

**CONSULTATION WITH YOUNG
PEOPLE AND PARENTS ON
INFLUENCING SCHOOL POLICIES**

CCMS POSITION PAPER



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1.0 INTRODUCTION

- 1.1 In seeking to address the matter of consultation with pupils and parents on influencing school policies, it is important to consider how such an issue fits into the overall view of education as espoused by the Catholic Maintained Sector.
- 1.2 Catholic schools exist in response to identified need and parental demand and as a consequence the need for schools to involve pupils and parents fully in the life of the school takes on greater significance. The Council for Catholic Maintained Schools (CCMS), in articulating the philosophy and ethos of Catholic education has a long standing commitment to the ideal of meaningful consultation with pupils and parents. This is wholly in keeping with the Council's obligation, articulated in its Business Plan, to promote the value of education. In promoting Catholic education, CCMS endeavours to ensure that the curriculum provided in Catholic schools contributes to the spiritual, moral, social, physical and academic development of each individual student.
- 1.3 It is against this backdrop that the Council considers the issue of consultation with pupils and parents on influencing not only school policy but the broader life of the school as a vibrant, faith-based community.

2.0 THE PROCESS OF EDUCATION

- 2.1 The Christian ideal of education contains the core values of respect for diversity, the common good, truth and justice. Education is not simply an economic, social or political activity but a moral one which takes place in communities, the home, the school, the parish and the locality and which has at its heart, the twin notions of the fundamental worth of each person and the higher common good to which each belongs and through which each expresses his/her common humanity.
- 2.2 Catholic schools should help form young people who see themselves as communal beings equipped to live in harmony with others and should empower those same young people to realise their full dignity as persons in relationship not only with their neighbour but also with God. This commitment to a universal concern for and identification with others represents the distinctiveness of Catholic education.

- 2.3 The goal of Catholic education must therefore be, above all else, the formation of the student. While the needs of society, the economy and the wider world must be catered for, it should not be at the expense of the personal needs of the young person. It is the young people themselves who are best placed to identify their needs and to offer suggestions on how best to address and meet them. Therein lies the necessity for meaningful consultation.
- 2.4 The school's commitment to consultation with pupils and parents is determined by the overall vision for the school and how the school sees the role and purpose of education. In its Mission Statement, a Catholic school must articulate a vision for the school which is influenced by and shared with the entire school community and which reinforces the position of the pupil who is at the centre of the education process. That being the case, meaningful consultation with pupils and parents takes on greater importance and significance. In the best practice it promotes inclusion and membership of the whole school community.

3.0 RIGHTS WITH RESPONSIBILITIES.

- 3.1 The Council subscribes to a vision of the future where young people are able to enjoy themselves, realise their potential and participate as full and active citizens in a secure and peaceful society.
- 3.2 Active participation by young people in such a society involves recognition of the fact that they have rights and responsibilities and that those will be protected and promoted in an environment where they can feel valued, understood, involved, safe and supported. Herein lies a major challenge for schools and teachers because we must recognise that the individual's entitlement to rights is not dependant on that individual's acceptance and fulfilment of his/her responsibilities. Rights are an entitlement in themselves and we cannot deny the individual his or her rights because they fail to accept their responsibilities.
- 3.3 Recognising that rights are an entitlement does not however, give the individual licence to abdicate accompanying responsibilities. The challenge for any education system, but especially Catholic education, is to develop in individual pupils an acceptance of their responsibilities and the contribution they can make to "the common good".
- 3.4 The entitlement of the child or young person to be actively involved in determining the nature of the educational process is clearly enshrined in Articles 12 and 13 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child which states;

“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, the views of the child being given due weight in accordance with the age and maturity of the child.” (Article 12)

and

“ 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, regardless of frontiers, either orally, in writing or in print, in the form of art, or through any other media of the child’s choice.” (Article 13)

In recognising that the school climate is characterised largely by the quality of relationships within the school and that everyone’s contribution to the life of the school community should be sought, valued and appreciated, the Council accepts the validity of the rights enshrined within the UN Convention and would encourage schools to explore ways of ensuring those rights are accorded to pupils. The challenge for schools is once again significant.

- 3.5 A key element of the challenge revolves around the nature of power. To actively engage pupils, they must feel that the topics to which they can contribute are significant and that those who are listening will actually hear what is being said and, where possible, act upon it. If pupils, however, wish to effect change through new found power, which comes through meaningful consultation, they must be ready to accept responsibility for their contributions to the process.
- 3.6 To what degree, however, do teachers have the power to initiate change? If teachers are to listen to and act upon suggestions which come from consultation with either pupils or parents can they do so if their own voices remain unheard? This in itself raises an entirely separate but related issue, which impacts on a successful approach to meaningful consultation with pupils.

4.0 CONSULTATION WITH YOUNG PEOPLE

- 4.1 If education is to have any hope of success in preparing young people to play an active role as a citizen in a democratic society, then the necessary learning in school must be at least in part, experiential. For this to happen, schools have to become more democratic than they currently are in the everyday lived experiences of their students. The responsibility of committing to a democratic society does not only lie with schools, however. Society at large and communities at a more local level must also strive to model the democratic ideal. To do otherwise makes the task faced by our schools all the more difficult. By modelling democratic values and inviting pupils to take part in shaping school life, schools are more likely to encourage their pupils to become more involved in society generally. This ethos of democratic participation also results in enhanced learning across the curriculum, especially when the participation includes decision making about what is to be learned, how, when and with whom.

- 4.2 Consultation with pupils will of course vary according to the age and degree of maturity of the pupils. But pupils do have the right to be consulted on matters of school life that affect them. Pupil views can often make a significant contribution to the development of school policies and policies to which pupils feel they have made a meaningful contribution are more likely to be better understood and more easily implemented. It would also be the hope that the consultation process in itself would contribute to the building up of positive relationships within the school.
- 4.3 There already exist many examples of good practice in the area of pupil consultation. Appendix 1 provides a number of statements for schools to consider in evaluating their own commitment to pupil consultation. At post-primary and increasingly at primary level, the development of student councils is a fine example of consultation in practice and has contributed significantly to pupil participation in the decision making process within schools. The student council is one way of implementing Article 12 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child but can only be successful if it springs from a deep belief in the right of young people to have a voice, a belief which must be held at school leadership level.
- 4.4 Those schools which operate successful student councils do not attempt to restrict what can be discussed by negotiating and establishing sensible and agreed guidelines in advance. This ensures that the deeply felt desire of many young people to be included in decision making does not fall foul of scepticism as to the extent to which their views will be genuinely considered. Meaningful participation in school councils is something which must be taught and in those schools which exhibit best practice there is considerable time and effort spent on educating the children in the purpose of a school council and how to contribute effectively to it.
- 4.5 Council fully accepts that young people have the right to participate actively in decisions that may affect their lives and recognises the valuable contribution that student councils, when representative of all pupils, have made to this process. It is vitally important that schools ensure, however, that while increasing the opportunity for pupils to engage in the decision making process, the student council will only succeed if engagement is meaningful and pupils see that they have a realistic chance of influencing substantial aspects of school policy. Otherwise disillusionment and disengagement from the process will occur.
- 4.6 Schools need to be acutely aware of the obligation they have to develop the capacity of young people to participate in a fair and inclusive society throughout their lifetime. Many young people feel that they are not listened to and a growing sense of disillusionment and feeling of lack of involvement is resulting in a generation progressively turning its back on participation in society and the democratic process. In some instances this attitude manifests itself within schools

where young people feel they are still treated “like children”. It is important that in this regard schools realise that young people have perhaps changed more in the last 20 years than schools have. Schools are in a “catch-up” situation and must endeavour, through engagement with young people, to model the democratic, tolerant, participative societies they would wish to see developing locally and in the wider world.

- 4.7 Council accepts that this is a major challenge for schools but is confident that the capacity is there to rise to that challenge. Aspects of the new NI Curriculum – Personal Development, Learning for Life and Work, Local and Global Citizenship will assist in the development within young people of the capacity to participate in a fair and inclusive society throughout their lifetime.

5.0 CONSULTATION WITH PARENTS

- 5.1 Consultation with parents is an essential element in the development of the school as a living community and continues to play a key role in promoting a culture of co-operation between parents and schools. Catholic education has always focussed on the indissoluble link between the home, school and parish (community). In some communities the strength of that link has diminished in recent years and this places greater pressure on the school which might sometimes be viewed negatively by parents, particularly if they themselves had a poor educational experience. Council firmly believes, therefore that teachers should actively seek to work with parents in a meaningful way and value the contribution they make to the life of the school and the education of their children. Parents are partners in the education of their children and this is something which must be evident in practice in our schools.

- 5.2 Every school has an obligation to liaise with parents in a way which makes them more conscious of their role and responsibility but in a manner which is neither preaching nor patronising. Such an approach helps establish healthy partnerships. Appendix 2 presents a number of statements against which the school can measure its commitment to consultation with parents. In one area in particular, policy development, it is more likely that parents will respond positively if they understand the rationale for particular policies and feel that they have been given the opportunity to contribute to their development. Such positive engagement can contribute also to parental confidence and self-esteem, leading eventually to increased participation in the education of their children.

- 5.3 Council recognises the many examples of good practice within the education system of consultation with parents, from the letter to parents inviting contributions on a particular topic, through the use of questionnaires and on to the organisation of workshops with parents, under the direction of school staff and Governors, which look at policy development. Such work, while respecting the differing needs of parents, pupils and the school community gives all parties the opportunity to express differing viewpoints and contributes to further

strengthening the distinctive partnership which exists between the home and the school. Council is convinced that further progress in this area will result as staff and parents become more acutely aware of their respective roles and more confident in the contribution they play together to the education process. From a Governor's perspective, while there is no longer a requirement to report annually to parents, Council hopes that Governors will continue to use the concept of an annual parents/Governors meeting in a format designed to meet the particular objectives set by the school in order to maintain meaningful contact with the parent body.

- 5.4 Parents are the first educators of their children and should not abdicate this responsibility to the school. It is important therefore, that they recognise the responsibility they have to contribute to the on-going education of their children while they are at school. Schools must also recognise the knowledge that parents have of their children and draw on that knowledge to ensure the child grows and develops to become a valued member of the school community and society at large. The development of healthy working relationships between the parents and the school contribute greatly to this process. Council believes that in order to win the support of parents their views must be sought and their contribution to the life of the school recognised and acknowledged. Meaningful and sustained consultation with parents is an essential element in attaining this goal.

6.0 CONCLUSION

- 6.1 The purpose of education is to enable pupils to realise their full potential and to awaken in them a sense of their dignity and worth. How schools approach their work with young people should therefore not lead to situations where those same young people feel powerless in relation to many aspects of their own lives. The principle of seeking and taking account of the views of the child or young person is an important one. It is also a key element of learning. In view also of the key role parents play in the education of their children, seeking and taking account of their views is also an essential aspect of school life today.
- 6.2 In future years, the development and implementation of the Pupil Profile, while being primarily teacher driven, will provide considerable opportunities for schools to develop more fully a process of meaningful consultation with both parents and pupils. The purpose of the Pupil Profile is to reflect each child's individual progress and achievement every year, as well as help support and inform decisions made throughout their school education. It is clear that in the early years the role of parents in this process may outweigh that of the pupil but as the child grows and matures, his/her level of involvement will increase to the point where in Key Stage 3 and 4 the pupil will contribute significantly to the content of the Pupil Profile. Initial piloting of the Pupil Profile has resulted in some very positive feedback. The various formats currently under consideration provide ample opportunity, in the section entitled "*Focus for Development*", for teachers and parents to work closely together in order to help the child make further improvements.

- 6.3 At Key Stages 3 and 4 the development of the Pupil Progress File, pupil driven as opposed to teacher driven, will surely lead to greater consultation between teacher, pupil and parent on aspects of the child's educational progress and consideration of future options. The Progress File is designed to help young people and adults manage their own learning and career path by supporting individuals in reviewing and planning their development and recording their achievements. Those schools which seek now to develop positive relationships with pupils and parents will be best placed to take full advantage of the possibilities presented in future by the Pupil Progress File.
- 6.4 Exemplars of Pupil Profiles and Progress Files have been trialled with great success in a number of schools. They provide a variety of opportunities for teachers, parents and pupils to work together to provide an accurate picture of an individual pupil's progress in relation to skills, capabilities and strengths. In addition, opportunities are provided to comment on pupil interests and areas for further personal development. It can only be through effective consultation with parents and pupils that this profiling of individual pupils will become an efficient, meaningful and fit for purpose tool.
- 6.5 Ultimately, the aim of the educator must not only be to guide children towards academic attainment but to enable them to take up roles of participation, responsibility and leadership in society. Council earnestly believes that when schools seek to actively involve young people, to teach democracy in a democratic environment, the benefits are not only to society but to the young people themselves in terms of increased self-confidence and the development of transferable skills. The longer-term impact of consultation with both pupils and parents will depend on the extent to which teachers and school leaders are able to build processes and the development of relationships into their regular practice.

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APPENDIX 1

Pupils must become aware of and involved in the school community if they are to contribute to its growth and that of themselves as individuals. To live in the school community without having the opportunity to actively take part will lead to pupils believing they have no contribution to make to its direction.

Hence, the school which seeks to consult with pupils must aim to:-

1. Provide a clear mission statement describing the vision and core values of the school and the importance it attaches to active pupil participation in the life of the school.
2. Use a variety of techniques e.g. questionnaires, discussions, interviews, student councils, to engage with pupils on a range of topics relevant to their participation in the life of the school.
3. Take seriously the views of pupils and explain any consultation process to them.
4. Offer feedback to pupils in a constructive manner which indicates that their views are valued.
5. Develop in pupils a positive sense of themselves as learners.
6. Discuss learning strategies with pupils.
7. Encourage pupils to become more independent and take responsibility for their learning.
8. Give pupils the opportunity to evaluate their own learning and the content of lessons.
9. Operate in a climate of trust that allows teachers and pupils to review their work together openly and constructively.
10. Include all pupils in the consultation process, providing opportunities for dialogue and support to those who may find participation in the process difficult.
10. Engage meaningfully with pupils in completing the Pupil Profile and Pupil Progress File.

APPENDIX 2

Central to any consultation process with parents, is the manner in which communication takes place. The essence of good consultation is that it is a two way process in which each participant attends to what the other is saying. The school which is committed to effective consultation with parents must aim to:-

1. Provide a clear mission statement describing the vision and core values of the school and the importance it attaches to active parent participation in the life of the school.
2. Work with parents in developing ways in which they can contribute to their child's education.
3. Report to and communicate with parents in a manner which is understood by all parents.
4. Provide opportunities, e.g. letters, questionnaires, consultation meetings, for parents to contribute to and comment on aspects of school life including the development of policies.
5. Receive as well as give information.
6. Ensure, as far as is possible, that **all** parents are seen to be given the opportunity to participate in the consultation process.
7. Create a climate in which parents feel able to contribute constructively to consultation processes.
8. Ensure education is experienced as a partnership between the school, parents, parish and local community.
9. Engage meaningfully with parents in the process of completing the Pupil Profile and Pupil Progress File.
10. Communicate on a regular basis, at Board of Governor level, with parents and use this as an opportunity to consult productively with parents on issues affecting the life of the school.

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