

Note of meeting between members education and Culture Committee and Board members Scottish Parent Teacher Council

Edinburgh 7 November 2015.

Present: **Stewart Maxwell MSP**
 Mary Scanlon MSP
 Gordon MacDonald MSP
 7 Board members SPTC
 Eileen Prior SPTC

The meeting was arranged as part of the Committee's ongoing work considering Education budget in schools as well as the work looking at Attainment both in terms of the inquiry and the education (Scotland) Bill.

Members were keen to hear from the SPTC about their experiences both at the schools in which they are attached and more widely. In particular the impact on schools of the above and ways in which parents (and school councils) can be engaged.

Fundraising and other value/role of PTC

SPTC members indicated parents are often seen as "cash cows", in some schools raising up to £15-£25k annually to purchase equipment and other items. This can cushion the effects of budgetary restraint in those schools (mainly in affluent areas) and can thus widen the gap between schools.

In Aberdeenshire some PCs seek grants to bridge the gaps in schools, drawing on parental expertise and targeting oil companies, local industry and parents. This is full time work, completing forms and sourcing applications.

The SPTC are keen to widen representation on PC's and reach out to all parents and Government are considering how best to explain to parents their role and powers available to them. PCs are now involved in wider issues than previously and schools are beginning to see the value of parental involvement. While SPTC do not actively partner up schools in terms of learning from PC's they do seek to bring parent members together.

Engagement

In Edinburgh engagement was considered good with attempts by the authority to engage and listen to PCs. In addition there is a parent representative on the council Education committee. This was not a universal position across the country notwithstanding the Parent Involvement Act. Many parents have little or no knowledge of the legislation, a common comment when advised of their rights to be involved and consulted being "I didn't know we were allowed to do that". Members queried the roles of LA's and Education Scotland in this regard.

It was noted head teachers set the ethos around engagement and whether it is supported or not. But not all heads want to engage with PC's.

Teacher education generally covers engagement with parents in a very limited way, eg one optional lecture. It was also noted one of the areas cut by LA's was parent officers, either jobs were removed or amalgamated with other roles. This aspect is only seen when crisis develop.

It was noted that attempts to close schools are guaranteed to engage parents, but in such circumstances the trust has inevitably gone with the authority.. SPTC members recognised educational value could be improved by closure in certain circumstances.

There was a need to get parents involved at the nursery level, allowing them to be closely involved and developing an ethos of "our school/your school", a more collegiate and partnership approach.

Over the piece parents were being seen as consumers and not participating partners. Finally is it time to review the format and operation of parent nights, they have been unchanged for many many years.

Staffing and budgetary cuts

Across Scotland education budgets had been cut to the bone, no further scope for reductions other than in teacher numbers in most areas.

Limited discretion exists with head teachers over budgets, with utilities and other aspects controlled centrally. In effect many control little more than the "paper clip" budget. Even when the PC raises funds purchases require to be made through central contracts, often at higher rates.

In Fife it was suggested any in-house savings made were recouped by the LA which reduces the incentive for innovation and effort. It was also suggested a head teacher cannot carry money forward between budget years as it would simply be clawed back.

Attainment

Difficulties are more than poverty they are around equity, a societal gap exists. It was noted a gap exists by the start of P1. The change required must be to family learning, educating families (parents) noting all parents want the best for their children. Other significant factors noted were the reductions in antenatal classes which (can) operate as informal support networks.

A major influence in attainment is the aspiration of parents, those with money/influence have advantages. Important to identify why the situation is now worse than 30-40 years ago. A radical approach is required noting that all (recent) policies to improve educational attainment widen the gap (this it was suggested was because the take up is higher at the top end).

It was noted the key role that career advisor teachers can play here and also observed that achievements, other than just exams, require to be recognised.

National Testing

SPTC members were unsure about the purpose of the policy and whether it was about the Government showing an improvement or to improve learning for each child by identifying individual difficulties and improving consistency across the board. If the rationale was the former they wondered whether it would be preferable to sample nationally rather than test all. If the latter it was observed teachers were best placed to assess and would already be in possession of that information.

They further wondered about the outcomes for children with the proposed policy and it was noted the purpose was not being communicated well. Feedback from tests required to be constructive and useful to the child, their parents and the teacher if the policy was to lead to improvements.

Overall there was doubt that teachers were not being trusted with the learning process.

David Cullum
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