

'DEMOCRA-SCHOOL' AND DEMOCRATIC STRUCTURES IN SCHOOLS

Briefing for the Northern Ireland Assembly Education Committee 16 November 2011

This briefing paper presents details of work undertaken by the Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People (NICCY) to promote the establishment and development of school councils and democratic structures in schools. The paper will;

- *Outline the role and duties of NICCY;*
- *Consider the rationale for school councils and democratic structures and reference relevant policies which support these;*
- *Describe NICCY's 'Democra-School' programme, and;*
- *Provide information detailing NICCY's engagement with key educational stakeholders in relation to school councils and democratic structures.*

1.0 The Role and Duties of the Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People (NICCY)

NICCY was created in accordance with The Commissioner for Children and Young People (Northern Ireland) Order 2003 to safeguard and promote the rights and best interests of children and young people in Northern Ireland. Under Articles 7 (2)(3) of this legislation, NICCY has a mandate to keep under review the adequacy and effectiveness of law, practice and services relating to the rights and best interests of children and young people by relevant authorities. The remit of the Office is children and young people from birth up to 18 years or 21 years if the young person is disabled or in the care of Social Services.

In order to fulfil its duties, NICCY undertakes a broad range of activities. This includes responding to queries and complaints regarding services for children and young people and supporting them and their families in legal proceedings against public bodies, scrutinising legislation and policy and commissioning research into issues affecting children and young people. In addition, NICCY also creates effective participation opportunities for children and young people and actively supports good participative practices by other organisations.



In determining how to carry out her functions, the Commissioner's paramount consideration is the rights of the child and NICCY bases all of its work on the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC).

2.0 A Rationale for School Councils and Democratic Structures

A School Council may be defined as an elected group of pupils who have been chosen by their peers to represent their views, concerns or experiences, usually with the aim of improving different aspects of school life.

School councils have become an increasingly common feature in primary, post-primary and special schools and their benefits have been highlighted by a range of educational bodies and organisations including DfEE Advisory Group on Citizenship (1998)¹, the Secondary Heads Association (2003)² and Ofsted (2006)³. It is important to note at the outset that although a school council is the most common method of implementing democracy in schools, there are other forms of equally effective democratic representation. Schools may identify class, form or year group representatives to convey pupils' views or undertake to consult regularly with pupils about issues affecting them using appropriate media such as surveys or class consultations.

There is a considerable body of evidence which documents the benefits of school councils for the school community, pupils' personal development and learning and towards supporting school policy development.

2.1 A Positive Impact on the School Community

Research indicates that the establishment of school councils can be beneficial to pupils, teachers and the wider school community. They can create a more positive school environment and generate greater inclusivity by bringing together pupils, staff, the senior management team, and boards of governors. Evidence indicates that school councils can contribute to a reduction in dropout rates in schools⁴ and positively impact on school ethos

¹ Crick Report (1998). Education for Citizenship and the Teaching of Democracy in Schools. Final Report of the Advisory Group on Citizenship. London: QCA.

² Trafford, B (2003). *Schools Councils, School Democracy, School Improvement*. Leicester: Secondary Heads Association

³ Ofsted (2006). *Improving Behaviour: Lessons learned from HMI monitoring of secondary schools where behaviour has been judged unsatisfactory* (November). www.ofsted.gov.uk

⁴ Monahan, L. (1999). *Moving Forward with Pupils*: IAPCE.



and teacher-pupil relationships⁵. Having a school council has also been seen to have a positive impact on pupils' behaviour and to create a greater sense of ownership of the school and its activities for pupils⁶.

2.2 Encouraging Pupils' Personal Development

In relation to pupils' personal development, the establishment of a school council gives pupils an opportunity to acquire a range of valuable skills⁷, including those of debating, leadership, negotiation and teamwork, which will be of benefit to them in later life. Positive participation can help build children and young people's self-esteem, self-efficacy and ability to express themselves. It enables pupils to take responsibility for projects, and to demonstrate they can manage and bring such projects to a successful conclusion.

2.3 Enhancing Pupils' Learning

Research into the benefits of school councils has sought to provide evidence to support anecdotal claims that participation improves attainment. In a study of his own school using value-added measures, Trafford (2003) found an association between pupil voice and improved attainment⁸. In a separate study, Hannam (2001) compared similar comprehensive schools that did and did not have provision for pupil participation, and the findings also identified a perceptible positive difference⁹.

Research also suggests that consultation with pupils concerning teaching and learning can bring about a range of positive outcomes. These include enhancing teachers' understanding of pupils' responses and attitudes towards particular aspects of teaching and learning, supporting individual learners who find learning difficult and contributing towards the development of and experimentation with new approaches¹⁰. Furthermore, it is suggested that if pupils are consulted about teaching and learning, they are more likely to better understand the learning process and to regard learning as a serious matter¹¹.

⁵ Davies, L., Williams C. & Yamashita, H. (2006). *Inspiring Schools – Impact and Outcomes: taking up the challenge of pupil participation*. London: Carnegie.

⁶ Ofsted, *op.cit.*

⁷ Schools Council, UK. <http://www.schoolcouncils.org>

⁸ Trafford, *op.cit.*

⁹ Hannam, D (2001). *A Pilot Study to Evaluate the Impact of the Student Participation Aspects of the Citizenship Order on Standards of Education in Secondary Schools*. Report to the DFEE. London: DFEE.

¹⁰ James, M. & Pollard, P. (2006). *Improving teaching and learning in schools:*

a commentary by the Teaching and Learning Research Programme. Swindon: ESRC.

¹¹ Flutter, J. & Ruddock J. (2004). *'Consulting Pupils: What's in it for Schools?'* Routledge: Falmer.



Democratic participation is explored through the Northern Ireland Curriculum, and particularly through Local and Global Citizenship. 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 requires that young people have the opportunity to investigate different ways to participate in school and society, and uses the example of school councils as an example of how 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.

2.4 Contribution to School Policy Development

The contribution made by a school council to the development of school policy can have significant benefits for pupils and the school. It can provide a formalised channel of communication between pupils, the senior management team and board of governors and serve as a 'sounding board' for the senior management team and board of governors. Clearly, school policies are far more likely to be successful where they are clearly understood and supported by all partners within the school community.

Research indicates that pupils, overwhelmingly, wish to be involved in participative decision making in schools¹². And while pupils are likely to take a 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. Therefore for school councils and other structures to be successful, it is vital that all members of the school community are committed to the aims and objectives and willing to play their part in their operation.

¹² <http://eprints.ioe.ac.uk/4937/1/Alderson2000School121.pdf>;

Kilkelly, U. (2004). *Children's Rights in Northern Ireland* Belfast: NICCY,

Pedder, D. and McIntyre, D. (2006). 'Pupil consultation: the importance of social capital'. *Education Review*, 58 (2), 145-157.



3.0 The Policy Context – Support for Pupils’ Participation and School Councils

3.1 Children’s Rights and Participation: the UNCRC

Pupils’ participation in schools can be argued for on a number of grounds¹³. Essentially, the education system exists for pupils; they are consumers of school education, along with their parents and as such, it may be argued, they hold consumer rights. Ensuring their participation in that system and providing opportunities for them to feed back on their experiences should therefore be paramount. Investment should be made to make sure the views of children and young people are represented and services built around their needs. A school council provides an opportunity for pupils to engage in a structured partnership with teachers, parents and school managers in the operation of their school. In terms of moral obligations, it may also be argued that children and young people have a right to take part in matters which concern them.

With regard to legal obligations, the UNCRC states that it is the child’s right to participate and to have a say in matters affecting them. The Government has an obligation to protect children’s rights through its ratification of the UNCRC. Article 12 of the Convention, which enshrines the right of the child to have their views heard, listened to and taken seriously, is clearly relevant to the development of school councils.

Article 12 states that governments;

‘shall assure to the child who is capable of forming this 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’.

In its concluding observations concerning the implementation of the UNCRC in the UK¹⁴, the United Nations Committee recommended that the Government;

¹³ Scottish Consumer Council, (2007). ‘School Councils and Pupil Participation in Scottish Secondary Schools’. Scottish Consumer Council.

¹⁴http://www.ofmdfmi.gov.uk/un_committee_on_the_rights_of_the_child_concluding_observations_pdf_4.pdf



'promote, facilitate and implement, in legislation as well as in practice, within the family, schools and the community...the principle of respect for the views of the child' (33(g)) and that it 'strengthens children's participation in all matters of school, classroom and learning which affect them' (67(g)).

NICCY's role is to promote and safeguard the rights and best interests of children and young people and to uphold the UNCRC. It therefore strongly supports the right of children to express their views and to have these taken into consideration, in a range of contexts and including schools.

3.2 Consultation with Pupils: Northern Ireland Legislation and Policy

Various pieces of education legislation address the importance and value of consulting pupils. Article 19(4) of the 'Education and Libraries (Northern Ireland) Order' 2003¹⁵ states that before making (or revising) policies or general principles concerning discipline, the Board of Governors must listen to the opinions of pupils.

In the Education (Northern Ireland) Order 1998¹⁶, Article 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 provided by DE. In June 2005, DE issued guidance entitled 'School Development Planning' and this states (p6-7) 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."

It goes on to suggest that consultation can be organised in a variety of ways, including through the establishment of a school council.

One of the underpinning values of the '10 year Strategy for Children and Young People in NI 2006 – 2016' is for all children and young people to be active participants in society. One of the key supporting themes is to

¹⁵ <http://www.legislation.gov.uk/nisi/2003/424/contents/made>

¹⁶ <http://www.legislation.gov.uk/nisi/1998/1759/contents>



‘develop a culture where the views of our children and young people are routinely sought in matters which impact on their lives’¹⁷. It also pledges that in accordance with the UNCRC, particularly Article 12, that the Government will be proactive in obtaining the views of children on matters of significance to them.

4.0 ‘Democra-School’: Promoting Democratic Practices in Schools

4.1 Background

‘Democra-School’ is concerned with children and young people having an appropriate and effective voice in their schools. The main aim of the initiative is therefore to promote democracy in schools across Northern Ireland, through the development of appropriate democratic structures, including school councils.

The impetus to develop ‘Democra-School’ arose from NICCY’s awareness of an absence or inconsistent use of established participatory procedures and policies through which pupils could ‘have a say’ within their school. Furthermore, NICCY found that even where such structures existed they were in some cases, regarded as tokenistic, not taken seriously or strongly controlled by staff.

In addition, one of NICCY’s strategic objectives is to promote and support opportunities for children and young people to participate. Given that young people spend a significant proportion of their formative years at school, NICCY believes it is important that they can participate effectively and meaningfully in decision making about different aspects of school life. This, alongside a requirement to fulfil NICCY’s legislative duties, specifically to keep under review the adequacy and effectiveness of services and practice, led to the initiation of the ‘Democra-School’ programme in December 2005¹⁸.

4.2 ‘Democra-School’: Developing the Resource

A steering committee was established in 2005, consisting of teachers, principals, young people and NICCY staff, all of whom shared a vision of young people having a voice within their school environment. Initial discussions were held with Angela Smyth, the then direct rule Education

¹⁷ <http://www.ofmdfmi.gov.uk/ten-year-strategy.pdf>, p.13

¹⁸ See Appendix 1 – A Timeline detailing NICCY’s work on school councils to date.



Minister, who encouraged the development of the project. Subsequently, NICCY held two major conferences, at which pupils and their teachers from schools without school councils engaged with their counterparts from schools who had established a school council.

In the process of developing 'Democra-School', NICCY took account of the information exchanged and the positive and negative practices shared through 12 workshops convened at the first 'Democra-School' conference in March 2006. This was attended by over 200 pupils, teachers and key education stakeholders. *Democra-School, 'Having Your Say': Guidance for School Councils* was then launched at a second conference, attended by 130 participants in February 2007. Following the launch, NICCY provided follow-up training to 20 schools who participated in the conference. This consisted of a series of workshops relating to school council development and child rights awareness. Following the workshops, NICCY has continued to deliver support to schools interested in the 'Democra-School' programme.

4.3 'Democra-School': The Content

'Democra-School' is designed to support teachers, schools and school council members in establishing effective and successful school councils through the provision of relevant information and advice. Taking account of the information collected during the two conferences, the Guidance developed ten standards which are required to implement models of good participative practice. Each section of the Guidance identifies a key issue that pupils, teachers and other stakeholders recognised as being important in the development of a school council. Expanding on this issue, the Guidance considers why the issue is significant and how a school might consider addressing it. A simple checklist provides a reminder of different tasks which should be completed. Throughout the document, additional information and resources are signposted and schools are encouraged to explore these. These include references to relevant legislation and policies, with particular reference to the UNCRC, and links to guidance for school councils in other parts of the UK and across a range of countries.

Additional downloadable resources have been developed and made available through the NICCY website¹⁹. These include information on election guidelines; the roles of the school council chairperson, treasurer etc, and information about minute-taking and work plans. From October 2008 to

¹⁹ www.niccy.org



October 2011, information from the 'Democra-School' web page was downloaded 865 times. This equates to more than one download per school day over this three year period, so the resource is regularly used.

While 'Democra-School' is not regarded as a definitive guide to the development and sustainability of school councils, it is designed to support schools at each stage of the developmental journey from their creation to evaluation and review. It does this by employing a step-by-step approach and highlighting key issues for consideration by teachers, pupils and senior management. 'Democra-School' also recognises that each school is unique with its own particular strengths and requirements and the Guidance can therefore be used to meet their specific needs. The resource is endorsed by School Councils UK²⁰.

4.4 Reviewing Schools' Experiences

During autumn 2010, the twenty schools who participated in the 'Democra-School' workshops convened following the launch of the resource, were asked to participate in a survey to review their experiences of having a school council. Pupils and teachers commented on a broad range of positive outcomes. These are detailed below. Many of the beneficial findings noted in Section 2 above, were identified in their responses.

4.4.1 Confidence

All council members felt their confidence had increased through their participation in a school council, particularly in terms of public speaking and decision making. Most students felt that they were more confident when speaking to other young people and adults outside the school environment.

4.4.2 Experience

For many pupils, the greatest benefit of being on the school council was the range of experiences they gained, which could be transferred to other activities in which they were involved. Many senior pupils believed it was beneficial that they could reference their involvement on UCAS forms and job applications. One school provided opportunities for students to engage with other participative forums in their local area so that they could meet with other young people and advise the local council on issues affecting them. Pupils felt this was a particularly worthwhile experience as they were able to use their position to improve things for other young people.

²⁰ www.schoolcouncil.org



4.4.3 Feeling part of the school community

Pupils reported being very motivated to compete for a place on the school council as it was recognised by the school community as a prestigious position. Several students indicated that they felt they had an important role in the school through their involvement in the school council and that they felt proud to be part of the wider school community.

4.4.4 Improved Teaching

Several schools reported having consulted the school council about teaching styles. One school regularly met with the council to discuss the use of IT in teaching. Both pupils and staff felt this improved teaching, as teachers could identify methods or tools more likely to capture student's interest and enhance their learning experience. One Principal commented that the school council contributed to improving both teaching and learning.

4.4.5 More cohesive school community

It was widely agreed that staff had identified a positive change in students' attitudes to school when they felt more involved in decision making. This ranged from increased involvement in after-school activities to a decrease in the number of incidents of littering and graffiti in the school.

4.4.6 Better Communication

Where effective procedures for communication were established, teachers reported a marked improvement in students' receipt and understanding of relevant information. Some teachers felt that feedback provided to students via school council members was more easily understood and digested than information coming through school assembly or form class announcements. One school council had a dedicated notice board which was updated regularly with information. For many students, it was easier to raise concerns or complaints through the school council than other channels. Teachers felt that issues were dealt with more quickly and easily as they were addressed before becoming potentially more serious.

Respondents also identified a number of challenges:

4.4.7 Time

Finding an appropriate meeting time was a significant challenge particularly for schools in rural areas where some students had long



journeys home after school. Some school councils met over lunch time, though they felt this was more effective when the school provided lunch for the council. Some councils felt that they would have benefitted from having contact with the school's board of governors however it was difficult to identify a suitable time to meet. Because of these time-related challenges, respondents felt that decision-making was sometimes slow to progress.

4.4.8 Lack of Funding

Many potential initiatives identified by school councils required additional funding which wasn't always possible. Several of the councils were involved in fundraising for the school, but they felt that some of this money could have been dedicated to student initiated projects. Schools offering free canteen meals or refreshments during meetings felt this could become a significant financial burden.

4.4.9 Managing Expectations

Managing expectations was a very common problem for school councils. Council members, other pupils, and staff often had competing priorities and different perceptions of the role of the school council. Council members commented that some pupils were not always fully aware of the Council's remit and so they sometimes felt under pressure to deliver outcomes or to effect change. Managing expectations was much easier for schools which had effective and transparent communication systems and a clear remit for the school council.

4.5 School Council Audit

In the process of undertaking work on school councils, NICCY became aware of a dearth of statistics relating to school councils or pupil representative bodies in Northern Ireland. In order to establish a baseline of information NICCY emailed each school in Northern Ireland to inquire if it had a school council co-ordinator and 207 schools confirmed that they had one in place. It is likely that more school councils do exist and that schools simply did not respond to the request. NICCY welcomes any efforts to collect more complete and accurate statistics regarding school councils.



Table 1: Number of Schools in Northern Ireland with School Council Co-ordinators

School Type	Number of Schools with School Council Co-ordinators
Nursery	1
Primary	98
Special	10
Secondary	69
Grammar	26
Bunscoil	2
Meanscoil	1
Total	207

5.0 Advocating for Democratic Practices in Schools: NICCY's engagement with Key Stakeholders

Following the development of the 'Democra-School' guidance and along with ongoing work with schools, NICCY has been advocating for the formal introduction of school councils and democratic structures in schools. From 2009, NICCY has sought to working strategically with key educational stakeholders towards the introduction of a policy to establish effective democratic structures for pupils in schools across Northern Ireland.

5.1 Engagement with Education Professionals

NICCY has convened several meetings with representatives of the five main teaching unions (NAHT, NASUWT, ATL, INTO, UTU)²¹ to discuss the 'Democra-School' programme and to ascertain their views and experiences of school councils. Each of the Unions expressed their support, in principle, for the 'Democra-School' programme and indicated their willingness to support schools interested in establishing school councils.

²¹ NAHT: National Association of Head Teachers
 NASUWT: National Association of Schoolmasters/Union of Women Teachers
 ATL: Association of Teachers and Lecturers
 INTO: Irish National Teachers' Organisation
 UTU: Ulster Teachers' Union



Discussions at a subsequent meeting with representatives from the teacher unions, academics from the Queen's University Belfast and school principals focused on the perceived role of the Department of Education (DE) in relation to promoting and supporting school councils. Participants proposed that DE be involved at three levels;

- i. *Attitudinal:* There was a perception that DE should play a key role in 'winning the hearts and minds' of education professionals and support staff, especially principals, and in persuading them of the importance and benefits of establishing school councils or other democratic structures in their schools. In terms of practical examples of how this might be achieved, it was suggested that a module addressing the benefits of school councils could be included in the Professional Qualification for Headship (PQH) programme, that presentations on school councils could be delivered at school governor training, and relevant articles could be published in teaching publications.
- ii. *Operational:* Participants noted that any policy on school councils produced by DE should be accompanied by appropriate supporting advice and guidance. It was suggested this should highlight potential challenges as well as benefits. It was also proposed that the Education and Library Boards should have a role in providing advice and support.
- iii. *Legal:* Participants also believed that DE should provide clarity and advice in respect of key legal issues associated with the establishment and maintenance of school councils.

5.2 Engagement with Junior Ministers

Members of NICCY's Youth Panel (NYP) were actively involved in the 'Democra-School' programme from the outset. In June 2009, two NYP members met the then Junior Ministers Kelly and Newton, requesting their support for the establishment of school councils. The junior ministers replied, indicating they were;

'very supportive of structures which provide opportunities for meaningful participation and engagement and we believe that school councils can be a good way of engaging young people in the school environment... We did write to Caitriona Ruane, Minister of Education, drawing your



presentation to her attention. In our letter we highlighted support for school councils and asked her to give careful consideration to the issues you raised.'

5.3 Engagement with the Department of Education

In seeking to ensure that every school has a school council or an appropriate democratic structure in which pupils may participate, NICCY initially considered advocating for the introduction of appropriate legislation. The School Councils (Wales) Regulations, 2005²² made it a statutory requirement for all maintained schools in Wales to have a school council to ensure that the voice of pupils is represented in the development of school policies and procedures. The legislation requires that councils meet at least six times a year and stipulates that the headteacher and governing body must consider any matter communicated to them by the school council.

Whilst a legislative route was initially considered, following discussions with the then Education Minister, Caitriona Ruane, it was considered more expedient to work collaboratively with the Department of Education to support the development of policy guidance for school councils.

DE then endorsed 'Democra-School' Guidance on its website;

"The Department of Education is keen to support all schools in the north of Ireland to establish a School Council using the Democra-School programme designed by the Commissioner for Children and Young People (NICCY). The programme is designed to support and encourage the development of meaningful school councils and the practice of democracy in the school environment."

DE has also made reference to the role, benefits and usefulness of school councils in at least ten policies, circulars and reports²³, including:

- *Pastoral Care in Schools: Promoting positive behaviour*, (2001);
- *School Development Planning*, (2005);
- *Every School A Good School: A policy for school improvement* (2009);
- *Every School a Good School: The Governors' Role*, (2010).

²² <http://www.legislation.gov.uk/wsi/2005/3200/contents/made>

²³ See Appendix 2.



Paragraph 3.2 above also referenced various policies which record the importance of consulting with pupils

To date, NICCY has discussed school councils and appropriate policy guidance with various Education Ministers on three occasions and with Departmental officials on four occasions. In 2010, DE expressed its commitment to move the process forward and requested that NICCY identify important issues which it believed should be addressed in policy guidance produced by DE. In February 2011, DE confirmed that a draft circular of policy guidance had been prepared for internal consultation. Unfortunately, due to the Assembly elections, this process was then delayed. At a meeting with the current Education Minister, John O'Dowd, the Commissioner requested an update on the status of the draft circular. The Minister gave his commitment to review his department's work on the issue of school councils and to update NICCY on his plans.

6.0 Conclusion

NICCY has been working to promote the establishment, development and sustainability of school councils since 2005. This work has encompassed the provision of practical support to schools, the publication of 'Democra-School', ongoing consultation with key education stakeholders and sustained engagement with DE. During this time, there have been positive developments, with the establishment of greater numbers of school councils and more positive and frequent references made to the benefits of pupil participation, consultation with pupils and school councils in DE policies and reports. Key educational stakeholders have also demonstrated their interest and support in 'Democra-School' and expressed a willingness to support the development and work of school councils.

However, while such developments are encouraging, NICCY has been disappointed by delays on the part of the Department of Education to progress the introduction of a policy circular on school councils. NICCY has provided ongoing advice and information to DE to support the development of such a policy however as indicated above, the draft circular is still under review.

The benefits of school councils are widely documented and the feedback from schools who participated in the 'Democra-School' programme provides additional evidence of the positive impact these can have on pupils, teaching



and learning and on relationships in the school community. The UNCRC places an obligation on Government to provide opportunities for children and young people to participate and to have their opinions listened to. NICCY believes that school councils are a valuable mechanism which can help to realise this right for pupils.

School councils are now a legislative requirement in a number of countries and policies supports the provision of school councils in others. NICCY believes that DE should urgently introduce a policy for school councils in order that children and young people in Northern Ireland can have their voices heard and so that they can effectively and meaningfully participate in decision-making in their schools.



Appendix 1

'Democra-School' Programme Timeline of Developments

<i>December 2005</i>	Initial meeting of the 'Democra-School' Steering Group
<i>March 2006</i>	1 st 'Democra-School' Conference, Oxford Island
<i>April 2006 – Jan 2007</i>	Drafting of 'Democra-School' Guidance
<i>February 2007</i>	2 nd Democra-School Conference and launch of 'Democra-School' Guidance by Maria Eagle, direct rule Minister for Education in Northern Ireland
<i>March 2007</i>	'Democra-School' Guidance circulated to every school in Northern Ireland.
<i>April 2007 onwards</i>	NICCY's Participation team promote and facilitate school council workshops in schools.
<i>October 2007</i>	Initial discussion about school councils with Minister of Education, Caitriona Ruane.
<i>February 2009</i>	Further meeting with Minister of Education, Caitriona Ruane.
<i>June 2009</i>	Letter received from Caitriona Ruane supporting voluntary development of school councils and encouraging dialogue with DE officials. Presentation on benefits of school councils by NICCY Youth panel members to Junior Minister Gerry Kelly.
<i>July 2009</i>	Junior Ministers Kelly and Newton wrote to Education Minister stating their support for school councils.



<i>October 2009</i>	1 st meeting with DE officials
<i>November 2009</i>	1 st meeting with ETI officials
<i>February 2010</i>	2 nd meeting with DE Officials
<i>April 2010</i>	1 st meeting with teacher unions (ATL; UTU; INTO; NAHT).
<i>July 2010</i>	2 nd meeting with education unions (UTU, ATL, NAHT, NASUWT).
<i>August 2010</i>	NICCY forwarded 'Desired Outcomes for Young People through the Democra-School Programme' paper to DE. 3 rd meeting with DE officials
<i>November 2010</i>	NICCY forwarded suggested issues for inclusion in Department of Education School Council Policy Guidance.
<i>December 2010</i>	Seminar convened with union representatives, academics and school principals.
<i>February 2011</i>	4 th meeting with DE Officials: DE confirmed a first draft of a policy circular on school councils was in preparation for internal consultation.
<i>August 2011</i>	Meeting with Education Minister John O'Dowd. Minister was broadly supportive of school councils but expressed a desire to review work completed to date.



Appendix 2

Department of Education Publications referencing School Councils and Pupil Consultation/Participation

1. **'Managing Schools during New Build Projects - A Guide for Principals' (2011)**

Page 3: 'Consult with the children e.g. through the **school council**, about what they would like to know about the project.'

2. **Research report on 'Audit of Counselling and Other Therapeutic Interventions in Primary and Special Schools in the North of Ireland' (2009)**

Page 1: 'Research evidence demonstrates that counselling is one of a range of services that help to support the health, emotional and social needs of pupils and lead to a healthy school culture. Other elements could include: Seeking pupils' views through **school councils** and other means'

Page 22: from Table 2.2: Summary of emotional well-being interventions in schools from the literature:

School councils: Effective **school councils** that meet regularly, have trained participants, consult and communicate well and evaluate annually can give elected pupils a voice to represent all pupils and improve their school.

3. **Every School a Good School: A Strategy for Raising Achievement in Literacy and Numeracy (2008)**

From foreword by Education Minister:

'We are sending this booklet to **School Councils** for them to look at and putting it on our website: www.deni.gov.uk.'

4. **Drugs: Guidance for Schools in Northern Ireland (2009)**



Page 9: Involving Pupils

'Some useful examples of methods for involving and consulting with pupils would be, for example, through **school councils**, focus and discussion groups and questionnaires.'

5. **Every School A Good School: A Policy for School Improvement (2009)**

Page 39: 'School Councils offer an important model to support engagement; however the focus has to be on delivering genuine engagement. We do not wish to prescribe the means but rather we want to encourage all schools to find meaningful ways of giving their pupils a voice – and of listening and responding to the views of young people.'

Page 41: DE's goal in relation to promoting engagement between schools and pupils, parents, families and communities;

'To work with schools to **ensure that their pupils are given a voice** in the running of the school and that there are strong and effective links between every school and the parents, families and local communities it serves'.

'In pursuit of this goal we will:

provide a resource to support **school councils** and to encourage all schools to set up councils or other forums to ensure that pupils have a voice in decisions on the running of the school'.

Page 56: Timescale for this: 'Resource for **school councils** to be commissioned and completed by end 2010'.

6. **Research Report on 'Good Practice in Literacy and Numeracy in British and Irish Cities where the level of Social Deprivation is comparable to, or worse than, Belfast' (2008)**

Page 11: At a school-level, consideration should be given to...

- Strengthening ways of working with parents as partners in all phases through, for example, parent/student workshops, family literacy and numeracy learning activities, **school councils** and surveys.



7. **Research briefing: Out of School Hours Learning Provision and School Improvement in Northern Ireland (2004)**

Page 11: The following factors are broadly seen as presenting opportunity for provision:

- Pupil interest: the majority of principals agreed on the importance of pupil interest. Suggested ways to increase pupil interest included:
 - pupil consultation;
 - pupil involvement, e.g. via **school council**.

8. **Pastoral Care in Schools: Promoting Positive Behaviour (2001)**

Page 40: Policy Review:

Page 64: Where weaknesses are found, a review will be necessary. All of the staff, teaching and non-teaching, and the pupils and Governors, should contribute to this review. Pupils can be consulted, for example, through **School Councils**, or in Circle Time or PSE lessons. Where significant changes are contemplated, parents should also be consulted, and, in any event, should be consulted periodically (say every 3 years).

9. **School Development Planning (2005)**

Page 6: Consultation and Involvement

(c) Pupils, irrespective of age, will have likes/dislikes that will inform the plan positively, they will have their own views on, for example, after-school provision, the organisation of their day, homework, uniform, lunch facilities. Older pupils can be expected also to have views on issues such as curricular choices, careers education and guidance and enrichment courses/activities.

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. Consultation can be organised in a variety of ways, such as:

- by speaking directly with the pupils;
- the establishment of a **School Council**



10. Every School a Good School - The Governors' Role (2010)

This provides school governors with details of their roles and responsibilities including establishing a **school council**:

'Many schools have established **school councils** as a way to enable pupils to express their views and promote issues such as anti-bullying, healthy eating and healthy lifestyles which affect them and their environment. DE considers 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.'

The Board of Governors is encouraged to support this development in its own school. 'Guidance on the establishment and operation of **school councils** has been issued by the NI Commissioner for Children and Young People.'

