



## HAVING YOUR SAY



## >> EVERYONE HAVING A SAY!

A school council is a formal group of pupils elected by their peers to represent them and their views. It is also an important way in which schools can provide meaningful leadership opportunities for pupils. Councils can actively explore a wide range of issues which affect young people, within a framework which, as far as possible, ensures that the advice presented to pupils is balanced and relates to school activities, and not influenced by wider community and leadership interests.

From the experience of schools which have a school council it seems that pupils are happier and participate in their education more effectively when their ideas are listened to and their opinions valued<sup>1</sup>. Schools in turn benefit when pupils are involved in helping to direct their own learning and assist in the school's decision making process. A school council is one structure which can assist students and schools in achieving this ideal.

This guidance is designed to support teachers, schools and school council members in establishing effective and successful school councils by providing information and direction.

### Legislation, policy and strategies which set the context for school councils

The **United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC)** was adopted by the United Nations General Assembly on 20 November 1989. It has been ratified by 191 out of 193 countries (including the UK in 1991) making it one of the most widely accepted global conventions.

The Convention has 54 Articles that support the development of a school council include Articles 12<sup>2</sup>, 13<sup>3</sup> and 29<sup>4</sup> of the UNCRC.

As just mentioned the UNCRC is an international convention and as such the development of school councils is an excellent starting point for global citizenship. This links directly with the **Local and Global Citizenship** element of the revised 'Learning for Life and Work' area of the Northern Ireland School Curriculum.

One of the key concepts within this is **Democracy and Active Participation**, which aims to explore how young people can take part in and influence democratic processes.

This revised curriculum requires that young people have the opportunity to investigate various ways to participate in school and society, and uses the example of school councils as a way to support this participation.

The **Education and Libraries (Northern Ireland) Order 2003** clearly states the importance of consultation with pupils. Indeed, it identifies that before making (or revising) policies or general principles concerning discipline, the Board of Governors must listen to the opinions of pupils. This also includes ways to encourage good behaviour and respect for others and, in particular, preventing all forms of bullying among pupils.

<sup>1</sup>New South Wales Department of Education and Training Student Services and Equity Programs, (1998) 'Student Representative Council Guide' Department of Education and Training: NSW page 2

<sup>2</sup>Article 12: "... parties shall assure to the child who is capable of forming his or her own views the right to express those views freely in all matters affecting the child... children and young people have the right to have their opinion listened to and taken seriously."

<sup>3</sup>Article 13: "The child shall have the right to freedom of expression; this right shall include freedom to seek, receive and impart information and ideas of all kinds..."

<sup>4</sup>Article 29 "...parties agree that the education of the child shall be directed to the development of the child's personality, talents and mental and physical abilities to their fullest potential..."



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School councils will support schools, in a participative way, to gather pupils' thoughts and feelings about issues that are important to them and that may have an impact on the school environment.

The **Education (Northern Ireland) Order 1998 - Articles 13(2)** states that it is the duty of the Board of Governors of a school to prepare, and from time to time revise, a **School Development Plan**. The legislation also says that in preparing this plan, the Board of Governors must consider any guidance given by the Department of Education.

In June 2005, the Department issued guidance entitled '**School Development Planning**', which states (pages 6 & 7) that *"The quality and value of pupils' contribution to improving the life of the school is potentially very great, even among the younger children. It is dependent on the extent to which the Principal and staff are able to create opportunities and the climate for constructive and positive debate."*<sup>5</sup>

It goes on to suggest that although consultation can be organised in a variety of ways, one of these could be the establishment of a **school council**.

The Government's **10-year Strategy for Children and Young People in NI, 2006 – 2016** includes an underpinning value that children and young people should be active participants in society. It supports this by aiming to develop a culture where the views of our children and young people are routinely sought in matters which have an affect on their lives.

The strategy also pledges that in accordance with the UNCRC, the government will be proactive in obtaining the views of children on matters of significance to them, which reflects **Article 12** of the convention.

The education system exists for students; ensuring their participation in that system and feeding back on their experiences should be paramount.

For further information on **United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child** go to [www.ohchr.org/english/law](http://www.ohchr.org/english/law)

For further information on the **Education & Libraries (Northern Ireland Order 2003 and the Education (Northern Ireland) Order 1998** go to [www.deni.gov.uk](http://www.deni.gov.uk) or [www.opsi.gov.uk](http://www.opsi.gov.uk)

For further information on **Department issued guidance entitled 'School Development Planning'** go to [www.deni.gov.uk](http://www.deni.gov.uk)

For further information on the **10-year Strategy for Children and Young People in NI, 2006 – 2016** go to [www.allchildrenni.gov.uk](http://www.allchildrenni.gov.uk)

For further information on **NICCY's Anti-bullying Guidance** go to the priorities section at [www.niccy.org](http://www.niccy.org)

<sup>5</sup>Department of Education, NI, (2005) 'School Development Planning Guidance'  
Department of Education: NI pages 6 and 7