

# Backchat



SPTC Newsletter

**Scottish Parent Teacher Council**, the independent voice for parents, is a national organisation. It has been serving parents' groups in schools for 60 years.

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## Happy New Year – but where’s the money?

1. As always, we like to start the year by sending best wishes to all our members but then plunge straight into more serious matters. This year is no different. So, we all send you our very best wishes for 2010 before moving onto the hot topic of school funding – budget cuts and how much parents are contributing for essential supplies.
2. Recently we have become aware that Parent Councils (PCs) and PTAs are raising considerable sums, indeed thousands of pounds, to help their schools, so it was not surprising when school funding came up as a major topic of concern for parents at our annual conference in November. We undertook to run a survey of our members to establish what is happening across Scotland.
3. The survey is now enclosed, but you can also download it from our website [www.sptc.info](http://www.sptc.info) and return it to us electronically.
4. At almost the same time, the Scottish Parliament’s Education Committee voted to hold an inquiry into school funding. This will involve local authorities and Audit Scotland and is due to have its first hearing on February 5<sup>th</sup> 2010. We hope to feed the results of our survey into this bigger inquiry so we ask you to be as accurate as possible when completing the form, and return it to us by 15<sup>th</sup> February, if at all possible – no pressure then! Many thanks for your help.



*Solving the mystery of disappearing funds!*

## New Development Manager appointed

We are delighted to announce that SPTC now has a **new Development Manager, Eileen Prior**. Eileen is a communications professional who has been involved in education and children’s services at a national and local level for around ten years. Two of her children are currently in school and she has just started her second term as a ministerial nominee on the General Teaching Council of Scotland.

She started work at the beginning of January and will work in partnership with Judith Gillespie for a little while. We asked Eileen to write an introductory piece for *Backchat*, and this is what she says:-

*Writing a few hundred words for Backchat should be a straightforward thing for someone who has been writing for a living for tens of years. It’s less than easy, however, for a number of reasons.*

*In the first place I will be filling mighty big shoes, as Judith Gillespie commences her retirement. Judith’s knowledge and grasp of educational issues is formidable and I’m preparing for a lot of work to bring myself up to speed on SPTC’s issues.*

*This brings me onto the second barrier to my writing: the challenge of highlighting just one or two matters I feel are going to be critical over the coming years. In all honesty, there are simply too many big issues and I would not wish to take a simplistic approach at a time when the education system in Scotland is in tumult.*

*Suffice to say, I am passionate about our education system: about working with parents and professionals to make it the best it can be; about working with policy makers to raise the issues which concern parents most and, most importantly, about playing a small part in ensuring all of Scotland's children have an educational experience that opens their minds and their world.*

*It will be a great honour to be part of the SPTC and to serve its members.*

## **Conference Report**

Our 61<sup>st</sup> Annual Conference, even when judged by the exacting standard of delegates' expectation of the lunch (!), was a great success. It was held in the Glasgow Royal Concert Hall and attended by nearly 100 people, mostly parents, from across Scotland.

### **Fiona Hyslop**

The opening talk was given by Fiona Hyslop the then Cabinet Secretary for Education and Lifelong Learning. She explained her vision for Scottish Education from cradle to grave and laid out the important role that parents have to play. She gave a very upbeat report on the implementation of Curriculum for Excellence and talked of its important focus on literacy and numeracy, and on developing children as individuals. She also spoke of how parents are involved in schools and of the new National Parent Forum which had its first meeting on 21<sup>st</sup> November. This is made up of one Parent Council representative from each local authority and its purpose is to give parents a stronger voice at the national level. Fiona Hyslop's full speech is in the Conference report on our website.

### **Janet Brown**

Next up was Janet Brown, Chief Executive of the Scottish Qualifications Authority (SQA), who gave a very clear explanation of the new qualifications that are being developed to replace Standard Grades and the Intermediate exams.

Janet started by saying who is on the Management Board which is responsible for overseeing the development of Curriculum for Excellence (CfE) – These are the “providers of education” (teachers, local authorities, HMIe etc.) but, interestingly, no users - parents or students!

She then went on to outline SQA's role in developing qualifications and the basic principles that underlie qualifications. Next came a presentation on the Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework (SCQF), the twelve-point scale covering all Scottish qualifications from Access 1 to a Ph.D. However, this version of the SCQF showed how the new qualifications - National 4 and 5 - and the new qualifications in literacy and numeracy will fit on. Finally, Janet described the key features of the new qualifications. For example the new literacy and numeracy qualifications will be assessed through portfolios of evidence across the curriculum and externally marked by SQA. The new National 4 will be internally assessed and not graded, whereas the National 5 will be assessed both internally and externally and will be graded.

The general feedback from delegates was that Janet's presentation was extremely clear and we are delighted that she has allowed us to post the overhead slides that she used in the Conference report on our website [www.sptc.info](http://www.sptc.info).

Both speakers spent time answering questions and delegates particularly valued their willingness to lay their reputations on the line in this way.

### **Open Discussion**

The final session at the Conference was an open discussion in which delegates were free to bring up matters that were of concern to them. It was at this point the issue of funding featured large and it was interesting to hear how different authorities approach parents' concerns. Some said that their authorities had set up very good consultation systems so that parents' views could be fed right back to the leading councillors, whereas others complained that they had no such forum and felt completely isolated.

### **Exhibition**

Running throughout the day was an exhibition of contributions from member schools showing what parents do and how they get involved. The activities ranged from what looked like fantastic parties, a race night with model horses on wheels to various gardening projects. The exhibition was so successful we hope to set up a new section on our website highlighting *news from you*. If you have something to contribute, please send it to [sptc@sptc.info](mailto:sptc@sptc.info) Pictures are particularly welcome.

## Child Protection

The Government is currently consulting on the details of the new *Protection of Vulnerable Groups* legislation which it hopes to implement in the spring of 2010. The headline news is that this legislation extends the disclosure system to cover vulnerable adults and also sets up a scheme (live register) that everyone who requires an enhanced disclosure has to join. Individual records on the scheme can be updated if new information becomes available.

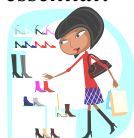
The cost of joining the scheme - a necessary requirement - will be £59, whilst the cost for checking the record of someone already on it will be £18. The system is therefore expensive and, whilst no one wants to cut corners when it comes to child protection, it is important to make sure that money is spent in the right way.

We now question the value of disclosure. Since April 2002, there have been over 4 million applications for disclosure checks and, in the financial year 2008/09, 360,000 enhanced disclosures were processed. All this is in order to identify if someone is one of the 378 people on the list of those disqualified from working with children. However, the list does not just include those who have harmed children; people who are convicted of specific crimes e.g. murder, are automatically placed on the list, regardless of whether they ever worked with children.

These are the facts and figures of the existing scheme, but the numbers being checked are about to increase considerably. Whereas, before, an enhanced disclosure was needed for someone in a childcare position, this new legislation requires a disclosure for anyone whose "work" (which is widely defined) might give *the opportunity to have unsupervised contact with children*. The consultation document makes it clear that this would apply to "parental bodies meeting in an educational establishment at times when children are present" independently of whether or not they were actively seeing children. It is enough to suppose that they might have the opportunity for unsupervised contact. The same would apply to any ordinary parent going into a school as part of the parental involvement legislation. The only equitable way to marry the new rules on child protection with the parental involvement legislation is for the Government to pay the £59 million cost for all parents to be placed on the new register. But, is this really the best way to identify the 378 people who are currently disqualified from working with children? Please join SPTC in calling for common sense to prevail and for a full evaluation of the disclosure system.

## Financial Education

**What's the problem - shoes are essential!**



Back on the topic of money, those with older children are doubtless all too aware that many youngsters have a rather cavalier attitude to money, spending on the fun things and ignoring basic essentials! The Scottish Centre for Financial Education (SCFE) want to finance-proof young people. They have developed resources for schools to help youngsters develop the financial skills (e.g. budgeting) that they will need throughout life. SCFE are also keen to work with parents to discuss what levels of financial awareness youngsters need and what parents can do to help. The SCFE team is willing to attend parents' meetings at local authority, cluster or school level, (please see enclosed flier). For more information, contact Frances McGrane on 0141 282 5157 or by emailing [f.mcgrane@LTScotland.org.uk](mailto:f.mcgrane@LTScotland.org.uk)

## Attendance at School – what do I need to know?

The Scottish Government has produced a new leaflet for parents explaining the ins and outs of attendance. It starts by explaining what attendance means and goes on to say when your child can legitimately be off school (e.g. if they are ill or have permission to be involved in a non-school activity) and what you need to do to let the school know. It also advises parents that some schools run a truancy alert scheme so they will get a phone call or text if their child is not there for registration.

However, the leaflet then moves on to non-permitted absences. It starts with holidays in term-time that are only allowed in exceptional circumstances - otherwise they are counted as unauthorised absences. Next up is truancy which is often as much of a problem for parents as for schools. The leaflet explains what support parents and children can expect from the school, and how the school will work with parents to try to resolve any problems that are behind the truancy. The leaflet then explains exclusion and again what support parents can expect over this. Finally, the leaflet makes it clear that parents have a legal duty to ensure that their children attend school and what legal steps can and will be taken against parents who fail in this duty.

The leaflet is good in so far as it lays out all the information very clearly and gives contact details for organisations that can help parents. However, it is bad in that it is only available online. It's on Parent- Zone at [www.parentzonescotland.gov.uk](http://www.parentzonescotland.gov.uk)

## Your Questions Answered

***We are going to set up a 200 club and would like some advice about the administration. What is the best way to collect money from people? Do we need a licence?***

The easiest way is to ask people to fill in a direct debit form. It is a good idea to have a copy of this attached to a letter explaining about the scheme and also to include a completed exemplar direct debit form. Money can then be taken from their bank account every month or, if they wish, as a lump sum every year. If people do not want to use this method, then they could pay by cash. However, this will mean a lot of work for your Treasurer so it would be easier to ask for a lump sum to be paid on an annual basis. It may be a good idea to have a designated Committee member in charge of this scheme.

If you are only including Parent Council/PTA members – parents and teachers at the school – then you won't need a licence. However, if you want to include friends, family and other people outside the school, then you should contact your local authority licensing department to arrange for a lottery licence.

***We are planning a Country and Western themed Spring Fair in April and want to offer something more interesting than the usual stalls and games. We've provisionally booked ponies from our local stables and had hoped to organise a BBQ; our Local Authority won't allow either! Are we covered through our SPTC membership/insurance?***

What a brilliant idea to have a theme for your Spring Fair – are the ponies for a rodeo? You have the cover you need with SPTC insurance for most of your activities but, if you are hiring the ponies from the stable, you must check that the stables have their own public liability insurance. If you get the use of the ponies as a gift, their use is covered by your SPTC insurance.

As for the barbecue, your SPTC membership/insurance covers you for anything that happens as a result of your decisions and/or negligence. For example, if you happened to undercook some meat and someone contracted food poisoning as a result, you are covered. Of course nobody wants this to happen and we always urge good practice at all events. We have a leaflet, "Safety at Fundraising Events" which is full of useful tips. You can download this from our website at [www.sptc.info](http://www.sptc.info) or contact the office and we can post one to you.

***Do we have to hold our events at the school?***

No your insurance covers you for 24 hours a day, seven days a week, wherever you hold your events in the UK.

***Do we need an auditor for our accounts?***

You do not need a qualified auditor to check your accounts. What you do need is to have them checked by someone who is competent working with figures and who is not a member of your committee or related to anyone on the committee. A parent who works for a bank or building society or does the books for a small business would be good. In a secondary school, you could approach a maths or business studies teacher.

## ***MY WORST TEACHER!***

We are intrigued (the politest word we can think of) by the first article in the magazine section of *The Times Educational Supplement Scotland (TESS)*, the leading educational journal. It is entitled ***my worst parent***. The column has developed its own special language, so a PFH is a Parent From Hell, whilst the pre-Christmas contributor called for "a robust formula with valid weightings... to apply to the shortlisted candidates for this dubious accolade". Teachers win £50 in M&S vouchers for being "successful contributors"(!). TESS has long had a regular and positive feature on ***My best teacher***, with celebrities contributing their fond memories, so why now this negative view of parents?

We just wonder what would be the reaction if we started a similar feature, but from the parents' perspective? Actually, we don't have to wonder. At a recent public meeting, we raised parents' concerns about the increasing number of composite classes that are being created in many schools as a by-product of smaller classes in P1 to P3. At the end of the meeting a leading member of one of the biggest teaching unions came to berate us roundly for being "negative". It would seem that despite parental involvement and all that jazz, parents remain extremely junior partners in education – good for raising money, but not much else!