

# Gathered together

How an exciting new project is helping to support parents from ethnic and cultural minorities get involved with their children's schooling

*"I was shocked to find out that my school has 34% ethnic minority families – I knew they were underrepresented on our committee, but did not realise by how much"*

*"I have never heard of the Parents' Council - this is my first time to hear of it"*

These comments represent views expressed to the Scottish Parent Teacher Council (SPTC) and BEMIS (the umbrella organisation for ethnic and cultural communities in Scotland) when we conducted our review of Parent Councils in Scotland. Some parents were aware of discrepancies in representation but unsure of how to address, and others completely unaware that parent councils not only existed, but were open to all parents to join.

We know parent councils have struggled to engage with those from ethnic minorities (EM) and many of the respondents in our survey, conducted across Scotland with a number of consultation tools, recognised that they needed help to reach out to these parents. In response, Gathered Together was created to meet this need and to empower parents from ethnic minority backgrounds to overcome barriers and get more involved in their child's school community.

Gathered Together is a pilot project working across six local authorities - Aberdeen, Aberdeenshire, Falkirk, Fife, Glasgow and Stirling and Clackmannanshire – with the areas chosen based on the strong links both BEMIS and SPTC have in the areas as well as the significant ethnic minority populations. We also wanted to ensure a good representation of both urban and rural local authorities.

A central part of our work has been delivering training, linking with local community groups including Regional Equality Councils and local English language classes for ethnic minority parents to explore what barriers they face to getting more involved in their child's school community and their rights as parents. Many of the parents experience barriers from language due to lack of confidence, but we have also found that parents often are not aware of how they can get more involved. Many did not know that they have the right to attend Parent Council meetings, which should be open to all parents with children at the school, and some also spoke about cultural differences - coming from countries where parents don't speak to teachers unless there is a problem, for example, and struggling to understand the Scottish Curriculum for Excellence.

We want to overcome these issues and help parents from all backgrounds, particularly those from ethnic minorities, become more involved and feel supported to be more involved in their child's education.

With that said, there are some inspiring examples that can be found. One mother, who came to Scotland as a



refugee, said that joining the Parent Council had helped her relationship with her son. Having a son grow up in a different culture, although he was born in Scotland, was difficult but by getting involved in the school she learnt about the world he is living in and felt closer to him, she explained. It also helped her make friends and become a firm part of the local community.

Through work conducted by BEMIS in partnership with SPTC, we are helping Parent Councils review what they are doing to engage with all parents and provide practical solutions for overcoming barriers.

Parent Councils can be a great way for all parents, particularly those from ethnic minority backgrounds, to feel they are a part of the school, playing a big role in creating a friendly and inclusive atmosphere and in helping to engage parents in their children's learning. We want this to be encouraged and facilitated for all parents, regardless of background.

For more information on the Gathered Together project, visit <http://www.bemis.org.uk/gathered-together.html> or <http://gatheredtogether.bemis.org.uk/>

## Gathered Together report – key findings

- 77% of parent councils have no representation from ethnic minority parents
- Language barriers were stated as common barriers for low participation from parents from ethnic minority backgrounds
- Aspirations to involve a more representative membership, was a common theme



*Gathered Together is a project led by BEMIS, with the partnership of SPTC. It is funded by the Scottish Government under the Third Sector Early Intervention Fund, and managed by the BIG fund.*