

RISE

THE RESEARCH AND INFORMATION ON STATE EDUCATION TRUST

PARENT GOVERNOR REPRESENTATIVES

A Guide to Good Practice

Lessons from the research

THE purpose of this guide is to identify the factors that underpin Parent Governor Representative (PGR) effectiveness and the areas of 'good practice' which encourage parents to volunteer to become PGRs, and which equip and enable them to carry out their duties successfully within the local government arena.

It is based on the research, *Parent Governor Representatives: a 'bigger say' for parents*, by Keith Pocklington, Create Consultants and Mike Johnson, Keele University. (Johnson and Pocklington 2004, www.risetrust.org.uk). The research involved questionnaires and interviews with PGRs, former PGRs, Chief Education Officers and Councillors. There were 86 LEAs involved. The research was commissioned by the educational charity RISE (Research and Information on State Education) and funded by the Esmee Fairbairn Foundation.

The research revealed a wide range of practice across English local authorities.

Evidence from the research suggests that where good practice exists on the lines suggested here, the effort is worthwhile. In those local authorities where the PGR role is established and reasonably or very effective, the views of parents are being brought into the council chamber and being taken note of. In addition there is an increasing awareness among LEA officers and elected members of how policy proposals might play out with parents.

However, the essential fragility of this service needs to be constantly borne in mind. If PGRs are to be recruited and retained in post, a climate that is conducive to their work must be fostered and appropriate support, resources and funding provided.

1. Starting out

PGRs need to be made to feel welcome and valued. A clear lead from the CEO is particularly important. Thereafter, PGRs need to be seen to enjoy the active support of both professional and political leaders.

2. Induction and training

PGRs should be provided with a formal, planned induction to cover, for example:

- an overview of the structure of local government and of the local authority itself;
- a more focused briefing covering central council functions, procedures and working practices;
- a general briefing by the CEO or a senior officer covering education issues and DfES legislation about PGRs;
- a specific briefing covering the role itself, e.g. protocols involved, confidentiality, ideas on reaching parents, the Scrutiny and Overview Committee. This could be done by the head of governor services and perhaps involve the existing or recently stepped down PGRs;
- a personal introduction to key LEA staff and elected members.

PGRs also should be included in all formal training laid on for new councillors and any other training offered to councillors.

3. A point of liaison

PGRs should be assigned a 'named contact' to serve as their initial point of liaison within the local authority. The research found that the typical 'teething' problems PGRs reported were: feeling marginalized or ignored; ignorance of where to go for information or support; and feeling overwhelmed by the potential breadth of the role.

4. Ongoing support

- PGRs should meet regularly with a senior LEA officer and ideally with the CEO more occasionally. They can also benefit from regular contact with the head of the LEA's Governor Services.
- LEA officers and elected members need to ensure that PGRs are assigned to key committees and working parties where they can have a real influence.

'I was given open access to all parts of the council, and the officers in Democratic Services have been particularly supportive in giving advice and guidance when requested. This level of support is at all levels, including the Chief Executive, who has spoken to me regularly about the role and has made clear his commitment to increasing community involvement in decision making, of which he sees the PGRs playing a vital role.' (PGR)

- PGRs should be copied into main circulation lists in respect of council business so as to receive papers, etc., in advance of key meetings.
- PGRs, in common with elected members, should receive briefings prior to attending meetings of key committees on which they sit. Ideally, PGRs would also be provided with a post-session briefing with a senior officer to review the meetings they attend, including discussing the outcomes and possible implications for their work. This would also afford PGRs the opportunity to give feedback on their experience of the meeting and perhaps make suggestions as to how it could be improved from their particular perspective.

5. Facilities required by PGRs

- Administrative support.
- Inclusion on the council website and own e-mail address.
- A post box within the LEA and access to the internal mail system.
- A dedicated telephone line.
- Access to computers and training where necessary.
- Access to the local authority press office for advice on matters such as how to deal with queries from the media.
- Access to office space or a public room where they can meet or receive members of the public.
- Their own budget, to be spent on activities which they determine, albeit in consultation with senior LEA officers.
- Some form of allowance for attending key formal meetings.
- Somewhere to park on council premises.
- If necessary, an allowance for child care.

6. PGR recruitment and retention

The research showed that recruitment has been a difficulty. Local authorities need to put in place urgently a planned succession strategy and should aim to stagger the succession, with existing roleholders acting in the capacity of coach or even mentor. Current PGRs should be on the lookout, in their dealings with parent governors, for likely candidates to serve as PGRs.

7. Structure and organisation of PGR services

Local authorities should strive always to have in post a minimum of two PGRs and their term of office should be a minimum of three years and ideally four. Having two or more PGRs working in tandem at any given time affords the possibility of sharing the workload, including dividing this up along lines of personal interest, pooling knowledge and expertise, offering mutual support, discussing tactics and strategy, brainstorming of ideas, e.g. for developing the practice and determining future strategy.

8. Representing parents and linking with the local community

The research showed the following as being among the effective means of communicating with school governors, parents and members of the community.

- A network of nominated 'link' governors, one per governing body, across an LEA, to serve as PGRs' initial point of liaison within each governing body.
- PGRs maintaining periodic contact, by letter or email, with school governing bodies, ordinarily via the nominated link governor.
- PGRs holding periodic (e.g. biannual) meetings with a dedicated network of link governors across an LEA.
- PGRs attending the meetings of the local Governors' Network and reporting verbally on the work they had undertaken and their achievements.
- PGRs having their own occasional newsletter to parents, in which they report on work undertaken, together with their future plans, covering, say, the next 12 months. In some cases this communication took the form of an annual report to parents.
- PGRs being given space in the reports or newsletters of other groups and agencies, e.g. school governing bodies, local governor journals and newsletters, council circulars and magazines, and producing features to highlight aspects of their service.
- PGRs writing articles in the local press and making presentations for use by other forms of mass media, e.g. local radio and television.
- PGRs having their own space on the local council website or a website link on the council website and, ideally, their own website.

'Clerks to governing bodies put an item about us on the agenda of every governing body at the start of the Autumn term asking for a named parent governor to liaise with. A newsletter from us is sent out to all parent governors with the training pack. We directly mail all named parent governors inviting them to a meeting with us.' (PGR)

- PGRs establishing an e-mail based system of communication with parent governors and parents, password-protected, so that *only* these groups are able to access the facility.
- An annual workshop for parent governors, which PGRs help to plan, facilitate and contribute to.
- PGRs becoming involved in the training of school governors, parent governors especially.
- PGRs producing posters and other publicity materials for display in schools, public libraries, health clinics, etc.

The research also showed very clearly that establishing meaningful contact with parents – and to a lesser extent, headteachers – is one of the biggest challenges with which PGRs are faced. Getting a definite feel for what parents think or what are issues or matters of concern to them lies at the very heart of the PGR's role, and yet, arguably, it is the most problematic aspect.

The issue of practicality lies at the heart of PGRs being able to represent parents' views. Arguably, a combination of direct contact with parents – perhaps via an annual open meeting, or once every two years – combined with stronger links with parent governor groups on an LEA basis, is the most realistic way forward. This could be supplemented with periodic larger scale consultation on specific issues. Councils ought to involve the PGRs as a matter of course whenever they undertake some form of large scale consultation exercise with parents and/or parent governors on specific issues of significance to parents, e.g. a proposed school reorganisation, or a possible change to the pattern of the school year. PGRs might also seek to convene occasional meetings with groups of parents within given schools – such as a Parents' Council or Forum.

'The two original PGRs have developed a role within the LEA, creating a high profile, and providing a voice and support for parent governors and parents.' (CEO)

'The new system of local government should give focused roles to stakeholders and not just in education based committees but social service and community safety with "Every Child Matters". Extended schools and community use of schools will have strong implications for the parental voice.'
(Councillor)

The research revealed that in some local authorities quite effective local parent networks already existed, into which the PGRs were able to link.

Instances of where parents' views and opinions have been made to count as a consequence of an intervention on the part of PGRs should be publicised – thereby simultaneously underlining the importance of ensuring that the 'parental voice' is heard within local government, as well as the significance of the PGRs' role in ensuring that that parental voice actually does come across.

9. Communication, mutual support and the sharing of good practice

PGRs themselves indicated that the following could be helpful:

- reinstatement of an annual, national PGR conference;
- better use of electronic measures, e.g. PGR website, PGRNET-list, e-mail facility;
- the PGR newsletter, if made more substantial, e.g. by including greater sharing of effective practice and active debate on contentious issues;
- greater dialogue and contact with peers in other local authorities.

August 2005

RISE (The Research and Information on State Education Trust) commissions research and provides information on state education.

RISE reports have covered many issues of particular interest to parents, e.g. class size, school reports, home-school agreements, parental involvement in OFSTED inspections, school complaints procedures and school admissions.

RISE aims to produce information for parents, governors, the media, educational professionals and other interested groups.

Please see the website www.risetrust.org.uk for more information about RISE.

RISE is a charity, please donate to allow our work to continue.

Please send cheques, payable to RISE, to:

RISE, 21 Fitzroy Court, London N6 5RD

RISE

RISE

Please feel free to copy and distribute this leaflet.

The full research on which this Good Practice guide is based, along with an executive summary, can be read and downloaded from the RISE website www.risetrust.org.uk