



Irish National Teachers' Organisation
Cumann Múinteoirí Éireann

Submission to the Department of Education & Skills

Advancing School Autonomy

On behalf of the INTO

15 February 2016

IRISH NATIONAL TEACHERS' ORGANISATION

Invitation for submissions on advancing school autonomy

Submission Form

Name	IRISH NATIONAL TEACHERS' ORGANISATION
Position (if applicable)	
Organisation (if applicable)	
Address	INTO 35 Parnell Square Dublin 1 DO1 ET35.
Telephone*	01-8047700
Email address*	dnc@into.ie
Date	15th February 2016

*Subject to the provisions of the Freedom of Information Acts, this information will not be provided to other parties

Is this response a personal view or is it made on behalf of your organisation?

Personal [] On behalf of an organisation []

Written submissions may be in English or Irish.

KEY QUESTIONS

Outlined below are 7 questions related to advancing school autonomy. You are invited to provide your feedback on each question. There is also a space at the end for any other more general comments you may wish to make on the issue of advancing school autonomy.

1. What do you see as the benefits and risks of increasing school autonomy in Ireland?

Introduction

The Programme for Government 2011-2016 proposed that changes be made in relation to the autonomy of schools to make decisions with regard to aspects of staffing, budget, curriculum, governance and ethos. The INTO notes that there has been no call among the education community in Ireland for greater autonomy for schools and there is no evidence to support the proposal that granting schools in Ireland greater autonomy will be of benefit to school communities. Autonomy means different things depending on context. Jurisdictions that have introduced autonomy for schools in the areas of finances, management and staffing reflect cultural contexts where neoliberal ideology in education prevails. The INTO rejects, emphatically and unequivocally, an ideology of education which focuses on markets, competition and measuring of performance data as the means by which the effectiveness of schools is monitored, assessed and evaluated. The evidence, as outlined in the report, does not support the argument that granting greater autonomy to schools will improve student outcomes or be of benefit to the school community. To the contrary, there are potentially many negative effects. INTO will not support any initiative which will increase the workload of principals and teachers or cause a deterioration in their conditions of service.

The INTO is availing of this opportunity to respond to the many issues which are raised in the Consultation Paper. At the outset, it is important to state that the INTO is not opposed to school autonomy where it matters, and in the course of its response, it will reiterate those areas in which autonomy is valued. The INTO will also demand the resources and structures required to support the current levels of autonomy which schools have and wish to maintain.

Potential justifications for advancing autonomy in the school system

The Consultation Paper is at cross-purposes on this question. Initially, it states that it is not intended to discuss whether school autonomy should be advanced, but it should be taken for granted on the basis of research evidence and the Programme for Government. It argues that there is a thread through the research evidence which indicates that increased autonomy is intended to result in better outcomes for students, but it then contradicts itself by reporting that the evidence of a causal link between improvements in students' achievements and increased autonomy is not consistent and that a range of factors such as the instructional leadership of the principal, the qualifications and practice of teachers and the level of engagement of parents are much more influential in producing improved learner outcomes. While, the Consultation Paper is of the view that the philosophical and ideological arguments for increasing autonomy are persuasive, it is unable to support these arguments with research –based evidence. Even if the research-based evidence

substantiated some of the arguments in favour of greater levels of autonomy, the INTO would continue to reject the ideology which associates greater levels of autonomy with increased educational outcomes and with increased accountability. It is very noticeable that very different cultural contexts to that which exists in the Republic of Ireland obtain in those jurisdictions in which schools have a significant level of autonomy.

A key element with regard to greater school autonomy relates to the capacity of schools to manage this autonomy. Under the present management structures, the vast majority of personnel on Boards of Management are volunteers. Anecdotal evidence suggests that at present many schools have difficulties in recruiting Board members. In these circumstances, it is totally unrealistic to propose enhanced duties and responsibilities for Boards of Management. Even if a willingness to take on the functions existed, there is a serious query in relation to the capacity of Boards to oversee complex legal, building and personnel issues and an increase in autonomy would result in the workload of principals being increased considerably.

Context for increasing autonomy

With 42% of schools having less than 100 pupils, and 558 schools having less than 50 pupils, it is unrealistic to propose any model which assumes a 'one size fits all' approach to the governance and the administration of schools.

2. In what particular areas of school operations and work do you think autonomy should be advanced?

Legislation and regulation

The Education Act affirms a high level of local autonomy for schools, and from the INTO's perspective, there are areas in which autonomy is valued; there are areas in which less autonomy would be of more value, and there are supports and resources required if a greater level of autonomy is to be given to schools. The commitment to reform and consolidate school rules and regulations is welcome and long overdue, and should be undertaken irrespective of the extent to which autonomy is ceded to schools.

Governance

It is anticipated that the Parent and School Charter which is currently being developed will set out a range of expectations in relation to reporting to parents on individual pupil's progress, and parental involvement in school self-evaluation so that they can comment 'meaningfully' on the quality of the school's work. At present, teachers meet formally with parents once per year; they provide written reports to parents yearly, and parental comments on the work of the school are made informally on a regular basis. Increasing the level of reporting is unnecessary and unacceptable. The high level of engagement that

schools have with parents should be acknowledged, though some schools struggle to get parental involvement and engagement despite their best efforts. As promised in the Literacy and Numeracy strategy the DES should support parents to fulfil their roles as primary educators.

Teachers value very much the role which parents play in the education of their children, and they are very appreciative of parental participation in the life of the school, but parental involvement mainly relates to ensuring that their children are making satisfactory progress at school. Increased parental involvement in educational provision at school level could lead to decisions being based on the self-interest of a limited number of parents. In circumstances such as these, devolving greater autonomy to schools could result in inequality within the education system being accentuated because schools in the more advantaged socio-economic areas will have greater level of parental participation and a much greater capacity to fulfil enhanced involvement in the operation of the schools.

School ethos

The level of autonomy which schools have regard to ethos is valued and the INTO has consistently supported the aim of providing a greater diversity of school patronage.

The employment /deployment of teachers

The Consultation Paper proposes that 'careful consideration' should be given to an incremental approach to increasing the autonomy of schools regarding the deployment of teachers. Schools value the existing level of autonomy which they have with regard to the appointment of teachers, SNAs and ancillary staff, and with specific reference to the deployment of teachers, the INTO wishes to reserve judgement on increased autonomy over staffing until the present pilot scheme with regard to the deployment of SEN resources is completed and assessed

Curriculum, pedagogy and assessment

The existence of a centrally devised curriculum with a commitment to ensuring that pupils have access to a broad and balanced curriculum adapted to local needs is the approach to curricular provision which the INTO has advocated consistently. It is noted that the revised curriculum may be less prescriptive, and will concentrate on learning outcomes. The difficulty with this approach is that an emphasis on outcomes does not address the content which the pupils will encounter. The INTO is in favour of a broad curricular framework so that there is a consistency with regard to the learning experiences which pupils encounter and there is not a wide disparity from school to school with regard to the subjects being offered or not being offered. The continuing autonomy for schools to decide on the most appropriate pedagogical approaches within this broad framework is supported by the INTO.

- 3. What supports are required to ensure that increased autonomy in the areas you have suggested (in your reply to Question 2) works for the good of students and the community? You might consider this for schools, parents, students and the wider community.**

Greater flexibility with regard to the deployment of teacher

The important issue with regard to a more flexible approach to the deployment of teachers is that there is consistency of approach from individual inspectors. Some schools may wish to utilise a subject specialist approach to teaching, while others may advocate setting on a subject by subject basis. Ultimately, it is vital that the approaches utilised are in the best interests of the pupils to enable them to encounter a broad, balanced curriculum and achieve the most favourable learning outcomes.

Leadership

The level of investment by the State in the systematic development of the professional skills of school leaders has been minimal, and the establishment of a national centre for school leadership is a welcome first step. It is to be hoped that the professional skills which it is intended to develop will relate for the most part to teaching and learning and not place undue emphasis on administrative performance. Before countenancing any changes to school governance, it is essential that middle management posts are reinstated and adequate ancillary staff provided so that principals are supported in their increasingly complex roles as school leaders.

There is a passing reference to the introduction of measures to enhance the mobility of principals by the introduction of fixed-term contracts. This proposal is anomalous because it does not appear to have any bearing on greater levels of school autonomy.

Teacher qualifications and skills

The INTO is of the view that it is counter-productive to require a set minimum amount of professional development. Teachers should be trusted to engage in professional development as required. A mandatory requirement could lead to a box-ticking exercise to ensure compliance with regulations at the expense of teacher goodwill which underpins much of teachers' current engagement in ongoing professional development.

Accountability

The Consultation Paper contains six specific proposals with regard to the manner in which increased autonomy will be related to a clear accountability framework. Four of the proposals are concerned with an increase in bureaucracy and form-filling. Schools will be required to draw up five-year development plans; to provide more information for parents prior to enrolment in schools; to publish annual reports and evaluate their performance

year on year under a 'new system of self-evaluation'.

Teachers are already involved in the School Self-Evaluation process; they provide information for parents; they engage in development planning and many schools publish annual reports. They are also subject to Whole School Evaluations, Incidental Inspections, and they are very cognisant of the importance of taking on board the views of parents and pupils to ensure that they comply with existing accountability requirements. The INTO is opposed unequivocally to the ideology which correlates the granting of additional autonomy with performance data and tables.

Linking autonomy with enhanced accountability measures does not constitute an increase in autonomy but instead it makes autonomy a conditional concept. If schools are perceived as doing well under the proposed new structures, they will be deemed to have earned their autonomy, but if they are adjudged to be less successful, they will lose their autonomy and be subject to an increased level of inspections. The aim of increased autonomy is to improve student outcomes not to induce a tick-box mentality which will detract from the teaching and learning functions of schools. It would be preferable if the emphasis was placed on support for schools to assist improved student outcomes, rather than linking improved outcomes with a greater level of accountability and an enhanced role for the Inspectorate.

It is advocated that principals' decision-making and performance be reviewed so that they can be held to account for the impact of their decisions, and it is suggested that consideration be given to the introduction of performance management systems for principals and teachers. The supportive nature of primary schools is very valuable, and it is essential to avoid the introduction of structures which could impact on the goodwill which exists among members of the school community. The role of a principal is as 'primus inter pares'. One of the functions of principals is to support their colleagues. It is not being suggested that principals ignore instances where teachers are struggling and the learning outcomes for pupils are unfavourable, indeed they currently manage this situation under the procedures developed under Section 24 of the Education Act. However, the main emphasis should be on providing supportive mechanisms rather than performance measures.

Budgets and funding

The present situation with regard to budgetary autonomy is mixed. Traditionally, all capital works were managed by the Department of Education and Skills, and the INTO recommends that this approach be continued because schools do not have the capacity to manage large-scale projects. Schools have a greater level of autonomy with regard to the Minor Works grant, the Emergency Works grant, the Additional Accommodation Scheme and the Summer Works scheme. In many instances, the management of these projects ends up being devolved to principals with the result that their summer vacation is completely eroded due to the necessity for them to be available to answer queries in relation to the projects. It would be preferable not to have autonomy in these instances but to have an administrative tier between schools and the DES which would have the expertise to manage schemes such as Summer Works and Minor Works. It might be possible to structure the administration

and oversight of the works on the same basis as the Procurement scheme.

The INTO is in favour of the continuation of the payroll system for teachers and SNAs because flexibility with regard to pay and conditions of service would not be in the common good. It notes that the Department of Education is engaged presently in an arbitration process with regard to the pay of secretaries and caretakers. The INTO recommends that all school staff are paid on the basis of a national pay policy from a centrally controlled pay-roll system. The experience of INTO members in Northern Ireland of devolved budgets to manage staffing has created difficulties for principal teachers and boards and is not recommended.

There is a considerable level of autonomy with regard to the management of non-salary funds such as capitation grants and books grants. Unfortunately, the level of funding is inadequate and practically all schools rely on fund raising to supplement this income. The INTO recommends that at the very least the grants are restored to previous levels, and that schools continue to be allowed to manage the resources in line with their own priorities.

The present system of funding has accountability requirements, and schools would appreciate a level of support such as was recommended with regard to the management of the Summer Works Schemes with regard to the keeping of accounts and presenting these accounts for audit. Any moves to devolve greater budgetary autonomy would require significant investment in the management of the resources, and the development of mechanisms to ensure that schools accounted for these resources. This could result in an increased administrative burden which would counteract any possible benefits from increased autonomy to manage school budgets.

A noticeable element of the Consultation Paper and the accompanying Research Paper is that many of the pre-requisite conditions for advancing greater autonomy to schools are either not in place or have only recently been established with their efficacy up to this point being unproven. For example, there is a recommendation that the capacity of Boards of Management be strengthened, but there is no evidence to suggest that the Boards as presently constituted would be willing or able to take on increased duties or powers. The suggestion that Boards might need to be professionalised has cost implications, and could also result in a total review of the management structures of schools. The Consultation Paper has placed very considerable emphasis on the role which the National Centre for Leadership will play in enhancing the skills and professional competence of schools leaders, but the training of mentors and a small scale pilot programme of mentoring for principal teachers in a limited geographical area only began in early 2016. It is necessary therefore to defer judgement on the effectiveness of this initiative.

The reform of the primary curriculum is being undertaken, and while the purpose of this work is also to enhance learning outcomes, it is not valid to conflate the aims of autonomy, accountability and curriculum reform. The commitment to the provision of continuing professional development for teachers is welcomed by the INTO but judgement must again be deferred until the professional development schedule has been put in place.

It is incongruous to note a reference to enhanced support for middle management teams in schools when there has been an embargo on appointment to middle management posts for a number of years, and the INTO demands that this embargo be lifted as a matter of urgency.

In terms of budgetary matters, if schools are to be given a greater level of autonomy, it will then be necessary to develop ICT systems to monitor the manner in which these funds have been used, and to establish an audit function within the Department of Education and Skills. It is very difficult to ascertain the benefits which would accrue from these proposals because schools do not wish to have autonomy over capital works or the payment of salaries, but simply wish to have a single grant for the non-pay element of grants which can then be applied in the most appropriate manner for the needs of individual schools.

Concluding comments

In summary, the INTO values autonomy for schools in the areas of school ethos, the appointment and deployment of staff, pedagogical methods, freedom to teach within a curricular framework which can then be adapted to local needs, and the freedom within SSE to choose their own area for evaluation, set their own targets and decide on their own school improvement plan. Schools also appreciate limited autonomy with regard to some budgetary matters.

Schools would welcome less autonomy in some areas, such as the payment of support staff (caretakers and secretaries), and project management of building works. Principal teachers appreciate consultation around building works but the workload associated with current processes is excessive.

There are some areas where responsibility is best left at central level. These responsibilities include rates of pay, payment of salaries, capital works, curriculum framework, and inspection of schools.

In order for schools to manage their current level of autonomy and their current duties and responsibilities, a number of supports are required. These include, as a priority, the re-establishment of special duties posts, adequate administrative and caretaking staff for all schools, oversight of Minor and Summer Works, and support for schools with accounting and audit procedures.

Submissions should be returned by e-mail to autonomyconsultation@education.gov.ie

by close of business on **29 January 2016**.