

**Committee for Education**

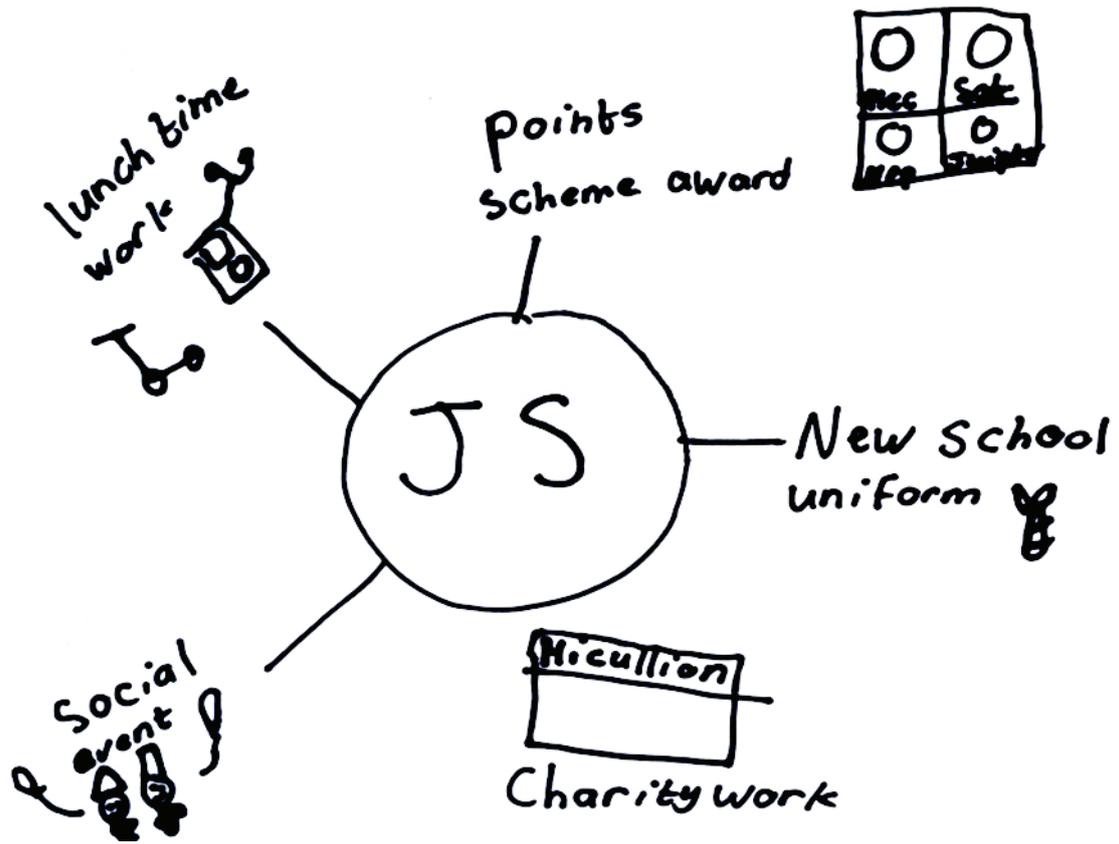
# Report on the School Councils Inquiry

Together with the Minutes of Proceedings, Minutes of Evidence and  
Written Submissions Relating to the Report

Ordered by the Committee for Education to be printed 20 June 2012  
Report: NIA 66/11-15 the Committee for Education

**REPORT EMBARGOED UNTIL  
00:01 am on 12 September 2012**





We are proud to serve you!

All pictures contained in this report were drawn by pupils as part of the Focus Groups



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# Membership and Powers

## Powers

The Committee for Education is a Statutory Departmental Committee of the Northern Ireland Assembly established in accordance with paragraphs 8 and 9 of the Belfast Agreement, section 29 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998 and under Standing Order 48 of the Northern Ireland Assembly.

The Committee has power to:

- Consider and advise on Departmental budgets and annual plans in the context of the overall budget allocation;
- Consider relevant secondary legislation and take the Committee stage of primary legislation;
- Call for persons and papers;
- Initiate inquiries and make reports; and
- Consider and advise on any matters brought to the Committee by the Minister of Education.

## Membership

The Committee has 11 members including a Chairperson and Deputy Chairperson and a quorum of 5. The membership of the Committee is as follows:

- Mervyn Storey (Chairperson)
- Danny Kinahan (Deputy Chairperson)<sup>1 2</sup>
- Michaela Boyle
- Jonathan Craig
- Jo-Anne Dobson
- Phil Flanagan
- Brenda Hale
- Trevor Lunn
- Michelle McIlveen
- Daithí McKay
- Sean Rogers<sup>3</sup>

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1 With effect from 31 January 2012 Mr Mike Nesbitt replaced Mr David McNarry

2 With effect from 17 April 2012 Mr Danny Kinahan replaced Mr Mike Nesbitt as Deputy Chairperson

3 With effect from 23 April 2012 Mr Sean Rogers replaced Mr Conall McDevitt

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## List of Abbreviations used in the Report

ATL	Association of Teachers and Lecturers
DE	The Department of Education
DfEE	Department for Education and Employment
ELB	Education and Library Board
ETI	Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment
INTO	Irish National Teachers Association
IPS	Integrated Primary School
NAHT	National Association of Head Teachers
NASUWT	National Association of School Masters/Union of Women Teachers
NCBNI	National Children's Bureau Northern Ireland
NFER	National Foundation for Educational Research
NI	Northern Ireland
NICCY	Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People
NICMA	Northern Ireland Child Minding Association
NYP	NICCY's Youth Panel
Ofsted	Office for Standards in Education, Children's services and Skills
PQH	Professional Qualification for Headship
PS	Primary School
PSE	Personal and Social Education
PSP	Participation Support Programme
SCIE	Social Care Institute for Excellence
SEN	Special Educational Needs
SMG	Senior Management Group
SMT	Senior Management Team
SOAP	Speaking Out Against Poverty Programme
SPSS	a data management and analysis Programme
The Committee	The Committee for Education
The Department	The Department of Education
UNCRC	United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child
UTU	Ulster Teachers Union

# Executive Summary

School Councils are increasingly a feature of school life all across Northern Ireland and play a key role in many young people's early experience of democratic participation. Research from elsewhere has shown that vibrant, representative and well-resourced School Councils can deliver positive educational and social outcomes to pupils, schools and communities, but that School Councils require support if they are to thrive.

The aim of the Committee's inquiry was to examine the experience, operation and contribution of School Councils in Northern Ireland, with a view to identifying ways to support and enhance their work. The Committee also sought to identify other methods of pupil participation currently in use, as part of this inquiry, with an open mind, as one method may not fit all schools.

The Committee sought to establish a sound evidence base for its scrutiny by taking the views of a representative group of stakeholders and also contacted all schools in Northern Ireland.

The Committee was delighted to see that there are some great examples of School Councils in existence and pupils were very enthusiastic about being part of them and making a difference. The Committee would like to encourage pupils' achievements on School Councils being recognised and celebrated within the school year.

The Committee was encouraged to learn that there is currently 'free' support and guidance from organisations readily available to schools and seeks to encourage the Department to actively promote this resource as well as facilitate the sharing of good practice examples from existing School Councils.

The Committee strongly believes that training and support should be provided for pupils and staff taking part in Councils or other methods of participation, as this will not only make the participation more effective but will develop life skills for the children taking part; and membership should be rotated to allow opportunities for a wider range of pupils.

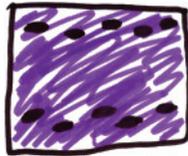
During discussions with the children, it was apparent that the Council should have a say in matters that are central to students' daily life in school. To give purpose and value to the Council, it should report to the school governors on a regular basis.

The Committee is grateful for the contribution of schools, the staff and pupils who participated in the focus groups, stakeholders, Departmental officials and particularly the Assembly Research team and Education Officers, as well as other staff within the Assembly. A number of key conclusions and recommendations have been identified for consideration by the Minister of Education and schools across Northern Ireland.

Throughout this report we have included pictures drawn by pupils who participated in the focus groups, to describe the work and aims of their School Councils.



Raising money for charity



Getting new play equipment



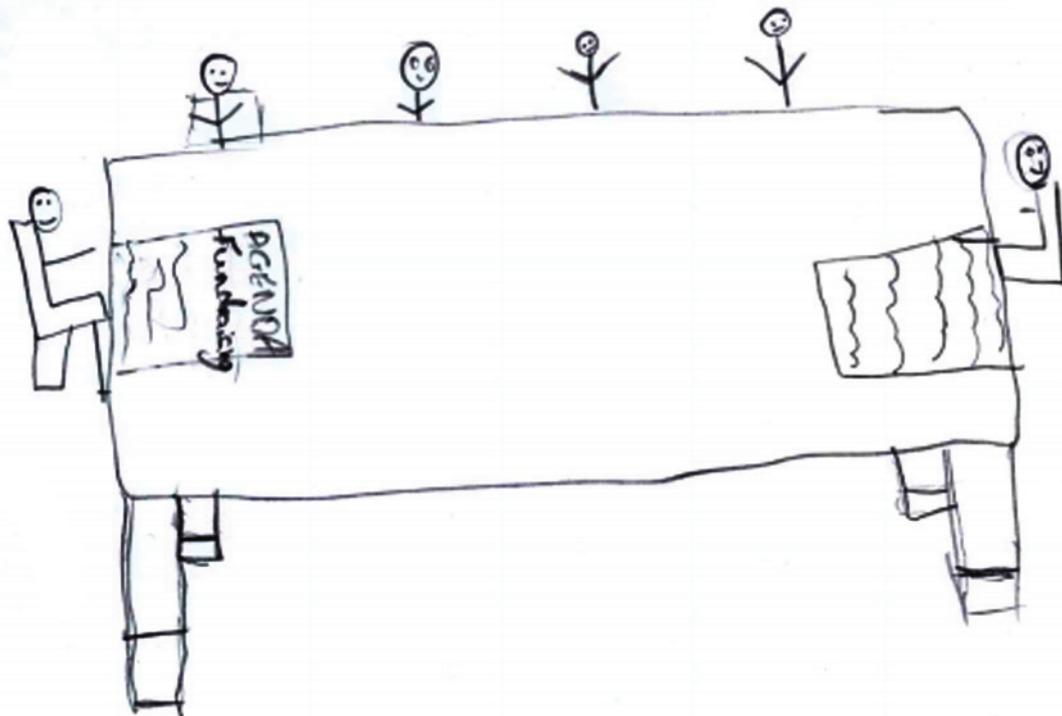
Raising money for markings on our playground

Respect + Responsibility



School Council IS AWESOME!

21/3/2022



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# Introduction

## Background<sup>1</sup>

A School Council can be defined as a formal group of pupils within a school who are elected by their peers to represent them and their views. Councils can explore a range of issues affecting young people and for many young people; School Councils are often their first practical experience of democratic values and practices in operation.

A preliminary review of the research evidence indicates that School Councils have the potential to deliver positive outcomes for students and for schools, including:

- increased self-confidence and learning outcomes for pupils;
- increased participation in school life;
- improvements in discipline and behaviour; and,
- improved school ethos.

However School Councils can face a number of issues, for example a lack of clarity about the Council's purpose, inadequate engagement from staff and the challenge of ensuring representation from pupils of different ages, abilities, disabilities and backgrounds.

The research evidence also reports that School Councils vary widely in their effectiveness and for Councils to be successful the literature suggests that they must deal with matters central to daily life in school and be situated within wider structures and practices that support participation, mutual respect, co-operation and a commitment to diversity and equality within the school.

Support is available to schools wishing to establish a School Council through the Democra-School programme (produced by the Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People (NICCY)). The Department of Education expressed its support for the development of School Councils in all schools. However, it would appear that there is little comprehensive information available on the number of School Councils across Northern Ireland, how they operate and what they deliver. The following terms of reference for the Committee's inquiry into School Councils seek to address this information gap.

## Inquiry Aims

The aim of the Committee's inquiry is to champion and celebrate School Councils in Northern Ireland. It will examine the experience, operation and contribution of School Councils in Northern Ireland, with a view to identifying ways to support and enhance their work.

## Terms of Reference

At its meeting on 12 September 2011, Members agreed to the following terms of reference for a Committee Inquiry into School Councils.

The Committee wishes to:

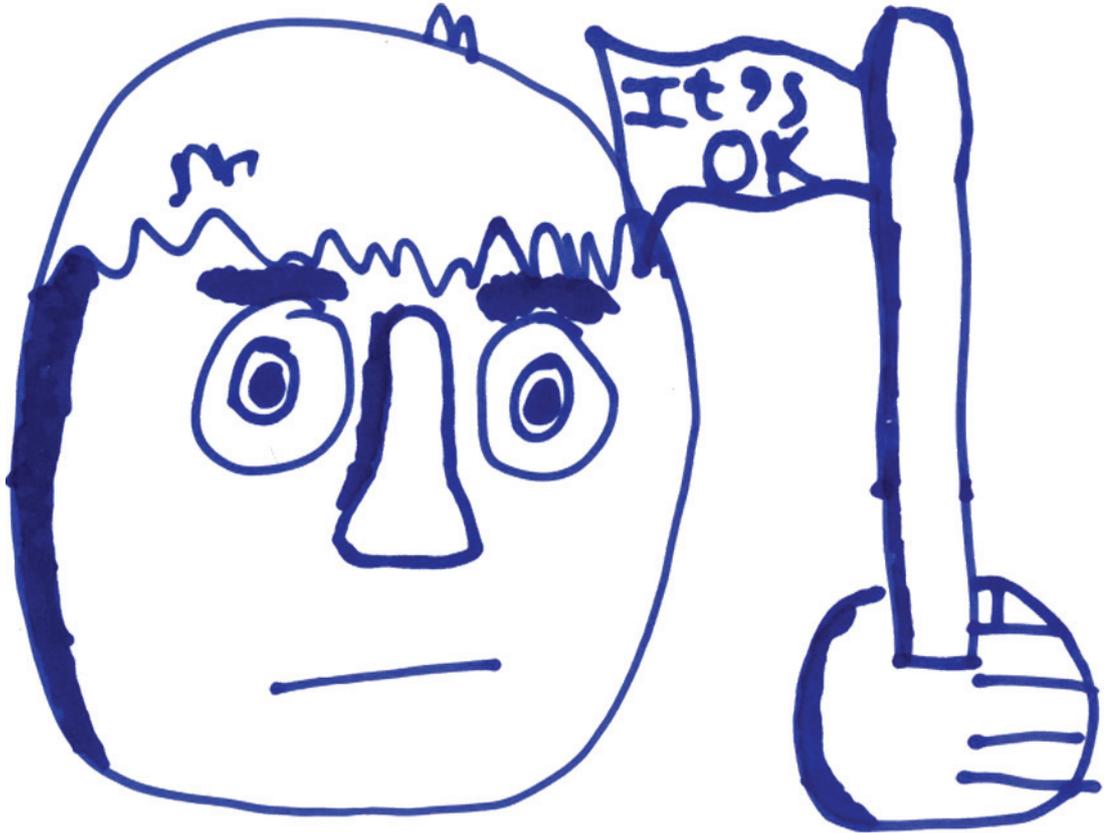
- Establish baseline information on the number of School Councils in Northern Ireland;
- Examine how existing School Councils operate in practice;

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1 This section draws in large part on the research paper prepared for the Committee for Education (NIAR 397-11) School Councils, August 2011.

- Identify what educational and social outcomes School Councils deliver in Northern Ireland and how this compares with reported outcomes elsewhere;
- Make recommendations to support and enhance the work School Councils do across Northern Ireland; and
- Report to the Assembly by September 2012.

At its meeting of 19 October 2011, the Committee formally launched this inquiry.



All pictures contained in this report were drawn by pupils as part of the Focus Groups

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# The Committee's Approach

The Committee agreed that the inquiry, in the first instance, would be research led rather than focused on gathering public evidence, and would be launched on-line on the Assembly's website. In addition, the Chairperson recorded a short video-piece on the background to, and rationale for, the Committee's inquiry which was placed on a prominent position on the website.

As part of the data gathering phase, all schools across Northern Ireland were provided with an opportunity for School Councils to bring their work to the attention of the Committee.

## Literature review

A scoping paper was written by the Assembly Research and Information Service in August 2011 (included at Appendix 3) considering the evidence on the potential benefits of School Councils, issues and challenges around their effective implementation, and the factors and attributes of successful Councils.

## Survey

The aim of the quantitative survey was to gather baseline information on the operation and experience of School Councils in Northern Ireland. The evidence within the research scoping paper helped to inform the design of the questionnaire. After piloting, the survey was launched on the 9th January 2012 and sent out to all special, primary and post-primary schools by email via the C2K system.

The survey was sent out to 1,112 schools. A total of 289 responses were received, giving a response rate of 26%. Overall, there was a reasonable spread of respondents across school management type and Education and Library Board (ELB) area.

Over three quarters (77%) of respondents to the survey had a School Council. Post-primary schools were significantly more likely to report that they had a Council than primary schools, as were single sex schools (in comparison to mixed schools).

Around 60% of schools responding to the survey, that did not have a Council, reported they were considering or preparing to establish one.

## Focus groups

The planned qualitative phase of the research aimed to provide more detailed information on the experiences of pupils taking part in School Councils here, as well as the views of pupils whose school did not have a Council.

Seven focus groups were conducted, 20 different schools, including primary, post primary and special educational needs schools took part, of which five involved participants in School Councils and two involved pupils whose school did not have a Council. The Assembly's Education Officers facilitated the focus groups and Hansard transcribed the sessions.

The children were given an opportunity to voice their opinions and explain the benefits that School Councils can offer.

Pupils participating in the focus groups highlighted a range of outcomes from taking part in their School Council. These included personal benefits as well as outcomes for the school, including:

- Greater confidence;
- A sense of achievement;
- Improved communication skills;

- Increased responsibility;
- Improvements to the school environment;
- Positive outcomes for other pupils; and
- Increased engagement with teachers.

In particular, many pupils described a feeling of pride and a sense of achievement as a result of being a school councillor. Increased confidence and greater responsibility were also common themes.

Pupils in the focus groups reported they had most influence in organising one-off events, followed by raising money and school uniform. In comparison, in the survey, the greatest number of respondents indicated that their School Council had most influence on the school environment (93%), followed by organising one-off events (75%).

Many students expressed a preference to 'learn on the job,' however some supported the idea of a forum to share ideas and practice across schools.

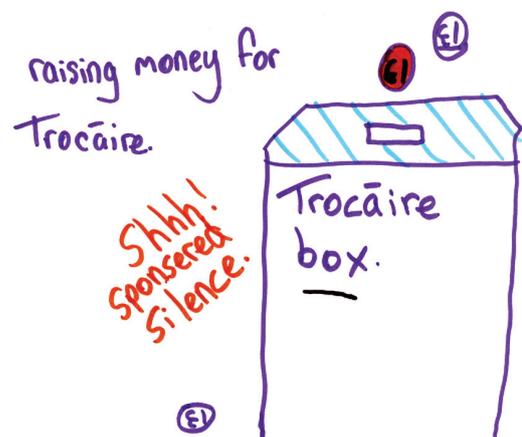
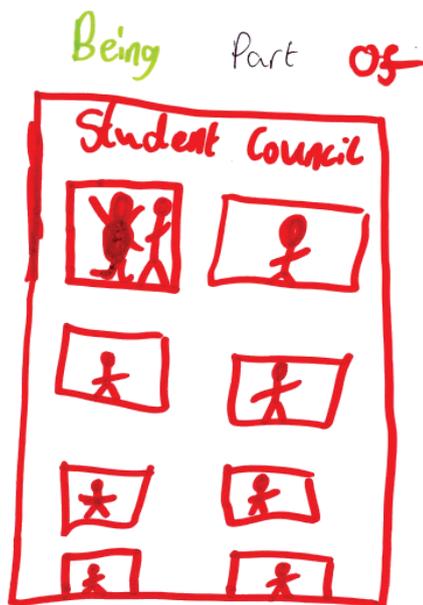
A number of pupils highlighted the crucial importance of genuine staff engagement with the Council however, few pupils reported to their school's Board of Governors.

In both the survey and the focus groups, pupils expressed that teaching and learning were the areas in which School Councils had the least influence.

Evidence from both the survey and focus groups suggests that most School Councils have a designated member of staff involved in its work. Many focus group participants reported that this key contact (usually a teacher or vice-principal) took their ideas forward to the principal.

The majority of pupils in the focus groups who did not have a Council stated that they would like their school to have one.

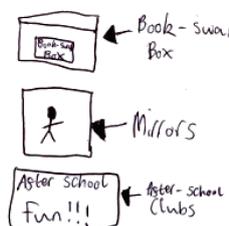
During the focus groups pupils were asked to describe the role of their School Councils, below are samples of the drawings produced at these groups.



"Happy pupils are the School Council's responsibility."

Primary focus group participant)

a team.



All pictures contained in this report were drawn by pupils as part of the Focus Groups

## Key Conclusions

### Pupil participation

The Committee would encourage pupil participation to include reviews, feedback and periodic surveys, to help build upon and improve the mechanisms and relationships within schools.

The Committee observed that Senior Management attitudes to pupil participation varied widely, from a high level of support, resources and participation, to merely paying 'lip service' to setting up a Council and giving pupils no support; the Committee would like to see this addressed within departmental guidelines.

The Committee accepted the views of the pupils it heard from, that thought should be given to the label that is attached to the method of participation chosen by the school; pupils should be allowed to choose the name given to their method of participation, therefore giving them ownership.

The Committee observed that School Councils may not always be the best method for a school to encourage pupil participation, particularly in small schools, and thinks the most important thing is that the Department and schools actively encourage pupil participation and show policy leadership in developing guidelines for this.



### Organisational input

The Committee commends organisations such as: the Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People (NICCY), Save the Children and the National Children's Bureau N.I. (NCBNI), among others who are undertaking excellent work within schools to assist and encourage pupil participation.

It is apparent to the Committee that a dedicated and enthusiastic member of staff can make a huge difference to the success of a Council. Schools should therefore seek to assign a staff member who will be given the training, time and support to assist pupils in having a successful, meaningful Council of which the school can be proud.

During the focus groups pupils highlighted the fact that structured and clear avenues of communication are crucial. The Committee would endorse this sentiment and ask that schools put in place mechanisms for pupils who are not directly involved in the Council, to both contribute to, and receive feedback on, agenda items and outcomes.

## Membership of School Councils

The Committee believes that mechanisms should be developed to encourage pupils with all abilities to participate to avoid 'popular pupil only syndrome'.

The Committee was delighted to see that there are some great examples of School Councils in existence and pupils were very enthusiastic about being part of them and making a difference. The Committee would like to encourage pupils' achievements on School Councils being recognised and celebrated within the school year.

# Recommendations

## Departmental guidance

The Committee recommends that the Department of Education publicises the 'free' support available, for the establishment and operation of School Councils, from organisations, that is available to schools as well as the online help and guidance.

The Committee recommends that the Department of Education encourages and facilitates the sharing of information among schools of good practice examples, to help develop School Councils, and other methods of participation.

In addition, where School Councils exist within Area Learning Communities, the Department should encourage the formation of a joint Council between the schools in that community.

## Training

The Committee recommends that training should be provided for pupils and staff who take part in Councils and other methods of participation, e.g. minute taking, chairing meetings and report writing. This not only makes the participation more effective but develops life skills for those taking part.

## Pupil participation

The Committee recommends that the Council should have a say in matters that are central to students' daily life in school.

## Membership of School Councils

The Committee recommends that the membership of School Councils should be rotated to allow opportunities for a wider range of pupils.

## The role of School Governors

The Committee recommends that all School Councils should report to the school governors; to facilitate this, a dedicated governor should be allocated this duty, or another appropriate formal mechanism put in place.





Northern Ireland  
Assembly

Appendix 1

# Minutes of Proceedings



# Wednesday 16 November 2011

## Senate, Parliament Buildings

**Present:** Mervyn Storey MLA (Chairperson)  
David McNarry (Deputy Chairperson)  
Michaela Boyle MLA  
Jo-Ann Dobson MLA  
Brenda Hale MLA  
Trevor Lunn MLA  
Conall McDevitt MLA  
Michelle McIlveen MLA

**In Attendance:** Roisin Fleetham (Assembly Clerk)  
Roisin Kelly (Clerk Assistant)  
Alyn Hicks (Assistant Clerk)  
Paula Best (Clerical Supervisor)  
Sharon Young (Clerical Officer)

**Apologies:** Daithí McKay MLA  
Phil Flanagan MLA  
Jonathan Craig MLA

**10.33am** The meeting moved into public session.

#### 4. **Committee's Inquiry into School Councils - Evidence Session from the Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People (NICCY)**

**11.37am** Patricia Lewsley-Mooney, Commissioner, Marlene Kinghan, Head of Communications and Participation and Alison Montgomery, Senior Policy and Research Officer joined the meeting and provided an oral briefing on the work carried out by NICCY to support School Councils and answered Members' questions.

**11.47am** Mr McDevitt rejoined the meeting.

**12.13pm** Mrs B Hale left the meeting.

*Agreed* the Commissioner would accept and consider the correspondence at 3.7 above.

*Agreed* the Commissioner would provide the Committee with examples of good practice in relation to school councils to assist the Committee's Inquiry.

**12.22pm** The Chairperson suspended the meeting.

**12.33pm** The meeting resumed with the Chairperson, Deputy Chairperson, Ms M Boyle, Mrs J Dobson and Mr McDevitt present.

*Agreed* the Committee Clerk would produce a paper for a possible Committee visit to examine the practice in Wales where school councils are a legislative requirement.

**12.34pm** Ms M McIlveen joined the meeting.

**12.34pm** Mrs J Dobson left the meeting.

#### 5. **Committee's Inquiry into School Councils – Briefing from the Department of Education**

**12.34pm** Linda Wilson, Director of Parents, Families and Communities and Eve Stewart, Head of Participation and Parenting Team joined the meeting and provided an oral briefing on the

Department of Education's position on School Councils and support for pupil participation and answered Members' questions.

*Agreed* officials agreed to provide the Committee with a copy of its draft guidance on school councils/pupil participation together with a copy of the Minister of Education's letter informing NICCY that it would not progress the guidance until the Committee's Inquiry has been completed.

**12.50am** Mrs J Dobson rejoined the meeting.

*Agreed* the Committee would seek the views of the Education and Training Inspectorate (ETI) on school councils and other forms of pupil participation.

*Agreed* the Committee would ask the Department for its assessment of the costs of operating school councils and other forms of pupil participation.

*Agreed* the Committee would write to the Department to request details of the schools which allow pupils to review applications for teaching positions.

*Agreed* the Committee would have one briefing on proposed changes to GCSEs

**[EXTRACT]**

## Wednesday 18 April 2012

### Senate, Parliament Buildings

**Present:** Mervyn Storey MLA (Chairperson)  
 Danny Kinahan MLA (deputy Chairperson)  
 Michaela Boyle MLA  
 Jo-Anne Dobson MLA  
 Brenda Hale MLA  
 Trevor Lunn MLA  
 Conall McDevitt MLA  
 Michelle McIlveen MLA

**In Attendance:** Roisin Fleetham (Assembly Clerk)  
 Sinead Kelly (Assistant Assembly Clerk)  
 Paula Best (Clerical Supervisor)  
 Sharon Young (Clerical Officer)

**Apologies:** Jonathan Craig MLA  
 Phil Flannigan MLA  
 Daithí McKay MLA

**10.33am** The meeting commenced in open session.

#### **8. NCB Northern Ireland briefing on the Committee's Inquiry into School Councils**

**12.02pm** Celine McStravick, Director and Gill Hassard, Participation Officer joined the meeting and provided the Committee with a briefing on their participation support for schools programme.

**12.23pm** Mr Lunn left the meeting.

**12.29pm** Mrs Dobson left the meeting.

**12.36pm** Mrs Dobson re-joined the meeting.

#### **9. Save the Children briefing on the Committee's Inquiry into School Councils**

**12.40pm** Marie McGrellis, Nicole Breslin and Niamh McGough, ambassadors for Save the Children joined the meeting and provided the Committee with a briefing on School Councils and other ways children can engage and contribute in schools.

*Agreed* that the ambassadors would provide additional information to the Committee regarding social media and how it is used in a positive way to promote their work.

**[EXTRACT]**

## Wednesday 13 June 2012

### Senate, Parliament Buildings

**Present:** Mervyn Storey MLA (Chairperson)  
Danny Kinahan MLA (deputy Chairperson)  
Michaela Boyle MLA  
Jonathan Craig MLA  
Phil Flanagan MLA  
Brenda Hale MLA  
Trevor Lunn MLA  
Michelle McIlveen MLA  
Daithí McKay MLA  
Sean Rogers MLA

**In Attendance:** Roisin Fleetham (Assembly Clerk)  
Hilary Bogle (Assistant Assembly Clerk)  
Paula Best (Clerical Supervisor)  
Sharon Young (Clerical Officer)

**Apologies:** Jo-Anne Dobson MLA

**11.05am** The meeting commenced in open session.

### 3. **Consideration of the Committee's draft School Councils Inquiry Report**

The Committee considered the draft Report section by section.

*Agreed:* The Committee agreed that the papers included in the appendices should form part of the Report.

*Agreed:* The Committee agreed the Executive Summary, as drafted, should form part of the Report.

*Agreed:* The Committee agreed the Background, as drafted, should form part of the Report.

*Agreed:* The Committee agreed the Inquiry Aims, as drafted, should form part of the Report.

*Agreed:* The Committee agreed the Committee Approach, as drafted, should form part of the Report.

*Agreed:* The Committee agreed the Key Conclusions, as drafted, should form part of the Report.

*Agreed:* The Committee agreed that the recommendation on 'Departmental Guidance' should be amended to include reference to areas where there is an existing learning community.

*Agreed:* The Committee agreed that the recommendation on 'The Role of the School Governors' should be amended to include 'or appropriate mechanism put in place'.

*Agreed:* The Committee agreed that the Recommendations, as amended, will be considered again next week.

*Agreed:* The Committee agreed that a text box should be added to the first page to explain what the pictures are.

*Agreed:* The Committee agreed that the amendments made today should be incorporated into the final version of the draft Report and included in next week's pack for agreement and sign off.

*Agreed:* The Committee agreed to launch the Report at an event on 12th September 2012.

*Agreed:* The Committee agreed to write to the Speaker inviting him to attend the launch and address the audience.

**[EXTRACT]**

## Wednesday 20 June 2012

### Senate Chamber, Parliament Buildings

**Present:** Mervyn Storey MLA (Chairperson)  
Danny Kinahan MLA (Deputy Chairperson)  
Michaela Boyle MLA  
Jonathan Craig MLA  
Jo-Anne Dobson MLA  
Brenda Hale MLA  
Trevor Lunn MLA  
Michelle McIlveen MLA  
Daithí McKay MLA  
Sean Rogers MLA

**In Attendance:** Roisin Fleetham (Assembly Clerk)  
Sheila Mawhinney (Assistant Assembly Clerk)  
Danielle Saunders (Clerical Supervisor)  
Sharon Young (Clerical Officer)

**Apologies:** Phil Flanagan MLA

**10.32am** The meeting commenced in public session.

#### **6. Committee's consideration of a draft report on its School Councils Inquiry.**

The Committee considered a draft of the Executive Summary, the Introduction and the Key Conclusions and Recommendations of the Report on its School Councils Inquiry.

*Agreed:* The Committee agreed the draft and ordered that it should be published in September 2012.

**[EXTRACT]**

## Wednesday 4 July 2012

### Senate Chamber, Parliament Buildings

**Present:** Mervyn Storey MLA (Chairperson)  
Danny Kinahan MLA (Deputy Chairperson)  
Michaela Boyle MLA  
Phil Flanagan MLA  
Trevor Lunn MLA  
Michelle McIlveen MLA  
Sean Rogers MLA

**In Attendance:** Roisin Fleetham (Assembly Clerk)  
Sheila Mawhinney (Assistant Assembly Clerk)  
Paula Best (Clerical Supervisor)  
Antoinette Hoskins (Clerical Officer)  
Simon Kelly (Assembly Legal Service) (Item 1 only)  
Kiera McDonald (Assembly Legal Service) (Item 1 only)  
Caroline Perry (Assembly Research and Information Service) (Item 6 only)

**Apologies:** Jonathan Craig MLA  
Jo-Anne Dobson MLA  
Brenda Hale MLA  
Daithí McKay MLA

**10.50 am** The meeting moved into public session.

#### **Chairpersons Business**

- The Committee considered amendments to the report on its inquiry into Schools Councils.

*Agreed:* The Committee agreed that these amendments should be added to the final report for publication.

*Agreed:* The Committee agreed that a relevant extract of the minutes of this meeting should be approved by the Chairperson and included in the report.

**[EXTRACT]**





Northern Ireland  
Assembly

Appendix 2

# Minutes of Evidence



# 16 November 2011

## Members present for all or part of the proceedings:

Mr Mervyn Storey (Chairperson)  
 Mr David McNarry (Deputy Chairperson)  
 Ms Michaela Boyle  
 Mrs Jo-Anne Dobson  
 Mrs Brenda Hale  
 Mr Conall McDevitt

## Witnesses:

Mrs Patricia Lewsley-Mooney *Northern Ireland  
 Commissioner for  
 Children and Young  
 People*

Mrs Marlene Kinghan *Office of the  
 Northern Ireland  
 Commissioner for  
 Children and Young  
 People*

1. **The Chairperson:** Patricia, you are very welcome and it is good to see you all again. Our apologies for the delay; we overran badly in dealing with our correspondence. Thank you for the information that you have supplied to us. An issue was raised earlier in the meeting about a particular child and parent. We will forward you a copy of the letter.
2. **Mrs Patricia Lewsley-Mooney (Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People):** I already have a copy of it. I will pass it to my legal and casework team, which will correspond with the parent.
3. **The Chairperson:** Let me say to members that I have noticed that, on a number of recent visits to schools, it is interesting that many schools have included their school councils. Last week, we met the school council at Harberton Special School, which was very interesting. So this is a timely piece of work. I hand over to you, Patricia.
4. **Mrs Lewsley-Mooney:** Thank you very much, Mr Chairman. Let me first apologise; I have a bit of a cold. I hope

that I do not start coughing in the middle of the presentation.

5. **The Chairperson:** If it is only like this, that will be all right.
6. **Mrs Lewsley-Mooney:** I think that you are far enough away.
7. I would like to begin by thanking the Committee for its invitation to attend. I am delighted to share details of the work that I have undertaken to promote and support democratic structures for participation in schools.
8. I warmly welcome the Committee's inquiry and its intention to take account of schools' experience of school councils and the contribution that such councils have made to school life and pupils' personal, social and educational development.
9. In this short presentation, I will highlight the key issues outlined in my written submission to the Committee, to which the Chairman has already referred. It will include some reference to relevant policies in international obligations which support school councils and democratic structures and a description of our Democra-School programme and feedback from schools. I will also outline what I feel needs to happen to take the issue forward and how the Committee, through its inquiry, can make the most impact for children and young people.
10. By way of introduction, I want to say that my office has been working on school councils and democratic structures in schools for more than six years. That issue was first brought to the attention of the previous commissioner in 2005, and since then the office has undertaken research on the issue, worked with schools to support the establishment of school councils, gathered feedback from schools and engaged with a range of key stakeholders. Over that time, we have moved from research to practice to seek

- to influence policy. Indeed, we were working with the Department to develop policy guidance on school councils and were informed by Department officials that that was in draft in February 2011. Sadly, we were informed late yesterday afternoon that the Department has decided to await the outcome of this inquiry before progressing with the guidance. Therefore, while I believe that the inquiry is vital, it is important that the Committee is aware of the progress that has been made in supporting school councils and democratic structures and in drafting policy guidance, and it would, therefore, be deeply concerning if the work that has been done by teachers, pupils, previous Ministers and others over the past six years was lost.
11. I will outline the relevance of my powers and duties on school councils. I have a mandate to keep under review the adequacy and effectiveness of practice relating to the rights and best interests of children and young people by relevant authorities. Practice here includes what happens in schools and, therefore, relates to the opportunities that pupils are given to participate and to contribute their views.
  12. Before I talk about school councils, it is important to say that although they are generally recognised as the most common means of involving pupils in decision-making, there are other forms of democratic representation in schools. One size does not fit all. For example, schools can identify class, form or year-group representatives to collect and communicate pupils' views to the senior management team in a school. Pupils may also be asked, through questionnaires or class consultations, about their views on issues that affect them. I am supportive of the different democratic structures in schools as long as they can meaningfully and effectively involve pupils. Research indicates that pupils overwhelmingly want to be involved in participative decision-making in schools. However, while they are likely to take a lead role in the running of the school council, it is vital, if it is to be successful, that everyone in the school community is committed to, and willing to play their part in, the operation.
  13. It is important to highlight the relevance of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) to the development of school councils. Article 12 of the convention enshrines the right of the child to have his or her views heard, listened to and taken seriously, and, by ratifying the UNCRC, the Government have an obligation to protect that right. Furthermore, in its concluding observations on the implementation of the UNCRC in the UK, the United Nations committee recommended that the Government strengthen children's participation in all school, classroom and learning matters that affect them.
  14. The importance of listening to children and seeking their views on matters that affect them is emphasised in various government policies and strategies, including the 10-year strategy for children and young people in Northern Ireland 2006-2016 and the Education and Libraries (Northern Ireland) Order 2003. Moreover, guidance that relates to school development planning, which supports the Education (Northern Ireland) Order 1998, states:
 

*"The quality and value of pupils' contribution to improving the life of the school is potentially very great, even among the younger children. It is dependent on the extent to which the Principal and staff are able to create opportunities and the climate for constructive and positive debate."*
  15. It goes on to suggest that consultation can be organised in a variety of ways, including through the establishment of a school council. So, there is recognition by government of the importance of children and young people participating in decision-making and of the potential value of their contributions. That is encouraging, but we need to go further.
  16. I will introduce Democra-School, and I hope that members have a copy of the resource. Democra-School was compiled by my office in partnership with teachers and pupils. It is guidance that

- also contains a set of standards, and it aims to help schools to establish and sustain school councils and democratic structures.
17. The decision to develop Democra-School arose from our awareness of the lack, or the inconsistent use, of participatory procedures and policies. Such procedures and policies are ways by which pupils can have a say in the school. Even were such structures existed, they were sometimes just tokenistic, were not taken seriously or were not managed effectively by staff. Pupils contacted the previous commissioner to raise concern about the issue. Teachers emphasised the benefits of school councils but were disappointed by the lack of guidance.
  18. Democra-School was developed with the support of a steering committee that was set up in 2005. Discussions were also held with Angela Smith, the then direct rule Minister of Education. She encouraged the project and was supportive of having a policy for school councils. In 2006-07, two major conferences of pupils and teachers were convened, and the information exchanged at them on the positive and negative practices was used to compile Democra-School guidance and standards.
  19. Each section of the guidance identifies a key issue which pupils, teachers and other stakeholders recognised as important in the development of a school council. The guidance explores why the issue is significant and suggests how a school might think about how to address it. A simple checklist provides a reminder of different tasks that should be completed to achieve a standard. Throughout the document additional information and resources are signposted, and schools are encouraged to explore those.
  20. Democra-School is designed to support schools at each stage of the journey from a school council's creation, through its development to evaluation and review. It takes a step-by-step approach that recognises that each school is unique, with its own particular strengths and requirements, and the resource is endorsed by School Councils UK. Following the conferences, my staff delivered additional workshops and training, and ongoing support is being delivered to schools that are interested in the Democra-School programme.
  21. During autumn 2010, 20 schools that participated in the first Democra-School workshops were asked to complete a survey to review their experiences of having a school council. Pupils and teachers commented on many positive outcomes, which included council members becoming more confident, particularly in public speaking and decision-making; improved teaching in schools, because the school council was consulted about teaching tools or methods; and pupils having a more positive attitude to school because they felt more involved in decision-making.
  22. Schools also reported that there was better communication between teachers and pupils. Teachers felt that pupils accessed and understood information more effectively when it was communicated through the school council rather than during school assembly or via class announcements.
  23. There were also some challenges. A number of schools reported that it was difficult to find an appropriate time to meet. That was a particular challenge in rural schools, where pupils had to travel some distance home. Other schools mentioned difficulties in finding a suitable time to meet the board of governors, adding that delays in arranging such meetings could lead to delays in decision-making. Many potential initiatives identified by school councils required additional funding that was not always available, although some councils were involved in fund-raising activities. Managing pupils' expectations was a challenge for some pupils who were not always fully aware of a school council's remit, and council members sometimes felt under pressure to deliver outcomes or to bring about change.
  24. Although the consultation was not extensive, responses indicated that the

- positive outcomes far outweighed any challenges. However, it is important to acknowledge that those challenges exist. As the Committee noted, there is an absence of data in relation to school councils in Northern Ireland, and I am pleased that the Committee plans to collate more complete and accurate statistics. Doing so is essential to the setting of a benchmark.
25. As I said, my staff and I have engaged on the subject of school councils with a range of key stakeholders, including representatives from the five main teaching unions, school principals and academics from the school of education at Queen's University. We explored their views and experiences of school councils and discussed what they felt that the Department of Education's role should be in promoting and supporting school councils and democratic structures. Union representatives expressed their support, in principle, for the Democra-School programme. They also indicated their willingness to support schools in establishing school councils.
26. When I first considered how school councils might be more widely promoted, I considered ways of amending the draft Education and Skills Authority (ESA) legislation. Members may be aware that legislation relating to school councils was introduced in Wales in 2005. However, following discussions with the then Education Minister, Caitríona Ruane, I decided that it would be more expedient to work collaboratively with the Department of Education to support the development of policy guidance for school councils. The Department endorsed Democra-School guidance on its website in 2009. It also made reference to the role, benefits and usefulness of school councils in many policies, circulars and reports.
27. My staff and I have participated in ongoing discussions with various Education Ministers and Department officials since 2005. In 2010, the Department expressed its commitment to move the process forward and requested that we provided information about what should be included in policy guidance for school councils and democratic structures. In February 2011, the Department confirmed that a draft circular of that guidance had been prepared for internal consultation. However, that was delayed due to the Assembly elections. Just late yesterday afternoon, I learned that the Department has now decided to further delay producing guidance, as it wishes to await the outcome of your inquiry.
28. Since the issue was raised with us, we have been working in a variety of ways to support the establishment, development and sustainability of school councils or alternative democratic structures. A timeline detailing our work is included with our written submission. My decision to work with the Department was, essentially, a compromise. I made that decision because I believed that that approach would enable pupils to access participation opportunities in their schools more quickly. I am, therefore, extremely disappointed by the Department's delay in producing policy guidance and the Minister's recent decision to postpone this again.
29. The Department has made many references in legislation, policies, reports and on its website to the benefits and importance of school councils and democratic structures. Despite that, it is not now going to provide schools with the appropriate departmental guidance to support them in developing democratic structures. I urge the Committee to call on the Department to produce the guidance for schools and to give consideration to the development of a policy on school councils. Introducing a policy would ensure that every pupil has the opportunity to participate in decision-making in their school. That protects children's right to participate as enshrined in article 12 of the UNCRC. It would also identify appropriate standards, which would seek to ensure consistency and quality in provision across schools. Crucially, it will also provide a means by which that could be monitored and evaluated.

30. I welcome the Committee's inquiry and believe that it will generate valuable quantitative and qualitative information. I sincerely hope, however, that come next September I will be joining the Committee in not only celebrating the best practice of school councils and other democratic structures but also welcoming the introduction of policy guidance for schools.
31. **The Chairperson:** Thank you very much, Patricia. The information that you have provided to us has been a huge help. We are not starting here with a clean sheet. You have done a huge amount of work, such as the process that you have engaged in, the information and analysis, and the audit that you carried out in 2010 that showed that fewer than 15% of schools have a school council. It will be interesting to see whether that has changed.
32. I will put this question to departmental officials when they come in. If the Department has postponed what it was supposedly producing, it might be good if the officials would even share with us at least what their starting baseline was. That would then help us in trying to develop and make proposals. That would be a different way to approach the policy agenda, rather than the Department always producing a policy and us scrutinising it. If there was collaboration between us and them, we may get better guidelines coming out the other end.
33. What do you see, Patricia, as the core problem in the legislative sweep from the convention to the Education and Libraries (Northern Ireland) 2003 Order? If you were in a position to do so, what would you say needs to be done legislatively to really help the process of the introduction of school councils?
34. **Mrs Lewsley-Mooney:** Importantly, it is not about creating a separate piece of legislation. It could be easily added to some of the education legislation that is coming up the line. For instance, when we looked at how it could be added to the ESA legislation, we were told that that could not be done because it would need to go out for consultation. The compromise for us was that, if we at least got policy guidelines, there would be a hope that it would eventually move further down the line and be added to education legislation somewhere else rather than go through the House as a separate piece of legislation.
35. It is disappointing for us. The compromise at that time was to look at the policy guidelines. We had hoped that those would come to fruition and be put into use in January 2012. We have been delayed and delayed and delayed. The young people who have been involved in this process since 2005 were continually given support and promises, and they thought that it would happen. They have now left the Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People's (NICCY) youth panel and come out of university, and they are saying, "Still nothing has happened. What kind of Government does not listen to the voice of young people?" That makes it very difficult.
36. **The Chairperson:** In the paper that you gave us, you mentioned the survey that was carried out. One principal made the interesting comment that school councils contributed to improving both teaching and learning. Is that a commonly held view, or do some teachers and management structures see school councils as an unwelcome interference in how they should best run the school?
37. **Mrs Marlene Kinghan (Office of the Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People):** As Patricia said, feedback on the work that we have done since 2005 has been very positive, not just from children and young people but from teachers in particular. Most teachers probably do a lot of this every day. To be fair to the teachers, they do not cause the sticking point. It becomes a bit of a sticking point when they perhaps need a certain type of resource or a change in the timetable. This is not all about resources. Sometimes it may be just about changing the school timetable to alleviate one duty of a teacher to enable him or her to take on some of this work.

38. There were some problems around the lack of a constitution, proper guidance on how this would work and a system in which they could feed back and monitor and evaluate it. That is very important in respect of performance nowadays. Those are all issues that teachers felt would be well captured if they had some sort of policy. However, with the best will in the world, it is very difficult for a teacher to put those proposals forward in the absence of that policy. They cannot feed back as they would want and, at that point, may decide to come back to it another day. The will of the teachers and the unions back that up; the unions very much backed that up when we met them.
39. **The Chairperson:** Marlene, did you or the organisation envisage the guidelines being about how the Department sees school councils operating? Or, were the guidelines more about helping pupils and teachers by setting out how school councils could be established or managed? Did you see the guidelines as being all-encompassing?
40. If all these things emanate from the bowels of Rathgael House or wherever, there can be a one-track approach. However, school councils are a two-way process. They are primarily about listening to the voice of young people, but they are also about ensuring that that structure is in place. It is a two-way process in which both sides of the debate should have an understanding of what is expected of them in a general framework.
41. **Mrs Kinghan:** From talking to the people who know about this — teachers, principals, pupils and officials — we know that it is a three-way process. The overwhelming feedback that we got is that it will only work if everyone, including the Department, officials and boards, gets involved and backs it. When we did the initial work, rather than lobbying for legislation or putting forward proposals for policy, we brought together a steering committee of interested parties. Those interested parties included principals who had worked in schools in which there had been bullying, graffiti, issues with pupil behaviour and issues between pupils and teachers, which created absenteeism and all sorts of other issues. When they came to us and said that they had an example of how they were able to get over some of those hurdles by involving the pupils, in consultation with the teachers, and moving this forward, they said that they were converts, wanted to tell others and asked if they could come onto the steering committee. We had very little difficulty in getting people to join; in fact, we were oversubscribed. When we ran the conferences, we had to put a limit on those who could attend the workshops. For us, it was clear that there was a major impetus out there.
42. We involved the Department by asking its officials to sit on the steering committee. We got representatives from the citizenship programmes of each of the five education and library boards. That was very useful, and it fitted in very well to their areas of work. From our point of view, it was a win-win situation for all three, particularly for the schools which had to move this forward and, ultimately, develop young people to become active citizens and to take their part in a democratic society.
43. **Dr Alison Montgomery (Office of the Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People):** We provided substantial support to the Department in developing guidance. There were a number of issues to look at. First, we gave teachers the context of why this is important and how it is relevant to other departmental policies, strategies and so on. We also looked at the role of the council. We suggested that it was important to be clear about what the role of the council was within the school. It is also important to look at the key features of what makes effective school councils. In putting that information together, we pulled together information, advice and so on that we had been given from teacher unions, teachers and pupils.
44. We also looked at the role of different educational stakeholders and took them

- through the process of how a school council operates from the beginning, through its development to its evaluation and review. We also looked at positive examples of how you engage with pupils in the community and, obviously, referenced the benefits to that.
45. It was a very holistic type of input, and we talked it through in a lot of detail with the Department. The school council has to be supportive, and you have to be able to demonstrate how it has had a positive impact. It is also important to put it in the context of wider educational policy and legislation.
46. **Mrs Dobson:** Thank you for your presentation. It is a relevant and important issue, and it is great that you are presenting to the Committee on it. I share your views on the protection of children's rights. That is an incredibly important issue. It is important that they are protected not only on paper, but in reality. I believe that school councils have the potential to play a major role in that protection.
47. I have a couple of questions, and my first follows on from points that Marlene made. What steps do you believe principals and teachers should take to ensure that, once set up, the school council retains members and actively encourages their participation on a range of issues across the school?
48. Secondly, I notice that public speaking improvements were noted by participants. That is extremely important, and it is brilliant to hear. Have you made contact with the Royal College of Speech and Language Therapists on that issue, as it may have interest in such improvements?
49. **Mrs Lewsley-Mooney:** Your first question relates to the commitment of principals to school councils in the first place and how they are set up. Having the policy, guidance and standards in our packs was important to us. We want to have a standard of school council across the board. We have been to a number of schools, and we have seen cases where there has been a great use of school councils and where they have bedded into the schools and others where, as a token gesture, they meet once a term. We have also seen schools that do not agree with school councils. We have to get the message across. Sometimes we have brought those groups of people together to talk about how they can do that. Some of the young people who are involved in school councils have created forums of school councils that come together to talk about the issues that they look at and about how they can share some of their skills and experiences.
50. **Mrs Dobson:** Is that involvement retained and maintained through young people telling other young people? How would you encourage them to keep it going and encourage participation once it is set up?
51. **Mrs Lewsley-Mooney:** The issue is the culture within the school and how it encourages young people to get involved. Very often, we hear about the great and the good always being picked for things, but we have found that a school council provides an opportunity for young people who normally would not get involved in things. As I said, I have been to schools where the whole process of the election has even been there, and young people who want to stand for election create manifestos and go out and sell what they would do for the class. So, you could have three or four people in the one class going for one position. That process leads to pupils getting their voting slips two weeks before the vote is to take place — if you do not have your voting slip you do not get to vote — to doing PR and going upstairs to the sixth form room where the pupils are counting the vote. The announcement of the election is later down the line.
52. **Mrs Dobson:** We saw a vote in Limavady, and it was brilliant.
53. **The Chairperson:** The day that we were in Limavady, they were voting.
54. **Mrs Dobson:** The atmosphere was brilliant.

55. **The Chairperson:** The members tried to vote, but they could not produce identification, so they were not allowed to.
56. **Mrs Lewsley-Mooney:** So, the issue is the culture within the school and how young people are encouraged. The more young people go forward, the more they are encouraged to go forward.
57. As I said, we have seen the positive outcome from school councils, such as the public speaking aspect, confidence building and self esteem. Having a voice that somebody listens to builds young people's confidence.
58. **Mrs Kinghan:** Just to add to that, it is about building momentum and retention. That is where the standards come in. The standards include such things as getting the school's board of governors on board and getting the whole school environment involved.
59. **Mrs Dobson:** That is how you keep the momentum.
60. **Mrs Kinghan:** Exactly. It is an issue of winning hearts and minds. It is like anything we try to do: you can legislate all you want, but, at the end of the day, you have to win the hearts and minds. That was the big issue here. There were a lot of hearts and minds, but there were some people in the organisation saying that it would be too difficult. There are barriers and challenges, and we recognise that, but, keeping the impetus going requires leadership from the top. Having these standards and being able to support the board of governors to give it guidance on how to approach this is important, because it is not something that everybody may know about. This is useful for them.
61. The issue is also about making sure that the standards are in place and that people and pupils know the expectations, because there can be an issue of raising expectations beyond what the school can deliver. So, that very honest conversation needs to take place, and that would be built into the standards that, hopefully, they would be able to get out of it.
62. **Mrs Lewsley-Mooney:** Your second question was about the Royal College of Speech and Language Therapists. We have a very good working relationship with that organisation, particularly in working together on speech and language services. I do not know whether we have ever asked them the specific question about school councils.
63. **Mrs Kinghan:** One of the very positive things in this has been the work that we have done in special schools. So, there has been speech and language involvement there. People may think that you cannot have a school council in a special school, but very much the opposite is true. Again, we were inundated with responses from special schools with fantastic schools councils, and we were delighted to see that there were so many.
64. **The Chairperson:** Harberton Special School was amazing.
65. **Dr Montgomery:** You will see from our audit that 10 special schools indicated that they had school councils.
66. **The Chairperson:** I saw that.
67. Have you ever had an example of a school council that sent a representative to the board of governors?
68. **Dr Montgomery:** There is a mechanism whereby pupils can go forward to represent the views of the school council to the board of governors. That works in a more organised fashion in Ireland and in other jurisdictions, but it has happened in some schools in Northern Ireland, where pupils from student councils have gone forward to represent a view on a particular issue to feed in to the school governors' decision-making. So, that is quite an effective mechanism.
69. **Mrs Dobson:** Have organisations, such as the Scouts Association or the Girl Guides, been in touch with you about providing badges or certificates of achievement through the school council? Is that a way of rewarding children that you could explore at some point?

70. **Mrs Lewsley-Mooney:** Not through the school councils. However, we have worked with uniformed organisations around a number of things, including workshops. We are working on a badge to do with the UNCRC that some of the uniformed organisations could obtain. It has been done already in Wales and other places, so we do not want to reinvent the wheel.
71. **Mrs Dobson:** None of them have approached you through the school councils yet?
72. **Mrs Lewsley-Mooney:** Not through the school councils in particular, but we work directly with the uniformed organisations, such as the Boys' Brigade and others.
73. **Mr McNarry:** You are welcome. I was interested in your presentation. It was genuinely caring and certainly very knowledgeable. If you do not mind me saying so, it was robust where it needed to be. However, it was the robust bit that I picked up on, as I naturally would. Just to get it clear in my head, did you infer or say that the Department delayed policy guidance, awaiting the outcome of our inquiry?
74. **Mrs Lewsley-Mooney:** Yes. The Department sent me an e-mail late yesterday afternoon. I do not have a hard copy of the letter yet, and I will take it up with the Minister. However, I received an e-mail late yesterday afternoon, which said that it would not be continuing with the guidance until the inquiry had done its work.
75. **Mr McNarry:** It is rather flattering but, at the same time, I assume it is a cop-out.
76. **Mrs Lewsley-Mooney:** There could have been a parallel process. The work on the guidance could have continued, and the Committee could have carried out its inquiry. As you said, Mr Chairman, you could have encompassed it. In fact, as you said from the outset, it might have helped you in some of your decision-making.
77. **The Chairperson:** There will be an opportunity to put that to departmental officials in a few moments.
78. **Mr McNarry:** It is always very interesting when someone else appears to know more than we do. I am inquisitive about how they know that and what else they know. Are you telling the Committee that the Department has prepared some papers but that it has put them on hold and, perhaps, it would be a good idea for the Committee to get a hold of them?
79. **Mrs Lewsley-Mooney:** Yes. That is what the Chairman was saying earlier. We were told in February this year that the draft guidelines had been produced but that they had to go to officials and the Minister.
80. **Mr McNarry:** I wanted to hear that a second time. I just wanted to be sure that that is where we are.
81. **Mrs Lewsley-Mooney:** We then had the elections in the middle of that, which put it on hold for another while. However, we met the Minister, and we raised the issue of the guidelines, and he kind of said that it was not as big a priority as it might have been for the previous Minister but that it was still ongoing. Then we got the letter yesterday to say otherwise.
82. **Mr McNarry:** May I go on to a separate point? I understand that the commission played a role when, I assume, it was asked to by schools that are facing the threat of closure. Did any of those schools have a school council involved in that approach to the commission?
83. **Mrs Lewsley-Mooney:** We have been approached by a number of parents and others about a number of closures. I cannot really talk about individual cases or schools. However, my legal and casework team is looking at that. As far as I am aware, no young people have come forward. It has been the parents and some of the adults concerned.
84. **Mr McNarry:** I know that you cannot talk about individual schools, and I would not want you to. Without mentioning any names, I have one such school in my own consistency, and that is how I know about it. Are you able to give us details on the role that you do play when such contact is made? Keeping in the context

- of what we are discussing, would school councils have a role to play in, at least, having an opinion on the issue that their school might be closed? An awful lot of schools will be feeling the threat. I am wondering whether school councils could get involved when there is a threat to their school or even a threat to their neighbours.
85. **Mrs Lewsley-Mooney:** There is certainly an opportunity for the voice of young people, whether they are in a school council, in a school that is threatened with closure, or they want to support children who attend a school that is threatened with closure. Very often in such debates, however, those are the last voices to be heard. We have a role in several ways; I will give you a short example of one way in which we have become involved. We will be seeking legal opinion, in light of the Minister's ongoing consultation, on a board's decision that pre-empts the outcome of that consultation. We will have the opportunity to ask for legal advice on that. As regards the bigger picture, we welcome the voice of young people in the whole process.
86. **Mr McNarry:** How far do you take the pursuit of legal advice? I do not want to put words into anyone's mouth; I know that I am treading on issues on which legal advice has been sought and is probably still awaited. Would you support a school in a legal challenge on behalf of the children?
87. **Mrs Lewsley-Mooney:** It would depend on the nature of the legal challenge and whether there was no other route to be taken. In that case, we would support a challenge. We would have to make sure that there was no other available process.
88. **Mr McNarry:** That is a politician's answer.
89. **Mrs Lewsley-Mooney:** It is a commissioner's answer. I have to make sure that there is no other process that those people can go through. It is in my legislation. I cannot step on someone else's toes. However, if, for instance, parents decided to take legal action, we could support them financially to help them to take the case if they could not draw down legal aid.
90. **Mr McNarry:** That is what I wanted to hear. Thank you.
91. **Mrs Lewsley-Mooney:** That would depend on my budget and the cost of the case.
92. **Mr McNarry:** Now you are behaving more like a politician. You sound like John O'Dowd, talking about budgets.
93. **Mr McDevitt:** You have been reviewing the Executive's performance against the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. How do you assess things generally at the moment?
94. **Mrs Lewsley-Mooney:** The commitment to children and young people has been rolled back hugely. In the first Assembly, there was the children's fund as well as this office and the children and young people's unit being set up. When the Assembly was suspended, we had the children and young people's package, which is now gone. The children and young people's unit has also gone. We believe that the Executive have an opportunity in the life of this Assembly to make a real difference. We hope that they will make children and young people in particular a priority in the Programme for Government. The piece of work that we launched last week helped to give us some of the evidence that we needed behind that.
95. **Mr McDevitt:** What is your view of the Executive's capacity to fulfil their article 12 duties? Do you think that they are fulfilling those duties to children to give them full participation in decision-making?
96. **Mrs Lewsley-Mooney:** Some work has been started, but there is a lot more to be done. We have asked each and every Department to sign up to a participation statement of intent, and all but one have done that. Our job now is to go back and ask exactly how they are doing that. The Executive will have the opportunity to find out how they are living up to their article 12 obligations by having people

- such as the children's champions being answerable to the ministerial subcommittee, when and if it meets.
97. **Mr McDevitt:** That is another matter. On the specific matter of school councils, I take it that what you are saying today is that guidance would be great, and there is no reason why we could not see it, but that you would still like to see those in a statutory body.
98. **Mrs Lewsley-Mooney:** Yes.
99. **Mr McDevitt:** I agree with the Chairperson that there is so much that we can build on and, potentially, be even braver about. If we were to put school councils on a statutory footing — picking up on the Chairperson's point about giving students a direct role in the governance of a school by giving them a seat on the board of governors — do you believe that student councils should have the right to nominate to the board of governors?
100. **Mrs Lewsley-Mooney:** Yes. It would be a democratic process through which they would elect their chair or a member of their school council to represent them on that, and it is important that the young people would have the opportunity to do that.
101. **Dr Montgomery:** I will clarify the previous point. Wales has associate governors, and up to two pupils from the school council can be elected to serve on that. That is in legislation in Wales.
102. **Mr McDevitt:** What level of decision-making do you think should be devolved to a student council? How meaningful should its role be in decision-making?
103. **Dr Montgomery:** As the commissioner said, every school will determine what its school council should be about. We are very much of the mind that every school is unique and has its particular needs. A primary school, for example, will approach a school council quite differently from a post-primary school and from a special school. It is about focusing on that school's needs and on the relationship between teachers and pupils and how they wish to develop that. It is a fine balance between teachers' input, senior managers' input and managing a school council so that it works effectively and does not have too much control. That is a fine balance that needs to be worked at in schools.
104. **Mrs Kinghan:** That is what we found. As Patricia said, there was a huge variance in the involvement of pupils and, in some cases, the involvement of teachers. In some schools, there was a clear involvement and an idea of the benefits that that could bring. That is where guidance would be useful in that there would be standards to which people could aspire. Perhaps not everyone would get there in the first year or the first five years, but at least they would have something to aspire to. We want a policy layer to ensure that that is taken forward.
105. **Mrs Lewsley-Mooney:** Whatever young people's level of involvement, it is important that, if they ask for something that is impossible to give, as long as the opportunity exists to explain why that is the situation, at least they will feel that their voice has been heard.
106. **The Chairperson:** Following on from David's point, Patricia, is there an obligation on education and library boards (ELBs) to consult with school councils or school pupils on development proposals, of whatever nature, including closures or changes to a school?
107. **Mrs Lewsley-Mooney:** There is no specific remit, but, under article 12 of the UNCRC, there should be a remit for young people to have a voice in those types of decisions.
108. **Mrs Kinghan:** The Education (Northern Ireland) Order 1998 refers to bullying policies, but that does not go across all policies. That is where there is a discrepancy in children's voices being heard. A UN committee has said that, when a decision affects a child, that child should be asked, if he or she has the capacity.
109. **The Chairperson:** That is a very interesting point.

110. Patricia, perhaps at some stage you can convey to us examples of good practice in school councils. We were very impressed by those in Limavady and Harberton Special School. You mentioned some in Wales and some in the Republic. Perhaps you can give us some good examples, and the Committee will be interested in seeing them.
111. **Mrs Lewsley-Mooney:** I certainly will.
112. **The Chairperson:** Thank you. I have no doubt that we will come back to you. You are more than welcome to stay and hear the Department's presentation.

# 16 November 2011

## Members present for all or part of the proceedings:

Mr Mervyn Storey (Chairperson)  
 Mr David McNarry (Deputy Chairperson)  
 Ms Michaela Boyle  
 Mr Conall McDevitt  
 Miss Michelle McIlveen

## Witnesses:

Ms Eve Stewart *Department of*  
 Ms Linda Wilson *Education*

113. **The Chairperson:** Linda and Eve, you are very welcome. I am sorry for the delay and for holding you back. We have had a presentation from the Children's Commissioner, and we want to raise a number of issues with you. If you have some comments to make, please proceed. We received your briefing paper.
114. **Ms Linda Wilson (Department of Education):** The effective participation of young people — that is, the opportunity to influence processes and decisions about their lives and to bring about change — is an important consideration in the Department of Education's (DE) approach to education.
115. As part of the Department's school improvement policy, Every School a Good School, DE wants a greater focus on engagement in schools, particularly with pupils. The involvement of young people is now identified as an indicator of effective performance, and it is also a specific goal in promoting engagement among schools and pupils, parents, families and communities.
116. As part of the school development planning process, schools are required to demonstrate that there is a commitment to involve young people in discussions and decisions in school life that directly affect them and to listen to their views. A schedule to the regulations identifies arrangements to consult and take account of pupils, parents, staff and others in the preparation of the plan.
117. Together Towards Improvement sets out the inspection framework; the Education and Training Inspectorate (ETI) introduced that process to enable schools to self-evaluate. One indicator of quality leadership and management is the encouragement of learners' involvement in discussions, decisions and aspects of school life that affect them directly, thus ensuring that the student voice is represented. That is underpinned by other parts of the process, which, for example, include shared evaluation of teaching and learning and stakeholder involvement. Paragraph 5 of our briefing paper sets out examples of effective pupil engagement in addition to school councils. It highlights a number of ways in which pupils might be involved. It includes strategic examples, such as involvement in the governance and management of schools, input in classroom teaching through assessment and class-led form work, and the use of various methods to canvass pupils' views.
118. During a school inspection, the Education and Training Inspectorate will seek to identify good practice and examples of positive pupil engagement. The Every School a Good School policy refers to the provision of a resource to support school councils specifically and to encourage all schools to set up councils or other fora to ensure that pupils have a voice in decisions on the running of their school. In that respect, DE has referenced the Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People's (NICCY) Democra-School guidance on its website.
119. An effective school council can make an important contribution to pupils' educational development. However, there are other ways to engage effectively with pupils. School councils are one of a number of means for schools to engage

- with pupils. Although DE supports the concept of school councils in principle, the key aim is to encourage all schools to find meaningful ways to give pupils a voice that can be heard. In that context, the Department would not seek to be prescriptive, but rather encourage, facilitate and promote means of effective and meaningful pupil engagement.
120. **The Chairperson:** Thank you for your presentation and briefing paper. Will you clarify something for us? The Children's Commissioner has just informed us that, after discussions with the Department over the past number of years, DE was in the process of introducing guidelines on school councils but has now decided not to do so until the outcome of our inquiry is published. Do you agree that it would be helpful if the Department were to share its current thinking on those guidelines, so that, as we continue with our inquiry, we will end up with something that is meaningful, useful and has buy-in from everybody about how we proceed on the issue?
121. In your presentation, you refer to a requirement for schools to evaluate participation, the exchange between pupils, and so on. However, paragraph 4 of your briefing paper states:
- "The Education and Training Inspectorate does not evaluate individual aspects of pupil engagement such as school councils".*
122. There seems to be a disparity. On the one hand, departmental documents provide encouragement to schools. On the other hand, the inspectorate decides not even to evaluate the merit, value or worth of that process. Do you think that that needs to be changed?
123. **Ms L Wilson:** As I understand it, the inspectorate does not specifically evaluate whether a school has a school council. It looks at whether there is meaningful pupil engagement. The inspectorate would say that, as it goes about its work, it talks to pupils, observes how schools operate, how classrooms are run, how pupils behave in and contribute to class, and so on. It would take the view that, although it does not evaluate it specifically, it looks for it, comments on it and sees whether it is part of the school process.
124. **Mr McNarry:** Chairman, I am not too sure that you got an answer to your question.
125. How long have you been working on the issue?
126. **Ms L Wilson:** I came to DE in September 2009.
127. **Mr McNarry:** Is it true — I ask only because I understand that it might be — that a draft document has been in circulation in the Department since February?
128. **Ms L Wilson:** We have a very rough working document, which we pulled together following discussions with NICCY. The document needs further work, and it needs to be set in a wider context. We had helpful engagements with NICCY, which provided some useful steers. I then discussed the matter with departmental colleagues, who put other points of view to me, such as whether the issue was school councils or ensuring effective pupil participation by a variety of means. If a school council is working well, it can be highly valuable. However, the Department does not want a school council to be tokenistic, with the focus being on process rather than outcomes. It was clear from speaking to colleagues that there are issues around setting the matter in a wider context.
129. **Mr McNarry:** Since September two years ago, you produced, in February, a rough draft. Could the Committee see that rough draft?
130. **Ms L Wilson:** Yes, certainly.
131. **Mr McNarry:** We would be obliged if you would pass that down to us. I appreciate and follow your line of thinking. Now that we know that you have a rough draft that is likely to be on guidance, is it true that you are holding back on its publication and are waiting for the outcome of the Committee's inquiry?
132. **Ms L Wilson:** The Minister is embarking on a major programme of work and reform. He will decide the priorities and

- the work that the Department has to take forward and make decisions about that.
133. **Mr McNarry:** Are you telling us that the Minister does not see that as a priority?
134. **Ms L Wilson:** I am not commenting on what the Minister's priorities are.
135. **Mr McNarry:** Is your interpretation of what the Minister has said to you that it is not a priority? Those are your words, and they will be in the Hansard report.
136. **Ms L Wilson:** What I am saying is that the Minister decides the priorities for the Department, and he is looking at an ambitious programme of work for the Department. That will set the priorities for the Department.
137. **Mr McNarry:** Do you think this issue will be included?
138. **Ms L Wilson:** That is a matter for the Minister and the permanent secretary.
139. **Mr McNarry:** Paragraph 7 of your briefing paper, headed "Way Forward", states: "it was ... agreed that a school council in every school was not necessarily the goal, but that the focus should be on participative structures which were appropriate to schools."
140. What do you mean by:  
*"participative structures which were appropriate to schools"?*
141. **Ms L Wilson:** Paragraph 5 of the paper lists various methods through which pupils can engage and participate. We want schools to decide which participative structures are the most appropriate for them. It will be slightly broader than simply saying that a school council is required and that that is the be-all and end-all.
142. **Mr McNarry:** I know what you are saying. However, if you are saying that a school council structure is not necessary, what type of structure do you think is an appropriate alternative to a school council, and how would that materialise within the setting of the needs of children?
143. **Ms L Wilson:** It is an important structure. There are other methods of pupil engagement. For example, there is the opportunity to use classes to investigate pupils' views about specific school issues. Those could come up with ideas for change or whatever.
144. **Mr McNarry:** How would they be structured or channelled? Do you cover that in the draft document?
145. **Ms L Wilson:** No. We do not cover it in detail.
146. **Mr McNarry:** Therefore, you have presented a list of possible examples, from A to K, but you have nothing to back it up.
147. **Ms L Wilson:** Some of those examples happen in schools, but whether they are formal structures is a separate issue. I understand that the normal practice is for schools to have a class teacher, with whom specific issues can be discussed. In some cases, those are more structured than in other schools.
148. **Mr McNarry:** When a school council does not exist, the Department would encourage a school to work with pupils to advance any one of examples A to K. Does your draft document have a view of example E: "pupil input to reviewing applications for teaching posts"?
149. **Ms L Wilson:** No, we do not have a view as such. I am advised by the inspectorate that that can happen.
150. **Mr McNarry:** Are you aware of that happening in any school?
151. **Ms Eve Stewart (Department of Education):** We are not aware of it personally, but we have been advised by the inspectorate that it is aware of it happening.
152. **Mr McNarry:** Do you think that you could find out for us from the inspectorate the schools of which it is aware?
153. **Ms L Wilson:** I could certainly ask it for more information.
154. **Mr McNarry:** That would be very helpful. Has a costing been done for resourcing school councils or some structure that

- you have not put together yet that would enact examples A to K?
155. **Ms L Wilson:** No. There are no costings in the Department for any of those examples or for school councils. Obviously, we are aware that school councils would be an additional burden on schools, but we have no costings.
156. **Ms Stewart:** The guidance, which is very rough, focuses solely on school councils. It does not focus on wider participation.
157. **Mr McNarry:** I wonder what you have been doing for two years. Every question that I have asked you relates to the briefing paper. It is your briefing. It is very extensive, and it is very helpful to the Committee. I wonder, particularly in this day and age, whether the costings are significant or negligible. They could be important. As you say, we do not know whether the Minister feels that school councils are a priority, but that is a key issue as to the Minister's thinking. I am trying to link that with the absence of costings, which would be helpful. I am surprised, to be frank, that you have not done any costings. I am trying to link the absence of that to the presentation of this extensive document, and yet the news that greets us today is that you have stopped and delayed any declaration of policy guidance until the Committee reports on its inquiry. I find that astonishing.
158. **Ms L Wilson:** I can say only that the Minister sets the priorities. Obviously, if he —
159. **Mr McNarry:** Was the decision to delay based on your interpretation of how the Minister is thinking?
160. **Ms L Wilson:** I do not think that it is a matter of delaying; it is recognising that we would wish any guidance that we produce to be informed by the work of the Committee and to take that into account.
161. **Mr McNarry:** You have been at this for two years. The Committee expects any guidance that you produce to be useful to us.
162. **Ms L Wilson:** I can say only that the work in the Department is taken forward as it is prioritised at any particular time in its workload.
163. **Mr McNarry:** I understand your difficulties.
164. **The Chairperson:** Will you confirm two things for me? First, was it communicated to NICCY that the work was being suspended pending the outcome of our inquiry?
165. **Ms L Wilson:** A letter has issued from the Minister to the Children's Commissioner to explain that.
166. **The Chairperson:** Obviously, we will have sight of that letter at some stage.
167. **Ms L Wilson:** Yes.
168. **The Chairperson:** Secondly, if it is the intention and the purpose of the Department to be informed by the work of the Committee, would I be right in saying that the reverse could also be the case? We could also be informed by the work of the Department, but that could only be on the basis of the information that the Department supplies to us. Even though, in your definition, the Department has only a rough guide, it would be helpful for us to see where the Department is in relation to the matter.
169. **Ms L Wilson:** I am happy to share that with you.
170. **Mr McDevitt:** It is encouraging that a lot of work seems to be going on, particularly by the inspectorate. I take it from your answers to David that examples A to K are practices that the inspectorate has found in schools. In other words, it is not a made-up list, and the inspectorate has come across such examples.
171. **Ms L Wilson:** That is my understanding. The inspectorate is looking for such examples.
172. **Mr McDevitt:** It would be helpful when considering examples K and E, which David is interested in, if the inspectorate could give us some feedback about the reality of those practices? We need to confirm how many schools are

- doing A, B, C, D, E, F and G. We also need to know whether any qualitative analysis has been carried out and the inspectorate's view on what represents best practice.
173. On the broader issue of benchmarking, as you worked your way through the matter over the past couple of years, what other regions of the UK or member states of the European Union have you looked to as examples of best practice and of achieving full participation for our young people and children in schools?
174. **Ms Stewart:** We have not really got to the stage of benchmarking. We have looked at the position in the UK, and we are still not 100% certain of the position there. We know that Wales has a statutory duty for schools to have school councils, but, to be honest, we do not yet know what the position is in England, Scotland and the Republic of Ireland; we are trying to get that information. We have not looked any wider than that.
175. **Mr McDevitt:** We may be able to help you with that. What is your best professional view of the strength or validity of the statutory duty that operates in Wales?
176. **Ms Stewart:** I do not have experience of what is happening in Wales, and I have not spoken to officials or professionals there. However, I am aware of the position in Northern Ireland, and I know that, when the Education Bill was being drafted, NICCY asked for a statutory duty to be included in it to require all schools to have school councils. However, the Minister at the time took the view that to be prescriptive about school councils, and to require every school to have one, would carry a great risk of school councils becoming tokenistic and mechanistic. They would not work in the way that the Minister and the Department would want them to work, and it was agreed that work would be progressed to try to encourage schools to have school councils.
177. NICCY has useful information, and its Democra-School guidance is very good. Schools have access to it, and the Department put that guidance on its website as a resource for schools to use.
178. **Ms L Wilson:** From the discussions that I have had with the inspectorate, I know that it thinks that school councils operate effectively when children are used to participating in many other ways and when participation runs through schools and is built into their ethos. If you are taking that slightly broader view, I suppose that the question is what would a statutory duty be about or around?
179. **Mr McDevitt:** If you took your A to K menu of participation vehicles or points, statutory duty could be about giving statutory effect to many of those, in many ways providing the architecture and the substance around which a council would operate. That would avoid the risk of a council being set up and treated as a token exercise because, perhaps, the culture of a school is not participative. Do you have an opinion on that? That list is very interesting and is broader than I expected. I am exceptionally encouraged by some things I read there; that level of participation may be only in a small number of schools, but surely a statutory duty framed around that level of participation could be very positive.
180. **Ms L Wilson:** There is always a debate around statutory duty, but one that is more broadly based and focused on participation would, to my mind, be a better approach than one that is narrower, partly because it allows for greater creativity and development.
181. It strikes me forcefully about the entire sector and young people that the agenda of participation is moving fast. Society being what it is, young people's needs are developing at a rate that none of us can imagine. One reason that attracts me to flexibility is that people can respond; people are not locked into legislation that states that schools must have something that will not be relevant five, seven or 10 years in the future. Broader participation that allows scope for local solutions, creativity, new thinking and new developments would be much more in line with my thinking.

- The debate on whether a statutory duty is needed is a separate issue.
182. **Mr McDevitt:** I will leave it at that, Chair. I have the analogy of society needing democracy but not needing a parliament to deliver democracy.
183. **The Chairperson:** That is a novel idea.
184. **Mr McDevitt:** It would be anarchy.
185. **Ms L Wilson:** That is not what I intended to say.
186. **Ms Stewart:** Although there may not be a statutory duty, and the Department and the Minister will have a view, as part of the school development planning process whereby schools have to produce a three-year development plan and review it every year, one indicator for effective performance is that a school has to show a commitment to engage with young people, and the inspectorate, under its inspection framework —
187. **Mr McNarry:** Do you think that that would save school closures if they threw it in now?
188. **Ms Stewart:** Pardon?
189. **Mr McNarry:** Do you think that that would save any school from being closed if they threw it in now?
190. **Ms Stewart:** Are you being serious?
191. **Mr McNarry:** I am being serious, because schools are closing in my constituency. I am being very serious, because I am dying to save them.
192. **Ms Stewart:** I do not know. The pupils' views should probably be considered and taken into account. I do not know whether that would make a difference. Schools must meet certain viability criteria.
193. **The Chairperson:** You referred to the effects and benefits of school councils. We received extensive and useful information from NICCY earlier. Is the Department aware of any research that has been conducted? Are some of the assertions in your briefing paper made on the basis of research?
194. **Ms L Wilson:** I do not know for sure. The inspectorate is clearly engaged in issues concerning young people and participation. We do not have data on school councils, and we do not have a structured evaluation of school councils in Northern Ireland, how well they operate and what they are achieving. That is important so that we can get an idea of what does and does not work.
195. **The Chairperson:** Linda and Eve, thank you very much. No doubt we will return to subject as the inquiry progresses.

## 18 April 2012

### Members present for all or part of the proceedings:

Mr Mervyn Storey (Chairperson)  
 Mr Danny Kinahan (Deputy Chairperson)  
 Ms Michaela Boyle  
 Mrs Jo-Anne Dobson  
 Mrs Brenda Hale  
 Mr Trevor Lunn  
 Miss Michelle McIlveen

### Witnesses:

Ms Gill Hassard *National Children's Bureau NI*  
 Ms Celine McStravick *Bureau NI*

196. **The Chairperson:** I welcome to the Committee Celine McStravick, who is the director of the National Children's Bureau (NCB) NI, and Gill Hassard, who is the participation officer. I am sorry for the delay, but we took a bit longer than expected to go through our correspondence. You are very welcome.

197. **Ms Celine McStravick (National Children's Bureau NI):** Thank you very much for inviting NCB to present on our Participation Support programme for schools. I commend the Committee for commencing the inquiry. Some of the research you have already developed has been incredibly useful and relevant. I know from talking to school principals that everyone is very happy that this has been picked up as an issue.

198. I want to speak for a few minutes on what NCB is because some of you may not be familiar with our work. I will then hand over to the very able Gill, our participation officer, who will talk in more detail about our programme in schools.

199. The National Children's Bureau in Northern Ireland is a department of a much larger organisation based in England. We specialise in policy-relevant research; practice development, which is working with anyone who works directly with children and young people; and participation. We always work from an evidence-based perspective and really

try to move policy forward and provide the best outcomes for children and young people.

200. We have been in Northern Ireland for nearly 15 years. We commenced our work here because we were given so many government commissions for research. We listed in the briefing paper some interesting research about young people's attitudes to and experiences of contact with people from different minority ethnic backgrounds. That was commissioned by the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister (OFMDFM), and I worked with several schools in doing that research.

201. What makes us different as well is that we always involve young people in any research we do. In particular, we train young people as researchers to work alongside us. We think that gives a particularly useful and rich perspective.

202. In Northern Ireland we also run Young NCB, which is one of our participation projects. That was set up a few years ago, and is a network of over 100 young people throughout Northern Ireland. We bring them together, and Gill runs an excellent capacity-building programme with them. That is about influencing policy as well and getting young voices heard on issues that affect them. They are developing very important life skills. I always say that, interestingly, they keep us on track as well. So, the staff of NCB always have to listen to our Young NCB colleagues and often have to do things that we may not be inclined to do in the first instance. Last year, Young NCB raised the issue of body image and its effect on young people, and did some very interesting research of its own.

203. We also run Building a Culture of Participation, which was a programme developed from research we did throughout England; namely, in residential care homes for children, and looked at how to change organisational structure

- and leadership in order to develop effective participation of children and young people.
204. We also run the Participation Support programme in schools. That is a very recent development for us in Northern Ireland. In and around 2009, when we were conducting research in schools and working very closely with staff and principals, we were often asked whether we could come and support them to improve participation. I have to say that my first inclination was to say that there was already lots of support out there, because we were aware that the education and library boards were doing some work and that the Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People (NICCY) had the Democra-School programme. In the first instance, I thought that I would be signposting schools to what already existed, but when we went to meet the Children's Commissioner and the education and library boards, we realised that there was no support for schools. There were toolkits for schools, but school principals were at a loss in respect of how to engage senior management teams (SMTs), in particular, in order to make them understand why participation was important. I suppose that is why we started looking at developing a very specialised and bespoke programme that, we thought, gathered all our skills on participation, any evidence that we had on what worked and any of our experience from elsewhere.
205. We also lead a partnership of organisations in England called Participation Works, which has an excellent website that has incredible resources all about improving participation. We use some of its work as well. When we started developing the curriculum for the Participation Support programme, we worked very closely with schools, because we wanted to make sure that it met their needs. I thought that it might be useful for you to know a bit more about what the programme looks and feels like and the experiences of schools, so I will now hand over to Gill, who will tell you a bit more about it.
206. **Ms Gill Hassard (National Children's Bureau NI):** I suppose that, first, we acknowledged that all schools will be different in respect of what training they need and maybe even what level of participation they already have. Initially, we meet principals and senior management teams to ask them some basic questions and look at the school size and population; it is basically a baseline audit of participation levels. It is often the case that those who have school councils feel that they need extra support to run them and that those who do not have them want to set them up. So, as soon as we have all that information, we go away and develop a workshop that we run with the pupils. For example, I was recently in a school where the student council was up and running, but the pupils had not actually received any training on how to run it, such as taking minutes, looking at ideas for getting the rest of the pupils' voices heard and communication between themselves and the senior management team. So, I was able to go away and develop a bespoke support package for that school and then go back in and do some training days with them. That was really to embed participation with the pupils.
207. As well as that, we use our time in the workshops to develop a school survey and an audit for the whole school population. The pupils develop questions and get the survey done, and then we analyse the results for them and come back with the answers about the levels of participation from the rest of the pupils in their school. They may think that a certain issue needs to be tackled in their school, so we will go away and then come back with the answers once we have analysed all the results for them.
208. The difference between our programme and a Democra-School-type resource is that we go in and do specific training with senior management teams and principals. As Celine talked about, that is through the Building a Culture of Participation training. What we have done is adapted that for schools. So, we go in and look at individual schools

- and deliver the programme. It involves a full day's training with the staff team. It is really about making staff in a school aware of the issues of participation. In my experience, it is really about negating the fear of giving pupils more control of the school. In my experience, that is one of the barriers to participation between teachers and pupils, and it is one of the elements of the training. They also do an audit of what they would like their school to look like — a wish list, if you will — and we then develop an action plan for them based on what comes out of the training day. We develop a participation action plan for the school based on the pupil surveys and staff feedback on the training. I am their contact, so if they have any questions as they go through the year or the action plan, I can provide one-to-one support. What we really do is leave them with the action plan and go back a year later to support them with any additional training needs that they may have and the development of staff and pupil needs.
209. That is really what the Participation Support programme looks like and how it is run, but it is really different in each school, because some schools want a lot of support, and I could be going back to them almost on a weekly basis, and other schools are happy to just have one big training day and go away with their action plan, and are quite happy to run with it themselves. That is the way that looks.
210. I just want to tell you a little bit about the funding. We were aware that there were no big pots of money available. We were talking to principals, who were saying that, ideally, they would love NCB to come in and do it, but they did not have any money for it. We have got two years' funding through Atlantic Philanthropies to do the Participation Support programme. We have done it in a couple of schools for free and they have been able to avail themselves of that service without us having to charge them for anything. That has been a fantastic resource for them. Obviously, the uptake is now going to be a lot higher because people will obviously want something if they can get it for nothing. The challenge that we then have is how we roll it out to all schools and enable everybody to have equal opportunities to access the training. That is one of the challenges that we are looking at around the funding and meeting the demand for the Participation Support programme in all schools.
211. Training needs to be an annual thing, because, if pupils are going to be moving on, and school councils often have annual elections, the school will need training each year; so, ideally we would like to go back in and train them on an annual basis. We also thought of the turnover of P7s and first years.
212. We only started that earlier last year, so we have been going quite well and the feedback has been fantastic from pupils and staff. The letter that I gave to you includes a few examples of the kind of things they said on their feedback questionnaires. I think that they are looking for more support from us, and, ideally, we would like to be in a place to give them that in the coming years.
213. **The Chairperson:** Celine, I was almost tempted to say that, given the work that NCB does, maybe it could go and help the Department of Education in relation to letting go of control. That might be useful.
214. **Ms McStravick:** No comment.
215. **The Chairperson:** I would not put you in that position.
216. Thank you for coming and thank you for the paper that you submitted and the work that you do. We set out on the school inquiry to see what the participation was, how schools organise their school councils, what level of school councils there are and what the variation is in what they achieve or whatever. You have picked up an issue in relation to staff, which, in a sense, is a key issue. If that has been the focus, how do you see the Department and the boards and what has been your interaction between those? Clearly, it will come down to whether the principal can afford to do the training, but, if that was set aside, do you believe that there

- is a rationale in the Department and the boards to encourage schools to go down that particular route?
217. **Ms McStravick:** It is a difficult question to answer, given the state of the boards at the moment, because they are obviously going through incredible change. We first went to meet a few advisers in different boards at the start of this journey, and I thought that the boards were there to offer support through their advisory role, particularly the Curriculum Advisory and Support Services (CASS), that there was already support there, and that maybe the problem was that signposting was not correct. However, when we went to meet two particular officers in the boards, it was very clear that they were at a loss as well. They had determined the demand, but they did not have the capacity either. Also, when you are going into a school to provide this particular support, it is good to be independent. The board goes into a school with its own experience of that school, whereas we can go in with a very independent perspective, as a critical friend, to listen to the young people. It is interesting that, when we go in, some schools will say that the school council is working fine and that it needs only a tiny bit of support, but, when we ask the school council, we might hear something very different and we can reflect that in our programme.
218. We met the Department at the start of the process. It wanted to highlight what we were doing, but, because at that stage we had not sourced any funding for it, the Department said that it could not roll it out to all schools as it would have raised expectations too much. We were happy enough. We knew that there were schools that needed it, so we just continued with it.
219. With regard to school councils and this kind of inquiry, there is an absolute imperative for the Department to show some policy leadership, but beyond school councils. School councils is one example, not the answer.
220. **The Chairperson:** That is my next question. After it, I will open the meeting to members' questions.
221. NCB has carried out work on a wider remit and, obviously, its reports on Northern Ireland have been very specific on certain issues. Is NCB convinced, in principle, of the need to have school councils and of their value? It is easy to get into the scenario whereby this is seen as a bit of tokenism on the part of the school or the system. They allow school councils, but they will not give up control. As an outsider, I am interested in your work as an organisation that has a very wide remit covering participation, development and research. It would be very useful for the Committee's inquiry to give empirical evidence that shows the value of this. In education, we always talk about added value. This is something that you, as an organisation, see as adding value and worth to the character of young people, the community, the school, and so on.
222. **Ms McStravick:** I absolutely agree. It is incredibly important for all schools to recognise the value of participation. I caution against saying that school councils are the answer, unless they are accompanied by quality standards and a good evaluation of what that means.
223. **The Chairperson:** The other mistake that could be made is that school councils are seen as the only vehicle for participation.
224. **Ms McStravick:** Absolutely. The school council is not the only vehicle, it is just one. In a school in which we worked very recently, we were brought in and the management said that they wanted to set up a school council. However, after we worked with the SMT for a day, it realised that there were so many other things that it could do to improve dialogue with the pupils which were much broader than a school council. Even the process of encouraging young people to get their voices heard in all sorts of ways would help the entire running of the school. Having a culture of participation — not wanting to steal the title of one of our training programmes — is really essential. It has all sorts of added value. There is no doubt about it. We talk to Young NCB members. When they are involved

- in their school and feel that they have some kind of role, they are more likely to attend, contribute, feel valued and all the other things that will come of it.
225. For me, it is really important that, if the systems are in place, if there are school councils, there should be a process to reflect on how they are doing. Schools that we go into may say they are absolutely fine, but there is no system there to ask young people how it is going for them and what they are getting out of it. It is not about the school; it is about the young people.
226. **The Chairperson:** The other area is pastoral care. That can be seen as something needing a very subjective approach. A school in my constituency has developed a postbox system that has worked very well throughout the school. A child can drop something in, putting their name to it or anonymously. That system has raised a considerable number of issues in that school. It has been to the benefit of the senior management team in addressing particular problems. In some cases, the senior management team was not even aware of what was going on.
227. **Ms McStravick:** That is a good example of how it is broader than just a council.
228. **The Chairperson:** That postbox system always comes back to my mind as another form. Regardless of whether it was under the guise of pastoral care, there was participation and a voice being heard, but in a different format than going and knocking on the principal's door.
229. **Ms McStravick:** For us, it is also important that the young people see that their voice is being heard, so we work with schools to show how you demonstrate that, if somebody has put something in a postbox, something has happened as a result. We need much more of that in schools. We can say that pupils suggested this, and as a result we did this or, as a result, we thought about it and did not do it because of this. So, it is not just that pupils keep giving their views and then wonder what is happening. All that wider process is part of our action plan when we are working with schools, and it is all about the culture. One school principal recently said to me that it helped them in bringing forward some disclosure from pupils on very sensitive issues because all of a sudden they felt that it was OK to kind of raise things. So, you are absolutely right.
230. **Ms Hassard:** As far as I am aware when I am working with pupils and talking with Young NCB members, school councils are often made up of pupils who are very popular, outspoken and confident. You are then not getting the voices of the other students, particularly the ethnic minority students. We touch upon that in the training for the teachers in that they may well have a student council but let us look at the processes of how the election happened, for example, and how we can hear from other pupils in the school who may have equally valid points to make. For example, Mervyn, you were talking about the postbox system being an excellent method. There are lots of other examples, and, in the training for the teachers, those are the kind of examples we give out on activities that they can do with their pupils to encourage everybody to be heard, not just 12 of the brightest and most popular students.
231. **Mr Lunn:** Thanks for your presentation. I can sense your enthusiasm for this, and I share it, but you seem to be having a similar problem to what we have had. When we trawled the various schools, the response rate we got was quite disappointing. I think it is fair to say we were a wee bit surprised by the low number of schools that had a school council. I see that you say in your funding paragraph that you managed to deliver the Participation Support programme to three schools and are in discussions with two more. Are you satisfied with that?
232. **Ms McStravick:** To put it in context: we really started it only last year. I am quite satisfied because, at the minute, we have funding for only one member of staff. Because of the way we work, I

- am more inclined to make sure we get it right. I am really satisfied with the work and quality of work we have delivered in those schools.
233. When we went to see the chairperson of the Post Primary Principals' Association, he said that he could give me a list. That is the last thing we need because we do not have the capacity to deliver to all schools. This was us trying to meet the demand in the way we could. It is always difficult trying to get the balance right. We specifically targeted schools in disadvantaged or neighbourhood renewal areas because we are particularly interested in improving inequalities for children's outcomes. So, we do not see ourselves working in every school in Northern Ireland by any means.
234. **Mr Lunn:** You talked about disadvantaged areas, and I see that you have worked with Lismore in Craigavon, which is in a difficult area but I think it is a terrific school.
235. **Ms McStravick:** It is excellent.
236. **Mr Lunn:** I am delighted to see that you have had some success there. Do you have a target for the number of schools you may become involved with over the three years that you have the funding?
237. **Ms McStravick:** About 10 schools a year was our ambition but, as Gill rightly said, our approach is to say that no two schools are the same. For example, one school, which I will not name, thought that it did not have any issues, and then, when we went in and delved deeper, the programme became more intense. I came out feeling incredibly proud of what we achieved but we did not expect that it would take so long, nor did the school. I am not sure whether we will meet that target. I could do with another 15 staff, Trevor, if you are interested.  
[Laughter.]
238. **Mr Lunn:** Or another £15,000. [Laughter.] Yeah, OK. Thanks very much.
239. **Mrs Dobson:** Thank you for your presentation. I was interested to read Celine's reference to 'Attitudes to Difference'. On Monday evening, I met a group of migrants from my constituency — mainly Polish nationals — who attend a church-led evening class to learn English. Obviously, their children will come up against specific barriers when it comes to education. How do you feel that the Department and boards help children of migrant workers?
240. **Ms McStravick:** That is an interesting question because, as well as the work that we presented on today, we run a project called Diversity in Action Northern Ireland. That project is a direct result of a piece of research that we did, 'Attitudes to Difference', which is the evidence perspective from which we often work. That research showed that children from ethnic minority backgrounds were relatively happy in school and that the real issue lay with the front line practitioners — the teachers, GPs and health visitors — who were struggling to meet the needs of such children and were at a loss. So, we run training for all those front line practitioners, particularly in cultural competency and myth busting, that helps them understand the real issues.
241. Gill will tell you about a specific programme for ethnic minority children in schools that she ran, which was interesting.
242. **Ms Hassard:** We worked with different groups of ethnic minority children to try to get their voices heard about how it feels for them to be new into the country. One of the outputs from the project was that they designed postcards containing their own faces and handwritten messages. We felt that that was a powerful way of allowing those young people to be seen. Research shows that those young people were often taking a step back and were not sure where to go to, for example, access services.
243. You said that they were going to an after-school class to learn English, which is fantastic. However, they need to have somebody in their school or community who knew about the class to signpost it. That is where the Diversity in Action project has helped; it is a hub

- for anyone who is working with young people in that sector to find out about things that are happening across the Province and signpost them.
244. **Mrs Dobson:** Co-ordinate it.
245. **Ms Hassard:** Co-ordinate, yes, absolutely.
246. **Mrs Dobson:** Do you think that school councils are a way in which all views, including those of people from minority backgrounds, can be taken on board by schools when making decisions? How do you think that you could make them totally representative? You said earlier that sometimes the most popular children are those on the school council. How do you get the minority groups involved?
247. **Ms McStravick:** It is also important to raise the capacity of children in schools. If you start with just an election process, you will get young people who are going to do it. So, as part of our programme, we run a series of workshops in a school and ask the teachers to select young people to attend those workshops who would not normally put themselves forward. By that I mean that they need capacity raising. Gill works with them on their presentation skills, how to get their point across, and so on. She makes it fun for them to see the potential, because they may not understand what it involves. We think that it is important to add that into the process. You cannot just expect young people to put themselves forward with no training, capacity-building or anything. As part of that, we always say that schools have to look at making sure that their council is representative of its population, whether it is ethnic minorities, male or female, or any of that.
248. **Mrs Dobson:** You would want that to happen to make sure that minority groups get their chance.
249. **Ms McStravick:** Yes. That is absolutely and utterly essential. We must make sure that, if that is not happening, specific support is put in for ethnic minority children to see why and to make sure that those barriers are broken down.
250. **Mrs Dobson:** Gill, you referred to feedback, and Trevor said that it included Lismore's. It is good to see that there is feedback from schools in Craigavon and Portadown in my constituency. You said that, following your research in 2009, you met school principals and boards. How receptive were they to your Participation Support programme?
251. **Ms McStravick:** It was interesting because all the school principals we met — through our research in other fields, we know quite a lot and have quite a good network of principals whose opinions we would seek — were incredibly receptive, to be honest. The only barrier was funding. They said they would love this and that it would fit in with their inset training, citizenship classes and learning for life and work. The principals said that it would fit everywhere; in fact, the Education and Training Inspectorate (ETI) inspects schools on it and it would be great for them to demonstrate that they had done something.
252. **Mrs Dobson:** So, you had no difficulty in engaging with schools across the boards, just with the issue about funding?
253. **Ms McStravick:** We have never had a difficulty. In particular, we are always insistent that we work with the senior management team as well as part of the process, because I think there is absolutely no point in working with the young people unless you have got the senior management team engaged in the process. We have never had a problem. They might start off saying that there is no way that they could give us a full day, but they have never actually refused yet.
254. **Mrs Dobson:** So, they are very receptive, apart from the funding?
255. **Ms McStravick:** Yes, they are looking for the support.
256. **Ms Hassard:** The experience we had of one school was that the staff said that they did not do participation so they really needed us to come and

help them, but, when we did our initial audit questionnaire and looked at the things that they did, they were actually doing quite a lot of good work, but they were not aware that that was what participation was. That is why we felt that the training with the senior management team at the start of that process was invaluable, because people bandy about the term “participation”, but they need to know what it actually means and how it looks. That is why a lot of the stuff that they were doing just needed more co-ordination. They did not have to do a lot of extra work to develop their plan and get their school working more effectively.

257. **Mr Kinahan:** I congratulate you. It is fascinating hearing how you are doing. I am intrigued to see where you think we should be going, because we feel that what you are doing should be part of every school and part of the whole curriculum. If you are only doing 10 schools a year, it will take a long time to get through everyone. Therefore, should we be trying to adopt what you are doing everywhere? That is one question. The other point I am intrigued about is that, when you do get strong children with strong opinions, how do you get around the point of building up their expectations so that they feel that they are going to get what they want, when, in fact, there are lots of good reasons as to why a school cannot or will not. I congratulate you on what you are doing.
258. **Ms McStravick:** I will take the first question about what is next and whether it should be regionalised. Obviously, I agree: all schools should be able to avail themselves of some participation support. Gill and I were just speaking outside about the fact that there are resources available, including Democra-School and other toolkits that are available, but I think that, to change the culture of an organisation, you need that investment and that one-to-one support. I do not think you can skip on to a checklist of what we should be doing, because, with the best will in the world, teachers are there to teach, and this is a different approach. I would

like to be able to target the schools that need it the most. That might be the schools that have lower attainment levels, because I think there is a link to raising pupil aspirations and then raising attainment levels and engagement in their school and community, so it would be nice to be able to define the top tier of schools that you would go to first. If it is Department of Education policy that that should be happening, it should also provide the funding and support to enable it to happen. It is not really fair to ask schools to do this without a support programme running alongside it.

259. That was an excellent question about managing expectations, because it is often one of the fears of the teachers that they are going to want to change the uniform, paint classrooms and all sorts, but, actually, when we work with the young people, it is not often the case. Part of us raising the capacity of the young people is to be very clear with them that, if they want to be listened to, they should be reasonable. It is about compromise and co-operation; it is not about ruling the school. We build that into the training, and it is essential from the start to be very clear about expectations.
260. **Ms Hassard:** As part of the training with pupils, we also talk about channels of communication. Quite often, the school has a student council and feels that that is the job done, but actually it is not being managed correctly, because pupils are having a say and their messages are going out, but there is no feedback. Maybe the staff are not saying that they cannot have a change of uniform because there is no money, or whatever it is that they are asking for that is maybe not going to happen. In our training, we are very clear that, as long as you can ask the right question and as long as the teachers can feedback their responses — negatively or positively; it does not really matter — their expectations are met because they have asked the question and had the answer. You cannot have everything that you ask for, and that is OK as long as

- young people are clear that they are not being ignored.
261. **Ms Boyle:** Jo-Anne has already asked some of my questions. I have only one or two, if that is OK. Thank you for the presentation. I know that most or all of your work involves the participation of children in the school environment, but I will sidetrack here a wee bit. Society is changing and children have attitudes. Some of the attitudes outside school affect them in school. Do you see any trends there? Do any issues come out as you talk to children? Do those issues affect them outside of school? Are there any conclusions on that?
262. You have a waiting list because of the demand, which is good. How long is that waiting list? You are based in the North. Can I ask, as I represent a rural area, whether you have been out in the west? Are you getting into the schools and tapping into schools in rural areas?
263. **Ms Hassard:** When you asked about the issues, what occurred to me was the issue of bullying. Pupils talked about how they had helped their school look at its bullying policy. Feeding into that is a fantastic starting point. They gave examples of many problems with pupils fighting outside schools or between schools in the same area. And when they came into the schools —
264. **Ms Boyle:** Text bullying?
265. **Ms Hassard:** Yes, and cyberbullying and all of those things. That is one example of how students in the school can look at an issue. They can decide that they are going to have to tackle an issue in some way. Is that what you were asking about?
266. **Ms McStravick:** Just to note, as well, that NCB hosts the Northern Ireland Anti-Bullying Forum —
267. **Ms Hassard:** Coincidentally.
268. **Ms McStravick:** Coincidentally. Just to add to the portfolio of what we are doing at the moment.
269. **Ms Boyle:** Do you do a follow-up? Do you re-evaluate by going back into the schools after you have been in them?
270. **Ms McStravick:** Yes, we do. That is really important. There is absolutely no point in us handing over an action plan without going back in. In particular, the survey that we do in the school gives a kind of baseline of what pupils think the levels of participation are, not what the staff thinks. It is what the pupils are saying. Then we go back, six months later, and do the same survey. We are then able to say to the senior management team that things have not changed, have changed or have got worse. You cannot argue with what the young people are saying. We have, obviously, had conversations where schools have told us that everything is fine. We reply, “Interestingly, our survey says that these pupils think that they are not being heard.” That encourages the school to change a bit more.
271. As for getting out and into rural areas, I am a rural girl myself so, yes, I welcome any opportunity to get out beyond Belfast. At the minute, interestingly enough, we are running another programme for the Big Lottery Fund and we are running some workshops about building a culture of participation for the voluntary sector up in Derry. Now that we have run the participation programme for a number of schools, we are much more confident that we have a very tight programme that we are able to roll out much wider. So my ambition — the answer — is yes. Try and stop me.
272. **Ms Boyle:** Have you ever been to any schools in Tyrone?
273. **Ms McStravick:** Not yet, but never say never.
274. **Ms Boyle:** Derry is not quite that rural.
275. **Ms McStravick:** Well, I am thinking of the north-west and some of our work with groups in Limavady.
276. **The Chairperson:** Do not forget Strabane.
277. **Ms McStravick:** How could I forget Strabane?

278. **Miss M McIlveen:** Chair, we are all very parochial.
279. **The Chairperson:** We are all very parochial, yes.
280. **Miss M McIlveen:** Thank you for your presentation. It is good to hear from you. I am just interested in the comment that you made in your introduction with respect to looked-after children and the work that you have done in some of the residential homes. I want to explore some of the benefits that you have found, what the young people have got out of that, how that has assisted them through school and whether you have seen any noticeable difference in attainment as a result of their being involved in participation networks.
281. **Ms McStravick:** The Building a Culture of Participation training was developed from baseline research which we did in residential care homes throughout England. We worked with a very broad cohort of staff through very different areas of the looked-after system. We identified what could happen differently in the care home to encourage participation and, as a result, interestingly, that research was quite fundamental in finding out how care homes could be run differently, down to very basic things like letting young people open the fridge themselves as opposed to having locks on them. These are things that we would take for granted, but staff are so used to them.
282. In Northern Ireland, participation with looked-after children is very ably led by the Voice of Young People in Care (VOYPIC). However, through Young NCB and our work with the Big Lottery Fund, we run an Engage programme, and some of the young people on that are in the looked-after system. Time and again, we have found those children particularly eager to feel that they have a voice and a place.
283. As part of our work with the Engage programme, we ran a residential with young people, all of whom said, “We never had the opportunity to do this. Nobody ever listens to us” — all the usual things that I am sure we all felt as teenagers. I think that it is particularly important for those young people to feel valued, something that is often missing for someone in the looked-after system. What they say should not only be listened to but treated as important and valid. We find that telling them what has happened as a result of what they said helps that process. We will be getting some young people involved in delivering some of the training that we do for the Big Lottery Fund, so that they are seen to be crucial parts of the whole area of training for the voluntary sector. As opposed to just being talked about, they will be involved in that.
284. I am not sure whether that answers your questions, Michelle, but —
285. **Miss M McIlveen:** I am looking at whether their participation has helped in confidence building and whether that has had any demonstrable achievement outcome or whether, just by getting involved, they are more inclined to get involved in the school system; their attendance improves, and so on. Have you done any research on that?
286. **Ms McStravick:** We have not done any research on that link between whether children in the looked-after system and voluntary participation had increased attainment. I suppose from our perspective, this is where I go back into saying that we cannot give you exact evidence of that. So I would feel uncomfortable quoting on that. However, hearsay and our ad hoc experience very clearly indicate that investing in any child and improving their participation and all such life skills will inspire them. A child who is inspired will aspire, and that is important. It is a difficult thing to get right, because it often takes a lot of time to invest and to do it properly.
287. **Ms Hassard:** A couple of looked-after young people who I worked with in the Engage programme said that they do not want to talk just about being looked after; they want to have a voice about being a teenager in Northern Ireland, being a male or female — whatever you would ask Joe Public about. That was

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an important thing that we encouraged. As Celine said, they will be on our training programme as co-facilitators in training for the Engage programme in September. We will be doing a capacity-building programme with them, so they will not just be talking about being looked after; they will have a voice in different ways. I think that that is important too.

288. **Miss M McIlveen:** How many young people are involved in Young NCB?
289. **Ms McStravick:** About 105 in the whole network, and there is an advisory group of about 12 or 13 at the last count. They come in for different reasons. It is not that we meet regularly with all of those young people. Gill works incredibly hard to make sure that other opportunities from across the voluntary sector are open to any members of Young NCB. Anything that we do to support organisations includes making sure that Young NCB does not become a problem in itself by becoming a closed group. We try to make it as open as possible.
290. **Miss M McIlveen:** Thank you.
291. **The Chairperson:** Celine and Gill, thank you very much. That has been very useful. I have one doubt that one area that has not been looked at is that of area planning, which schools are about to go into. The question was raised earlier about how we communicate all of this to parents. It would be an interesting piece of work to ask what young people think about a school merger proposed in area plans. That may be something that you may consider asking the Department to do. We will certainly be asking. However, Celine and Gill, thank you very much. Your input into the inquiry is very helpful. I have no doubt that we will be in contact with you again.
292. **Ms McStravick:** Thanks very much for giving us the opportunity to speak. If you need any more help or support, Gill will be able to help you.



## 18 April 2012

### Members present for all or part of the proceedings:

Mr Mervyn Storey (Chairperson)  
 Mr Danny Kinahan (Deputy Chairperson)  
 Ms Michaela Boyle  
 Mrs Jo-Anne Dobson  
 Mrs Brenda Hale  
 Miss Michelle McIlveen

### Witnesses:

Ms Nicole Breslin *Save the Children*  
 Ms Niamh McGough  
 Ms Marie McGrellis

293. **The Chairperson:** Nicole, Marie and Niamh, you are very welcome. Our apologies for keeping you. When you were in earlier, we identified you as the ambassadors. Thank you for coming. Feel completely at ease; you are among friends. We have not had ambassadors here before, so we are very honoured to have you. Nicole, are you going to lead off?

294. **Ms Nicole Breslin (Save the Children):** No. *[Laughter.]*

295. **The Chairperson:** I will try again. Marie, you are going to lead off.

296. **Ms Marie McGrellis (Save the Children):** Yes. We are ambassadors for Save the Children, and we are here representing the 20 young people from Belfast and Derry who make up our group. As ambassadors for Save the Children, we work with the charity to come up with issues that are important to us and our communities. We have tried to get a campaign going. In 2010, we had our first End Child Poverty summit, which raised awareness of the problem of child poverty in Northern Ireland. In 2011, we launched our campaign, Education is the Key to Break the Cycle of Poverty, because we believe that more needs to be done to help children succeed in school. That led to our second summit, which was attended by two members of the Committee: Conall McDevitt; and

Daithí McKay. We put forward our cause to the Assembly and a motion was tabled. We also met John O'Dowd, the Education Minister. We are here today to explain why school councils are an important way for children and young people to have their say.

297. **Ms Breslin:** I am going to talk about examples of student councils in our schools. When we shared our personal experiences, we discovered that school councils work very differently in each school. Some schools have different names for their student councils. For example, the pupils of St Cecilia's College in Derry refer to their council as the "leadership team". Another name we came across was the "student forum".

298. Another ambassador, who is not here today, said that her primary school had a student council and that those on the council had to draw up manifestoes and be elected by their fellow classmates. We then discovered that her secondary school, St Colm's High School, Belfast, does not have a student council.

299. Another example is St Columb's College in Derry. The members of its school council are elected after each boy stands up in front of their class and gives a speech about why they want to be on the council. The majority normally vote for whoever is funniest rather than who is level-headed.

300. **The Chairperson:** I was going to say that it is the same in politics. *[Laughter.]* Nothing really changes.

301. **Ms Breslin:** I will give you a positive example of how its student council worked. It raised an issue about the state of the bathrooms in the school, which the staff took on board. The toilets were then completely refurbished, and people were hired to clean them daily. So that worked really well for them. A more negative example would be from my own school, Thornhill College in Derry, an

- all-girls' grammar school. A statue was built in front of our school last year. It was absolutely hideous; it is awful.
302. **The Chairperson:** You are on record now here. Be careful. *[Laughter.]*
303. **Ms Breslin:** It cost a lot of money and we were not asked about it as students. We know as students that we have a right to some say, no matter how small, but we had no idea. So, they built the statue anyway. This year is my final year at Thornhill. Normally, every two years we have a school musical that students from Thornhill and other schools would take part in but this year we were not able to fund it. It is the first time in 15 years that it has fallen through because our school did not have the money.
304. Another example is that I am in my school senior basketball team and we were not able to enter the team in the league this year because we did not have the money. Obviously, that was heartbreaking for me and my fellow players. That is an example of how we did not have a say in how that money could have potentially been better spent. Those are our examples.
305. **Ms McGough:** When we all as ambassadors got together for a meeting, we discussed the role of school councils and the purpose of this inquiry, and we thought we should share some of our ideas on how we thought they could be improved.
306. First of all, they should involve direct contact with the principal and senior members of staff. I go to Thornhill College as well, and we work with the politics teacher, which is good because he knows what he is talking about when it comes to politics, but he does not have the influence or authority to make actual changes in the school. So the school council is more for show than anything else.
307. For school councils to be accountable, other students need to know what is going on. In our school, we do not even know what the school council is doing. I find out through friends but there are no regular updates. Students not on the school council should have a chance to put forward their opinions as well, even if they are not elected.
308. There should be more support from all teachers because, like I said, school councils are for show in most places. If there is more support from the teachers, other students may take more of an interest in it rather than thinking there is no real point if nobody is going to support them through it. School councils should be representative of school pupils, so there should be representatives from every year group because a lot may be just sixth formers or junior school, who do not have exams to worry about.
309. Before elections, pupils should be informed of what a school council is because before we started working with this for Save the Children, I did not know what a school council was or what it was supposed to do. There are also a lot of misconceptions about what school councils do. If there were a clear definition put forward before elections in schools, it could help people to put themselves forward as members.
310. Finally, school council representatives from each school should meet with other schools and share the experiences of what they have been doing in their own school, so they can really share ideas and fix their own schools.
311. **The Chairperson:** On that last point, Niamh, we went to Limavady, which is not that far away from yourselves, and saw a very good example of not only one school but a number of schools because, geographically, they are very close. They have come together and had some very good ideas on things that they had brought forward. It would be useful and worthwhile for you to have a discussion with them because you are not that far away from each other.
312. That point you make in relation to what is happening in other schools is a vital point. I just made the comment that it is like a NILGA for school councils because obviously that is a federation or overarching body.

313. **Mr Kinahan:** I found that fascinating, particularly when you mentioned about not having enough funding for netball. That is an issue that is bigger than the school, and led me to exactly what Michelle was saying earlier. We need a way of gathering the information at a higher level to know that if there is a specific issue such as that for netball in a whole group of schools, we need to find a way of getting at the funding. We do need a system of getting the information that is not just for that school but for that area. I found that absolutely fascinating, so keep up the good work.
314. **Ms Boyle:** Thank you for your presentation. There is nothing like hearing it from the horse's mouth. Thank you for being very open and honest. My questions are similar to the ones I asked after the previous presentation. You are very confident young women. How do you, within the confines of your own schools, reach out to young people, boys and girls, who are not as confident, or young people with learning difficulties? How do you bring them on board within the school environment to get onto your council? I am sure that you would encourage them to be part of your council. Is that a job that you do within your own school councils?
315. Danny already mentioned netball, which I was going to mention as well. I came from an all-girls school and I found it very difficult. There is very little promotion of girls' sports, even within an all-girls school. In the main, it is normally soccer, Gaelic and rugby. You are quite right to point out netball, and Michelle mentioned it earlier. There is a lack of promotion around that. Keep up the good work in trying to get that on the curriculum. Thank you for your presentation.
316. **The Chairperson:** I notice that Kevin was not able to make it today.
317. **Ms McGrellis:** Yes, he is also in his final year at school and he could not make it for class reasons.
318. **Ms Boyle:** I want to get your opinion, if you have one — I have an opinion on it — on the two months off on school holidays in the summer. Do you have an opinion on that? Do you think it is too long? *[Laughter.]*
319. **The Chairperson:** We will answer as politicians as well.
320. **Ms McGrellis:** I am a first year at the University of Ulster and, at the moment, my holidays are for around four months. For older students, I think two months is fine, because a lot of them start to find jobs, and that helps. I also have a younger brother, and, during the summer holidays, my mum tries to keep him occupied. It is the same with younger cousins. Because we are such a close family, everybody pitches in, but, in my opinion, I think that it is fine, because the two months go by pretty quickly. I know that, for some families, it is hard to keep younger children occupied, but I still think it is good, because you are in school all the time. I know that you have the mid-term breaks and Christmas holidays, but when can kids be kids?
321. **Ms Breslin:** Our lives revolve around school, essentially. It is a good length of time; I would not shorten it.
322. **The Chairperson:** A bigger issue — then we will ask Michaela what her opinion is — is that of schools having different times off. I have three children at three different schools, and they were all off at different times. Now, I have a big issue with my eldest girl, who is at the University of Ulster, with the amount of time that she is not there. Sometimes, she is there for three hours a day. I have a bigger issue with the time that they spend at university, but there is an issue about standard set times for holidays, because that causes all sorts of problems for parents when one child is at school and another is not at school. That is a huge issue. That would be a bigger issue to resolve than the length of the holidays.
323. **Ms McGrellis:** In my family, we all go to different schools, and it is a problem. It would be a lot easier just to keep the holidays at the same time.

324. **The Chairperson:** Yes. Teacher relief time and all that kicks in as well.
325. **Mrs Hale:** Thank you for coming. I apologise: I have a sore throat so I am whispering. It is really to go back to communication channels between school councils, senior management teams and boards of governors. Might it help to have a nominated person who would access those individuals or management groups for you? Do you think that that would help validate the school councils, so that it felt that its voice was being heard at the board of governors and SMT level?
326. **Ms Breslin:** Yes. I was on our school's student council when I was 14, 15 and 16. Those were the years when I was on it. As Niamh said earlier, it was basically for show. I joined the council thinking that I would be able to play a part in making policies and do some sort of decision-making, but that was not the case. I think it would definitely help if, within the council, one person was nominated and they had more of an address, more of a voice. Then it would work a lot better, and that person could inform the rest of the council.
327. **Mrs Hale:** Would it help if schools that have councils build the council into the pastoral care ethos, or the school ethos, so that the school council would have a nominated rep, who would move between the main bodies?
328. **Ms Breslin:** Yes.
329. **Mrs Dobson:** Thank you for your presentation. It was very refreshing to hear directly from you. Most of my questions have already been answered. However, I would like to ask you whether you think that school councils should be compulsory across primary and post-primary education? Do you think they would be more effective if they were compulsory and that their views would be given wider recognition by boards of governors or principals?
330. **Ms Breslin:** In secondary schools, yes, they should be compulsory. I thought that they were, but when we discussed it as a group, we found out that they were not.
331. **Mrs Dobson:** You talked about sharing ideas. If they were all compulsory, it might be easier to share ideas. Niamh, or maybe it was Nicole, said that she discovered, when she went to the next school, that some schools did not have a school council established. So if they were compulsory, it would be easier to share those ideas.
332. **Ms Breslin:** Yes, it would be a good way of communicating. If a secondary school's council is not operating quite as well, then it could take advice from other councils.
333. **Mrs Dobson:** It would make it easier to share ideas. Do you all feel that?
334. **Ms McGrellis:** Yes, definitely. In our school council we were given separate classes, in a way, including in citizenship and things like that. They were geared towards school councils. We always thought that there was a school council every year. There may have been some years when it was not as consistent as others, or when there was not as much involvement. However, that was more due to the pupils, who maybe were not as confident as in other years. In my school, we had a leadership team: that was mostly composed of the school council members but we had younger students who were on the council as well. It was more the sixth-years who led it, and we listened. In secondary schools, school councils should be compulsory because you are at that age when you want to speak out more for yourself. You want to know how to do it.
335. **Mrs Dobson:** It gives you the opportunity.
336. **Ms McGrellis:** Yes. It gives you the opportunity. For myself, I know that, if I had not participated, I would not be able to speak in places like this.
337. **Mrs Dobson:** It helps your confidence in every aspect.
338. **Ms Breslin:** Yes. There are more benefits if it is compulsory.

339. **Mrs Dobson:** Nicole, did you say that you had a school council in your primary school?
340. **Ms Breslin:** It was another girl; another ambassador. She had one in her primary school.
341. **Mrs Dobson:** What do you think is the best way to get the message out to other pupils in other councils? Should it be done orally, in writing, by PowerPoint, Facebook, or Twitter? How would you like to see information and knowledge shared among schools?
342. **Ms Breslin:** It is best done face-to-face, in honesty.
343. **Mrs Dobson:** By meeting other pupils.
344. **Ms Breslin:** Yes. By meeting every six months or so.
345. **Mrs Dobson:** Direct contact is ultimately the best?
346. **Ms McGough:** Yes. It makes people listen to you. If it is on Facebook or something, you do not have to take it on. Face-to-face is best.
347. **Ms McGrellis:** If it comes from pupils, rather than teachers, it is best. For a lot of things, teachers say you have to join this and do that. A lot of people will think we are only doing this because we have to.
348. **Mrs Dobson:** Because it has been forced on you.
349. **Ms McGrellis:** It is better if it comes from a student. For me, it was a lot to do with the pupils I was listening to who said that it was a good opportunity. We made a presentation to other pupils encouraging them to join, so I know that that helped me, and I hope that it helped them as well.
350. **Mrs Dobson:** They saw how much you were getting out of it, which encouraged other pupils.
351. **The Chairperson:** You are ambassadors for Save the Children. Does that add value, in that you have more opportunities? If you did not have that role, and stayed in your own school councils, would you have the same opportunities?
352. **Ms Breslin:** No.
353. **The Chairperson:** Clearly, then, there is a role for other outside organisations to interact with schools, which is vital.
354. **Ms McGrellis:** The three of us were on the Foyle Youth Council in Derry when Save the Children came in and worked with us, which is how we got involved with Save the Children. We carried on ourselves, and they asked whether we wanted to work as ambassadors. We put our names forward and continued to work for them. If the school councils got more involved and got more outside organisations to come in, a lot more opportunities would be available to pupils.
355. **The Chairperson:** There is also the big issue of social media, which we will want to think about, because schools discourage it for obvious reasons, such as protection. Even in Derry today, the police have issued warnings about things on social networks. However, it is valuable to young people if it is used constructively to encourage participation in school councils, and so on. That is an element of our inquiry that we may need to comment on, and I will put that down as a marker for us.
356. **Ms McGrellis:** We use Facebook a lot to communicate what we have been doing as ambassadors in Belfast and Derry. We use it constructively and properly.
357. **The Chairperson:** We would be very interested in something like that coming back to us, which would be very useful.
358. **Miss M McIlveen:** Thank you for coming today; it has been very interesting to hear from you. The point has been made, and it is a good one, that you need to go much further afield, rather than being insular in your own school council. The Chair mentioned NILGA; I know from personal experience, when I served on Ards Borough Council and got involved with NILGA, that it opened up other opportunities to get involved in outside bodies. For me, to build my confidence and hear opinions on various

- things and bring them back was critical for my own development, so I can see how that has worked for you.
359. Nicole, you mentioned one of the examples from one of the schools in relation to the selection process. You said, essentially, that the class comedian, or the person with the best personality on the day, got selected, perhaps, rather than the person with the best background or feel for the issues. There is also a problem for children who put themselves up for selection but are not elected. There is, perhaps, a feeling of failure. How can that be addressed? What are the best options for conducting a selection process or elections?
360. **Ms Breslin:** Kevin is not here today, but that is how the council was elected in his school. In my school, we had a poll in which we wrote a name on a piece of paper and put it in a box, and the votes were counted. That worked, in my form class anyway. I was selected as deputy and another girl was selected as the representative for our form class. We wanted to do it and our class knew that we wanted to do it. Maybe people could put their names forward before they say anything to their class, and then have a class discussion about it so that other people could nominate members of their class who they think would be good and should do it. They could discuss, as a group, who would be best for it. I think that would work.
361. **Miss M McIlveen:** Have you found that the same people each year get nominated or do some schools say that if you have done it for one year, you cannot do it another? So there is a rotation, which gives others the opportunity to be involved, rather than the person elected in form 1 remaining there until upper sixth.
362. **Ms Breslin:** It would be better that way. That is not how it is done in our school, but that would definitely be a better way. We had elections in our school in year 9 and then we just did not hold any more. When a group was needed from our school, we would ask student council members if they fancied having a day out at the Millennium Forum, the City Hotel or wherever.
363. **Miss M McIlveen:** So it is the same people all the time who get the opportunities, as opposed to sharing them?
364. **Ms Breslin:** Yes. So, as I say, it is the same people and others are kind of neglected in the whole thing. But that other way would definitely be better.
365. **The Chairperson:** Those are things that we need to think about in making recommendations or reaching conclusions. The other valuable point that you mentioned was that it is called different things in different places. Is “school council” the most appropriate term? Invariably, in Northern Ireland, and any country, the terminology will determine how people respond and react. The minute that you use the word “council”, they all think Derry Council, Limavady Council, Strabane Council, or whatever. They have an idea — good or ill — depending on their view of a particular local authority, and they just see that as being what all this is about. It may be better to call it a “leadership team” or something else. Even views on differing terminology would be useful, because what is used encourages or discourages. That was a valuable point that you made.
366. **Ms McGrellis:** Our school had a council and the leadership team, because our leadership team was more to do with prefects. So it was more to do with our head girl and deputy head girls and their prefects. The school council is separate. However, because our school had just opened a new building, our leadership team took on that role as we tried to get everything set up. We tried our best at it, and I think that we succeeded in making it a good year for that. I think that the terminology is something to think about as well.
367. **The Chairperson:** To conclude, the other point is the structure. Who sits on the school’s senior management team? Do any pupils sit on it? Who sits on the school council? Do any teachers sit

on it? We have discussed the issue of whether boards of governors ever get involved in school councils. Do pupils even know who the governors are or the role that their board plays? There is all of that. Does the board of governors know what is happening and what they are supposed to be doing?

368. All sorts of issues are raised that we want to try to highlight in a report that we can send to schools. We can say that we have carried out this inquiry and we hope that the report will help in the whole participative process. Thank you very much for coming. We wish you well as ambassadors for Save the Children.





Northern Ireland  
Assembly

Appendix 3

# Research Papers





Northern Ireland  
Assembly

## Research and Library Service Research Paper

August 2011

NIAR 397-11

**Caroline Perry, Research Officer**

# School councils

This paper considers the potential benefits of school councils, issues and challenges around their effective implementation, and the factors and attributes of successful councils. It finds that while the effectiveness of school councils varies, they have the potential to deliver positive outcomes for students and schools. Their effectiveness depends on a number of factors, for example, the extent to which they are situated within wider democratic structures and practices.

Research and Information Service briefings are compiled for the benefit of MLAs and their support staff. Authors are available to discuss the contents of these papers with Members and their staff but cannot advise members of the general public. We do, however, welcome written evidence that relate to our papers and these should be sent to the Research and Information Service, Northern Ireland Assembly, Room 139, Parliament Buildings, Belfast BT4 3XX or e-mailed to [RLS@niassembly.gov.uk](mailto:RLS@niassembly.gov.uk)

## Key Points

- A school council is a group of pupils within a school elected by their peers to represent them and their views;
- The Department of Education states that it is keen to support all schools to establish a council using the Democra School programme which aims to support the practice of democracy in the school environment;
- Evidence suggests that school councils vary widely in their effectiveness;
- However, it is thought that they have the potential to have positive outcomes for students and for schools, including increased self-confidence and learning outcomes for pupils; increased participation in school life; improvements in discipline and behaviour; and improved school ethos;
- School councils can face a number of issues, for example a lack of clarity on the council's purpose, inadequate engagement from staff and ensuring representation of pupils of different ages, abilities, disabilities and backgrounds;
- For councils to be successful, the literature suggests that they must deal with matters central to daily life in school and be situated within wider structures and practices that support participation;
- As such, 'democratic schools' should demonstrate core values including cooperation, mutual respect and a commitment to diversity and equity;
- Areas for consideration could include undertaking a baseline analysis of the number of school councils in Northern Ireland and exploring the views and experiences of participants;
- In addition, other areas that could be explored include:
  - The influence and effectiveness of school councils in NI;
  - The extent to which schools have an ethos that supports participation;
  - The availability, form and content of training for pupils and teachers involved in councils;
  - The extent to which councils are representative; and
  - How, if at all, school councils could become more successful, including the role of students, schools and wider educational stakeholders in this.

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# Executive Summary

## **Background and policy context**

A school council is a group of pupils within a school elected by their peers to represent them and their views. In Northern Ireland, the Department of Education (the Department) states that it is keen to support all schools to establish a council using the Democra School programme, which has been designed by the Commissioner for Children and Young People (NICCY), and aims to support the practice of democracy in the school environment.

A number of policies and pieces of legislation highlight the importance of children and young people having a right to have their opinions heard when adults are making a decision that affects them. These include Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, the Education and Libraries (Northern Ireland) Order 2003 and the Department's guidance on school development planning.

## **Potential impacts and benefits**

School councils are known to vary widely in their effectiveness. However, there is agreement in the literature that they have the potential to have positive outcomes for students and for schools. Among the key potential benefits are the following:

- Increased self-confidence and learning outcomes for pupils;
- Increased participation in school life and improved communication between pupils and teachers;
- Improvements in discipline and behaviour; and
- Improvements in school ethos.

## **Issues and challenges**

A number of issues and challenges have been identified in previous research that have the potential to have an impact on the efficacy of school councils. These centre around a lack of clarity about the purpose of the council, insufficient engagement or 'buy in' from staff, and maintaining momentum once the council is established. Other important issues include the provision of training to support pupils and staff and ensuring representation on the council of pupils of different ages, abilities, disabilities and backgrounds.

## **Factors and attributes for effective school councils**

The literature highlights variation in the effectiveness of individual school councils, and links this to a number of factors that should be in place for a council to be successful. Importantly, the school council must have influence in matters that are central to daily life in school, for example, school policies and term planning, rather than involvement in 'tokenistic' activities. In addition, it should have a formal constitution setting out how the council is to be run, including detailing specific roles and responsibilities.

Other important factors that have been identified in this regard include ensuring that the council is whole-school, rather than simply class- or year-based, and making sure that it is located within wider structures and practices that support pupil participation. In this context, truly 'democratic schools' should demonstrate values including cooperation, mutual respect, justice and a commitment to diversity and equity.

## **Conclusion**

It is evident that school councils have the potential to have positive outcomes for pupils and for schools. However, in order to do this, it is crucial that they are situated within wider practices that promote pupil participation in schools, and that they deal with issues relevant to the daily life of students.

Areas for consideration could include undertaking a baseline analysis of the number of school councils in Northern Ireland, and exploring the views and experiences of pupils, teachers and principals who have been involved in councils. Particular consideration could be given to the influence and effectiveness of school councils in Northern Ireland; the extent to which schools have a wider ethos supporting participation; the availability of training to participants; and the extent to which councils are representative. Finally, it may be useful to consider how, if at all, school councils could become more effective, and the role of councillors, schools and wider educational stakeholders in this.

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- 1 Introduction
- 2 Policy context
- 3 Potential impacts and benefits of school councils
- 4 Issues and challenges around school councils
- 5 Factors and attributes of successful school councils
- 6 UK Parliament school council awards
- 7 Conclusion

# 1 Introduction

A school council is a group of pupils within a school elected by their peers to represent them and their views. A school council may be a student's first experience of democratic values and practices.<sup>1</sup>

The Department of Education (the Department) is keen to support all schools in Northern Ireland to establish a school council using the Democra School programme, designed by the Commissioner for Children and Young People (NICCY). This programme aims to support and encourage the development of meaningful school councils and the practice of democracy in the school environment.<sup>2</sup>

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1 Parliament Education Service (2010) The Year Book 2009-2010 Celebrating school councils and their achievements  
2 Democra School – School Councils [online] Available at: <http://www.deni.gov.uk/index/85-schools/5-school-management/school-councils-2.htm>

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## 2 Policy context

School councils align with a number of policies and pieces of legislation relating to young people's participation in society and in the decisions that affect their lives. The key areas are outlined in the following table.

**Table 1: Policies and legislation that school councils align to**

Policy/ legislation	
Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child	States that when adults are making decisions that affect children, children have a right to say what they think and have their views taken into account
Education and Libraries (Northern Ireland) Order 2003	Highlights the importance of consultation with pupils, stating that Boards of Governors must listen to the opinions of pupils when making or revising policies
Revised curriculum <sup>3</sup>	Young people should be provided with opportunities to investigate democracy and participate in school and society
Departmental guidance on school development planning <sup>2</sup>	States that the individual or group leading the preparation of the School Development Plan must consult with pupils and parents
Strategy for Children and Young People in NI 2006-2016	An underpinning value is that children and young people should be active participants in society

### Statutory or voluntary?

There have been calls for school councils to be made a statutory requirement for schools, for example as recommended by the Select Committee on Education and Skills in its review of citizenship education in 2006-07. Some authors suggest that making councils compulsory would underline the importance the Government gives to the role of citizenship in schools.<sup>5</sup> However, the Government's response to the Select Committee report highlighted a preference for schools to retain flexibility in how they choose to engage pupils.<sup>6</sup>

School councils have been compulsory in all primary, secondary and special schools in Wales since 2006. However, a report from the Welsh inspectorate in 2008 found that schools still needed to engage all pupils more broadly in decisions about teaching and learning. It found that in a few cases, pupils had been involved in the appointment of senior members of staff, influencing how money is spent and developing policies such as recycling and anti-bullying.<sup>7</sup>

NICCY advocates a more consensual approach, whereby everyone within the school community agrees that a council is important, and values and supports its establishment. The Democra School literature states that there needs to be a sense of ownership from the whole school so that the council can draw support from pupils and staff.<sup>8</sup>

3 The Education (Curriculum Minimum Content) Order (Northern Ireland) 2007 UK: The Stationery Office

4 Department of Education (2010) School Development Planning Bangor: DE

5 Inman, S. and Burke, H. (2002) School councils: an apprenticeship in democracy? London: Association of Teachers and Lecturer, Whitty, G. and Wisby, E. (2007) Real Decision Making? School Councils in Action London: Institute of Education

6 House of Commons Education and Skills Committee (2007) Citizenship Education: Government Response to the Committee's Second Report of Session 2006-07 London: The Stationery Office

7 "Welsh inspectorate criticises pupil engagement in schools" (2008) Education Issue 300 p.4

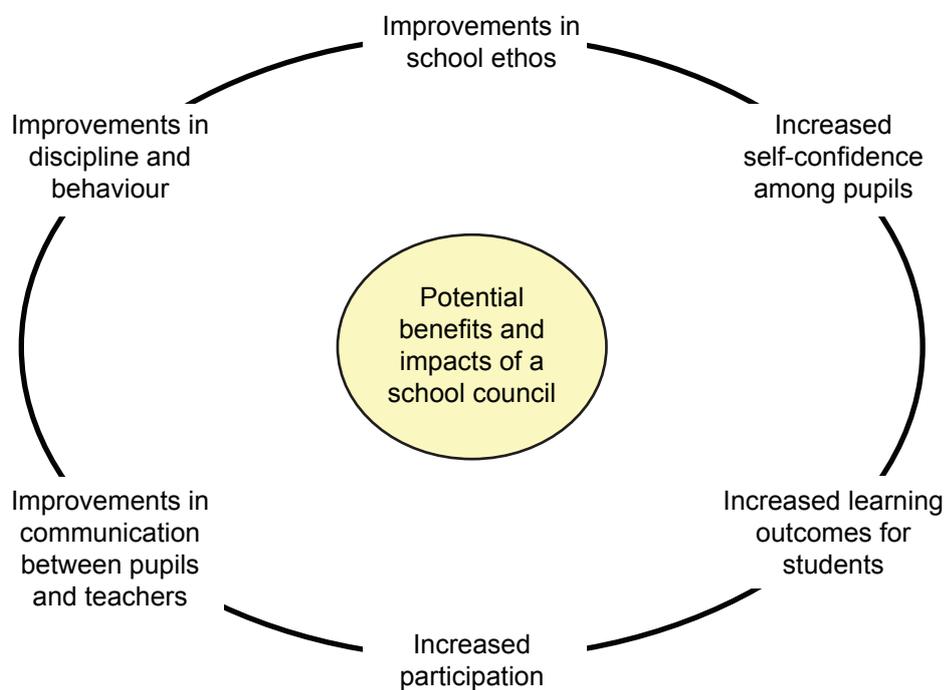
8 Democra School – School Councils [online] Available at: <http://www.deni.gov.uk/index/85-schools/5-school-management/school-councils-2.htm>

### 3 Potential impacts and benefits of school councils

The literature highlights a number of key benefits and potential outcomes for schools and pupils that have a school council. Overall, they are thought to help and improve many aspects of school life, and one author suggests that there is almost no part of school life which school councils do not have the potential to improve.<sup>9</sup>

However, individual school councils are known to vary greatly in their effectiveness.<sup>10</sup> One study examining the impact of school councils found that they had weak levels of influence on both schools and classrooms. Nonetheless it concluded that, under certain conditions, councils can be a positive, if moderate, force for school and classroom change.<sup>11</sup> The key potential benefits of councils highlighted in the literature are outlined in Figure 1 and considered in more detail in the subsequent paragraphs.

**Figure 1: Key benefits and impacts of having an effective school council**



#### **Increased self-confidence among pupils**

The evidence points to improvements in self-confidence for students who take part in school councils. This is thought to be a result of getting recognition for good work, seeing suggestions being carried out, having their opinions respected, acting as advocates and having a greater sense of pride or ownership. Collaborative working was also thought to play a role in increasing self-esteem.<sup>12</sup>

9 Rowe, D. (2003) *The Business of School Councils: An investigation into democracy in schools* London: Citizenship Foundation

10 Mould, D. (2011) "The Requirements of Representation" *Ethos* Vol. 19, No. 1

11 Parker, K., Leithwood, K. (2000) "School Councils' Influence on School and Classroom Practice" *Peabody Journal of Education*, 75, pp. 37-65 Ontario

12 Davies, L., Yamashita, H. (2007) *School Councils – School Improvement. The London Secondary School Councils Action Research Project* University of Birmingham

A study of school councils in special schools found increased self-confidence among students and improved relationships with staff. This had, in turn, led to pupils being more likely to ask questions or ask for help if they were having trouble understanding in class.<sup>13</sup>

### **Increased learning outcomes for students**

Evidence suggests that student councillors often demonstrate improved learning outcomes, particularly around communication skills, experience of meetings, leadership, political grounding and taking increased responsibility. In terms of grounding in democratic processes, students can learn how to ask others' views, be a representative, argue a point of view and take different things into account in decision making.<sup>14</sup>

### **Increased participation**

School councils have been found to increase participation in school life, leading to a sense of greater responsibility and ownership.<sup>15</sup> They can facilitate pupil involvement in decisions about and implementation of policies and practices, supporting what is often referred to as the 'student voice'. A representative school council therefore has the potential to involve students in important decisions and lead to greater participation in school life.<sup>16</sup>

### **Improvements in communication between pupils and teachers**

Linked to increased participation in school life, a number of studies have found that school councils can also result in improved communication between students and teachers. In some cases, a school council can be viewed as a vehicle for facilitating this communication and to contribute to the smooth running of the school.<sup>17</sup>

### **Improvements in discipline and behaviour**

The literature suggests that school councils can play a role in improving behaviour in schools. One innovative approach within the London Secondary School Councils Action Research Project involved students taking part in teaching and learning committees observing lessons and providing feedback to teachers on various aspects of teaching. In addition, a behaviour sub-council identified areas of classroom disruption and then worked directly with specific disruptive students to improve behaviour, with positive results.<sup>18</sup>

### **Improvements in school ethos**

Many advantages of school councils in relation to school ethos have been reported in the literature. For example, they are thought to promote a positive school atmosphere and a caring school environment that is supportive and inclusive.<sup>19</sup> One report states that schools must be willing to change their ethos and structures if necessary in order to support the establishment of credible school councils.<sup>20</sup>

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- 13 Simon, J. and Stone, J. (2005) *School Councils for All: Including disabled pupils and pupils with special educational needs* London: School Councils UK
- 14 Taylor, M. and Johnson, R. (2002) *School councils: their role in citizenship and personal and social education* Slough: NFER
- 15 Davies, L., Yamashita, H. (2007) *School Councils – School Improvement. The London Secondary School Councils Action Research Project* University of Birmingham
- 16 Mould, D. (2011) "The Requirements of Representation" *Ethos* Vol. 19, No. 1
- 17 Keogh, A.F., Whyte, J. (2005) *Second Level Student Councils in Ireland: A study of enablers, barriers and supports* Dublin: The Stationery Office
- 18 Davies, L., Yamashita, H. (2007) *School Councils – School Improvement. The London Secondary School Councils Action Research Project* University of Birmingham
- 19 Keogh, A.F., Whyte, J. (2005) *Second Level Student Councils in Ireland: A study of enablers, barriers and supports* Dublin: The Stationery Office
- 20 Whitty, G. and Wisby, E. (2007) *Real Decision Making? School Councils in Action* London: Institute of Education
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## 4 Issues and challenges around school councils

The research has also identified a number of potential issues and challenges around establishing an effective school council. These include the following:

- Lack of clarity around the purpose of the council;
- Lack of staff engagement with the school council;
- The provision of training to enable pupils to chair and participate in meetings effectively;
- Ensuring that pupils are representative of different ages, abilities, disabilities and socio-economic backgrounds;
- Maintaining momentum; and
- Other issues such as a lack of organisation, excessive bureaucracy or a lack of effective leadership.

### **Lack of clarity around the purpose of the council**

Research has shown that in some cases, there is a weak interpretation or understanding of the purpose of the school council. Indeed, the importance of clarifying the purpose of a school council has been highlighted in the literature. For example, concerns have been raised that schools will become preoccupied with the processes around a school council rather than its purpose.<sup>21</sup>

Democra School guidance states that pupils must be clear about what they want to achieve before attempting to set up a school council, and have prepared an action plan. The guidance also states that it is vital to have a set of clear guidelines and rules in a single document, usually called a constitution, providing a framework for how the council should be run. This framework should ensure that the council is educational, democratic, open and transparent and worthwhile.<sup>22</sup>

### **Lack of staff engagement**

Some studies have found a lack of staff involvement in the school council, whereby the principal played a significant role in its running, but other staff remained marginal to its work.<sup>23</sup> It has also been suggested that some adults do not 'buy in' to an ethos and practice of pupil empowerment.<sup>24</sup> Other concerns for teachers that have been cited include workload, already busy timetables and a fear of the unknown.<sup>25</sup>

One study found that more influential councils had facilitative principals who supported and endorsed the councils, and provided information, knowledge and skills to council members. The principals also worked closely with the chair of the council and helped the council to build connections with the school staff.<sup>26</sup>

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- 21 Veitch (2009) 'Participation in practice: an evaluation of the primary school council as a participatory tool' *Childhoods Today* and Whitty, G. and Wisby, E. (2007) *Real Decision Making? School Councils in Action* London: Institute of Education
- 22 Democra School [online] Available at: <http://www.niccy.org/Publications/democra2>
- 23 Keogh, A.F., Whyte, J. (2005) *Second Level Student Councils in Ireland: A study of enablers, barriers and supports* Dublin: The Stationery Office
- 24 Inman, S. and Burke, H. (2002) *School councils: an apprenticeship in democracy?* London: Association of Teachers and Lecturers
- 25 Whitty, G. and Wisby, E. (2007) *Real Decision Making? School Councils in Action* London: Institute of Education
- 26 Parker, K., Leithwood, K. (2000) "School Councils' Influence on School and Classroom Practice" *Peabody Journal of Education*, 75, pp. 37-65 Ontario
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Some authors suggest that there is a strong case for finding strategies that engage all staff in the work of the school council.<sup>27</sup> Indeed, NICCY recommends that there is a named teacher with direct access to senior management working with the school council and supporting its establishment. It also suggests that senior management need to provide space and time for the council within the school day.

#### Training for pupils and staff

There is broad agreement in the literature that participants in school councils, including pupils and teachers, require training for successful outcomes. Systematic training is believed to be important, and it has been suggested that this training could be part of the curriculum in terms of citizenship.<sup>28</sup>

A report on the London Secondary School Councils Action Research Project found that support and training were viewed very positively by students and staff. Training for school councils involved in the projects was extensive, including giving insights into elections, running meetings, being a representative and engaging with staff. More specialist training was also provided, for example to behaviour sub-councils, on conflict resolution techniques, mediation theory and research skills.<sup>29</sup>

Guidance for the Democra School initiative states that training must be provided for staff and pupils, and that this could be internal or external, and provided by existing staff within the school. With regard to training for pupils, it suggests that it should aim to:<sup>30</sup>

- Give real examples of how school councils can make a difference;
- Identify what personal and life skills can be attained;
- Ensure that pupils have knowledge of their right to have their voice heard; and
- Develop an understanding of how young people can have a peer leadership and peer support role within their school.

#### Ensuring representation

Ensuring that school councils include a broad range of pupils, across different ages, abilities and socio-economic backgrounds, is another important challenge for schools. There is evidence to suggest that the procedures used to run school councils, which are based on representative democratic practice, require high levels of literacy, which can discriminate against younger or less literate children.<sup>31</sup>

One article describes the use of alternative visual strategies in school councils, aimed at encouraging involvement by more children and enabling them to participate. These included the use of mapping, drawing, card ranking and time lines to facilitate discussion. A study found that these strategies led to greater participation than might be achieved through more conventional, adult-style approaches, and thus supported greater inclusion.<sup>32</sup> Another author

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- 27 Inman, S. and Burke, H. (2002) *School councils: an apprenticeship in democracy?* London: Association of Teachers and Lecturers
- 28 Inman, S. and Burke, H. (2002) *School councils: an apprenticeship in democracy?* London: Association of Teachers and Lecturers
- 29 Davies, L., Yamashita, H. (2007) *School Councils – School Improvement. The London Secondary School Councils Action Research Project* University of Birmingham
- 30 Democra School [online] Available at: <http://www.niccy.org/Publications/democra2>
- 31 Veitch (2009) 'Participation in practice: an evaluation of the primary school council as a participatory tool' *Childhoods Today*
- 32 Cox, S., Robinson-Pant, A. (2006) "Enhancing participation in primary school and class councils through visual communication" *Cambridge Journal of Education* Vol. 36, No. 4, pp515-132
-

states that using a range of processes based on children's competences can help children to experience democracy, rather than simply learning about democratic practice for the future.<sup>33</sup>

The Institute of Education notes that pupils with special educational needs may require particular support to participate in school councils, and that schools would benefit from greater support in designing provision for pupil voice that can accommodate a wide range of abilities and disabilities.<sup>34</sup>

Another important aspect of representation relates to including the views and opinions of students who are not council members. A study in the Republic of Ireland found that students who were not members of the council generally did not have a good opinion of it, and felt that junior students were not represented adequately.<sup>35</sup> One author outlines three elements of representation that play a role in ensuring that the democratic process is legitimate:<sup>36</sup>

- The representative is asked by their peers to act as a representative;
- The representative has a mechanism to accurately collect the opinions of those he or she aims to represent; and
- The representative proactively reports back to those students during and after the process.

### **Maintaining momentum**

Research from the National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER) has highlighted challenges around keeping momentum going within a school council, as well as pupil disillusionment about the pace of change.<sup>37</sup>

NICCY guidance highlights the importance of regular and comprehensive self-evaluation by the school council to reaffirm that it is effective, and give further confidence to move ahead. One article suggests cultivating a school ethos in which being a councillor is regarded as a respected and sought-after role could play a useful part in maintaining momentum. Inviting political representatives to observe council meetings is suggested as one potential way of doing this.<sup>38</sup>

### **Other issues**

Other challenges reported include lack of organisation, the timing of meetings, the provision of feedback to peers, teachers and other staff and excessive bureaucracy.<sup>39</sup> In addition, recruiting members to school councils, educating the wider school about its purpose and tensions about roles and responsibilities in schools with a prefect system were also found to be potential issues.<sup>40</sup>

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33 Veitch (2009) 'Participation in practice: an evaluation of the primary school council as a participatory tool' *Childhoods Today*

34 Whitty, G. and Wisby, E. (2007) *Real Decision Making? School Councils in Action* London: Institute of Education

35 Keogh, A.F., Whyte, J. (2005) *Second Level Student Councils in Ireland: A study of enablers, barriers and supports* Dublin: The Stationery Office

36 Mould, D. (2011) "The Requirements of Representation" *Ethos* Vol. 19, No. 1

37 Taylor, M. and Johnson, R. (2002) *School councils: their role in citizenship and personal and social education* Slough: NFER

38 Taylor, M. and Johnson, R. (2002) *School councils: their role in citizenship and personal and social education* Slough: NFER

39 Taylor, M. and Johnson, R. (2002) *School councils: their role in citizenship and personal and social education* Slough: NFER

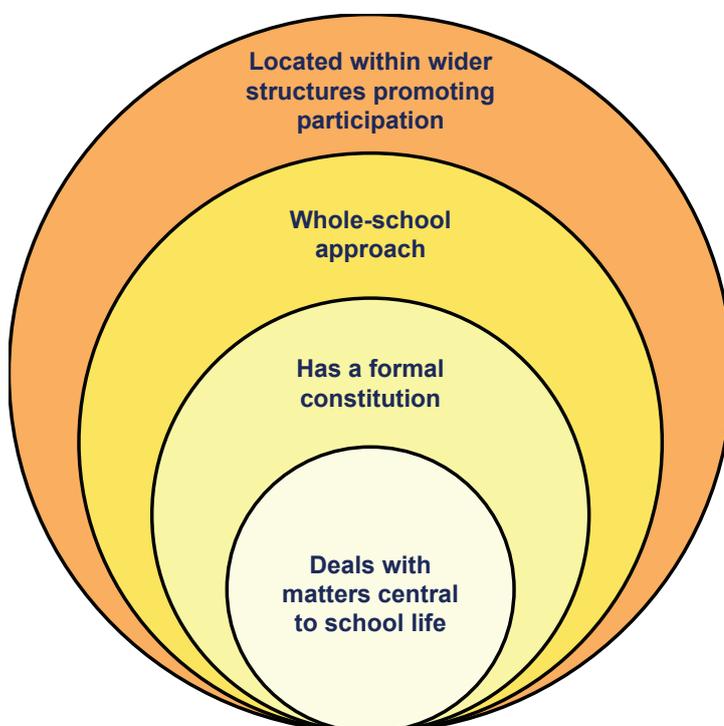
40 Keogh, A.F., Whyte, J. (2005) *Second Level Student Councils in Ireland: A study of enablers, barriers and supports* Dublin: The Stationery Office

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## 5 Factors and attributes of successful school councils

The following figure illustrates some of the key structural attributes of an effective school council that are cited in the literature; these are considered further in the subsequent paragraphs.

**Figure 2: Key structural attributes of an effective school council**



A key factor in ensuring that a school council is effective is that pupils must have influence in matters that are central to their daily life in school. Examples could include the school council having a say on teaching methods, school policies, term planning and the recruitment of staff.<sup>41</sup> The literature warns against school councils simply taking charge of areas such as running events and fundraising, as this can quickly overshadow the purpose of the school council.<sup>42</sup>

As discussed previously, having a formal constitution providing a framework for how the council should be run is also important. NICCY states that an effective constitution will help the school council to operate in a professional manner and foster an inclusive approach. The constitution:<sup>43</sup>

- Should be developed by pupils with the support of the teaching staff;
- Should set out the roles and responsibilities of the council and the rules it needs to have in place;
- Should detail who can be a member of the council and the election procedures to be used; and
- Should discuss the administration and planning of the council.

In addition, the school council should take a whole-school approach (not simply class- or year-based) and be located within wider structures and practices within schools that promote pupil

41 Bäckman, E. and Trafford, B. (2007) Democratic governance of schools Strasbourg: Council of Europe publishing

42 Mould, D. (2011) "The Requirements of Representation" Ethos Vol. 19, No. 1

43 Democra School [online] Available at: <http://www.niccy.org/Publications/democra2>

participation. For example, one report indicates that it is within the context of 'democratic schools' that councils can most effectively make a contribution, and states that the core values of such schools include cooperation, mutual respect, justice and a commitment to diversity and equity. In particular, the authors suggest that institutions need to have a genuine and consistent commitment to pupil participation demonstrated through whole school structures and practices, for school councils to achieve their potential.<sup>44</sup>

In order to do this, schools should review and evaluate the opportunities available for pupils to make their voice heard and regularly review their core values and ethos to ensure they are supportive of participation.<sup>45</sup> It is also important for school leaders to be clear that they are willing to involve pupils in decision making, listen to their views and act on those views where appropriate. One report notes that the extent to which a school council is involved in the routine business of a school, such as the drafting of behaviour policies, gives an indication of the seriousness with which pupil voice is taken.<sup>46</sup>

The literature also highlights a number of operational characteristics that are important in supporting an effective school council, including the following:<sup>47</sup>

- Meetings are formally run with agendas and minutes;
- There are explicit representation and reporting mechanisms;
- Scope of the agenda can be determined by pupils as well as staff;
- Council is formally consulted about major policy decisions;
- Children and adults are clear on what they mean by participation (in particular, that it is not simply listening to children); and
- The council is under the direct oversight of the principal.

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44 Inman, S. and Burke, H. (2002) *School councils: an apprenticeship in democracy?* London: Association of Teachers and Lecturers

45 Inman, S. and Burke, H. (2002) *School councils: an apprenticeship in democracy?* London: Association of Teachers and Lecturers

46 Whitty, G. and Wisby, E. (2007) *Real Decision Making? School Councils in Action* London: Institute of Education

47 Inman, S. and Burke, H. (2002) *School councils: an apprenticeship in democracy?* London: Association of Teachers and Lecturers and Veitch (2009) 'Participation in practice: an evaluation of the primary school council as a participatory tool' *Childhoods Today*

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## 6 UK Parliament school council awards

The Speaker of the House of Commons holds awards to celebrate excellence in school councils. All schools, including those in Northern Ireland, are invited to nominate projects for the awards. These are then assessed by a team of expert judges and four schools receive a trophy and a prize from the Speaker. Every school that enters receives a certificate to recognise the work they achieve.<sup>48</sup>

The awards look for school council projects that have helped to include everyone, for example in a school or a community; have made a real change; and are student-led. The projects are judged within the following categories:

- How people get on;
- School building and environment;
- Getting more people involved;
- Things outside the school; and
- Teaching and learning.

The yearbook for the school council awards 2009-2010 examines themes emerging from school councils within particular age categories. For example, in the 4-7 age category, a key theme was pupils wanting to share their learning with others and collaborating with teachers, other students and adults to transform how they were learning.

In the 11-16 age group, 'understanding identity' was a key theme, whereby councils became aware that other students were having problems with issues affecting their sense of belonging and progress, and sought to find a solution.

## 7 Conclusion

This paper has considered the potential benefits of school councils, issues and challenges around their effective implementation, and the factors and attributes of successful councils. It has found that while the effectiveness of school councils varies, councils have the potential to have positive outcomes both for students and schools. Their effectiveness depends on a number of factors: in particular, they must be situated within wider structures promoting participation, and deal with matters central to daily school life, rather than simply ‘tokenistic’ activity.

There are a number of areas pertaining to school councils that could be considered by the Education Committee in its forward work programme. These could include undertaking a baseline analysis of the numbers of school councils in Northern Ireland, and whether they are more prevalent in particular school phases and sectors. In addition, consideration could be given to visiting school councils and taking evidence from their participants, including students, teachers and principals. Other areas for consideration could include:

- The influence and effectiveness of school councils here;
- The benefits and outcomes of school councils for participants in NI schools;
- The extent to which schools have a wider ethos of participation and democracy and the impact of this on the school council;
- The availability, form and content of training and support for pupils to support their participation in school councils, including pupils with special educational needs;
- The extent to which school councils are inclusive and representative of young people of different ages, abilities, disabilities and backgrounds;
- How, if at all, school councils could become more effective, and the role of councillors, schools and wider educational stakeholders (including the Department and NICCY) in this.



Northern Ireland  
Assembly

## Research and Library Service Research Paper

27th January 2012

NIAR 904-11

**Caroline Perry and Barbara Love**

# Survey results for the Committee's Inquiry into School Councils

The Committee for Education is holding an Inquiry into School Councils aiming to examine the work of school councils in Northern Ireland, how they operate and their contribution to school life. This Research Paper presents the results of a recent survey of schools undertaken as part of the inquiry.

Research and Information Service briefings are compiled for the benefit of MLAs and their support staff. Authors are available to discuss the contents of these papers with Members and their staff but cannot advise members of the general public. We do, however, welcome written evidence that relate to our papers and these should be sent to the Research and Information Service, Northern Ireland Assembly, Room 139, Parliament Buildings, Belfast BT4 3XX or e-mailed to [RLS@niassembly.gov.uk](mailto:RLS@niassembly.gov.uk)

## Key Points

- A survey was undertaken as part of the Committee's Inquiry into School Councils in order to capture baseline information on the work of school councils here;
- Over three quarters (77%) of respondents to the survey had a council;<sup>1</sup>
- The survey results indicated that certain types of school were significantly more likely than others to have a council: post-primaries were more likely than primaries; single sex schools were more likely than mixed schools; and larger primary schools (with 90 pupils or more) were more likely than smaller primary schools to have a council;
- Just over half of all respondents stated that their council was formally consulted about major policy decisions; this was significantly more likely to be the case in post-primary schools than primary schools;
- Most of the respondents to the survey indicated that their school's council influenced the school's environment, while two-thirds noted that it influenced school policies (again more likely in post-primary schools);
- Just under two-thirds of respondents stated that training had been provided for all pupils taking part in the school council;
- Overall, 57% of respondents stated that they employed strategies to encourage the involvement of pupils with SEN; this was significantly more common in smaller primary schools (with 89 or fewer pupils) than larger primaries;
- Of the respondents who did not have a school council, around 60% reported that they were considering or preparing to establish one; many of the remainder deemed alternative engagement methods as sufficient;
- Areas for further consideration could include:
  - The effectiveness of school councils compared to other engagements;
  - The reasons why some school types are less likely to have a council and the relevance of school councils in these contexts;
  - Whether particular school types could benefit from further support in developing a school council, and what form of support would be appropriate;
  - The extent to which pupils feel that their council is representative;
  - The support for pupils with SEN provided in some schools;
  - Pupils' views on training; and
  - Pupils' views on their council's level of influence in school.

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1 However as the sample may not be representative, this finding should be treated with caution

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# Executive Summary

## Introduction

The Committee for Education is holding an Inquiry into Schools Councils examining the work of school councils here and seeking to identify ways to support and enhance their work. This Research Paper presents the results of a survey on school councils conducted in January 2012.

The purpose of the survey was to provide baseline information on the operation and experience of school councils in Northern Ireland. A link to the online survey was sent to all primary, post-primary and special schools within an email via the C2K system. A total of 289 responses were received, giving an overall response rate of 26%.

### Profile of schools with a school council

Overall, 77% of respondents to the survey had a school council. However, it is possible that schools that have a council would be more inclined to respond to the survey, and as the sample may not be representative, this finding should be treated with caution.

The survey results indicate that certain types of school were more likely than others to have a council (these findings have statistical significance):

- Post-primary schools were more likely than primary schools to have a council;
- Single sex schools were more likely than mixed schools;
- Larger primary schools (with 90 pupils or more) were more likely than smaller primary schools to have a school council.

## Engagement and reporting

Respondents to the survey reported high levels of engagement by staff with the school council. In terms of consultation, just over half (53%) of respondents stated that their council is formally consulted about major policy decisions, and this was significantly more likely to happen in post-primary schools (64% compared to 46% of primaries).

The literature highlights the importance of school councils having explicit reporting mechanisms. The majority of respondents to the survey indicated that their council reported to other pupils (93%) and to the principal (90%). A much smaller proportion of respondents (30%) stated that the council reported to the Board of Governors.

## Influence

The evidence on school councils notes that they must have influence in matters that are central to daily life in school in order to be successful. For example, the literature cautions against councils primarily being involved in organising one-off events or fundraising activities. Responses to the survey show that while a high proportion of school councils here were involved in one-off events (75%) and fundraising (70%), the most frequently cited area of influence was on the school environment (93%).

In addition, two-thirds (66%) of respondents stated that their school council influenced school policies. Post-primary respondents were significantly more likely to report that their council influenced school policies and school food than their counterparts in the primary sector. Other examples included a school council within a recently amalgamated school developing a new uniform and crest, and school councils that had influence over home-to school transport or the purchasing of goods for the school.

### **Training and support**

There is broad agreement in the literature that participants in school councils (both pupils and staff) require training in order to support successful outcomes. Just under two-thirds (65%) of respondents stated that training had been provided for all pupils taking part in the council. Pupils participating in councils in small primary schools (those with 89 pupils or fewer) were significantly less likely to be provided with training than those in larger primaries.

Representing pupils with a range of abilities on the school council is highlighted in the literature, which notes that pupils with Special Educational Needs (SEN) may require particular support in order to enable them to participate. In our survey 57% of respondents overall stated that they employed strategies to encourage the involvement of pupils with SEN.

The survey results suggest that school size has an impact on the likelihood of a school actively working to support the participation of pupils with SEN. Small primary schools (with fewer than 89 pupils) were significantly more likely than larger primaries to employ strategies to encourage the involvement of pupils with SEN (82% compared to 57%).

### **Reasons for not having a school council**

Of the respondents to our survey who did not have a school council, around 60% reported that they were considering or preparing to establish one. With regard to those who were not planning to set up a council, the main reason noted was that they deemed other engagement mechanisms as sufficient. This was particularly the case in small schools, in line with our finding that smaller primary schools were less likely to have a council. The most commonly noted alternative forms of engagement included:

- Assemblies (94%);
- Pupil surveys or questionnaires (82%);
- Circle time (75%);
- Interest groups, such as eco-groups (65%); and
- Suggestion boxes (60%).

### **Conclusion**

The survey results highlight a number of areas that could be given further consideration. These could be explored through the planned qualitative research and video-conferencing with pupils as part of the Inquiry. The areas could include:

- The effectiveness of school councils in comparison to other forms of engagement;
- The reasons why smaller schools, primary schools and mixed-sex schools are less likely to have a school council and the relevance of school councils in these contexts;
- Whether particular types of school could benefit from additional support in establishing and developing a school council, and what form of support would be most appropriate;
- The extent to which pupils feel that their school council is representative of pupils of different ages and abilities;
- The support for pupils with SEN provided in some schools, for example, the reasons why this is more common in smaller schools, what forms of support are most effective and whether good practice could be further disseminated;
- Pupils' views on training, including its effectiveness where provided, and whether pupils who have not had training would find it useful;
- The reporting mechanisms used by school councils, their effectiveness and pupils' views on the extent to which their work and views have influence and lead to positive outcomes.

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Key Points

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- 2 Methodology
- 3 Organisation of school councils
- 4 Engagement, reporting and evaluation
- 5 Influence
- 6 Training and support
- 7 Reasons for not having a school council and other forms of engagement
- 8 Conclusion

Annex: Questionnaire

# 1 Introduction

The Committee for Education is holding an Inquiry into School Councils which aims to examine the work of school councils in Northern Ireland, how they operate and their contribution to school life. The inquiry will seek to identify ways to support and enhance the work of school councils here. This Research Paper presents the results of a recent survey of schools undertaken as part of the inquiry. Further background information on school councils can be found in Paper 85/11: School councils.

## 2 Methodology

The aim of the quantitative survey was to gather baseline information on the operation and experience of school councils in Northern Ireland for the purposes of the Committee's inquiry. The planned qualitative phase of the research aims to provide more detailed information on the experiences of pupils taking part in school councils here.

### **Questionnaire design and pilot**

A scoping paper was written by the Assembly Research and Information Service in August 2011 considering the evidence on the potential benefits of school councils, issues and challenges around their effective implementation, and the factors and attributes of successful councils. The evidence within the scoping paper helped to inform the design of the questionnaire.

A draft of the questionnaire was circulated to the Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People (NICCY) and the Department of Education (the Department) for comment prior to the implementation of the pilot.

The questionnaire was sent to nine school principals who were asked to complete the questionnaire and comment on its suitability and ease of use. Feedback was positive and after making some minor amendments based on the comments received, the questionnaire was finalised.

### **Administration**

The survey was launched on the 9th January 2012 and sent out to all special, primary and post-primary schools (46 special schools, 847 primary schools and 219 post-primary schools) by email via the C2K system. Schools were provided with a link to the online survey and a telephone number was provided for any queries. A reminder email was sent on 18th January 2012. Schools were also sent the survey in pdf format to allow the option of returning a hard copy. The survey closed on the 20th January 2012.

### **Analysis**

The data was analysed using SPSS. Crosstabulations were performed by school phase (primary and post-primary); school type (Catholic maintained and controlled); mixed and single sex schools; and small schools compared to larger schools. Chi square was used to test the statistical significance of the findings at the 0.05 significance level.

### **Response rate**

The survey was sent out to 1,112 schools. A total of 289 responses were received, giving an overall response rate of 26%. The following section provides an overview of the profile of respondents.

### **Profile of respondents**

Overall, there was a reasonable spread of respondents across school management type and Education and Library Board (ELB) area. However, the response rate was higher for post-primary grammar schools than for post-primary non-grammars, and higher for post-primary schools than for primary schools. As such, there may be a non-response bias influencing the proportion of schools estimated to have a school council in Northern Ireland. The following tables provide an overview of respondents to the survey by school phase, ELB area and management type.

**Table 1: Respondents by school phase**

<b>School phase</b>	<b>Respondents (schools)</b>
Primary	186
Post-primary – grammar	30
Post-primary – non-grammar	54
Special	12
Unspecified	7
<b>Total</b>	<b>289</b>

**Table 2: Respondents by Education and Library Board (ELB)**

	<b>BELB</b>	<b>NEELB</b>	<b>SEELB</b>	<b>SELB</b>	<b>WELB</b>
Respondents	31	81	54	59	62

**Table 3: Respondents by school management type**

<b>School Management Type</b>	<b>Respondents (schools)</b>
Catholic maintained	101
Controlled	143
Controlled Integrated	6
Grant-maintained Integrated	14
Other maintained	1
Voluntary maintained	13
Voluntary non-maintained	4
Gaelscoileanna (Irish-medium)	3
Unspecified	4
<b>Total</b>	<b>289</b>

### 3 Organisation of school councils

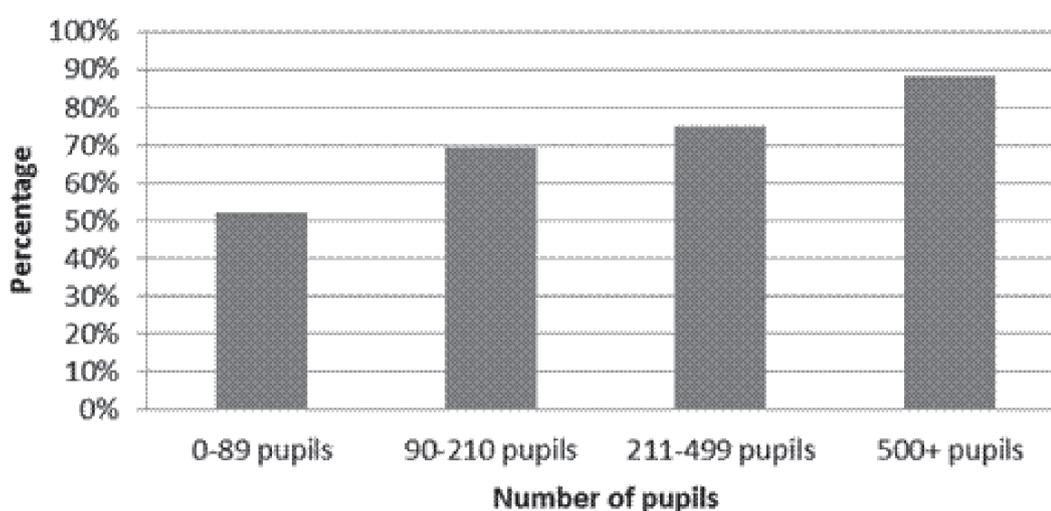
#### Profile of schools with a school council

Overall, 77% of respondents to the survey had a school council. However, it is possible that schools that have a council would be more inclined to respond to the survey; in addition as the sample may not be representative, this finding should be treated with some caution.

Post-primary schools were significantly more likely to report that they had a council than primary schools (93% compared to 68% of primaries). Single sex schools were more likely to state that they had a school council than mixed schools (97% compared to 74%): this finding is also statistically significant.

Survey results show that smaller primary schools (those with 89 pupils or fewer) were significantly less likely to have a school council than schools with 90 pupils or more (52% compared to 74%). The following figure illustrates the percentage of primary school respondents who stated that they had a school council, according to school size.

**Proportion of primary schools with a school council by total enrolments (n = 208)**

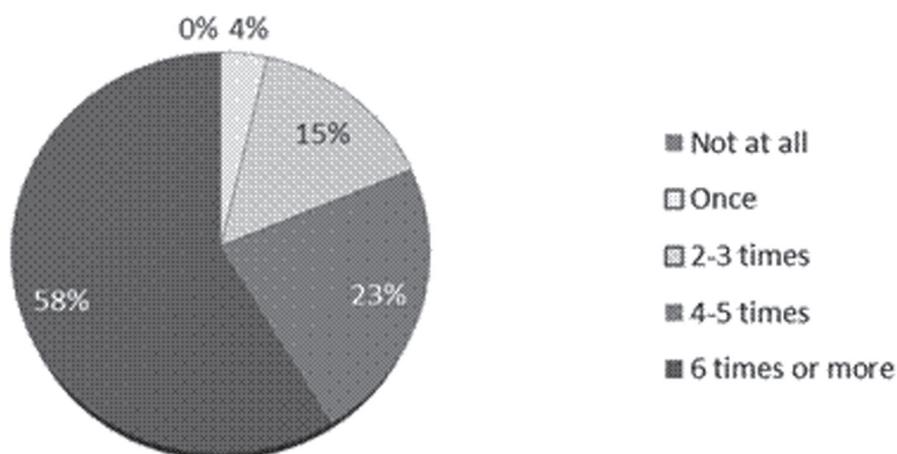


Differences between Catholic maintained and controlled schools were small and not statistically significant in this regard.

### Frequency of meetings

The majority (58%) of school councils had met six times or more in the past 12 months, while a further 23% had met four to five times. The following figure illustrates the frequency of council meetings noted by respondents to the survey.

**How often has your school council met in the past 12 months? (n = 220)**



### Framework

A high proportion (95%) of respondents overall stated that their school council had a clearly defined purpose.

The guidance suggests that to be as effective as possible, school councils should develop a formal constitution that provides a framework for how the council should be run.<sup>2</sup> In our survey, 53% of respondents stated that they had a formal constitution setting out guidelines and rules on how it should be run.

Post-primary respondents were statistically more likely to report that their council had a constitution (78% compared to 53% of respondents from primary schools). In addition, school councils in small primary schools (fewer than 90 pupils) were significantly less likely than other schools to have a constitution (36% compared to 74%).

Differences between controlled and Catholic maintained schools were not statistically significant in regard to whether they had a constitution.

### Representation

The evidence also highlights the importance of including a broad range of pupils of different ages and abilities in order to support adequate representation on the school council.<sup>3</sup> Almost all respondents (99%) stated that their school council includes a range of pupils of different ages.

<sup>2</sup> Democra School [online] Available at: <http://www.niccy.org/Publications/democra2>

<sup>3</sup> For example Veitch (2009) 'Participation in practice: an evaluation of the primary school council as a participatory tool' *Childhoods Today*

### Use of guidance

The Commissioner for Children and Young People (NICCY) has developed the Democra School programme which aims to support and encourage the development of meaningful school councils and the practice of democracy in the school environment.<sup>4</sup> A guidance pack was developed in 2007 and distributed to every school in Northern Ireland, providing practical guidance on establishing and running a school council, and the guidance is also available online.<sup>5</sup> Of the respondents to our survey:

- Less than three in ten (29%) schools were aware of and had used Democra School guidance;
- 44% stated that they were aware of the guidance but had not used it; and
- More than a quarter (27%) of schools were not aware of the guidance.

The results indicate that post-primary respondents were significantly more likely to be aware of NICCY's Democra School Guidance than their counterparts in the primary sector (82% compared to 68% of primary respondents); taking into account both those who had or had not used the guidance. In addition, respondents in primary schools with 90 pupils or more were significantly more likely to be aware of the guidance (74% compared to 50%) than those in smaller primaries.

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4 Democra School – School Councils [online] Available at: <http://www.deni.gov.uk/index/85-schools/5-school-management/school-councils-2.htm>

5 Democra School [online] Available at: <http://www.niccy.org/Publications/democra2>

## 4 Engagement, reporting and evaluation

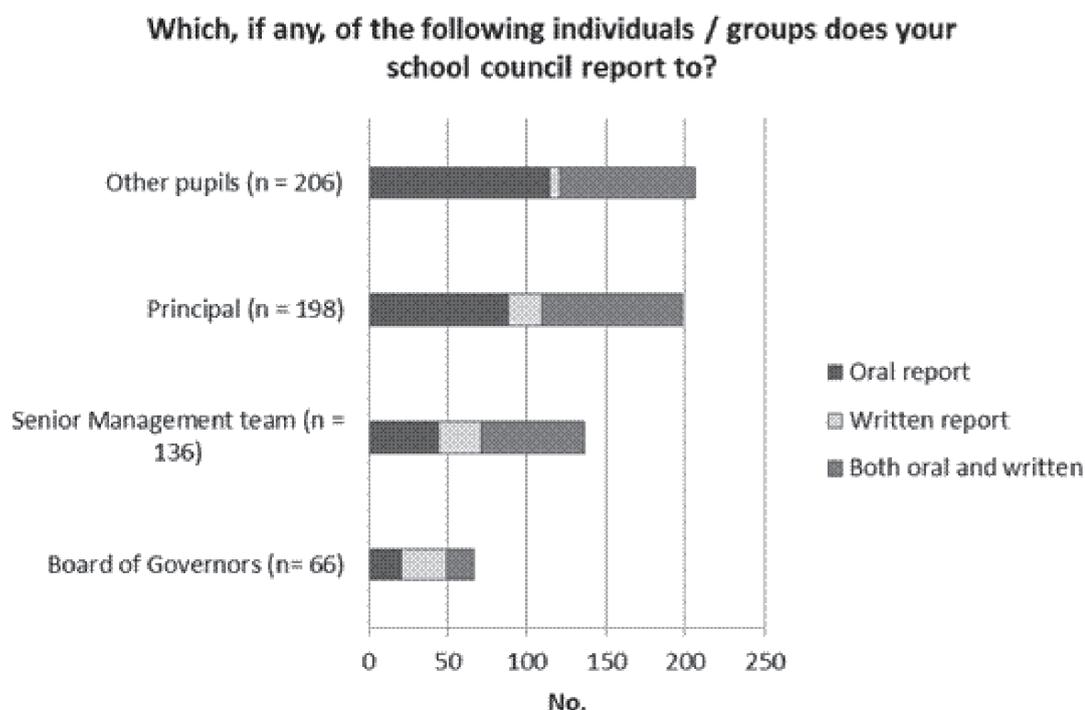
### Engagement

Respondents to the survey reported high levels of engagement by staff, with 98% reporting that members of staff are engaged in the work of the school council.

In regard to consulting with the school council, just over half (53%) of respondents reported that their school council is formally consulted about major policy decisions. Post-primary schools were more likely than primary schools to report that their council is formally consulted on major policy decisions (64% compared to 46%): this finding is statistically significant.

### Reporting

The literature highlights the importance of school councils having explicit reporting mechanisms. The following figure provides an overview of the number of school councils in the survey who report to pupils, the principal, the school's senior management team and the Board of Governors. It also highlights the most commonly used methods of reporting.



The figure shows that most (93%) school councils report to other pupils. Over half of these councils (55%) do this through oral reports to other pupils.

In addition, most school councils report to the principal (90%). Such reports tend to be either oral (44%) or both oral and written (45%). Just over one in ten (11%) of school councils only provide written reports to the principal.

A much smaller proportion (30%) of school councils reports to the school's Board of Governors. Of those that do, the greatest proportion (42%) provide written reports while just under a third (32%) report orally.

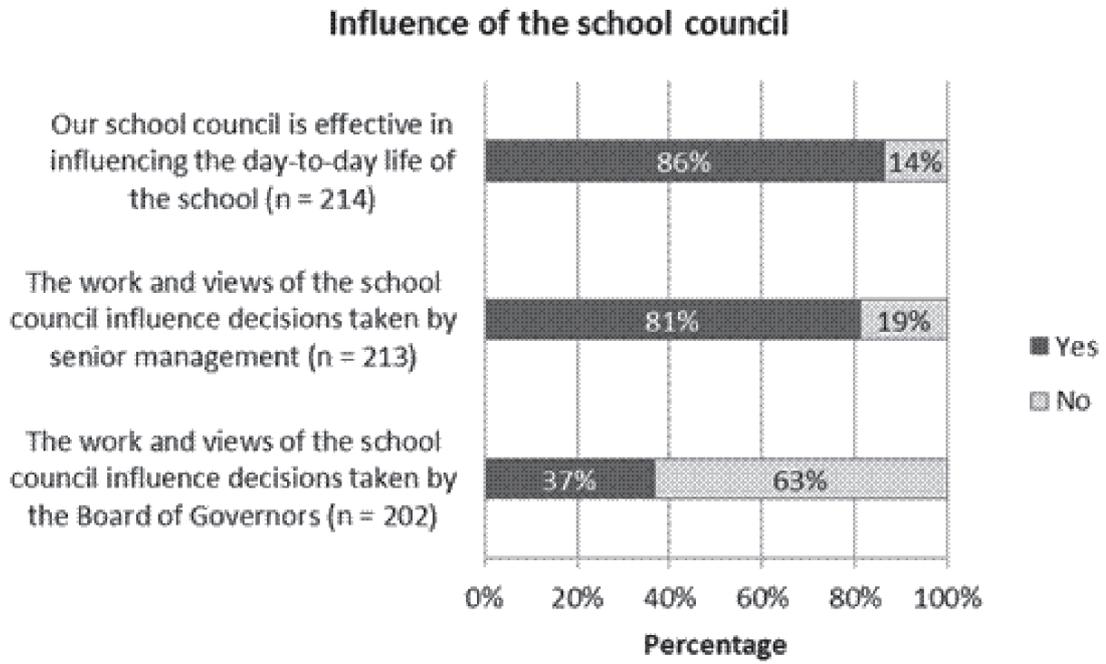
**Evaluation**

With regard to monitoring and evaluation, 59% of respondents stated that the effectiveness of the school council is monitored and evaluated and a record of this is kept. Guidance from NICCY highlights the importance of regular and comprehensive self-evaluation.

## 5 Influence

### Level of influence

A high proportion (86%) of respondents believed that their school council was effective in influencing the day-to-day life of the school. Levels of influence reported by respondents are illustrated in the following figure.



Results for these questions do not show statistically significant differences between primaries and post-primaries or between Catholic maintained and controlled schools. However, respondents in larger post-primaries (with more than 400 pupils) were significantly more likely to state that the work and views of school councils influenced the decisions taken by the Board of Governors than those in smaller post-primaries (49% compared to 15%).

A high proportion (86%) of respondents stated that their school council can demonstrate that it has had a positive impact both on pupils who participate in the council and those who do not.

### Areas of influence

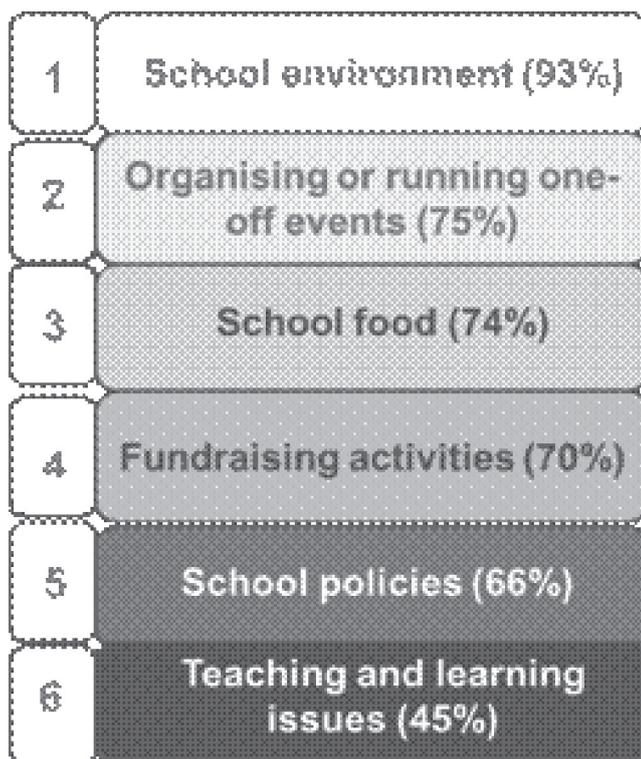
A key factor in the success of a school council cited in the literature is that pupils must have influence in matters that are central to their daily life in school. The evidence warns against school councils simply taking charge of running events and fundraising, as this can overshadow the purpose of the school council.<sup>6</sup>

Responses to the survey indicate that school councils here most often influence the school environment (93% of responses). Three quarters of school councils (75%) were involved in running one-off events and 70% played a role in fundraising activities. The following figure illustrates the overall findings.

6

Mould, D. (2011) "The Requirements of Representation" *Ethos* Vol. 19, No. 1

**Which, if any, of the following areas does your school council influence?**



A smaller proportion of respondents stated that their school council had influence over timetabling (11%) and the recruitment of staff (2%). Of the areas of influence cited in the survey, post-primary school councils were significantly more likely than their counterparts in primary schools to have influence over:

- School food (82% of post-primary schools compared to 67% of primary school councils); and
- School policies (81% of post-primary schools compared to 61% of primary schools).

Respondents also indicated a range of additional areas that their school's council had influence over, including:

- Developing school crest and uniform;
- Pupils' welfare, for example, health and well-being;
- Extra-curricular and lunch-time activities;
- School development, for example, school development plan and the school's ethos;
- Purchases of resources and equipment, for example furnishings and playground equipment;
- Home to school transport; and
- Developing links with other schools.

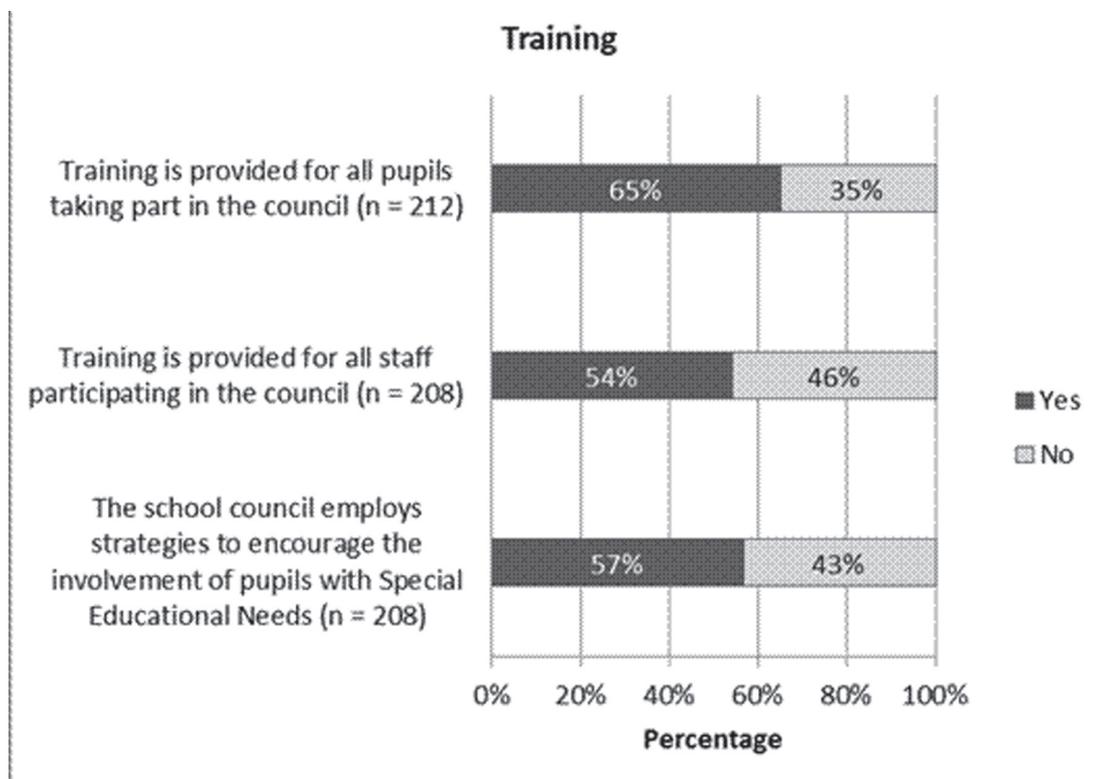
*"Issues that impact on pupils, such as the bike rack, toilets, school dinners, playground equipment and the length of time for break and lunch."* (Primary respondent)

*"Things like what makes a good lesson and what makes a good form tutor."* (Post-primary respondent)

*"As a newly amalgamated school the students were involved in developing the design for the uniform, sports uniform and the school crest."* (Post-primary respondent)

## 6 Training and support

There is broad agreement in the literature that participants in school councils (both pupils and staff) require training in order to support successful outcomes. Just under two thirds of respondents (65%) to the survey stated that training had been provided for all pupils taking part in the council. These findings and details of the proportion of schools whose staff have received training in this regard are illustrated in the following figure.



Pupils participating in councils in small primary schools (those with 89 pupils or fewer) were less likely to be provided with training than their counterparts in larger primaries (36% compared to 74%).

The Institute of Education has stated that pupils with Special Educational Needs (SEN) may require particular support to participate in school councils, and that schools would benefit from greater support in designing provision that can accommodate a wide range of abilities and disabilities.<sup>7</sup> The previous figure highlights that 57% of school councils in the survey employed strategies to encourage the involvement of pupils with SEN.

School size appears to have an influence on the extent to which schools actively seek to support the involvement of pupils with SEN. Survey findings indicate that small primary schools were significantly more likely than larger primaries to employ strategies to encourage the involvement of pupils with Special Educational Needs (82% compared to 57%).

In addition, councils of smaller post-primary schools (those with fewer than 400 pupils) were significantly more likely to employ strategies to encourage the involvement of pupils with SEN (71% compared to 45%). However the sample size here was small, therefore this finding should be treated with some caution.

<sup>7</sup> Whitty, G. and Wisby, E. (2007) *Real Decision Making? School Councils in Action* London: Institute of Education

## 7 Reasons for not having a school council and other forms of engagement

Of the 68 schools that stated that they do not have a council, around 60% reported that they were considering or preparing to establish one. Some respondents stated that the development of a school council is set out within the school development plan and/ or that staff are receiving training in preparation.

*“Training on Circle Time formed part of staff development in the past two years. Now that this practice is firmly embedded throughout the curriculum we feel in a state of readiness to develop a school’s council. One teacher has already agreed and is signed up to attend training, with a view to starting this up immediately afterwards.”* (Primary respondent)

The main reason reported by schools for not having or preparing to establish a school council was that there were other mechanisms in place for engagement that the school deemed sufficient. This was particularly the case in small schools, where pupils may have more direct, informal contact with teachers. This supports the finding noted earlier in this paper that small primary schools were significantly less likely to have a council than larger primaries (those with 90 or more pupils).

*“We are a very small primary school and children are regularly consulted during class time and circle time about their needs, wants and concerns... To take on another new initiative at this time would put unnecessary strain on staff who are already responsible for numerous areas of the curriculum.”* (Primary respondent)

In a small number of cases a school council was not considered appropriate, for example in special schools for pupils with profound learning difficulties, or due to a perception that school councils are not inclusive.

*“Our school is small and we found that a council type structure did not give any avenue to those who were quiet and lacking in confidence or the less able. Often it was pupils who “shouted the loudest” or who were the more able who were voted in and this could/ did in some cases lead to pressure on other pupils to avoid giving their opinion or being heard.”* (Post-primary respondent)

Other reasons provided for not establishing a school council were:

- Insufficient time to develop a council;
- School council not considered a priority;
- New school;
- Staff are unable or unwilling to commit time to the development of a council;
- School was not accepted for training.

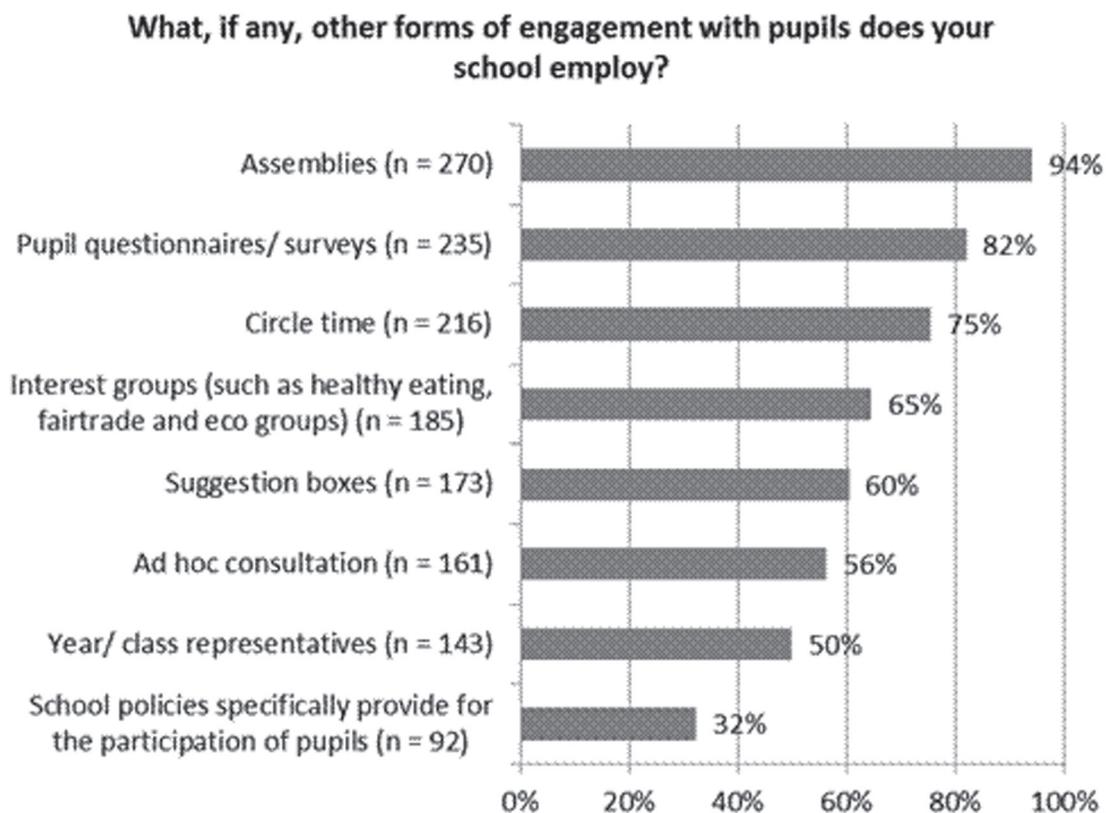
### **Other forms of engagement**

The evidence highlights the importance of school councils being located within wider structures and practices in schools that promote participation. Authors suggest that in order for school councils to reach their potential, schools need to have a genuine and consistent commitment to pupil participation.<sup>8</sup> All respondents to the survey were asked what other

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8 Inman, S. and Burke, H. (2002) School councils: an apprenticeship in democracy? London: Association of Teachers and Lecturers, Whitty, G. and Wisby, E. (2007) Real Decision Making? School Councils in Action London: Institute of Education

forms of engagement with pupils they use. The responses to this question are illustrated in the following figure.



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## 8 Conclusion

The survey results highlight a number of areas that could be given further consideration, for example through the planned qualitative phase of the Inquiry (research with pupils) and video-conferencing between pupils and the Committee. These areas could include:

- The effectiveness of school councils in comparison to other forms of engagement;
- The reasons why smaller schools, primary schools and mixed-sex schools are less likely to have a school council and the relevance of school councils in these contexts;
- Whether particular types of school could benefit from additional support in establishing and developing a school council, and what form of support would be most appropriate;
- The extent to which pupils feel that their school council is representative of pupils of different ages and abilities;
- The support for pupils with SEN provided in some schools, for example, the reasons why this is more common in smaller schools, what forms of support are most effective and whether good practice could be further disseminated;
- Pupils' views on training, including its effectiveness where provided, and whether pupils who have not had training would find it useful;
- The reporting mechanisms used by school councils, their effectiveness and pupils' views on the extent to which their work and views lead to positive outcomes.

# Annex: Questionnaire

## Education Committee inquiry into school councils: questionnaire

### Introduction

The Northern Ireland Assembly Committee for Education is holding an Inquiry into School Councils. The aim of the inquiry is to champion and celebrate the work of school councils in Northern Ireland, and it will examine the experience, operation and contribution of school councils here, with a view to identifying ways to support and enhance their work.

This short questionnaire aims to gather evidence for the inquiry including the number of school councils in Northern Ireland and views and experiences on their work and impact. It should take no longer than ten minutes to complete. Your answers will be anonymised and combined with those of others and the findings will be presented in a report to the Committee. Subsequently, the Committee will identify a small number of 'case study' schools to take part in the next stage of the inquiry. This is likely to involve video-conferencing between the Education Committee and members of the school council.

### Questions on school councils

1. Does your school have a school council (a school council is a formal group of pupils elected by their peers to represent them and their views)? (Tick as appropriate below)

Yes		(continue to question 2)
No		(proceed to question 6)

2. How often has your school council met in the past 12 months? (Please tick one of the options below)

Not at all	
Once	
2-3 times	
4-5 times	
6 times or more	

3. Which, if any, of the following individuals / groups does your school council report to? (Tick to indicate reporting method for any that apply)

	Oral Report	Written Report	Both Oral & Written
Other pupils			
Senior management team			
Principal			
Board of Governors			

Which, if any, of the following areas does your school council influence? (Tick all that apply)

Fundraising activities	
Organising or running one-off events	
Teaching and learning issues	
School food	
School environment (internal and external)	
School policies (for example, behaviour or discipline policies)	
Timetabling	
Recruitment of staff	
Other (please specify) _____	

4. Do the following statements accurately describe your school council?

	YES	NO
Our school council has a clearly defined purpose		
Our school council has a constitution setting out guidelines and rules on how it should be run		
Training is provided for all pupils taking part in the council		
Training is provided for all staff participating in the council		
The school council includes a range of pupils of different ages		
The school council employs strategies to encourage the involvement of pupils with Special Educational Needs		
Members of staff are engaged in the work of the school council		
The school council is formally consulted about major school policy decisions		
The work and views of the school council influence decisions taken by the Board of Governors		
The work and views of the school council influence decisions taken by senior management		
Our school council is effective in influencing the day-to-day life of the school		
The effectiveness of the school council is monitored and evaluated on a regular basis and a record of this is kept		
Our school council/school can demonstrate that the school council has had a positive impact both on pupils who participate in the council and those who do not		

What, if any, other forms of engagement with pupils does your school employ (Tick all that apply)

Circle time	
Year/ class representatives	
Pupil questionnaires/ surveys	
Ad hoc consultation	
Assemblies	
Suggestion boxes	

School policies specifically provide for the participation of pupils	
Interest groups (such as healthy eating, fairtrade and eco groups)	
Other (please specify) _____	

5. Are you aware of and have you used the Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People’s (NICCY) Democra School guidance? (Tick as appropriate)

Aware of it and have used it	
Aware of it but have not used it	
Not aware of it	

6. The Committee is interested in the reasons why your school does not have a school council. Please insert brief reasons (no more than 100 words) in the space provided below. (If your school does not have a school council please skip this question)

Reasons: _____ _____ _____ _____ _____ _____	
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7. Are you willing to be contacted again as part of the Committee’s Inquiry (for example, in regard to the identification of ‘case study’ schools)?

- Yes
- No

8. \* School information

Please provide the following information about your school.

DE School reference number \_\_\_\_\_

School name \_\_\_\_\_

Postcode \_\_\_\_\_

Contact email \_\_\_\_\_

9. School phase

Please provide the following information about your school.

Primary (including preparatory department of grammar schools)	
Post-primary - grammar	
Post-primary – non-grammar	
Special	

## 10. School Type – Please indicate School Type

Catholic maintained	
Controlled	
Controlled Integrated	
Grant-maintained Integrated	
Other maintained	
Voluntary maintained	
Voluntary non-maintained	
Irish Medium	

Clarification/Other (please specify)

## 11. School information - Mixed/ single sex school

Mixed	
Single sex	

## 12. School information – Primary Schools - total enrolment:

<b>Primary</b>	
0-89 pupils	
90-210 pupils	
211-499 pupils	
500+ pupils	

## 13. School information – Post-Primary Schools – total enrolment:

Post-Primary	
0-399 pupils	
400-599	
600+	
-	

## 14. School information – Which Education and Library Board area is your school located in?

Belfast Education and Library Board	
North Eastern Education and Library Board	
South Eastern Education and Library Board	
Southern Education and Library Board	
Western Education and Library Board	



Northern Ireland  
Assembly

## Research and Library Service Research Paper

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30th April 2012

NIAR 140-12

**Caroline Perry**

# Research findings for the Committee's Inquiry into School Councils

The Committee for Education is holding an Inquiry into School Councils aiming to examine the work of school councils in Northern Ireland, how they operate and their contribution to school life. This Research Paper presents the results of a recent survey of schools and focus groups with pupils undertaken as part of the inquiry.

Research and Information Service briefings are compiled for the benefit of MLAs and their support staff. Authors are available to discuss the contents of these papers with Members and their staff but cannot advise members of the general public. We do, however, welcome written evidence that relate to our papers and these should be sent to the Research and Information Service, Northern Ireland Assembly, Room 139, Parliament Buildings, Belfast BT4 3XX or e-mailed to [RLS@niassembly.gov.uk](mailto:RLS@niassembly.gov.uk)

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## Key Points

- Research was undertaken as part of the *Committee's Inquiry* involving a literature review, a survey of schools and a series of focus groups with pupils;
- Over three quarters of respondents to the survey had a school council; post-primary schools were significantly more likely to report that they had a council;
- Most survey respondents stated that their school council had a clear purpose, and focus group participants described aiming to give pupils a voice and to improve life in school;
- The evidence suggests that most councils have a key member of staff involved in its work, and pupils highlighted the importance of genuine staff engagement;
- The literature states that for school councils to be effective they must have influence in matters that are central to their daily life in school, however, focus group participants felt that they had the most influence in organising one-off events and fundraising;
- Pupils highlighted a range of positive outcomes resulting from being a school councillor, including greater confidence, a sense of achievement, improved communication skills and changes to the school environment;
- Many students expressed a preference to 'learn on the job,' however some supported the idea for a forum to share ideas and practice across schools;
- Many school survey respondents who did not have a council planned to establish one, while others deemed alternative methods of engagement as sufficient;
- The majority of pupils in the focus groups who did not have a council stated that they would like their school to have one;
- Areas for further consideration might include:
  - How schools could be encouraged to establish and support a school council, and to ensure that the council has a say in matters that are central to students' daily life in school;
  - Whether teachers involved in school councils could benefit from specific training;
  - The usefulness of school councils having increased contact with the Board of Governors, and how this might be facilitated;
  - Ways in which pupils' achievements on school councils might be recognised and celebrated;
  - Whether a forum for participants in school councils to share ideas and good practice would be beneficial, for example, through a website.

# Executive Summary

## **Introduction and methodology**

The Committee for Education is holding an *Inquiry into School Councils* which aims to identify ways to support and enhance the work of school councils here. This paper presents the results of research undertaken as part of the inquiry. The research involved a literature review, a survey of schools in Northern Ireland and a series of focus groups with pupils.

## **Organisation of school councils**

Over three quarters (77%) of respondents to the survey had a school council. Post-primary schools were significantly more likely to report that they had a council than primary schools, as were single sex schools (in comparison to mixed schools).

Most respondents to the survey stated that their school council had a clear purpose, and this was supported by evidence from the focus groups. Many participants described their council's purpose as giving pupils a voice and trying to improve school life. Just over half of respondents to the survey stated that they had a formal constitution setting out guidelines and rules on how the council should be run.

Most participants in the research felt that their school council was broadly representative of pupils of different ages and genders. Appointment to the council tended to be on the basis of an election after the candidates had made a speech or presentation; however other approaches included an interview panel and selection by teachers.

## **Engagement and reporting**

Evidence from the survey and focus groups suggests that most school councils have a designated member of school staff who is involved in its work. Many focus group participants described their key contact (usually a teacher or vice-principal) taking their ideas forward to the principal, and a number of pupils highlighted the crucial importance of genuine staff engagement with the council. However, few pupils reported to their school's Board of Governors.

## **Influence**

The literature states that for school councils to be effective, pupils must have influence in matters that are central to their daily life in school. In particular, it warns against councils simply taking charge of fundraising and running events.

In our focus groups, pupils most commonly stated that they had most influence in organising one-off events, followed by raising money and school uniform. In the survey, the greatest number of respondents indicated that their school council had most influence on the school environment (93%), followed by organising one-off events (75%). In both the survey and the focus groups, teaching and learning was thought to be the area where school councils had the least influence.

## **Outcomes**

Pupils participating in the focus groups highlighted a range of outcomes from taking part in their school council. These included personal outcomes and outcomes for the school, including:

- Greater confidence;
- A sense of achievement;
- Improved communication skills;
- Increased responsibility;

- Improvements to the school environment;
- Positive outcomes for other pupils; and
- Increased engagement with teachers.

In particular, many pupils described a feeling of pride and a sense of achievement as a result of being a school councillor. Increased confidence and greater responsibility were also common themes.

### **Training and support**

The literature asserts that pupils and staff participating in school councils require training in order to support successful outcomes. In our survey 65% of respondents stated that training had been provided to all pupils taking part in the council, and there was a mixture of pupils who had received training and those who had not in the focus groups.

Where training had been provided, this was usually carried out by a teacher or by other pupils who had previously served on the council. While many pupils in the focus groups expressed a preference to 'learn on the job' rather than to receive further training, some thought that a forum for sharing ideas across school councils might be useful.

### **Reasons for not having a school council and other forms of engagement**

Around 60% of schools responding to the survey that did not have a council reported that they were considering or preparing to establish one. Where schools were not planning to establish a council, they often suggested that other mechanisms in place for engagement were sufficient. Some schools, for example very small schools, did not feel that a school council would be appropriate.

The majority of participants in the focus groups who did not have a school council stated that they would like to have one, citing the opportunity to have their say and increased responsibility as among the potential benefits.

In terms of other forms of engagement, most pupils who had a council felt that this was more effective than other approaches. Many of the pupils who did not have a council stated that a number of other approaches were used to ascertain their views in school, such as interest groups or through designated teachers. However, a number of pupils highlighted the potential disadvantages of relying on sharing their views with individual teachers, stating that it depends very much on the teacher.

### **Conclusion**

The research has highlighted many positive outcomes for pupils involved in school councils, and has emphasised the importance of genuine staff engagement. The findings suggest a number of areas that could be given further consideration:

- How schools could be encouraged to establish and support a school council, and to ensure that the council has a say in matters that are central to students' daily life in school;
- Whether teachers involved in school councils could benefit from specific training;
- The usefulness of school councils having increased contact with the Board of Governors, and how this might be facilitated;
- Ways in which pupils' achievements on school councils might be recognised and celebrated;
- Whether a forum for participants in school councils to share ideas and good practice would be beneficial, for example, through a website.

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- 9 Conclusion

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# 1 Introduction

The Committee for Education is holding an *Inquiry into School Councils* which aims to examine the work of school councils in Northern Ireland, how they operate and their contribution to school life. The inquiry is seeking to identify ways to support and enhance the work of school councils here. This Research Paper presents the results of research undertaken as part of the inquiry, including the result of a survey of schools, focus groups with pupils and a literature review. Further information can be found in Paper 85/11: School councils. and Paper 18/12: Survey results for the Committee's Inquiry into School Councils.

## 2 Methodology

The research aspect of the inquiry involved a literature review, a survey of schools and a series of focus groups with pupils.

### Literature review

A scoping paper was written by the Assembly Research and Information Service in August 2011 considering the evidence on the potential benefits of school councils, issues and challenges around their effective implementation, and the factors and attributes of successful councils.

### Survey

The aim of the quantitative survey was to gather baseline information on the operation and experience of school councils in Northern Ireland. The evidence within the research scoping paper helped to inform the design of the questionnaire. After piloting, the survey was launched on the 9th January 2012 and sent out to all special, primary and post-primary schools by email via the C2K system.

The survey was sent out to 1,112 schools. A total of 289 responses were received, giving an overall response rate of 26%. Overall, there was a reasonable spread of respondents across school management type and Education and Library Board (ELB) area.

### Focus groups

The planned qualitative phase of the research aimed to provide more detailed information on the experiences of pupils taking part in school councils here, and the views of pupils whose school does not have a council.

Seven focus groups were conducted, of which five involved participants in school councils and two involved pupils whose school did not have a council. The Assembly's Education Officers facilitated the focus groups and Hansard transcribed the sessions. Each of the groups contained a number of schools. The profile of the groups by phase is outlined in the following table.

**Table 1: Profile of focus groups by phase**

School phase	With a school council	Number of groups	Total number of schools
Primary	Yes	2	6
	No	1	3
Post-primary	Yes	2	6
	No	1	1
Special	Yes	1	3
<b>Total</b>		<b>7</b>	<b>19</b>

### 3 Organisation of school councils

#### Profile of schools with a school council

Overall, 77% of respondents to the survey had a school council. However, it is possible that schools that have a council would be more inclined to respond to the survey, therefore this finding should be treated with some caution.

Post-primary schools were significantly more likely to report that they had a council than primary schools (93% compared to 68% of primaries). Single sex schools were more likely to state that they had a school council than mixed schools (97% compared to 74%): this finding is also statistically significant.

Survey results show that smaller primary schools (those with 89 pupils or fewer) were significantly less likely to have a school council than schools with 90 pupils or more (52% compared to 74%). Differences between Catholic maintained and controlled schools were small and not statistically significant in this regard.

#### Framework

The majority (58%) of school councils had met six times or more in the past 12 months, while a further 23% had met four to five times. A high proportion (95%) of respondents overall stated that their school council had a clearly defined purpose.

In the focus groups many participants described their purpose as trying to improve school life and as giving pupils in the school a chance to voice their opinions.

**Figure 1: Primary school focus group participant's picture describing their school council's purpose**



*“I think the job of the school council is to make the school in which you are a councillor a better place.” (Primary focus group participant with a school council)*

*“We give everyone a voice so they can make a difference to their own school.” (Post-primary focus group participant with a school council)*

The guidance suggests that to be as effective as possible, school councils should develop a formal constitution that provides a framework for how the council should be run.<sup>1</sup> In our survey, 53% of respondents stated that they had a formal constitution setting out guidelines and rules on how it should be run. Post-primary respondents were significantly more likely to report that their council had a constitution (78% compared to 53% of respondents from primary schools).

### Representation

The evidence also highlights the importance of including a broad range of pupils of different ages and abilities in order to support adequate representation on the school council.<sup>2</sup> Almost all respondents (99%) stated that their school council includes a range of pupils of different ages.

This finding is supported by evidence from the focus groups with pupils. Most participants highlighted that pupils of different ages, often one or two representative(s) of each year group, were involved in their school council. However in one primary school, only pupils in primary 7 were allowed to be councillors.

In the majority of schools that took part in the focus groups, councillors were elected on the basis of a pupil vote, often after making a presentation or speech. In one post-primary school an interview panel approach was used. In another post-primary school, elections had been abandoned as they were perceived to have become a ‘popularity contest’. They were replaced with a process whereby candidates wrote down their ideas for the council anonymously, and the teacher picked the candidates on the basis of the ideas.

*“We feel it is very effective the way we hold elections because the pupils vote for the council members and can say who they feel will be good in the council.” (Post-primary focus group participant with a school council)*

*“We had a vote last year, but it came down to whoever was friendly with that person, whoever was smartest or cleverest.” (Primary focus group participant with a school council)*

### Use of guidance

The Commissioner for Children and Young People (NICCY) developed the Democra School programme aiming to support and encourage the development of meaningful school councils.<sup>3</sup> Of the respondents to our survey:

- Less than three in ten (29%) schools were aware of and had used Democra School guidance;
- 44% stated that they were aware of the guidance but had not used it; and
- More than a quarter (27%) of schools were not aware of the guidance.

These findings are broadly supported by the focus groups with pupils, with the majority of participants stating that they had not heard of or used the guidance.

1 Democra School [online] Available at: <http://www.niccy.org/Publications/democra2>

2 For example Veitch (2009) ‘Participation in practice: an evaluation of the primary school council as a participatory tool’ *Childhoods Today*

3 Democra School – School Councils [online] Available at: <http://www.deni.gov.uk/index/85-schools/5-school-management/school-councils-2.htm>

## 4 Engagement and reporting

### Engagement

Respondents to the survey reported high levels of engagement by staff, with 98% reporting that members of staff are engaged in the work of the school council. The literature highlights the importance of school councils having explicit reporting mechanisms. In our survey most (93%) school councils report to other pupils and to the principal (90%). A much smaller proportion (30%) of school councils reports to the school's Board of Governors.

The findings from the focus groups were similar to those from the survey. Most participants described having a key contact in the school, often a teacher or the vice-principal, who then take forward ideas deemed to be viable to the school's principal. Some school councils had closer contact with the principal; however few reported having contact with the Board of Governors.

A number of participants highlighted the importance of genuine staff engagement with the school council, with some suggesting they would like more involvement from senior management.

*"In the past it might not have been as effective as it is now because with the new principal, she really wants to make a difference and give the pupils a voice." (Post-primary focus group participant with a school council)*

*"It is better if you have teachers involved because it is a back-up. They give some ideas as well, so the pupils can also learn from the teachers." (Special school focus group participant with a school council)*

One school participating in the focus groups that did not have a school council stated that a council had previously been established in their school, but had fallen through because the teacher who started it was unable to continue with it.

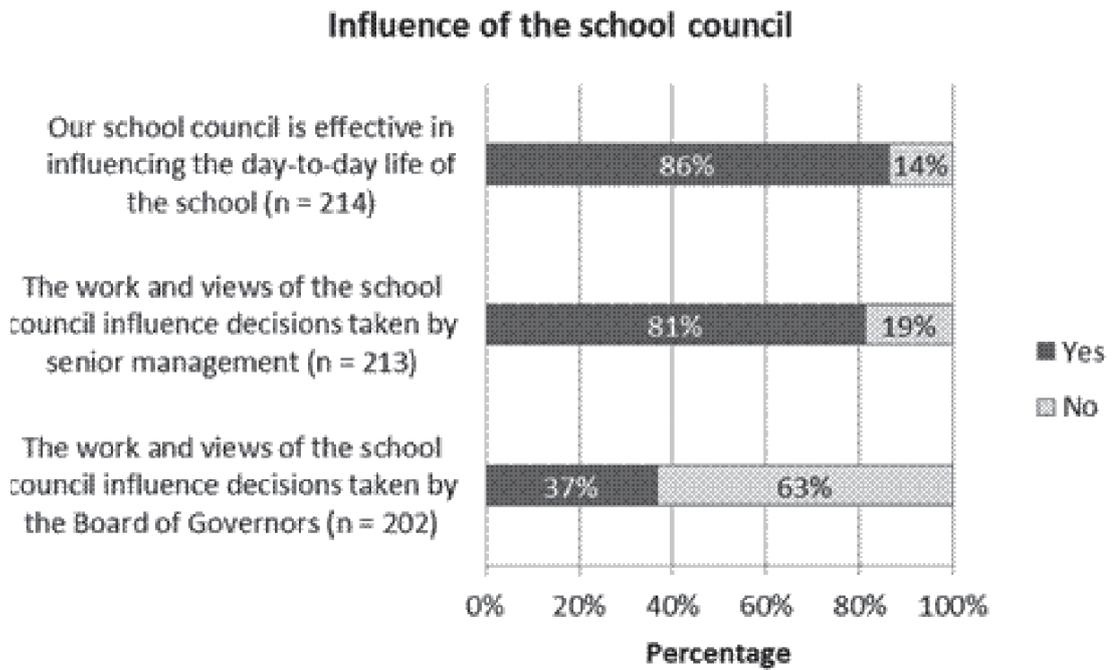
Most focus group participants stated that their school council reports to other pupils in the school, using school newspapers, assemblies, class or form groups or noticeboards to do so. However, some pupils indicated that other pupils may not understand what the school council does, and may not always be interested in its work.

## 5 Influence

### Level of influence

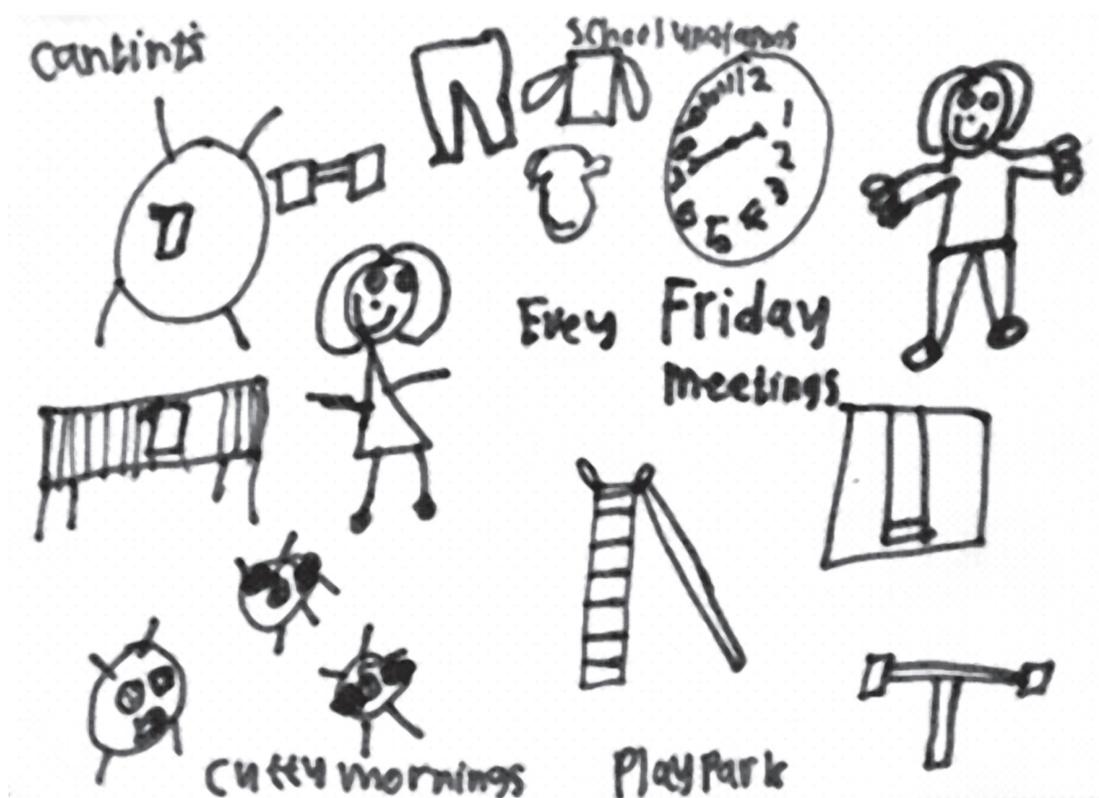
A high proportion (86%) of respondents to the survey believed that their school council was effective in influencing the day-to-day life of the school. Levels of influence reported by respondents are illustrated in the following figure.

**Figure 2: Survey findings on the influence of the school council**



In addition, a high proportion (86%) of survey respondents stated that their school council can demonstrate that it has had a positive impact both on pupils who participate in the council and those who do not. Most of the participants in the focus groups felt that their school council had been successful in changing elements of life in school.

**Figure 3: Special school focus group participant's picture illustrating aspects of school life influenced by their council**



**"We got a new uniform, a play park, new tables in the dining hall. We do coffee mornings to raise money for charity"**

(Special school focus group participant)

#### **Areas of influence**

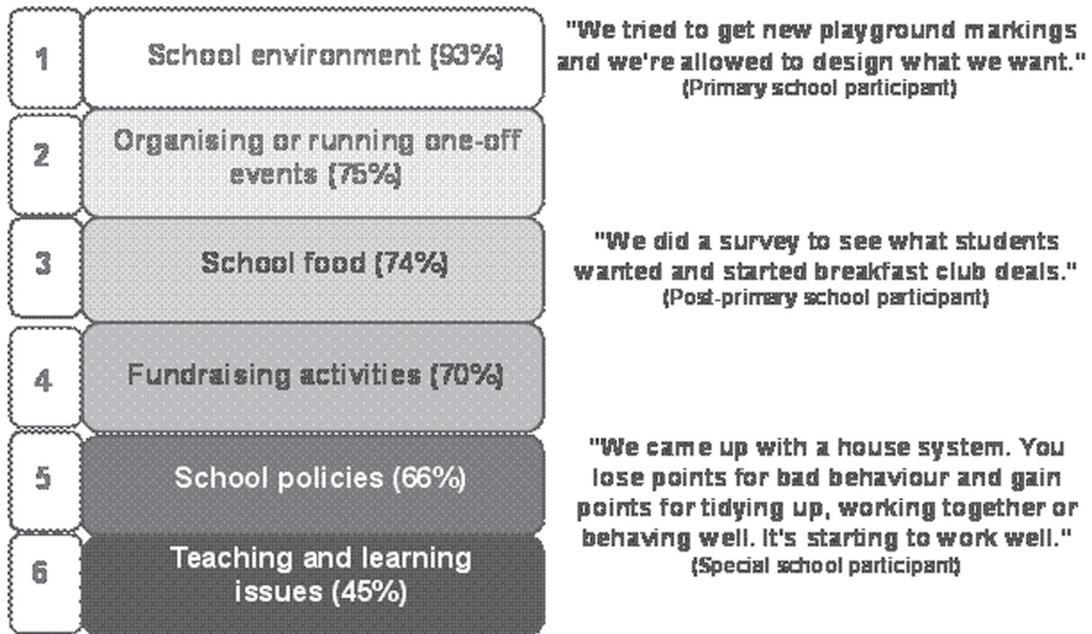
A key factor in the success of a school council cited in the literature is that pupils must have influence in matters that are central to their daily life in school. The evidence warns against school councils simply taking charge of running events and fundraising, as this can overshadow the purpose of the school council.<sup>4</sup>

Responses to the survey indicate that school councils here most often influence the school environment (93% of responses). Three quarters of school councils (75%) were involved in running one-off events and 70% played a role in fundraising activities.

In the focus groups with school council members, organising one-off events was most frequently cited by participants as the area where school councils have the greatest influence. This was followed by raising money for the school and school uniform. Organising one off events was also most often cited by participants who did not have a school council as the area where they had the greatest influence in their school.

Teaching and learning was most often cited as the area where school councils had the least influence. The following figure presents the results of the survey of schools regarding areas of influence, together with quotations from the focus groups with pupils.

**Figure 4: Survey and focus group findings on areas of influence**



Source: survey of schools and focus groups with pupils

**Figure 5: Primary school focus group participant's picture illustrating aspects of school life influenced by their council**

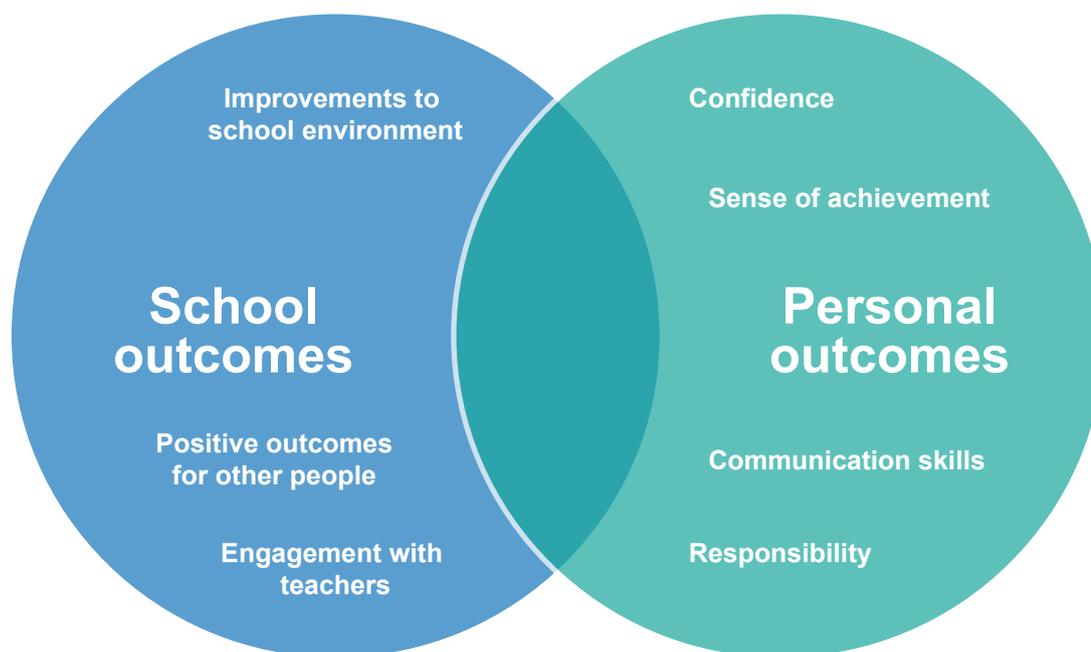


**"The school council has been involved in a sponsored silence, playground equipment and raising money."** (Primary focus group participant)

## 6 Outcomes

Participants in the focus groups discussed a range of outcomes from taking part in their school council. These included outcomes for the school, such as changes to the school environment or uniform, as well as personal outcomes. The following figure provides an overview of the main outcomes of school councils cited by participants in the focus groups.

**Figure 6: Main outcomes of participating in a school council cited by pupils**



As illustrated in the previous figure, many participants in the focus groups discussed a feeling of pride and sense of achievement as a result of being a school councillor. Many highlighted particular achievements, and others cited personal outcomes such as improved communication and organisational skills.

Figure 7: Special school focus group participant's perceptions of school council



**"We have empowerment so we can improve and make things better. We encourage people to work with us to improve behaviour, skills and compassion. We have lots and lots of ideas"**  
(Special school focus group participant)

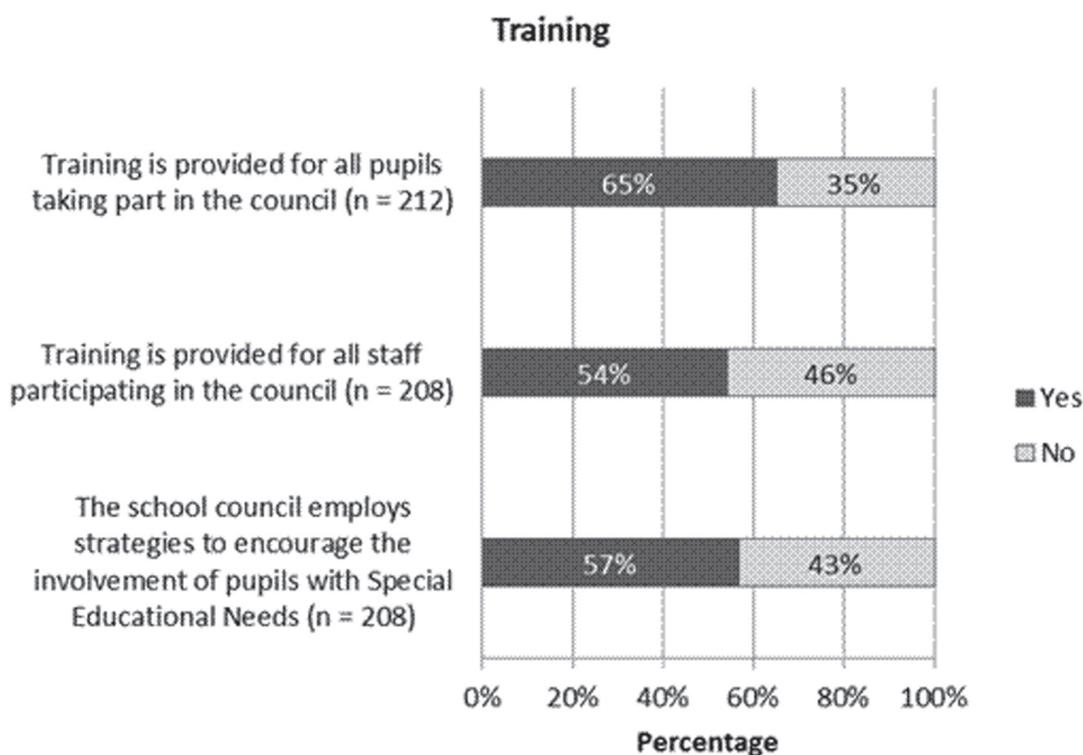
*"Before I took part in the council I had no confidence, now I am very, very confident."*  
(Special school focus group participant with a school council)

*"The new seating area we arranged was a lot of help for students, and they even came and thanked us for it."* (Post-primary focus group participant with a school council)

## 7 Training and support

There is broad agreement in the literature that participants in school councils (both pupils and staff) require training in order to support successful outcomes. Just under two thirds of respondents (65%) to the survey stated that training had been provided for all pupils taking part in the council. These findings and details of the proportion of schools whose staff have received training in this regard are illustrated in the following figure.

**Figure 8: Survey findings on the influence of the school council**



In the focus groups there was a mixture of pupils who had been provided with training and those who had not received any training. Where training had been provided, it tended to be provided by teachers, the principal or by other pupils who had previously been councillors.

*“The principal organised a couple of workshops before we got elected, on team-building and communication skills.”* (Post-primary focus group participant with a school council)

*“We learned from our last school councillors and our teacher who helps the school council.”* (Primary focus group participant with a school council)

*“We just sort of did it. We haven’t had any training on how to do things.”* (Primary focus group participant with a school council)

Most pupils in the focus groups did not feel that they needed more training, describing a preference to learn ‘on the job’. However, some pupils thought that a forum for sharing ideas across different school councils, such as a website, would be useful.

## 8 Reasons for not having a school council and other forms of engagement

Of the 68 schools responding to the survey that stated that they do not have a council, around 60% reported that they were considering or preparing to establish one. Some respondents stated that the development of a school council is set out within the school development plan and/ or that staff are receiving training in preparation.

*“Training on Circle Time formed part of staff development in the past two years. Now that this practice is firmly embedded throughout the curriculum we feel in a state of readiness to develop a school’s council. One teacher has already agreed and is signed up to attend training, with a view to starting this up immediately afterwards.”* (Primary survey respondent)

These findings are in line with those from the focus groups with pupils who did not have a council, as many schools participating were planning to establish a school council in the future.

The main reason reported by schools responding to the survey for not having or preparing to establish a school council was that there were other mechanisms in place for engagement that the school deemed sufficient. This was particularly the case in small schools, where pupils may have more direct, informal contact with teachers.

*“We are a very small primary school and children are regularly consulted during class time and circle time about their needs, wants and concerns...To take on another new initiative at this time would put unnecessary strain on staff who are already responsible for numerous areas of the curriculum.”* (Primary survey respondent)

In a small number of cases a school council was not considered appropriate, for example in special schools for pupils with profound learning difficulties, or due to a perception that school councils are not inclusive.

*“Our school is small and we found that a council type structure did not give any avenue to those who were quiet and lacking in confidence or the less able. Often it was pupils who “shouted the loudest” or who were the more able who were voted in and this could/ did in some cases lead to pressure on other pupils to avoid giving their opinion or being heard.”* (Post-primary survey respondent)

Other reasons provided for not establishing a school council were:

- Insufficient time to develop a council;
- School council not considered a priority;
- New school;
- Staff are unable or unwilling to commit time to the development of a council;

The majority of participants in the focus groups who did not have a school council stated that they would like to have one.

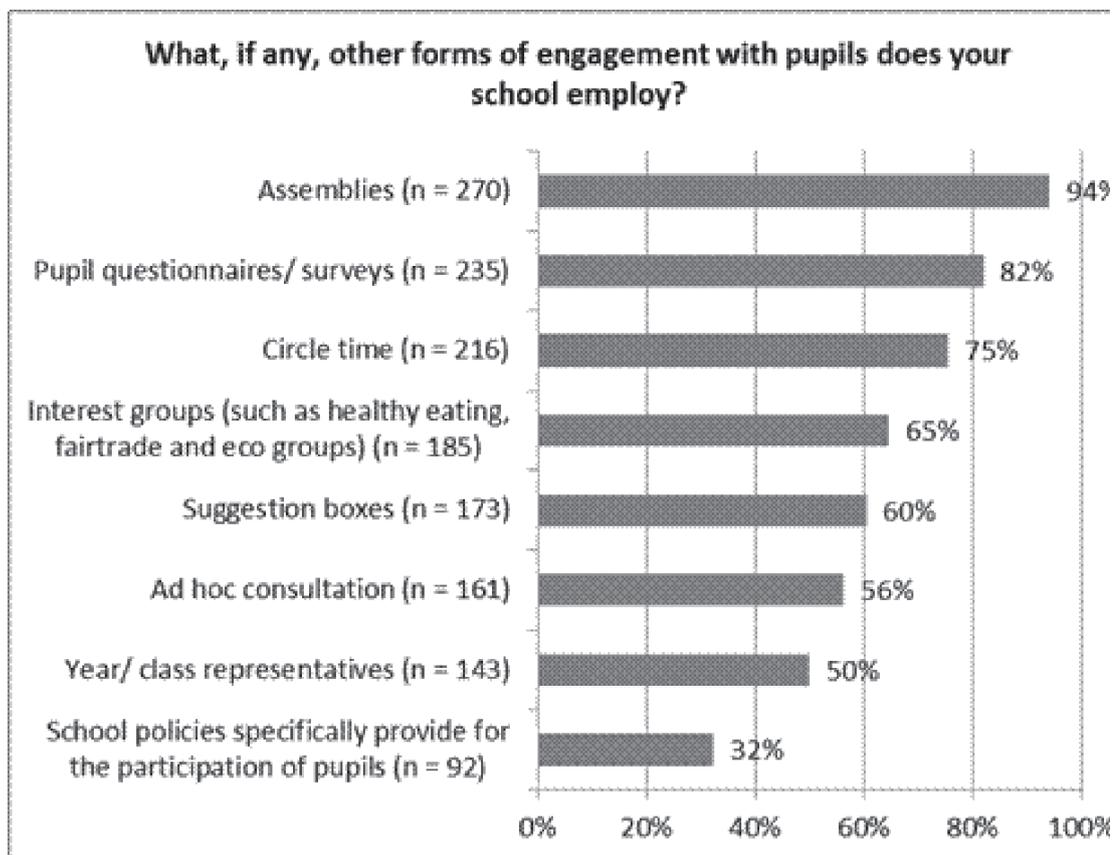
*“The pupils would be able to interact with other pupils and find out the issues that they think are important, rather than teachers forcing ideas about these issues onto pupils.”* (Post-primary focus group participant without a school council)

*“It would give us responsibility as pupils; that we would have our say.”* (Post-primary focus group participant without a school council)

### Other forms of engagement

The evidence highlights the importance of school councils being located within wider structures and practices in schools that promote participation. Authors suggest that in order for school councils to reach their potential, schools need to have a genuine and consistent commitment to pupil participation.<sup>5</sup> All respondents to the survey were asked what other forms of engagement with pupils they use. The responses to this question are illustrated in the following figure.

**Figure 9: Survey findings on other forms of engagement used**



In the focus groups, the majority of pupils felt that school councils were more useful than most other ways of being asked their views. However, they tended to acknowledge the importance of having a range of methods to engage pupils and some suggested that other approaches could complement the work of the school council.

*“Surveys are good and the school council can use them but not on their own. We have an eco-club in school and we work closely with them.”* (Primary focus group participant with a school council)

The pupils who did not have a school council who participated in the focus groups described a range of other approaches used in their school to engage them and ascertain their views. These included interest groups, designated teachers for cases such as bullying and speaking directly to class teachers or the principal. A majority of pupils thought that year or class representatives and interest groups were more effective ways of listening to pupils' views.

5 Inman, S. and Burke, H. (2002) *School councils: an apprenticeship in democracy?* London: Association of Teachers and Lecturers, Whitty, G. and Wisby, E. (2007) *Real Decision Making? School Councils in Action* London: Institute of Education

Many pupils who did not have a council highlighted the disadvantages of relying on individual teachers to share their views, with some suggesting that a more formal approach might be beneficial.

*“Some of them listen to you and some of them don’t. It depends what teacher it is and how busy they are.”* (Primary focus group participant without a school council)

## 9 Conclusion

This research has explored school councils in Northern Ireland, their operation and experiences. The findings suggest that there are positive outcomes for pupils involved in school councils, and highlight the importance of genuine staff engagement. The evidence highlights a number of areas that could be given further consideration.

- How schools could be encouraged to establish and support a school council, and to ensure that the council has a say in matters that are central to students' daily life in school;
- Whether teachers involved in school councils could benefit from specific training;
- The usefulness of school councils having increased contact with the Board of Governors, and how this might be facilitated;
- Ways in which pupils' achievements on school councils might be recognised and celebrated;
- Whether a forum for participants in school councils to share ideas and good practice would be beneficial, for example, through a website.





Northern Ireland  
Assembly

Appendix 4

# Written Submissions



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# Briefing Paper for the Education Committee Pupil Participation – Education Training Inspectorate

## Introduction

1. The purpose of this paper is to set out for the Education Committee, the background to and key characteristics of successful pupil participation in schools, and the challenges of promoting such characteristics in schools, based on inspection evidence from schools in Northern Ireland (NI).
2. Outcomes for children and young people in their learning and in their lives often improve when they are involved actively in decision-making. The increasing recognition of the rights of children and young people to be heard and to have their views taken seriously is expressed in local and international developments in legislation and policy.
3. The United Kingdom is a signatory to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. Article 12 indicates ‘All children have a right to be able to give their opinion when adults are making a decision that will affect them, and adults should take it seriously.’
4. The NI curriculum places the learner at the heart of the educational process, through its overarching aim of empowering young people to achieve their potential and to make informed and responsible decisions throughout their lives, and the curricular objectives of developing each young person as an individual as a contributor to society; and as a contributor to the economy and the environment. Within this context, pupil participation permeates all aspects of the curriculum in NI and inspection evidence confirms that good schools are developing the ‘pupil voice’ very well.
5. Other key references which indicate the need for active pupil engagement and appropriate participative structures within schools in NI are contained within Every School a Good School, School Development Planning Regulations (2010) and Together Towards Improvement.
6. The Education and Training Inspectorate does not evaluate individual aspects of pupil engagement but, may make reference to effective practice if it has been observed during inspection. Inspection evidence indicates that the extent to which young people are listened to is dependent on the specific vision, culture and values of the school.
7. Key elements of the school’s provision are considered in the evaluation of the quality of pastoral care. The quality of pastoral care and the safeguarding of children and young people has been, and remains, a positive feature in the schools inspected. Most (76%) of the post-primary schools inspected during 2010-11 provided a good or better quality of pastoral care to their pupils; 58% were very good or outstanding. Case study exemplars of such practice which highlight pupil engagement are featured in Annex A.
8. In contrast, in the less effective practice, the need to promote the ‘pupil voice’ may be identified as an area for improvement. The quality of provision depends significantly on the ethos, effectiveness of the leadership within the school and on opportunities for the professional development and empathy of key members of staff. When such aspects are less effective meaningful opportunities for pupil participation are limited.
9. Possibilities for positive engagement with children and young people observed during inspection include through:
  - the provision for learning for life and work including, in particular, the personal development and local and global citizenship programmes;
  - UNICEF Rights Respecting School initiative;
  - contribution to the European Parliament in Brussels;

- contribution to the self evaluation process using quality indicators at curricular and pastoral level;
  - Pupil/Year/School Councils/ECO Clubs;
  - pupil-led classwork and workshop activities;
  - school assemblies;
  - school counselling service;
  - whole school surveys/questionnaires;
  - election of office bearers;
  - review and development of school policies; and
  - input into quality learning and teaching, school development planning, governance; and teaching appointments.
10. In the very good or outstanding exemplars of pupil participation, key decisions are informed by ‘the pupil voice’ including improving learning and teaching and school policies.
11. Involvement in the democratic process of electing a School Council can motivate pupils to participate in the school and wider community. Inspection evidence confirms that the degree to which Councils can inform school decisions varies. The focus can remain on operational matters such as school rules rather than on more strategic matters, such as approaches to learning and teaching. Variation can exist between pupils’ experiences in primary and post-primary phases. To be successful, Councils must be truly representative, engage meaningfully with all and effect improvement.
12. While more ‘visible’ types of mechanisms including School Councils are important, the means to support all children and young people in developing the skills, opportunities and confidence in expressing views through curricular opportunities has more impact in determining how fully participatory the school culture will be.
13. In the context of pupil participation, children and young people learn about the democratic process, the importance of engaging with others who may have different views, and the need to achieve consensus and to work together, in the best interests of all members of the school community. Wider consultation leads to young people feeling more valued and respected and engaging more with the learning process; teachers gain greater insight into how pupils are learning and can respond more effectively. It is particularly important that the voices of young people, who are at risk of becoming disengaged, are heard, so that their sense of self-worth is raised. An environment where participation is fully embedded in the ethos, values, practice and professional relationships of a school remains key for success.
14. External professional development opportunities for staff in listening to and engaging with children and young people are crucially important and are currently limited. The contracting Curriculum Advisory and Support Service has to give priority to the development of literacy and numeracy and to supporting schools within the formal intervention process.
15. Participation in schools is ‘a shared journey’ in which effective methods of consulting with children and young people can enable them to make a positive difference and to achieve better outcomes for themselves and for society, the economy and the environment, throughout their lives.

## Pupil Participation Case Studies

### 1. Primary School

Formal structures for pupil participation begin in year four, with individual class councils in all classes from year four to seven feeding into the overall Pupil Council. All children in each class vote for three peers to hold the positions of chairperson, vice chairperson and secretary for a period of six weeks. Representation is balanced in terms of religious affiliation and gender and the teachers involve the children fully in the consideration of attaining this representative balance.

Within the year four class, in order to develop the children's early understanding of participatory processes, the teacher models the post holder roles and responsibilities and facilitates the debate style process for conducting class council business. By upper key stage two, the children are able to operate their class council meetings independently and confidently.

The class councils meet formally every Monday for twenty minutes to raise and consider no more than four items of business. Agendas and minutes are held in a class council folder which the class reps take forward each Thursday to the Pupil Council meeting. A teacher, who fulfils the function of Pupil Council co-ordinator, facilitates the meetings by helping the children to manage their time effectively and to keep interactions pertinent and to the point. The children record their agendas and minutes in a pupil council folder within the C2K public folder and on the pastoral care notice board every week. Following Pupil Council meetings, the class council reps feed back outcomes and decisions to the classes at the subsequent Monday meeting.

Pupil Council representatives have presented their ideas to both the Parents' Council and Board of Governors and consequently, have successfully impacted change.

In addition, the children in year six operate the school's Eco Committee using the same structures and practices as the Pupil and Class Councils. This extends the opportunities for pupil participation further as only those children who do not hold Class or Pupil Council positions are able to be post holders. Their current areas of work in school include, for example, monitoring and reducing the use of electricity, reducing, reusing and recycling school waste materials such as paper and organising the school's fruit shop for the promotion of healthy snacks. The school has been awarded the Green Eco Flag three times and on each occasion, the children have represented the school's work to the adjudicating authority.

As a result of their opportunities for participation, the children have been able to:

- contribute meaningfully to the decision making process in relation to matters affecting them such as
  - aspects of their learning;
  - school social and fundraising events;
  - the purchase of equipment;
  - caring for themselves and the environment;
  - nominating local and global charities to support; and,
  - translating a range of important ideas into actions for improvement.

The school's well-embedded structures highlight the importance the staff, parents and governors place on pupil participation being genuinely child-centred and on developing the children's understanding that they are positively empowered within a school ethos committed to openness and inclusion.

### **Extract from Inspection Report (January 2011)**

*'The quality of the arrangements for pastoral care in the school is outstanding. An inclusive and very good learning environment is a consequence of a well-constructed pastoral care system that all staff, children and parents understand. There is an appropriate emphasis on building up the children's self-esteem by involving purposefully the children with their learning. The 'Class Council' and 'Pupil Council' system provide the children with a genuine consultative process whereby their views are presented on future improvements within the school and on changes within the pastoral policy.'*

*The Eco Committee organise the school's fruit shop from which the children can purchase a healthy snack at break time. The 'Green -fingers Club' and the 'Pupil Council' all contribute purposefully to school policy and the practices which encourage the children to adopt healthy lifestyles.'*

## **2. Special School**

Most special schools have school councils.

All learners in special schools have Individual Education Plans and most contribute to their evaluation and to learning careers planning and transition.

Three young pupils, two with special educational needs, visited the European Parliament in Brussels in November 2011 to speak about their views on inclusion as part of the 'Voices of Young People.'

The objectives of the conference included:

- to fully involve young people both with and without disabilities and/or special educational needs from secondary and vocational education;
- to listen to the young people and see what progress has been made in practice since 2007 with regards to inclusive education in their respective countries; and
- to highlight important issues raised by all the young people regarding benefits of inclusive education and challenges still to overcome.

The event provided young people from across Europe, both with and without disabilities and/or special educational needs, with the opportunity to make their voices heard. They expressed their views on inclusive education based on their own experiences, as well as highlighting challenges and their requirements and hopes for the future.

## **3. Post-Primary**

### **Extract from Inspection Report (January 2010)**

*'The highly rigorous culture of self evaluation that underpins the development work at all levels to quality assure the work of the college.'*

An important current dimension of the self evaluation process is the 'pupil voice.'

Within the school there are vibrant Pupil Leadership Teams and Pupil Councils. The pupils are consulted fully in relation to key areas that affect their lives. Both provide suitable forums for young people from all year groups, to voice their opinions and to bring matters of concern to the Senior Leadership Team.

Using focus groups and highly structured questionnaires, the pupils' views are sought on a variety of themes which include:

- Clarity of expectations
- Their experiences as learners

- Quality of working relationships
- Making a contribution to school life
- Listening and responding to the 'pupil voice'
- Well-being (including views about Being Healthy and Feeling Safe)
- Behaviour for Learning

The feedback received forms an integral part of the whole school development planning process for learning and care, guidance and support.

The school is involved presently in a project funded by the General Teaching Council of Northern Ireland which includes researchers from the Queen's University of Belfast. The project facilitates the observation of 'live' classroom lessons by groups of teachers to collect data on aspects of learning and teaching; data is analysed collaboratively with the assistance of pupils with differing learning needs and aptitudes. Initial findings indicate that including the pupils in learning and teaching research is a highly positive experience for all concerned. In the words of one teacher *'I am totally in favour of pupil involvement in the evaluation process reflecting on both their own learning (and that of others) and their teacher's teaching. So far, we have gathered some very useful information from the students into what could be taught differently. On reflection this may be too late; it may be more appropriate to put the students in the pedagogical driving seat and allow them to work alongside us in the planning of lessons'*.

Having completed this first cycle of the project groups of pupils are then more fully involved in the process of decision-making and in the co-construction of learning, leading to increased levels of motivation and to better outcomes in the classroom for all.

# Department of Education

## Education Inquiry into School Councils

### DE Advance Briefing Paper for Meeting on 16 November 2011

#### **Current Position**

1. As part of the Department's school improvement policy, DE wants to see a greater focus on engagement within schools, particularly with pupils. DE wants to see more schools following the example set by many, involving pupils more directly in decisions on the running of the school. This is consistent with Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child and the right of the young person to have their voice heard on issues that affect them. School Councils offer an important model to support engagement. However, DE does not wish to prescribe the means but, rather, wants to encourage all schools to find meaningful ways of giving pupils a voice – and of listening and responding to the views of young people. DE would not wish to create a system whereby schools 'must' have a school council which could risk them becoming a mechanistic or tokenistic way of implying that pupil voice is valued.
2. The key references for pupil engagement (including school councils) are contained within Every School a Good School, School Development Planning and Together Towards Improvement. Not all schools have school councils and DE is not in a position to know if those which are in existence operate effectively. However, DE supports and encourages the development of school councils, on a voluntary basis, through existing policies.
3. In Every School A Good School: A Policy for School Improvement, DE aimed to 'provide a resource to support school councils and to encourage all schools to set up councils or other forums to ensure that pupils have a voice in decisions regarding the running of the school'. DE has referenced the NICCY 'Democra School' resource pack on the DE website.

#### **School Inspections**

4. The Education and Training Inspectorate does not evaluate individual aspects of pupil engagement such as school councils but, as with any aspect of school life, will make reference to good practice if it has been observed during the inspection. The most successful work in pupil engagement is where schools increasingly involve their pupils in decision making processes because they believe it is the right thing to do rather than because they have been given a directive to do so.

#### **Effective Pupil Engagement**

5. In addition to school councils, effective pupil engagement involves the appropriate use of, for example:
  - a. pupil questionnaires and pupil focus group interviews as a formal part of the school's self-evaluation process (into for example the quality and effectiveness of teaching- to compare with teachers' views);
  - b. use of the form period to investigate pupils views of specific school development issues;
  - c. pupils' formal assessment of the module at the end of each teaching module when then lead to improvement;
  - d. pupil led class-work as a result of review and consultation;

- 
- e. pupil input to reviewing applications for teaching posts;
  - f. pupil membership of the school's Board of Governors;
  - g. pupil membership of PTA;
  - h. pupil election of prefects and monitors;
  - i. comment boxes for anonymous comments;
  - j. pupil led publications or contributions to school publications; and
  - k. Eco Schools - pupil teams which check the compliance of the school to its green credentials.
6. It is important that schools continue to explore ways in which all pupils views can be accessed and heard and not just the most articulate. Where pupils are contributing to what is largely an adult group, such as governors it is important that they are given adequate training in understanding their role so that they can participate fully rather than their presence be viewed as in any way tokenistic.

#### **Way Forward**

7. There had been previous discussions with NICCY around the introduction of a statutory duty on each school to have a school council. However, it was subsequently agreed that a school council in every school was not necessarily the goal, but that the focus should be on participative structures which were appropriate to schools. NICCY has produced useful detail on school councils which DE will take into account in moving forward in its consideration of what might be required in relation to the introduction of wider participative structures.
8. The Education Committee's Inquiry findings will be relevant to the work which DE plans to progress on this and officials would be keen to keep in touch with progress on the Committee's Inquiry.

Department of Education  
November 2011

## NCB Northern Ireland

### NCB NI submission for presentation to the Committee for Education Inquiry into School Councils meeting on 18th April 2012

#### NCB NI Participation Support Programme for Schools

The presentation will be led by Celine McStravick, Director, NCB NI & Gill Hassard, Participation Officer, NCB NI

#### **Background to NCB**

NCB Northern Ireland (NCB NI) is a department of NCB, a research and development charity, which works to enhance the outcomes of children in Northern Ireland, through support to children and young people and to those who work with or for them. Our work programme includes practice development, direct participation work with children and young people, research and evaluation projects, as well as dissemination activity through publications, resources and events all aimed at improving outcomes for children and young people. NCB Northern Ireland works in partnership with several fora concerned with children's issues and works directly with the Northern Ireland Assembly to promote the views of children and young people.

NCB NI have operated in Northern Ireland for over 15 years specifically in policy relevant research; including:

- Attitudes to difference: young people's attitudes to & experiences of contact with people from different minority ethnic and migrant communities in Northern Ireland, (2010), NCB.
- New to Northern Ireland: a study of the issues faced by migrant, asylum seeking and refugee children in Northern Ireland (2010) NCB.
- A review of the use of secure accommodation in Northern Ireland (2008) NCB.
- Working with challenging and disruptive situations in residential child care: Sharing effective practice, with Rosemary Kilpatrick et al (2008), Social Care Institute for Excellence (SCIE) London.
- The day care needs of young children with disabilities in Northern Ireland (2008) NCB and NICMA.

Over the past three years NCB NI have introduced participation and practice development work streams gleaning best practice information from our experience in England. Our participation portfolio includes:

Young NCB NI, a participation project of NCB, was set up in October 2008 to help young people across Northern Ireland influence policy decisions and have their voices heard on issues that affect them. It also affords members an opportunity to develop a range of useful life skills, to learn about policy development and governance and to meet and exchange ideas and experiences with other young people from across Northern Ireland. The group has its own advisory board to decide issues for members to work on so that the agenda is set by young people, for young people.

Building a Culture of Participation, a one day course exploring how an organisation's culture can be established to support children and young people's active and meaningful participation. The course is based on developing participants' skills and knowledge in participation, involving self and organisational analysis as well as action planning. The course

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was developed from NCB research and is supported by an in-depth research report and a handbook.

Participation Support Programme (PSP) in Schools. NCB NI offers a bespoke programme to support the participation of children and young people within the school environment.

### **The development of PSP in schools**

In 2009 NCB NI was conducting research within schools across Northern Ireland and whilst working closely with Principals and staff identified clear gaps for training in participation, for both staff and pupils in order to support successful outcomes. Following this NCB NI met with school principals, Education and Library boards, the Chair of Post Primary Principals Association and various organisations such as; Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People (NICCY), and UNICEF's Rights Respecting Schools and discovered that there was indeed a high demand for additional support to schools to embed participation.

Hence we developed a bespoke programme combining all of our skills and evidence gathered in Northern Ireland and England to develop PSP to support the participation of children & young people within the school environment.

Notably, NCB leads 'Participation Works' (<http://www.participationworks.org.uk/>) which is a partnership of seven national children and young people's agencies that enable organisations to effectively involve children and young people in the development, delivery and evaluation of services that affect their lives. The information and resources available have helped inform our development of PSP in Northern Ireland and also provides an online resource of support to schools, including the 'How to Guides' for schools.

### **The PSP curriculum**

NCB recognise that whilst Student Councils and other democratic structures are a positive step to pupil participation, it is crucial that they are situated within wider practices that promote pupil participation in schools and so the PSP aims to take a holistic approach to embedding participation in the school environment, working with the Senior Management Team (SMT) as well as teaching staff and pupils.

NCB NI acknowledge that each school is different and so the starting point of the Participation Support Programme is to meet with the Principal and SMT to discuss the current levels of participation within the school and complete a baseline audit questionnaire.

Following on, NCB deliver a bespoke programme which includes:

- Delivery of workshops with pupils to embed participation within the school.
- Auditing current participation levels in the school via a school survey developed in the workshops by the pupils.
- Providing staff training that explores how the school's culture can be established to support children and young people's active and meaningful participation. This training develops participants' skills and knowledge in participation, involving self and organisational analysis as well as action planning.
- Assessment and analysis of audit and training.
- Development of Participation Action Plan for school.
- Staff are provided with follow up support to improve participation levels.
- Follow up review to determine participation levels in the school and the schools individual PSP outcomes.

### **Funding**

During our development phase and discussions with Principals, we became aware that schools have limited access to funding for participation work, hence we sourced independent funding for this support programme.

In 2011 NCB NI secured three years funding from Atlantic Philanthropies to support our participation programme and to date have delivered our PSP to three schools and are in discussions with two other schools to begin working in the latter half of 2012.

### **Challenges**

- Critical to the success of this programme is seeing the management team at the beginning of the process. This can prove difficult due to the time constraints in the school calendar. However, we have been able to slot into the In-set training programmes within the school year.
- Funding has also been a challenge as schools do not have specific funds set aside for training for participation and resources to sustain the commitment.
- Meeting the demand for this support service. We currently have a waiting list of schools who are interested in availing of this support programme.
- As with all training the schools will need additional support, including refresher training each year to both staff and pupils, especially for the intake of new pupils at the start of each academic year.

### **Feedback & Evaluation**

So far the feedback from the evaluations of this programme has been extremely positive:

Following the student workshop, Lismore Comprehensive School, Craigavon said “They (Student Council members) have commented on the positive working relationship which was seen to emerge throughout yesterdays training and in particular the contribution from some of the junior members”.

A SMT member from Clounagh Junior High School, Portadown commented “It (the teacher training) exceeded my expectations in that I felt it led my train of thought to develop and become more open to the concept of pupil participation”.

### **Contact**

For further information regarding NCB NI participation programmes please contact Gill Hassard on Tel: 028 9089 1730 or email: [ghassard@ncb.org.uk](mailto:ghassard@ncb.org.uk)

# Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People (NICCY)

## ‘Democra-School’ and Democratic Structures in Schools

### Briefing for the Northern Ireland Assembly Education Committee

#### Summary Points

**16 November 2011**

The full briefing paper presents details of work undertaken by the Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People (NICCY) to promote the establishment and development of school councils and democratic structures in schools.

#### Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People (NICCY)

NICCY was created in accordance with The Commissioner for Children and Young People (Northern Ireland) Order 2003 to safeguard and promote the rights and best interests of children and young people in Northern Ireland.

#### Research and Policy Context

- There is a considerable body of evidence which documents the benefits of school councils for the school community, pupils’ personal development and learning and towards supporting school policy development.
- The Government has an obligation to protect children’s rights through its ratification of the UNCRC. Article 12 of the Convention, which enshrines the right of the child to have their views heard, listened to and taken seriously, is clearly relevant to the development of school councils. Various pieces of education legislation in Northern Ireland also address the importance and value of consulting pupils

#### ‘Democra-School’

- Democra-School is concerned with the voice of the pupil and promoting democracy in schools across Northern Ireland, through the development of appropriate democratic structures, including school councils. NICCY designed the resource to support schools to establish effective and successful school councils. In providing feedback on their experience, pupils and teachers commented on a broad range of positive outcomes.
- In the process of undertaking work on school councils, NICCY surveyed schools to identify the number of schools councils currently in existence. 207 schools indicated that they had a school council.

#### NICCY’s engagement with key educational stakeholders

- NICCY has engaged with key educational stakeholders throughout its work on school councils. This has included meetings with the teaching unions, teachers, academics, members of the Northern Ireland Executive and the Department of Education.
- Teacher unions expressed their support, in principle, for the ‘Democra-School’ programme and indicated their willingness to support schools interested in establishing school councils.
- NICCY initially advocated for the introduction of appropriate legislation for school councils (similar to the School Councils Regulations introduced in Wales). Following further engagement with DE, it was considered more expedient to work collaboratively with the Department to support the development of policy guidance. DE has endorsed ‘Democra-School’ Guidance on its website.

- To date, NICCY has discussed school councils and appropriate policy guidance with various Education Ministers on three occasions and with Departmental officials on four occasions. DE expressed its commitment to move the process forward and requested NICCY identify key issues which should be addressed in policy guidance. A briefing was provided in November 2010.
- In February 2011, DE confirmed that a draft circular of policy guidance had been prepared for internal consultation. Unfortunately, due to the Assembly elections, this process was then delayed. At a meeting with the current Education Minister, a commitment was given to review DE's work on the issue of school councils and to update NICCY on plans.

### **Conclusion**

While there have been positive developments in the course of NICCY's work on school councils over the past 6 years, NICCY has been disappointed by the delays to introduce policy guidance and believes that DE should urgently introduce a policy in order that children and young people can effectively and meaningfully participate in decision-making in their schools.

# 'Democra-School' and Democratic Structures in Schools

## Briefing for the Northern Ireland Assembly Education Committee

**16 November 2011**

This briefing paper presents details of work undertaken by the Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People (NICCY) to promote the establishment and development of school councils and democratic structures in schools. The paper will;

- Outline the role and duties of NICCY;
- Consider the rationale for school councils and democratic structures and reference relevant policies which support these;
- Describe NICCY's 'Democra-School' programme, and;
- Provide information detailing NICCY's engagement with key educational stakeholders in relation to school councils and democratic structures.

### **1.0 The Role and Duties of the Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People (NICCY)**

NICCY was created in accordance with The Commissioner for Children and Young People (Northern Ireland) Order 2003 to safeguard and promote the rights and best interests of children and young people in Northern Ireland. Under Articles 7 (2)(3) of this legislation, NICCY has a mandate to keep under review the adequacy and effectiveness of law, practice and services relating to the rights and best interests of children and young people by relevant authorities. The remit of the Office is children and young people from birth up to 18 years or 21 years if the young person is disabled or in the care of Social Services.

In order to fulfil its duties, NICCY undertakes a broad range of activities. This includes responding to queries and complaints regarding services for children and young people and supporting them and their families in legal proceedings against public bodies, scrutinising legislation and policy and commissioning research into issues affecting children and young people. In addition, NICCY also creates effective participation opportunities for children and young people and actively supports good participative practices by other organisations.

In determining how to carry out her functions, the Commissioner's paramount consideration is the rights of the child and NICCY bases all of its work on the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC).

### **2.0 A Rationale for School Councils and Democratic Structures**

A School Council may be defined as an elected group of pupils who have been chosen by their peers to represent their views, concerns or experiences, usually with the aim of improving different aspects of school life.

School councils have become an increasingly common feature in primary, post-primary and special schools and their benefits have been highlighted by a range of educational bodies and organisations including DfEE Advisory Group on Citizenship (1998)<sup>1</sup>, the Secondary Heads Association (2003)<sup>2</sup> and Ofsted (2006)<sup>3</sup>. It is important to note at the outset that although a school council is the most common method of implementing democracy in schools, there are other forms of equally effective democratic representation. Schools may identify class,

1 Crick Report (1998). Education for Citizenship and the Teaching of Democracy in Schools. Final Report of the Advisory Group on Citizenship. London: QCA.

2 Trafford, B (2003). Schools Councils, School Democracy, School Improvement. Leicester: Secondary Heads Association

3 Ofsted (2006). Improving Behaviour: Lessons learned from HMI monitoring of secondary schools where behaviour has been judged unsatisfactory (November). [www.ofsted.gov.uk](http://www.ofsted.gov.uk)

form or year group representatives to convey pupils' views or undertake to consult regularly with pupils about issues affecting them using appropriate media such as surveys or class consultations.

There is a considerable body of evidence which documents the benefits of school councils for the school community, pupils' personal development and learning and towards supporting school policy development.

## **2.1 A Positive Impact on the School Community**

Research indicates that the establishment of school councils can be beneficial to pupils, teachers and the wider school community. They can create a more positive school environment and generate greater inclusivity by bringing together pupils, staff, the senior management team, and boards of governors. Evidence indicates that school councils can contribute to a reduction in dropout rates in schools<sup>4</sup> and positively impact on school ethos and teacher-pupil relationships<sup>5</sup>. Having a school council has also been seen to have a positive impact on pupils' behaviour and to create a greater sense of ownership of the school and its activities for pupils<sup>6</sup>.

## **2.2 Encouraging Pupils' Personal Development**

In relation to pupils' personal development, the establishment of a school council gives pupils an opportunity to acquire a range of valuable skills<sup>7</sup>, including those of debating, leadership, negotiation and teamwork, which will be of benefit to them in later life. Positive participation can help build children and young people's self-esteem, self-efficacy and ability to express themselves. It enables pupils to take responsibility for projects, and to demonstrate they can manage and bring such projects to a successful conclusion.

## **2.3 Enhancing Pupils' Learning**

Research into the benefits of school councils has sought to provide evidence to support anecdotal claims that participation improves attainment. In a study of his own school using value-added measures, Trafford (2003) found an association between pupil voice and improved attainment<sup>8</sup>. In a separate study, Hannam (2001) compared similar comprehensive schools that did and did not have provision for pupil participation, and the findings also identified a perceptible positive difference<sup>9</sup>.

Research also suggests that consultation with pupils concerning teaching and learning can bring about a range of positive outcomes. These include enhancing teachers' understanding of pupils' responses and attitudes towards particular aspects of teaching and learning, supporting individual learners who find learning difficult and contributing towards the development of and experimentation with new approaches<sup>10</sup>. Furthermore, it is suggested that if pupils are consulted about teaching and learning, they are more likely to better understand the learning process and to regard learning as a serious matter<sup>11</sup>.

Democratic participation is explored through the Northern Ireland Curriculum, and particularly through Local and Global Citizenship. One of the key concepts within this is 'Democracy and

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4 Monahan, L. (1999). *Moving Forward with Pupils*: IAPCE.

5 Davies, L., Williams C. & Yamashita, H. (2006). *Inspiring Schools – Impact and Outcomes: taking up the challenge of pupil participation*. London: Carnegie.

6 Ofsted, op.cit.

7 Schools Council, UK. <http://www.schoolcouncils.org>

8 Trafford, op.cit.

9 Hannam, D (2001). *A Pilot Study to Evaluate the Impact of the Student Participation Aspects of the Citizenship Order on Standards of Education in Secondary Schools*. Report to the DFEE. London: DFEE.

10 James, M. & Pollard, P (2006). *Improving teaching and learning in schools: a commentary by the Teaching and Learning Research Programme*. Swindon: ESRC.

11 Flutter, J. & Ruddock J. (2004). *'Consulting Pupils: What's in it for Schools?'* Routledge: Falmer.

Active Participation', which aims to explore how young people can take part in and influence democratic processes. This requires that young people have the opportunity to investigate different ways to participate in school and society, and uses the example of school councils as an example of how schools can develop children and young people's understanding of democratic structures, enhance their insights into decision-making processes and assist in their development to become active citizens in the wider community.

## **2.4 Contribution to School Policy Development**

The contribution made by a school council to the development of school policy can have significant benefits for pupils and the school. It can provide a formalised channel of communication between pupils, the senior management team and board of governors and serve as a 'sounding board' for the senior management team and board of governors. Clearly, school policies are far more likely to be successful where they are clearly understood and supported by all partners within the school community.

Research indicates that pupils, overwhelmingly, wish to be involved in participative decision making in schools<sup>12</sup>. And while pupils are likely to take a lead role in the establishment and operation of a school council, there are important roles for boards of governors and principals in supporting the establishment and ongoing development of school councils. Therefore for school councils and other structures to be successful, it is vital that all members of the school community are committed to the aims and objectives and willing to play their part in their operation.

## **3.0 The Policy Context – Support for Pupils' Participation and School Councils**

### **3.1 Children's Rights and Participation: the UNCRC**

Pupils' participation in schools can be argued for on a number of grounds<sup>13</sup>.

Essentially, the education system exists for pupils; they are consumers of school education, along with their parents and as such, it may be argued, they hold consumer rights. Ensuring their participation in that system and providing opportunities for them to feed back on their experiences should therefore be paramount. Investment should be made to make sure the views of children and young people are represented and services built around their needs. A school council provides an opportunity for pupils to engage in a structured partnership with teachers, parents and school managers in the operation of their school. In terms of moral obligations, it may also be argued that children and young people have a right to take part in matters which concern them.

With regard to legal obligations, the UNCRC states that it is the child's right to participate and to have a say in matters affecting them. The Government has an obligation to protect children's rights through its ratification of the UNCRC. Article 12 of the Convention, which enshrines the right of the child to have their views heard, listened to and taken seriously, is clearly relevant to the development of school councils.

Article 12 states that governments;

*'shall assure to the child who is capable of forming his or her own views the right to express those views freely in all matters affecting the child...children and young people have the right to have their opinion listened to and taken seriously'.*

12 <http://eprints.ioe.ac.uk/4937/1/Alderson2000School121.pdf>; Kilkelly, U. (2004). Children's Rights in Northern Ireland Belfast: NICCY, Pedder, D. and McIntyre, D. (2006). 'Pupil consultation: the importance of social capital'. Education Review, 58 (2), 145-157.

13 Scottish Consumer Council, (2007). 'School Councils and Pupil Participation in Scottish Secondary Schools'. Scottish Consumer Council.

In its concluding observations concerning the implementation of the UNCRC in the UK<sup>14</sup>, the United Nations Committee recommended that the Government;

*'promote, facilitate and implement, in legislation as well as in practice, within the family, schools and the community...the principle of respect for the views of the child' (33(g)) and that it 'strengthens children's participation in all matters of school, classroom and learning which affect them' (67(g)).*

NICCY's role is to promote and safeguard the rights and best interests of children and young people and to uphold the UNCRC. It therefore strongly supports the right of children to express their views and to have these taken into consideration, in a range of contexts and including schools.

### **3.2 Consultation with Pupils: Northern Ireland Legislation and Policy**

Various pieces of education legislation address the importance and value of consulting pupils. Article 19(4) of the 'Education and Libraries (Northern Ireland) Order' 2003<sup>15</sup> states that before making (or revising) policies or general principles concerning discipline, the Board of Governors must listen to the opinions of pupils.

In the Education (Northern Ireland) Order 1998<sup>16</sup>, Article 13(2) states that it is the duty of the board of governors of a school to prepare, and from time to time revise, a School Development Plan. The legislation also says that in preparing this plan, the board of governors must consider any guidance provided by DE. In June 2005, DE issued guidance entitled 'School Development Planning' and this states (p6-7) that

*"The quality and value of pupils' contribution to improving the life of the school is potentially very great, even among the younger children. It is dependent on the extent to which the Principal and staff are able to create opportunities and the climate for constructive and positive debate."*

It goes on to suggest that consultation can be organised in a variety of ways, including through the establishment of a school council.

One of the underpinning values of the '10 year Strategy for Children and Young People in NI 2006 – 2016' is for all children and young people to be active participants in society. One of the key supporting themes is to 'develop a culture where the views of our children and young people are routinely sought in matters which impact on their lives'<sup>17</sup>. It also pledges that in accordance with the UNCRC, particularly Article 12, that the Government will be proactive in obtaining the views of children on matters of significance to them.

## **4.0 'Democra-School': Promoting Democratic Practices in Schools**

### **4.1 Background**

'Democra-School' is concerned with children and young people having an appropriate and effective voice in their schools. The main aim of the initiative is therefore to promote democracy in schools across Northern Ireland, through the development of appropriate democratic structures, including school councils.

The impetus to develop 'Democra-School' arose from NICCY's awareness of an absence or inconsistent use of established participatory procedures and policies through which pupils could 'have a say' within their school. Furthermore, NICCY found that even where such

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14 [http://www.ofmdfmi.gov.uk/un\\_committee\\_on\\_the\\_rights\\_of\\_the\\_child\\_concluding\\_observations\\_pdf\\_4.pdf](http://www.ofmdfmi.gov.uk/un_committee_on_the_rights_of_the_child_concluding_observations_pdf_4.pdf)

15 <http://www.legislation.gov.uk/nisi/2003/424/contents/made>

16 <http://www.legislation.gov.uk/nisi/1998/1759/contents>

17 <http://www.ofmdfmi.gov.uk/ten-year-strategy.pdf>, p.13

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structures existed they were in some cases, regarded as tokenistic, not taken seriously or strongly controlled by staff.

In addition, one of NICCY's strategic objectives is to promote and support opportunities for children and young people to participate. Given that young people spend a significant proportion of their formative years at school, NICCY believes it is important that they can participate effectively and meaningfully in decision making about different aspects of school life. This, alongside a requirement to fulfil NICCY's legislative duties, specifically to keep under review the adequacy and effectiveness of services and practice, led to the initiation of the 'Democra-School' programme in December 2005<sup>18</sup>.

#### **4.2 'Democra-School': Developing the Resource**

A steering committee was established in 2005, consisting of teachers, principals, young people and NICCY staff, all of whom shared a vision of young people having a voice within their school environment. Initial discussions were held with Angela Smyth, the then direct rule Education Minister, who encouraged the development of the project. Subsequently, NICCY held two major conferences, at which pupils and their teachers from schools without school councils engaged with their counterparts from schools who had established a school council.

In the process of developing 'Democra-School', NICCY took account of the information exchanged and the positive and negative practices shared through 12 workshops convened at the first 'Democra-School' conference in March 2006. This was attended by over 200 pupils, teachers and key education stakeholders. Democra-School, 'Having Your Say': Guidance for School Councils was then launched at a second conference, attended by 130 participants in February 2007. Following the launch, NICCY provided follow-up training to 20 schools who participated in the conference. This consisted of a series of workshops relating to school council development and child rights awareness. Following the workshops, NICCY has continued to deliver support to schools interested in the 'Democra-School' programme.

#### **4.3 'Democra-School': The Content**

'Democra-School' is designed to support teachers, schools and school council members in establishing effective and successful school councils through the provision of relevant information and advice. Taking account of the information collected during the two conferences, the Guidance developed ten standards which are required to implement models of good participative practice. Each section of the Guidance identifies a key issue that pupils, teachers and other stakeholders recognised as being important in the development of a school council. Expanding on this issue, the Guidance considers why the issue is significant and how a school might consider addressing it. A simple checklist provides a reminder of different tasks which should be completed. Throughout the document, additional information and resources are signposted and schools are encouraged to explore these. These include references to relevant legislation and policies, with particular reference to the UNCRC, and links to guidance for school councils in other parts of the UK and across a range of countries.

Additional downloadable resources have been developed and made available through the NICCY website<sup>19</sup>. These include information on election guidelines; the roles of the school council chairperson, treasurer etc, and information about minute-taking and work plans. From October 2008 to October 2011, information from the 'Democra-School' web page was downloaded 865 times. This equates to more than one download per school day over this three year period, so the resource is regularly used.

While 'Democra-School' is not regarded as a definitive guide to the development and sustainability of school councils, it is designed to support schools at each stage of the developmental journey from their creation to evaluation and review. It does this by employing

18 See Appendix 1 – A Timeline detailing NICCY's work on school councils to date.

19 [www.niccy.org](http://www.niccy.org)

a step-by-step approach and highlighting key issues for consideration by teachers, pupils and senior management. 'Democra-School' also recognises that each school is unique with its own particular strengths and requirements and the Guidance can therefore be used to meet their specific needs. The resource is endorsed by School Councils UK<sup>20</sup>.

#### **4.4 Reviewing Schools' Experiences**

During autumn 2010, the twenty schools who participated in the 'Democra-School' workshops convened following the launch of the resource, were asked to participate in a survey to review their experiences of having a school council. Pupils and teachers commented on a broad range of positive outcomes. These are detailed below. Many of the beneficial findings noted in Section 2 above, were identified in their responses.

##### **4.4.1 Confidence**

All council members felt their confidence had increased through their participation in a school council, particularly in terms of public speaking and decision making. Most students felt that they were more confident when speaking to other young people and adults outside the school environment.

##### **4.4.2 Experience**

For many pupils, the greatest benefit of being on the school council was the range of experiences they gained, which could be transferred to other activities in which they were involved. Many senior pupils believed it was beneficial that they could reference their involvement on UCAS forms and job applications. One school provided opportunities for students to engage with other participative forums in their local area so that they could meet with other young people and advise the local council on issues affecting them. Pupils felt this was a particularly worthwhile experience as they were able to use their position to improve things for other young people.

##### **4.4.3 Feeling part of the school community**

Pupils reported being very motivated to compete for a place on the school council as it was recognised by the school community as a prestigious position. Several students indicated that they felt they had an important role in the school through their involvement in the school council and that they felt proud to be part of the wider school community.

##### **4.4.4 Improved Teaching**

Several schools reported having consulted the school council about teaching styles. One school regularly met with the council to discuss the use of IT in teaching. Both pupils and staff felt this improved teaching, as teachers could identify methods or tools more likely to capture student's interest and enhance their learning experience. One Principal commented that the school council contributed to improving both teaching and learning.

##### **4.4.5 More cohesive school community**

It was widely agreed that staff had identified a positive change in students' attitudes to school when they felt more involved in decision making. This ranged from increased involvement in after-school activities to a decrease in the number of incidents of littering and graffiti in the school.

##### **4.4.6 Better Communication**

Where effective procedures for communication were established, teachers reported a marked improvement in students' receipt and understanding of relevant information. Some teachers felt that feedback provided to students via school council members was more

easily understood and digested than information coming through school assembly or form class announcements. One school council had a dedicated notice board which was updated regularly with information. For many students, it was easier to raise concerns or complaints through the school council than other channels. Teachers felt that issues were dealt with more quickly and easily as they were addressed before becoming potentially more serious.

Respondents also identified a number of challenges:

#### 4.4.7 Time

Finding an appropriate meeting time was a significant challenge particularly for schools in rural areas where some students had long journeys home after school. Some school councils met over lunch time, though they felt this was more effective when the school provided lunch for the council. Some councils felt that they would have benefitted from having contact with the school's board of governors however it was difficult to identify a suitable time to meet. Because of these time-related challenges, respondents felt that decision-making was sometimes slow to progress.

#### 4.4.8 Lack of Funding

Many potential initiatives identified by school councils required additional funding which wasn't always possible. Several of the councils were involved in fundraising for the school, but they felt that some of this money could have been dedicated to student initiated projects. Schools offering free canteen meals or refreshments during meetings felt this could become a significant financial burden.

#### 4.4.9 Managing Expectations

Managing expectations was a very common problem for school councils. Council members, other pupils, and staff often had competing priorities and different perceptions of the role of the school council. Council members commented that some pupils were not always fully aware of the Council's remit and so they sometimes felt under pressure to deliver outcomes or to effect change. Managing expectations was much easier for schools which had effective and transparent communication systems and a clear remit for the school council.

#### 4.5 School Council Audit

In the process of undertaking work on school councils, NICCY became aware of a dearth of statistics relating to school councils or pupil representative bodies in Northern Ireland. In order to establish a baseline of information NICCY emailed each school in Northern Ireland to inquire if it had a school council co-ordinator and 207 schools confirmed that they had one in place. It is likely that more school councils do exist and that schools simply did not respond to the request. NICCY welcomes any efforts to collect more complete and accurate statistics regarding school councils.

**Table 1: Number of Schools in Northern Ireland with School Council Co-ordinators**

School Type	Number of Schools with School Council Co-ordinators
Nursery	1
Primary	98
Special	10
Secondary	69
Grammar	26
Bunscoil	2

School Type	Number of Schools with School Council Co-ordinators
Meanscoil	1
<b>Total</b>	<b>207</b>

## 5.0 Advocating for Democratic Practices in Schools: NICCY's engagement with Key Stakeholders

Following the development of the 'Democra-School' guidance and along with ongoing work with schools, NICCY has been advocating for the formal introduction of school councils and democratic structures in schools. From 2009, NICCY has sought to working strategically with key educational stakeholders towards the introduction of a policy to establish effective democratic structures for pupils in schools across Northern Ireland.

### 5.1 Engagement with Education Professionals

NICCY has convened several meetings with representatives of the five main teaching unions (NAHT, NASUWT, ATL, INTO, UTU)<sup>21</sup> to discuss the 'Democra-School' programme and to ascertain their views and experiences of school councils. Each of the Unions expressed their support, in principle, for the 'Democra-School' programme and indicated their willingness to support schools interested in establishing school councils.

Discussions at a subsequent meeting with representatives from the teacher unions, academics from the Queen's University Belfast and school principals focused on the perceived role of the Department of Education (DE) in relation to promoting and supporting school councils. Participants proposed that DE be involved at three levels;

- i. Attitudinal: There was a perception that DE should play a key role in 'winning the hearts and minds' of education professionals and support staff, especially principals, and in persuading them of the importance and benefits of establishing school councils or other democratic structures in their schools. In terms of practical examples of how this might be achieved, it was suggested that a module addressing the benefits of school councils could be included in the Professional Qualification for Headship (PQH) programme, that presentations on school councils could be delivered at school governor training, and relevant articles could be published in teaching publications.
- ii. Operational: Participants noted that any policy on school councils produced by DE should be accompanied by appropriate supporting advice and guidance. It was suggested this should highlight potential challenges as well as benefits. It was also proposed that the Education and Library Boards should have a role in providing advice and support.
- iii. Legal: Participants also believed that DE should provide clarity and advice in respect of key legal issues associated with the establishment and maintenance of school councils.

### 5.2 Engagement with Junior Ministers

Members of NICCY's Youth Panel (NYP) were actively involved in the 'Democra-School' programme from the outset. In June 2009, two NYP members met the then Junior Ministers Kelly and Newton, requesting their support for the establishment of school councils. The junior ministers replied, indicating they were;

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21 NAHT: National Association of Head Teachers  
 NASUWT: National Association of Schoolmasters/Union of Women Teachers  
 ATL: Association of Teachers and Lecturers  
 INTO: Irish National Teachers' Organisation  
 UTU: Ulster Teachers' Union

*'very supportive of structures which provide opportunities for meaningful participation and engagement and we believe that school councils can be a good way of engaging young people in the school environment... We did write to Caitriona Ruane, Minister of Education, drawing your presentation to her attention. In our letter we highlighted support for school councils and asked her to give careful consideration to the issues you raised.'*

### 5.3 Engagement with the Department of Education

In seeking to ensure that every school has a school council or an appropriate democratic structure in which pupils may participate, NICCY initially considered advocating for the introduction of appropriate legislation. The School Councils (Wales) Regulations, 2005<sup>22</sup> made it a statutory requirement for all maintained schools in Wales to have a school council to ensure that the voice of pupils is represented in the development of school policies and procedures. The legislation requires that councils meet at least six times a year and stipulates that the headteacher and governing body must consider any matter communicated to them by the school council.

Whilst a legislative route was initially considered, following discussions with the then Education Minister, Caitriona Ruane, it was considered more expedient to work collaboratively with the Department of Education to support the development of policy guidance for school councils.

DE then endorsed 'Democra-School' Guidance on its website;

*"The Department of Education is keen to support all schools in the north of Ireland to establish a School Council using the Democra-School programme designed by the Commissioner for Children and Young People (NICCY). The programme is designed to support and encourage the development of meaningful school councils and the practice of democracy in the school environment."*

DE has also made reference to the role, benefits and usefulness of school councils in at least ten policies, circulars and reports<sup>23</sup>, including:

- Pastoral Care in Schools: Promoting positive behaviour, (2001);
- School Development Planning, (2005);
- Every School A Good School: A policy for school improvement (2009);
- Every School a Good School: The Governors' Role, (2010).

Paragraph 3.2 above also referenced various policies which record the importance of consulting with pupils

To date, NICCY has discussed school councils and appropriate policy guidance with various Education Ministers on three occasions and with Departmental officials on four occasions. In 2010, DE expressed its commitment to move the process forward and requested that NICCY

identify important issues which it believed should be addressed in policy guidance produced by DE. In February 2011, DE confirmed that a draft circular of policy guidance had been prepared for internal consultation. Unfortunately, due to the Assembly elections, this process was then delayed. At a meeting with the current Education Minister, John O'Dowd, the Commissioner requested an update on the status of the draft circular. The Minister gave his commitment to review his department's work on the issue of school councils and to update NICCY on his plans.

22 <http://www.legislation.gov.uk/wsi/2005/3200/contents/made>

23 See Appendix 2.

## **6.0 Conclusion**

NICCY has been working to promote the establishment, development and sustainability of school councils since 2005. This work has encompassed the provision of practical support to schools, the publication of 'Democra-School', ongoing consultation with key education stakeholders and sustained engagement with DE. During this time, there have been positive developments, with the establishment of greater numbers of school councils and more positive and frequent references made to the benefits of pupil participation, consultation with pupils and school councils in DE policies and reports. Key educational stakeholders have also demonstrated their interest and support in 'Democra-School' and expressed a willingness to support the development and work of school councils.

However, while such developments are encouraging, NICCY has been disappointed by delays on the part of the Department of Education to progress the introduction of a policy circular on school councils. NICCY has provided ongoing advice and information to DE to support the development of such a policy however as indicated above, the draft circular is still under review.

The benefits of school councils are widely documented and the feedback from schools who participated in the 'Democra-School' programme provides additional evidence of the positive impact these can have on pupils, teaching and learning and on relationships in the school community. The UNCRC places an obligation on Government to provide opportunities for children and young people to participate and to have their opinions listened to. NICCY believes that school councils are a valuable mechanism which can help to realise this right for pupils.

School councils are now a legislative requirement in a number of countries and policies supports the provision of school councils in others. NICCY believes that DE should urgently introduce a policy for school councils in order that children and young people in Northern Ireland can have their voices heard and so that they can effectively and meaningfully participate in decision-making in their schools.

## Appendix 1

### 'Democra-School' Programme Timeline of Developments

December 2005	Initial meeting of the 'Democra-School' Steering Group
March 2006	1st 'Democra-School' Conference, Oxford Island
April 2006 – Jan 2007	Drafting of 'Democra-School' Guidance
February 2007	2nd Democra-School Conference and launch of 'Democra-School' Guidance by Maria Eagle, direct rule Minister for Education in Northern Ireland
March 2007	'Democra-School' Guidance circulated to every school in Northern Ireland.
April 2007 onwards	NICCY's Participation team promote and facilitate school council workshops in schools.
October 2007	Initial discussion about school councils with Minister of Education, Caitriona Ruane.
February 2009	Further meeting with Minister of Education, Caitriona Ruane.
June 2009	Letter received from Caitriona Ruane supporting voluntary development of school councils and encouraging dialogue with DE officials. Presentation on benefits of school councils by NICCY Youth panel members to Junior Minister Gerry Kelly.
July 2009	Junior Ministers Kelly and Newton wrote to Education Minister stating their support for school councils.
October 2009	1st meeting with DE officials
November 2009	1st meeting with ETI officials
February 2010	2nd meeting with DE Officials
April 2010	1st meeting with teacher unions (ATL; UTU; INTO; NAHT).
July 2010	2nd meeting with education unions (UTU, ATL, NAHT, NASUWT).
August 2010	NICCY forwarded 'Desired Outcomes for Young People through the Democra-School Programme' paper to DE. 3rd meeting with DE officials
November 2010	NICCY forwarded suggested issues for inclusion in Department of Education School Council Policy Guidance.
December 2010	Seminar convened with union representatives, academics and school principals.
February 2011	4th meeting with DE Officials: DE confirmed a first draft of a policy circular on school councils was in preparation for internal consultation.
August 2011	Meeting with Education Minister John O'Dowd. Minister was broadly supportive of school councils but expressed a desire to review work completed to date.

## Department of Education Publications referencing School Councils and Pupil Consultation/Participation

### 1. **'Managing Schools during New Build Projects - A Guide for Principals' (2011)**

Page 3: 'Consult with the children e.g. through the **school council**, about what they would like to know about the project.'

### 2. **Research report on 'Audit of Counselling and Other Therapeutic Interventions in Primary and Special Schools in the North of Ireland' (2009)**

Page 1: 'Research evidence demonstrates that counselling is one of a range of services that help to support the health, emotional and social needs of pupils and lead to a healthy school culture. Other elements could include: Seeking pupils' views through **school councils** and other means'

Page 22: from Table 2.2: Summary of emotional well-being interventions in schools from the literature:

**School councils:** Effective **school councils** that meet regularly, have trained participants, consult and communicate well and evaluate annually can give elected pupils a voice to represent all pupils and improve their school.

### 3. **Every School a Good School: A Strategy for Raising Achievement in Literacy and Numeracy (2008)**

From foreword by Education Minister:

'We are sending this booklet to **School Councils** for them to look at and putting it on our website: [www.deni.gov.uk](http://www.deni.gov.uk).'

### 4. **Drugs: Guidance for Schools in Northern Ireland (2009)**

Page 9: Involving Pupils

'Some useful examples of methods for involving and consulting with pupils would be, for example, through **school councils**, focus and discussion groups and questionnaires.'

### 5. **Every School A Good School: A Policy for School Improvement (2009)**

Page 39: '**School Councils** offer an important model to support engagement; however the focus has to be on delivering genuine engagement. We do not wish to prescribe the means but rather we want to encourage all schools to find meaningful ways of giving their pupils a voice – and of listening and responding to the views of young people.'

Page 41: DE's goal in relation to promoting engagement between schools and pupils, parents, families and communities;

'To work with schools to **ensure that their pupils are given a voice** in the running of the school and that there are strong and effective links between every school and the parents, families and local communities it serves'.

'In pursuit of this goal we will: provide a resource to support **school councils** and to encourage all schools to set up councils or other forums to ensure that pupils have a voice in decisions on the running of the school'.

Page 56: Timescale for this: 'Resource for **school councils** to be commissioned and completed by end 2010'.

**6. Research Report on ‘Good Practice in Literacy and Numeracy in British and Irish Cities where the level of Social Deprivation is comparable to, or worse than, Belfast’. (2008)’**

Page 11: At a school-level, consideration should be given to...

- Strengthening ways of working with parents as partners in all phases through, for example, parent/student workshops, family literacy and numeracy learning activities, **school councils** and surveys.

**7. Research briefing: Out of School Hours Learning Provision and School Improvement in Northern Ireland (2004)**

Page 11: The following factors are broadly seen as presenting opportunity for provision:

- Pupil interest: the majority of principals agreed on the importance of pupil interest. Suggested ways to increase pupil interest included:
  - pupil consultation;
  - pupil involvement, e.g. via school council.

**8. Pastoral Care in Schools: Promoting Positive Behaviour (2001)**

Page 40: Policy Review:

Page 64: Where weaknesses are found, a review will be necessary. All of the staff, teaching and non-teaching, and the pupils and Governors, should contribute to this review. Pupils can be consulted, for example, through **School Councils**, or in Circle Time or PSE lessons. Where significant changes are contemplated, parents should also be consulted, and, in any event, should be consulted periodically (say every 3 years).

**9. School Development Planning (2005)**

Page 6: Consultation and Involvement

- (c) Pupils, irrespective of age, will have likes/dislikes that will inform the plan positively, they will have their own views on, for example, after-school provision, the organisation of their day, homework, uniform, lunch facilities. Older pupils can be expected also to have views on issues such as curricular choices, careers education and guidance and enrichment courses/activities.

The quality and value of pupils’ contribution to improving the life of the school is potentially very great, even among the younger children. It is dependent on the extent to which the Principal and staff are able to create opportunities and the climate for constructive and positive debate. Consultation can be organised in a variety of ways, such as:

- by speaking directly with the pupils;
- the establishment of a School Council

**10. Every School a Good School - The Governors’ Role (2010)**

This provides school governors with details of their roles and responsibilities including establishing a school council:

*‘Many schools have established **school councils** as a way to enable pupils to express their views and promote issues such as anti-bullying, healthy eating and healthy lifestyles which affect them and their environment. DE considers that ‘the quality and value of pupils’ contribution to improving the life of the school is potentially very great, even among the younger children. It is dependent on the extent to which the principal and staff are able to create opportunities and the climate for constructive and positive debate.’*

The Board of Governors is encouraged to support this development in its own school. ‘Guidance on the establishment and operation of **school councils** has been issued by the NI Commissioner for Children and Young People.’

## Save The Children Ambassadors

We believe that all children have the ability, given the right support, to make a difference to their lives and the lives of children and families around them. The Ambassadors project gives this support. Through mobilising the voices of young people fighting poverty, supporting them at a national and regional level to campaign on the issues important to them, we will help bring a message to government too powerful to ignore.

### **Speaking Out Against Poverty**

Before becoming an Ambassador the young people work on local community change projects as part of the Speaking Out Against Poverty (SOAP) programme. Their projects aim to highlight the issue of child poverty and look at ways of tackling some of the symptoms of child poverty in their community. The Speaking Out Against Poverty (SOAP) programme works in three main geographical areas Belfast, Derry and Dungannon. Our current Ambassadors group of over 20 young people are primarily from Foyle Youth Council and the Colin Area of West Belfast.

## EDUCATION IS THE KEY TO BREAK THE CYCLE OF POVERTY

Children growing up in poverty and disadvantage are less likely to do well at school.

### **In Northern Ireland:**

- 1 in 4 children is living in poverty
- 1 in 5 children leaves primary school without basic numeracy and literacy skills
- Children and young people currently have little or no say on how the money for their education is spent

This educational inequality can impact on their future opportunities and is called the "POVERTY CYCLE" To break this cycle we need to ensure resources are targeted at those who need it most.

### **We are calling on you, as the Education Minister, to:**

- Target extra resources at pupils living in poverty to enable them to succeed at school
- Make schools accountable for the impact funding has on helping children living in poverty to realise their potential.

## Inspiring Change Programme

**Inspiring Change is a 3 year UK wide programme aimed at improving the life chances of children living in severe poverty and empowering children and their families living in poverty to have a voice and influence change.**

Save the Children's campaign to end UK child poverty has already attracted widespread support amongst politicians, the media and the public. However, **one of the most integral parts of our campaign is the voices of children, young people, their families and the local community.** We believe that one of the best ways to find solutions to the problems faced by children and young people is to work directly with them, giving them opportunities to express their views and find their own solutions, and supporting them to help deliver those solutions and campaign and advocate for changes that will benefit themselves and their peers.

### **How will we achieve this objective?**

There are two distinct aspects to this work, the local and the national, with strong cross over and links.

We will establish 100 groups by 2011 across the UK through our five office bases in Glasgow, Manchester, Belfast, London and Cardiff. We will help them to tackle practical problems in their local communities by providing practical, financial and where appropriate volunteer support and expertise. Anticipated themes include housing, employment, education, health, environment and income. We will also work with children and young people in directing our campaign calls to change policy and practice at devolved and UK government level to better support the fight against child poverty in the UK.

### **Local Outcomes**

Outcomes for participants:

1. Transform the lives of those children and young people in our local groups (through confidence building, group work and team building, development of communication and budgeting skills, skills training and providing opportunities for accreditation, work placements which will lead to employment &/or further education).

Outcomes for the Community

2. Transform the lives of those who will benefit from the local practical change (local groups will lead tangible projects that impact positively on local communities).

### **UK wide Outcomes**

3. Build a mass movement for change and change the attitudes towards poverty - 200,000 campaigners join our end child poverty campaign and hold the Government to account, taking part in a variety of actions from attending rallies to sending letters to their MPs and volunteering their time to support local groups.
4. Successfully advocate for policy change at a local and national level so that locally tested solutions are adopted as permanent local service provisions and at a UK level, the Government commits more financial resources to ending child poverty.

The meaningful participation of children and young people will run throughout both strands of work and there will be a portfolio of volunteer opportunities, local and national that will support groups and help to build up key constituencies of support across the UK.

## Inspiring Change Northern Ireland - Speaking Out Against Poverty (SOAP)

In Northern Ireland Save the Children is planning to develop groups in differing geographical areas.

### **Methodology**

Weekly sessions with participants will provide a solid framework for the groups development. The programme has three core themes.

**Team building and skills building:** Participatory methods will be used to develop a strong sense of team and to introduce topics such as Child Rights, Child Poverty and Campaigning.

**Advocacy skills building and planning:** Groups will identify key changes they would like to make in their community, based on the above six themes, and will be supported to develop an advocacy plan. Groups will be encouraged to meet politicians, service providers, business owners and others who have power, influence, and decision-making ability in their communities.

**Change-making:** Through the provision of financial support , and utilising advocacy and campaign experts from within Save the Children the group will be supported to make their change plan a reality. Sessions will be adapted according to the plan for each group.

### **What Kind of Changes will groups make?**

Changes will be identified by each group, and our participatory methods will enable us to support groups to work on a variety of changes and adapt training and support accordingly. Previous work has seen us support groups to make changes ranging from

- The development of a football pitch on local wasteland to create a safe and free place to play;
- Lobbying the council for free swimming in the summer holidays;
- Raising awareness of lack of part-time job opportunities with local business providers;
- Supporting schools to improve their response to bullying due to socio-economic status;
- Challenging transport providers for free travel passes for young people up to the age of 18;
- Setting up a mini enterprise schemes.

### **Logistics & Timescales**

- Each workshop will run for between 1.5 to 2 hours every week (although we can be flexible in our approach depending on the needs of each group and the age of participants).
- Workshops can take place in the day time, evenings or at weekends depending on participant needs.
- Save the Children would commit to supporting groups for a period of between 4-6 months depending on the need of the group. We anticipate running approximately 15 sessions with each group, depending on their needs. We are keen to work with partners who are committed to sustaining these groups beyond this time period.

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**Partners**

We are looking to develop partnerships with existing organisations. These may include:

- Services with existing groups such as schools, children's centres and youth services
- Services looking to engage with children living in poverty who are looking to set up groups and would like our support
- We encourage at least 1 staff member from partner agencies to help plan and facilitate sessions so that this activity is integrated into their work
- We will ask each partner to sign a partnership agreement outlining the role of each partner

**Resources**

Save the Children will provide support for the following elements of the work:

- Financial support for the young people's 'change' action plan
- 1 group facilitator (we require partners providing one member of staff to support the project)
- Refreshments for group sessions if required
- Funds to support access to the group, for example to cover participant travel costs, child care, or translation costs.

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Northern Ireland  
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Appendix 5

# Alphabetical list of schools that responded to the questionnaire in relation to school councils



# Alphabetical list of schools that responded to the questionnaire in relation to school councils

**Note:** We are unable to identify the location of some schools due to the anonymity of replies.

- Abbey PS
- Abercorn PS
- Acorn Integrated PS
- Altishane PS
- Andrews Memorial PS
- Antrim Grammar School
- Antrim PS
- Ashfield Girls' High school
- Assumption Grammar School
- Ballycastle High School
- Ballyclare High School
- Ballyclare PS
- Ballycraigy PS
- Ballykeel PS
- Ballymena PS
- Ballymoney High School
- Ballysally PS
- Ballywalter PS
- Banbridge High School
- Bangor Academy and Sixth Form College
- Belfast Model School for Boys
- Belfast Model School for Girls
- Belfast Royal Academy
- Bellarena PS
- Belleek PS
- Belmont House SEN School
- Belvoir Park PS
- Birches PS
- Blythefield PS
- Braidside Integrated PS
- Braniel PS
- Broadbridge PS
- Bronte PS
- Brownlee PS
- Bunscoil an Traonaigh
- Bunscoil an Tsléibhe Dhuibh
- Bushvalley PS
- Cairnshill PS
- Campbell College Junior School
- Camphill PS
- Carnalridge PS
- Carr PS
- Carrickfergus Central PS
- Carrickfergus College
- Carrickfergus Grammar School
- Carrowdore PS
- Carrowreagh PS
- Castledawson PS
- Cavehill PS
- Cedar Integrated PS
- Cedar Lodge SEN School
- Christ the Redeemer PS
- Christian Brothers Grammar School Omagh
- City of Armagh High School
- Clarawood SEN School
- Coleraine College
- Coleraine High School
- Collegiate Grammar School, Enniskillen
- Comber PS
- Cookstown High School
- Cranmore Integrated PS
- Crawfordsburn PS
- Creavery PS
- Cross and Passion College
- Crumlin Integrated PS
- Cumber Claudy PS
- Cumran PS

- Derrychrin PS
- Desertmartin PS
- Dominican College
- Donaghadee PS
- Donemana PS
- Down High School
- Downshire School Carrickfergus
- Dromore Road PS
- Drumahoe PS
- Drumgor PS
- Drumlegagh PS
- Drumsallen PS
- Duneane PS
- Dungannon PS
- Dunluce School
- Edenderry PS Banbridge
- Edmund Rice College
- Elmbrook SEN School
- Erne Integrated College
- Evisk PS
- Faughanvale PS
- Fivemiletown College
- Fleming Fulton SEN School
- Fort Hill College, Lisburn
- Fountain PS
- Fourtowns PS
- Friends' School
- Gibson PS
- Gillygooley PS
- Gilnahirk PS
- Glastry College
- Glendermott PS
- Glengormley Integrated PS
- Glenlola Collegiate School
- Gortnagarn PS
- Grange PS
- Greenisland PS
- Greenwood Infants' PS
- Groggan PS
- Grosvenor Grammar School
- Harding Memorial PS
- Harryville PS
- Hart Memorial PS
- Hazelwood Integrated PS
- Holy Child PS
- Holy Family PS Belfast
- Holy Family PS Downpatrick
- Holy Family PS & Nursery Londonderry
- Holy Trinity PS
- Hollywood PS
- Hunterhouse College
- Integrated College Dungannon
- Kilbride Central PS
- Killowen PS
- Kilmaine PS
- Kilrea PS
- Kilronan SEN School
- Kilross PS
- Kirkistown PS
- Knockbreda High School
- Knockloughrim PS
- Landhead PS
- Ligoniel PS
- Limavady Central PS
- Linn PS
- Lisnasharragh PS
- Lisnaskea High School
- Little Flower Girls' School
- Long Tower PS
- Loreto Grammar School Omagh
- Loughash PS.
- Lumen Christi College
- Lurgan College
- Lurgan Model
- Maghaberry PS
- Maghera PS
- Maralin Village PS

- Mercy PS
- Milltown PS
- Mitchell House SEN School
- Moat PS
- Moira PS
- Monkstown Community School
- Mount Lourdes Grammar School
- Mount St Catherines P S
- Movilla High School
- Mullavilly PS
- Nendrum College Comber
- Newtownards Model PS
- Newtownbutler PS
- Oakfield PS
- Oakgrove Integrated College
- Oakgrove Integrated PS
- Omagh Academy
- Omagh County PS
- Our Lady Queen of Peace PS
- Our Lady's & ST Mochua's PS
- Our Lady's PS
- Phoenix Integrated PS
- Portglenone PS
- Portora Royal School
- Portstewart PS
- Presentation PS
- Primate Dixon PS
- Rainey Endowed Grammar School
- Rasharkin PS
- Rathcoole PS
- Rathore SEN School
- Riverside SEN School
- Roddensvale SEN School
- Rossmar SEN School
- Royal School Armagh
- Saint Fanchea's College
- Saint Mary's PS
- Saintfield High School
- Scoil na Fuiseoige
- Seymour Hill PS
- Shimna Integrated College
- Sperrin Integrated College
- Sperrinview SEN School
- Spires IPS
- Springhill PS
- St. Anne's PS
- St. Brendan's PS
- St. Brigid's PS
- St. Canice's PS
- St. Cecilia's College
- St. Columba's College Portaferry
- St Comgall's PS
- St. Eithne's PS.
- St. Eugene's College
- St. Gemma's High School
- St. Jarlath's PS.
- St Joseph's Carryduff
- St Joseph's Grammar School
- St Joseph's PS Crumlin
- St Joseph's PS and Nursery Unit Dunloy
- St. Joseph's College
- St. Joseph's PS Strangford
- St. Kieran's PS
- St. Laurence O'Toole's PS
- St. Macartan's PS Loughinisland
- St Mary's College Londonderry
- St Mary's Grammar School Magherafelt
- St Mary's High School Lurgan
- St Mary's Limavady
- St Mary's PS Altinure
- St Mary's PS
- St Michael's Grammar School
- St. Marys High School Newry
- St. Mary's on the Hill PS
- St Mary's PS Bellaghy
- St. Mary's PS Draperstown
- St. Mary's PS Aughnacloy

- St. Michael's PS
- St Patricks PS Glen
- St Patrick's PS
- St Patrick's PS Ballygalget
- St Patrick's PS/ Nursery
- St. Patrick's College
- St. Patrick's PS
- St Teresa's PS Lurgan
- St Therese of Lisieux PS
- St Therese PS Lenamore
- St Tierney's P S
- Strabane PS
- Straidbilly PS
- Sullivan Upper School
- Tandragee Junior High School
- Tandragee PS
- Templepatrick PS and Nursery Unit
- The Armstrong PS
- The Thompson PS
- The Wallace High School
- Thornhill College
- Ulidia Integrated College
- Victoria College Belfast
- Victoria Park PS
- Wellington College Belfast
- Whitehouse PS and Nursery Unit
- William Pinkerton Memorial PS
- Windsor Hill PS



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Appendix 6

# List of Schools that participated in the Inquiry focus groups



## List of Schools that participated in the Inquiry focus groups

Ashfield Boys High  
Ballyclare Primary School  
Banbridge High School  
Belfast Royal Academy  
Braidside Integrated Primary School  
Bronte Primary School  
Crawfordsburn Primary School  
Desert Martin Primary School  
Dromore Road Primary School  
Jordanstown SEN  
Omagh Academy  
Phoenix Integrated Primary School  
Rossmar SEN  
Sperrinview SEN  
Springhill Primary School  
St Colm's High School  
St Joseph's Boys School Londonderry  
St Joseph's Primary School Belfast  
St Mary's Grammar Magherafelt  
St Mary's Primary School Limavady







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