

Consultation Response

Consultation Document on the Rural Schools (Scotland) Bill prepared by Murdo Fraser MSP April 2008

Children in Scotland welcomes the invitation to respond to this consultation document that proposes to introduce into Scottish law a presumption against the closure of rural schools.

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 elements added to the eventual Bill addressing this topic, Children in Scotland would support such legislation.

In general, Children in Scotland is not in favour of making 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 choices 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

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

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

In the 40 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. However, these numbers do not tell the whole story.

During the same period, the total number of *pupils* in Scotland's publicly funded schools has dropped far more precipitously than the number of *schools*. The vast majority of school closures since 1976 – especially at the primary school level -- have occurred in Scotland's rural areas.

Equally important, the presumption in favour of rural school closures has continued long after the evidence failed to document the benefits of this course of 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.

Given the historical propensity (presumption) by local education and government leaders to view rural school closures as desirable, it may be necessary to impose a formal presumption against rural school closures for a period of time in order to 'level the playing field'. 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. This new measure appears to be politically achievable.

The intent should be to arrive at a time when rural school closures are not 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 options and the evidence. This is unlikely to happen today.

Complimentary presumptions are needed

Children in Scotland thinks a new law that only establishes a formal presumption against rural school closures would be insufficient. We suggest that the new presumption proposed in this Consultation Document be accompanied by three other formal presumptions, as follows:

Presumption in favour of the paramount importance of the current well-being and future life chances of the rural children and young people affected. 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 considerations.

Accordingly, it no longer should be sufficient to claim that *any* specific percentage of space utilisation within school buildings for classroom purposes is a legitimate 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 – which could and should include sharing the school building. The problem of excess space for classroom purposes can be dealt with through the solution of other services/groups using this space for legitimate public purposes.

Presumption in favour of improving, as well as preserving, rural schools. Too often, the 'battle' 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 realities.

The rhetoric about the value and importance of rural schools' advantages must become realities. For instance, rural schools are well-placed to: use the community as a 'natural laboratory' for learning science; serve as the 'hub' or 'heart' of the community through place-based learning; employ advanced technologies to bring learning resources *to* students; promote intergenerational programmes and mentoring; integrate children's/health services; and, promote healthy, outdoor learning, play and leisure activities.³ But, being well-placed is not enough. Potential advantages of

³ See: *Northern Lights: Building Better Childhoods in Norway*. Children in Scotland 2007; John Shelton, *Consequential Learning: A Better Approach to Public Schools*. New South Books, 2005; *A Sense of Time, A Sense of Place: Meeting the Needs of the Whole Child in Small Communities*. Children in Scotland 2005; and, *Arts for All?: Developing Cultural Entitlements for Young Children in Rural Scotland*. Children in Scotland 2007

rural schools must become actual advantages that benefit students through new investments of financial and human resources.

Presumption in favour of meaningful consultations about rural schools with children and young people, as well as with their mothers/fathers/carers. Under Article 12 of the *UN Convention on the Rights of the Children*, all children have the right to be heard and heeded on 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 are heard in debates about the future of a particular rural school. Meaningful consultation processes with students and their parents (unlike superficial, bureaucratic ‘tick box’ exercises) are neither quick nor cheap. Done properly, however, they usually provide valuable insights -- as well as breeding commitment, rather than cynicism.⁴

The three additional presumptions outlined above would add ‘meat to the bones’ of the proposed new presumption against rural school closures. Children in Scotland hopes that all three will be incorporated into any Bill on this topic. Doing so is likely to have positive results for children, young people and rural communities throughout Scotland. It also will bring Scotland into line with a growing thread within rural development policies and funding at the European level.⁵

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⁴ For an example of established best practice in consulting with rural students, see: *Access All Areas*. Children in Scotland 2007

⁵ *A Charter for Rural Communities: The final report of the Carnegie Commission for Rural Community Development*. Carnegie UK Trust 2007; Bronwen Cohen, *Childcare Services for Rural Families: Improving Provision in the European Union*. European Commission Network on Childcare, European Commission. Brussels 1995; and, Bronwen Cohen, *The Structural Funds of the European Community and Childcare with special reference to rural regions* European Commission Network for Childcare. Brussels 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, 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 450 members, including 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 Executive, local authorities and practitioners. It services a number of groups such as: the Cross Party Parliamentary Group on Children and Young People; the National Children's Voluntary Forum; the National Early Years Forum, the Rural Advisory Group and the Additional Support Needs Network. Children in Scotland hosts Enquire, the national advice service for additional support for learning.