware of existing support services eg EWOs, PAC and parent support groups in their area
7. Parents should be made aware at an early stage of problems relating to their child and there should be a partnership approach to resolving these
8. There should be transparency at all stages of the suspension and expulsion process
9. There should be thorough monitoring of the new procedures for suspension and expulsion
10. Parents should be provided with feedback on the final document relating to suspension and expulsion

Executive Summary

In Autumn 2002, the Department of Education set up a working group consisting of representatives from the Department of Education, the Education and Library Boards and the Council for Catholic and Maintained Schools to carry out a review of the arrangements for suspending and expelling pupils. Following completion of the review by the working group the Department of Education published a consultation document entitled 'Suspension and Expulsion Procedures: Proposals for Change' which outlines the changes it proposes to make. However, changes will not be made until it has feedback from all the people who could be affected by the proposed changes including parents, pupils and the schools.

The Department of Education recognised that parents are an important stakeholder in relation to suspensions and expulsions of pupils. It therefore wished to consult with parents as a part of the overall process. In this context it approached the Parenting Forum [NI], a project managed by the Parents Advice Centre, and asked it to carry out a consultation exercise with parents across the five Education and Library Boards. The Parenting Forum has considerable experience in carrying out such exercises: it has contact with a network of parents and parent support groups throughout Northern Ireland on a daily basis and is well placed to carry out real and meaningful consultations with parents within a tight time frame-work.

To facilitate the consultation process a short programme was designed lasting approximately 2 hours for use with a number of parent focus groups throughout Northern Ireland.

In April 2004 the Parenting Forum [NI] commenced the task of carrying out the consultation exercise with parents on behalf of the Department of Education. The initial plan had been to enlist the co-operation of schools in setting up the focus groups. However, this proved problematic on several counts. Some schools did not respond to the initial written request for their school to host a focus group, some declined to take part because they were involved in a dispute which they felt precluded them from becoming involved in this extra-curricular activity, some declined

because of the time of year and others did not want to take part because they felt that suspensions and expulsions were not an issue. As a result of this, there was a change of focus in how groups were chosen and this resulted in several meetings taking place outside a school setting. The impact of this was threefold: slightly fewer focus groups took place [12 in all], fewer parents were represented because of the nature of the groups and thirdly, the groups facilitated contained more parents who had direct experience of suspension and expulsion

The following is a brief summary of the findings. More qualitative information is to be found in the main body of the report.

a. All schools should use the same scheme for the suspension and expulsion of pupils

All the focus groups agreed with this proposal. The overall themes emerging from many of the groups were the need for a scheme which demonstrated fairness and that parents should be consulted before suspension or expulsion is imposed.

b. The Department of Education should issue guidance on the proper use of suspension

All the groups agreed with this proposal. Once again a common theme was the need for fair and equitable guidance which was adhered to by all schools.

c. The Education and Training Inspectorate should monitor schools' suspension arrangements

All the focus groups agreed with this proposal. The key theme emerging in this discussion was the need for effective monitoring procedures that include seeking the views of the parents who have had experience of the process.

d. A school is responsible for the education of a pupil while on suspension

Seven groups agreed with this proposal, one group disagreed and four groups were split in their opinion. Overall more parents agreed than disagreed. Whilst there was no consensus on this proposal a variety of views were expressed about the arrangements for the continuing education of the suspended pupil.

e. There should be no formal right of appeal against a suspension

Two groups agreed with this proposal, eight groups disagreed and two groups were split in their opinions. This question produced strong views about the right of appeal. Parents overall seemed to be mainly in favour of an appeal's process with many groups implying that whatever system is put in place there will always be situations in which unfair decisions are made and therefore a need for an appeal's process. Several groups saw this as a human right's issue.

f. DE should prepare an information leaflet for parents about the legal position on suspensions

All the groups agreed with this proposal though one group suggested a separate leaflet for the parents of pupils with Special Educational Needs. The overall message emerging from feedback on this proposal is the need to make a user friendly information leaflet accessible to all parents and to have a dedicated person within the school who could answer parent's queries about suspensions.

g. There should be a single 'expelling authority' for all schools

h. An 'independent assessor' should represent the interests of a pupil during a proposed expulsion

These two questions were presented as alternatives to the parents as this is how they present in the main body of the consultation document. The majority of the groups felt that a single 'expelling' authority would be the preferred option in facilitating a fair and equitable process for all pupils. A small number of groups felt that there could be an independent person representing the interests of the pupil on the 'expelling authority' panel. The major concern in the discussion on these two proposals was that the membership of the 'expelling authority' would be appropriate, understand the needs of young people and be detached from the school. Practical suggestions were made as to who might become a member of such a body

i. DE should prepare an information leaflet for parents about the legal position on expulsions

All the focus groups agreed with this proposal and the comments mirrored those made in the earlier proposal suggesting an information leaflet on the legal position regarding suspensions. The responses emphasised the need for a user- friendly leaflet backed up by the

availability of a nominated person who could be available for clarification. Suggestions were made about aspects of the process that should be clearly detailed in the leaflet to ensure the process is clear for all.

j. New guidance on the consultation process should be issued before an expulsion decision is made

The groups were unanimous in agreeing with this proposal. Parents emphasised in their discussion that the guidance needs to include a focus on the communication process between parents, children and the school. Overall, the issuing of guidance was felt to be a very positive proposal.

k. Expelled pupils should not be out of education for longer than 15 school days

All but two of the focus groups agreed with this proposal. The remaining groups were split evenly in their opinions. In one group two parents felt 15 days was too long. Some parents who had agreed with the proposal also suggested that a shorter time span would be preferable.

l. A regional independent expulsions appeals process should be established

The groups were split in their views on this proposal. 6 groups agreed and 2 groups disagreed with the remainder of the groups being divided in their opinion. However, overall considerably more parents thought that there should be a regional independent appeal's process. Whilst the overall balance was in favour of the regional appeal's panel, the focus group's main concern was that any process was fair, independent and took place within a specified short time framework.

m. New guidance should be issued about the application of the Special Education Needs Code of Practice to behavioural problems

All the focus groups agreed with this proposal. The discussion focused on the need to ensure that school staff were properly trained on the Code and that it was properly resourced to ensure its effectiveness. The issue of parent's lack of awareness of it would suggest the need to include information about it in parent information leaflets issued by the DE and the schools.

n. Pupils with special educational needs should not be expelled

Only 4 groups agreed with this proposal although a fourth group agreed with the exception of one parent. 4 groups disagreed and the rest were divided or qualified their response. One group felt that children attending a special school should not be expelled.

The overriding comment made in this section was that the system needs to be fair. A lot of parents felt there was a need to have the same rules for everyone placed in mainstream education irrespective of whether they have a special education need or not.

o. Applications for admission to schools, outside the normal period, should be determined within 15 school days

All the focus groups agreed with this proposal. The main reason the parents agreed with it is that it would minimise the disruption to a pupil's education.

p. Schools working together as a voluntary admissions cluster should be facilitated

The majority of the groups agreed with this proposal, 2 groups disagreed and 1 group was split though most of the parents in this particular group disagreed.

Overall clusters were seen by many parents to be a positive idea but a range of alternative provision needs also to be available, particularly for children with special educational needs. Parents felt it would be unfair if some schools ended up taking a higher proportion of expelled pupils.

q. ELBs, CCMS, schools and other interested parties should use information about suspensions to plan services and target support

All the focus groups agreed with this proposal

A final open ended question was asked of the parents:

How do you think schools and the education authority can best support children who are at risk of being expelled and also the parents of these children?

Facilitators were asked to encourage participants who had either positive or unhelpful experiences to share these. From the list of suggestions it is clear that parents have a variety of ideas about what services could support them and their children. Two phrases that were commonly

reiterated were: inform parents early and provide information about support services. Parents also frequently mentioned the need for specialist training for teachers and principals to better equip them to provide support to challenging children and to work closely with parents

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