Welcome to the first issue of Parents’ Voice—newsletter for parents of post-primary students in Ireland!

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The National Parents Council post primary is a voluntary group that gives national voice to parents of students in post-primary schools in Ireland. Parents are the primary educators of their children as outlined by Irish Constitution. We work to unite parents and ensure your participation and inclusion at all levels of the post-primary education system.

We hope you enjoy reading our newsletter—please help us to spread the word and encourage other parents to sign up!

Thank you for your support to date,

Rose

Welcome from NPCPP President, Rose Callan

W E L C O M E  F R O M  N P C P P  P R E S I D E N T ,  R O S E  C A L L A N

Parents’ Voice - Newsletter

In this issue:

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- Heavy School Bags
- Parent and Student Charter
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- Admissions Bill
- Tacklebullying.ie
- Safer Internet Day
- New Model for Allocating Special Education
- Teaching Resources

February 2017  Issue 1/2017

Parents’ Voice - Newsletter

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NPCpp in the Media

ASTI Dispute—press releases:

- Ballot Results
- Press Release 22nd January 2017
- Press Release 5th December 2016
- Press Release 9th November 2016

ASTI Dispute—media coverage:

- Irish Times 26th January 2017
- Kildare FM
- LmFm (Starts at 14:36)
- KCLR (Starts at 07:50)
- Ocean FM
- Irish Examiner
- Evening Echo

NPCpp Director addressing the Oireachtas Joint Committee on Children and Youth Affairs—Heavy School Bags Issue—watch here.

Heavy School Bags—media coverage:

- Newstalk
- Journal.ie
- Irish Independent
- Irish Examiner
- Irish Times

Cost of Mock Exams:

- Cork 103 FM (stats 19:06)
The Association of Secondary Teachers in Ireland (ASTI) conducted a ballot of its members on proposals which emerged from talks between the Union and the Department of Education and Skills. Parents were awaiting the results, many concerned by the impact that this dispute has on their children. On 2nd February 2017 the results of the ballot were released. ASTI Members rejected the proposal by 52.5% to 47.5%. With the exams approaching, parents are feeling more and more frustrated and angry. Is anyone thinking about our children? What is the Department of Education and Skills doing to prevent any further strikes?

The National Parents Council post primary made several calls on the Association of Secondary Teachers in Ireland (ASTI) and the Department of Education and Skills to stop using our children as pawns in this dispute.

We are calling for:

• No more disruptions of education of our children
• Equal opportunity for all children at Exams
• Any further action to take place outside teaching hours

The dispute is creating uncertainty and instability for all - students, teachers and parents. It has gone on too long and is delaying necessary advances in education which are essential if Ireland is to be able to respond to the international competitive challenges coming our way. The situation which may arise where the Junior Cert English is marked differently in TUI and ASTI schools is not acceptable.

The National Parents Council post primary ensures that parents' voice is represented at the national level. We are not taking sides, our only aim is to minimise the impact this dispute has on our children. Education of our children is important and we urge both the Department of Education and Skills and ASTI to keep the best interest of our children central to their thoughts.

We would like to thank all parents who contacted us in the past four months to express their views and concerns regarding this dispute. Your quotes and feedback helps us to ensure parents' voice is represented in the national and local media. Please stay in touch and keep sharing your thoughts and concerns with us! You can share your story with us here.
HEAVY SCHOOL BAGS

The National Parents Council Post Primary (NPCpp) were invited to the Joint Oireachtas Committee on Children and Youth Affairs to voice the concerns that many parents have regarding the weight of school bags, especially of post-primary students. We received many complaints for parents on the issue of the weight of school bags over the years and it something that the NPCpp has been continually highlighting.

Parents, The State, School management, Principals, and Teachers all have a shared duty of care to our students’ well-being, and all should engage in a process which will bring agreed implementable recommendations forward.

Internationally, it is acknowledged that heavy school bags could lead to serious long-term problems, including chronic back pain. Furthermore, guidelines indicate that children should never carry a bag that weighs more than 15% of their body weight. In the US, the limit of school bag weights is recommended by The Chiropractic Association in US is 10-20% of students’ body weight.

After more than 15 years it is insufficient for the Department of Education & Skills to publish a report and carry out an awareness campaign in schools which consisted of information leaflets and posters highlighting the potential hazards of heavy schoolbags and then leave it to schools to introduce measures to alleviate the problem. It is not possible to implement changes which may help if there is no funding and/or no physical space in already overcrowded schools.

The issue of children carrying excessively heavy schoolbags has been neglected for too long. It is a serious health & safety matter and consideration should be given by government to legislate for a maximum weight relative to body weight that a child can carry in their schoolbags. Some countries, for example Hong Kong, New Zealand, Bolivia, Israel, Italy and Poland have already legislated on heavy school bags, and have weight limits on school bags for different age groups.

We consider that the more recent generations of our children were required to carry increasing weight levels which far exceeded international ‘best practice’ levels. The matter is of such a serious nature, that at some point in the future (if that day is not already nearly upon us), the implications for this State could be comparable to the claims for Army deafness disability payments back in the 90’s, albeit with the potential to be on a far greater scale.

This may seem by some as alarmist, but things which were described as alarmist in the past, have a habit, with the passage of time, of becoming a reality. An example here is that NPCpp made annual representation from the early 90’s that the absence of a ‘one child, one seat’ policy on school transport was one of the single biggest concerns nationally of parents. Our calls were ignored until the inevitable happened, leading to the tragic deaths of 5 secondary students in county Meath in 2005. Within 3 months of that tragedy the problem was solved. Let us not wait any longer in finding an agreed, implementable solution to the health risks to which the students of this Nation are exposed to by the current need to carry weights in excess of best international practice.

We are hopeful, that by engaging in the discussion, all parties with an interest and shared concern will bring about some very necessary changes and agreed recommendations for current and future generations of parents and children.
On 5th December 2016, Minister for Education and Skills, Richard Bruton, announced that the Government have approved the draft outline of a new law, which will require every school to consult with parents and students, and publish and operate a Parent and Student Charter.

Some of the issues which the schools will be required to deal with under the Charter include:

- Consult students and parents regularly in relation to school costs and work to avoid costs acting as a barrier
- Publish a school financial statement which would include information on how any voluntary contributions are used
- Invite feedback from parents and students
- Provide a fair and accessible mechanism for resolving complaints, including through mediation. The use of formal grievance and complaint processes should be a last response, except in the most serious cases
- Publish a number of complaints made, the reasons for the outcome in each case, and how the outcome was reached by the school
- Provide better information about School Management, School Policies including on admission, and information on extracurricular activities and school performance
- Acknowledge gaps, deficiencies or room for improvement

The guidelines will be finalised following a consultation process between the Department of Education and Skills, National Parents Council primary, National Parents Council post primary and the Irish Second-level Students’ Union. The role of the Ombudsman for Children will be expanded and schools will be required to consider any suggestions, guidance or recommendations made by the Ombudsman.

The draft Bill is with the Oireachtas Committee on Education and Skills for pre-legislative scrutiny.

Parents’ Voice

PARENT AND STUDENT CHARTER

Have your say!

The National Parents Council post primary considers the proposed legislation as key in terms of parental involvement and role in education of our children. There are many ways how you can get involved – some ideas below:

- Get talking – include Parents and Students Charter on the agenda of your next Parents Association meeting. Think about the best way of engaging parents in your school on this topic. Let us know how you got on!
- Be part of it – Parents Charter will be our key topic for our upcoming Spring Seminar planned for Saturday 8th April. Venue to be confirmed. Save the date!
In December 2016 the National Parents Council post primary took part in the consultation of the Department of Education and Skills on School Uniforms and Other Costs. This is what we submitted.

Uniform Policy

Uniforms should be practical, comfortable and represent value for money for families. Consultation with parents in each post primary school regarding the uniform policy (or any other policy) is essential. The uniform policy should consider its appropriateness for students from minority ethnic backgrounds or different religions affiliations. The uniform policy should also consider transgender students and offer flexibility.

Cost reduction measures that should be considered are:

- Reduction in number of uniform items that require the school crest
- Plain coloured uniform or tracksuit items which can be bought from high street retailers
- Separate school crests that can be either sewn or ironed on to generic uniforms
- Accommodation of Pre-Worn Uniform sale or Swap Rail before summer holidays
- Possibility of having a stock of communal blazers that the school can hire out to students for specific functions such as school concerts, ceremonies etc.
- Review cost of uniform in consultation with parents annually
- Schools with be-spoke uniforms to shop around and ensure competitive pricing and value for money. Competitive tendering and bulk purchase by schools might be considered as well.

Sufficient time should be provided by schools to parents in relation to changes to their Uniform Policy

All schools should be allowed to have a choice around their uniform however parents must be consulted as they are the ones who bear the cost of the uniform. The current Back to School Clothing and Footwear allowance rate of €200 per student (age 12 – 22) per school year helps some parents, but is not open to all. It also does not reflect the actual cost of the uniforms for the year. Also the Child Benefit of €140 per month ends once a student is 18 years of age, which is not commensurate with the time spent in full-time education in post primary schools (Transition Year, late enrolment into primary school etc.). A child can be 19, nearly 20 when they leave school.
Other Costs

Parents of students in post primary schools are required to cover many costs every year. The cost of first year in secondary school is estimated at €735 per student in average. This includes:

- Voluntary contributions
- School Books & Workbooks
- iPads and e-Books
- School footwear
- School gym wear / sportswear
- Sports equipment
- Transition Year costs
- Charges for Curricular ad Extra-Curricular activities
- School bags & equipment

While the cost of uniforms is being emphasized in many cases, other costs that parents bear throughout the school year in post primary schools are significant. There are very little supports available to low income families in respect of these additional costs and although some of them are presented as voluntary, non-payment often leads to exclusion of students which could be seen as discriminatory.

The National Parents Council post primary fully supports all measures that will lead to reduction of the above costs to parents. We strongly believe that all post primary school parents should be consulted regarding school costs in order to ensure parents can meet these costs. Extra support may be needed for parents who cannot meet these costs in order to ensure that no student is left behind.

On behalf of the National Parents Council post primary, thank you for giving us the opportunity to make a submission and represent parents’ views on the very high cost of schooling.

Tell us what you think!

Share your thoughts and concerns with us – feedback facility of our website available here.

Spring Seminar

8th April 2017

Save the date!
Parents and Students Charter – have your say!
Cyberbullying – what parents need to know
Stay informed – sign up to our notifications on events and news here.
ADMISSIONS BILL

On 16th January 2017 the Minister for Education and Skills, Richard Bruton, announced his intention to reform the schools admissions system in relation to the role that religion can play in the process. Although the intention of the Minister is to make changes in respect to the primary schools system in the first instance, further actions will be considered at the post primary level in the future. Therefore it is important for us as parents to have our voices heard.

The Minister suggested four possible approaches:

Catchment Area
This approach would prohibit religious schools from giving preference to children of their own religion who live outside the catchment area ahead of non-religious children or children of other religions who live inside the catchment area.

Nearest School Rule
This approach would allow religious schools to give preference to a religious child only where it is that child’s nearest school of that particular religion.

Quota System
This approach would allow a religious school to give preference to children of its own religion in respect to only a certain proportion of places, meaning that the remaining places would be allocated based on other admission criteria.

Outright Prohibition
This approach would prohibit religious primary schools using religion as a factor in admissions. Places would be allocated based on other factors.

The Department of Education and Skills opened a four-week consultation process to public where you can specify which approach you would prefer and why. Consultation paper is available here. We encourage parents to consult with their Constituent Body on the National Parents Council post primary or submit their own views to the Department. Deadline for submissions is 20th March 2017 at 5pm.

PARENTS’ ASSOCIATION TRAINING—BOOK NOW

The National Parents Council provides FREE training to Parents’ Associations, delivered in your school on the date and time that suits your group. The two-hour session provides information and guidance on various aspects of parents’ involvement in the post primary education system. Topics include:

- Parents’ Association remit
- Role of Officers & Members
- Constitution of a Parents’ Association
- Draft Agenda for meetings
- Networking and Partnerships

To book this FREE session for your Parents’ Association email training@npcpp.ie or call our office +353 (1) 830 2740.

Don’t forget to check our website – we have a dedicated section for Parents’ Associations!
What is Tacklebullying.ie?
It is the national website to counter bullying and cyberbullying for young people, parents and teachers. The website is packed with information for young people, parents and teachers to learn more about bullying and cyberbullying. What they are, the different types of both and how to effectively prevent and counter bullying. Parents, teachers and young people can also use the "Get Help" and Resources page to get useful information to help and learn more. Website users can also contact the creators; The National Anti-Bullying Research and Resource Centre at DCU for more information and support on bullying.

Who is the website for?
The Tackle Bullying website is a national website to prevent, intervene and resolve bullying for everyone. If you have been affected by bullying and you are not sure what to do Tackle Bullying can help you to find out.

Online forum
You are free to read through other people’s posts in the public Discussion Forum and may find some information there that is helpful. If you want to post a problem or take part in discussions, you will need to register with Tackle Bullying. When you register you will be given a username. From then on your peers and others on the site will only know you as this username meaning your privacy will be protected at all times. You will always remain anonymous unless you choose to contact the website and directly give your name or contact information. If you would like to hear from other young people, you can post something in the Discussion Forum. Other people your age will read your message and post replies giving you advice and support.

We ask that if you are feeling very unhappy or have a bullying problem that is seriously affecting you that you contact one of the Moderators directly by sending them an email in the ‘Get Help’ section. That way you will be able to speak privately about your situation and get advice on how to handle things. If the Moderator is not able to provide you with the information you need, you will then be provided with contact details for someone who can help you.

The National Parents Council post primary is a proud member of Tackle Bullying website Advisory Board.

What is Safer Internet Day?
Safer Internet Day is an EU wide initiative to promote a safer internet for all users, especially young people. It is promoted in Ireland by the PDST Technology in Education and Webwise, and was celebrated in Ireland on Tuesday 7th February 2017.

The Theme this year is ‘Be the change: Unite for a better internet’. New resources for parents were launched by Webwise—have a look here:

Did you know?
On 6th January 2017 PSNI released a list of secret texting codes used by young people. Have a look!
On 18th January the Department of Education announced changes in allocation of resource teaching hours for 2017/2018. The Minister is to implement a new model following policy advice from the National Council for Special Education (NCSE) and piloting of new model in 47 schools.

**Key benefits of the new scheme:**
- 7.2% increase in Resource Teachers - 900 extra teachers have been provided to support the introduction of the new model
- No schools to lose existing resource teaching hours, these will either increase or remain unchanged
- No need for child assessment / diagnoses in order to access the support (it is hoped that this measure will free up time of the NEPS and the HSE)
- More autonomy given to schools in terms of how to use the resources
- Reduced administration burden to schools and parents
- The new model enables better planning as the resources are allocated for 2 years

These changes will apply only to resource teaching hours. The Special Needs Assistance (SNA) scheme remains unchanged.

The National Parents Council Post Primary welcomes the positive changes in supports to students with special educational needs. The pilot shows that the new model can work once the schools receive adequate resources and supports. No requirement for diagnoses in order to access supports ends unnecessary labelling of children with special educational needs.

However we highlighted with the Department the following points:
- Importance of supports available to schools and principals in implementation of the new model (guidelines, training, ongoing support and access to DES, NEPS and HSE).
- Information booklet for parents to be developed, available in hardcopy as well as softcopy, plain English and include case studies / Q&A section.
- Parents of children with special education needs who manged to secure resource teaching hours for their child after spending money and time on getting diagnoses and waiting long time for the actual allocation of support might be concerned how will the new allocation model impact the supports available to their child.
- Transparent appeals process between schools and the Department must be developed (in case there is a dispute around allocation of resource teaching hours or the school profile).
- Emergency resource teaching hours must be available.
- Guidelines must include development of Individual Education Plans (Pupils Plans) for every student. Parental involvement is essential.
- Guidelines on how can parent complaint regarding the supports available to their child must be developed.

Are you worried how are these changes going to affect your child? Get in touch! Our feedback facility of our website is available here.
Parents’ Voice

WHO ARE WE?
The National Parents Council Post Primary (NPCpp) is a voluntary group that gives national voice to parents of students in post primary schools in Ireland. The secondary education system consists of schools under the patronage of Catholic Voluntary schools, Religious Minority Schools, Schools run by the Christian Brothers, Community and Comprehensive Schools and Education & Training Board schools. Each of these sectors established a governing body which nominates four representatives to the National Parents Council Post Primary.

The National Parents Council Post Primary works as umbrella group for parent associations in the secondary section of the Irish education system.

Parents are the primary educators of their children as outlined by Irish Constitution. The NPCpp is named in the Education Act 1998. We unite parents and ensure their participation and inclusion at all levels of the post primary education system.
The National Parents Council Post Primary has a Board of twenty members who work on behalf of parents and children without remuneration.

Our Vision
NPCPP aims to provide a forum that actively supports parents and guardians in their parenting role and to interact effectively with schools and other education partners on issues that impact on the education, development and general well-being of young people within the post-primary education system.

Our Mission
The NPCPP is the voice and advocate for parents and guardians of young people in post-primary education. It serves and represents parents and guardians, principally through engagement with Parents Associations. In consultation with its Constituent Bodies, the NPCpp, offers co-ordinated

STAY IN TOUCH!
There are many ways how to stay in touch with the National Parents Council post primary.

• Use our online feedback form - http://www.npcpp.ie/about-us/contact-us

• Like us on Facebook: www.facebook.com/NationalParentsCouncilPP

• Follow us on Twitter: @NPCpp

• Link with your Constituent Body:

Fed-CSSPA PACCS ETBsNPA COMPASS
AFFILIATIONS PROGRAMME – JOIN NOW!

What are affiliation fees?
The National Parents Council post primary (NPCpp) introduced the Affiliation Programme in 2012. The programme is calling on Parents Associations, School Management Bodies, Trustee Associations, the National Association of Principals / Secretaries and Boards of Management to support NPCpp by voluntary contribution of €1 per pupil per annum.

What are the benefits of becoming affiliated to the National Parents Council post primary?
The National Parents Council post primary affiliates Parents Associations to provide stronger voice to parents of children in post primary schools. Affiliated Parents Associations will:

- Be formally recognised by the Department of Education and Skills (School Evaluation / Inspections)
- Get access to free training for parents and parents associations
- Be part of national parents body and actively contribute to the formation and development of policies
- Take part in surveys and have your voice heard at the national level
- Get access to advice and support for parents and parents associations locally and nationally
- Receive regular communications and updates, invitations to local and national events, caste study requests, petitions etc.
- Enjoy 10% discount on public liability insurance cover for Parents Associations from Brennan Insurances (www.brennaninsurances.ie)

Where does the money go?
The affiliation fees are used to support the below activities and work. The Department of Education and Skills supports the affiliation fee as a recognised expense on school funds.

- Training development and provision
- Exam Helpline
- Information to parents and parents associations (over the phone, online, printed leaflets etc.)
- Advocacy and policy development
- Communications & Events – National Conference, Spring Seminar, web & social media activities
- Representation of parents on national bodies and committees (Teaching Council, NCCA, Department of Education)
- Professional secretariat of the National Parents Council post primary
- Work and activities of Constituent Bodies of NPCpp

Questions? Contact our accounts at 01 830 27 40 or email accounts@npcpp.ie.

NATIONAL PARENTS COUNCIL POST PRIMARY

Unit 6/7, Building 125
OMNI Park Shopping Centre
Santry, Dublin 9
Phone: 01 830 27 40
Email: office@npcpp.ie