

# Democracy in Schools and the Local Community

## – a brief guide

### INTRODUCTION

The framework for personal, social and health education and citizenship within the revised National Curriculum refers specifically to the requirement to prepare pupils 'to play an active role as future citizens and members of society'.

At each Key Stage the theme of democratic participation is traced out in references to activities or attainment targets indicating the kind of experiences through which pupils will best learn (see panel on right).

This theme of democratic participation reflects the emphasis on active involvement in the final report of the Advisory Group on Citizenship.

'It is vital that pupils are provided with structured opportunities to explore actively aspects, issues and events through school and community involvement, case studies and critical discussions that are challenging and relevant to their lives. It is difficult to conceive of pupils as active citizens if their experience of learning in citizenship education has been predominantly passive.'

Schools of all kinds throughout the country display a rich and growing variety of forms of 'community involvement'. However, effective understanding and participation of the kind envisaged has a particular significance when we consider the possibilities for pupils learning through democratic involvement both within the school and in the life of the local community. Whilst schools are in no sense 'mini democracies' and pupils below the age of 18 do not have the vote, schools exist within a framework of democratic governance both at local and national level and Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child affirms the right of children to express views freely and have them given due weight according to their maturity.

Thus schools will need to build upon the growing amount of accumulated experience in developing structures providing for the effective involvement of pupils in democratic procedures. It will be important, however, to ensure that such involvement is not merely the simulation of rights and responsibilities yet to be attained but that it provides pupils with the real experience of a growing capacity to influence and make decisions in matters which affect their lives within school and beyond.

#### Democratic participation themes at each Key Stage:

##### Key Stage 1

- 'make a contribution to the life of the class and school'
- 'take responsibility – for example, for their own behaviour through making classroom rules together and supporting them'

##### Key Stage 2

'participate – for example, in the decision-making process of the school and relate it to democratic structures and processes such as councils, parliaments, government and voting'

Within the context of a new foundation subject for citizenship at Key Stages 3 & 4 the programmes of study are summarised as 'becoming informed, active and responsible citizens'.

##### Key Stage 3

'show understanding of how changes are effected in society'

##### Key Stage 4

'evaluate the effectiveness of different ways in which change can be brought about at different levels of society. Pupils participate effectively in school and community-based activities, demonstrating a willingness and commitment to evaluate critically such activity'.

# SCHOOL COUNCILS

## WHY BOTHER?

School Councils are by no means a recent development. Some schools already have twenty or more years' experience of representative bodies of this kind. Increasingly schools are looking to involve pupils effectively in important aspects of school life for a number of reasons:

- greater ownership of the norms and values of the school makes for a more cooperative working atmosphere and can harness the considerable weight of pupils' opinion in response to anti-social behaviour from a minority
- pupils know much about the way schools work in practice which teachers do not. School Councils allow pupils to feed in this expert knowledge which may cover such areas as
  - student welfare issues (e.g. bullying, security, racism)
  - discipline issues
  - rules and codes of conduct
  - staff / pupil relations
  - access to extra-curricular activities
  - curriculum matters (e.g. optional subjects available, relevance of course content in PSE, sex education, careers education & guidance)
- the law now requires and encourages adults to consult with young people on issues which involve them
- learning to speak out on issues of concern is an important educational experience. Involvement in the processes of working through elected representatives can teach pupils about the workings of democratic or consultative structures, including taking minutes, framing proposals for debate or discussion, establishing committees, etc.

In considering the role of the School Council it is important to distinguish between two rather different assumptions. On the one hand it may be seen merely as a means for pupils to express views and to make suggestions in the light of their daily experience within the school. The agenda will thus be largely set by pupils, giving a superficial sense of 'democratic' involvement but often followed by disappointment or disillusion when requests or suggestions remain unfulfilled. On the other hand there is the possibility of

setting the School Council clearly within the school's framework of consultation and decision making in such a way that the pupils become increasingly effective within the overall system of democratic accountability. This is not to belittle the more limited purpose of the former aim but rather to set it within a wider educative context. This will hold implications for the relationship between the council, however constituted, and governors, head teacher, staff and pupils throughout the school.

## SOME PROBLEMS

Our researches and much anecdotal evidence indicate that few School Councils run smoothly year after year. This may be the case for a variety of reasons. However the following issues have all been identified as important considerations bearing upon the success or otherwise of councils over time:

### ● SIZE AND COMPOSITION

One girl and one boy elected by each class or tutor group may be unmanageable in larger schools. Year group or house councils can be an effective alternative. These then elect representatives to the whole school council.

A single 'link' member of staff may lead to lack of involvement of the rest of the staff. Participation by a number of staff can help everybody to take seriously the council's role within the school.

### ● FREQUENCY & TIMING

Continuity and momentum may be lost when meetings are held only once or twice a term, especially if representatives are elected for just one year.

The question of when to meet is always difficult. Lunch time or after school tends to lead to a lower level of attendance because of other commitments. Leaving lessons has obvious drawbacks, but a common compromise is the simultaneous timing of meetings with form tutor periods.

### ● INVOLVEMENT OF PUPILS

The most difficult issue for many schools has been that of communication between representatives and those who elected them. Regular, structured opportunities for representatives to report back, discuss and take up issues with their classmates are essential. The format for this will differ according to age, as will the role of staff in assisting the process. However 'class council' sessions are a means of assuring that a forum exists for all to voice opinions, contribute to debate and influence decisions.

## THE GOVERNING BODY

### ● AGENDA BUILDING

It has been a common experience for agendas to become taken up almost entirely by matters such as uniform, toilets, lockers and similar pupil welfare issues. Meanwhile major decisions may be taken by the Head and/or governors with no consultation of pupils whatsoever. If pupils are to learn about democratic participation through experience, then the school council will need to be presented with a wider range of issues as an integral part of the school's consultation processes.

### ● GROUND RULES

It is important that common understanding should exist with regard to what matters may appropriately be discussed at council meetings. This is probably best done in published form. The aim should be to provide the maximum possible latitude. However, complaints about named individuals, for example, whether teachers or pupils, should be pursued through other means rather than in open meetings.

### ● COMMITTEES

Some issues require research, planning or follow-up with individuals between meetings. Smaller committees, working or action groups can help to ensure that matters are pursued, information and views ascertained and relevant proposals formulated.

### ● RESOURCES

Whilst discussion and debate on a variety of matters of concern is itself valuable experience for pupils, a further dimension is added if the council has at its disposal a sum of money about which it must make decisions. The consideration of competing alternatives and priorities within limited resources is an essential element of decision-making in a democratic society.



School Councils work well in primary as well as secondary schools.

Governing bodies provide democratic representation for parents and teachers alongside appointees of elected local authorities. Co-opted members represent various interests in the local community. Governors have considerable responsibilities and their decisions are significant in many aspects of school life. Head teachers are accountable to their governors in ways which few pupils readily recognise.

There is much potential here for pupils' learning. Valuable insights may be gained through exploring in ways appropriate to their age the individual roles of staff and governors, the structure of responsibilities in which they are set, the way in which particular decisions are taken and the differences of opinion which surround some of them. They may also learn something of the national democratic context within which schools operate.

If the opportunity for learning of this kind is to be offered, then the nature of the relationship between governors and pupils becomes important.

- Do governors and pupils meet each other? If so, under what conditions and circumstances?
- If there is a school council, does the governing body ever consult it to seek pupils' views?
- Are pupil representatives invited to observe or make presentations at governors' meetings?
- Does the citizenship education curriculum at secondary school include, for example, an investigation of power, authority and influence within the school, including interviews with teachers, head, parents and governors?

Some of the above questions may arouse nervousness, particularly with regard to investigative curriculum projects of the kind suggested. However, all of these activities and procedures have been adopted successfully in numbers of schools, providing pupils with important information and insight.

## LOCAL DEMOCRACY

Most local authorities are attempting to develop new ways of consulting and involving the electorate on a wide range of issues, frequently targeting some of their efforts upon young people. Youth and community services, education departments and schools have been involved in developing consultative bodies under names such as Youth Forum, Youth Council or Youth Parliament.

Whilst the term 'youth' is used to cover a fairly wide age range, often including those in their early twenties, there are interesting examples of local authorities working closely with schools, both primary and secondary. One district council has a youth council comprising two representatives elected by the school councils of each of the six secondary schools within the district. The principal aims and purposes are expressed as:

**To provide young people with the opportunity to:**

- *increase their awareness of the democratic process;*
- *express their views about matters of interest and importance to both young people and the wider community;*
- *have an input into the District Council's decision-making process; and*
- *be assured that their views are heard and valued.*

The Youth Council meets four times per year and reports to the schools via individual school councils and to the District Council via its Policy and Resources Committee.

Another borough has initiated elections in primary schools to a junior council with its own elected Junior Mayor.

In a separate but related development campaigns to increase voter registration have led some authorities to conduct 'mock' or 'mimic' registrations in schools, not only with the oldest pupils, but in at least one case on a regular basis with pupils as young as eight.

The potential use of the internet in enabling young people to express views and engage in debate has been explored successfully in one borough where the issue of bullying emerged as a matter of widespread concern.

## RESOURCES

### PUBLICATIONS

#### **ALL TOGETHER NOW - COMMUNITY PARTICIPATION FOR CHILDREN & YOUNG PEOPLE**

Save the Children (1997)

#### **THE BUSINESS OF SCHOOL COUNCILS – AN INVESTIGATION INTO DEMOCRACY IN SCHOOLS\***

Citizenship Foundation (2001)

Report of research into the factors which contribute to effective school councils.

45pp; £8

Don Rowe

#### **CITIZENSHIP: CHALLENGES FOR COUNCILS**

The Education Network / Local Government

Information Unit (2000)

Kathy Baker, Janet Stillett, Saskia Neary

#### **CITIZENSHIP SCHOOLS – A PRACTICAL GUIDE TO EDUCATION FOR CITIZENSHIP AND PERSONAL DEVELOPMENT**

Campaign for Learning / UNICEF (2001)

Titus Alexander

#### **EMPOWERING CHILDREN & YOUNG PEOPLE - PROMOTING INVOLVEMENT IN DECISION-MAKING (A TRAINING MANUAL)**

Children's Rights Office / Save the Children (1997)

*\* Please note that 'The Business of School Councils' is the only title on this list available from the Citizenship Foundation. For details of other publications from the Foundation please visit the our website (see below).*

### ORGANISATIONS

#### **CITIZENSHIP FOUNDATION**

Supports and advises on citizenship and democracy in schools.

Tel: 020 7367 0500

[www.citfou.org.uk](http://www.citfou.org.uk)

#### **SCHOOL COUNCILS UK**

Trains teachers and pupils to set up effective structures for pupil involvement.

Tel: 020 8349 2359

[www.schoolcouncils.org](http://www.schoolcouncils.org)