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Target Audience

- Principals and Boards of Governors
- Education and Library Boards
- The Council for Catholic Maintained Schools
- Northern Ireland Council for Integrated Education
- Comhairle na Gaelscolaíochta
- Governing Bodies Association

Summary of Contents:

This circular provides guidance for Principals and Boards of Governors on how to encourage pupil participation in decision making in schools

Governor Awareness:
Essential**Status of Contents:**
Information and guidance
for School Principal and
Boards of Governors**Related Documents:**
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PUPIL PARTICIPATION

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INTRODUCTION

Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) enshrines the right of all children and young people to say what they think should happen and to have their opinions taken into account when adults are making decisions that affect them.

Many schools here already have in place forms of pupil participation. This circular has been designed to encourage and support those working in all grant aided schools to have effective forms of engagement to help children and young people to participate in making decisions that affect them.

On 22 October 2013 the Minister, as part of his statement on advancing shared education, stated that ‘it is my aim that every school will have an effective method of encouraging young people’s participation in the life of the school.’ The NI Executive and the Department have published a range of strategies which recognise the importance of ensuring that the opinions of children and young people are heard by decision-makers in all public services. The key references for school councils/pupil voice are contained within Every School a Good School: A Policy for School Improvement (ESaGS), School Development Planning, Together Towards Improvement and the 10 year Strategy for Children and Young People. The Delivering Social Change for Children and Young People Strategy will build on existing strategies to improve the lives of children and young people and help to enable children and young people to contribute positively to community and society.

The Department recognises the value of all forms of pupil participation and the important contribution these can make in supporting pupils as key stakeholders and decision-makers within their schools. The Department is committed therefore to encouraging all schools to find meaningful ways of giving children and young people a voice, listening to them, respecting and responding to their views and by doing so enabling children and young people to understand that their opinions count. The education system exists for children and young people; ensuring their participation in that system and listening to their experiences helps them make the most of their education.

The Department does not wish to be overly prescriptive. It is a matter for individual schools to identify the method and degree of participation which best suits the needs of their pupils and to find meaningful ways to ensure their voice is heard. It is expected that in order to set up and maintain effective participation structures that the views of all staff and pupils are taken into consideration regularly to promote engagement among staff, pupils, parents, families and the wider community.

Participation within a school involves more than having a school council which is only one aspect of participation. All pupils need to have the opportunity to be involved to know they are listened to and that their views are valued. Hearing pupils' voices and responding in a timely manner is the key to effective participation. Schools should therefore have due regard to ensure that:

- No pupil is excluded or prevented from participation due to age, gender, religion, disability, performance or behaviour;
- Support is provided to those facing the greatest barriers e.g. pupils with learning difficulties or requiring specialist support;
- Minority groups and those from areas of greatest disadvantage are represented;
- Pupil age groups and understanding is taken into account when considering participation structures;
- Methods are put in place to encourage the involvement of pupils lacking confidence or those who may be disengaged.

THE BENEFITS OF PARTICIPATION

What are the benefits for the pupils?

- Improved emotional Health and Wellbeing;
- Better educational outcomes;
- Development of life skills such as problem solving, negotiation and decision making;
- Increased respect for those that are different to them;
- Enhanced confidence, self-esteem and motivation;
- Development of knowledge, understanding and skills that can lead to increased learning outcomes;

- Familiarity with group, leadership and democratic processes;
- Better personal , social and organisational skills;
- Increased responsibility, involvement and commitment to the school and the community.

What are the benefits for the school?

- Happier Children & Young People;
- Better communication/relationships between staff and children and a more cohesive school community;
- School policies are more likely to be successful where they are clearly understood and accepted by all partners within the school community;
- Improvements in engagement, learning and teaching;
- Improvements in pupil behaviour and school ethos; and
- Improvements to the school environment.

What are the benefits for the community?

- Less anti social behaviour/crime;
- Empowered young people with heightened awareness of local and global issues and a greater sense of social responsibility to tackle wider issues, such as poverty, crime and health;
- Improvements within the local community;
- Improved relationships with parents and the wider community; and
- Valuing of education by parents and the community.

LINKAGES TO WIDER POLICIES

The Executive's 10 Year Strategy for Children and Young People outlines as one of its underpinning themes the need to develop a culture where the views of children and young people are routinely sought in matters which impact on their lives.

The Delivering Social Change for Children and Young People Strategy will provide an integrated policy framework encompassing policy on children and young people, including children's rights and further implement obligations under UNCRC.

In its school improvement policy, Every School a Good School, the Department sets out its aim to encourage all schools to set up councils or other forums to ensure that pupils have a voice in decisions regarding the running of the school. The involvement of young people is now identified as an indicator of effective performance, and it is also a specific goal in promoting engagement among schools, staff, pupils, parents, families and communities. As part of the school development planning process, schools are required to demonstrate that there is a commitment to involve young people in discussions and decisions in school life that directly affect them and to listen to their views.

Within Together Towards Improvement, developed by the Education and Training Inspectorate (ETI) to help support schools in the process of self-evaluation, the encouragement of learner involvement in discussions and decisions on aspects of school life that directly affect them and representation of the student voice is identified as an indicator of effective school leadership and management.

WHAT IS PARTICIPATION?

Teachers are already engaging with pupils on a daily basis with regards to their learning in the classroom. The concept of participation builds upon that engagement in a positive and pro-active way so that children and young people are given the opportunity to voice their opinions and have a real say in decisions that affect their lives in schools and within their local community. Schools should create an ethos of participation within the school.

Effective participation requires personnel working with children and young people to put in place structures that will ensure children and young people's opinions are encouraged, listened to, respected and valued when taking decisions that impact upon them. This involves children and young people playing an active part in their education as a result of schools becoming more open to listening to all children and young people's views.

The establishment of 'participation champions' within schools can act as a catalyst to increasing participation activities within the school setting. Members of school staff can be provided with training (see page 14 'Help and Support') to help raise awareness of the importance of participation and can help to support and motivate other school personnel to make participation a priority within the school.

Principles of Participation

- It has to be meaningful and ongoing;
- Pupils, Parents and Teachers need to talk to each other to make participation work;
- It is a process which includes respect for all those involved;
- The language used must be clear and appropriate to the age of the pupils;
- Pupils should have an understanding of the type of decisions their views can change (i.e. it is not a wish list);
- Engagement must be responsive and relevant to pupils' age and interest;
- Pupils need trained, supported and encouraged to help them make positive contributions to issues that relate not just to them both in the schools and the wider community;
- Pupils' opinions need to be encouraged, listened to, respected and valued when taking decisions that impact upon them.

In practice, this means schools providing ways to communicate with pupils as part of the ongoing decision making process and engaging with them as stakeholders in issues that impact on the school and the wider school community. By adopting this approach pupils will see that they have a valuable contribution to make in ensuring the effectiveness of their school.

Challenges in taking Participation Forward

There are a number of reasons why children and young people do not participate:

- The age of the child (i.e very young children);
- The language used to communicate;
- Lack of confidence/experience of having their views listened to or taken into account;
- Lack of confidence/experience to speak out;

- Lack of skills training in participation;
- Lack of resources;
- SEN;
- Role/Influence of Parents;
- Sharing of power and responsibility;
- Lack of feedback;
- Clarity of expectations; and
- The frequency of participation.

To participate in decision making, children need information, they need to know that they will be listened to and that their views are valued and taken into account. Opportunities for pupils to develop the skills required for effective participation should be part of their everyday experience. Decisions taken without participation can make them less effective.

All pupils need to be involved to know they are listened to and that their views are valued. It is important that schools continue to explore ways to involve all pupils' views not just the articulate but those from minority groups or those who face additional barriers to learning.

HOW DOES PARTICIPATION WORK?

Pupils need to be encouraged and enabled to participate in a variety of decision making processes within a school, with due regard to their age and abilities. Participation can take many forms: informal discussions; pupil evaluations; suggestion boxes; pupil surveys; focus groups; school council forums; and many more.

Outlined below are some examples of involving children and young people in that process which can be used individually or by combining two or more:

- Day to day learning, including both what is taught and how it is taught;
- Curriculum choices where the curriculum is tailored to meet the needs, interests and abilities of the pupils;
- Buddying – older pupils are given responsibility to support younger children (i.e. reading or maths);

- Developing school policies such as promoting positive behaviour and reward systems, learning and teaching, anti-bullying, assessment and marking, curriculum;
- Identification of future priorities for the school development plan;
- Developing facilities such as sports, music, arts, drama;
- Dealing with matters such as pupil welfare, school meals, healthy eating, school uniform, school transport;
- Extra-curricular/lunchtime/enrichment activities;
- Links with local community projects; litter campaigns/green flag etc;
- Fundraising;
- Improvements to the school environment;
- The school timetable;
- Purchasing of equipment; and
- Developing links to other schools.

WHAT DOES SUCCESSFUL PUPIL PARTICIPATION LOOK LIKE?

For successful pupil participation, it is important that the school has an ethos where pupil participation is valued highly in all realms of its work. The school, therefore, needs to demonstrate consistently its core values of cooperation with pupils, mutual respect and a commitment to inclusion, diversity and equity. The success of pupil participation will also depend on how well the structures put in place ensure that they capture the opinions and concerns of the wider school population and on how well the outcomes of any consultations are communicated to those participants. It is therefore important that schools have in place effective evaluation methods to assess the impact that participation structures have had across the school community.

Of course, whilst pupils have the right to have their voice heard, it is also important to recognise that participation is a two way process. Pupils need to be aware that there are certain responsibilities placed on them to ensure that participation is effective. Appropriate support should be put in place to ensure that pupils develop an understanding of the extent to which they are personally responsible for their own learning as well as the impact their behaviour and general conduct can have on themselves and those around them including their peers, teachers and other adults who form part of the school community.

Asking for pupils' views is only the first step; communicating to the pupils what aspects of their views have (or have not) been acted upon is a vital next step. Pupils should also be provided with regular opportunities to think about and discuss their views and suggestions.

Opportunities to facilitate these channels of communication include:

- Assemblies;
- Circle Time;
- Evaluation of learning;
- Suggestion/comment boxes placed at regular intervals throughout the school;
- Use of imagery such as 'This is a listening school' to demonstrate to pupils that their views are listened to;
- Email box and/or a dedicated school webpage;
- Questionnaires/surveys to pupils or specific year group pupils;
- A regular newsletter to all pupils with an 'opportunity to reply' form attached;
- A notice board(s);
- Form classes to hear pupils' views on specific school development issues;
- Pupil elections of Prefects/School Council;
- Pupil led class-work;
- Recognition for pupils who engage in participation activities such as a letter of thanks to recognise their contribution; and
- Pupil membership of school's Parent Teacher Association.

As well as linking to the curriculum, particularly through Personal Development and Mutual Understanding and Local and Global Citizenship, active participation in schools can develop children and young people's understanding of democratic structures, enhance their insights into decision-making processes and assist in their development to become active citizens in the wider community.

AREA LEARNING COMMUNITIES

The Revised Curriculum places the learner at the heart of the educational process, through its overarching aim of empowering young people to achieve their potential and to make informed and responsible decisions throughout their lives, and the curricular objectives of developing each young person as an individual as a contributor to society; and as a contributor to the economy and the environment.

Area Learning Communities (ALCs) have been established across post-primary schools in local areas and also include FE Colleges. ALCs enable schools to more easily work together to meet the requirements of the Entitlement Framework for all pupils in an area. This means that schools can facilitate the coming together of pupils for purposes such as the delivery of courses, in addition to the range of extra-curricular links that have been developed separately over time between schools. Developments in technology also support greater ease in communications between pupils, for example through online forums and video conferencing and the Department would encourage schools to use these links to enable schools, via school councils or other forms of pupil participation, to liaise on an area basis.

WAYS IN WHICH PARTICIPATION CAN BE REWARDED

Ensuring that all pupils engage in the process is an important challenge for schools. Schools benefit most when all of the pupils are represented, regardless of age, ability (particularly with regard to level of literacy), socio-economic background, etc. Schools can help ensure that all pupils are represented by a range of means: providing basic training for pupils, for example, on how to chair a meeting, write a report, take minutes, speak in public, debating etc; rotating the membership of school councils and discussion groups; focusing on issues of importance to a particular section of the school community and providing rewards or incentives to engage more pupils in the process. The main reward for participation, however, should be the celebration of improvement in the quality of provision for participants, the local community and the next generation.

The Rights Respecting School Award is a United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) award which focuses on the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child and how this is implemented within the school environment. To become a Rights Respecting School a school must show that they demonstrate the key values which relate to the award, that a rights respecting ethos is founded within the school and children play an active role within the school environment. More information can be found on: www.unicef.org.uk

ROLE OF THE EDUCATION AND TRAINING INSPECTORATE (ETI)

The key questions and quality indicators which guide inspection and self-evaluation in schools can be found within the ETI publication *Together Towards Improvement: a process for self evaluation*¹. During a school inspection, the inspection team will evaluate the extent to which leadership encourage pupil involvement in discussions and decisions on aspects of school life that directly affect them, to ensure the student voice is represented. In addition, the team will evaluate the extent to which the school development plan has been agreed and contributed to by the pupils.

In relation to classroom practice, a key question in *Together Towards Improvement* is how effective is the school's planning at supporting and promoting successful learning, with one of the related quality indicators being, 'there are opportunities for the pupils to contribute to the planning process'. Another quality indicator refers to the extent to which teachers use and build upon the pupils' ideas and interests to promote successful learning.

Through lesson observation and in discussions with the pupils, the inspection team will also evaluate the extent to which the pupils have effective personal and social skills and are acquiring the dispositions, skills and capabilities to participate effectively in society and as contributors to the local and global economy.

¹ *Together Towards Improvement: a process for self evaluation* is available at: <http://www.etini.gov.uk/index/together-towards-improvement/together-towards-improvement-post-primary.htm>.

SCHOOL COUNCILS

School Councils are a means through which young people represent their peers and can be valuable in providing a process for children and young people's participation in the decision making structure of schools.

In schools where School Councils work well they are viewed as giving pupils a voice, developing their personal and social skills, enhancing citizenship and promoting the school as a hub of the community. Best practice would indicate that School Councils work most effectively when there is a clear link to the school's senior management team and, most importantly, ensuring that all pupils are involved in its work. This can include the use of class and year groups working in partnership with the whole School Council.

Experience shows that a School Council that is supported can help to improve many aspects of school life. It is an important and useful method to provide leadership and development opportunities for pupils. One of the key concepts within the 'Learning for Life and Work' area within the revised school curriculum is democracy and active participation. The revised curriculum requires young people to be provided with opportunities to participate in school and society and School Councils provide one way to facilitate this goal.

How to establish a School Council

In considering the formation of a School Council it may be helpful for schools to consider the following points:

- The school Principal, with the approval of the Board of Governors, should establish and maintain processes for the purposes of informing pupils of the activities of the school;
- Pupils should be able to establish a School Council with encouragement and support of the school Principal and Board of Governors;

- The processes for establishing and maintaining a School Council should facilitate the involvement of pupils in the operation of the school in association with the Board of Governors, parents and teachers;
- The School Council should promote the interests of the school and the involvement of pupils in the affairs of the school, in co-operation with the Board of Governors, parents and teachers; and
- Membership of School Councils should be rotated to allow opportunities for a wider range of pupils to have their voices heard and to participate in decision-making (especially more marginalised young people). It is important that all pupils are encouraged to participate fully and everyone in a school is allowed to stand for election to ensure everyone's voice is heard.

Role of School Personnel

While pupils are likely to take the lead role in the establishment and operation of a School Council, there are important roles for Boards of Governors and Principals in supporting the establishment and ongoing development of School Councils.

For a School Council to be successful and be a valued part of school management and rooted in the ethos of a school it must be properly supported and nurtured. If it is seen to be imposed then its contribution will be diminished.

The role of the Principal is of central importance in the establishment and operation of a School Council. Assisting the Board of Governors in the development of school policy, and in working with teachers and parents to implement policies at a day-to-day level, the Principal is centrally placed in all aspects of the school's operations.

In the initial stage, the Principal, in partnership with a designated teacher(s) can assist in the development of a School Council in several ways:

- a. Discussing with pupils the role of a School Council and the role of individual representatives on the Council;

- b. Facilitating the holding of elections and by advising on an appropriate statement of objectives;
- c. Assist in guiding the development of the Council so as to facilitate a constructive and purposeful Council; and
- d. Promote a school culture which recognises the importance of pupil engagement and participation.

There are also specific duties which may be undertaken by Boards of Governors (following consultation with the Principal and teaching staff). These include:

- Establishing and maintaining procedures for the purpose of communicating to pupils the activities of the school;
- Encouraging and helping pupils to set up a School Council and assisting a School Council once established;
- Training should be provided for pupils and staff who take part in the School Council;
- Drawing up rules for the establishment of a School Council such as election of members; and
- Consider designating a teacher to liaise with the Council on an ongoing basis to help plan and organise activities.

If the value of a School Council is to be fully realised, it will be important that the Board of Governors involves the Council in the development of school policies and in the planning and organisation of school activities and events.

The establishment of a School Council is not an end in itself but rather offers all concerned an enhanced means of building partnerships and effective communication within the school. To further cement the role of pupils within the school environment consideration could be given to the opportunity to provide a link between pupils and the Board of Governors. For example, this might be achieved by nominating a governor to attend particular School Council meetings or inviting a School Council member(s) to address particular Board of Governors meetings. However, schools are best placed to determine what arrangements are most suitable to facilitate the voice of their pupils.

CASE STUDIES OF GOOD PRACTICE

The Department encourages the sharing of information and good practice amongst schools. Schools can access examples of good practice with regard to effective pupil participation, identified by ETI, through the following link:-

http://www.deni.gov.uk/pupil_participation_case_studies_eti.pdf

HELP AND SUPPORT

The Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People (NICCY) launched the Democra-School guidance pack in 2007, designed to support and encourage the development of meaningful School Councils and the practice of democracy in the school environment. The pack, which was developed in co-operation with teachers and pupils, also helps school leaders understand how School Councils should work and how they can benefit schools. The guidance is easily accessed on the NICCY website as follows:-

www.niccy.org

In addition to the resource material provided by NICCY, further information and support on pupil participation is also available from the National Children's Bureau (NCB) who offer a bespoke programme to support the participation of children and young people within the school environment:- <http://www.ncb.org.uk/who-we-are/northern-ireland>

Schools can access these websites to enhance and develop their provision for the wider participation of pupils.