

# Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF): The Pupil and Parent Guarantees

The response of the General Teaching Council for England (GTC)

## Introduction

1. The General Teaching Council for England (GTC) is the independent professional body for the teaching profession. Its main duties are to regulate the teaching profession and to advise the Secretary of State on a range of issues that concern teachers and teaching and learning. The Council acts in the public interest to contribute to raising the standards of teaching and learning.
2. The GTC welcomes the opportunity to respond to this DCSF consultation on the proposed Pupil and Parent Guarantees as part of the White Paper *Your child, your schools, our future: building a 21st century schools system*.
3. Through the professional register, the Code of Conduct and Practice for registered teachers and its responsibilities for safeguarding competence and conduct, the Council is itself a key player in the accountability framework. As part of its policy advisory remit, the Council is undertaking work with teachers and national stakeholders to explore the future of accountability including the changing relationship between service users and providers as part of wider public service reform. The GTC would be pleased to share findings from the work to date.

## Background

4. This detailed response to the proposals builds on the GTC's response to the White Paper: *Your child, your schools, our future: building a 21st century schools system*. This welcomed the intention to strengthen relationships between parents, pupils and schools by clarifying entitlements and responsibilities but questioned whether the concept of a set of pupil and parent guarantees will achieve this aim.
5. The Council has consistently recognised the importance of schools being held to account for their performance, but has also argued for a better balance between external accountability and schools' accountability to their local communities.
6. Parental engagement is a powerful lever for raising achievement in schools. Where parents and teachers work together to improve learning, the gains in achievement

are significant<sup>1</sup>. Schools are already developing their capacity to provide opportunities for children and young people, and their parents to be more active partners in learning. Accountability may need to reflect this change in emphasis, with more scope for schools to pursue locally determined outcomes and to give an account of variance through self-evaluation or by other means<sup>2</sup>.

## Overarching Comments

7. The GTC's reading of the evidence on relationships between parents and schools is that the priority should be supporting parents, teacher and other school staff in mutually respectful and constructive dialogue about children's learning, rather than the concept of parents and pupils as passive recipients of entitlements through a centrally imposed set of guarantees. The GTC questions the concept of a 'guarantee' since it establishes a contractual rather than a collaborative relationship between home and school. The emphasis should be as much on the *responsiveness* of school to parents and vice versa, as on formal accountability<sup>3</sup>.
8. It is right to ensure that parents have the information they need to support their own child's learning and hold an appropriate stake in the school. However, it is important to guard against placing so much emphasis on parental engagement that those children whose parents do not engage are further disadvantaged. To this end, the Council welcomes the acknowledgement that children whose parents choose not to sign a Home School Agreement (HSA) should not be penalised.
9. The use of the term 'guarantee' suggests that there is a mechanism to ensure its terms are met or a method of redress should they not. However, current proposals state that the guarantees will not be legally binding. It is, therefore, not clear how pupils and parents will be empowered to secure their entitlements, especially, as a large number of the guarantees are aspirational. The use of 'should' rather than 'must' means that schools can consider their local circumstances when making a decision to offer specific entitlements. This is not a definition of a 'guarantee' in its truest sense.
10. Equally, throughout, some of the measures by which pupils and parents can be confident that the guarantees have been met are difficult to determine. A number of the pupil guarantees set out an entitlement to 'high quality provision' in careers information and guidance, as well as sporting and cultural activities. However, there is no explanation about the method used to evaluate the quality of this provision, for example, through the results of pupil and parent satisfaction surveys or Ofsted judgments on the quality of teaching and learning in these areas.
11. Similarly, the document pledges that parents can be confident that the government will take action where schools or local authorities (LAs) are not delivering high

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<sup>1</sup> University of Warwick on behalf of the Specialist Schools and Academies Trust (SSAT), *Engaging Parents in Raising Achievement Do Parents Know They Matter?* 2007

<sup>2</sup> GTC Memorandum: CSFSC Inquiry into School Accountability, February 2009

<sup>3</sup> GTCE response to DCSF: White paper: *Your Child, your schools, our future: building a 21st century schools system*, September 2009

quality education. Again, further clarity is needed about the mechanism for setting out how this parent guarantee will be met.

12. Proposals for pupils and parents to enforce their guarantees through recourse to the Local Government Ombudsman (LGO) are insufficient since the LGO has no power to direct a school to act in response to its investigation of any complaint and any subsequent recommendations. It is notable that there are now several channels through which complaints against a school can be lodged. The Government should review the complaints processes open to parents and/or pupils, with the aim of providing greater clarity for families.

### **Home School Agreements (HSAs)**

13. Under current proposals HSAs are central to the implementation and communication of entitlements and responsibilities for pupils and parents.
14. The Council questions the emphasis the proposals place on these as a device for strengthening relationships between pupils, parents and schools. Some evidence suggests that the establishment of a home school agreement can be counter-productive through categorising parents as either 'supportive' or 'problematic', which is at odds with the concept of partnership<sup>4</sup>
15. As with the guarantees themselves, the HSA is not legally binding and parents are not compelled to sign them. Furthermore, evidence from the evaluation of Home School Agreements in 2003 by Sheffield Hallam University questioned the effectiveness of HSAs. Only 30% of schools surveyed felt that the agreements had had a positive impact on:
  - parents and teachers working together
  - parents supporting their children's learning at home
  - communicating the school role
  - pupil behaviour and
  - homework.
16. Feedback from pupil interviews demonstrated strong views on what should be in the agreement, specifically, that teachers ought to take more time to listen to individual pupils' problems and concerns, and provide for more independent learning.
17. The majority of schools thought HSAs had made no impact, with the exception of administrative procedures. Other comments related to its burdensome nature<sup>5</sup>.

### **Catch-up support for English and mathematics**

18. The proposals for the provision of additional support in English and mathematics for those pupils who are not on track to make two National Curriculum levels of progress in these subjects are welcome, but lack flexibility. In line with the

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<sup>4</sup> School Leadership & Management, *Home-School Agreements: a true partnership?*, February 2001

<sup>5</sup> DfES and Sheffield Hallam University: *Evaluation of Home School Agreements research report*, 2003

commitment to tailored support, it would be more appropriate for teachers to have the opportunity to deploy resources for additional support flexibly, on the basis of their professional judgment, within the context of the imperative to narrow gaps in achievement<sup>6</sup>.

19. The Council welcomes the findings from the Price Waterhouse Coopers (PWC) evaluation of one-to-one tuition in English and mathematics as part of the Making Good Progress (MGP) pilot which reported on the positive impact on pupil achievement as a result of the additional support. However, there is limited evidence from other one-to-one tuition programmes on the long-term impact on educational outcomes and whether it represents value for public money.
20. The GTC urges the Government to continue to monitor and evaluate the national roll-out of one-to-one and small group tuition, as a limited research base means there is currently little evidence on which to draw.
21. Identification of those pupils who are eligible for catch-up support will rely on effective formative and summative teacher assessment. The Council has consistently argued for a greater degree of teacher involvement in the assessment system to inform teaching and learning, and has recommended the need for more effective professional learning on assessment at all stages.
22. The lack of a clear definition of a 'reasonable offer' of support for those pupils which are eligible does not constitute a guarantee since it is dependent on the individual circumstances of the school. The notion that the local authority underwrites this entitlement risks confusing pupils and parents about where the responsibility for the provision lies.
23. The universal entitlement to additional support for looked after children irrespective of whether they are on track to make two National Curriculum levels of progress is a welcome recognition of the barriers to achievement that this group of children and young people face. However, the rationale for expanding the entitlement to support to all looked after children needs to be made explicit.

### **Parental involvement in school governance**

24. The proposals to increase parental involvement in governance arrangements are welcome. The Council acknowledges the unique contribution that parents can make to the leadership and direction of schools, as well as to strengthening home-school relationships.

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<sup>6</sup> GTCE response to DCSF: White paper: *Your Child, your schools, our future: building a 21st century schools system*, September 2009

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