

Report of the Executive Committee (school year 2015/16)



Prepared by Anne Cody

At the AGM in June 2015, seven members were elected to the Executive Committee (EC): Anne Cody as Chair and Dave Holmes as treasurer remained in their roles, and Peter Magill also stayed on from. New members were Lucy Quinn as secretary, Ciara Brehony, Carol Kim, and Alma Carey. The EC is strengthened by Deirdre Crowe as Chair of the Board of Management (BoM), who contributes to the EC meeting without being a voting member.

The purpose of the EC is two-fold: Firstly, it is the legal owner of school property and building and is tasked with taking a long-term view (as opposed to the Board of Management (BoM), who manages the day to day running and maintenance of the school). Secondly, the EC is charged with overseeing the ethos of the school. This also manifests through oversight of the BoM, who develops and reviews policies.

Lucy Quinn as the secretary filed the relevant form at the Company Registration Office to update the names of directors of BSPA, i.e. secretary (Lucy), treasurer (Dave) and chair (Anne).

So now we had a team in place, and started to look at individual themes. Key items were:

1. Building the BSPA community
2. Review of insurance arrangements re playground activity
3. Charity status of BSPA
4. Long-term future of the school
5. Pros and cons of joining Educate Together as patron

This is a substantial work programme, and whilst not all items were completed, all were progressed.

Building the BSPA community

Compared to the founder generation, there now is a much greater normality in having a school like BSP. One of the side effects of this welcome development is that the school community is not as close-knit as it was at the time. Some symptoms of a lower level of engagement throughout the school community include the very small membership of BSP association (37 individuals/couple subscribed in 2014/15), limited attendance at a number of events, and difficulty to recruit volunteers to various committees and activities.

Whilst there is no quick fix, the Executive Committee considered a number of activities to improve this situation. These include:

- Lowering the financial barrier to BSP association membership through reducing membership fees from currently €15 per couple/€10 per individual to €2 per family (ideally collected jointly with the materials costs at the beginning of the school year). This is brought to the AGM as a motion.
- Introducing a buddy system for new parents in the school. This would be similar to the one in place for students in Junior and Senior Infants classes but for parents who are new to the school (in Junior Infants or any other class). The idea is to ask parents who have been in the school for a number of years to put their names forward as 'buddies'. Their role will be to be

a point of contact for the new parents, either to answer questions or to give information. We don't foresee this as being onerous - it will probably mostly be being available at coffee mornings or social evenings, in the yard at home time, or on the end of the phone, whatever suits. The purpose of this is to help further a sense of community within the parent body.

- We are planning a family picnic on 19 June in the school. This is not a fundraiser, but a social event for people to get together and share some food. Families coming into the school in September are also invited.

The Board of Management (BoM) term ended in November, and the Executive Committee nominates two members including the Chair. After thanking the outgoing BoM members for their excellent work, the Executive Committee unanimously appointed Deirdre Crowe as Chair and Alec McTurk, who is also taking on the treasurer role for the BoM. Both have been members of the BoM before and have done stellar work in the day to day management of the school.

Review of insurance arrangement re playground activity

Perceived restrictions in children's activities during yard time and a potential link to insurance liabilities were investigated. There was a strong desire to ensure that the children's need for fresh air and active playtime were met as these are key to the child's well-being and performance in school during the day. Lucy researched the school's insurance policy to understand if there is any liability the school should be wary of when implementing activities in the school.

After reviewing the insurance Policy Document and discussing the matter further with the school's insurance broker there appears to be no obvious restrictions regarding children's behaviour on the yard. Limitations are however set with regards to specific activities the school may undertake that are considered high risk such as horse riding. The insurance broker confirmed that the Insurer (Allianz) do not place restrictions on schools with regards to yard behaviour of children. Issues arise as a result of parental complaints of negligence on the schools part. In the event of the school being taken to court for such a complaint the insurance is designed to cover this aspect. It would then be down to the court-system to adjudicate the issue and rule accordingly.

Carol Lanigan confirmed the rules in place in yard are for children's safety rather than a possible insurance liability. The yard has a mixture of children from Junior Infants to 6th class mostly at the same break times. Large scale chasing games are restricted to ensure the smaller children are not injured. There are yard rules in place, however students have been asked for possible solutions and ideas for yard activities which Carol is reviewing. The yard is zoned into different areas to allow maximum activities which are varied throughout the year. During the spring months the senior children are given exclusive time outside on the yard.

In addition to yard time, senior children have exercise opportunities via sports and swimming. The school is currently focusing on fitness and many teachers have taken CPD courses through the summer of 2015 which they are now implementing at the school.

An all-weather surface replacing all or parts of the grass areas would open the yard considerably. However, this requires a significant investment on the schools part. Due to the on-going cost of school repairs this is not currently feasible. Wood chips were added to some green areas as a trial solution to some of the waterlogged grass areas.

School building and long-term future

Ownership of the land the school is on has now been clarified, and the BSP is the legal owner. This comes with the responsibility to consider the long-term future of the school. The school continues to make expensive repairs each year. These repairs diminish the school's ability to obtain or replace much needed new equipment. For example: patch repairs on the gutters (which had been recently replaced) cost the school €4k last year. The extension to the school (which houses An Sciathan and the team-teaching area) is a temporary building. This structure is in need of repair and long-term replacement.

The school body must now decide whether it is feasible to continue to make these expensive repairs or whether the group needs to consider a longer term plan for the school such as a rebuild or relocation.

In addition, the school is heavily over-subscribed each year. There are only 30 places offered each year for the incoming Junior Infants due to the school's single stream nature. The school must therefore decide whether it should expand to dual stream to meet the needs of the community.

The newly elected Executive Committee requires a team of volunteers to form a working group which will research and discuss the possible future plans for the school building. Work on this project will commence in the next school year.

Charity status of BSPA

In autumn of 2015 it became clear that whilst the BSP Trust is a registered charity with a charity number issued by revenue (which has been used for school business for years), the BSP association as the patron and separate legal entity is not a registered charity. An application was made to the Revenue and to the Charities Regulatory Authority before Christmas 2015 to remedy this situation. Neither application has been finally assessed and a number of clarifications have been given to Revenue (including a letter setting out the arrangements signed by a trustee, the Chair of the BoM and the Chair of the Executive Committee). However, we have received notification that we are permitted to continue operating as a charity, including fundraising, until such date as our application for inclusion on the public register of charities is decided.

Once the charity status of BSP has been resolved, the last remaining active role for the trustees will be completed. We received legal advice that a Trust can dissolve once it does not hold assets (such as accounts or land, which the BSP Trust doesn't) and has completed the purpose set out in its Declaration of Trust, however there are other legal considerations that need to be teased out fully before deciding a course of action. This will be a matter for the trustees to decide, however the view of the Department of Education and Skills will also have to be sought. Should the trustees decide to dissolve the Trust, the Executive Committee would like to specifically invite them to become members of the Executive Committee. Honorary membership of the BSP for the trustees forms a motion to the AGM.

Pros and cons of joining Educate Together as patron

This is a very fundamental question for BSP. When BSP was founded, it was the second school in the country that did not have a church-affiliated patron. It was not allowed to join forces with the Dalkey School Project and use the same patron body. BSP and DSP are founder members of Educate Together; however because they already had their patrons in place they remained independent of ET's patronage. There are 11 independent schools in the country in a similar situation. Some have in the

past decided to abolish their own patron and seek ET as their patron. This is possible in mutual agreement with ET. The ET ethos is almost identical to the BSP ethos, and BSP draws on many ET resources on a regular basis through its membership. However, there may also be downsides.

Alma undertook to speak to a number of relevant people and prepare a discussion document, and Carol has become involved into this project. We did not get an opportunity to discuss this gathered information at the Executive Committee or indeed with the wider school community. This will need to be done in the next school year, with dedicated meeting(s) to tease out the best course forward for the school. Given the strong feelings on both sides of the argument, a format where different people represent different perspectives might lead to the most balanced and informed democratic decision.

Change in accounting policy

With the Companies Act 2014 coming into force, companies with a turnover of less than €10,000 p.a. do not have to have audited accounts. They still need to submit accounts in the same format as previously to the Company Registration Office. The turnover for BSP in previous years has been in the region of €3,500, and the cost for auditing these has been disproportionate. Since the Executive Committee has expertise available from Dave (who has just completed his final accountancy exams), the accounts for 2015 have been prepared in-house.

Educate Together AGM

The morning began with a number of workshops, and Lucy as the BSP representative attended a social media workshop. This focused on using social media to positively promote education within the school. A teacher had successfully used Twitter and shared their experience.

The annual report focuses on strategic priorities:

1. Increasing school places within ET. 2015 had been a successful year for ET which had welcomed 3 new primary schools. Demand is strong and oversubscription is an issue for many ET schools.
2. Be leaders in ethical education. ET does so through its "Learn Together" ethical education curriculum. They also hosted the first ET Ethical Education conference.
3. Ensure schools are implementing the charter. At the 2015 AGM the term multi-denominational was replaced with "equality-based" or "equality and human-rights-based".
4. Ensure the success of the Educate Together model at second level. In 2015 there were four secondary ETs. Four new secondary schools are due to open in Sept 2016 - Balbriggan, Cork, North Wicklow and Stepside.
5. Achieve Financial Sustainability and Security. 2015 was a challenging year for ET financially due to low levels of government funding and increase in demand for new schools. They continue to fundraise and have sought donations from member schools. The BoM have committed to providing further clarification regarding future financial strategy / budgeting later this year in an effort to avoid further emergency "bail-out" requests".

ET updated their memo/arts to a new constitution. This is a legal requirement due to new Companies Act but also includes changes to the charter (equality). New directors and officers were elected.

A number of motions were put forward and carried covering: teacher recruitment, strategic plans, funding, BoM training, special education (regarding terminology used for "ASD Units" and research into how this model will work at secondary level) and commitment not to use school uniforms/teacher titles (for those with ET patron only).

The day finished with an address from President Higgins.

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