

Anne Tohill
Department of Education
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31/05/2014

Dear Anne,

Thank you for your letter. We are reassured to hear that the Minister for Education is taking an interest in this matter, and we very pleased to be able to discuss this.

There has been a certain amount of confusion over whether the consultations are separate and could therefore result in five different policies, so it is interesting to hear that the aim is, or should be, a common process. I think we can all agree that the education and wellbeing of children and young people is paramount.

Your letter suggests that the focus of the policy should be on striking a 'balance between ensuring that the rights and needs of children themselves are appropriately protected and facilitating parental preference for home education'. This assumes conflict between the interests of parents and children, when it is acknowledged in law at every level from local to international that parents are, prima facie, the most appropriate judge of (and advocate for) their child's best interest. Only in exceptional circumstances should the state take over this essential parental role. There is therefore no such balance to be struck in normal circumstances, given that the parental preference should be assumed to be in the interests of their child – whatever style or form of education they favour.

HEdNI is keen to work with the Department and Education Boards to build trust between home educating families and the Boards. Trust comes first from a policy which accurately expresses the Board's legal powers and duties; the stated aim of any scheme must be to support families in providing the best possible education for their children, rather than insisting on a schedule of aggressive monitoring and presumption of failure. With trust and support, we could build a good working relationship that would truly put the education and wellbeing of children and young people to the fore.

We trust that the Minister will approach his consideration of the draft from a position of respect for the parental duty to provide an education, and of trust in Northern Irish parents to do their best for their children.

Yours sincerely,

Sarah Dickinson
Consultation Response Coordinator

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