

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.

June 2009 Issue 109

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Help Wanted

The next few months are "AGM season" when many PTAs and Parent Councils hold their annual meetings and report back to parents on what they have been doing over the past year. If this applies to you, we'd really like you to send us a copy of your report so that we can build up a picture of what parents' groups are doing across Scotland. We will then feed this information back to you, so that you can compare activities at your school with what others do; we will also make the information available at our annual conference in November when the theme is *Schools and Parents* - and, if you haven't already got the date in your diary, this will take place on **7th November** in the **Glasgow Royal Concert Hall**.

We would also like to hear about anything you had hoped to do but couldn't for some reason. We sent this request out by email with the last *Backchat*, and some folk have replied - so thank you to them - but it would be great to have more feedback.

Meanwhile, if mention of AGMs is starting to make you panic, we do have the inevitable helpful leaflet - *Good Practice for Annual General Meetings* - which, amongst other things, offers a model agenda. You can download it from our website www.sptc.info (look in publications) or we'd be happy to post you out a hard copy.

Money Matters

If you thought our item on having good procedures for handling money was a little over-the-top, we're sorry to report that yet another school has had money go missing - this time £2,800. The Parent Council had very good procedures, but they were deceived by a Treasurer who was quite deliberately defrauding them. The problem only came to light when, at the end of the year, the in-school records were checked against the bank statements by an independent person and the discrepancy was found.



When money goes missing like this, everyone feels very upset and the situation is made more difficult when the offender has children at the school. It is therefore very important that, at the AGM, an independent person who is not on the committee or related to anyone on the committee is publicly appointed to check the books at the end of the year. The person appointed should not only be happy working with accounts but also quite careful about checking all the records.

What is Curriculum for Excellence and what does it mean for me?

1) What is Curriculum for Excellence?

If the overall term, Curriculum for Excellence, seems strange, you may be more familiar with the "four capacities" that it aims to develop - *Confident Individuals, Successful Learners, Effective Contributors* and

Responsible Citizens. These reflect the purpose of Curriculum for Excellence to provide pupils with learning/teaching that is more relevant to the changing world. In order to achieve this, the programme itself consists of a number of separate but related elements.

- The first is a new approach to teaching which is more interactive between the pupils and teacher, and less about teachers simply providing information.
- The second is a slimming down and updating of what is taught to focus on what is relevant to the world today and what youngsters need to know.
- The third is more cross-subject teaching i.e. using a project to combine different elements from different subjects. So in science the topic *Planet Earth* draws on all the conventional sciences, physics, chemistry and biology.
- The fourth is a new focus on literacy and numeracy by all teachers in all areas of the curriculum to help ensure that youngsters become competent in these skills.
- The fifth is a modernised qualification (examination) system in the upper secondary (S4 onwards) which takes account of both the new style of teaching and learning and the new content. (Youngsters will also be assessed in literacy and numeracy in secondary school and given an award that reflects where they are with these.)
- Finally, there's a recognition that not all learning happens in the classroom and youngsters will be credited for other activities that they do whether these are playing sport/music or taking part in activities like the Scouts.



It is also anticipated that the new, interactive approach to teaching and the more relevant curriculum content will motivate pupils to learn and so help them raise their levels of attainment.

2) What does Curriculum for Excellence mean in Primary Schools?

What stays the same?

- Many primary schools are already well established in delivering Curriculum for Excellence. The interactive teaching suits their normal approach as does using projects that draw on different subjects.
- With a single class teacher, it is quite natural for him/her to teach literacy and numeracy through all areas of learning.

What will be different?

- The changes that you might notice are that the 5 – 14 levels of “A” to “D/E” are disappearing. Instead, the primary curriculum will cover two stages – 1 and 2 – with the first stage starting in nursery and going on to the end of P3 and the second stage covering P4 to P7.
- There will be no formal national tests, although teachers will continue to assess pupils’ progress and report back to parents. Also, some local authorities are using standardised tests to see how children across the authority compare and are progressing.

The primary school will remain what it has always been for children – a good place to learn with the focus on the individual child.

3) What does Curriculum for Excellence mean in Secondary Schools?

In general secondary schools are not so advanced in introducing Curriculum for Excellence. With different teachers for different subjects, the programme does not fall quite so naturally into their current approach. However, a number of schools are already making great strides and developing cross-curricular topics, involving different subject departments. Individual schools have a lot of flexibility on how they do this and schools will develop different programmes of learning that suit their pupils and their staff.

- Under Curriculum for Excellence, the secondary school will be organised differently. Although there is currently a little variation, with some schools presenting pupils early for SQA exams, most schools are organised into three, two-year blocks; S1/2 - a general course, S3/4 - Standard Grade/equivalent courses, S5/6 - the qualification years for Highers and Intermediate exams. In future the secondary school will be organised into two, three-year blocks; S1 to S3 - a general course and S4 - S6 the senior phase when qualifications will be taken.
- S1 to S3 will build on the work done in primary schools and will cover levels 3 and 4 of the Curriculum for Excellence. There will continue to be a strong focus on interactive teaching, literacy and numeracy, cross-curricular working and the child’s learning outside the classroom.

- In S4 to S6 many of these same elements will continue, but as youngsters move forward to qualifications, they will be taught more subject-based material.
- Although the qualifications are still being developed, they will continue to be offered in specific subjects, not cross-curricular topics. Pupils will not get a Higher in Planet Earth!
- The new qualifications which will replace Standard Grade and/or Intermediates 1 and 2 will be sat for the first time in 2014. Until then, students will continue to sit the existing qualifications.
- The new qualifications will be at the same level, have the same value and be just as rigorous as the existing qualifications so they will be equally valued by employers, colleges and universities. There will be no advantage or disadvantage in sitting the old or new qualifications.
- The popular Skills for Work courses will continue to be offered from S3 onwards as they are at present.

As we have said, secondary schools are already starting to introduce new approaches to teaching and some cross-curricular work, but the major changes will happen more gradually. These will follow the current P6 children as they move through secondary because these are the youngsters who are due to be the first take the new qualifications in 2014. For more information go to the LTS Curriculum for Excellence website at www.ltsotland.org.uk/curriculumforexcellence/

New Bill on school closure

Anyone who has been caught up in a school closure will know that it can be a very painful business, with parents and pupils often fighting hard against what they see as an uncaring local authority.

School closures will always be with us; they usually happen because there has been a major change in the pupil population - either an overall drop in the number or a significant shift in where people live e.g. out of one area into another. In the same way that an authority is expected to build more schools if the pupil population increases, so it is sometimes necessary for an authority to close schools if its pupil population falls.

Authorities get money from central Government to run schools but they are only funded for the pupils actually in the schools; they are not funded for empty places (or for pupils who go to private schools). However, empty places still have to be paid for and if there are too many, this will take money away from all the other children who are at schools in the authority.

Although school closures sometimes have to happen, there is no reason why the process cannot be open and honest. This is exactly what the School (Closures) (Scotland) Bill, which is currently being considered by the Parliament's Education Committee, is seeking to establish. Whilst the Bill is popularly seen as aiming to stop rural school closure by making "viability of the community" an aspect that must be considered when it is proposed to close a rural school, the bulk of the legislation will affect everyone. It is about putting in place good procedures, for example -

- the local authority must publish a consultation paper outlining the educational benefit of closure, and provide scope for people to correct any factual errors in that document,
- a wide range of people must be consulted; the consultation period must last at least 30 school days and must include a public meeting,
- the local authority is required to issue a post-consultation report outlining the points made during the consultation.

There are a few controversial points – like the role of the HMIe – but in general consideration of the Bill is moving along smoothly. If you want to know more, go to the Scottish Parliament website at www.scottish.parliament.uk and follow the links to the Education, Lifelong Learning and Culture Committee. If you're really keen you can go to listen to some of the evidence sessions of the Committee. You need to get a ticket, but you can do this by phoning 0131 348 5200.

Your Questions Answered

Our school had a very bad HMIe report which wasn't much of a surprise to many parents. We were all very hopeful that, finally, things would then get better but, after an initial good start, progress has stalled. What can we do?

This is a tricky one because parents have no authority over the management of a school – this is the job of the local authority. Although, during the process of an inspection, parents are invited to comment on the school via a survey and directly, this is to provide the inspectors with evidence, not because parents have any direct role in running the school. However, that does not mean you are

powerless. For a start, if it was a really bad report, HMIE will come back to the school to assess progress. You can ask to speak to them so that you can raise your concerns directly. Indeed, it may be worth writing to them in advance of the review visit, asking for a meeting. Meanwhile, there's no harm in putting a little pressure on the local authority and reminding them of the poor HMIE report and of the need to make some improvements. I would suggest that you write to both the chief education officer and the councillor who has overall control of education for the whole authority (not just for your section/area). Write separate letters to each, but tell them that you have written to the other. Remind them of the poor HMIE report and ask them to come to a Parent Council meeting and report what steps they are taking to put things right. This does not have to be a confrontational meeting, merely one where parents are quite firm and spell out the problems quite clearly. Good luck!

We thought we'd have an end-of-term "fun" evening for parents and pupils on the beach. Are we covered if we hold events outwith the school?

Yes, you have no problems – except perhaps what the weather chooses to throw at you! The public liability insurance that you have through your SPTC membership covers your organisation for your decisions/actions; there is no restriction in terms of time and place, so you can happily hold your event on the beach, in the village hall or the school. However, it is worth looking at what you are planning, thinking it through to make sure you've thought of the risks, and taking sensible steps to prevent any accidents.

Doughnuts for Breakfast?

The consumer magazine *Which?* has been running a series of healthy food campaigns, highlighting the real food content of many processed foods.

Their latest report, *Going Against the Grain*, investigates the sugar, salt and fat content of the market's top 100 breakfast cereals. They have found that

- only 8% of cereals contain healthy levels of sugar and
- 60 out of a 100 cereals contain more sugar per serving than a jam doughnut.

However, there is good news because, since *Which?* last looked at breakfast cereals in 2006, manufacturers have reduced salt levels; and they've completely removed hydrogenated fats - which are believed to be more harmful than saturated fats - from all the leading brands.

To find out which cereal gets the green light, or how your morning cereal fares, go to www.which.co.uk/cereals.



“Are these the healthy-option doughnuts with less sugar than most breakfast cereals?”

Changes at SPTC - Judith Gillespie to retire

After more than 20 years working for SPTC - first as a Director, then as Convener and, most recently, as Development Manager - Judith Gillespie has decided it is time to retire and spend more time with her grandchildren. This means that we will soon be looking for a new team leader. We hope to advertise the post in mid-June with interviews in mid-August. If you think you might be interested and would like to know more, please phone the office. Meantime, we plan to make the most of Judith's skills until she leaves. She has promised to stay and help run the Conference and AGM in November, when many of you will have a chance to say cheerio.

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