

Schools sometimes speak of 'hard-to-reach' parents but, says **Margaret Booth**, we should recognise that many parents find schools inaccessible – and do something about it

Reach a little further

How often, on the morning after a parents' evening, have you heard a teaching colleague comment: "Well, we all know that the parents you really need to see never turn up"? Or a frustrated home/school worker reflecting after the first session of a parenting course that "they all said they were coming, but only two turned up"?

These are two examples of the parents and carers who may be branded 'hard to reach'. A working definition might be those that the school finds it most difficult to engage in a joint approach to supporting their children's education. But evidence gathered by Warwick University during its Engaging Parents In Raising Achievement project¹ clearly demonstrated that most parents considered 'hard to reach' by schools reported that they in turn found schools hard to reach – a situation sure to lead to poor relationships and a culture of mutual blame.

But however tricky the challenge, every school has a clear responsibility to do all it can to remove the barriers that deter parents from participating in their children's education. Government policy makes this explicit through the Every Child Matters agenda, the Every Parent Matters report² and other policy statements.

How carefully do schools really think about who their hard to reach parents are, and why? Here are some parent groups that are typically considered by schools to be hard to reach:



- busy working parents who cannot attend school during the day and have limited time to support home/school learning
- parents who had a negative experience of school and do not recognise the value of education for their own children
- parents who speak English as an additional language and who find contact with school difficult
- stressed, troubled or ill parents who have little spare capacity to support their children's education
- parents new to the country who have little experience of schools or schooling
- parents with low self-esteem and self-confidence who feel they have little to contribute.

Many schools keep some records of parental involvement, such as attendance at parents' evenings and participation in family learning. This information is often held in different places by different members of staff. But without a co-ordinated picture of parental involvement, there is no reliable way of identifying individuals or groups of parents who may need more support to be involved. Nor is there a systematic way of identifying those parents who are most committed and ensuring that their support is fully recognised.

At Ilkley Grammar School, North Yorkshire, a system that records and monitors students' progress has been extended so that parental involvement can be recorded and monitored. This gives the school a clearer overview of parents' involvement, enabling managers to be proactive in both encouraging participation and thanking parents who show high levels of commitment.

Making schools less hard to reach

The more effective the general approaches a school uses to remove barriers to parent partnership, the more time will be available for staff to focus on those needing more intensive support. The following sections highlight good practice in a number of key areas.

First impressions

How can schools ensure that parents visiting for the first time will feel welcome? In the case of a particularly nervous or reluctant parent, or one who speaks little English, this first experience may leave a lasting impression in terms of future involvement. So will the parent find:

- signs indicating where visitors can park
- the entrance clearly signed from the road
- an easily visible buzzer entry system
- welcome signs and information in community languages
- a friendly and professional receptionist located at a pleasant reception point?

At The King Edward VI School in Morpeth, Northumberland, staff recognised that parents might feel daunted to arrive at a busy main school entrance along with a throng of

secondary students, so they created a separate entrance area, with associated meeting spaces. Parents are greeted by trained staff whose role is to ensure that their needs are met.

Communication

Flexible school communication systems will help to meet the needs of all parents, including those who are recognised as harder-to-reach individuals or belong to such a group.

In primary schools, where regular informal contact is possible with the parents of younger children, staff can make a special effort to 'meet and greet' parents in the playground or classroom when they know that family circumstances mean a little extra support may be needed. For the parents of older children, schools can provide an early morning drop-in, where minor concerns can be addressed at an early stage.

Blowers Green Primary in the Black Country offers a regular parent drop-in session. In addition, when a problem has arisen, an invitation to a parent to "call in at the drop-in" has often produced a more positive outcome than a request to "come to a meeting" in the head's or deputy head's office.

Email, text messaging and the internet are now the favoured forms of communication for many adults and children. Schools are responding by setting up swift and efficient electronic communication systems. Working parents, parents of older children who do not meet staff on a day-to-day basis, and those who live a long way from the school may particularly appreciate this approach.

The staff at Phillimore Primary School in Sheffield were on the point of abandoning their parent-teacher association for want of parental support. But having established a home/school texting system, one text message on the day before the next PTA meeting brought more than 40 parents into school.

Translating newsletters and other information for parents into several community languages can be costly and time-consuming. Some alternative strategies adopted by schools are: for pupils or students to be briefed so they can pass on information to their parents; for teaching assistants and parent volunteers to greet parents in the playground and explain the key points of the document to them, or for parent support workers or learning mentors to target individual parents for whom an item of information is particularly relevant.

At Wincobank Primary School in Sheffield a group of parents regularly work as early morning volunteers, handing out information in the playground, encouraging parents to become involved in activities. They operate as parent-to-parent ambassadors in a school that operates in very challenging circumstances.

Being proactive

If parents fail to attend a parents' evening, don't complete the documentation in relation to their child's transfer to

secondary school, or fail to keep up their child's attendance, most schools will contact them to find out why, and try to work with them to rectify the situation. This approach, however, leaves the school following up something the parent has already failed to do, with the possibility of an embarrassed or defensive response.

A proactive approach can be so much more positive. If, for example, a school holds co-ordinated records of parental involvement, it should be possible to anticipate those parents who are less likely to attend a parents' evening, prompting a telephone call or a text message reminder. Proactive contact is a positive way to engage with the parents, to emphasise their importance to the school and to reaffirm that school staff are there to help and not to criticise.

At Highfield Nursery and Children's Centre, Birmingham, individual support and encouragement are often needed to engage Asian parents. The school's learning mentor was particularly aware of one mother who, despite encouragement, was reluctant to enter the building. One day she spotted the parent carrying an adult reading book as she brought her daughter to school. This led to a conversation about her reading interests, and to the mother helping to run the parents' library and becoming fully engaged with her child's learning – proactivity in action!

Engagement in learning

There is evidence that engaging in their children's learning can be the most important contribution parents can make in terms of raising educational achievement.³ Providing parents with clear, jargon free information about their child's curriculum, and supporting this with straightforward guidance on how they can help, is vital. Paper-based or internet-based information can be supplemented with practical learning sessions.

The Dearne High School, Barnsley, has used a wide range of approaches in Key Stage 4 to enable parents and students to work together during preparation for external examinations. These included presentations, drop-in sessions, printed materials, revision guides and a range of ICT-based resources. Essential to this strategy is an ICT hardware loan programme, enabling parents and students to work together at home. This approach has impacted significantly on the achievement of students in an area of traditionally low educational aspiration and achievement.

Big challenges

Finding ways of engaging fathers, grandfathers and male carers can be particularly challenging. South Haringay Infant School in Haringey, London, has seen a group of fathers and grandfathers working with children, supported by a professional ceramicist. A full term of activity led to the production of a stunning piece of sculpture, while at the same time participants benefited from learning and working together as a multicultural adult and child family team.

At the Orchard Special School in Sandwell, West Midlands, the profound learning difficulties of many pupils mean it is difficult for them and their parents to enjoy traditional family outings. School staff and parents work together to provide family days, held at weekends, when the school community can come together to have fun and share experiences.

Engaging busy working parents in their children's learning can be difficult. Here are some simple strategies that support parental involvement.

Activities during the school day

- Limit the number of times parents are invited to participate, and make them really worthwhile.
- Give plenty of advanced warning, so parents can arrange time off work.
- Hold most activities at the beginning or end of the day to reduce disruption to parents' work.
- Engage parents in 'sharing our learning' activities that involve some interaction with their own child.
- For start-of-school activities in primary schools, have a specific, focused ten-minute task which a parent can stay for and do with a child, rather than a general invitation to "come in and read".

Home learning activities

- At secondary level, use a flexible and varied approach that allows parents and students to work together at their own pace, as at the Dearne High School.
- At primary level, provide specific activities for joint pupil and parent learning, rather than expecting all homework to involve parents.
- Design tasks that can be completed over a two- or three-week period to give families maximum flexibility.
- Provide clear task guidelines, on paper or through the school website.

Adult and family learning

Providing learning activities for parents to help them to support their children's learning requires a real understanding of the parent community and a well-developed consultation process. In some instances schools might provide adult and family learning on their own premises, but at other times they might point parents



towards provision made by other agencies in the local community.

The kind of provision that is right will vary enormously from school to school, and parent to parent. In communities with a long history of low educational achievement and aspirations, parents may simply be frightened off by an invitation to take part in a ten-week family learning course. It may take a significant period of coaxing – through a more leisure-based approach and short, non-threatening one-off workshops, perhaps – before the school offers full-length courses.

On the other hand, in an area where many parents have higher education qualifications, the offer of lower-level adult learning is unlikely to be appropriate, but parents may well want to learn more about how to help their primary-aged children with maths or to attend some confidentially run sessions on 'Coping with Your Teenager'.

Knowing your community, and working out with parents how to identify and meet their needs is essential. Working with local partners, Marsden Community Primary School in Lancashire has provided a wide range of adult and family learning opportunities for parents and community members. These have been specifically designed to support parents' own learning and to help them to support their children's learning. The comprehensive programme includes adult and family literacy and numeracy, English for speakers of other languages, ICT, healthy eating, Asian dressmaking and arts and crafts. A high-profile annual awards ceremony is held to celebrate success.

The hardest of all

The challenges facing some families are intense. Physical illness, depression, family breakdown, domestic violence and substance abuse are among the causes. These families may be seen by schools as the hardest of all to reach in terms of their capacity to engage in their children's education, and co-ordinating multi-agency involvement may be the school's most valuable contribution.

In less extreme cases, however, schools can support pupils, students and their parents using a range of sympathetic and proactive approaches. At The Grove Maths and Computing College in East Sussex, the multi-agency centre (MAC) provides confidential support for students and their parents based on the principles of Every Child Matters. The MAC provides a working base for a wide range of colleagues including the school nurse, the Connexions service, the school's police liaison officer and the service for children with sensory needs. The Grove is seen by other professionals as a leader in multi-agency involvement, with its work benefiting students, their parents and the wider community.

Finally, if partnership with parents is genuinely seen as central to the work of the school, then school managers should take every opportunity to publicise achievements, thank participants and encourage all parents to be involved. It may be particularly useful to:

- display high-quality photographs of parental involvement prominently around the school and on plasma screens
- publish 'thank you' messages to parents for their support on the website, in newsletters and on display boards
- hold school awards assemblies and presentations including parent and family awards
- entering parents' projects for local, regional or national awards
- publish attendance figures for parents' evenings and other events to highlight high levels of participation
- collect evaluation data, publish outcomes and report how parents' views have influenced change and improvement.

So is there a case for schools to dispense with the notion of 'hard-to-reach' parents? Would it be more productive simply to think of the parent community as diverse and complex, with individuals in need of different levels of support and understanding to help them to engage effectively with their children's learning? If so, the challenge for schools is to understand their parents' circumstances and to work with them to develop differentiated, needs-led approaches which provide maximum benefit in terms of the school resources available.

The excellent work undertaken by many schools serves to illustrate that it is possible to create a context in which 'easy-to-reach' schools can work effectively in partnership with parents and carers to learning and achievement.

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References

1. University of Warwick research project, 'Engaging Parents in Raising Achievement: Do Parents Know They Matter?' (2006), commissioned by the Specialist Schools and Academies Trust, funded by the DCSF and written by Alma Harris and Janet Goodall
2. *Every Parent Matters*, (DCSF 2007), sets out the vital role of parents in improving their child's life chances and educational attainment and how the Government can best help them achieve this.
3. 'The Impact of Parental Involvement, Parental Support and Family Education on Pupil Achievements and Adjustment: A Literature Review' (2003) by Charles Desforges and Alberto Abouchaar