

# A Voice for Parents

*"Trust schools must establish a Parent Council where the Trust appoints the majority of the governing body. All schools are encouraged to establish some sort of parent forum or council, as part of their duty to have regard to parents' views."*

The above is an extract from the "Guidance to Governing Bodies on Setting up a Parent Council" which was issued in January 2007 by the Department of Education and Skills as part of the implementation of the 2006 Education and Inspections Act.

## Introduction

The Campaign for State Education has lobbied for many years for there to be Parent Councils to provide accountability to parents for their children's schools. CASE welcomes the support for Parent Councils in the Education and Inspections Act 2006 and we believe it will help parents who want a Parent Council in their school. However, we want to see all schools required by government to set up parents' councils made up of parents elected by each class or year group.

The DfES Guidance says:

*"Parents are a driving force behind their own child's achievements but also for improving the school system as a whole. A Parent Council gives parents a route to express their opinions and ideas, and governing bodies a means to sound out parents' views on decisions about the strategic direction of the school. Setting up a Parent Council is an opportunity to foster a culture of genuine participation and to attempt to reach those disengaged parents and parents of particular groups of pupils who may face significant barriers to their inclusion such as language, literacy or culture. Schools may already be actively trying to engage some or all of these groups and may find ways to draw on this as they establish a Parent Council"*

The Education and Inspections Act 2006 requires Governing Bodies to consult with parents. In the case of new Foundation or Foundation Special Schools, where the foundation appoints a majority of governors, the Governing Body must establish an advisory Parent Council. (These schools may also be known as "trust" schools.)

The School Governance (Parent Council) (England) Regulations 2007 set out minimum membership, function and support arrange-

ments for Parent Councils in such Trust or Foundation schools. However, the regulations do not apply to foundations established under the School Standards and Framework Act 1998.

There is an incentive to comply in the same DfES Guidance, which also said:

*"The new Ofsted self-assessment and inspection arrangements require schools to assess and demonstrate how well they listen to, and act on, parents' views. A Parent Council is an excellent way to do so"*

## What is a Parent Council?

A Parent Council is a body composed of parents which provides a forum for their views to be made known to parent governors and, through them, to the headteacher and the governing body of their children's school.

Parent Councils are an accessible way to involve more parents in decisions about the school. They can be less formal and require a lesser commitment than being a member of the governing body.

They should also enable more parents to make a real contribution to their child's school.

## Why have a Parent Council?

Although the 1986 Education Act established the right of parents to elect parent governors onto the school governing body, it did not establish a means whereby parents could communicate with their parent governors or vice versa.

The logo for CASE (Campaign for State Education) features the word "CASE" in a bold, black, sans-serif font. A red checkmark is positioned behind the letter 'A', extending from the bottom left to the top right.

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Many parent governors find it difficult to communicate or consult with parents in the school. At times they may even be discouraged from doing so. Others may find their views dismissed as “only speaking for themselves”.

Many parents do not know who their parent governors are or how to reach them. A Parent Council would enable parent governors to discuss issues directly with a representative group of parents

There could be other benefits too. Schools report difficulties in recruiting parent governors, while parents may be reluctant to come forward when they are unsure of their role. Parent Councils may encourage parents to come forward and from there it would be a smaller step to becoming a parent governor.

## Who should be members of a Parent Council?

While the DfES Guidance states that it is up to the Governing Body (GB) to decide how parents are “appointed or elected”, CASE believes that a Parents’ Council should be elected by the parents in each class or year group.

We believe that there should be a minimum of ten elected parent representatives with at least two from each year group. In a large school the GB should aim for more. When there are more candidates than seats, the GB should organise an election.

Ideally, each class or year group should meet at the start of the academic year to elect parents willing to represent them.

Such meetings would also offer parents an opportunity to discuss school issues together.

In addition to elected parents, the Guidance suggests that the GB could decide to include other parents on the Council who represent pupils who “require special consideration”.

We believe that this additional membership should be agreed between the GB and Parent Council wherever the interests of children with special educational needs or who are from black and minority ethnic groups are not adequately represented.

The extra places should be to enable the Parent Council to reflect the intake of the school and not simply be appointments made by the Governing Body.

## What is the role of the Parent Council?

The DfES Guidance says:

*“The governing body remains the decision-maker and provides the strategic leadership of the school. There is no reduction in the role and responsibilities of the governing body of schools which have established a Parent Council. Parent Councils have a consultative and advisory role. They are a means to strengthen the voice of parents and to enable more parents to express their opinions and influence decisions”.*

Unfortunately, it continues:

*“it is for the GB to decide how and when to consult the parent council and the precise issues on which the GB should consult will be a matter for the individual school”*

CASE believes that this is for the Parent Council to decide, after consultation with the GB over practical arrangements.

We consider that it is important to clearly define the role of the Parent Council. We recommend that they should adopt a simple set of rules covering how meetings will be run and the relationship between the Parent Council and the GB.

We believe that the Council should be entitled to discuss whatever they consider important and be given the necessary information to do so.

The rules should make clear any exceptions to this e.g. that they should not use the Council to pursue issues concerning individual parents, children or members of staff .

## How would a Parent Council work?

The DfES Guidance suggests that:

*“The Parent Council will decide, in consultation with the governing body how the Council will operate. It will agree the frequency of meetings, the quorum for any votes of the Parent Council and the place and proceedings of its meetings.*

*Although the governing body and the Parent Council will be able to decide the procedures in*

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*respect of any voting arrangements when decisions are taken regarding co-opting non parents on to the Parent Council only parents of registered pupils may vote.”*

CASE envisages the Parent Council meeting regularly to discuss issues raised by parents. Parent Governors would normally attend, taking the opportunity to raise issues with a representative group of parents. CASE believes this would improve communications and reduce those problems which arise through misunderstanding.

The DfES goes on to say:

*“The GB will be required to provide the Parent Council with the information, support and assistance it would need to carry out its consultative and advisory functions. Although the governing body will have a duty to make arrangements for the Parent Council to meet, many Parent Councils will be self-running and informal”*

*“Arrangements for meetings should take account of parents’ preferences, availability and circumstances. The governing body will need to make suitable accommodation available for Parent Council meetings. Other options for engaging parents in the Council include the use of online forums so that attendance in person is not always necessary.”*

It is an important principle that the school should provide facilities and resources to enable parent representatives to communicate with parents and carers.

However, CASE believes that email and on-line discussion should be an extra means of communicating with parents but other methods should continue so that those without computer access are not excluded.

## **Would it need to organise fund-raising or social events?**

No. The Parents’ Council is intended to be a consultative body that discusses issues of concern to parents and provides a means of regular communication and consultation with parent governors. Many schools already have organisations such as a PTA or Friends of the School whose purpose is to organise fund-raising and social events.

## **What CASE thinks**

CASE welcomes the Government’s proposals for Parent Councils which go some way to redress the balance of the legislative changes that have drastically reduced parent representation on the governing bodies of Trust Schools and Academies. CASE calls both for Parent Councils and a significant proportion of elected parent governors in all types of schools.

## **What you can do**

- Talk about these ideas with parents at your local school.
- Discuss them with your headteacher and parent governors.
- Raise them with local councillors and your MP

## **Where to get more information**

- ✓ Human Scale Education: Setting Up Parents’ Councils Project 2004-05 Research Information  
<http://www.dfes.gov.uk/research/data/uploadfiles/RW48.pdf>
- ✓ Human Scale Education: [www.hse.org.uk](http://www.hse.org.uk) - Human Scale Education: Setting Up Parent Councils:  
[http://www.teachernet.gov.uk/\\_doc/9559/parentcouncils.pdf](http://www.teachernet.gov.uk/_doc/9559/parentcouncils.pdf)
- ✓ Calderdale Pilot: <http://www.parents-and-carers.org.uk/>

Feedback on this document will be gratefully received. You can contact CASE by post

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*CASE has been campaigning on education issues for over 40 years and relies entirely on membership fees to fund its activities.*