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All change?

*Fresh look, relevant content, same vital resource*

We’re printing Backchat just as you are heading to the polling stations, so by the time you receive this you will know which party (or parties) will be forming the next government.

Whoever the Cabinet Secretary for Education is, they have some major challenges coming up.

The reports from two recent reviews – Donaldson (teacher education) and Cameron (devolved school management) – now need to be taken forward. (There is more elsewhere in Backchat on these two reviews.)

The McCormac Review of teachers’ terms and conditions is underway and expected to deliver its report in the summer.

And meanwhile the current negotiations on teacher pay seem to have hit a wall – which may lead to strike action in schools.
All this is set against the continuing pressure on budgets at local authority level, causing many parents across the country real worries as councils look for ways to cut costs in education services.

Of most concern to us is the way some councils are treating consultation with parents as optional, rather than something which should be central to their planning: we raise this issue whenever we can and with anyone who will listen – and we’ll keep on doing that. Unfortunately we don’t expect improvement any time soon.

We are always very interested to hear from members about their experiences – please let us know what’s happening in your area, whether it’s good or bad.

On a lighter note, we now have almost 300 members in Parents’ Voice, our email survey group. Let us know if you are interested in joining their ranks! You’ll receive no more than one email a month and all your details will be kept confidential.

During April and May we are running surveys on Curriculum for Excellence and the new exam structure and will shortly analyse the results.

We want to know how you feel about the changes, the information you are receiving, and whether you understand what’s happening in your schools.

On the subject of qualifications, you’ll find with this issue a copy of the SQA’s latest leaflet for parents (mentioned in the last Backchat), designed to answer your questions.

We’ve also included a flyer from the Times Educational Supplement Scotland, offering parents a special subscription rate. Hopefully it’s of interest to some of you.

Till next time.

Curriculum for Excellence – perspective

Curriculum for Excellence continues to develop at different rates and in different ways around the country: reports we receive from parents and carers are varied but generally tell a story of greater understanding and satisfaction in the primary sector than in secondary.

However, there are two critical areas we know you have concerns about: assessment and reporting on progress, and the new qualifications structure – which is still being developed and will be the exams current S1s sit in 2014.

Parents and carers – and of course teachers too – have become very accustomed over the years to the assessment system used under the 5 – 14 Curriculum. After so many years it is hardly surprising that assessing young peoples’ achievements under CfE has created some angst and head-scratching all round.

However, the message we receive is that in some areas assessment is not happening (and neither is S1 parents’ night!) and teachers are privately saying they don’t know how to assess progress under CfE. We also understand some local authorities are asking teachers to continue using 5 – 14 assessment techniques which are no longer relevant.

Teachers are now being asked to define whether a young person is Developing, Consolidating or Secure in the various aspects of their learning – a concept many are struggling with.
The Government has launched a National Assessment Resource (NAR), an online information bank to help guide teachers through the process, though the feedback we have seen from teachers is variable and the resource seems quite limited.

We’re keen to hear from you about your experiences of assessment – do you feel you have been kept well informed about your youngster’s progress and understand the new system? Are your children’s teachers confident in what they are doing? Are your children involved and do they understand what’s happening?

The new qualifications – particularly the new National 4 and 5 – continue to be developed ahead of their introduction in 2014. The pace of this development and the thorny issue of number and range of subjects continue to come up regularly. Look out for the SQA’s Guide for Parents, which has been written to answer your questions and is enclosed with this issue of Backchat.

About Kinship Carers

The government recently announced a new national testing and support service for kinship carers, to be run by Children 1st.

There’s a growing awareness of the fact that many children and young people are cared for by family members (or friends) other than their parents: and often these kinship carers struggle for the support they need.

Many of the children they look after are particularly vulnerable and so the carers often find themselves having to work with social services, NHS and schools to ensure the youngster is properly supported.

Often the caring relationship is informal and so kinship carers can meet challenges when trying to negotiate support for the child, or when dealing with his or her school.

The new service will offer a range of support, training and advice to kinship carers to help them and the children they care for – often in difficult and challenging circumstances.

SPTC Membership Renewals for PCs: coming soon

Individual Parent Councils – those which are not members through their local authority – should look out for the Membership Renewal Notice which will be winging its way to you in about a month’s time.

As yet we don’t know what the membership fee for 2011 - 12 will be, but rest assured we will always offer our members the very best value. Don’t forget that SPTC membership gives you a wide range of benefits:

- Comprehensive and low cost insurance, covering almost everything parent groups can dream up. It also covers the organisation’s cash after an event and financial loss due to dishonesty
- You can add further all risks insurance at a small cost to cover high value events like fashion shows, or expensive equipment you buy for your school
- If you do have to make a claim on your insurance, we guide you every step of the way
- SPTC staff are available at the end of the phone or by email to answer your queries about education issues or help you resolve problems
- We organise a range of information sessions for parent groups – tell us what interests you and we’ll try to come to your area

*SPTC is a company limited by guarantee. Company No. SC151086, Scottish Charity No. SC019168*
You'll receive Backchat by email or post six times each year. We try to make it current and interesting – if there is something in particular you would like us to cover, just let us know.

We hold a conference every year on a topic of interest to parents – look out for news of our next event (November) in the next issue of Backchat.

We share parents’ perspectives on different issues and gather information through our surveys.

The Board of SPTC is made up of parents and teachers – if you would be interested in getting involved at a national level and bringing your perspective to SPTC, you can be nominated by other parents at your child’s school.

Bullying – What can I do?

Bullying … What can I do? is a new publication available from the Scottish anti-bullying service, respectme. The leaflet provides advice for children and young people to help them understand what bullying is, why people do it, and what they can do to keep themselves safe and well. It also provides information on where to go for more information or support.

Unfortunately bullying is an issue which never seems to go away but creates a huge amount of anxiety – and worse – for young people and for their parents and carers, who want to help but often don’t know how.

respectme is first and foremost an organization which provides information and training to professionals working with those being bullied: young people themselves have previously been directed to ChildLine for support.

We’re pleased to see respectme is recognizing that young people need more than an advice line.

Parents and carers may also find the leaflet and the list of contacts helpful. Remember that every school should have measures in place to address bullying: if the youngster you are concerned about doesn’t get the help they need, be persistent: go back to the schools and if that doesn’t lead to results, contact the Parent Officer or Complaints Officer at your local authority.

Always remember bullying is never about the young person being bullied – the issue is with those doing the bullying and the remedy is always to change their behaviour.

Unfortunately there is rarely a quick solution, but that doesn’t mean nothing can be done.

Education Reviews – It’s all happening!

The first half of 2011 is a busy time for reviews of different aspects of education: you may have read about the Donaldson review, which was published early in 2011. Conducted by former HMIE Chief Inspector Graham Donaldson, it looked specifically at teacher education and whether it needs to change to meet the needs of our education system in the 21st century.

The Donaldson Review (you can read it at SPTC is a company limited by guarantee. Company No. SC151086, Scottish Charity No. SC019168.)
(www.scotland.gov.uk/Publications/2011/01/13092132/0) goes into great detail about the challenges facing teaching and puts forward a range of recommendations designed to move the profession up a gear.

Much of the review will be of interest to parents but there are a few recommendations which we think are particularly relevant: the establishment of Hub schools where probationary teachers will be placed; placements should include more experience in relation to working with parents and other professionals; CPD should be planned and evaluated more directly on its impact on young people’s progress and achievement.

While there was a response published by the government before Parliament broke up, the next step is for the next government to put forward specific proposals on how its addresses the findings.

Another report – commissioned by the government and delivered in short time – was by David Cameron, former Director of Education and a major figure in the development of Curriculum for Excellence.

Cameron’s Review looked at devolved school management and considered whether the push for more power to be shifted to headteachers is justified and achievable.

The findings of the report broadly support the ideas and recommend changes to school funding, including cluster level management of budgets and a national formula for the distribution of money to schools.

Underway at the moment is the McCormac Review, which is looking at teacher pay and conditions. There has been a wide consultation and SPTC has made a submission to ensure the perspective of parents is part of the committee’s considerations. Key points we made are:

- Generally, parents feel teachers’ terms and conditions are good and there is unlikely to be support for any enhancement.
- The quality of CPD offered to teachers can be variable and may not have clear objectives in term of improving outcomes for young people.
- There is a need to look at different ways of providing good quality CPD but within limited budgets.
- The system of appraisal which is supposed to support and direct teachers in their career is not working properly.
- Support staff in schools are important because they free up teachers for teaching and contribute significantly to the school community, but we know parents are concerned that support assistants sometimes act as teachers or that they are poorly managed and led.
- If the Chartered Teacher scheme is to continue, those who go through it need to be recognized for the skills they bring to the school.
- Teachers need to take responsibility for their own career development and this in turn must be supported by their employers.

The McCormac review is part of major review of teacher terms and conditions announced by the government earlier this year and is seen by many as part of an assault on the wider education service.

16+ Learning Choices – a quick guide

For parents of secondary school pupils, the options available to them as they move towards the magic age of 16 always cause concern. 16+ Learning Choices is a government commitment linked to CfE, which guarantees the offer of a place in post-16 learning for every eligible young person who wants it.
16+ Learning Choices should mean an offer of post-16 learning well in advance of the youngster's school leaving date and before leaving the senior phase at school. The offer should be personalized and reflect the young person's needs and aspirations.

Perhaps most significantly, the scheme brings together the different bodies who might be involved in helping a young person – school, college, community learning and development, social work – particularly focusing on those who are most vulnerable. It also specifically addresses the need for the right financial supports.

JOIN IN WITH THE BIG LUNCH

Here’s an idea for a great social and fundraising event – The Big Lunch. It’s been an annual event since 2009 and is led by the Eden Project.

It is a simple idea; the aim is to get as many people as possible to have lunch with their neighbours and friends for a few hours of fun and community spirit. In difficult times, it’s a great way to give everyone a boost.

This year’s event takes place on Sunday 5th June and a big lunch can be held anywhere – in the garden, on the street, in a park or at a school. It could be a great way to show off your school to the wider community – local families, older residents, those that may be suffering from isolation, local businesses – and who knows they may be more willing to support your events in the future.

You could have an international theme if you want, or have a barbeque or simply a sandwich lunch – get as many people involved as you can, both to bring and eat the food!

If you would like to register to join in the the Big Lunch, go to www.thebiglunch.com
You will then receive an Organiser Pack with everything you will need to start planning your event; from recipe ideas and leaflets to stickers and posters.

Commissioner reports on his RIGHT blether

You may remember last year that we told you about the Commissioner for Children and Young People and his consultation called a RIGHT blether.

It provided an opportunity for children and young people across Scotland to say what was important in their lives, in the home, where they learn, in the community and in Scotland. In all there were 75,059 votes cast.

You can read the whole report at www.sccyp.org.uk/publications/adults/blether The results are broken down by age and also by local authority area, but we’re simply giving you the most voted for option in each of the categories:

- 53% want help to be safe and secure in their own homes
- 43% want the same chances in education, no matter how much money their families have
- 42% want to feel safe and secure in their own community
- 37% want everyone to include each other in Scotland, no matter how different
Interestingly, only 24% of those who voted had heard about the Commissioner beforehand, and 44% had heard about the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, which is to be a cornerstone of the Commissioner’s work into the future.

FINANCIAL EDUCATION PARTNERSHIP

Financial Education Partnership (FEP) is an initiative that offers workshops on financial capability and employment skills in schools and colleges across Scotland.

The service is at no cost to schools – it’s funded by a number of financial services organisations and is delivered by a team of volunteers.

The workshops cover such things as managing your money, sensible borrowing, setting up your own business, time management and effective interview skills.

FEP is keen to involve parents’ groups in delivering these workshops so, if you would like more information email: fep@charterbanker.com or telephone 0131 473 7773.

Move to Ensure Teachers keep Skills Updated

As you might know the governing body for teachers, the General Teaching Council for Scotland, becomes independent of government next year – the first body of its kind in the world to do so.

As part of this, the government has given GTCS the responsibility of setting up a process – provisionally called Professional Update – which will see teachers being required to keep their skills up to date through training and development.

It’s put forward as a move which will benefit teachers and put them on a par with other professionals such as doctors and lawyers, who have to demonstrate that they have completed defined hours of training.

It’s not without controversy – some teachers believe it undermines their professionalism and that it is a back-door way of pushing struggling teachers into the competence process.

Whatever view is correct, GTCS is working on how the system is designed and introduced – watch this space.