

## **GIVING PARENTS A VOICE**

### **Parental Involvement in Policy-Making**

A study for the Research and Information on State Education Trust  
by Maureen O'Connor

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# **RISE**

The Research and Information on State Education Trust

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## A. Introduction

The aim of this study was to provide comparative information to help inform discussion about how parents as a group should be represented in decision-making about education policy in the UK. The author was asked to gather information and write a summary of the existing models of representative parent or parent-governor organisation, including some assessment by participants of the institutions involved. There has been considerable study of parental involvement in educational activities with their own children and their teachers, but little of the introduction of so-called "parent-power" into the decision-making structure of education, or into how "parent-power" in the UK compares with what is on offer in other countries.

The project consisted of a survey by brief questionnaire of UK and associated education authorities which was used as a basis for follow-up interviews with local politicians, officials and parents' representatives in areas where there was evidence from the survey of relevant initiatives or well-developed parental involvement in policy-making. Interviews were also conducted with schools taking individual initiatives to involve parents in school level policy-making and with representatives of national school governors', parents' and parent-teacher organisations to obtain views on how they are or might in future be involved in national policy-making. A review of academic research into the relationship between parents and policy makers and the experiences of parents at all levels was made. Contact was made with parents' organisations in a number of overseas countries to facilitate international comparisons.

## B. The LEA Survey

The project began with a survey of all Local Education Authorities in England, Wales and Scotland, the Northern Irish Library and Education Boards and the Education Authorities of Jersey, Guernsey and the Isle of Man. 137 questionnaires were sent out. Replies were received from 83 authorities, a response rate of 60%.

The object of the survey was to collect basic information about the involvement of parents, and parents' and governors' organisations, in local education policy-making. The aim was to use the survey replies as a basis for more detailed inquiry wherever participation was evidently well-developed.

Within an overall response rate of 60% to the survey, there were variations among regions.

**TABLE 1 Response Rates**

	No.of authorities	Response	%
London Boroughs	33	22	66%
Metropolitan Boroughs	36	21	58%
English Counties	40	20	50%
Welsh Counties	8	4	50%
Scottish LEAs	12	7	58%
Northern Ireland ELBs	5	4	80%
Others	3	3	100%

### i. Representation on Education Committees

The direct representation of parents on education committees as co-opted non-voting members was significantly higher in London than elsewhere. A number of respondents in Inner London made the point explicitly that this was a direct consequence of the now defunct Inner London Education Authority's policy of parental consultation and involvement being maintained in its successor boroughs. In London as a whole, boroughs of different political persuasions have parental representation on their education committees: the complete list of respondents consists of Bexley, Greenwich, Hammersmith and Fulham, Haringey, Harrow, Havering, Kensington and Chelsea, Lewisham, City of London, Merton, Newham and Southwark.

**TABLE 2 LEAs with Parent Representation**

London Boroughs	12	from	22 responses
Metropolitan Boroughs	1	from	21 "
English Counties	7	from	20 "
Welsh Counties	1	from	8 "
Scottish LEAs	0	from	12 "
Northern Ireland ELBs	1	from	4 "
Others	N/A		
Totals	22	from	77 "

Some London boroughs have retained ILEA-initiated Parents' Consultative Committees which elect education committee representatives. Others have education committee representatives elected by governors' organisations, and such representatives can be, but will not necessarily be, parents. The City of London, with its very small electorate, has an education committee member directly elected by parents. Haringey takes nominations from a range of community and parents' groups and the committee elects one nominee for cooption.

The other significant group of authorities with parental representation at education committee level is the English County Councils. The majority take nominations from the local federation of PTAs. Surrey has two governor committee members, chairs of primary and secondary boards respectively, elected by their fellow chairs, but not necessarily parents. A number of respondents indicated that although they do not yet have parental representation on their committees, the policy is under consideration following changes in political control after the 1992 county council elections.

## ii. Parents', governors' and parent-governors' organisations

The National Confederation of Parent-Teachers' Associations (NCPTA) is regarded by some local authorities as representative of parents generally. The NCPTA has LEA-wide federations and some are involved in the nomination of parents' representatives to education committees. Responding to the RISE survey one chief education officer complained that although his authority was committed to parental participation at all levels, it regarded the absence of a local federation of PTAs as a significant disadvantage to their efforts and had approached the NCPTA nationally to complain about the lack of organisation. The survey asked authorities whether there were active organisations in their areas for governors generally or for parent-governors specifically - or both. A number of respondents reported that the establishment of such organisations was under active consideration. Others had, in some cases long established, consultative committees for parents generally.

**TABLE 3 Representative Organisations**

Organisations for	Governors	Parent-govs.	Consultative
London Boroughs	7	5	5
Metropolitan Boroughs	9	1	1
English Counties	9	-	3
Welsh Counties	2	-	-
Scottish LEAs	N/A	N/A	4
Northern Ireland ELBs	-	-	-
<b>TOTALS</b>	<b>27</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>13</b>

These results roughly accord with the number of groups discovered by the National Association of Governors and Managers for a meeting to discuss a national governors' forum in September 1993. They were able to list 24 groups in existence and another six in the course of being set up. They did not distinguish between groups for all governors and those for parent-governors. It seems safe to say that less than half of local authorities yet have any representative organisation for governors of any sort.

Two counties reported that local branches of NAGM served as governors' associations in their area. Some have governors' forums for various divisions of an authority or for various groups of governors i.e. primary, secondary. Some have more than one organisation: the London Borough of Haringey has a Council of Governing Bodies, a Black and Minority Ethnic Governors' Association and a Parent-Governors' Association. Newham has an Association of Parent-Governors and a Governors' Forum. Southwark has a Governors' Association and a Parents' Consultative Committee. Barnsley has a Chairman's Governors' Forum offering a termly meeting for all governors. Bradford has an Asian Governors' Network in each of its five districts, plus a Governors' Advisory Group. Further details follow in Section C.

## iii. Who initiated the formation of such organisations?

The parents' consultative committees in some of the former ILEA boroughs have been kept in existence by

local authority decision. Boroughs with PCCs include those under Labour and Conservative control.

Governors' organisations have in some cases been initiated by groups of governors or parent-governors themselves, in one case through an LEA initiative, in some cases through the initiative of individual education committee chairs. In one case a successful governor initiative in one division led to the LEA promotion of similar organisations in the other four divisions of the county, using the governor-training network to call inaugural meetings.

Some LEAs have found consumer resistance amongst governors to a proliferation of bodies discussing the same issues. One London borough had its parent-governor organisation collapse in favour of a forum for all governors. Other attempts to set up governor organisations have encountered "meeting fatigue", particularly in rural areas where attending any forum involving groups of schools entails considerable travelling time. Parents and others willing to become involved in the management of their own local school are not always willing to extend that commitment to a wider arena.

#### **iv. How are organisations funded?**

The running costs of parents' consultative committees in the former ILEA boroughs are generally subsumed into the general education budget. Some governors' organisations are funded directly by the LEA, generally through its governor training or governor support services. GEST money is frequently quoted as a source of funds for governors' organisation on the premise that they are integral to the training process. Some governors' organisations are self-financing through a subscription from governing bodies. £10 a year seems to be a usual figure. Local authority subsidy may come indirectly through the provision of meeting rooms etc. LAMPAG (the Lambeth parent governors' organisation) is funded in part by a charity and employs its own administrator.

#### **v. LEA perceptions of participation**

The survey asked respondents to comment on how far parents' views were taken into account in policy formulation. One respondent complained that this question was "naive", presumably on the assumption that it would not be answered honestly. In spite of this, few responses gave an automatic "yes, of course", to the question. Most were more considered and in some cases disarmingly honest in their assessment of the extent of parental influence. Some authorities are dismissive of the need for separate parental representation other than through the normal democratic process. A number of respondents made the point that elected members of education committees were in many cases parents or grand-parents themselves, with the implication that that should suffice as a means of representing parents' views.

A number of LEAs confessed that parents' views were heard but did not necessarily carry much weight. As the respondent from one London Borough, well-known for carrying through policies which met widespread parental opposition, put it: "Parents views are always taken into account along with the views of others i.e. staff, local residents etc. But the council does not always come to a view that parents support." A North of England respondent commented even more bluntly: "Other than through the ballot box, very little account is taken."

At the other extreme, the London Borough of Westminster went to the trouble of commissioning a MORI poll of parents with the intention of feeding back the views which emerged to school governing bodies and to its education committee for policy development. Other boroughs with consultative committees of parents include their views in reports to committee. A county in the south west, where all parties and parents' groups had been extremely critical of Government policy in recent years, commented that it was a pity officials and politicians nationally did not take a leaf out of their book and listen more closely to parents' concerns.

Parental opposition to policy proposals is also conceded to be effective by some LEAs, if only in a negative sense. Protest at closure and reorganisation plans is widely held to affect policy, particularly at election times. The threat of "opt-out" initiated by parents is also conceded to have an effect on planning and budgetary issues. Some authorities have shelved plans to change the school day or the number of terms in the school year in response to parental objections. Another commented that elected representatives had been responsive to parental lobbying on budget issues.

It is clear, however, that parents as governors are generally in a stronger position as regards consultation than parents as members of PTAs or pressure groups. The implementation of LMS has seen a significant increase in training, support services and consultation meetings about specific aspects of policy for governors generally, and parent-governors have inevitably benefitted from this change. A number of authorities indicated that officers and or/committee chairs met governors' representatives regularly. Fewer said that they extended the same courtesy to federations of PTAs or other groups.



## **C. Case Studies from LEAs, Governors and Parents' Groups etc:**

### **i. Representation and consultation procedures in selected LEAs.**

#### **1. HAMMERSMITH AND FULHAM**

*A London borough, formerly part of the ILEA, to the west of the capital, with a population of 150,000, six nursery schools, 39 primary schools, eight secondary schools and 10 special schools. The council is under Labour control.*

Hammersmith and Fulham has both a Parent Governors' Consultative Committee and an All-Governors Forum. The former was established at the instigation of parent-governors under the ILEA and nominates one person for co-option to the education committee. The latter was established by the successor authority in 1990. The LEA also consults other parents groups on specific issues. The views of the PGCC are included in reports to the education committee and the views of parents are incorporated into reports when the future of a school is under review. An item under which parent-governors can raise their concerns is incorporated into the borough's standard agenda for governors meetings.

According to officials, the PGCC was initially a thriving organisation but attendance at meetings waned in the early 1990s, possibly as a result of the establishment of the Governors' Forum. The latter continues to be well-attended and there is some feeling that in a small authority one organisation may be sufficient.

#### **2. HARINGEY**

*An outer London borough, to the north of the capital, with a population of 202,600, four nursery/pre schools, 81 primary schools, nine secondary schools and 5 special schools. The council is under Labour control.*

Haringey has a wide-ranging procedure for co-options to its education committee. The borough approaches local community and parents' organisations to seek nominations. If there is more than one nomination from the groups consulted an election is arranged. The co-options include representatives of school governors, parents, community groups, special needs parents and two teacher representatives.

The borough facilitates a Parent-Governors' Association and a Black and Minority Ethnic Governors' Association through its Training Co-ordinator for Governors. There is also a Council of Haringey School Governors, an umbrella organisation initiated by governors specifically seeking a means of influencing policy. There is no direct grant aid for any of these bodies but some financial help with premises for meetings etc.

There is also regular consultation with the Central Council of Parent and Parent-Teacher Associations which meets regularly with the Parent-Governor Association in a Parents' Consultative Committee which includes the Leader of the Council, senior Education Services Committee members and officers.

The Director of Education Services concludes that "parents views are taken into account 'extensively if slowly'!"

#### **3. NEWHAM**

*An outer London borough to the north-east of the capital with a population of 207,000, eight nursery schools, 69 primary schools, 13 secondary schools, one sixth form college and 6 special schools. The council is under Labour control.*

Newham has three representatives of parents co-opted to its education committee. They are elected by and from parent-governors to represent parents of nursery and primary children, secondary pupils and pupils with special educational needs. This arrangement dates back to 1984.

The borough has an Association of Parent Governors, which is serviced by the Newham Parents' Centre, a unique organisation offering help and support to parents generally, including parent-governors. It is funded through a variety of official and charitable sources. The NAPG was established in 1977 as a support service when parents were first elected to governing bodies.

There is also a Governors' Forum for all governors serviced by the borough's Management and Governing Bodies Support Service. This was established by the Education Committee in 1990 as a means of enabling representative governors to meet Committee members and officers to discuss pertinent issues.

The authority also consults widely both formally and informally with parents' groups including Parents in Partnership, an organisation concerned with home-school cooperation for special needs children, and special interest groups such as the Asian Parents' Association.

#### **4. KENSINGTON AND CHELSEA**

*A London borough, formerly part of the ILEA, with a population of 125,600, with 4 nursery schools, 27 primary schools, three secondary schools, one sixth form college and two special schools. The council is under Conservative control.*

The Royal Borough has had one parent representative on its education committee since its inauguration as an independent education authority in 1990. The representative is elected by the Kensington and Chelsea Parents' Group which was initiated by parent-governors and is funded by grant from the LEA. Membership consists of all parent-governors and an equal number of non-governor parents from each school. The organisation evolved from consultative arrangements initiated by the ILEA and it meets with the director of education once a term. The borough has a separate organisation for chairs of governing bodies which is also consulted regularly on policy issues.

#### **5. BEXLEY**

*An outer London borough with a population of 217,000 and one nursery school, 70 primary schools, 16 secondary schools, four special schools and one CTC. The council is under Conservative control.*

Bexley has two parent representatives on its education committee nominated by the Bexley Federation of PTAs. One of these representatives also serves on two of the three education sub-committees. Provision for parental representation was made when the constitution of the education committee was revised in 1990. Previous representation for "a person with special knowledge and experience of education" dates back to 1985. There are no organisations for governors, a primary governors' group having been started and folded within a year. Officers meet regularly with the Federation of PTAs and from September 1993 the LEA is holding regular briefing meetings for parents on topics of major interest.

The LEA's Action Plan for 1993/4 includes the following: "To help parents play as full a part as they wish in the education of their children by:

- a) working with schools to provide information on what the school provides and how parents can help, particularly in the areas of basic literacy and numeracy;
- b) providing parents and older pupils with clear, simple and comprehensive advice on the educational opportunities available in the borough;
- c) simplifying the complaints procedure so that it is accessible to parents and can be used by schools as a means of self-improvement;
- d) enhancing the role of the Library service in providing educational information and resources for parents; and
- e) working with governing bodies to enhance all forms of communication and partnership with parents."

#### **6. CITY OF WESTMINSTER**

*A London borough, formerly part of the ILEA, with a population of 185,000, with 42 primary schools, 8 secondary schools and three special schools. The council is under the control of the Conservatives.*

The City does not have a representative of parents on its education committee and a parent-governors' forum collapsed in 1992 through poor attendance. Parent governors were included in a working group to consider special needs policy. There is a termly meeting with the authority for chairs of governors.

The City has a long-standing problem of loss of pupils through families opting for secondary schools outside the borough, particularly for denominational reasons. In 1993 the City commissioned MORI to conduct a survey of parents' and pupils' views on Westminster schools as part of its Education Review with the aim of assessing user satisfaction with the system and pin-pointing why so many families with secondary age children chose to send them to schools outside the City.

MORI found that the majority of parents and pupils were satisfied with the education provided by the City, with teaching standards, with extra help provided for pupils with special needs (including the gifted), with the range of subjects, the approachability of teachers and their opportunities to have a say in how schools were run. However, satisfaction rates amongst parents with children in City schools in the low 80% range were less good than in a national survey conducted four years earlier (93%) and also less good than those of parents who sent their children to schools outside Westminster (91%). The parents most satisfied with their children's education were those choosing Roman Catholic schools.

MORI identified eight areas of concern, with more concern expressed about some schools than others: discipline, teaching methods, homework, exam results, the cleanliness of buildings, extra-curricular activities, teacher feed-back to parents and communication with parents generally.

All schools were given the confidential results of the survey as it concerned their own schools. In addition the education committee put in place an action plan aimed at addressing some of the concerns raised by parents and monitoring progress. Two new posts were created to encourage increased effectiveness in schools and promote the ethos of partnership. The LEA intends to commission further surveys to monitor whether perceptions change as action is taken to rectify perceived defects in the schools. Schools are also being encouraged to seek feedback from pupils and parents as part of their development plans.

## 7. MANCHESTER

*A Greater Manchester Metropolitan borough with a population of 457,000 with seven nursery schools, 131 nursery classes, 178 primary schools, 28 secondary schools, three sixth form colleges and 28 special schools. The council is under Labour control.*

The City included six advisory member places on its education committee from the start of the 1993/4 municipal year. They will serve for one year and both the electoral process and the role of advisory members will be reviewed after a year.

The City is divided into three administrative districts and each district is represented on the committee by two governors elected at district consultative meetings of governors held in the spring term. It was hoped that one representative from each district would be a parent governor but in the event only one parent governor stood for election, although some of the other representatives have previously been parent governors and/or are parents.

The consultative meetings are chaired by members of the education committee. They are not regarded as policy-making bodies but allow direct contact between governors and elected members and officials. Candidates for the education committee advisory places were encouraged to prepare written statements about their candidature, which were circulated with ballot papers at the meeting. Only governors resident in the City were allowed to vote.

There are no other organisations for governors or parent-governors in the City but the authority involves governors closely in planning and monitoring their own training, provides Parent Education tutors in schools, and operates a Parents' Advice Centre and Shop for inner city parents and a citywide Parental Information Network. Consideration is being given to further initiatives to strengthen parental involvement at all levels of the education service.

In 1992 the City commissioned Emma Beresford, a secondary school teacher who had already undertaken some research into parental involvement in North America, to conduct a survey into parental involvement in the LEA's primary and secondary schools. One aspect of this research was to look at the effectiveness of the City's aim of increasing the participation of citizens in council services to ensure that the result of Government legislation was not simply to give more power to "the middle class articulate few".

Ms. Beresford's research found that there was a high level of awareness of the LEA's commitment to parental involvement, and that there had been parental input to policy-making on the 5-16 school system, on policy for the under-fives and, in individual schools, on the job description and specification for head-teachers. Parental involvement was also expected in school development plans. There had been a successful bid for Urban Aid money for work with parents of pre-school children in Moss Side and Hulme. Governor training in the City had been successful and comprehensive. She recommended that to make further gains, there should be a clear policy strategy on parental involvement and better co-ordination between different parts of the education service. She suggested that further research was needed into parents' needs and views on Manchester schools, interpreter services for parents should be made a priority and that the City should aim to hold a parents' conference to discuss educational issues.

## **8. BRADFORD**

*A West Yorkshire metropolitan district with a population of 472,000 and six nursery schools, 166 primary schools, 63 middle schools, 24 secondary schools and 15 special schools. The council is under Labour control.*

Consultation with parents takes place almost entirely through the network of school governors. Each governing body in the City sends two representatives to an area Governors' Forum which meets at least once a term with education officers and each of which has a "link" councillor on education committee with whom they liaise. The chair and vice-chair of each Forum constitute a Governors' Advisory Group which meets regularly with education officers and elected members. One representative from each forum also has a place on education committee. The system is funded by the LEA. The agenda highlights issues which will come before governing bodies and education committee, taking two or three issues per meeting.

There is also an Asian Governors Network which was set up by the LEA governors' support service, with the help of Urban Programme money, as a result of requests from new Asian governors recruited in 1992. About 80 governors, including parents, meet regularly to discuss matters of concern. It is expected that the Asian governors will also seek representation on education committee.

## **9. KIRKLEES**

*A West Yorkshire Metropolitan district with a population of 375,500 and four nursery schools, 161 primary schools, nine middle schools, 26 secondary schools, nine special schools and one tertiary college. The council is under Labour control.*

Kirklees Council has launched a New Deal for Schools policy which is overtly antagonistic to what they describe as the Government's notion that "competition and the unfettered operation of market forces are the way to empower the citizen and provide an effective education service". The initial phase of this policy was concerned with offering schools autonomy, choice and quality of service while encouraging them to remain within LEA control and benefitting from collaboration with the council and each other.

The second phase, launched in 1993, addressed issues of accountability, which the council believes is diminished by many recent reforms. The council has committed itself to opening up its decision-making processes to public influence and scrutiny. They plan to establish an Education Forum which will bring together representatives of parents, governors, head, teachers and non-teaching staff, pupils/students, the business community, religious groups and representatives of the Education Committee. The aim of the Forum would be to enhance local democracy by involving local citizens more directly in the process of planning and governing local education provision.

The role of the Forum initially will be to give these groups a voice and a formal means of consultation leading to advice to the Education Committee. It is envisaged that the Education Committee might in time become a smaller body, actively seeking and listening to advice from the Forum, as soon as the Forum has established its credibility as a genuinely representative body. Elected members and officers in Kirklees say that they do not under-estimate the potential difficulties in establishing an effective forum, ensuring satisfactory representation of diverse groups and ensuring clarity about its powers and the limits on its powers.

As a first step to seeking greater involvement by parents in policy-making the council has published *The Kirklees Parent*, a once-a-term glossy newsletter dealing with general educational issues and news of local schools. The authority also holds regular consultation meetings for parents on local issues and national topics such as the National Curriculum and the 1993 Education Act. There is no borough-wide organisation for parents or governors, but a governors' association is in the course of being established.

## **10. HAMPSHIRE**

*An English county with a population of 1,542,900 and four nursery schools, 580 primary schools, 98 secondary schools, six grant maintained schools, 48 special schools. The county council has no party in overall control.*

The county has a Governors' Forum and is seeking to establish and fund divisional forums which can be independent of officers and head-teachers and organise their own training, development and organisation. The incoming "hung" administration is seeking a nomination from the County Forum to sit on the Education Committee.

Consultation used to take place between officers and the chair of the education committee and the local Federation of PTAs. The latter organisation no longer exists, and officers have developed private networks of parents, usually recommended by heads, to help with specific projects such as the up-dating of the

county's information on admissions. The lack of a representative organisation of parents is regarded as a serious disadvantage by officers.

The county has produced with parental help two high quality A4 size 22 page illustrated booklets *Your Child Starting School* and *Moving on to Secondary School* which are issued to parents during the year before a school start together with information on transfer procedures for the particular area of the county in which the family lives. Both booklets give information on the county's education service, the legal requirements of the system, how primary or secondary schools function, and emphasise partnership with parents and representation through governing bodies.

## ii. School initiatives

### 1. ACLAND BURGHLEY SCHOOL, CAMDEN

Acland Burghley is a co-educational 11 - 18 comprehensive school in North London with 940 pupils. It serves a multi-cultural catchment area and has a strong tradition of excellence in the creative arts. It is also committed to involving parents as closely as possible in the work of the school. The main means of home-school communication is a fortnightly, high quality, desk-top-published newsletter which includes staff and pupil news, extra-curricular events, information on school policy and a lively noticeboard section. Issues in summer and autumn 1993 focussed on new members of the teaching staff, examination results, a campaign against racism following an attack which involved the friend of some of the school's students, and a Christmas appeal.

The main means of involving parents in policy discussions is through the parents' committee of each year group which works closely with the head of year. They arrange meetings to discuss matters of interest or concern during the year, and some have organised their own newsletters for parents of that year. This is a useful means of identifying gaps and inconsistencies.

There is also an annual day conference for parents, students and governors to discuss major issues of school policy. Recent discussions have looked at the role of parents in assessment, a home-school contract, and have helped to draw up a Code of Conduct for the school. Up to 120 parents have regularly attended these sessions. According to the head, Philip O'Hear, the involvement of parents is crucial to the development and success of individual policies, such as homework, equal opportunities, assessment, and to the development of a consensus on the school's values.

### 2. ASHLAWN SCHOOL, RUGBY

Ashlawn is a 1000-strong bi-lateral school for 12 to 18 year olds which has a strongly developed system of home school liaison. Parents are invited to four types of meeting with the school each year: parents' evenings of the traditional kind for feedback on progress in specific subjects; information meetings on aspects of educational and school policy e.g. the National Curriculum; meetings with tutors to discuss pastoral care and/or problems; "home-school link" meetings, of which there are three a year for every year group, which tackle general concerns about children and school policy.

The head has found that most parents worry about the same things - homework, bullying, uniform etc. - but all tend to imagine that they are unique in their worries. "They are greatly reassured to find they are normal." Where home-school link meetings arrive at a consensus on a particular aspect of school policy this is circulated to all parents. The school claims that relationships between parents and tutors have become much closer as a result of their particular approach to home-school liaison and that a number of aspects of school policy have been influenced by parental feedback and suggestions, from the design of an organiser for older students to approaches to work experience.

A document on *Resolving Homework Problems* set out the rationale for having homework, the ways in which pupils might be asked to undertake homework - research, reading, revising, retrieving information etc - and action points for pupils, teachers and parents, such as the maintenance of an accurate homework diary by all three groups, clear instructions and regular marking by teachers, sensible supervision by parents etc. Parents were also asked to contact form tutors if homework appeared to be presenting a problem.

## iii. The experience of parents

This section of the report is based on interviews with 12 individuals involved as parents in some of the policy-oriented arrangements described elsewhere in the report. Some were willing to be identified, some of the more critical commentators were not.

The largest single group of parents now involved in policy-making of any sort is parent-governors. There seems to be general satisfaction with the level of representation for parents in county schools. In

voluntary schools there are complaints that parents are under-represented and that the churches can in some cases still be distinctly autocratic in their dealings with parents and teachers.

Other research has already shown that parent-governors' experience of their role can be somewhat mixed (see Section H below). This was confirmed by the parent-governors to whom I spoke. There was serious concern expressed that for one reason or another schools were not holding elections for these positions, with the strong inference that head-teachers who do not wish to have "difficult" parents on their governing body can manipulate the system to ensure that only congenial parents are nominated, if possible without the bother of an election.

This suspicion was to some extent confirmed by experience in the North-West of England where 13 local authorities paid for a video explaining the role of parent-governors and encouraging nominees to come forward. When an informal survey was made of how widely the video had been used by schools, it emerged that there had been a high number of elections in areas where the video had been shown, fewer where it had not, and that a significant number of elections were being held during the summer term, so disenfranchising the parents of in-coming pupils for up to four years.

There was also evidence of some antagonism towards parent-governors from all parts of the political spectrum with one Labour education committee chair ready to dismiss the video out of hand because "it would give his parents ideas above their station".

Another interviewee from London spoke feelingly of antagonism towards parent-governors from heads and political nominees on governing bodies (of both main political parties), of serious attempts to prevent issues being discussed, even those which, like appraisal, governors have a statutory responsibility to monitor, and of deep suspicion and hostility when an association of parent-governors was formed. "The politicians of all parties feel seriously threatened by participation. They fear that parents are going to get out of control. The trouble with this is that parent-governors get exhausted and eventually stand down. We have lost a number of very good governors that way."

An alternative view of the shortage of parent-governor candidates in some schools was that the amount of work now expected of parent governors is excessive and deters many volunteers. This was also cited as a reason for the fact that parent-governor / governor associations do not always survive long. The LEA Survey threw up comments on "meeting fatigue" amongst governors. A parent-governor in Inner London regretted the absence of representatives of the minority communities from many governing bodies, which he put down to language and cultural difficulties, particularly traditions which prevented women from some minority communities taking any active part in public life.

Keith Beck, an Oxfordshire governor involved in the efforts to establish a national forum for governors commented that power had been thrust upon governors and parents and that their "views" were currently being bandied about without any basis in fact. "It is essential that we have a representative voice which actually reflects opinions at the grass roots. The views of one or two people at national level is not good enough. Nor do we want to be consulted about policy only after the policy documents have been issued. We want to be consulted when policy is being formulated. Industry and commerce has learned that top-down policy-making is not effective. Governments should take note of that."

Apart from the strong residual antagonism in some areas to the very notion of parent-governors, those who were elected complained of isolation, poor communications, disputes with heads over their right to report back to their electorate and how that should be done, and the overwhelming task of dealing with the mountain of paperwork which now besets all governors. For this reason most welcomed the growing number of associations for parent-governors and/or governors generally, as a back-up to governor training, as an opportunity to compare experiences with governors from other schools and as a channel for making joint representations on issues of policy.

A co-opted member of an education committee representing governors generally spoke of the crucial role of governor-trainers in enabling governors to be effective. In his borough training had been excellent and governors had been involved in the selection of a replacement when the senior training official moved on.

A supportive view of local authority efforts in the field came from the chair of the Newham Association of Parent-Governors who believes that the existence of the association is vital to support parent-governors in their role and that it provides a useful means of enabling parents to handle the immense amount of information which now comes to governors. It also enables parent-governors to liaise with the parent representatives on Education Committee. Meetings are held a short time before the main Education Committee meeting in each cycle so that parent-governor views on agenda items can be fed into the system. "You do hear of areas where governors have difficulty in getting their voice heard. Not everything that

Newham does is perfect but we do feel that we can have our say and that it will be listened to."

A parent-governor of long-standing, nominated as parent representative to the education committee of a London Borough by the local parents' association, also complained of isolation in her borough-wide role. In her view it is not easy for an "ordinary parent" to sit on an education committee dominated by experienced and close-knit groups of politicians. The atmosphere can be intimidating, the views of parents may be seldom sought and initiatives on parental involvement taken without any consultation with the parent representative.

The problem of reporting back to those who have ostensibly elected you is even more acute than at the school level. Regular news-letters do not always reach those for whom they are intended if they have to rely on the good-will of LEA and schools for distribution. Knowledge of grass-roots views may be patchy even in a borough-wide parents' association. As others also said, the key to effective representation is effective communication, and that is not always easy for a sole parent representative on a large committee representing a wide geographical area.

Parent representatives with wide experience of education committee membership, pressure groups and a governors' association in Gloucestershire made the point strongly that views which conflict with Government policy are not welcome. The county has been involved a long-running dispute between all its political parties and central Government over its Standard Spending Assessment which the county believes militates unfairly against its schools. Parents groups have played a leading role in campaigning and in some of the research into how the SSA formula works, but there is a degree of cynicism about the effect of parents' views when they come into direct conflict with the makers of financial policy, local or national. Jan Smith, a seasoned campaigner in the area, comments that what parents want is involvement before decisions are made and clear accountability, whether from the LEA or the new Funding Agency for grant maintained schools. What they often get is politicians who still think that they know best.

## D. LEA Survey: Scotland

Parental involvement in education in Scotland is organised in a different way from England and Wales. Since legislation in 1988, which followed the Education Reform Act in England and Wales but which differed significantly from it, Scottish schools may elect to have a school board. About 75% of schools currently have boards, the number fluctuating as boards are created and some are abandoned, mainly through lack of parental support.

School boards include elected parent representatives (the majority), teacher representatives and co-opted members of the local community. The head-teacher is not a member but may attend meetings as an adviser, as may officials of the Education Authority (EA) and the local councillor.

School boards have fewer powers than English and Welsh governing bodies, being responsible in the main for the allocation of capitation funds in consultation with the head-teacher. Boards are specifically required to promote contact between the school, its parents and the community, report annually to parents and encourage the establishment of a parent-teacher association.

The Scottish Education Department (SED) has a School Boards Support Unit, and published a termly newsletter for board members which more than half of the board members who responded to an SED questionnaire said that they found useful and interesting.

The survey returns indicated that no Scottish education authorities include parent representatives on their education committee. Co-opted members are confined to church and teacher representatives. Lothian Region does include parents on its Schools Appeals Committee and on the Appointment Committee for senior staff. Nominations come from the Federation of PTAs or from school boards where they exist.

Most EAs say they consult widely with school boards and with other parents' groups. Consultation with school boards, one region commented, "is almost automatic". Others have regular meetings with chairs of school boards and consult on all major policy items. The Borders EA sent a questionnaire to every family of a child who would be involved in the proposed testing and got a 100% response, which was relayed to the Scottish Education Department. Attempts to set up local organisations of school boards, however, have not generally been successful.

Nationally there are two parent representatives on the Scottish Consultative Council on the Curriculum which itself consults widely with all the interest groups in education, including parents. The Forum of Scottish Education was established in 1988 at the height of the debate on education reform. This provides an informal meeting place for all interest groups and meets roughly every six weeks.

Nationally there are three major organisations for parents. The Scottish School Boards' Association was established in 1991 and represents 800 schools out of about 2000 with established boards. Membership is growing. The SSBA is non-political, is funded by a grant of £5,000 from the Scottish Education Department and is increasingly being consulted by the SED, by the teachers' unions and by the Scottish Council for Educational Research.

The Scottish Parent-Teachers' Council has more than 700 school PTAs in membership and also reports growing interest in its activities. The SPTC is also consulted by officials nationally, and has been instrumental in persuading the SED to produce a video for parents explaining the 5 - 14 curriculum. The SPTC chair was a member of the working party on devolved school management, which has introduced a scheme significantly different from that in use in England and Wales as a result, SPTC claims, of parental pressure.

The third group, the Parents' Coalition, is a pressure group, now disbanded, which came into being during the campaign against the SED's test proposals for primary children. It claims credit for the radical changes eventually made in the testing procedures in Scotland. Its survey revealing deep parental dissatisfaction with the proposed testing regime is widely credited with changing ministerial minds on the issue.