



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Committee for Education

**OFFICIAL REPORT
(Hansard)**

**Inquiry into School Councils: Save the
Children**

18 April 2012

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

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Members present for all or part of the proceedings:

Mr Mervyn Storey (Chairperson)
Mr Danny Kinahan (Deputy Chairperson)
Ms Michaela Boyle
Mrs Jo-Anne Dobson
Mrs Brenda Hale
Miss Michelle McIlveen

Witnesses:

Ms Nicole Breslin	Save the Children
Ms Niamh McGough	Save the Children
Ms Marie McGrellis	Save the Children

The Chairperson: Nicole, Marie and Niamh, you are very welcome. Our apologies for keeping you. When you were in earlier, we identified you as the ambassadors. Thank you for coming. Feel completely at ease; you are among friends. We have not had ambassadors here before, so we are very honoured to have you. Nicole, are you going to lead off?

Ms Nicole Breslin (Save the Children): No. *[Laughter.]*

The Chairperson: I will try again. Marie, you are going to lead off.

Ms Marie McGrellis (Save the Children): Yes. We are ambassadors for Save the Children, and we are here representing the 20 young people from Belfast and Derry who make up our group. As ambassadors for Save the Children, we work with the charity to come up with issues that are important to us and our communities. We have tried to get a campaign going. In 2010, we had our first End Child Poverty summit, which raised awareness of the problem of child poverty in Northern Ireland. In 2011, we launched our campaign, Education is the Key to Break the Cycle of Poverty, because we believe that more needs to be done to help children succeed in school. That led to our second summit, which was attended by two members of the Committee: Conall McDevitt; and Daithí McKay. We put forward our cause to the Assembly and a motion was tabled. We also met John O'Dowd, the Education Minister. We are here today to explain why school councils are an important way for children and young people to have their say.

Ms Breslin: I am going to talk about examples of student councils in our schools. When we shared our personal experiences, we discovered that school councils work very differently in each school. Some schools have different names for their student councils. For example, the pupils of St Cecilia's College in Derry refer to their council as the "leadership team". Another name we came across was the "student forum".

Another ambassador, who is not here today, said that her primary school had a student council and that those on the council had to draw up manifestoes and be elected by their fellow classmates. We then discovered that her secondary school, St Colm's High School, Belfast, does not have a student council.

Another example is St Columb's College in Derry. The members of its school council are elected after each boy stands up in front of their class and gives a speech about why they want to be on the council. The majority normally vote for whoever is funniest rather than who is level-headed.

The Chairperson: I was going to say that it is the same in politics. *[Laughter.]* Nothing really changes.

Ms Breslin: I will give you a positive example of how its student council worked. It raised an issue about the state of the bathrooms in the school, which the staff took on board. The toilets were then completely refurbished, and people were hired to clean them daily. So that worked really well for them. A more negative example would be from my own school, Thornhill College in Derry, an all-girls' grammar school. A statue was built in front of our school last year. It was absolutely hideous; it is awful.

The Chairperson: You are on record now here. Be careful. *[Laughter.]*

Ms Breslin: It cost a lot of money and we were not asked about it as students. We know as students that we have a right to some say, no matter how small, but we had no idea. So, they built the statue anyway. This year is my final year at Thornhill. Normally, every two years we have a school musical that students from Thornhill and other schools would take part in but this year we were not able to fund it. It is the first time in 15 years that it has fallen through because our school did not have the money.

Another example is that I am in my school senior basketball team and we were not able to enter the team in the league this year because we did not have the money. Obviously, that was heartbreaking for me and my fellow players. That is an example of how we did not have a say in how that money could have potentially been better spent. Those are our examples.

Ms McGough: When we all as ambassadors got together for a meeting, we discussed the role of school councils and the purpose of this inquiry, and we thought we should share some of our ideas on how we thought they could be improved.

First of all, they should involve direct contact with the principal and senior members of staff. I go to Thornhill College as well, and we work with the politics teacher, which is good because he knows what he is talking about when it comes to politics, but he does not have the influence or authority to make actual changes in the school. So the school council is more for show than anything else.

For school councils to be accountable, other students need to know what is going on. In our school, we do not even know what the school council is doing. I find out through friends but there are no regular updates. Students not on the school council should have a chance to put forward their opinions as well, even if they are not elected.

There should be more support from all teachers because, like I said, school councils are for show in most places. If there is more support from the teachers, other students may take more of an interest in it rather than thinking there is no real point if nobody is going to support them through it. School councils should be representative of school pupils, so there should be representatives from every year group because a lot may be just sixth formers or junior school, who do not have exams to worry about.

Before elections, pupils should be informed of what a school council is because before we started working with this for Save the Children, I did not know what a school council was or what it was

supposed to do. There are also a lot of misconceptions about what school councils do. If there were a clear definition put forward before elections in schools, it could help people to put themselves forward as members.

Finally, school council representatives from each school should meet with other schools and share the experiences of what they have been doing in their own school, so they can really share ideas and fix their own schools.

The Chairperson: On that last point, Niamh, we went to Limavady, which is not that far away from yourselves, and saw a very good example of not only one school but a number of schools because, geographically, they are very close. They have come together and had some very good ideas on things that they had brought forward. It would be useful and worthwhile for you to have a discussion with them because you are not that far away from each other.

That point you make in relation to what is happening in other schools is a vital point. I just made the comment that it is like a NILGA for school councils because obviously that is a federation or overarching body.

Mr Kinahan: I found that fascinating, particularly when you mentioned about not having enough funding for netball. That is an issue that is bigger than the school, and led me to exactly what Michelle was saying earlier. We need a way of gathering the information at a higher level to know that if there is a specific issue such as that for netball in a whole group of schools, we need to find a way of getting at the funding. We do need a system of getting the information that is not just for that school but for that area. I found that absolutely fascinating, so keep up the good work.

Ms Boyle: Thank you for your presentation. There is nothing like hearing it from the horse's mouth. Thank you for being very open and honest. My questions are similar to the ones I asked after the previous presentation. You are very confident young women. How do you, within the confines of your own schools, reach out to young people, boys and girls, who are not as confident, or young people with learning difficulties? How do you bring them on board within the school environment to get onto your council? I am sure that you would encourage them to be part of your council. Is that a job that you do within your own school councils?

Danny already mentioned netball, which I was going to mention as well. I came from an all-girls school and I found it very difficult. There is very little promotion of girls' sports, even within an all-girls school. In the main, it is normally soccer, Gaelic and rugby. You are quite right to point out netball, and Michelle mentioned it earlier. There is a lack of promotion around that. Keep up the good work in trying to get that on the curriculum. Thank you for your presentation.

The Chairperson: I notice that Kevin was not able to make it today.

Ms McGrellis: Yes, he is also in his final year at school and he could not make it for class reasons.

Ms Boyle: I want to get your opinion, if you have one — I have an opinion on it — on the two months off on school holidays in the summer. Do you have an opinion on that? Do you think it is too long?
[Laughter.]

The Chairperson: We will answer as politicians as well.

Ms McGrellis: I am a first year at the University of Ulster and, at the moment, my holidays are for around four months. For older students, I think two months is fine, because a lot of them start to find jobs, and that helps. I also have a younger brother, and, during the summer holidays, my mum tries to keep him occupied. It is the same with younger cousins. Because we are such a close family, everybody pitches in, but, in my opinion, I think that it is fine, because the two months go by pretty quickly. I know that, for some families, it is hard to keep younger children occupied, but I still think it is good, because you are in school all the time. I know that you have the mid-term breaks and Christmas holidays, but when can kids be kids?

Ms Breslin: Our lives revolve around school, essentially. It is a good length of time; I would not shorten it.

The Chairperson: A bigger issue — then we will ask Michaela what her opinion is — is that of schools having different times off. I have three children at three different schools, and they were all off at different times. Now, I have a big issue with my eldest girl, who is at the University of Ulster, with the amount of time that she is not there. Sometimes, she is there for three hours a day. I have a bigger issue with the time that they spend at university, but there is an issue about standard set times for holidays, because that causes all sorts of problems for parents when one child is at school and another is not at school. That is a huge issue. That would be a bigger issue to resolve than the length of the holidays.

Ms McGrellis: In my family, we all go to different schools, and it is a problem. It would be a lot easier just to keep the holidays at the same time.

The Chairperson: Yes. Teacher relief time and all that kicks in as well.

Mrs Hale: Thank you for coming. I apologise: I have a sore throat so I am whispering. It is really to go back to communication channels between school councils, senior management teams and boards of governors. Might it help to have a nominated person who would access those individuals or management groups for you? Do you think that that would help validate the school councils, so that it felt that its voice was being heard at the board of governors and SMT level?

Ms Breslin: Yes. I was on our school's student council when I was 14, 15 and 16. Those were the years when I was on it. As Niamh said earlier, it was basically for show. I joined the council thinking that I would be able to play a part in making policies and do some sort of decision-making, but that was not the case. I think it would definitely help if, within the council, one person was nominated and they had more of an address, more of a voice. Then it would work a lot better, and that person could inform the rest of the council.

Mrs Hale: Would it help if schools that have councils build the council into the pastoral care ethos, or the school ethos, so that the school council would have a nominated rep, who would move between the main bodies?

Ms Breslin: Yes.

Mrs Dobson: Thank you for your presentation. It was very refreshing to hear directly from you. Most of my questions have already been answered. However, I would like to ask you whether you think that school councils should be compulsory across primary and post-primary education? Do you think they would be more effective if they were compulsory and that their views would be given wider recognition by boards of governors or principals?

Ms Breslin: In secondary schools, yes, they should be compulsory. I thought that they were, but when we discussed it as a group, we found out that they were not.

Mrs Dobson: You talked about sharing ideas. If they were all compulsory, it might be easier to share ideas. Niamh, or maybe it was Nicole, said that she discovered, when she went to the next school, that some schools did not have a school council established. So if they were compulsory, it would be easier to share those ideas.

Ms Breslin: Yes, it would be a good way of communicating. If a secondary school's council is not operating quite as well, then it could take advice from other councils.

Mrs Dobson: It would make it easier to share ideas. Do you all feel that?

Ms McGrellis: Yes, definitely. In our school council we were given separate classes, in a way, including in citizenship and things like that. They were geared towards school councils. We always thought that there was a school council every year. There may have been some years when it was not as consistent

as others, or when there was not as much involvement. However, that was more due to the pupils, who maybe were not as confident as in other years. In my school, we had a leadership team: that was mostly composed of the school council members but we had younger students who were on the council as well. It was more the sixth-years who led it, and we listened. In secondary schools, school councils should be compulsory because you are at that age when you want to speak out more for yourself. You want to know how to do it.

Mrs Dobson: It gives you the opportunity.

Ms McGrellis: Yes. It gives you the opportunity. For myself, I know that, if I had not participated, I would not be able to speak in places like this.

Mrs Dobson: It helps your confidence in every aspect.

Ms Breslin: Yes. There are more benefits if it is compulsory.

Mrs Dobson: Nicole, did you say that you had a school council in your primary school?

Ms Breslin: It was another girl; another ambassador. She had one in her primary school.

Mrs Dobson: What do you think is the best way to get the message out to other pupils in other councils? Should it be done orally, in writing, by PowerPoint, Facebook, or Twitter? How would you like to see information and knowledge shared among schools?

Ms Breslin: It is best done face-to-face, in honesty.

Mrs Dobson: By meeting other pupils.

Ms Breslin: Yes. By meeting every six months or so.

Mrs Dobson: Direct contact is ultimately the best?

Ms McGough: Yes. It makes people listen to you. If it is on Facebook or something, you do not have to take it on. Face-to-face is best.

Ms McGrellis: If it comes from pupils, rather than teachers, it is best. For a lot of things, teachers say you have to join this and do that. A lot of people will think we are only doing this because we have to.

Mrs Dobson: Because it has been forced on you.

Ms McGrellis: It is better if it comes from a student. For me, it was a lot to do with the pupils I was listening to who said that it was a good opportunity. We made a presentation to other pupils encouraging them to join, so I know that that helped me, and I hope that it helped them as well.

Mrs Dobson: They saw how much you were getting out of it, which encouraged other pupils.

The Chairperson: You are ambassadors for Save the Children. Does that add value, in that you have more opportunities? If you did not have that role, and stayed in your own school councils, would you have the same opportunities?

Ms Breslin: No.

The Chairperson: Clearly, then, there is a role for other outside organisations to interact with schools, which is vital.

Ms McGrellis: The three of us were on the Foyle Youth Council in Derry when Save the Children came in and worked with us, which is how we got involved with Save the Children. We carried on ourselves, and

they asked whether we wanted to work as ambassadors. We put our names forward and continued to work for them. If the school councils got more involved and got more outside organisations to come in, a lot more opportunities would be available to pupils.

The Chairperson: There is also the big issue of social media, which we will want to think about, because schools discourage it for obvious reasons, such as protection. Even in Derry today, the police have issued warnings about things on social networks. However, it is valuable to young people if it is used constructively to encourage participation in school councils, and so on. That is an element of our inquiry that we may need to comment on, and I will put that down as a marker for us.

Ms McGrellis: We use Facebook a lot to communicate what we have been doing as ambassadors in Belfast and Derry. We use it constructively and properly.

The Chairperson: We would be very interested in something like that coming back to us, which would be very useful.

Miss M McIlveen: Thank you for coming today; it has been very interesting to hear from you. The point has been made, and it is a good one, that you need to go much further afield, rather than being insular in your own school council. The Chair mentioned NILGA; I know from personal experience, when I served on Ards Borough Council and got involved with NILGA, that it opened up other opportunities to get involved in outside bodies. For me, to build my confidence and hear opinions on various things and bring them back was critical for my own development, so I can see how that has worked for you.

Nicole, you mentioned one of the examples from one of the schools in relation to the selection process. You said, essentially, that the class comedian, or the person with the best personality on the day, got selected, perhaps, rather than the person with the best background or feel for the issues. There is also a problem for children who put themselves up for selection but are not elected. There is, perhaps, a feeling of failure. How can that be addressed? What are the best options for conducting a selection process or elections?

Ms Breslin: Kevin is not here today, but that is how the council was elected in his school. In my school, we had a poll in which we wrote a name on a piece of paper and put it in a box, and the votes were counted. That worked, in my form class anyway. I was selected as deputy and another girl was selected as the representative for our form class. We wanted to do it and our class knew that we wanted to do it. Maybe people could put their names forward before they say anything to their class, and then have a class discussion about it so that other people could nominate members of their class who they think would be good and should do it. They could discuss, as a group, who would be best for it. I think that would work.

Miss M McIlveen: Have you found that the same people each year get nominated or do some schools say that if you have done it for one year, you cannot do it another? So there is a rotation, which gives others the opportunity to be involved, rather than the person elected in form 1 remaining there until upper sixth.

Ms Breslin: It would be better that way. That is not how it is done in our school, but that would definitely be a better way. We had elections in our school in year 9 and then we just did not hold any more. When a group was needed from our school, we would ask student council members if they fancied having a day out at the Millennium Forum, the City Hotel or wherever.

Miss M McIlveen: So it is the same people all the time who get the opportunities, as opposed to sharing them?

Ms Breslin: Yes. So, as I say, it is the same people and others are kind of neglected in the whole thing. But that other way would definitely be better.

The Chairperson: Those are things that we need to think about in making recommendations or reaching conclusions. The other valuable point that you mentioned was that it is called different things in different places. Is "school council" the most appropriate term? Invariably, in Northern Ireland, and

any country, the terminology will determine how people respond and react. The minute that you use the word "council", they all think Derry Council, Limavady Council, Strabane Council, or whatever. They have an idea — good or ill — depending on their view of a particular local authority, and they just see that as being what all this is about. It may be better to call it a "leadership team" or something else. Even views on differing terminology would be useful, because what is used encourages or discourages. That was a valuable point that you made.

Ms McGrellis: Our school had a council and the leadership team, because our leadership team was more to do with prefects. So it was more to do with our head girl and deputy head girls and their prefects. The school council is separate. However, because our school had just opened a new building, our leadership team took on that role as we tried to get everything set up. We tried our best at it, and I think that we succeeded in making it a good year for that. I think that the terminology is something to think about as well.

The Chairperson: To conclude, the other point is the structure. Who sits on the school's senior management team? Do any pupils sit on it? Who sits on the school council? Do any teachers sit on it? We have discussed the issue of whether boards of governors ever get involved in school councils. Do pupils even know who the governors are or the role that their board plays? There is all of that. Does the board of governors know what is happening and what they are supposed to be doing?

All sorts of issues are raised that we want to try to highlight in a report that we can send to schools. We can say that we have carried out this inquiry and we hope that the report will help in the whole participative process. Thank you very much for coming. We wish you well as ambassadors for Save the Children.