REACHING OUT TO PARENTS

An exploratory study of parents and schooling in Scotland

Report prepared by
GRAHAM ATHERTON
Research Officer, Scottish Consumer Council

SCOTTISH CONSUMER COUNCIL
4 SOMERSET PLACE, GLASGOW G3 7JT.
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The Scottish Consumer Council is to be congratulated on producing an interesting and informative document. There can be little doubt that parents, as consumers or clients of the education service, have a role to play in the provision of schooling for their children, which until recently has mainly involved teachers and administrators.

The Scottish Parent Teacher Council, as one of the main representatives of consumer opinion in education, welcomes the recommendations contained in the report, believing as it does that parents should be kept fully aware of their rights, responsibilities, and any opportunities to make their views known.

One of the most important aspects of the report is concerned with the amount of contact between parents and teachers; it has always been the policy of the SPTC that such contact should be increased if children are to get the best out of their formal education.

We hope that the topics covered here will be widely discussed and that the findings and recommendations of the report will assist such bodies as school councils and parent-teacher associations towards greater communication between parents and schools.

David Fraser,
Chairman,
Scottish Parent Teacher Council.

February 1979

The Scottish Consumer Council would like to thank householders who took part in the survey and those individuals and organisations who assisted or supplied comments during the preparation of the report.
INTRODUCTION

1.1 MAIN ISSUES

About one out of every three households in Scotland contains children of school age — at present numbering over one million. (1) As ratepayers and taxpayers these households are entitled to expect 'value for money' from their children's schooling, which in 1976/77 cost them £531 million — working out at £437 for each child attending school. (2) Over and above this expectation, however, is the principle that a parent should be responsible for providing his or her child with an 'efficient education', a principle which is given statutory support in the Education (Scotland) Act of 1962. Yet as both the clients and the providers of their children's education, parents are often in a poor position to respond to and evaluate the services run on their behalf. They not only need an intelligent awareness of the way the law does or does not act in their interests, but they also need to know how to put their interests into effect. This to a large extent is dependent upon the provision of advice and information in an accessible and readable form. Only then can they come to an intelligent decision and assessment regarding their child's education.

Legal provisions and facilities already exist for representing parents' interests. The 1962 Education Scotland Act, as well as putting parents under a duty to provide 'efficient education' for their children, also requires public authorities providing educational facilities to 'have regard to the principle that children are to be educated in accordance with the wishes of their parents' (Sections 31 and 29 respectively). But the law is so hedged in with qualifications on these two matters that it is doubtful whether many parents are fully aware of — let alone accurately understand — these duties and obligations.

Under the 1973 Local Government (Scotland) Act, which came into force in 1975, education authorities are required to set up school councils in their area, and these councils — which now number around 300 — have a special duty to represent parental interests in school management. They replace school-area sub-committees, set up under acts of 1918 and 1947, but they have greater powers of parent-school initiative than the former committees. Now that school councils have been in existence for two or three years, it is pertinent to enquire how many parents of pupils have heard of them and how many can describe their functions and activities.

Parent-teacher or parents' associations have traditionally provided the forum for representing parents' interests in school, but only since about 1970 have they really got off the ground in Scotland — and 98% or more of them are now believed to exist. About two thirds of schools are still without a parent-teacher or parents association, however, and where they do exist it is still not evident how many parents have any contact with them or how many meetings they attend.

Of course, the most obvious and direct means parents have at their disposal for dealing with their problems and representing their interests are by
personal visits to school and meeting education staff. But it is not so clear how much school visiting is actually done by parents, or what is the purpose of these visits — or indeed, who is spoken to on these occasions.

To answer these questions the Scottish Consumer Council commissioned a sample survey of householders, carried out by a market research organisation in the summer term of 1978. The Scottish Consumer Council wished to make its own assessment of: the degree of public and parental awareness of parents’ duties and rights, as set out in the Education Act; how many parents have a PTA or PA and attend meetings; how widely known and understood are school councils; and how much contact already exists between parents and schools. It is perhaps worth pointing out here that although the findings relate mainly to parents of children at primary and secondary school and to householders generally, many of the issues discussed are also relevant to parents of children of pre-school age, a third of whom attend nursery schools. Many of the recommendations at the end of the report will apply to these parents as well.

It is hoped that the survey results, discussion points, and recommendations presented in this report will prompt action and new initiatives towards greater parental involvement and consultation from all of those for whom the report is intended: individual parents and their representatives on school councils, parent-teacher associations, regional and community councillors, members of parliament, and central and local government officials.

1.2 WHY PARENTAL INVOLVEMENT MATTERS

It is now widely accepted that parents influence the development and ‘life chances’ of their children, although how this actually comes about is not wholly understood and subject to differing interpretations. However, there seems to be agreement that parents are influential in the following ways.

(1) Achievement in School

There is an accumulation of evidence that home circumstances and parental attitudes strongly influence achievement in school, as measured by standardised tests of attainment in reading and school examination grades. In certain cases this achievement occurs independently of intelligence test scores. (4) A recent Scottish study of children’s reading, for example, found that children of parents in semi and unskilled manual occupations made less progress as they moved through primary school than children of parents in more skilled occupations. This was the case even when the children from different occupational groups started off with similar reading attainments lower down the school. (5) According to a memorandum issued by the Scottish Education Department in 1974: “There is evidence that parental interest in, and sympathy with, the aims of the school influence the motivation and achievement of pupils at least as much as the circumstances (e.g. buildings, equipment, levels of staffing, curricula) in which they are taught.” (6)

(2) Learning outwith school

It is a truism that parents are involved in their children’s learning from the
moment of birth: through their mere presence in the home, the provision of play objects and books, and perhaps most importantly through language and communication. This involvement does not cease once children commence school, and what is learned out of school probably affects what is learned inside school. As sociologist Jean Floud has remarked: "Education is a comprehensive process which involves everyone who is in contact with the child. The people mostly concerned with the child outside the school are the family." (7)

(3) Codes of conduct and social control
Both parents and schools have a stake in children's codes of behaviour, which may either support or impair performance of the learning task. The outcome will be largely dependent on the extent to which parents and their children support the values of the school, as defined by teachers and those who manage education. It is likely to be positive to all concerned where teachers and pupils, schools and parents are closely attuned with one another's interests and perspectives. The Park Report, dealing with truancy and indiscipline in Scottish schools, said as much when it urged: "Every possible opportunity should be taken to bring parents and the community into the life of the school". (8)

(4) Community and vocational education
For children, parents are the prime representatives of the community of which they form part: in terms of their occupational status, housing, area of residence, material living standards, leisure activities, beliefs and prejudices. Inevitably some or all of these factors will make their mark on children's conceptions of themselves and on what children expect to achieve as future adults. These self-conceptions and expectations critically determine the use pupils make of opportunities placed before them in school: choice of course or subject, careers guidance, preparation for further or higher education and extra-curricular activities. Schools, parents, and the community are not separate entities which can be neatly partitioned by classroom walls or parental 'non-interference'. The development of 'community schooling', involving joint parent-pupil participation in a wide range of school activities, is perhaps a belated recognition of this all-too-obvious inter-relationship.

1.3 SURVEY METHODS
A sample of 954 adults aged 15 and over were interviewed in June and July 1978, in 36 Scottish parliamentary constituencies in all education authorities except the islands councils. Within each constituency, addresses were selected at random but with the number of completed interviews being set at quotas for working and non-working men and women, to yield a representative spread of ages, sex and social classes. (9) At each address one household member (aged over 15) only was interviewed, with successive interviews taking place at least five households apart. Post-pilot interviews and the processing and tabulation of questionnaire responses were carried out by System Three (Scotland) Limited. As indicated below the sample is broadly representative of the Scottish population on sex, age and socio-
economic criteria, although professional and managerial groups are to some extent under-represented. (10)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sub sample</th>
<th>Number of respondents</th>
<th>Sample proportions</th>
<th>Population (UK)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Males</td>
<td>462</td>
<td>48%</td>
<td>48%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Females</td>
<td>492</td>
<td>52%</td>
<td>52%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15–34</td>
<td>401</td>
<td>42%</td>
<td>35%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>35–54</td>
<td>276</td>
<td>29%</td>
<td>35%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>55 and over</td>
<td>277</td>
<td>29%</td>
<td>30%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Professional/managerial</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>7%</td>
<td>15%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Skilled non-manual</td>
<td>217</td>
<td>23%</td>
<td>22%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Skilled manual</td>
<td>342</td>
<td>36%</td>
<td>32%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Semi/unskilled manual</td>
<td>332</td>
<td>34%</td>
<td>32%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Any children at school</td>
<td>317</td>
<td>33%</td>
<td>—</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No children at school</td>
<td>637*</td>
<td>67%</td>
<td>—</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* 199 of these respondents had children at school, but do not now, and 200 had children of pre-school age only. Thus over half of the total sample had had some parental experience of schooling.

REFERENCES AND NOTES

3. These figures are approximate and provisional, pending completion and publication of a survey being conducted on behalf of the Scottish Parent-Teacher Council.
8. Scottish Education Department, Truancy and Indiscipline in Schools in Scotland (The Pack Report), HMSO, 1977 (para. 3.54)
9. The social class of respondents was based upon the current or most recent occupation of the household head, using the classification of the Interviewers' Guide on Social Grading, on which population estimates (U.K.) were based.
10. The proportion of household heads in professional and managerial occupations in Scotland is lower than the proportion in the UK as a whole, so that the observed discrepancy need not be due entirely to sampling error.
The ratio of parents of primary pupils to those of secondary pupils was of the order 13:7, approximating the 600,000 primary and 400,000 secondary pupils in the school population.
SURVEY RESULTS

2.1 LEGAL DUTIES AND RIGHTS OF PARENTS

Parents are under a legal duty to provide their child with "efficient education suitable to his age, ability and aptitude by causing him to attend a public school regularly or by other means". (Section 31 of the Education (Scotland) Act 1962). Most other European countries place a similar duty on parents, although in Austria and Greece this duty is placed on the father only. Parents are under no obligation to send their child to school if they can convince the education authority that they can provide their child with efficient education suitable to his age, ability and aptitude "by other means". Indeed a group of parents in England have formed themselves into a group called "Education Otherwise" (the term "otherwise" being taken from the equivalent provision in Section 36 of the 1944 Education Act) to provide instruction for their children at home because they have lost confidence in the ability of schools to educate their children as they would wish. (1) The education authority must, in such circumstances, be satisfied about the quality of education provided by parents if it is not to serve an attendance order on them (Section 37 of the 1962 Act). But responsibility does not rest exclusively with parents. The education authorities are also under an obligation to provide "adequate and efficient" education facilities in their area to enable parents to perform their duty (Section 1 of the 1962 Education (Scotland) Act). Thus the concept or provision is very broad in its application and is not free of a certain amount of ambiguity. While parents would appear to be primarily responsible for providing their children with education, the education authority is responsible for ensuring that parents carry out their duties properly.

When asked who was primarily responsible for providing children with efficient education, 53 per cent of householder in the Scottish Consumer Council survey replied "parents" and another 32 per cent replied "education authorities", while 21 per cent mentioned "the government". (Fifteen per cent of householders mentioned "teachers" and 4 per cent "the district council"). Over a fifth of householder (22 per cent) referred to more than one agency, usually "parents" and "the education authority". Some 50 per cent of parents in the sample, however, failed to mention parents as being in any way responsible for providing their child with efficient education, even when shown a prompt card by the interviewer. Householders without any children at school (including those with children above or below school age) were no worse informed than those with children at school, 55 per cent of them mentioning "parents" as being primarily responsible for providing their children with education.

As a follow-up to the previous item, householders were asked to indicate from a set of given responses what is the legal responsibility of parents with respect to their children's education. Some 56 per cent correctly replied,
"to provide an efficient education", which is fairly consistent with the proportion above mentioning "parents". Other mentions were:

"To select a suitable school in their area" 20%
"To assess standards" 10%
"To ensure school properly equipped" 7%
"To support school functions" 3%

No statistically significant age, sex or socio-economic differences emerged in householders' responses to this item.

Parental involvement does not end here, however. Section 29 of the Education (Scotland) Act 1962 also requires education authorities to "have regard" to the general principle that children are to be educated in accordance with the wishes of their parents as far as this is "compatible with the provision of suitable instruction and training and the avoidance of unreasonable public expenditure." The wording of the section is important. It does not say that authorities shall provide education in accordance with parental wishes; it merely lays down a principle to which the authority must "have regard". Even then, the wishes of parents can be over-ridden where compliance with them would interfere with the provision of "efficient instruction" or cause "unreasonable public expenditure" (e.g. school overcrowding, extra staffing or transport costs).

Whether the Act in provides parents with any real choice is debatable. And the principle that parents should be given more "choice" is open to educational and political dispute. It could be argued, for example, that extending choice too far may well end up giving some parents more choice than others (e.g. where "popular" schools create "unpopular" ones). On the other hand, as Michael (now Lord) Young has argued, private education could become more popular in the long run if publicly maintained schooling remains too uniform, giving parents too little choice, and fails to become more diversified. (2) The evidence in this report does not permit an assessment of whether parents should be given more choice. Such an assessment would need to take into account a complex range of administrative, demographic and sociological factors affecting choice in different areas of Scotland. Moreover, consideration would have to be given to the sort of choice parents should be given. Should "choice" simply mean allowing parents to pick and choose between different schools offering basically similar courses, or should parents be given more choice, say, within schools or between different types of courses? These questions cannot be answered here. What this section attempts to do is to determine how many parents think they have some choice over which school to send their child and to compare their assessments with existing legal and administrative provisions.

The majority of householders in the survey – 56 per cent – believed that parents had no choice at all except by sending their child to a private school or moving into the catchment area of the preferred school. A third (32 per cent) gave the legally correct answers that parents had choice if "instruction at the chosen school is suitable and does not involve unreasonable expenditure" or where "places are available and transport can be provided". Only 11 per cent of respondents believed that "there is complete choice". Similar
patterns of response were obtained from householders with and without children at school and of different age, sex, and socio-economic status. Overall then, over two thirds of respondents — including parents — thought parents had no or very little choice over children’s schooling.

There are no nationally agreed explicit guidelines laid down in Scotland for the allocation and transfer of pupils to schools. (3) A Manual of Guidance, published by the Ministry of Education in 1950 (and revised in 1960) does specify certain criteria education authorities may use in allocating pupils, but it applies only to schools in England and Wales, not to Scotland. Those criteria include: religious denomination; linguistic character of instructions; provision of a particular type of advanced work at a particular school; convenience of access and avoidance of traffic dangers; family association with a particular school; and medical reasons (including “bullying”). (4) Each education authority does, however, make its own arrangements for allocating and transferring pupils to schools. All education authorities have schemes for the transfer of pupils from primary to secondary school, which must be approved by the Secretary of State, and some authorities use such schemes for their transfer arrangements at other stages. (5) In Strathclyde, while pupils are normally expected to attend the school ‘zoned’ for their area of residence, parents may request a transfer from their divisional educational officer, who will refer the application to the school council on which the desired school is represented. In deciding whether or not to grant a transfer, the school council will consider: any observations from the pupil’s present headteacher; whether accommodation can be provided in the chosen school without at the same time depriving pupils in the catchment area of places; the proposed transport arrangements between home and school; any additional costs which have to be borne by the authority; and the recommendations of the divisional education officer. Parents were originally required to state reasons for their choice, but it is understood that they need no longer do so. In the session of 1976, 2,093 parents in Strathclyde applied for exceptional admissions and transfers to schools. Over 1,700 of these applications were granted; a further 72 were turned down initially, but granted on appeal. In Lothian, where a ‘zoning scheme’ also operates, the transfer arrangements relate mainly to transfers from primary to secondary school. A circular letter is sent out each year to parents of primary 7 pupils, informing them of the secondary school allocated to them. Parents may request a transfer to an alternative school, giving reasons and any exceptional circumstances related to their choice. Parents are advised that their requests are unlikely to be granted except in special circumstances (e.g. to ensure siblings attend same secondary school or where normal transfer would be contrary to the educational or other interests of the child); and then only if there is accommodation in the alternative school and pupils living in the chosen school’s catchment area are not denied places). Parents are also informed that they have a right of appeal to the transfer committee. In 1978, 390 out of 613 such requests from parents were granted by the region. (6)

Where a request for a transfer of school has been turned down by the education authorities, some parents — in very exceptional cases — have appealed to
the Sheriff Court. But they have first had to get their education authority to serve an attendance order by withdrawing their child from school. The steps and risks involved are described in the appendix, not necessarily with a view to encouraging parents to use them, but to indicate that parents who wish to express their preference of school have the legal means to do so. In Davison v Dunfermline District Education Sub-committee, 1974, for example, the Sheriff ruled that an education authority could not invoke a rigid zoning policy to compel attendance at a particular school; a parent was not required to give reasons for his choice of school, and in this case the authority had failed to offer any educational or economic reasons for rejecting the parent’s preference. (7) In a similar successful appeal, Kidd v Kilpatrick School Council, 1977, the Sheriff ruled that:

“Where a parent wishes to attend a school other than that designated by the education authority, it is, in my view, quite clear that there is no onus on the parent other than to make his wishes known. He does not have to show that his case is an exceptional case, that there are special reasons why his child should attend the school of his choice rather than the designated school. It is for the education authority to show, if they do not agree, that a parent’s request is incompatible with the provision of suitable instruction and training and the avoidance of unreasonable public expenditure.” (8)

An interesting side-effect of the case was that the Sheriff varied instead of merely annulling the attendance order, thus obviating the possibility that the parent, having ‘won’ his case, might have to go through the procedure all over again should he be offered another school which is still not of his choice. While court rulings such as these are not legally binding in Scotland, the Sheriff would normally have to have good reasons for rejecting the decisions of his predecessors.

Under the new Education Bill, applying to England and Wales, parents would be given a right to express their preference of school and education authorities would be required to set up and publicise arrangements for allocating pupils to schools. These provisions will not apply to Scotland, where the Scottish Office has said there is “no need” for similar legislation. (9) Various observers have suggested that “parental choice” is not such a strong issue in Scotland as it is south of the border. Relatively more parents in Scotland live in areas of scattered population — including remote island areas — where “choice” of school is less feasible. There is also a tradition of attending the local or village school in some parts of Scotland, possibly dating back to the Act for the Settling of Schools, 1696, providing a school for every parish. Moreover, Scotland has had a relatively more uniform system of comprehensive secondary education than England and Wales, where 20 per cent of maintained schools are still selective. A weakness of existing legislation in England and Wales is that a parent may select the school to be named in the attendance order, to which the education authority must normally agree. This has led to overcrowding in some schools, and a new provision in the Bill will allow LEAs to declare a school full. No such difficulty has arisen in Scotland, where the school named in the attendance order is left to the discretion of the education authority. However, none of this means that
parents in Scotland should not be given an opportunity to express their preference of school before allocation takes place, nor that education authorities should not be required to publicise their admissions policies and arrangements, these being two of the Bill's key provisions. The bill also gives parents a statutory right to appeal to their LÉA (who must set up appeals machinery) without having in the first instance to seek an attendance order or appeal directly to the Secretary of State. Parents in Scotland must continue to rely on whatever non-statutory arrangements exist in their area, short of appealing to the Sheriff.

Overall, then, in a legal and administrative sense, parents in Scotland are provided with a measure of choice over their children's schooling. However, it would be naive to suppose that parents exercise any real choice in the sense that they may freely pick and choose between the schools or types of course in their area. As already indicated, demographic and sociological factors affect the degree of choice very considerably, so that parents who replied in the questionnaire that they had "no choice" may well have been responding with a fair degree of accuracy to a locally perceived situation. It would seem, though, that if parents are to come to any informed assessment about whether or not they should have more choice — and if so, what sort of choice — they should at least know about existing arrangements for giving them choice, limited as these may be. The most effective way of doing this, it would seem, would be for education authorities to fully publicise their existing arrangements and appeals procedures for the allocation and transfer of pupils. At the same time, school councils and parents' associations (discussed in the following sections) should also be encouraged to debate the meaning and desirability of choice, both within and between schools, looking carefully at the pros and cons, determining whether existing arrangements need to be changed or not and asking whether legislation proposed for England and Wales is also needed in Scotland.

2.2 SCHOOL COUNCILS

School councils were set up under section 125 of the Local Government (Scotland) Act, 1973, to "discharge the functions of management and supervision" of schools in their area. Each school council must contain "due representation" of parents of pupils, at least one member of teaching staff, and a representative of religious interests associated with schools under its supervision. Although every public school must be represented on a school council, there is no requirement that there must be as many school councils as there are schools. Indeed, of the 300 of more school councils in Scotland, only 17 of them represent single schools. A Scottish Department memorandum, issued in 1974, stated that school councils were set up to ensure effective "two way communication between the education committees and its officers and local communities ... particularly in the larger regions where the size of the population, and for many, physical distance are bound to impart the disadvantages of remoteness from the decision-makers". (10)

In this context, the Scottish Consumer Council was interested in finding out how many people had already heard of school councils and how well informed they were about their main functions and activities. According to
the survey carried out on the Scottish Consumer Council's behalf, just under two fifths (39 per cent) of those interviewed — including 45 per cent of parents — had heard of school councils. Given that this reply was prompted, these figures are probably over-estimates. (11) Householders from professional and managerial occupations were more likely to say that they had heard of school councils (63 per cent) than those from either skilled occupations (43 per cent) or semi- and unskilled manual occupations (27 per cent). About the same proportion of householders — 43 per cent — had heard of school boards of governors, a strikingly similar result to a poll conducted independently by the National Consumer Council. Again, professional and managerial groups appeared to be better informed than other socio-economic groups. (The recent publication of the Taylor report (12) on school government in England and Wales may have heightened awareness of governing bodies; and it may be that professional and managerial groups have had more contact with schools in England and Wales and Scottish fee paying schools, where boards of governors normally operate). One quarter of householders had heard of the Advisory Centre for Education, which provides — through its publication Where? — advice and information to parents about schools in England and Wales. Only 8 per cent had heard of the Consultative Committee on the Curriculum, set up in 1965 to advise the Secretary of State and have general oversight of primary and secondary school curricula in Scotland.

Of the 370 respondents claiming to have heard of school councils — including 143 parents of pupils — over half of them correctly selected either teachers or parents as being represented on them. Religious representatives who are also required to sit on school councils, were selected by only 12 per cent of respondents. Full results are set out below:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>What kind of people are represented on school councils</th>
<th>Householders generally</th>
<th>Parents of Pupils</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Parents</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teachers</td>
<td>58</td>
<td>57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pupils</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Religious representatives</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Community representatives</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Local councillors</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Others</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Don't know</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(Number of respondents, i.e. who have heard of school councils) (370) (143)

Over one fifth of the sub-sample admitted that they did not know who was supposed to be represented on school councils. Another 10 per cent (38 respondents) mentioned representatives other than those given above: "professional" and "business" people were mentioned by a third of these.
38 respondents, doctors, lawyers and JP's by another third, and members of parliament, civil servants, and local government officials by the remaining third.

One quarter of respondents who had heard of school councils correctly identified their main task as assisting in school management and supervision. The responses selected are shown below.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Main purpose of school councils</th>
<th>Householders generally</th>
<th>Parents of pupils</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>To assist in school management</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To assess educational standards</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To advise Scottish Educ. Dept.</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To run school social functions</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To raise school funds</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To develop school curriculum</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other answers</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Don't know</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No. of respondents (i.e. who had heard of school councils)</td>
<td>(370)</td>
<td>(143)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

While some or all of the "incorrect responses" might conceivably fall within the activities of school councils, they indicate that 65 per cent of respondents had only a hazy notion of their general function.

The 143 parents who had heard of school councils were next asked to say whether there was a school council concerned with their children's school. Forty five per cent correctly said that there was and only 14 per cent incorrectly replied that there was not — but 41 per cent said that they did not know. Of the 65 parents saying there was a school council concerned with their child's school, 21 of them were able to describe things they had done. They gave the following sorts of answers:

- "Raised funds for social events."
- "Arranged transport for children."
- "Discussion about whether school uniforms should be worn."
- "Tried to look into secondary school availability."
- "Started a thrift shop."
- "Provided a mini bus."
- "Arranged school holiday abroad."
- "Runs play scheme for children during holidays."
- "Got an old tenement pulled down — a hazard to children on way to school."
- "Ran a sponsored silence."

The necessarily small size of this sub-sample places limits on the degree of confidence one can place in the finding, but even a conservative statistical estimate of what would be obtained from repeated sub-sampling suggests that at most 40 per cent of respondents would be able to describe any work done by their school council. A similar consideration applies to the 31 out of 65 parents who were able to name their school council representative.
School councils are the subject of a fuller investigation by Dr. Alastair Macbeth and Mr. Malcolm MacKenzie of Glasgow University's Department of Education, whose final report is due to be published later this year. In their interim report, *Foundation Facts about Scottish School Councils, 1977*, the authors noted that the structure and management activities of school councils are not made explicit in the Act setting them up and that they vary from authority to authority. In Strathclyde, for example, there were only 81 school councils representing 199 secondary schools and their feeder primaries whereas in Orkney, Shetland and the Western Isles, there were altogether 39 of them. (The memorandum issued by the Scottish Education Department in 1974 had recommended that there should normally be one school council for one secondary school and its feeder primaries, and the Taylor Committee recently recommended that each maintained school in England and Wales should have its own governing body). These investigators also found enormous variations in the size of school councils: from 3 to 76 members, with an average size of 26 (the Taylor Report recommended a minimum membership of 8 and a maximum of 24). School councils were found to be by no means uniform in their functioning and activities either. While most of them were involved in the expansion and contraction of school provision, fixing of holiday dates, letting of school premises, school attendance and publicity, in only seven authorities was there provision for curricular issues in school council constitutions, with even fewer dealing with discipline, careers guidance, staff appointments, inter-school links, and extra-curricular activities. In their analysis of 8,451 items from school council minutes during 1976-77, the investigators found that over half the discussion topics related to “home-school-community” issues (exceptional transfers of pupils, lettings, transport, publicity, truancy and zoning), with another 28 per cent related to “non-educational in-school” issues (property maintenance, school holidays, uniforms, etc.). Ten per cent of discussion items were concerned with “educational issues”.

School councils have also been the subject of a certain amount of criticism, although this has not necessarily been directed at school councils in all areas. In a recent submission, for example, the regional branch of CASE (Campaign the Advancement of State Education) claimed that school councils in Strathclyde were poor at informing parents and pupils about their discussions; that meetings were arranged at unpredictable times; that elections of members were underpublicised; and that the press and public were discouraged from attending meetings. (13) Similar criticisms have come from a study by McKechin, who said that school councils in the region had failed to develop “meaningful participation” between home and school, adding that the non-statutory appointments were seldom imaginative or innovative (with no formal provision for community council representation). (14) All education authorities have been reviewing school councils in their area and Strathclyde now wants them to co-operate closely with parents. On the credit side, authorities such as Lothian, have used school councils to discuss the Munn, Dunning and Pack Reports (dealing with curriculum, assessment and discipline and truancy) with parents in their area. These meetings are open to the press and the public, attempts have been made to publicise elec-
tions (with limited success, though), minutes are circulated among public libraries and many school councils publish their own newsletters for parents. School councils have also been delegated powers to encourage the formation of parent-teacher associations. Such welcome developments as these are needed in all other areas if school councils are to become known and understood by all parents.

2.3 PARENT-TEACHER AND PARENTS’ ASSOCIATIONS

No complete figures currently exist on the number of parent-teacher and parents’ associations in Scotland, but the Scottish Parent Teacher Council (SPTC) estimates that there are over 980 of them — covering about a third of all publicly-maintained schools. This, of course, means that at least two out of every three schools are still without a PTA or PA. Provision varies from area to area, however. In Lothian region, for example, 70 per cent of primary and secondary schools have a PTA (although the percentages of nursery and special schools having one are much lower). Schools are under no obligation to set up a PTA, but as already indicated some school council constitutions do provide for their active promotion. According to a survey commissioned by the Scottish Parent Teacher Council, almost three quarters of PAs and PTAs in Scotland have been formed since 1970. Most of them meet once a month during term time and fund raising appears to be their most common activity. Parents are, apparently, far more likely to attend social functions than educational talks or discussions. About two thirds of the office bearers are parents and one third teachers (half of whom are head teachers). Many rural and nursery schools, however, report having “excellent” parent teacher relations without feeling any need to set up formally a PTA. (15)

The Scottish Consumer Council’s survey was focussed on parents rather than schools, so its findings are not directly comparable with those of the SPTC above. According to the SCC survey, nearly two thirds of parents (64 per cent) said that there was a PTA (or PA) at their children’s school (slightly more parents of secondary pupils than parents of primary pupils mentioned having a PTA). Of the remainder, 14 per cent of parents said their child(ren)’s school did not have a PTA — while 20 per cent said that they did not know. Of these 204 parents saying that there was a PTA at their child(ren)’s school, three quarters said that they had not attended any meetings in the last two terms. About 20 per cent had attended one to three meetings. There was no evidence, however, that parents from professional and managerial backgrounds attended more meetings than parents from other socio-economic groups having PTAs, thus casting some doubt on the notion that all PTAs are “middle class”. (Although it is probably still the case that fewer PTAs are found in working class areas). Only slightly more (80 per cent) of the male parents with a PTA or PA reported being non-attenders than females (70 per cent).

Neither the SPTC survey nor the SCC’s own investigation permit one to make any valid inferences about the effectiveness of parent-teacher or parents’ associations. Absence of a school PTA or low attendance at meetings could simply mean that parents are already satisfied with what the school is doing
and perceive no need to get involved. It may be that in some areas school councils effectively do the work of PTAs. On the other hand, a school may be without a PTA because parents have not been told how to form one or because the head teacher is not 'convinced' that the school needs one. The benefit of the doubt in such instances ought to be given to parents, who should be given as much advice and assistance as necessary from school staff in setting up and running a PTA. Leaflets issued by the Scottish Parent Teacher Council should be made freely available in schools without a PTA and all school councils should have written into their constitutions the formation and encouragement of PTAs. (16) More research is also needed on: how PTAs and PAs are formed; their objectives and activities; the characteristics of their membership; and how they relate to school staff, school councils and other groups.

4. PARENT-SCHOOL CONTACT

Contact between parents and schools does not, of course, depend on the existence of a school council or PTA, and the majority of parents rely on individual contact with school staff, either during normal school hours, at parents' days or evenings, or — less frequently — in their own homes. The results of the SCC survey indicate that a majority — 62 per cent of parents — had made one or more special visits to their child's school over the past 6 months; but 24 per cent "could not recall" whether they had done so, and 14 per cent said that they definitely had not. Some 42 per cent of parents claimed to have visited their child's school within the past month and a further 26 per cent had done so in the past two or three months. But parents in non-manual occupations mentioned more visits on average (2.4) than parents in manual occupations (1.6). One quarter of fathers — as against 4 per cent of mothers — claimed never to have visited their children's school over the previous six months. Parents of secondary pupils mentioned about as many school visits as those of primary pupils. When asked to describe the reasons for their last school visit, parents gave the following set of responses:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Reasons for last school visit</th>
<th>Percentages</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>To discuss child's educational progress</td>
<td>44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To attend a school open day</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To attend a parents' meeting</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To discuss child's attendance</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To discuss child's career</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To attend a sports event/social function</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unclassified responses</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Number of respondents)</td>
<td>(317)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

On this occasion, 72 per cent of parents reported seeing the "class teacher", followed by the head or assistant head teacher, (22 per cent), the subject teacher (13 per cent), and the careers or guidance teacher (4 per cent). Eight per cent said that they had not spoken to any members of the teaching staff on this occasion.
Interpretation of the sets of figures on the previous page is far from straightforward. Showing that not all parents visit their child's school regularly does not prove conclusively that parent-school communication is poor or inadequate. Contact may be effected in other sorts of ways: through newsletters, circulars, notices, or even through teachers or parents' 'notes'. Moreover, it is not clear what valuation should be placed on the frequency of visits by parents. There are indications, however, that the amount of school visiting done by parents in Scotland and the UK as a whole is low relative to such countries as Sweden, where parents may also consult teachers by telephone at pre-arranged times. Both the duration of visits and the quality of discourse with members of staff will also dictate whether visits to school by parents are in fact worthwhile. Some further light is shed on the issue, however, by an opinion poll — covering the UK — recently conducted by the National Consumer Council. Here it was found that while 83 per cent of the 640 parents sampled were "very satisfied" with the way their children were being educated, 39 per cent felt that they were not told enough about teaching methods used in school and 28 per cent thought that they were not told enough about their child's progress. Although 74 per cent believed that teachers seemed to be "very pleased" when parents went along to see them, 24 per cent felt that they would be "interfering" if they went along to the school uninvited — and 14 per cent thought that teachers wanted to keep parents out of school altogether.

It would appear, then, that a third of more parents have no regular or meaningful form of contact with their children's school. Contact may be inhibited where:

1. Parents are unable to obtain release from employment or from caring for dependents in order to visit school or attend parents' meetings. Geographical isolation may also prevent attendance at meetings.

2. Parents are afraid or reluctant to discuss their child's progress with school staff (perhaps as a result of their own 'unhappy' experiences of schooling).

3. Parents have concluded — partly as a result of socio-economic values and expectations — that their child is making poor progress or unlikely to profit from formal education. They may 'give up' in their interest or support relatively early on in their child's school career.

4. Friction or animosity exists between parents and school staff — either on an individual or a collective scale — perhaps as a result of personality differences, a history of long-standing disputes, or simply as a result of a generalised and inarticulated distrust.

These factors are not exhaustive, but they are sufficient to indicate that where parent-school contact is poor or non-existent, initiative for bridging the gaps must ultimately rest with the school or education authority. Staff could make themselves available to parents who, for the sort of reasons given above, cannot or choose not to visit school. There is in fact already some scope (albeit very limited) for allowing teachers to do this without necessarily undermining their conditions of service. The contract laid down by the Scottish Teachers Service and Conditions Committee, while requiring
teachers attend school during the "normal school day", also stipulates that "there shall be flexible arrangements for the balance of time within normal hours which is outside the school day. During this period essential non-teaching duties (e.g. preparation, correction) should be carried out, either in the school premises or elsewhere at the teachers' discretion." While clearly not drafted with home-school liaison work in mind, this provision may well have valid application to "essential" home visiting. A further provision relates to the payment of allowances for teachers conducting "twilight classes" between the end of the school day and 6.30 p.m. — and this might possibly afford opportunity for contact with parents. (17)

Generally, however, schools or individual teachers who have initiated special contacts with parents outwith normal school hours have done so as part of their unpaid overtime. Some recent endeavours to bring parents and schools closer together indicate the need to provide in-built home-school liaison work in teacher contracts. In Northern Ireland, for example, the central government has sponsored (since 1976) the appointment of some 200 home-school liaison teachers, who spend eight hours a week on teaching duties and the rest of their time contacting parents and organising parent-school activities. They are usually experienced teachers selected from the school in which they carry out home-school liaison work. They are expected to have a good knowledge of the community in which they work. They also provide classroom cover for colleagues who have arranged to meet parents in school. The scheme has apparently been well received by parents and schools alike and demand for sponsored appointments evidently exceeds supply. Although no comparable large scale scheme exists in Scotland, there are indications that some schools here are becoming alive to the need to foster effective home-school links. These links may range from voluntary home visits by teaching staff and the attachment of social workers or youth and community workers to particular schools to the setting up of "community schools" which see parents and the local community as part and parcel of their teaching activities. In parts of Glasgow and elsewhere there are already several experimental schemes involving parent-school co-operation (e.g. home visiting scheme in Moorpark Estate, Govanhill). (18) But none of these ventures is sufficiently widespread or developed to permit one to draw any firm conclusions as to the educational effectiveness of parent-school contact. That is why education authorities and individual schools need to develop more schemes and experiments of their own through which the educational significance of reaching out to parents may properly be gauged.

REFERENCES AND NOTES
1. See article "Schools Out" by Caroline Western in the November, 1978, issue of She magazine.
3. The Schools General (Scotland) Regulations, 1975, merely states: "No pupil shall be refused admission to a public school in an education area in which he is ordinarily resident except where admission or continued attendance would be inconsistent with the arrangements made by the education authority for the provision of education in the area". 

17
5. See Section 30 of the Education (Scotland) Act, 1962.
6. Figures supplied by Lothian and Strathclyde regional councils.
7. Dunfermline Sheriff Court, 18th June 1974 (not reported). See also article by A. Davison (the parent in the case) in The Times Educational Supplement (Scotland), 31st January 1975.
9. According to a Scottish Office Press Notice, issued November 24th 1978, “In England and Wales, the law on school admissions is confusing and to some extent contradictory, and the extent to which parents can express a preference varies widely from area to area. No similar need for legislation exists in Scotland.” At the time of writing, the Bill was entering its committee stage in the Commons.
11. It is also possible that a small number of respondents might have confused school councils with the Schools Council, a body concerned with the curriculum and assessment in schools in England and Wales (but not Scotland).
15. We are grateful to Scottish Parent Teacher Council Project for supplying this information.
16. Scottish Parent Teacher Council publications include, Why have a PTA?, Setting up a PTA and When the Head teacher is Not Convinced, available from 4 Queensferry Street, Edinburgh. The SPTC also publishes its own Review periodically and has produced summaries of the Munn, Dunning and Pack Reports.
CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

3.1 LEGAL DUTIES AND RIGHTS OF PARENTS

The Education Act requires that parents provide "efficient education" for their children and that education authorities in proving suitable facilities "have regard" to the principle that children are to be educated in accordance with parental wishes. But sections of the Act are so hedged in with qualifications that a large number of parents are understandably unclear or misinformed about what these duties and rights are. Education authorities each run their own schemes for taking parental wishes into account when allocating or transferring pupils to schools, but these arrangements — including appeals procedures — are not always made very explicit to parents.

Recommendation 1

Parents should be informed — in the clearest possible terms — about their legal rights and duties to provide education for their children. The relevant sections of the 1962 Education (Scotland) Act should be explained to them in full. Parents should also be told how pupils are allocated to schools in their authority and what criteria are used for granting "exceptional" transfers.

They should be informed about opportunities — legal and administrative — to express their views and advised how and under what circumstances they may appeal against education authority decisions. Leaflets and circulars should be issued by the education authority to all parents of pupils (including those attending nursery schools) explaining the above provisions.

Recommendation 2

Education authorities, school councils and parent-teacher organisations should initiate public discussion on parental rights and duties, as set out in the Education Act, to assess how far they are taken into account in their area and to consider whether existing legal and administrative provisions need to be changed in any way (e.g. in favour of more "parental choice", either within or between schools).

3.2 SCHOOL COUNCILS

Less than one half of all parents of pupils sampled claimed to have heard of school councils and they appeared to be no better informed about their membership or main function than householders generally. A considerable number of parents were not sure whether their child's school was represented on a school council and only a few were able to name their school council representative or describe any decisions taken by their school council. There are considerable variations in the way school councils operate from area to area.
Recommendation 3
School councils should fully publicise their meetings, aims and activities (including the election of council members) through the circulation of regular newsletters among parents of pupils and community groups in their area. Meetings should normally be open to the press and general public and minutes of meetings should be widely circulated. Each parent should receive the name and address of his or her school council representative.

Recommendation 4
School councils should contain one or more representatives from community councils or other community groups in their area. School councils should in turn be represented on community councils and both bodies should be regularly informed about one another’s aims and activities.

3.3 PARENT TEACHER AND PARENTS’ ASSOCIATIONS
While an increasing number of schools now have their own parent-teacher or parents’ association, at least one third of parents and two thirds of schools are without one. Even where such associations already exist, only a small number of parents appear to have attended many meetings.

Recommendation 5
Education authorities, school councils and single schools should actively encourage the formation and development of parent teacher or parents’ associations, particularly in areas where parents have little contact with school. This objective should be written into the constitution of every school council. Schools should make facilities readily available for parents wishing to set up their own association.

3.4 PARENT-SCHOOL CONTACT
A majority of parents make special visits to their child’s school at least once every six months, but the number visiting school more frequently to meet school staff is much smaller, with around one third either having made no visits or not remembering having done so. Discussing their child’s progress with staff, followed by attendance at open days and parents meetings, are the main reasons parents give for such visits. A high proportion of parents appear to be satisfied with the way their children are being educated, but a substantial proportion would like to be told more about teaching methods used and the progress of their child.

Recommendation 6
Schools should maximise opportunities for bringing parents and teachers together. As well as holding regular meetings of parents to discuss teaching activities, children’s progress and other topics, schools should appoint members of staff with special responsibility for developing home-school links. Special efforts should be made to contact parents who either cannot or are reluctant to visit school at any time. Allowances should be payable to teachers undertaking special work with parents out of normal school hours.
Recommendation 7

Every school should issue to each parent a written progress report once a term on his or her child. The report should not only contain teachers' assessments, but an outline of course objectives, teaching methods and materials related to learning activities.
APPENDIX

The Education (Scotland) Act, 1962, and School Attendance Orders.

Exceptionally, where a request for a transfer has been turned down, a parent may appeal to the Sheriff Court to secure the school of his or her choice, and there are several cases where parents have successfully done so. But he must first get the authority to serve an attendance order and be prepared to wait several months before his case is heard by the Sheriff. An outline of what is involved is presented here, not with a view to recommending it, but to show that a parent who really insists on making full use of his legal rights has opportunity to do so. The steps involved are as follows:

1) Before contemplating any legal action at all, a parent really must satisfy himself — and the education authority — that he has taken all other possible steps to inform the authority of his school preferences. He should ensure that his preferences have already been made known to the director of education, the head teachers of the allocated and preferred schools, and any relevant sub-committees or school councils dealing with transfers. He might even consider lobbying his regional councillor or obtaining the support of his local PTA. He could also seek advice from the citizen’s advice bureau. If he suspects “mal-administration”, he could complain — through his regional councillor — to the Commissioner for Local Administration in Scotland (or “local ombudsman”); although any remedies or redress the ombudsman may recommend are not legally enforceable. Only if all or most of these steps have been taken should a parent consider resorting to legal procedures.

2) Where all requests for a particular school have been turned down, a parent is entitled to withdraw his child from school, provided that he can satisfy the education authority that he is providing the child with efficient education suitable to age, ability and aptitude. (Section 37(1)).

3) Where the authority is not satisfied that efficient education is being provided for a child withdrawn from school without consent, the authority must give a parent notice of its intention to serve on him an attendance order (Section 37 (2)). But before serving the order, it must consider any views of the parent concerning the school he wishes his child to attend. (Section 37 (3)).

4) Once the attendance order has been served on him, a parent is entitled to appeal to the Sheriff, provided he does so within 14 days of receiving the order. The Sheriff may confirm the order, reinforcing attendance at the school allocated to the parent, annul the order, or amend it in favour of the parent’s choice. (Section 38 (5)).
(5) While the attendance order is in force, a parent may at any time ask the authority to amend the order by naming another school (or, if he decides to educate his child at home, or send him to a private school, he may ask the authority to revoke the order). A parent need not give any reasons for wanting his child to attend a particular school, although, in practice, his application will probably carry greater weight if he does so. If the authority turns down his request, a parent can appeal to the Sheriff. The education authority then has to convince the court that a transfer to another school would be "unreasonable or inexpedient in the interests of the child". (Section 39 (4)).

(6) A parent who refuses to comply with an attendance order may be able to offer a "reasonable excuse". Normally this would relate to the sickness of his child or the absence of suitable transport, but he may be able to cite "other circumstances" which could satisfy a court that he has a reasonable excuse. (Section 42).

As a demonstration of his intent to avoid the risk of, say, prosecution for child neglect, a parent will often escort his child to the preferred school daily while an attendance order is in force, even though his child will be turned away each time by the headteacher. (It may also be necessary that a parent ensures his child is received by a person in charge of the school lest he be charged with forfeiting his responsibility). Withdrawing a child from school on being denied the school of one’s choice also carries the risk that a parent who decides to educate his child at home or by other means (e.g. setting up private classes with other like-minded parents) will be left to "get on with it" where the education authority is satisfied that he is already providing a good education!
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