

# EVERYONE HAVING A SAY!

**Pupil participation is about ensuring and developing a culture within schools where pupils have a voice, and have the opportunity to play an active role in decisions that affect their learning and well-being.**

Pupil participation forums can take various forms and happen in a variety of ways, and at different levels of school life. Some of these are:

- Participatory groups such as school councils, eco-committees, healthy schools and peer mentors;
- Processes such as circle-time, focus groups, classroom charters and consultations;
- Having structures in place so that all pupils can be involved in decision-making, including those with additional learning needs.

The experience of schools which have pupil participation indicates 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 steer their own learning, and assist in the school's decision making processes. All forms of pupil participation can assist pupils and schools in achieving this ideal.

<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

## PUPILS' VOICES: MAKING A DIFFERENCE!

### Legislation, policy and strategies which set the context for pupil participation

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, including Articles 12<sup>2</sup>, 13<sup>3</sup> and 29<sup>4</sup> of the UNCRC.

As an international convention, the UNCRC is an excellent starting point for the development of pupil participation and pupils' voices within the school.

The Northern Ireland (NI) curriculum supports the development of pupils so they can reach their full potential throughout their time at school:

- Personal Development and Mutual Understanding (PD&MU) focuses on encouraging every child to become personally, emotionally and socially effective; to lead healthy, safe and fulfilled lives and to become confident, independent and responsible citizens, making informed and responsible choices and decisions throughout their lives;

<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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- Learning for Life and Work (LLW) is central to helping young people develop the fundamental skills, knowledge, qualities and dispositions that are pre-requisites for life and work;
- The NI 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, prevention of all forms of bullying among pupils.

Pupil participation will support schools 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)**<sup>5</sup> 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**<sup>6</sup>. 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 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*

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*the extent to which the Principal and staff are able to create opportunities and the climate for constructive and positive debate."*<sup>7</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 education system exists for pupils; ensuring their participation in that system and feeding back on their experiences should be paramount.

The Government's **10-year Strategy for Children and Young People in NI, 2006 – 2016**<sup>8</sup> 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 effect 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.

Work is currently underway to develop the new, post-2016 strategy which NICCY expects to highlight the importance of engagement with children and young people.

<sup>5</sup> For further information go to [www.deni.gov.uk](http://www.deni.gov.uk) or [www.legislation.gov.uk](http://www.legislation.gov.uk)

<sup>6</sup> For further information go to [www.deni.gov.uk](http://www.deni.gov.uk)

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

<sup>8</sup> For further information on the 10-year Strategy for Children and Young People in NI, 2006 – 2016 and for future developments go to: [www.ofmdfmi.gov.uk/articles/children-and-young-people](http://www.ofmdfmi.gov.uk/articles/children-and-young-people)



You can find out more about NICCY and the Pupils' Voices programme at [www.niccy.org](http://www.niccy.org), **028 9031 1616** and [participation@niccy.org](mailto:participation@niccy.org). Please contact the Communications team at NICCY if you require alternative formats of this material.