

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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STOP PRESS: Parents stop school funding cuts!

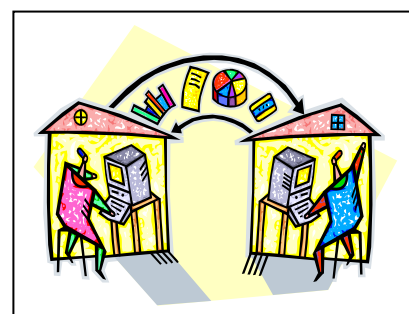
This may be a surprising headline but it is absolutely true. Edinburgh parents have managed to stop their Local Authority from making proposed 2% cuts from school budgets.

Last year Edinburgh Parent Councils set up an online network (similar to local Freecycle networks), hosted by Yahoo groups, in order to swap stories about what they were doing as Parent Councils. It began as a relatively low key affair. However, once Parent Councils learnt that the Council proposed 2% cuts from school budgets in 2009/10 in order to get Authority finances back on track, they started to use the network to report what the cuts would mean for their particular school, what they would lose, what they would have to do without. Everyone in the network could either get all the emails as they were sent or receive a daily digest of the emails. The result was that, across the city, there was a growing understanding of what the cuts would mean for schools in practical terms.

Members of the network could also email each other directly to ask questions, so once the network traffic moved from reporting the impact of cuts to reporting what action different schools were taking, it was possible to email for more information about, say, a letter-writing campaign or a proposed delegation to the council offices. Parents also reported to the network what individual councillors had said about the cuts at Parent Council meetings so making it possible to build up a picture of where the different political parties stood.

The network did not itself act as a lobbying group; it merely provided a space for people to talk to each other and exchange news and views. However, what was soon clear was that there was really strong opposition to the proposed cuts and that, if the Council went ahead with them, they would encounter serious opposition from parents from across the city who in turn were encouraged by knowing that they were not acting alone.

In the end the Council bowed to pressure; they decided to leave school budgets alone and find the necessary savings from other spending areas.



What are Parent Councils for?

On the front page we carry a typical example of what parents have always done to support their schools - campaign for more funds - and we know that many Parent Councils are currently campaigning against budget cuts or to stop school closures. However, going out and about, we're also aware that many Parent Councils are somewhat puzzled to know exactly what their normal role is and how they fit into the school set up.

- Are Parent Councils, as some suggest, part of the school management, there to help the headteacher “achieve the agreed objectives...of the development plan”?
- Are they a sort of fundraising machine for the school, charged with raising enough money to buy smart boards for every class?
- Are they responsible for ensuring that all parents are involved in the school, the role that many see the local authorities giving them?

One Shetland parent suggested that this last option was indeed what local authorities - and the Government - wanted of Parent Councils, but then went on to give the idea short shrift, saying, “I think that expecting parent volunteers to suddenly become experts at engaging the disengaged is unrealistic. Some parents are involved in Parent Councils on community spirited/philanthropic grounds but most parents are involved because they care about their own children’s education and they want to play a role in making sure it is as good as it can be.” Then, returning to the topic of our front page story she added, “In these straitened financial times, many parents are involved because they want to protect their children’s schools from cuts and closure threats.”

The Line between the Management and Parents

So where do Parent Councils sit in the school? If you imagine a line drawn between the Management on one hand i.e. the Headteacher, Local Authority etc, and parents on the other, then the Parent Council is firmly on the parents’ side of that line. Essentially it is a subcommittee of the Parent Forum, there to carry out business on behalf of all the parents in the school. The Parent Council is responsible for its actions to the Parent Forum and should act as a two-way communication system between the school and parents, representing parents’ views to the school and explaining the school’s views to parents.

There are times when parents and the “management” will not agree. For example, recently a number of authorities have been consulting on moving to a four-and-a-half-day week so that teachers can have in-service sessions on the free afternoon. However, many parents are unhappy about the proposal and it is the Parent Council’s job to represent this view, not persuade parents of the benefits of the four-and-a-half-day week. Being “on the parents’ side” can also mean discussing school policies and then explaining them to parents and we offer a genuine case below.

The Importance of 16th Birthdays – a case study

A parent, Mrs Y, was told by her son’s guidance teacher that school staff could not speak to her about her son’s poor attendance because he was now 16 years old. Puzzled, she decided to find out more. She learnt that sixteen is a very important birthday. A youngster’s legal status changes and whilst he/she may not be able to drive a car, vote or buy a drink, he/she does assume responsibility for his/her actions and for what is done to him/her. For example, a sixteen year-old signs for his/her own medical treatment. In the school context this means that the 16 year-old is responsible for his/her attendance and can make his/her own subject choices. For its part the school is required to respect this new, adult status and deal directly with 16+ pupils rather than with their parents.

Whilst Mrs Y understood that position, she was aware that different guidance teachers at the school operated differently. Some simply carried on talking to and involving parents, whilst others, like her son’s, would only talk to parents if the 16+ pupil signed a consent form allowing this.

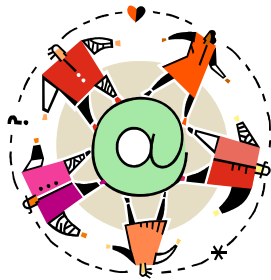
However, Mrs Y was a Parent Council member, so she decided to raise the matter at the next meeting. She wanted to find out if there was a school policy on involving the parents of post-16 pupils. If so, what it was, whether it was sensible, and whether it was observed by all teachers? Then having established what the policy was, the Parent Council and school could think of a way of telling parents about it.

The Parent Council decided that this probably wasn’t a matter of interest for all parents, that the most helpful time to tell parents was at the start of S4 when youngsters are heading for their sixteenth birthday. They thought the school should send an “alert” letter, explaining the significance of 16th birthdays, about the youngster’s imminent change in legal status and how the school would deal with it. The school responded positively to this suggestion and the “16+ alert letter” will be sent for the first time next year.

Come into my Chatroom!

Eleanor Coner reports on her foray into a chatroom

We've all read the headlines about (mainly) teenage girls being lured into meeting up with men they'd originally met through Internet chatrooms. I've always thought how naïve these youngsters must be if they believed everything they read/learned online – I mean everyone adopts a pretend name and personality when they go online! In the past, out of curiosity, I've gone into chatrooms only to be confronted by a load of nonsense messages and so I've left soon after. But recently I decided that there must be more to it than I realised as more and more people have been telling me about all the lovely people they've met this way.



Chatrooms come in all shapes and sizes and can be used for general chatting or special interests like hobbies or book clubs. They operate at two levels; there's a public space where all chat can be seen by everyone and "private rooms" where chatroom participants can have one-to-one conversations. The one that was "recommended" to me is one of the most popular, and has different sections according to your age and/or where you live. I decided to go into the Edinburgh room and once I had registered with a nickname and password I went into the public room. The "conversation" here seemed to be a bit of a free-for-all nonsense.

However, when I typed in that I was new to the chatroom, a couple of names clicked up on the bottom of the page and I realised they must be in "private" chatrooms. To chat to these folk I just had to type in "hi", and off I went.

I was pretty nervous ... but what could go wrong? I was safe at home and I *knew* about the dangers and safeguards – don't give away personal details, etc, etc. At first, the conversations seemed to be pretty harmless – "Hi, how are you? Do you work? How old are you? Where do you work?" I remembered all the rules and was pretty vague about things – there was nothing to it... actually, it was a bit boring. But then, things started getting out of control and, within a few minutes I was trying to have conversations with twelve men! Being a newbie I felt obliged to reply to them all and felt like one of those variety acts who spin lots of plates on long sticks. I couldn't keep track even though a lot of the talk seemed to be following a similar pattern and also seemed to be getting a bit ... friendlier. I'm sure that in the rush I let go a couple of nuggets of information that on reflection I should have kept secret.

Then I started to think about myself at the age of fourteen – insecure, ugly duckling, no boyfriend. I would have been so excited to have so many men interested in me and saying such nice things about how gorgeous I was and how they would love to see me ... just see me and hold my hand ... nothing else! I'm sure that at fourteen I would have seen nothing suspicious in it and, in the safety of my bedroom with my family asleep in the other rooms, I would have felt that nothing could hurt me... even if I let slip where I lived and what I looked like. After all, nobody was going to try and find me ... were they?

And yet, here I was in my 40's, mother of three grown-up sons, starting to find it quite exciting to be "talking" to so many people and actually doing the very thing I knew I shouldn't – giving away personal details. I sat there gob-smacked – was I *really* starting to think these men were actually interested in me? Was I really starting to imagine what they were like and thinking how nice they sounded?! Who's naïve now?

I'm sure that there are chatrooms out there where perfectly sensible, friendly people have perfectly normal conversations – and if you know of one, let me know. But this experience certainly made me realise that anyone could fall into the traps we know are there and I could quite imagine that if chatrooms had been around when I was a teenager I would have been completely addicted. Parents, you have been warned! In the meantime, I've told my husband that I might be late home next week as I've been invited to "afternoon tea" by four different men.

For more information and advice on safer use of the Internet, phone or email the office for a free copy of our SUSI pack.

Your Questions Answered

Can our Parent Council provide home baking for events at the school? Our headteacher says we shouldn't.

If you have insurance as part of your SPTC membership, the answer is “yes” as long as the event is organised by the Parent Council (or PTA) **or** is a school event where the food is clearly provided by the Parent Council (or PTA). Your insurance provides cover against the risk of food poisoning; so if someone does suffer food poisoning as the result of food provided at your event, they may make a claim. Moreover, cover is not restricted to food provided by the actual members of the Parent Council or PTA Committee. Food provided by other parents at the school, when requested to do so by the Parent Council or PTA, is similarly included in the cover.

However, no-one wants food poisoning, so it is sensible (but not a requirement) to follow some basic precautions when providing food.

- Observe good hygiene.
- Avoid high risk items e.g. those that contain fresh cream or raw eggs.
- If someone brings in a dodgy offering that you wouldn't eat yourself, quietly lose it.
- Don't offer guarantees that you cannot confirm. Bought products often contain the advice “this product was made in a factory where products containing nuts were made” i.e. there was a risk of cross-contamination which, for those with nut allergies, could be serious. Just because a product does not contain nuts, does not mean it is “safe”, so do not claim it is.
- If you are providing hot food, make sure that it is properly cooked and kept properly hot.
- For more tips on running fundraising events safely, please see our new leaflet (enclosed) [SAFETY AT FUNDRAISING EVENTS – a positive approach](#)

Finally, the Government has recently brought in new regulations which restrict the type of food that schools can provide. However, these **regulations do not apply to food provided by parents** whether for children's packed lunches or at social events, so there is nothing to stop you providing chocolate cake, crisps and fizzy drinks at your events.

Can we provide alcohol at our social events?

Again the answer is “yes” as long as providing alcohol is not specifically banned in your school-let contract. However, if you charge directly or indirectly for the alcohol, you have to apply to the licensing department of your council for a temporary permission and you are restricted in how many of these you can have in a year.

“Indirect charging” includes selling tickets that can be exchanged for a drink or charging an entrance fee that entitles people to a “free” drink. You do not need to apply for a temporary permission if people bring their own drink or if you provide drinks completely free of charge.



Exam results to your phone

SQA is about to re-launch the service that lets youngsters get their exam results by text or email on results day. Wherever they are, whatever they're doing, students can get their results without waiting for the postie to arrive. However, everyone does still get a real certificate through the post.

To take advantage of the results service, pupils have to register with My SQA by 16th July and activate their accounts by 24th July. To find out how to register go to www.mysqa.info

Quite apart from the results service, MySQA is a web-based facility that allows anyone registered with it access to their personal record of SQA qualifications*.

It allows students to keep track of their progress towards current courses and view all past SQA qualifications online. It is open to anyone who has taken an SQA qualification since 1995, who has a Scottish Candidate Number (SCN) and an email address to register. For example, someone who left school two years ago and is now on a gap year in Australia can access their SQA exam results through the MySQA website.

All records are secure, confidential and automatically updated.

* The website is normally open 24/7 but closes briefly when results are being issued to avoid server overload.