



As schools continue to build bridges with parents and carers **Margaret Booth** and **David Joslin** consider some of the many myths around parent partnership – and explode them one by one

Parent partnership – exploding the myths

Children and young people spend less than 15 per cent of their time in school and yet 60 per cent of parents believe schools have an equal or greater responsibility for children's learning than they do. Fortunately, the other 40 per cent believe the opposite!

In recent years a growing body of high-quality educational research has provided a real opportunity to understand more about the myths and realities surrounding the involvement of parents and carers in children's learning. Here we explore some of them and the implications for schools, based on a selection of research papers.

Myth 1: Parents living in socio-economically deprived circumstances are less able to support their children's learning than high-earning professional parents

Professor Charles Deforges, emeritus professor at the University of Exeter and an established authority in the field of parental engagement, has clearly shown that "it is what parents do, not who they are, that matters". Family involvement in a child's school experience has a positive effect on learning, regardless of income. More important is the attitude to learning. Working parents may have less time to be involved at school, but they can show how they value education and actively engage in their children's learning. Being poor is not a barrier to parental involvement.¹

Implications for schools

Don't underestimate the capacity of parents to support their children on the basis of limited socio-economic circumstances.

Don't overestimate the capacity of relatively wealthy parents to support their children's learning.

Do give practical advice to all parents about what they can do to help their children to learn.

Myth 2: Socio-economic circumstances are irrelevant to parental engagement in a child's learning, especially at the secondary stage

Unfortunately, extreme poverty is a barrier to parental involvement in education and a culture of poverty means there is less value placed on education and less 'social capital' available for networking and skills development. There are also institutional barriers as schools are seen as middle-class, and middle-class parents find it easier to become involved because they see teachers as equals.

In addition, parents' own experiences of education may impact on the value they place on their children's learning, and middle-class and professional parents are more likely to have valued their own school experience. It is worth recognising that parents who are considered by schools to be 'hard to reach' equally view schools as 'hard to reach'.²

Implications for schools

Make your school a genuinely welcoming and friendly place for all parents, especially at secondary level.

Celebrate pupils', students' and parents' achievements through displays in the main reception area. Treat this as your shop window, keeping it well dressed and changed regularly.

Provide learning opportunities for parents themselves, consulting them about their interests and needs.

Remember that teaching techniques will have changed greatly since most current parents were at school, so even those who are engaged in their children's learning will

benefit from opportunities to find out how they can best provide support.

Develop simple individualised strategies to encourage and motivate 'hard to reach' parents to become more involved in the school and with their children's learning.

Do try to ensure that families in extreme poverty get the multi-agency support they need to support their children's learning and development.

Myth 3: To get parents involved in the life of the school they need to be encouraged to join the PTA, the board of governors or any number of other committees or activities

While all of the above are honourable, this type of involvement does not guarantee a positive impact on a child's learning. Research such as that conducted by Project Appleseed in the United States concludes that the most effective practices focus on learning activities. Parents talking to their children in the home environment have been identified as a particularly important aspect of parental involvement.³ The assumption that increasing the presence of parents in the school will, in itself, translate into a positive impact on learning and achievement is false.

Implications for schools

Engage parents in school activities and committees as a means of gaining their interest and seeking their advice on matters that affect their own and their children's learning.



Focus attention on providing activities, support and guidance that will enable parents to support their children's learning in school and, especially, at home.

Emphasise the importance of conversations in the home, particularly in relation to the development of younger children.

Make provision that will support parents' own learning, increasing their confidence to support their children's learning, where this is appropriate.

Maximise the use of school websites, learning platforms and other forms of information and communications technology as a means of enabling parents to support their children's learning.

Myth 4: The school and its teachers are experts in educating children, and therefore have the greatest responsibility for learning

Parents, schools and teachers all play different roles in supporting learning. A working partnership between teachers and parents, based on mutual respect and trust, is ideal. The capacity of school leaders to manage parental involvement and to ensure that governing bodies, parent teacher associations and external agencies are able to make their contributions is also vital. It is effective partnership working that most benefits the educational achievement of children and young people.⁴

Fortunately only 2 per cent of parents think school has the greatest responsibility for learning but, worryingly, 58 per cent believe they only have the same level of responsibility as the school. As previously stated, this

means a significant minority – 40 per cent – think they have the greater responsibility.⁵

Against this backdrop 29 per cent of parents feel very involved in their children's schools, with 35 per cent strongly agreeing they want more involvement and 51 per cent feeling "fairly" involved. A welcome surprise is that 94 per cent of parents, despite 'hard to reach' issues, find schools welcoming.⁶

Implications for schools

Create opportunities for a genuine partnership with parents which respects their knowledge of their children and emphasises the importance of their educational role.

Create a climate in school that highlights the importance of the parents' contribution to their children's education.

Provide a wide range of opportunities through which parents can actively participate in and support their children's learning.

Myth 5: Schools and teachers are the greatest influence on learning

Children spend only 15 per cent of their time in school: therefore they are out of school almost six times longer than they are in! It is not surprising, then, that at the age of seven parental influence on a child's learning is six times that of the school. Even at 11 to 12 years of age, parental influence continues to be almost a third greater than that of school. After the age of 12, children – as they grow and mature – become their own greatest influence. At no point does the school have the greatest influence.⁷

Young people in secondary education do, however, continue to greatly value their parents' interest and moral support. In fact, 53 per cent of young people in secondary education cited better behaviour and improved morale following increased parental engagement; 25 per cent also said they valued education more highly, and 22 per cent that their homework had improved. Admittedly, parents and teachers had a slightly less optimistic view, reporting 13 per cent and 16 per cent homework improvement respectively.⁸

The difference between 'good' teaching and 'poor' teaching accounts for a 30 per cent variance in learning. However, young people in secondary education themselves account for 50 per cent of the variance, with parents at this stage accounting for 20 per cent.

This 20 per cent is an incredibly important catalyst, empowering the young person to start taking overall control of their learning.⁹



Low or no parental engagement in learning means low or no qualifications at the age of 16, whereas, with consistent parental engagement, best estimates consider achievement levels can be increased by at least 20 per cent.¹⁰ Probably the one statistic that gives greatest hope is that, human nature being what it is, 98 per cent of parents want their children to do better than they have.¹¹

Implications for schools

Ensure that all staff, governors and other key partners understand the impact that positive parental involvement can have on students' achievement.

Develop and implement strategies that make parental involvement central to the work of the school and to children's learning.

Recognise that almost all parents want their children to succeed, and want to be able to help them to do so.

Myth 6: Parent partnerships in schools are just another initiative that will only add to the workload of already overstretched staff

The hard facts demonstrate that there are clear economic and social benefits to be gained through raising educational standards. These cannot be ignored in a tough and challenging world. With global economic competition ever increasing, a rise of 1 per cent in literacy relative to the international average leads to a 2.5 per cent productivity rise and 1.5 per cent increase in gross domestic product.¹²

In these circumstances, every strategy that supports increased learning and achievement among our children and young people deserves to be pursued. The Department for Children, Schools and Families recognises that developing genuine parent partnership is one such strategy.¹³

Implications for schools

The engagement of parents in their children's learning contributes to raising achievement and potentially to the future economic well-being of the child, the family and the country.

The Government's expectation is that schools will work in partnership with parents, and Ofsted inspects this accordingly.

From September 2008, Ofsted will also inspect schools' promotion of community cohesion.

Engaging all parents with the school and with their children's learning is a key element in the development of a community cohesion strategy.

In conclusion, then, the involvement and engagement of parents should be integral to the work of the school, not an optional extra. Schools need to be clear about what they are aiming to achieve through parent partnership, and to pursue these aims for the benefit of families, not for the benefit of Ofsted!

It is important to support parents already involved in the school and to continue to reach out to those who are not. At the same time it is essential to be flexible in dealing with parents, thinking of them as partners and, indeed, as customers.

New technology, carefully employed, can open up new opportunities for working with families. It won't address all communications problems, nor will all parents have access, but some parents not previously reached will respond well.

Successful parental engagement in a child's learning requires a change in thinking, on behalf of both parents and schools. The change involves progressing parental involvement in schools to parental engagement in the home. In other words, just turning up for the likes of sports days, parent-teacher evenings and PTA events doesn't make a significant enough difference.

If you would like support in developing parent partnership in your school, the Leading Parent Partnership Award provides a sustainable, manageable framework that builds on and develops schools' existing good practice. Join us on an exciting journey!

Margaret Booth is a regional director and David Joslin is sales and marketing director for Prospects, which runs the Leading Parent Partnership Award.

References

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