

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.

October 2008 Issue 105

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Important Reminder

23rd October is the **last date to register** for **SPTC's 60th Anniversary Conference** which, thanks to the sponsorship of Aileen Campbell MSP is being held in the Scottish Parliament on Saturday 8th November.

New "light touch" Inspection Regime

School inspections are an important part of the education system. They help check that schools are operating to a common standard; they identify weakness within schools and across schools in subject areas and make recommendations for improvements. However, they are often seen as very stressful to staff and very disruptive of schools. Now HMIE propose to operate a new "light touch" inspection regime which, they hope, will reduce stress levels but still be as effective. The key features are:-

- Inspections will be shorter and relate more to how well a school shows that it already knows its own strengths and areas for improvement.
- HMIE will still gather the views of a sample of parents in a questionnaire and use the feedback to help shape the inspection. Any parent who wishes will also be able to complete a questionnaire.
- HMIE will meet the chairperson of the Parent Council during the inspection and invite him/her to comment on the draft report.
- A lay member of the inspection team will look at home school issues, communication and the involvement of parents; the lay member will also meet a group of parents selected by the inspection team to hear their views of the school and of their involvement in its life and work.
- Reports will be shorter and written in Plain English to make them more accessible to parents.
- There will still be follow-through inspections where these are needed.

Consultation on new exams

Responses to the consultation on new exams have to be in **by 31st October**. We have now been through the proposals in detail and our draft response is available on our website www.sptc.info Meanwhile, here is a summary of the main points with a note of our concerns in each area.

How do the new qualifications fit into the whole curriculum?

This is not actually a consultation question, but it is a very important consideration.

Secondary schools will be divided into two chunks:

- **S1-S3** will be a General Course for all pupils and **S4-S6** will be when they study subjects of their choice that lead to qualifications.
- The S1-S3 General Course will cover eight broad subject areas.
- There is no specific curriculum content for this; instead teachers will be expected to devise their own “programmes of learning”, drawing on topics that make sense locally.
- Cross-curricular teaching, and teaching through “experiences”, will be key features in the delivery of these learning programmes.
- In S1-S3 it will be possible for youngsters to begin Skills for Work courses but not other exam courses. The consultation makes it clear that all youngsters will be expected to complete the full three years of general education before they embark on courses for national qualifications.
- At the end of S3 teachers will assess the level students have reached before they move into S4 and their exam courses.
- Pupils will make their subject choices for the exam courses at the end of S3.
- It is expected that pupils will reach a higher level than they currently do by the end of S3.

Our concerns

- With no agreed curriculum, it will be very time-consuming for teachers to have to devise their own learning programmes and it could also mean children learn quite different things in different schools.
- If the assessment at the end of S3 is done school by school, what steps will be taken to ensure that teachers all work to a common standard?
- Many pupils find making subject choice and dropping the subjects they really don't like in S2 really motivating. It is not good to delay this process by a whole year.
- There is absolutely no evidence to support the assertion that pupils will reach a higher level at the end of S3 than they do at present.

Do you welcome the intention to update all qualifications at Access, Higher and Advanced Higher?

The intention is to keep Access, Higher and Advanced Higher so that they provide continuity and stability to the new qualification system. However, they will be updated both in terms of content and format to bring them into line with the other qualifications.

Our concerns

This sounds like a simple proposal, even a good idea. It is clearly important that the content of exam courses – particularly in fast-changing subjects like computing, other sciences and business studies – are modernised frequently, so we have no problems with the idea of updating content. However, changing the format to bring the qualifications into line with the proposed new ones could mean very radical changes, depending on what decisions are made about the format of the new qualifications. It could in effect mean that the only thing that stays the same with Higher etc. is the name! We are looking at a totally unknown degree of change, and it is hard to comment meaningfully until we know what will be involved. At the very least it will be necessary to take a lot of care to ensure that any changes are done properly.

What features of Standard Grade and the Intermediate courses should be included in the new courses?

Standard Grade (SG) Courses and Intermediates 1 & 2 will be scrapped and two new courses – General and Advanced General – will be developed using the best features of the existing courses.

- The new courses will be offered in all Standard Grade and Intermediate subjects.
- They will be made up of units (of variable length) which will be internally assessed.
- There will be an end-of-course external examination and the course award will be based on pupils' performance in both the units and the external examination.
- The new courses will take the same length of time as the current Intermediate courses.

Our concerns

- A simplification of the exam structure at S4 level is welcome. However, SG and Intermediate courses currently have a number of key differences. One of these is that with SG, students work at two different levels and then sit two exams so that at the end of the day nearly 98% get a course award. With the Intermediate courses pupils sit and then pass/fail at one level. The pass rate at Intermediate 2 is 78%.

- It is only possible to deliver five Intermediate courses in a full school year. This means that, under the new system, youngsters will be limited to taking five courses in S4, although the five courses can be made up of whole and half courses.

Should units be grade A – C?

It is proposed to grade units from A – C

Our concerns

Again, this sounds like a good idea – pupils would be more motivated by the units if they got a grade. However, grading is done internally, and so this immediately raises questions about how easy it will be to get every teacher working to a common standard and what confidence people will have in the grades.

Should grade units count towards the final award?

It is suggested that graded units will be combined in some way (the exact details have not yet been decided) with the result of the external exam and contribute to the course award.

Our concerns

Establishing common standards across all schools so that people have confidence in the grades will be even more important.

Also, if the graded units count towards the final course award, then pupils will be very concerned to do well in the units. Evidence from other courses where there are already graded units suggests that students will want to sit the unit assessments at the end of the course, they will want the chance to improve their grades through resits and there could even be a demand for an appeal system.

Should there be a “compensatory” award?

The Government wants to introduce a “compensatory” course award for those students who do not achieve an A to C pass in the new qualifications. They suggest these options:-

- Youngsters get an ungraded course award or a grade E to indicate that they have completed the course, sat the final exam but not got an A to C or D grade (which is the “near-miss” grade).
- Youngsters are awarded either an A or C pass at the level below that which has been studied.
- The units alone are recorded.

Our concerns

We think recording the units is the most positive approach. The ungraded course or the grade “E” simply says “this youngster didn’t get an A – C pass”. The award at the level below has been tried before and was abandoned because it caused such confusion.

Should there be literacy and numeracy awards at different levels?

- Literacy and numeracy will be compulsory subjects but youngsters will be able to opt out of taking Maths and English in S4.
- Numeracy will cover basic number, time, money as well as statistics and probability.
- Literacy will cover communication, analysis as well as use of language.
- The Government proposes that all teachers will take responsibility for delivering literacy; there will be no taught course.
- Youngsters will be assessed in the same way as they are assessed for other qualifications i.e. through internal unit assessment and an external exam.
- The exam will be sat at some point (not yet decided) between the end of S3 and the end of S4.

Our concerns

- Numeracy and literacy cover a wide range of topics and, unless there is an agreed programme, different teachers might teach these topics differently and thereby confuse pupils.
- If there is an external exam, there needs to be a taught course to prepare youngsters.
- It will be important to establish at the outset the value of the literacy and numeracy qualifications for further, higher education, and employment, compared to English and Maths if youngsters are to be free to drop the latter two.

Should there be more flexibility in when youngsters can sit exams?

The consultation makes a number of different proposals for increasing flexibility:

- allowing youngsters to study for exams over 12 months, 18 months or 24 months
- encouraging youngsters to by-pass lower level (i.e. General) qualifications
- introducing a winter diet.

Our concerns

- At first glance these also seem like attractive options. But if youngsters spend different lengths of time studying for the same exam, they will need separate teaching and only the large schools will be able to offer various time options and even then only in popular subjects.
- A winter diet was introduced previously and had to be abandoned because it was so unpopular.
- Youngsters have always been able to bypass lower level exams – they choose not to.

Your Questions Answered

We were recently told that the Government had introduced new food regulations which meant that we couldn't provide crisps and sweets at the discos we run in school. Is this true?

The short answer is "No". The Government has introduced regulations which ban crisps and sweets from school meals, but these restrictions do not apply to food provided by parents, whether for packed lunches or social events. The following is the official information.

Nutritional Requirements for Food and Drink in Schools (Scotland) Regulations 2008 came into force in primary schools at the start of this session and govern what food and drinks schools and authorities can provide to pupils. The regulations are quite detailed and their real purpose is to promote healthy eating, so much of what the guidelines cover is what can be provided. However, there is also a list of **banned foods** and these include "confectionary". This is defined as follows:-

- Chocolate and chocolate products e.g. bars of milk, plain or white chocolate, chocolate flakes, chocolate buttons, chocolate chips or chocolate-filled eggs
- Sweets e.g. boiled, gum/gelatine, liquorice, mint and other sweets, lollipops, fudge, tablet, toffee, sherbet, marshmallows and chewing gum; this includes sugar-free sweets. Cereal bars, processed fruit sweets and bars and sugared or yoghurt-coated fruit or nuts
- Savoury products are also banned and these include any pre-packaged items which can be eaten without preparation and consist of or include as a basic ingredient potatoes, other root vegetables, cereals such as crisps, corn puff or corn snacks, cornmeal snacks, tortilla chips, pretzels, sweetened or salted popcorn, prawn crackers, flavoured rice cakes, and Bombay Mix
- Nuts and seeds with added salt, sugar or fat.

However these regulations do **NOT** apply to:

- Food or drink brought on to the premises by parents or pupils, e.g. packed lunches or food bought by a pupil from a shop
- Food and drink provided in schools for people who are not pupils, e.g. staff
- Food and drink used in teaching food preparation and cookery skills, provided that any food so prepared is not served to pupils as part of a school meal
- Food or drink provided as part of a social, cultural or recreational activity, e.g. school discos, sports days or cultural events such as school-organised Burns Suppers or Christmas lunches
- Food and drink provided in nurseries and pre-school centres. (Separate guidance for the early years sector, *Nutritional Guidance for Early Years*, was published in January 2006.)



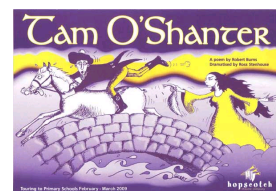
Psst, want to buy some chocolate

BRING THE THEATRE TO YOUR SCHOOL

Your fundraising events shouldn't just be about providing equipment for the school; why not treat the children (and teachers) to one of Hopscotch Theatre's entertaining and educational shows? They have just announced their programme for 2009.

"What A Load Of Rubbish" (touring January to June) follows the adventures of a family who are in danger of being swallowed up by rubbish.

Hopscotch is celebrating the 250th anniversary of Robert Burns next year with two productions. **"Tam O'Shanter"** (touring January to March) is a lively production performed to one class only, with two actors portraying the many colourful characters from this epic cautionary tale full of humour and dark mystery. **"The Life and Times of Robert Burns"** (touring August to November) is a fast and furious hour long show telling the bard's life story with the help of his songs and poems.



If you want to know more, Write to: **Hopscotch Theatre**, 7 Water Row, Glasgow, G51 3UW.

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