

Parental Involvement Seminar

Lochter Centre, Oldmeldrum

Saturday 16 March 2013

I attended the above seminar on behalf of TGS PC and the wider parent forum. The format of the seminar was very simple, a chance to go round various stalls before the seminar started (including the Banchory Alcohol Project); a brief introduction to the seminar; then straight into workshop 1 followed immediately by workshop 2. After this there was a break for lunch and then a question and answer session with a panel of speakers from Aberdeenshire Council, those being: -

- √¹ Maria Walker, Director of Education, Learning and Leisure
- √¹ John Harding, Head of Lifelong learning and Leisure
- √¹ Wilf Weir, Head of Education
- √¹ Councillor Ron McKail, Vice-Chair of the Education, Learning & Leisure Committee
- √¹ Dr Pauline Stephen, Head of Integration and Inclusion
- √¹ Andrew Griffiths, Head of Education and Staff Development

A copy of the questions and answers is being compiled by the Council and will be sent out later. This is just to let you know about the workshops I attended.

I had hoped to attend the workshop on the role of the Parent Council and the role of the Parent Forum and how the two could interact. This was due to be run by the Scottish Parent Teacher Council (SPTC) however their representative was unwell and the workshop had to be cancelled.

Instead I attended the workshop on Parental Involvement followed by the workshop on Qualifications, National 3, 4 and 5 – how will they be assessed? Here are the notes I made at both workshops.

Parental Involvement – Marjorie Temperley, Education Support Officer Parental Involvement

Quite a mixed group with parents from both primary and secondary schools and this was reflected in the discussion. In hindsight it would have been better (since this workshop ran twice) had it been run separately for primary and secondary schools since in the main the issues raised, although similar in topic, were different in outcome.

We were told we would look at 3 things:

- √¹ What best practice looks like
- √¹ What the local authority needs to be thinking about for good parental involvement?
- √¹ What parents would like to contribute

We discussed communication – both from the local authority to parents and parent councils, and between parent councils and the wider parent forum. We noted that various forms of electronic/digital communication could be used i.e. Facebook, websites, email, texting, glow – as well as the more traditional form of sending information home in the pupils schoolbag, however all forms of communication rely on parents to be proactive in reading the information communicated and in passing on concerns or issues they may have. We noted that this was the most challenging aspect and that we could try to communicate by all of these means however parents had to participate in the process for it to have meaning. We also noted that some families do not have access to computers and that although there is free access in libraries other free access points are not as well known. It was suggested that the Council could consider putting together a list of free access points across Aberdeenshire and advertise this through schools, on the website etc.

We discussed the transition phase for pupils moving from P7 to secondary and noted that there was a change in the nature of parental involvement at secondary school level - it is less direct in nature. Parents, particularly those who have played an active role in supporting their child through primary school, may find this to be a bit of a culture shock and it was suggested that some form of information on the nature of parental involvement at secondary school level could be produced. Some of the secondary schools (TGS included) have tried to become involved in the transition phase by holding meetings during the transition phase which parents from the feeder primaries are invited to attend. These meetings have tried to explain the role of the Parent Council and any attendant subgroups as well as outlining the positive aspects of secondary school life from a pupil's perspective.

We discussed the direct involvement parents have at primary school level - where they may be used to help out with classroom activities, in the library etc. and how this differed at secondary school. The example of helping out in the library (at secondary school) was put forward and we were advised that this should be possible in secondary schools. There are some things that parents will not be able to help with at secondary school level however all agreed that it should be possible to provide voluntary support to the schools where and if possible.

The workshop ended at this point and I felt that the proportion of parents from pupils at secondary school had been greater than that of those from pupils at primary school. This was reflected in the discussion and is why it may have been better to have had separate workshops for each of the school stages.

Qualifications, National 3, 4 and 5 – how will they be assessed? – Ian Stirling CforE Officer

As you can imagine this was a highly emotive workshop, with concerns regarding the assessments running high and strong views raised by all parents in the group. Although we were not given the opportunity to introduce ourselves I was able to note that within the group were parents of pupils from the secondary schools in Kemnay, Inverurie and Banchory (possibly Stonehaven however I am not certain of this). Some of those present were teachers at secondary level as well as being parents and it was interesting to hear their questions and experiences. During the discussion which followed it was obvious that not all schools were passing out the same information and that some schools were saying one thing whilst other schools were saying the opposite. Here is a summary of what was discussed:

√¹ National 3 and 4 qualifications will all be course examined and will be assessed internally. The standards by which they will be assessed will be verified by SQA (Aberdeenshire has full complement of teachers working on the verification standards, these teachers along with others from across Scotland will be working with SQA to ensure that assessments are marked at the appropriate level).

National 5, 6 and 7 qualifications will take the form of internal assessments as well as an externally assessed exam in May. No subject will be 100% exam.

The view from several of the parents at the workshop was that teachers did not seem confident about the new process. A suggestion was made that the local authority could produce an overview of the breakdown of internal and external percentage of exam (at National 5, 6 and 7 levels) e.g. English Higher at present is 20% folio and 80% exam, what will it be under new National 6 and 7? Mr Stirling thought this a good idea and agreed to produce this information and send it to Parent Councils to pass out to the wider parent forum in each school.

√¹ We were advised that it may happen that a pupil would not sit an exam at the end of fourth year and would emerge at the end of fifth year with either a higher or, if they failed that, a national 5

qualification. Upon being asked for clarification we were advised that in this instance a failed higher would not automatically mean a national 5, the pupil would in fact have to spend another year before sitting a national 5 (so 3 years in total if this were the case). We were advised that throughout the process there would be an expectation that teachers would flag up the pupil's progress and advise of the level of exam the pupil should sit.

One of the (teacher) parents advised that generally speaking no-one thought CfE was a bad idea however there were strong concerns about both the implementation of and communication about CfE which required to be addressed – at each level from the Scottish Government down.

- √¹ With regards to qualifications another (teacher) parent asked how Universities were looking at the National 6 and 7 qualifications. Under the current system they prefer to consider the achievements of pupils at the first sitting of higher exams, under the new system they will be unable to do this and will need to change their approach to Scottish students applying to University.
- √¹ Broad general education – we were advised that most schools were offering a broad range of choices in 3rd year and that schools were encouraged to make this choice range as broad as possible. In third year maths and English and a modern language are proscribed subjects however schools are encouraged to look at a range of 10-12 subjects in 3rd year (this allows pupils to select their 4th year choices from as broad a range of subjects as possible). We were advised that some schools have a rotation of subjects (roughly 3 month block per subject) - this allows pupils in 3rd year to study all 3 sciences on block rotation.
- √¹ We were advised that the curriculum is dependent on the quality of the teachers and that it is up to managers and head teachers to monitor what is happening in the classroom. We were advised that the hope is that the curriculum (format) in the broad phase is proscribed however how this is done is up to the teachers. It had been thought that level 3 would be achieved by the end of 3rd year however experience indicates that this is being achieved in 1st or 2nd year.
- √¹ It was pointed out that Aberdeenshire Council had misinterpreted the ability to teach national 4 or 5 in S3 and Mr Stirling was asked what the Council was doing to ensure that pupils would be able to work towards National 4 or 5 in S3. Mr Stirling advised that how this was covered would be down to the teacher and that it was being done already.

There was no restriction (now or ever) that some of the material from some of the national 4 and 5 courses could be covered in S3 and we were advised that new guidelines are being produced and that these issues would be covered within the guidelines.

We were also advised that anything covered in the classes was the responsibility of the head-teacher.

The Council does have a monitoring process on how work is progressing and this is done by both the Head Teacher and the QIO (quality information officer). There is an expectation that teachers will follow both local and national policies in implementing CfE.

We were advised that there would be no expectation that there would be an early presentation for examinations in 3rd year (with regards to fast-tracking for pupils).

- √¹ We were advised that level 4 and national 4 is not the same thing. Any confusion around this is down to the Scottish Government and not the local authority. If a pupil works at level 4 in 3rd year and in all likelihood that pupil will move to sit national 5 in 4th year.

- √⁴ A suggestion was made that the local authority could produce a guide for parents comparing the current standard grades and Highers (at each level) with their new equivalents. Mr Stirling agreed to do this and to send to Parent Councils for comment prior to sending round the wider parent forum.
- √⁴ With regards to prelims, we were advised that there is no requirement (even under the existing system) for pupils to sit prelims - this is up to each individual school. Mr Stirling advised that prelims gave pupils the experience of sitting the exam and this was preparation for the real thing. It is likely that prelims will continue.
- √⁴ We were assured that intermediate exams would remain in place next year (for this year's S4s who are preparing for the last round of standard grades). This proved to be confusing since several parents in the workshop had been advised by their school that there will be no intermediate exams next year and that they will be replaced by National 5 exams.
- √⁴ A (teacher) parent asked about the appeals process in the future and we were advised that this would become more difficult with the SQA adopting a harder approach to pupils who have under-performed over the school year. One reason in the future for considering an appeal would be if the pupil was sick and unable to present for the exam, this would require to be evidenced and a Doctors line may be needed in support of the appeal.
- √⁴ A parent asked how many exams pupils would sit in S4 and we were advised that typically this rests at 6 across Aberdeenshire. For the schools that have deferred implementing the CfE structure for a year their pupils will sit 8 exams next year however following that will sit 6 in subsequent years in line with the rest of Aberdeenshire.

I would note that I was very concerned and the number of times the 'buck' was passed down to the teacher. I considered this to be most unfair and that it created a picture of poor quality - which is not the case. I was supported in this and voiced my concerns within the group.

Overall the day was very informative and worthwhile and parents across Aberdeenshire share the same views and concerns, as well as praise for the teachers and pupil achievements, as we do at TGS.

Fiona Alderson
Chairman, TGS Parent Council