



Rural Schools (Scotland) Bill: A proposal to introduce a presumption against the closure of rural schools

ATL'S RESPONSE TO CONSULTATION ON MEMBERS' BILL BY MURDO FRASER MSP

APRIL 2008

ATL – leading education union

The Association of Teachers and Lecturers (ATL), as a leading education union, recognises the link between education policy and our members' conditions of employment. Our evidence-based policy making enables us to campaign and negotiate from a position of strength. We champion good practice and achieve better working lives for our members. We help our members, as their careers develop, through first-rate research, advice, information and legal support. Our 160,000 members – teachers, lecturers, headteachers, support staff and students – are empowered to get active locally and nationally. We are affiliated to the TUC, and work with government and employers by lobbying and through social partnership.

ATL Scotland is the fastest growing section of the Association. A Scottish office was established in autumn 2007 to develop the Association's capacity in Scotland in relation to recruitment, organising, policy development and campaigns.

We believe in positive engagement with all political parties and politicians at all levels across the UK.

Introduction

ATL is pleased to be able to respond to the consultation on the *Rural Schools (Scotland) Bill*. We view the issue of rural school closures firmly in the framework of their impact on poverty and social exclusion in rural areas. We believe that breaking the link between poverty and low educational attainment remains as much of a challenge for rural schools (and colleges) as it is for their urban counterparts.

Although a majority of factors due to poverty and deprivation are similar for urban and rural dwellers, ATL believes that the factors due to disadvantage and social exclusion are somewhat amplified for deprived rural households and hence for rural schools (and colleges) working to facilitate social mobility. Whilst urban poverty is highly visible and well documented, social exclusion in rural areas is rarely captured in official statistical data because of the dispersal of poor rural households and their often close proximity to affluence.

We believe that this Members' Bill can stimulate a debate on rural schools and their impact on the educational attainment of pupils and the important role they play in tackling social exclusion and poverty in rural areas. It is interesting to note the assertion in paragraph 3.2 of the consultation document that 'the Scottish Executive indicates there is a link between educational attainment of pupils and the rurality of their school'. We would argue from our experience elsewhere in the UK that the link is rather due to socio-economic background. However, we have found that rural schools can often provide community embedded-learning and support structures that mitigate some of the disadvantages due to socio-economic background. Learning in a small rural school is also a lot more personalised which is particularly beneficial to pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds.

Consultation process

ATL does not believe that the current consultation process is designed to aid communities to participate in such an important debate as the potential closure of their local school. We concur with Mr Fraser MSP that 'consultations often appear to be seen by local authorities as simply a hurdle over which they must jump on the way to a pre-determined conclusion'.

We would wish to see a more robust system which demonstrably involves local communities at the earliest point possible, prior to a formal consultation period being established.

Consultation criteria

ATL would support adoption of the consultation criteria used by the Department for Children, Schools and Families in England:

- The transport implications of rural school closures, including the welfare and safety of the children, the recurrent cost to the local authority of transporting pupils to schools further away, the quality and availability of transport links to the alternative provision, the effects on road traffic congestion, and the environmental costs of pupils travelling further to schools.
- The overall and long-term impact on local people and the community of closure of the village school and of the loss of the building as a community facility.
- Alternatives to closure including the potential for federation with another local school to increase the school's viability, the scope for 'extended school' or 'childcare centre' status to provide local community services and facilities e.g. child care facilities, family and adult learning, healthcare, community internet access etc.

Impact of transport on social exclusion

Our own research has shown that aside from the lack of public acknowledgement of rural poverty and its effects, current curriculum and planning demands are often adding to the difficulties of many rural schools in contributing towards breaking the link between poverty and low educational attainment. ATL believes that rural schools play a crucial role in tackling disadvantage and should therefore be adequately supported, including in being able to offer a range of curricular and extra-curricular experiences.

However, a recent survey of ATL members working in rural schools across the UK, has established that transport is one of the most substantial obstacles to providing a broad and balanced education for all pupils in rural educational settings. The lack of well resourced regular and extensive provision of public transport and safe routes to school currently prevents many pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds from taking part in after-school and

extra-curricular activities, which have shown to be an important means of raising self-esteem and increasing participation in education. Whilst we welcome the consultation document's acknowledgement of the potential of rural schools in raising attainment, ATL would further like to see this potential being consistently extended to the benefit of all sections of society.

Scottish Rural Support Fund

The experience of ATL members of the rural support fund in England leads us to believe that the introduction of a Scottish Rural Support Fund would be a positive move for teachers, students, parents and local communities alike.

Conclusion

ATL is happy to support the call for a presumption against the closure of rural schools contained within this Members' Bill. We firmly believe in the fundamental importance to local communities of rural schools and the role they play in tackling poverty and social exclusion. A copy of our recently published position statement, 'Poverty and social exclusion in rural areas,' is attached with this document for reference.

References

- ◆ ATL Position Statement, Poverty and social exclusion in rural areas, April 2008.
- ◆ Guidance on Statutory Proposals for Decision Makers (SOCs and School Adjudicators) DfES (a rolling document)
- ◆ Equality in Education: New Directions, The University of Manchester, 2007

This submission was prepared on behalf of

ATL Scotland – The Association of Teachers and Lecturers

CBC House

24 Canning Street

Edinburgh, EH3 8EG