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ILLUSTRATION: CHRISTOPHER E

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# Pupil power at St Patrick's

The students are in charge at a primary school in North Lanarkshire — at least when the children's council is in session. From fighting in the toilets to dirty cutlery in the canteen, no issue is left uncovered

**£2,000 AWARD**

**ST PATRICK'S PRIMARY SCHOOL,  
NEW STEVENSON,  
NORTH LANARKSHIRE**  
Children's council (citizenship,  
ages 5-11)

**S**tifled whispers echo around the library at St Patrick's primary school as 18 pupils take their seats for the second children's council meeting of the year. The youngest members are from primary 2 class and are both so small they can barely see over the top of the table.

The chair, Laura Martin, begins by asking if the council feels the headteacher has dealt with concerns raised the week before. There is lots of nodding and the council's assent is minuted.

Then they move on to current concerns: primary 3 delegates report fighting in the infants' toilets, primary 4 are worried that the older pupils keep kicking their football away, and primary 6 say that pupils have been "handling the cutlery" in the dinner hall. (All the time headteacher Catherine Adair is taking note of the points raised and addresses each in turn.) The chair then asks the council to propose solutions, which is where the hard thinking begins...

So who is making the newly washed cutlery dirty? Delicately, someone suggests that the knives and forks are not always entirely clean when they come out of the dishwasher. The head is swiftly deputised to talk to the dinner ladies.

And what about the football problem? A brief enquiry and it turns out the younger ones' games are encroaching on the older pupils' playground area. Hands shoot up in the air as an animated discussion ensues about swapping the playground around to give the footballers more space...

The discussion is not ad hoc, either. All points raised at the meeting will have been discussed during circle time (a time set aside for each class to talk through their problems openly with their peers and teacher). They will then have been voted on by the class before being taken forward to the council meeting.



Facing the challenge: two members of the children's council at St Patrick's primary, which plays a key role in the running of the school.

There's also council time for positive feedback. A sponsored skip and using the new laptops have apparently gone down well with pupils over the past week.

In fact, the council has played an important role in running the school for the last six years, and its recent success in organising a traffic safety project has shown pupils that taking action can make a real difference. Adair explains how pupils felt it was unsafe for parents to use the road outside the school as a pick-up and drop-off point. The issue kept re-emerging at council meetings and letters she had written to parents were having no effect.

"Eventually, I said to the council that I can put out the message in as many newsletters as you like, but you are going to have to tell your parents. Some of the children suggested writing to the police, asking them to come and book everybody!"

"Well, they did write a letter and, on

receiving it, the police decided something had to be done, so there was an action week across all local schools. Police and primary 7 volunteers were at our school gates every morning and evening explaining their worries to parents who were driving up, and 'we've not had a problem since'."

This successful initiative was highlighted by primary 3 class teacher Gerry O'Neill in her entry to the BT Schools Awards. She kept the school's application short and simple but thought it was vital that the judges heard what the children had to say about the council's impact.

"I had the idea of including a tape of the children discussing what it meant to them, so I asked a group of primary 7s, who were the very first delegates when the council started, if they'd mind having a chat about it. I put them in a quiet room and went away and just left them to it. Their tape went in with the entry and I

think that might have given us the edge."

The award will support the council's work by paying for the development of a school website, which will help delegates communicate their ideas with the local community. Up-coming agenda items and a full archive of minutes will be available on the site. The council's newsletter will also be posted online, as well as being available in a full-colour format thanks to a colour

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printer that the children chose to buy with some of the award money.

Laura, the chair of the council, believes the system works. "We hear different points of view and we pick the best one," she says. "I think [the other pupils] take notice of us because some of them have been delegates before and they understand how we do it. It's because it's people their own age, and it's easier for us to talk to them than for a teacher, which might feel bossy."

Kieran Breen, a primary 7 delegate, is enjoying a second stint on the council. "I think it's better for the whole school because if there's bad stuff going on it has the chance to be fixed. Sometimes the others take more notice of us, because all of us agreed. If it's serious, like fighting over football, the whole class might get grounded by us deciding, but it would take a lot."

www.stpatsnewstevenson.org.uk  
Louise Tickle