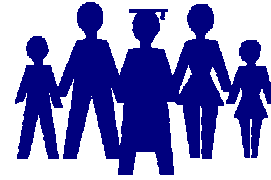


Backchat



SPTC Newsletter

Scottish Parent Teacher Council, the independent voice for parents, is a national organisation. It has been serving parents' groups in schools for 60 years.

March 2008
Issue 101

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happening with Parent Councils
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Disclosure – the current position

IMPORTANT INFORMATION

SPTC has had to withdraw its advice on disclosure checks because we are no longer convinced it is sound.

The original advice was drawn up in consultation with the Scottish Executive and CRBS but a subsequent review of the legislation has highlighted to us that where someone's "normal duties" involve "work of any kind, whether paid or unpaid" being carried out in an "educational establishment" - defined as both a school and the premises of that school - this is deemed "a child care position" and requires a disclosure check, regardless of whether any children are actually present. This means that workmen going into schools over the summer holidays or parent groups meeting regularly in the evenings all have to be checked.

We are NOT giving up though and continue our campaign to get some sense into the situation surrounding child protection and disclosure checks.

Government Response

Indeed, the Government has responded to our action very positively, and has provided us with the following statement:

"The Protection of Children (Scotland) Act was designed to prevent unsuitable people being able to work with children through their paid work or volunteering. The legislation was never intended to prevent parent councils meeting in schools in the evening or to impact on the use of schools out of hours by adults not working with children. It's crucial that we bridge the gap between the policy intention and the legal position. That's why we are moving swiftly to take steps to remedy this, including secondary legislation if necessary."

On 12th March we will meet with Adam Ingram, the Minister with responsibility for Child Protection, meantime if you have strong views, please contact your own MSP.

News from You

We are giving most of this Backchat over to news from you about Parent Councils – to information and feedback that we've had by phone, email and from our regional meetings across Scotland. What is striking is the range of different approaches and activities. It is most certainly not a case of one size fits all.

Parent Councils and constitutions

Parents have used the flexibility offered in the legislation to design Parent Councils to suit their school. They now come in many different shapes and sizes. To date the smallest we've heard of has six parents and the largest has 20. Most have more parents than used to be on the school board and many are using our suggestion and drawing members from each year group. However, one school has already got into a bit of a problem because the chair has stood down and they do not have an easy system for replacing him so it is as well that constitutions can be changed! (**TIP:** it would be perfectly possible to keep going with an "acting" chair until this problem is sorted out.)

Parent Councils and subcommittees

In some schools, the PTA is continuing as a totally independent body; in others the PTA is merging with the Parent Council and becoming a subcommittee. However, in order to do this, the PTA must first disband and it is then up to the Parent Council to set the subcommittee up. Our new leaflet explains the process in more detail. (**LINK HERE!!**) The same "setting-up" process is necessary for all subcommittees and we've heard of Parent Councils having specialist groups to look at matters like communication, hospitality and education as well as fundraising.

First Steps - fundraising



Many Parent Councils are starting with fundraising/social events. This makes sense as it puts some money in the bank for future activities, it's a good way to get to know each other and of getting more people into the school. (**TIP:** One way of getting parents more interested is to focus fundraising effort on something big that everyone, particularly the pupils, agrees the school needs. Improving leisure facilities for pupils is often quite a good one.) Fundraising is usually as much about getting parents involved as the money raised. However, one Parent Council did ask all parents simply to make a payment and, whilst this is not something we usually recommend, they raised quite a lot of money. In the process and in order to speak to as many parents as possible, they set up a communication chain

with each member of the council responsible for contacting particular people; this personal contact probably explains why they were so successful.

Communication

Indeed as Parent Councils are charged with getting more parents involved in the school, many have decided better communication is the way to go. However, one that had set up a website said that the problem was getting parents to look at it. (**TIP:** Link information that you want to send out, e.g. about activities, with information that parents really want to have, like the school holiday dates or the dates of Parent Teacher meetings.) Another school had made links with their local newspaper which had run an article on what was happening at the school. One group had written straightforward leaflets about new developments in the classroom. They had written a simple leaflet on how Maths is now taught and reported that, as it went home with every child, it was a better way of passing on information than holding a meeting when not so many parents would be able to turn up.

School Policies

Some Parent Councils have started by looking at school policies on matters like homework, bullying and health promotion. One parent suggested it would be helpful to link this in with the local authority to see what their priorities were. However, one parent pointed out that school policies were for the headteacher and staff to decide; that it takes a lot of time and effort to develop a policy and parents can't just come along and scrap everything that currently exists. Whilst this is true, parents can always ask questions. It may be that a policy is quite old and everyone has forgotten what it is; questions from the Parent Council can be a very helpful spur to further debate.

Explaining policies to all parents doesn't have to be a paper-based activity. One Parent Council reported that it was going to have a health promotion day in which there would be practical demonstrations on healthy lunch boxes and information on balanced meals. Taking this idea further, one school planned a sports fair when they would invite all local sports clubs into the school to promote what was available locally for children.

One Parent Council reported that it was not looking at school policies as such; instead it was trying to work out a values system against which all school activities could be judged. It was going to consult pupils, parents and staff and would write a draft policy for consideration by the Senior Staff.

Activities

Parent Councils that have inherited a range of activity clubs for children are keen to keep them going and some have taken over the programme of children's discos that the PTA used to run. (We are used to PTAs running Valentine and Hallowe'en discos, but this year we had one school phone up about a Leap Year disco on 29th February. I hope all the boys were ready for their proposals!)



Practical problems

There are always practical problems for Parent Councils to get involved in. One was very positive about the prospect of the school being refurbished. However, others were picking up where school boards/PTAs had left off and were lobbying for improvements in school buildings. Where a school is under threat of closure it hasn't taken Parent Councils long to get campaigning.

Activity at Local Council level

The recent cut in funding to local authorities is starting to have a big impact on schools. Many schools have had their money for books and equipment cut. In some secondary schools the range of subject choices is being reduced whilst elsewhere the cost of school meals is going up and/or free school transport is being limited. Many of these issues are getting onto the agenda of the local authority's Parent Council forum, if there is one. However, in this as in everything else, there is great variation across Scotland. In those authorities that already had an active school board forum at local authority level, this has moved smoothly into becoming a Parent Council Forum. However, these tend to be in areas that are geographically compact e.g. Falkirk, Edinburgh, Glasgow. In large authorities like Highland, Aberdeenshire etc. it is difficult to run a single meeting for everyone and here a pattern of more local meetings is developing.

A successful Parent Council

When challenged to list the features of a successful Parent Council, parents at a recent meeting came up with the following:

- All the parents at the school know who is on the Parent Council and feel that it belongs to them
- The membership includes parents from each year/class
- The Parent Council listens to what parents say and are flexible with their ideas
- Parents know how to contact the Parent Council
- Parent Council members make themselves available to talk, for example at the school gates
- There's a method for the parent forum to make suggestions e.g. via a noticeboard/ dedicated suggestion box/by email.

For the actual Parent Council members, the meeting offered the following advice:

- You can't give everybody everything that they want as people want conflicting things
- You can't do everything, so you must prioritise.

Feedback

Please let us know what is happening in your school so that we can continue to get information from all over Scotland and pass it on. Also, if you would like to host a regional meeting, please contact the office for more information.

STOP PRESS

The Anti-bullying Network is running a conference on the theme

Anti-bullying and Child Protection: have we gone too far?

The date: **Thursday 15th May 2008**

The venue: **Menzies Belford Hotel, Edinburgh**

Speakers include:

Kathleen Marshall, the Children's Commissioner

Tim Gill, the author of "No fear: growing up in a risk-averse society"

The cost is £110 for a single delegate and £190 for two. **However, SPTC will fund all but £10 of the cost for 10 parents. (please contact the SPTC office)**

For more information, go to the ABN website www.antibullying.net or phone 0131 220 1455

Your Questions Answered

Our Parent Council has insurance through you. Does this cover school activities as well?

If the school organises an activity, asks parents in to help, this would be the school's responsibility and would be covered by the school's (i.e. local authority's) insurance. However, if the Parent Council offers to take over responsibility for providing teas and coffees at the school event, then this part of the event would be the Parent Council's responsibility and would be covered by your insurance. In any event/activity, responsibility and liability are often shared by a number of people/groups. For example, if the Parent Council takes pupils by bus on a trip to a ski run, the Parent Council would be responsible for supervising the children, the bus company would be responsible for the safe operation of the bus, and the ski-run company would be responsible for the safe operation of the ski run.

Our PTA Committee has decided to reimburse members for expenses such as mileage. This is because our Supplies Co-ordinator has travelled over 100 miles to and from the cash and carry getting goods, whilst the Secretary has incurred £70 in daytime phone costs securing advertising for our school calendar. How should we go about this?

It is reasonable to pay expenses as no one should be out of pocket because they volunteer to help. You should agree a mileage amount and require receipts for other expenses. With mileage, set the rate at a level that just covers the actual expense of fuel. For telephone calls, an itemised telephone bill will give an indication of the costs incurred. You can draw up a simple form which asks folk to say why the expense was incurred in one column, and detail what is being claimed in the next column. All requests should be counter-signed before payment is made. The forms should be kept with your financial records and made available for the end-of-year audit.

Could you tell me if it is sufficient for the Parent Council to put up a disclaimer for the sale of anything electrical being sold at the car boot sale we're having at the end of March?

For this one, we sought the opinion of our broker and her reply is:- "The Parent Council should put up a notice, but in reality it will not make a huge amount of difference, as a claim could still come in and, if the claimants can prove that the Parent Council had been negligent, the Insurers would have to deal with it. If the original owner can be traced, the Insurers would try and subrogate but I think, given the way car boot sales operate, this is very unlikely. What the Parent Council **should not** do is adapt an electrical appliance in any way.

We're planning our summer fair and want to know if we are covered for a bouncy castle.

If you have insurance with SPTC, you are covered if you hire a bouncy castle and operate it yourself. Your main responsibilities will be in supervision i.e. making sure that there are not too many children on at any one time, that small children are not there with boisterous large children. If you hire in both the castle and the operator, you need to check that the operator has adequate insurance him/herself. If a child twists an ankle as he/she lands, this is an "accident of the activity" and not your responsibility, so there would be no claim.

And finally: GRIDCLUB – Safe, online-learning for all

GridClub was initially developed by Channel 4 and organisations like LTScotland as an online, fun way of helping youngsters aged 5-12 learn about their school curriculum.

It's child-friendly, and the interactive activities, video clips and articles serve as a teaching tool on a variety of topics. They help reinforce children's knowledge and understanding, and aid discussion and research in a wide range of subject areas.

A big and deliberate feature of GridClub is its safety. It is accessed through a safe, secure online environment by way of a unique username and password, with no links to any third party websites.

Many schools throughout Scotland have subscribed to GridClub at a cost of £1.50 per pupil per annum and there's also an option for families to have access at home for £24.99. Now your Parent Council/ PTA can **qualify for a discount on the cost** of a school subscription. You can even, through a partnership with GridClub, set up a fundraising scheme that would discount the cost of the home subscription AND generate funds for the school.

For further information on the options available, please contact Colin Maclean at cmaclean@gridlearning.com
To register for a free trial of GridClub please visit www.gridclub.com

Printed & Published by:- Scottish Parent Teacher Council, 53 George Street, Edinburgh, EH2 2HT. Tel 0131-226 1917

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