Listening to your **school’s community voice**

In her new book, educationalist **FIONA CARNIE** explores how teachers, students and parents can have more of a say in the education system. Here she gives our members an exclusive look at some of the themes covered in ‘rebuilding our schools from the bottom up,’ which was released earlier this spring.

We live in a democracy, and yet schools in England offer precious little opportunity for those who are affected by decisions to contribute to making them. This is a strange omission given the central role that schools should play in the development of a democratic society.

Enormous changes have taken place in the last 30 years; changes that have resulted in an increasingly centralised system where the voices of those who teach, those who learn and those whose children go to school have become marginalised. There is widespread concern among educators, academics and parents that these changes are not in the best interests of children.

As things stand, school students have little chance to contribute to decisions about what they are going to learn and how they are going to learn it. Parents are not routinely involved in school decision-making - even on issues that affect them. The majority of teachers have little say in what or how they teach, and they are not able to contribute to discussions about the direction of their school.

Of course, there are a number of schools doing excellent work in terms of listening to their students, teachers and parents. However, schools that have a strong students’ voice are not necessarily good at collaborating with the parents. Schools that work hard to build parental involvement don’t always put the same effort into student or staff engagement. And those schools where teachers feel they have a real voice don’t automatically value the views of their students or parents. It is often the case that there is little interaction between representatives of these three groups in discussion about the school’s policy and decision-making.

Sometimes these groups will pull in different directions because the priorities for teachers, parents and students will not necessarily align. All the more reason for dialogue because you can then discuss, address and mould differences into policies that gain the support of the school community as a whole. Without such a process, it is hard to build an active school community.

In theory, a school’s governing body should be the place where the voices of these different groups come together, but this does not appear to happen as a matter of course.

How then can we listen attentively to all of these voices and bring them together into a strong and powerful school community voice? Young people often have a clear sense of what helps them to learn. Teachers as professionals know how best to support their students. And parents have much to offer in terms of helping their children and the school.

Furthermore, schools will be strengthened by reaching out to their local communities, and involving local people and organisations in the education of the young. Schools on their own cannot offer the breadth of experiences and opportunities that constitute a rounded education.

Perhaps it is time for each school to establish a community council to agree on a vision and their values, and then assess the extent to which it is achieving its aims and objectives. Such a body would provide a space to discuss the different perspectives and experiences.

Professor Stephen Ball from University College London argues: “We need to reconnect education to democracy and work towards a relationship between schools and their communities.

“We should recognise the centrality of education to larger projects of democracy and community building. This is about communities, parents and students having a say in deciding what, how and by whom they are taught – and whether, how and when they are tested, among other things.”

“By working together in our communities, we can challenge the democratic deficit and rebuild our schools from the bottom up. As the saying goes, it takes a village to raise a child. It is time to engage the village.