

Media Release

28/04/2010

Pupil councils: laboratories of democracy or lip service? New Scottish research points the way to better pupil participation

Effective pupil councils have lots of untapped potential to improve school life – and realising their potential needn't cost much money, according to new research published today by Children in Scotland and the University of Edinburgh.

Having a Say at School (HASAS), the largest Scottish study of pupil councils ever undertaken, identifies ways to boost pupil council effectiveness including establishing a fair process for selecting representatives, enhancing good two-way communication, and ensuring continuity from year to year – with the biggest influence on success being the attitude of staff and adult advisors.

The study provides the first evidence ever on the realities of pupil councils nationwide, and is based on research in every secondary, independent and special school in Scotland, a large sample of primary schools, and all 32 local authorities. It was conducted by Children in Scotland in partnership with the University of Edinburgh's Centre for Research on Families and Relationships.

Results show pupil councils differ in how they are set up and run, but that they can be a vital link in the chain of decision making within a school, giving students a real voice in improving school life. Briefings on the report findings are available via the weblink below and the results will be communicated to pupils next week in a comic book being sent to every school in Scotland.

Tam Baillie, Scotland's Commissioner on Children and Young People, said: "Giving children a voice on matters affecting them, and encouraging them to speak up, is a crucial factor in ensuring their rights are respected. While we know they vary in terms of influence, pupil councils are one way that children can learn to articulate their thoughts, opinions, judgements and feelings, so that they are participants rather than pawns in the education system."

Keir Bloomer, Vice Convener of Children in Scotland, said: "One of the key aspects of Curriculum for Excellence is the active engagement of young people in their own learning. Partly this is about involving them in assessing their own progress and making decisions about their next steps. However, it is also about developing responsible citizens who play a critical role in the life of their school. Pupil councils have a vital part to play in this."

Notes to Editors

1. **The following lessons emerged on what effective highly regarded pupil councils have in common:**
 - The process by which students become pupil councillors is widely viewed as fair and reasonable
 - Adequate training and preparation are provided to pupil councillors and their adult advisors
 - Adult advisors engage with, and support, pupil councillors, but do not dominate
 - Good communication and collaboration exists between the pupil council and the headteacher or other adult decision-makers
 - Pupil councillors see themselves, and act, as representatives for their fellow students
 - Effective two-way communication is routine between council members and classmates
 - Pupil councillors work well together to set significant but realistic goals, decide priorities, make plans and take action
 - Adequate tools and resources (including funds) are available to conduct their work
 - They meet enough and for long enough periods to be able to deliver on all of the above; and
 - There is continuity and/or effective handover from year to year, instead of each pupil council having to start from scratch.
2. Schools are required to take students' views into account in decisions affecting them under the Standards in Scotland's Schools Act 2000. Although pupil councils are not mandatory, around 90% of Scottish schools currently have them.
3. More information about *Having a Say at School*, including five briefing documents on the research, can be found at www.havingasayatschool.org.uk or by calling Tracey Francis on 0131 222 2419.
4. *Having a Say at School* is based on more than 1000 responses including separate questionnaires to pupil councils, schools and education authorities. Six diverse pupil councils were also examined more closely through observation, interviews and additional surveys. The research was funded by the Big Lottery Research Fund and conducted between 2007 and 2009 by Kay Tisdall and Sue Milne at the University of Edinburgh and Fungi Gwanzura-Ottemoller and Jonathan Sher at Children in Scotland.
5. **Children in Scotland** is the longstanding national agency for the whole of the children's sector, reaching over 250,000 individuals through our extensive membership of more than 450 statutory agencies, voluntary sector organisations, professional associations and community groups. For further information visit www.childreninscotland.org.uk.

For more information contact Tracey Francis at tfrancis@childreninscotland.org.uk or call 0131 222 2419