

Consultation response to the Scottish Government's proposals for: *Safeguarding our rural schools and improving school consultation procedures*

September 2008

Children in Scotland welcomes the invitation to respond to this consultation document proposed to introduce into Scottish law a presumption against the closure of rural schools. The intent is not to prohibit school closures, but rather to make it 'a decision of last resort'.

Children in Scotland strongly supports the basic idea of keeping rural schools from being forced to cease operations for the wrong reasons and/or under the wrong circumstances. With certain substantive and procedural improvements added to the eventual legislation addressing this topic, Children in Scotland would support its enactment.

Similarly, Children in Scotland applauds the Scottish Government's intention to make the consultation process fairer, more transparent and more inclusive of the views of parents and community members. Here, too, with certain substantive and procedural improvements added to the eventual legislation, Children in Scotland would support its passage.

Specifically, our major recommendations are to:

- ❖ **Link two complementary 'presumptions' to the proposed legislative presumption against rural school closures**
- ❖ **Extend the consultation period from 6 to 12 weeks**
- ❖ **Expand the consultation process to meaningfully include the views of children and young people**

The proposed legislative presumption

Children in Scotland generally is not in favour of making any 'presumptions' about the suitability and effectiveness of administrative decisions affecting schools, child health or children's services. Normally, it is good practice to replace presumptions about organisational arrangements with fair, well-informed, case-by-case analyses of the merits of the options and the evidence. Complex situations normally require bespoke solutions.

However, the issue of rural school closures in Scotland may be ‘the exception that proves the rule’. For decades in Scotland, across the UK and in other OECD nations (especially the United States), there has been a *de facto* presumption in favour of rural school closures among education authorities and government agencies.¹ And, unlike numerous other policies, the historical presumption in favour of rural school closures actually has been implemented with unusual determination and ‘success’.

There are 552 fewer schools in Scotland now than four decades ago.² In the 30 years from 1976 to 2006, the total number of publicly funded schools in Scotland has dropped by nearly 17% -- including 357 (15%) fewer primary schools, 83 (18%) fewer secondary schools and 112 (37%) fewer special schools. Of course, this decline largely is attributable to fewer pupils.

Internationally, as well as within Scotland, the presumption in favour of rural school closures has continued long after the evidence failed to document the decisive benefits of this action. Rural school closures often were ill-advised, whether judged by the impacts upon the students involved or by the effects on the rural communities from which this public asset was removed. The main beneficiaries of these closures appear to be the education authorities, given that there were sometimes (narrowly-defined) cost savings. Even the cost savings are less significant -- and sometimes non-existent -- under closer scrutiny and accurate measures of total costs.

Given the historical propensity (presumption) by local education and government leaders to view rural school closures as desirable, it seems necessary to impose a legislative presumption against rural school closures for a period of time in order to ‘level the playing field’.

Ironically, even this Scottish Government proposal in favour of a presumption against rural school closures reflects the old mindset in such statements as “ . . . *the educational benefits of the change (very often to move to a new or better building) are usually clear . . .*”³ Although good facilities are welcome, the notion that quality of education is primarily a function of the school facility is unsupported by research on learning.

¹ Jonathan P. Sher, *et al.* *Rural Education in Urbanized Nations: Issues and Innovations*. An OECD/CERI Report, Westview Press 1981. See also: Jonathan P. Sher, *et al.* *Education in Rural America: A Reassessment of Conventional Wisdom*, Westview Press, 1978. Additional information on the negative consequences of America’s wholesale closure of rural schools can be found at the website for the Rural School and Community Trust (www.ruraledu.org). Also: Lawrence, Bingler, Diamond, Howley, *et al.* *Dollars and sense: The cost effectiveness of small schools* (www.eric.ed.gov).

² <http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Topics/Statistics/Browse/School-Education/PupilTeacherHistoric>

³ Scottish Government, *Safeguarding our rural schools and improving school consultation procedures*, 2008 (paragraph 90)

Woefully inadequate education can occur in beautiful, well-equipped schools, just as excellent education can take place within very modest buildings. This point is being made simply as an example of how pervasive the bias is among policymakers toward the alleged (but often illusory) benefits of rural school closures.

Children in Scotland would support a time-limited (perhaps 10 year) presumption against rural school closures as a needed corrective to the historical over-enthusiasm for such closures. The intent of a time limit is to arrive at a time when rural school closures are not routinely seen by education and government leaders (out of habit, professional socialisation or the primacy of narrowly-defined cost savings) as the easy or obvious option. Eventually, each potential rural school closure should be judged fairly on the basis of well-informed, case-by-case analyses of the merits of the evidence. This degree of fairness cannot be counted on today.

Complementary presumptions are needed

In the view of Children in Scotland, new legislation that only establishes a formal presumption against rural school closures would be insufficient. We suggest that the new presumption proposed in *Safeguarding our rural schools* be accompanied in this legislation by language enshrining the following two complementary presumptions:

1. Presumption in favour of the paramount importance of the current well-being and future life chances of the rural children and young people who would be affected by closure decisions. A holistic assessment of the likely impacts of a potential rural school closure (and of a rural school preservation) *upon the children and young people involved* should be accorded priority over financial, community or other professional considerations.

Accordingly, we agree with the Scottish Government's point that is wrong to claim that *any* specific percentage of space utilisation within school buildings for classroom purposes is a legitimate and sufficient reason to close a rural school. The Scottish 'new community schools' initiative and other key education, health, lifelong learning, children's services (e.g., GIRFEC) and early years policies all support greater joined-up provision and integrated services.

Joined up thinking and working on behalf of children certainly could and should include sharing the school building. The 'problem' of excess classroom space can be solved by other services/groups using this space for legitimate public purposes. We are keen on shared use of space that complements and extends the learning experiences of pupils, e.g., childcare provision, intergenerational programmes or community arts/music.

2. Presumption in favour of improving, as well as preserving, rural schools. Too often, the ‘battle’ over rural schools begins and ends with the decision about closure. If a school is ‘saved’, then that result usually is deemed sufficient and the status quo continues.

Children in Scotland believes that both the local community and the education authority should work toward, and invest in, turning the *potential* benefits of rural schools into day-to-day realities. In other words, adequate resources and robust action must back up the positive rhetoric about the value and importance of rural schools and their inherent advantages.

For instance, rural schools are well-placed to:

- ✓ use the community as a ‘natural laboratory’ for learning science;
- ✓ serve as the community’s ‘hub/heart’ through place-based learning;
- ✓ employ new technologies to bring learning resources to students;
- ✓ promote intergenerational programmes and mentoring;
- ✓ blend academic and practical/vocational skills in community settings;
- ✓ integrate children’s services and health services; and,
- ✓ promote healthy, outdoor learning, play and leisure activities.⁴

Unfortunately, being ‘well-placed’ is not enough. Not a single one of these potential comparative advantages of rural schools is guaranteed to become an actual advantage that benefits students and communities. These good outcomes do not now – and never will – happen by accident or as an inevitable consequence of sentimental attitudes (usually among city dwellers) about the benefits of rurality.

As in our cities, good outcomes for our rural students, schools and communities only will follow good planning, new investment and hard work toward common goals by all the parties concerned. Saving rural schools from closure could be a crucial step on the path toward rural rejuvenation and rural child well being – but it never should be mistaken for, or treated as, all that is required for rural students, schools and communities to thrive.

⁴ See: Children in Scotland, *Northern Lights: Building Better Childhoods in Norway*. 2007; John Shelton, *Consequential Learning: A Better Approach to Public Schools*. New South Books, 2005; Children in Scotland, *A Sense of Time, A Sense of Place: Meeting the Needs of the Whole Child in Small Communities*. 2005; and, Children in Scotland, *Arts for All?: Developing Cultural Entitlements for Young Children in Rural Scotland*. 2007

The proposed consultation procedures

Children in Scotland supports the general direction of travel proposed by the Scottish Government toward improving school consultation procedures and processes. We applaud the aspiration to carry out the governmental decision-making process in relation to rural school closures in a manner that respects and reflects the views and interests of rural mothers/fathers/carers, as well as those of the local community. Closing a rural school is not a narrow professional matter, so it is right to honour the public's role.

Two specific recommendations for improvement

There are two ways in which the procedural aspects of *Safeguarding our rural schools* could and should be strengthened. The first is to increase the public/parental/pupil consultation period from the proposed 6 weeks to 12 weeks. This is the standard length of time that the Scottish Government itself uses for its consultation procedures – and there is no compelling reason to shorten this period in the case of rural school closures.

There is no need to rush to judgment in deciding the fate of rural schools, students and communities. The seriousness of the decisions under consideration -- and the fact that responding to governmental consultations is an unfamiliar activity for many of the people from whom it will be most important to hear – both argue for at least a 12 week consultation period. This extra time becomes especially important if the Scottish Government is interested in a meaningful consultation process involving children and young people, rather than settling for a tokenistic, 'tick box' exercise.

This leads to our second recommendation. We appreciate that paragraph 62 of *Safeguarding our rural schools* specifically advocates that 'pupils at the school(s) affected' must be consulted. This is a good first step, but it should be bolstered by more specific requirements that will result in a *meaningful* consultation process with children and young people.

Under Article 12 of the *UN Convention on the Rights of the Children*, all school-aged children have the right to be heard and taken into account around decisions significantly affecting their lives and life chances. Decisions about rural school closures and about rural school improvements are obvious examples of matters of importance to the children and young people served by these schools. And yet, their voices rarely have been heard – let alone heeded -- in debates about the future of a particular rural school.

While larger community considerations tend to oppose closures – and while narrow cost considerations tend to support closures – neither of these legitimate interests have the lives and life chances of children and young people at their heart. Rural pupils must not be allowed to become pawns or hostages to competing adult interests in decision-making about their schools.

After all, along with the teacher and other staff members, it is the students (current and future) who spend so many of their waking hours in and around schools. What they know from their experience and what they think should happen merit serious attention and consideration by adult decision-makers. Meaningful consultation processes with students are neither quick nor cheap. Done properly, however, they usually provide valuable insights.⁵

The recommendations made here would strengthen both the policies and the procedures around rural school closures being proposed by the Scottish Government. They also will bring Scotland into harmony with a growing thread within rural development policies and funding at the European level.⁶

One final point. While there is nothing wrong with the four principles articulated in paragraph 8 of *Safeguarding our rural schools*, it should be noted that none of them specifically or powerfully address the heart of the matter – namely, that **rural children, young people, families and communities should end up being the primary beneficiaries of governmental decision-making about the future of rural schools.** Incorporating the recommendations made here into the final legislation would go a long way toward keeping the focus on these intended beneficiaries.

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⁵ For an example of consulting with rural pupils, see: Children in Scotland, *Access All Areas*. 2007

⁶ Carnegie UK Trust, *A Charter for Rural Communities: The final report of the Carnegie Commission for Rural Community Development*. 2007; Bronwen Cohen, *Childcare Services for Rural Families: Improving Provision in the European Union*. European Commission Network on Childcare, 1995; and, Bronwen Cohen, *The Structural Funds of the European Community and Childcare with special reference to rural regions*. European Commission Network for Childcare, 1992

Children in Scotland is Scotland's national agency for organisations and professionals working with and for children, young people and their families. It exists to identify and promote the interests of children and their families and to ensure that policies and services and other provisions are of the highest possible quality and are able to meet the needs of a diverse society. Children in Scotland represents over 470 members, including 90% of Scottish Local Authorities, all major voluntary, statutory and private children's agencies, professional organisations, as well as many other smaller community groups and children's services. It is linked with similar agencies in other parts of the UK and the European Union.

The work of Children in Scotland encompasses extensive information, policy, research and practice development programmes. The agency works closely with MSPs, the Scottish Government, local authorities and practitioners. It services a number of groups such as: the Cross Party Parliamentary Group on Children and Young People (with YouthLink Scotland) and the National Voluntary Children's Forum. Children in Scotland also hosts Enquire - the national advice service for additional support for learning, and Resolve:ASL, Scotland's largest independent education mediation service.