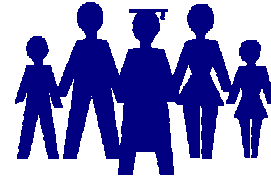


Backchat



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.

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Happy New Year

We'd like to take this opportunity to welcome you back to the start of a new term and wish you all the very best for 2009.

SPTC's 60th Anniversary Conference: Report

Now for a wee look back at 2008 and SPTC's 60th Anniversary Conference! Like all birthdays, our 60th involved a huge amount of preparation and then seemed to be over in a flash. It was held in the Scottish Parliament, thanks to the sponsorship of Aileen Campbell MSP, and there was something special about going into Committee Room 1 and sitting round the table and on the chairs used by MSPs.

The theme of the Conference was "*The Past, The Present and The Future*" and, as SPTC has quite a good and well documented archive going back to its foundation in 1948, we decided to set up an exhibition of SPTC's history to run alongside the conference. Some of the most fascinating documents are the original, hand-written minute books, the early accounts (all in old, pre-decimal money) and letters, including more than one heartfelt cry predicting the demise of the organisation if members did not rouse themselves to get active!

Also on display were photos, newspaper articles etc. of SPTC's more recent campaigns, including the demonstration against the education cuts in 1996 (proof that there is nothing new under the sun) when 40,000 parents, teachers and pupils marched through Edinburgh and, more recently, of our long-running campaign to get a common-sense approach to child protection and disclosure checks. The pictures from these campaigns caused a lot of merriment amongst delegates because they show many current players in their younger, pre-wrinkles-or-white-hair days!

THE PAST

The conference began with a presentation by our Development Manager, Judith Gillespie, on *The Past*, and she drew her material from the archive and her own memory – she has been a part of the organisation for 20 years and is by way of a walking archive herself. She recounted how SPTC's history fell into three distinct phases and at the end of each one, the organisation faced an uncertain future.

The Early Years

SPTC was set up in 1948 by a group of enthusiastic Glasgow parents who were keen for there to be close co-operation between parents and teachers for the benefit of the children. In these early years, the focus was

totally on education and education policy, not at all on fundraising. There were two conferences a year which were always well attended, but there was very little money – they had to resort to putting out collecting cans at the conferences – and there were very few members – only about 50 schools were fully paid up. It was enthusiasm and the hard word of the redoubtable volunteers that kept SPTC going. Despite this, by 1971 the writing was on the wall, and the then Chairman wrote out to AGM delegates, predicting that they could well be “attending the death of a long-ailing parent”.

The Middle Years

However, help was at hand because exactly then, the Government “discovered” parents and decided that they had a positive effect on children’s education (sound familiar?). There followed a series of policy initiatives, culminating in school boards, that gave parents an official role in education. As SPTC was the only national parent body around, it played an important part in getting these changes implemented and so phase two of SPTC’s history saw close co-operation with the Government. However, the Government’s changes were highly controversial and many of SPTC’s own members opposed them. This division of view, coupled with our old friend a shortage of cash, saw SPTC reach 1990 and again find its future in doubt.

The Recent Years

But the seeds of success had been sewn in the controversy. The legislation required school boards to set up PTAs, a number of high profile cases made people more aware of the need for insurance, and SPTC was able to continue the dialogue it had established with Government over policy issues. Membership grew steadily and with it, so did SPTC as an organisation. We went from less than 500 members (no one ever counted too carefully) to over 1,400. Moreover, despite the establishment of the Scottish School Board Association, officials and the Press continued to call on SPTC for comment and information. For its part, SPTC decided to place more focus on supporting PTAs and so were born our range of free advice leaflets and *Backchat*, our reader-friendly newsletter.

However, now there is a new kid on the block, the all-purpose Parent Councils, with the Government looking to set up a new national body for them so, once again, SPTC’s future is uncertain.

THE PRESENT

The Minister, Adam Ingram, dealt with *The Present*. He started off by paying tribute to the role that SPTC currently plays in Scottish Education; he then went on to detail current developments and finally he spoke about proposals for a new national body which, he admitted, were probably as much for the Government’s convenience as anything else.

In terms of SPTC’s role, the Minister referred to our contribution to the recent changes in the disclosure legislation, enabling Parent Councils to meet in school buildings without everyone having to be disclosed.

Within current developments, he highlighted Curriculum for Excellence which is intended to give youngsters a broader and more meaningful experience at school. He said that some schools are already implementing the principles and developing pupils’ wider skills. He also updated us on the decision to delay the introduction of the new qualifications for one year to ensure that there was enough time to develop them properly. It is now children who are currently in Primary 6 who will be the first ones to take the new exams.

Finally, the Minister spoke of the important role that parents have in education and what they can do to help their children. He talked about the support that is offered to Parent Councils by Lorraine Sanda, the National Parental Involvement Officer and her field-team. However, of major interest to everyone at SPTC were his comments on a new National Parents’ Body. At present there is a research project being run by Carole Millar to find out what parents want and after that the Government will consider what steps it could/ should take to introduce it.

THE FUTURE

Our final speaker was Walter Humes, who is a Professor of Education at the University of the West of Scotland and a well-known and witty contributor to the *Times Educational Supplement Scotland*. His theme was *The Future* but he started by entertaining us with a series of collective nouns, such as “a harangue of heidies” or “an inquisition of inspectors”. Once he’d got his audience awake and fully on



A harangue of heidies meets an inquisition of inspectors!

-side, he talked with authority about how hard it is for parents to participate in education when it is so dominated by powerful, professional groups - not just teachers and headteachers, but also quality improvement officers, directors of education, Her Majesty's Inspectors, Government officials and various quangos. He explained how the professionals had their own networks and were able to control the agenda by being the ones to give the written and official version of what had happened and what was to happen until that became the accepted truth.

Against such a background he agreed that it was important for parents to be independent and willing to hold everyone to account. However, whilst it was important to be outside the Establishment, it was important not to be so distant from it that no one asked for comments. It's hard to get the balance right, but he commended SPTC for how well they managed it.

But as well as praise, Walter offered some advice. He urged SPTC to look at the scope of its activities and to have a care for pupils who do not have parents fighting their corner- looked-after children, asylum seekers, travelling children etc. He also said that we need to accept that children's rights were now a legitimate challenge to parents' rights.

Finally Walter said that whilst the future could not be predicted, the role for SPTC would remain constant and this would require us to:-

- scrutinise legislation and policy initiatives
 - contribute to public debate
 - inform the wider parental community of key issues – “wider” in the sense of extending beyond the activists
 - strengthen the capacity of parents to negotiate the various layers of educational bureaucracy
 - form alliances with those professionals who may share similar concerns e.g. in relation to the speed of assessments for children who may have specific learning difficulties
 - ask searching questions of professionals – and these should include “why?” not just “how?”
- So, a pretty easy role really!

For a fuller report on the Conference, go to our website www.sptc.info and, in the left menu bar look in “About SPTC”.

New National Body

The Government has commissioned Carole Millar Research to find out what parents and Parent Councils want in the way of a new national body – and “not wanting one” is a legitimate response!

Her consultation is in three parts.

- The first is that all Parent Councils have been sent a questionnaire via their school asking them for their views on current support and what they might need. We also sent this out to all our members in November last year.
- The second is a series of consultation meetings –in Glasgow on 19th January and in Dundee on 26th January. Again information is coming to you via your local authority but, if we have your email address, we sent the invite letter and application form out in December. There are two sessions at each venue – one during the day and one in the evening – but places at each are limited to 30 and will be awarded on a first-come, first-served basis. If you are interested in going and have not had the application form, please phone the office.
- The third part sees Carole undertaking in-depth interviews with “key” people. We are not sure who these people are, but there are eight of them and our Convener, Miranda Harvey, was one of the select few. She spoke to Carol on 17th December.

New Exams Update

In October we gave you information about the proposals for new exams in S4, the introduction of literacy and numeracy qualifications in S4 and an update of Highers. The Government received 1,800 responses to the consultation and you can read them online at www.scotland.gov.uk/Publications/2008/12/04112537/0 They are still in the process of analysing what everyone said but it is already clear that there were two very strong and obvious messages:-

- the timetable was too tight
- youngsters should not be taking the literacy and numeracy qualifications in S4.

The Government has responded positively to both.

- The new exams will not now be introduced until 2014, which means that it is the current P6 children who will sit them first.
- It has agreed that the literacy and numeracy qualifications will be done before S4, probably in S3. The Government is also considering whether these need to be external exams or whether they could be assessed internally, in school.

News from You

I don't think it's overstating the case to say that Annual General Meetings cause a lot of hassle. Everyone knows they have to be held - they are the time when the Parent Council or PTA reports back to all its members - but many folk are puzzled to know what exactly should be included in the AGM and then, once that hurdle has been overcome, it seems not worth the hassle as hardly anyone ever bothers to turn up. Well, help is at hand on both scores. We have a leaflet, on our website www.sptc.info/publications/leaflets (also available, free, by post) which explains what an AGM should cover. However, for the more difficult trick of getting parents to come along and be interested, we turn to the Parent Council from Law Primary School in East Lothian who seem to have found a solution. They didn't just send out an invitation to the AGM: they also sent out an annual report of what they had been doing throughout the year.

The report was not long – just over two sides of A4 – and it was not fancy, but it provided clear information about the issues the Parent Council had considered including:-

- a school travel plan
- cashless catering
- a homework questionnaire
- the likely impact of a new housing development on the school
- news of a Parent Council logo competition



Maggie hoped that there'd be as many people at the AGM as she had ticks on her board

They told parents that here would be a chance for them to comment on any or all of these matters at the AGM.

The result was a good turnout and a very lively discussion. They did not try to avoid controversy unlike one school we heard of where the headteacher wanted no discussion of a proposed name change for the school in case it stirred up too much debate! In fact people do not always agree and debate is good.

In their report, the Law Parent Council also invited new parents to become involved and made it clear not only that all meetings were open to all parents but when they would be held!

Wanted:- News from You

We've been contacted by a special school asking for *Backchat* to carry more items that are specific to special schools. We in turn are now asking members in special schools to tell us about what's going on in your school – what issues have you been discussing? Does the list from Law Primary sound familiar to you?

CALLING DISABLED PARENTS – your experiences wanted

We have had an interesting request from researchers at the University of Strathclyde. With the new emphasis on parental involvement, they are looking into the experiences of disabled parents, recognising that they have particular needs. However, they want to focus on good practice, not the problems. They want to hear from parents who have mobility, sensory or learning disabilities or mental health issues, who live in central Scotland and have some experience of good practice/support in schools.

Parents will be invited to take part in an individual interview with one of the researchers. The interviews will be held at a time and place convenient to parents and will last about an hour. If the parents agree, the researchers would like to audio record the session to ensure that they have an accurate record, but nothing said by any parent will be passed on to anyone outside the research team.

Parents who take part – and the researchers are keen to talk to Dads as well as Mums – will receive a £15 gift token as a small “thank you”. For more information email roseann.maguire@strath.ac.uk