

Minute of a meeting of the Dounby Community School Parent Group held on 23 February 2012.

Present:	Georgie Clark	Lorraine Cormack
	Isla Dougall	Steve Durkin
	Geraldine Ferguson (Clerk)	Dawn Flett (Treasurer)
	Alastair Forsyth (Head Teacher)	Katrina Gray
	Michelle Hill (Chair)	Tracey Miller
	Margaret Sinclair	Corina Taylor

1. Chair's Welcome and Apologies

Apologies had been received from Shenagh Leiper.

2. Approval of Minute of last meeting (24 November 2011)

The minute of the meeting held on 24 November 2011 was approved as an accurate record.

3. Matters Arising

Invitation to co-opted members: teacher representative

Alastair confirmed that Emma Jane Rendall and Nicola Moar were to share the role of parent representative on the Parent Group, but that, unfortunately, on this occasion neither had been able to attend.

Expenses claim form

The Clerk supplied copies of a new expenses claim form for members to use in future.

4. Correspondence received by Chair

The Chair passed around a copy of the latest Parent & Teacher magazine as well as copies of the new Parents as Partners promotional materials from Education Scotland. She had also received an invitation to respond to a Consultation on Developing a Safety System for Adventure Activities in Scotland, and some literature about the 2012 Scottish Education Awards. Michelle confirmed that she had, in the end, been able to submit a response to the call for evidence from the Commission on Rural Education, which members had discussed at the previous meeting.

5. Update from Head Teacher

School maintenance

Alastair began by reporting on his continued lack of success, despite raising the issue at director level within the Council, in obtaining a timescale for the repair or replacement of the school's wooden picket fence, which was badly rotted and dangerous. The latest development was that he had been told by Technical Services that the problem lay with the appointed contractors who were 'dragging their heels'.

Group members expressed their frustration at this situation and, after a brief discussion on the way forward, it was agreed that, on behalf of the Group, the Chair should raise the matter in writing with the local councillors for the West Mainland to see if this might speed things up.

Alastair went on to confirm that there were a number of other outstanding repair jobs, which he was doing his best to progress. Most of these had become necessary due to storm damage, for example the damage to the bike sheds, the loss of the play house, and the damage to fascia panels at the front of the school. The issue of new rugby posts had been raised that day with the Director of Leisure Services, and the Head Teacher was hopeful that this work would soon be carried out.

Ethos Survey

Thirty one parents (10% of parents or carers eligible to respond) had completed the Ethos Survey, carried out by Orkney Islands Council's Education and Leisure Services in an attempt to promote a positive ethos in all schools and help identify priorities for further development.

Alastair felt that the statistics from four answers from parents and carers had raised questions that the school needed to consider:

- 19.4% of parents who responded did not believe the school was effective in sharing pupils' achievements with the wider community.
- 31% of parents who responded did not know what out of school activities were available for their child in the area.
- 33% of parents who responded did not know whether the school planned a range of opportunities for them to be involved in their child's education.
- 17.2% of parents who responded disagreed that the headteacher and senior managers had good relationships with parents.

One of the main issues, therefore, seemed to be communication, which was of particular relevance to Parent Group whose role was to represent the views of parents and carers and encourage links between the school, parents and carers, pupils and the wider community. Alastair said that the school was always looking at ways of improving communication and gave the example of the school blog, which he felt was a good way of highlighting what was going on in the school.

There was also some good news from the survey, for example:

- 96.8% of parents agreed or strongly agreed that their child enjoyed learning at school.
- 96.8% of parents agreed or strongly agreed that the school was helping their child to become more confident.
- 96.8% of parents agreed or strongly agreed that they were treated fairly and with respect by the school.

The 60 or so children in Primary 4 to Primary 7 had also had their own survey to complete. All the children who were eligible to respond had done so, although some children had not answered all the questions. From the children's answers, only two questions raised issues that the school needed to consider urgently:

- Only 52.5% of pupils knew about discrimination and how to address it.
- 26.6% of pupils disagreed that pupils treated each other fairly and with respect. (Alastair confirmed that teachers had discussed this particular issue and, although they felt that there had, at the time of the survey, been a few normal friendship tensions within some classes that might explain this result, they were agreed on the importance of working with the children to improve attitudes and had started to do so.

Alastair concluded by explaining that the revised HMIE inspection procedures would in future be more reliant on information gathered from schools' own bespoke surveys. Additionally, this would be the last time that the Council would issue a survey and collate data across all the schools.

6. Information on the school's Home Learning Policy

The Chair explained that this item had been put on the agenda because a few parents had indicated prior to the meeting that they were either unhappy about or unsure about the reasoning behind changes to homework practices in Primary 1 and changes to the way reading was being taught in Primary 1 and Primary 2.

Some parents felt that the decision in Primary 1 to reduce the amount of homework given was taken without sufficient notice being given to parents. One parent felt that the new system of no homework other than reading in Primary 1 lacked the structure that she felt had worked well for her and her child – she had enjoyed spending some quality time after school helping her child to complete a set task. Some group members, however, liked the new, less prescriptive, system of homework in Primary 1 and Primary 2 because it allowed them more flexibility to organise weekly homework tasks around other after-school activities.

A range of views were expressed concerning the school's decision to change the practice of sending graded Oxford Reading Tree scheme books home for children to read to their parents in favour of a system whereby the child would take home their own choice of library book to read with a parent or carer using the 'read together' method. Some group members were in favour of this change because they felt it provided for a more varied and interesting reading experience and improved their child's reading. Others felt that it was a step backwards as the child's confidence and enjoyment could be affected if they chose a book that was too difficult for them.

Having listened carefully to the views expressed by group members, Alastair commented that this was an area where there were a lot of sensitivities due to the difficulty of pleasing everyone. While he understood that parents might have reservations about some of the changes that had taken place or been proposed, he also felt he needed to defend the freedom of teaching professionals to make certain decisions without consulting parents. Alastair felt that this was particularly the case with regard to how reading was developed in school. However, on the other hand, the school's homework policy was an area where parents' views were very important. It was for this reason that the school was about to consult parents to obtain their views prior to developing a new Homework Policy for the whole school. Alastair hoped that Parent Group members would help by commenting on the first draft of the questionnaire before it was circulated to all parents and carers.

As regards the changes to the way reading was taught in Primary 1 and 2, Alastair explained the type of reading activities the children performed in school and talked about his involvement in particular with Primary 1. He said that, since the new practice had been introduced, some good progress had been made, and from what he had observed children were enjoying the new way of working. He explained that children needed a broader experience of different books outside of the Oxford Reading Tree scheme, and that school wanted to encourage parents and carers to use the "read together" method, rather than expecting the child to read the book that is taken home. He believed this approach would build children's confidence and encourage them to read more.

Alastair reassured parents that The Oxford Reading Tree was still considered by staff a very valuable resource for the teaching of reading in school. However, the graded books needed to be used 'sight unseen' so that teachers could assess pupils' progress accurately – and sending the books home with children militated against this.

Alastair concluded the discussion by acknowledging that parents could perhaps have been given more notice of the changes to homework and reading practice in Primary 1 and 2, and that the school's willingness to support and involve parents could have been more clearly communicated to them. He encouraged parents to keep school informed of any difficulties and problems with reading at home so that teachers could do their best to resolve these.

7. Any other Competent Business

The Head Teacher confirmed the appointment of Katrina Gray and Kerry Flett to the two part-time auxiliary posts, which up to now had only been filled on a temporary basis. He also explained that a further two part-time (temporary) posts would be advertised in due course.

8. Date of Next Meeting

There being no other competent business the meeting concluded at 8.40 pm after it had been agreed that the next meeting would be held on 24 May 2012 at 7pm.