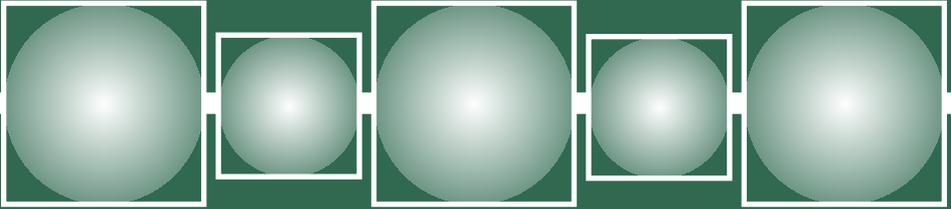


# STUDENT VOICE

a guide to promoting and supporting good practice in schools



**NASUWT**

The Teachers' Union  
NORTHERN IRELAND

*the largest teachers' union in Northern Ireland*

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## WHAT IS STUDENT VOICE?

Policy approaches to student voice, particularly at national government level, have been influenced by the provisions of Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC). The UK Government is a signatory to Article 12 of the UNCRC. This states that national governments shall:

*'assure to the child who is capable of forming his or her own views the right to express those views freely in all matters affecting the child, the views of the child being given due weight in accordance with the age and maturity of the child.'*

The provisions of Article 12 have significant implications not only for the work of schools and education, but also for other children's services, including family law, social care, health care, and youth and criminal justice. The rationale for this greater focus on student voice and pupil participation is that involving pupils, both individually and collectively, in their own learning and in the life of their school communities ensures that children's and young people's internationally recognised rights are respected and supports other important aspects of their physical, emotional, social and educational development.<sup>1</sup>

The fundamental principle of involving children and young people in decisions that affect their own lives, as described within Article 12, is common and evidence confirms that education and children's services policy makers and practitioners widely support the principle of student voice.<sup>2</sup>

## THE NASUWT'S VIEW

The NASUWT is absolutely clear that pupils should play an active, constructive and appropriate role in their own learning, the learning of their peers and the development of their school communities.

Teachers have always sought to ensure that pupils are able to articulate their views and participate effectively in their learning and in the wider life of their school communities. This is a fundamental element of teachers' professional practice and it recognises that teachers' ability to motivate pupils to learn depends on the extent to which pupils can be supported to engage in and take responsibility for their own learning.

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<sup>1</sup> United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) UK (2008) *Rights Respecting Schools in England* London: UNICEF UK.

<sup>2</sup> Halsey, K, Murfield, J, Harland, J L and Lord, P (2006) *The Voice of Young People: An Engine for Improvement? Scoping the Evidence*. York: National Foundation for Educational Research.

Protecting and enhancing the right of children and young people to be heard and participate meaningfully in decisions that affect their lives is a key duty of the state in a democratic society. It is, therefore, a particularly important principle in the context of the state's responsibilities for ensuring universal access to well-funded and high-quality education.

The NASUWT believes that there are seven basic principles that should be reflected in the development of student voice policy and practice at school level to ensure that student voice is effective and supported by the whole school community.

- **Principle 1** – Student voice activities should make a positive and demonstrable contribution to the life of the school.
- **Principle 2** – Student voice activities must not undermine teachers' professional authority and must not compromise other fundamental rights of children and young people.
- **Principle 3** – Student voice activities should be part of a system that values and respects the views of all members of the school community, including staff.
- **Principle 4** – Policies and practices on student voice must reflect the capacity of pupils to participate in particular activities and the extent to which they can reasonably be held to account for the results of their actions.
- **Principle 5** – Student voice activities and policies must be consistent with and support work to promote equality and diversity and tackle discrimination and prejudice.
- **Principle 6** – Approaches to student voice must be inclusive and give all pupils an opportunity to participate.
- **Principle 7** – Student voice activities must not add to teacher and headteacher workload or school-level bureaucratic burdens.

This guide will now explore each of the seven principles in turn.

**Principle 1 – Student voice activities should make a positive and demonstrable contribution to the life of the school.**

The NASUWT believes that student voice is most effective where it encourages pupils to become involved in projects and activities that enable them to enact genuine change within their schools, their communities or the wider world. Student voice activities should not be run for their own sake or simply to enable the school to comply with external requirements.

Examples of student voice activities could include: redeveloping school uniforms; setting up and running recycling initiatives; designation and redevelopment of physical equipment or recreational areas; involvement in community projects such as working with charities and outside organisations that support the most vulnerable in society; or developing and maintaining global links. Activities of this nature enable students to take responsibility for their learning and develop skills, including: problem-solving; negotiation; fundraising; and project management. Through these initiatives students recognise the symbiotic relationship between the rights that they can exercise and the responsibilities that they have.

**Principle 2 – Student voice activities must not undermine teachers’ professional authority and must not compromise other fundamental rights of children and young people.**

A key criterion for assessing the appropriateness and acceptability of any student voice initiative involves a consideration of the extent to which teachers’ professional authority is supported or undermined. Any student voice practice that is used to make judgements about a teacher’s professionalism and so has the potential to undermine teachers’ professional authority is unacceptable. Unfortunately, the NASUWT has received examples of schools using student voice to question teachers’ capabilities. Not only is this unacceptable employment practice, it is likely to create suspicion and resistance and undermine any benefits of student voice.

The NASUWT recognises unequivocally the absolute right of all children and young people, set out in Articles 28 and 29 of the UNCRC, to access educational provision that develops their personality, talents and mental and physical abilities to the fullest possible extent. The full text of Articles 28 and 29 is set out as an appendix at the back of this booklet. Securing this universal entitlement creates complex and wide-ranging responsibilities for schools for which they are legally accountable. If pupils’ educational rights and entitlements under the UNCRC are to be upheld in practice, the ways in which relationships between teachers and pupils are established and sustained are of critical importance. Student voice and pupil participation must not impede the ability of teachers and headteachers to discharge their responsibilities to secure the rights of pupils to a high-quality education.

The relationship between professional and institutional authority and pupils’ rights is well recognised (see, for example, the 1989 Elton Report on Discipline in Schools) and powers such as those to commission searches of pupils, to discipline, detain and exclude pupils and to restrain pupils are founded upon the concept of professional and institutional authority. Similarly, the responsibility of teachers and school leaders to design curricula that enable

pupils to progress and achieve their potential necessitates that teachers are accountable for the decisions they make. In this context, teachers must exercise their authority to teach and to lead teaching and learning. The authority of teachers is important 'for the purpose of securing [pupils'] education and well being and that of other pupils in the school and ensuring that they abide by the rules of conduct set by the school'.<sup>3</sup> This notion of authority is consistent with serious and purposeful approaches to student voice and pupil participation that ensure the views and opinions of pupils are heard and taken account of in decisions that affect their lives in school.

**Principle 3 – Student voice activities should be part of a system that values and respects the views of all members of the school community, including staff.**

Student voice should be an effective method of identifying the concerns and interests of pupils. It should offer opportunities for pupils to feel that they are able to engage with and influence developments within their school. This must be part of a whole-school approach that values and encourages the contributions of all members of the school community, including teachers. The NASUWT believes that student voice can only be effective if a school has developed and embedded mechanisms for ensuring that all members of the school community are able to express their views and ideas in an open and constructive environment that welcomes constructive feedback.

The NASUWT has evidence of student voice activities being presented as helping the school to take better account of students' views but managers then using feedback from students to make judgements about the quality of teaching. This is an abuse of both staff and students' trust and highlights the need for schools to ensure that the relationship between the senior management team and the structures and activities to promote pupil participation is robust, clearly planned and transparent.

**Principle 4 – Policies and practices on student voice must reflect the capacity of pupils to participate in particular activities and the extent to which they can reasonably be held to account for the results of their actions.**

Students should be encouraged to explore, develop and participate in school life as well as in the life of the school community as a whole. There is strong evidence that where students share a strong and positive affinity with their school, they are likely to be better motivated to learn. So, for example, students may be encouraged to take on responsibilities such as being a school prefect or monitor.

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<sup>3</sup> Department of Education and Science and the Welsh Office (1989) *Discipline in Schools: Report of the Committee Enquiry chaired by Lord Elton*.

Nevertheless, whilst schools will want to encourage students to take greater ownership and responsibility for aspects of school life, there are school-level responsibilities and tasks that should not be undertaken by pupils. Article 12 of the UNCRC implies that students should not undertake activities that require professional skills and expertise. These should only be undertaken by qualified and skilled persons who are accountable for their decisions and actions through their status as employees or governors.

The application of this principle requires a judgement to be made about whether a specific activity or responsibility can be allocated to pupils. Whilst this may require assessment of factors relating to a specific case, the description of typical student voice activities set out later in this booklet illustrates how this principle may be applied to form a judgement about the appropriateness or otherwise of a particular practice.

**Principle 5 – Student voice activities and policies must be consistent with and support work to promote equality and diversity, and tackle discrimination and prejudice.**

Legally, schools have a duty to promote equality.<sup>4</sup> Therefore, tackling discrimination and prejudice, promoting equality and fostering good relations should be embedded within all aspects of school life, including activities related to pupil participation and student voice. It is vital that approaches to student voice recognise and progress equality, anti-discrimination and inclusion within schools.

The NASUWT believes that there must be an explicit expectation within school-level approaches to student voice and pupil participation that the expression of prejudiced or discriminatory views and opinions by pupils is neither acceptable nor tolerable and will be tackled proactively. The Union cannot support activities that purport to advance student voice but that are potentially discriminatory.

Student voice activities have been used to challenge prejudice-related bullying and promote equality and diversity. These have included being alert in reporting incidents, peer mentoring, community action projects and activities that foster a sense of teamwork and promote shared identity.

**Principle 6 – Approaches to student voice must be inclusive and give all pupils an opportunity to participate.**

Student voice should enable students to respond to issues that can affect all students. It also provides opportunities for students to take responsibility for

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<sup>4</sup> England, Scotland and Wales: Equality Act 2010. Northern Ireland: Northern Ireland Act 1998, Section 75.

themselves and for others, develop an understanding of the relationship between rights and responsibilities and develop skills in representing, negotiating and debating. The NASUWT believes that all students should be encouraged to develop these skills and that schools should, therefore, develop strategies to encourage all students to become involved in student voice.

Research has identified the risk of poor practice where views that claim to be representative of the pupil population as a whole are, in effect, merely those expressed by a restricted group of pupils who are willing or selected to engage in certain forms of student voice activity.<sup>5</sup> Such practice is likely to be divisive and, in some instances, may lead to some pupils becoming disengaged from learning or participating constructively in the wider life of the school.

**Principle 7 – Student voice activities must not add to teacher and headteacher workload or school-level bureaucratic burdens.**

Approaches to student voice and pupil participation must not work against efforts to tackle excessive teacher and headteacher workload and working hours. Where student voice policies have been developed appropriately, they should contribute towards reducing bureaucratic burdens on teachers and headteachers and free them to focus on teaching and leading teaching and learning.

Practices that are not consistent with this key principle undermine the working conditions of teachers and headteachers and threaten the provision of high-quality learning experiences for pupils given the distraction from teachers’ and headteachers’ core responsibilities that they represent.

External expertise can enrich the quality of pupil participation and help to ensure that teachers and headteachers are able to concentrate on their core responsibilities of teaching and leading teaching and learning.

**STUDENT VOICE IN PRACTICE: JUDGING APPROPRIATENESS**

There are some common approaches to the use of Student Voice in schools. This document outlines some of the ways in which Student Voice has been developed in schools and tests each scenario against the seven principles.

**School councils/consulting pupils**

School councils are often the primary focus of student voice activities in schools. School councils can take a number of forms depending on the size of the school and the ages of the pupils involved. In some larger schools they are often augmented by year group or class councils or through ad hoc ‘working groups’ of pupils to consider particular issues.

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<sup>5</sup> Fielding and Rudduck op. cit.

School councils can be an important means by which pupil participation can be secured and there is increasing evidence that they are able to play an important role in addressing key school-level issues, including tackling bullying, poor behaviour and the enhancement and improvement of facilities for pupils. In addition, many schools engage in consultation activities with pupils on matters affecting their learning in the classroom, on whole-school issues and, for example, on such matters as school transport and healthy eating. These consultation exercises might include surveys, discussion groups, circle time sessions or interviews with pupils. As with school councils, pupil consultation exercises undertaken appropriately can be an effective means of seeking the views of pupils on issues of concern to them.

### **Putting principles into practice 1**

A primary school developed year action groups in which pupils were able to get involved if they wished. Each year group was given £200 to spend on recreational activities during break. A Year 6 action group decided to spend their money on football and netball equipment. The pupils are expected to take care of their equipment. Teachers have reported that pupils are using their break times more effectively and have taken pride in the choices they have made.

Provided school councils are developed in relation to the principles set out on student voice and pupil participation, the NASUWT believes that school councils and comparable approaches can be an effective method of engaging student voice.

The NASUWT is concerned, however, that issues have developed when the principles are not applied.

For example, issues have arisen over the extent to which pupils serving on school councils are able to reflect accurately the views of all their peers. Similarly, the extent to which the results of consultation activities are valid and reliable in terms of the sample of students upon which they are based are critical considerations if changes to school-level policies and practices are being contemplated as a result of the findings of such exercises.

It should also be stressed that the management and administration of school councils or other pupil consultation exercises should be undertaken by appropriately qualified support staff rather than teachers.

### **Involving pupils in assessing their own work and setting future progress targets**

Increasingly, there has been a greater emphasis on approaches to teaching and learning that involve pupils more actively in assessing their own progress and setting future learning targets.

The NASUWT believes that such policies will only be effective if they involve embedding approaches to teaching and learning that encourage learners to take greater responsibility for their own progress and achievement and give them the skills and experiences necessary to develop the ability to learn with greater independence.

In this context, approaches to pupil participation and student voice, where pupils are engaged in setting their own learning goals and targets, can often be a powerful and effective way of developing learner independence. However, the NASUWT is clear that such practices should not be developed or implemented in a way that works against the ability of teachers to take effective decisions about the appropriate teaching and learning strategies to be employed in respect of all the pupils for whom they are responsible.

Furthermore, some approaches that seek to involve pupils more actively in the assessment of progress and the setting of future targets may be unnecessarily workload intensive and bureaucratic.

Schools must ensure that the development of such activities does not affect efforts to tackle teacher and headteacher workload and to reduce overall working hours.

### **Putting principles into practice 2**

Year 10 RE students were asked to complete a specimen GCSE examination question following the end of a topic on Christian and Muslim views on the sanctity of life.

Students were then taken through the mark scheme for the questions, highlighting what they believe were the key indicators to gaining each grade. They were then asked to peer assess each other's work, including two positive targets about the work and one way in which the work can be improved in the future.

The teacher then marked the students' answers, comparing the marks given by other students in the peer assessment. This allowed the teacher to consider whether students understood the mark scheme effectively and could accurately assess the triggers for moving between grades. This lesson also provided students with an opportunity to understand more about examination techniques and setting their own targets for future work.

### **Pupils supporting and working with other pupils**

A powerful means by which pupil participation can be developed and supported involves pupils supporting and working with other pupils. Such

work can take the form of peer support, where older children support younger children through activities such as listening to them reading or the provision of informal pastoral care, to peer mentoring and mediation, where young people are trained to help other pupils to find positive solutions to disagreements and conflict.

Implemented sensitively and thoughtfully, the introduction of pupil-to-pupil approaches to student voice has the potential to make a significant and positive impact on the quality of pupil behaviour and social interaction within schools and to support and improve pupil wellbeing. Where practice is effective in this respect, pupils are still able to benefit from appropriate adult support where necessary and pupil-to-pupil input is implemented in a way that is consistent with other whole-school policies, including behaviour and attendance policies, that seek to address similar concerns.

Effective use of external sources of expertise and support to establish and develop pupil-to-pupil approaches to student voice is an extremely important consideration in this respect given that they can ensure that teachers and headteachers are not allocated responsibilities for which other members of the wider children's workforce are more suitably qualified and experienced.

### **Putting principles into practice 3**

A secondary school set up a community action project. Within this project a number of sixth-form boys developed a series of performing arts activities for younger pupils that were designed to tackle positive perceptions some children had about gang and knife crime violence. This not only enabled students to develop their team-building skills but also offered younger students the opportunity to see positive older role models acting constructively and develop an understanding about a key issue facing members of their community.

### **Lesson observations by pupils**

The NASUWT has become increasingly concerned about the use of observation of lessons by pupils as a means by which judgements can be formed about the quality of teaching and learning either in respect of the work of individual teachers, the engagement of other pupils or more generally across the school. Some schools now claim to offer training to individual pupils for this purpose.

Lesson observations should only be undertaken by adults who are suitably qualified. Views about the quality of professional practice should only be made by teachers who have Qualified Teacher Status (QTS).

Formal student observation of teachers' practice undermines key elements of the relationship between teachers and pupils by legitimising criticism of teachers. The use of a formal mechanism for pupil assessment of the quality of teaching and learning through evaluations of performance that are not based on professional knowledge and expertise could work to undermine pupils' confidence in teachers' capacity and capability.

Regardless of any conditions that seek to commit pupil reviewers to confidentiality in respect of their evaluation of teachers' practice, the fact that pupils cannot be held accountable for violating any such provision means that teachers cannot be given sufficient reassurance that pupil reviewers' opinions of individual teachers will not be communicated more widely.

These concerns do not, however, preclude teachers, using their own professional mechanisms, from seeking feedback from the pupils in the classes and groups for which they are responsible for the purposes of their own professional reflection and to inform future curriculum plans and priorities, nor does it prevent the help and support pupils can give as trained peer mentors and reviewers to other pupils.

### **Pupil involvement in staff recruitment**

It is common practice for recruitment procedures for both teachers and headteachers to involve some element of direct work with pupils. This has involved headteachers visiting a school to observe the teacher who has applied for a post, but it also now may include inviting applicants to plan and teach a lesson to a typical class or group of pupils in the school to which they have applied to work. The NASUWT understands why this is a common element of recruitment procedures but there is now evidence of recruitment processes that involve pupils giving feedback on the perceived quality of the lesson that has been taught.

The NASUWT does not believe that it is appropriate for interview arrangements to involve seeking the views of pupils on the relative merits of an applicant's teaching and other professional skills to inform recruitment decisions, and believes that this has serious issues in terms of ensuring that the school does not fall foul of equalities legislation.

The NASUWT has also been informed of a number of cases in which candidates for interview have been given a tour by pupils, and subsequently pupils have been canvassed for their opinions about the suitability of candidates as part of the overall recruitment procedure. The Union believes that this is poor practice and must not be perpetuated, not only because it is not appropriate for pupils to be involved in the recruitment process but also because it is impossible to define the shared criteria upon which opinions could

be based given the nature of such tours. Additionally, the NASUWT believes that this type of tour should be an opportunity for candidates to develop an understanding of the school to which they have applied to ascertain whether they wish to remain a firm candidate. In this context, communication with pupils during a tour could be an opportunity to discuss what pupils believe to be the strengths and weaknesses of a school. Candidates who believe that they are being assessed whilst being given a tour may feel inhibited in the questions that they feel able to ask and may not feel able to properly assess whether the school that they are viewing is suitable for their needs.

Of even greater concern is that, in some instances, pupils are being involved more directly in the recruitment of staff, including that of teachers and headteachers, through participation in interview panels, either as panel members or as 'consultants'. The NASUWT does not accept that this practice is appropriate. Membership of an appointment panel carries significant ethical and legal responsibilities in terms of fairness, equality, safeguarding and child protection and ensuring the overall effectiveness of the school team.

The appointment of staff is a serious and important undertaking. The needs of the school to appoint the best person for the job are clearly important and it is also important that all candidates are treated fairly, and that the person who is eventually appointed to the job can be confident in their new role and is not set up to fail. Part of that confidence will be contingent on being able to establish an appropriate level of rapport with pupils and to feel empowered to act with authority. The reality of involving pupils directly in the appointment process has the potential to place these considerations in jeopardy.

It is good practice that all persons represented on appointment panels have been trained to undertake their role effectively and are accountable for the decisions they make. This accountability is not only to the school, but might also include a requirement to defend an appointment decision in court or at an Employment Tribunal. Further, it would be not only inappropriate but also invidious to expect pupils to share this level of responsibility and accountability. Indeed, it would not be reasonable to place pupils in situations where they are given responsibilities that they may not be able to appreciate fully and that could carry serious consequences if not undertaken effectively.

### **Pupils as associate governors**

Contact between pupils and governors can be an important part of effective approaches to student voice and pupil participation. For example, members of a school council may be asked, or seek to attend, a meeting of governors to give feedback on their activities or to discuss future plans. This could be a regular item on a governing body agenda.

In Wales, school councils are able to nominate up to two council members to serve on governing bodies,<sup>6</sup> while in England, school governing bodies are able, if they choose, to nominate pupils to act as associate governors.<sup>7</sup> There are potentially serious implications for both staff and pupils if the engagement of pupil governors with the activities of the governing body is not considered carefully and managed appropriately.

It should be noted that in both England and Wales, governing bodies may exclude pupil governors from any governing body discussion relating to issues such as:

- staff appointment, staff pay, staff discipline, performance management of staff, grievances submitted by staff or dismissal of staff;
- admissions;
- individual pupil discipline;
- election, appointment and removal of governors;
- the budget and financial commitments of the governing body; and
- any other matter that the governing body believes should remain confidential to full members.

The NASUWT is clear that the fact that the governing body's powers of exclusion are discretionary runs the risk of involving pupils in the formulation of decisions by governing bodies that present a conflict of interest for the pupils concerned. It would not be reasonable, for example, to expect some pupils to be impartial about individual pupils who may be the subject of a governing body determination and with whom they have a particular personal history of friendship or conflict.

In respect of staffing issues, a decision not to exclude a pupil governor from discussions that could have a direct bearing on the terms and conditions of employment of individual staff and that might involve the disclosure of information that could undermine the continuation of an appropriate pedagogic relationship between pupils and teachers and other members of staff is also potentially highly problematic.

The NASUWT believes that governing bodies should always use their powers to exclude pupil governors when the issues listed above are being discussed. Staff governors should ensure that pupil governors are not invited to attend sections of governing body meetings where issues of the type described above are being discussed.

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<sup>6</sup> The School Councils (Wales) Regulations 2005.

<sup>7</sup> School Governance (Constitution) (England) Regulations 2003.

## **ADVICE**

NASUWT school leader members are advised to evaluate existing or new policies against the seven principles the NASUWT has identified.

Securing effective practice in student voice should involve consulting and seeking to agree student voice policies with the NASUWT and other school workforce trade unions.

The NASUWT Workplace Representative has a key role in seeking to ensure the seven key principles set out above are applied in the assessment of any student voice proposals and in ensuring that appropriate representations are made to school management and governors on any proposed or existing systems.

Individual teachers will need to be vigilant in safeguarding their own professionalism and should question and resist, with the support of the Union, practices that run counter to the NASUWT's principles.

Where it is not possible to secure appropriate approaches to student voice or pupil participation activities at school level consistent with the NASUWT principles, support should be sought from the NASUWT.

## **Appendix**

### **United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child**

#### **Article 28**

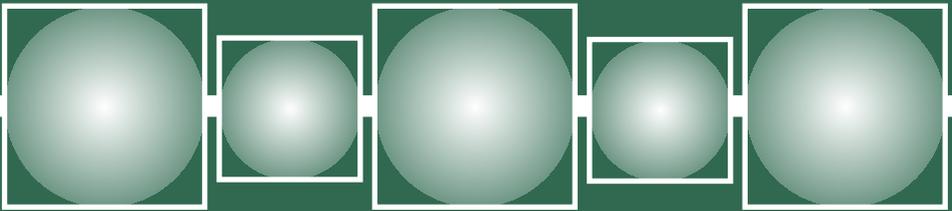
1. States Parties recognize the right of the child to education, and with a view to achieving this right progressively and on the basis of equal opportunity, they shall, in particular:
  - a. Make primary education compulsory and available free to all;
  - b. Encourage the development of different forms of secondary education, including general and vocational education, make them available and accessible to every child, and take appropriate measures such as the introduction of free education and offering financial assistance in case of need;
  - c. Make higher education accessible to all on the basis of capacity by every appropriate means;
  - d. Make educational and vocational information and guidance available and accessible to all children;
  - e. Take measures to encourage regular attendance at schools and the reduction of drop-out rates.
2. States Parties shall take all appropriate measures to ensure that school discipline is administered in a manner consistent with the child's human dignity and in conformity with the present Convention.
3. States Parties shall promote and encourage international cooperation in matters relating to education, in particular with a view to contributing to the elimination of ignorance and illiteracy throughout the world and facilitating access to scientific and technical knowledge and modern teaching methods. In this regard, particular account shall be taken of the needs of developing countries.

#### **Article 29**

1. States Parties agree that the education of the child shall be directed to:
  - a. The development of the child's personality, talents and mental and physical abilities to their fullest potential;

- b. The development of respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms, and for the principles enshrined in the Charter of the United Nations;
  - c. The development of respect for the child's parents, his or her own cultural identity, language and values, for the national values of the country in which the child is living, the country from which he or she may originate, and for civilizations different from his or her own;
  - d. The preparation of the child for responsible life in a free society, in the spirit of understanding, peace, tolerance, equality of sexes, and friendship among all peoples, ethnic, national and religious groups and persons of indigenous origin;
  - e. The development of respect for the natural environment.
2. No part of the present article or article 28 shall be construed so as to interfere with the liberty of individuals and bodies to establish and direct educational institutions, subject always to the observance of the principle set forth in paragraph 1 of the present article and to the requirements that the education given in such institutions shall conform to such minimum standards as may be laid down by the State.

[www.nasuwf.org.uk](http://www.nasuwf.org.uk)



## **NASUWT**

The Teachers' Union  
NORTHERN IRELAND

Ben Madigan House  
Edgewater Office Park  
Edgewater Road  
Belfast BT3 9JQ  
Tel: 028 9078 4480  
E-mail: [rc-nireland@mail.nasuwf.org.uk](mailto:rc-nireland@mail.nasuwf.org.uk)

*The largest teachers' union in Northern Ireland*

15/07047 Northern Ireland