

Parents as partners

The involvement of parents and carers is an essential component of successful extended schools. **Margaret Booth** explores how the Leading Parent Partnership Award can make a unique contribution

The government's Children's Plan asserts that partnership with parents is 'vital at each stage of children's development'. The role of the extended school in encouraging parental involvement in children's learning and development is a thread that runs through each of the key themes of:

- childcare: community-based support for parents
- parenting: helping parents to support their children's learning and development
- varied menu of activities: engaging children and their parents in enrichment activities
- swift and easy referral: ensuring that additional family support is provided when needed
- community use: increasing the use of school facilities by parents and the community.

However, achieving real parent partnership can be both challenging and demanding for schools. How often are the outcomes of parent consultations effectively ignored, and family learning courses under-subscribed? Some school staff still prefer parents to keep their distance from the classroom. Many secondary students are aghast at the very thought of their mums and dads setting foot on school premises! And does the average parent know what their child is studying and how they can realistically provide support?

The Leading Parent Partnership Award (LPPA) is a DCSF-recognised award for schools that are 'committed to working with parents for the achievement of pupils'. The LPPA provides a clear framework for action, with support from a trained LPPA adviser, and is suitable for children's centres and schools with pupils and students of all ages.

The LPPA framework crosses the boundaries of core curriculum delivery, extended schools provision and the Every Child Matters agenda. The award is achieved by addressing each of 10 key objectives that combine to generate a manageable and sustainable approach to parent partnership.

Objective 1: commitment

A key principle of the LPPA is that all partners are actively engaged from the outset: pupils and students, parents and carers, school staff, governors and, of particular importance in terms of extended schools, the local agencies that contribute to enriching the experiences of schools and their families. The LPPA encourages schools to seek all partners' views at the beginning of the process, and to keep them informed about, and engaged with, ongoing developments. So whether through creative use of your website or learning platform, exciting displays or newsletters,

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one-to-one chats with parents in the playground or developing a new role for your school council – effective communication is all-important!

Objective 2: planning and coordination

Try creating a 'spider diagram' of your school's parental involvement. It will probably include most of the following (and more): reception staff who 'meet and greet' visitors; teaching and support staff who provide informal feedback to parents, as well as writing reports, attending formal consultation events and providing activities for home learning; a learning mentor and SENCO to support named children and their families; senior staff and governors who devise and implement school policies that impact on parents' and children's lives; colleagues based in or out of school who provide family learning and enrichment activities or oversee the work of parent volunteers.

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Through its LPPA adviser, it is vital at the outset that each school is able to record its current provision for parents, identify areas for development during the LPPA period, prepare a clear, concise action plan and establish a management system for delivery, led by an LPPA school coordinator.

Once all partners are involved and an action plan is in place, practical activities can begin to make an impact through objectives 3 to 9.

Objective 3: welcoming and friendly schools

What makes a school welcoming and friendly to parents and other visitors? In these days of increased security, how easy is it for a first-time caller to identify the visitors' entrance? Is there a welcoming smile and

Grace Owen Nursery School, Sheffield

Grace Owen is an outstanding nursery school in an area where many parents and carers are raising their children in very challenging circumstances. A key LPPA priority, led by the extended schools manager, is to provide family and lifelong learning opportunities. Starting with simple, non-threatening activities such as sugarcraft or first aid, parents are gradually encouraged to try more challenging activities. More than 100 adults have achieved success in national maths and English tests. Others go on to accredited 'Supernanny' and 'Playing and Learning Together' programmes. Lots of one-to-one encouragement is needed to engage parents and encourage them to keep on learning, but the benefits for them and their children make all the effort worthwhile!

a comfortable waiting area? Is the school clean and tidy, with stimulating displays – including positive images of parental involvement? There is plenty more to consider in terms of making a school welcoming and friendly, but these are good basic starting points.

Does your school regularly ask parents about the quality of its welcome? Instead of a visitors' book (often not filled in), you could try a quick one-day-a-month survey of every visitor, done by reception staff, or a 'sticker on a chart' as visitors leave.

When you have gathered your data (and this applies to all the LPPA objectives), how do you let parents know about their collective feedback and the steps you have taken to make improvements?

The more you 'extend' your school and open it up to your pupils' parents and the wider community, the more vital your strategies for welcoming, managing and looking after families become, and the more first impressions will count.

Objective 4: lifelong and family learning

Different schools may adopt different approaches to this. In some, work with local partners to provide learning opportunities makes a real contribution to developing self-confidence and raising achievement. This might be through providing literacy, numeracy, ICT, English as an additional language (EAL) or other courses or, initially at least, through leisure or life skills provision. The work of the extended schools coordinator is central to the delivery of such activities in school, or in signposting parents to opportunities in the local community.

In all schools, encouraging parents to support their children's learning is a central theme of the LPPA. So, what does your school provide? It could be parenting classes, practical workshops on curriculum topics, guidance in supporting students through GCSEs, visiting speakers addressing topical issues, practical sessions making activities to share with children at home, or support groups for parents whose children have a particular special need.

Does your school have a programme of activities during the year that supports key school priorities but also meets parents' needs? Do all these have to be face-to-face, or could parents learn online

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through the school website or learning platform? And do you ask parents systematically what learning support they would like, and check up afterwards on how useful it has been to them?

Objective 5: enrichment activities

The LPPA defines enrichment activities as those that involve parents and children in joint learning. These might take place in school, at home or at other locations, such as during educational visits. Classic examples are parent-and-child play sessions, parents as reading partners, and joint sessions for parents and children of secondary-school age around post-16 options or 14-19 course choices.

During the LPPA, many schools begin to think more creatively about enrichment opportunities, particularly the reasons why these are offered, how they can support pupils' and students' learning more effectively, and how a planned programme of enrichment across the school can motivate parents and children to engage in learning together.

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Objective 6: induction

Schools usually take the induction of new pupils and students very seriously, knowing that an effective induction process will help to ensure a trouble-free transfer and minimise any fall in attainment.

But what of parents and carers? At its best, induction can be a very positive process, with opportunities to meet key staff, visits to the new school, and the provision of clear strategies that will enable parents and carers to make a full contribution to their child's educational development.

Parents need to know from the outset what they can expect of the school, and how they can offer support. What learning opportunities will there be for them? What learning can they share with their children? How will they get feedback on progress?

No matter what stage of education a pupil or student reaches, engaging parents and carers positively from the outset will support educational development and set the tone for relationships between the family and the school.

Objective 7: information provision

As pupils progress through school there is much to keep parents informed about, from straightforward information about events and activities, to detailed feedback on their child's progress.

At the heart of the LPPA is the provision of

James Brindley Science College, Stoke-on-Trent

You can be sure of a first-rate reception at James Brindley, because it has a red-carpet policy, setting out just how visitors will be welcomed – and it works. However, it is the school's commitment to the parent voice that has made a particularly strong contribution to parent partnership, with a parents' forum that meets regularly and serves as a genuine consultative group, providing an opportunity for parents to raise issues and give positive feedback. The head, who always attends for the last half-hour of each session, says: 'The LPPA has given purpose to the parent voice, and gaining the award will raise their self-esteem and self-confidence.' Teachers' TV has recently recorded at James Brindley, so that work on parent partnership will soon be reaching your TV screens!

information for parents, to help them support their children's learning. This is a three-stage process.

First, providing regular information about the learning will be delivered over a given period of time. This needs to be presented in a straightforward way that parents can understand.

Second, there needs to be suggestions as to how parents can support learning. Again, this should not be too technical – perhaps supporting the learning of key words, encouraging the reading of particular books, or relevant local visits. Activities will vary greatly according to the age of the pupils or students.

Finally, practical support can be offered to back up this guidance. It might be universal support for all, such as a practical evening on how to be an effective reading partner, or it may take the form of more targeted support, such as inviting specific parents to 'coping with teenagers' sessions.

Always seek parents' feedback in relation to the usefulness of information provided and practical approaches used, and identify which approaches are most effective. Such approaches may include, for example, the provision of curriculum booklets, regular learning newsletters, practical workshops, or online information. How does the general provision of information link to the individual targets set for pupils and students through school reports or other feedback mechanisms?

Objective 8: school policies

Parents are vital to the implementation of many school policies. Pupils' attendance, punctuality, behaviour and progress, for example, are all influenced by parents' attitudes and contribution.

But do parents really understand the school's policies in these and other key areas? Are policies written in family-friendly language, or are there cut-down versions specially prepared for parents? Is there clear guidance on how parents can support school policies, and how are parents involved in policy development and review?

There is a lot more to school policies than sheaves of A4 paper gathering dust on school office shelves! Collectively written and effectively applied, they can provide real motivation for positive parental involvement, particularly if a system of family awards is linked to achieving outcomes.

Objective 9: transition

LPPA objective 6 focuses on involving parents in the induction process. Involvement in their children's transition to the next stage of education is equally important, whether this is from pre-school to nursery, across the primary/secondary divide, or into the complex world of post-16 opportunities.

Through the LPPA process, schools will consider how they support parents through transition, and how this can forge positive links with the new school or setting. The support of parents whose children are

Eldon Junior School, Enfield

'Sharing Our Learning' is a key parent partnership theme at Eldon Junior, a complex multicultural school in Enfield that achieved the LPPA in November 2007. The programme ensures that parents and carers of every pupil are invited into school on a regular basis to share learning activities with their child's class. This might focus around a musical activity, science experiments, or the latest literacy activity the class has been working on. During the final verification, parents praised the school for the exciting chances they were given to share their children's learning, and members of the school council had no difficulty in coming up with 10 good reasons why having their mums, dads, grandparents or older brothers and sisters so involved in their school work was a great idea!

vulnerable or have special educational needs will be particularly important during the transition period.

Objective 10: monitoring and evaluation

The LPPA framework is designed to make monitoring and evaluation straightforward, focusing on the key outcomes of each objective, monitoring progress, and regularly asking: 'How are we doing with this?' and 'How can we do it even better?'

Schools are becoming experts in self-evaluation, and the development of parent partnership through the LPPA will contribute both to the Ofsted school self-evaluation form and to the school's record of progress towards achieving the national extended schools full core offer.

It's vital not to engage in 'death by questionnaire', which is why the LPPA also encourages schools to use a wide range of evaluative means – written, oral and visual approaches – that are accessible to all.

Thus the LPPA provides a supported framework for the development of effective parent partnership. The award indicates that the LPPA standard has been achieved at a given point in time. The aim of the award is not, however, for schools simply to acquire a one-off rubber stamp, but, through the LPPA process, to develop a sustainable approach to parent partnership that becomes embedded in the life of the school, to the benefit of all its partners.

For further information about the LPPA contact:
www.lppa.co.uk. Email: lppa@prospects.co.uk

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The Orchard School, Sandwell

The Orchard School provides an exciting and holistic educational experience for primary-aged pupils with profound learning difficulties, and is an outstanding example of the LPPA in action. Working in partnership with family members is absolutely central to the school's work. A simple home-school diary really works in maintaining day-to-day communication; toy and resource libraries provide specialist materials for family use; and there are numerous social and learning opportunities for family members. Above all, the school staff recognise the very individual needs of pupils and their families and work tirelessly to meet these. During the LPPA final verification, one parent explained the enormous problems she had faced in finding appropriate educational provision for her child, but that once The Orchard School became involved, 'all these difficulties just went away'.