

The magic ingredient: parents!

It's not just your Ofsted report that'll benefit from closer involvement with parents – teaching and learning will improve too. **Margaret Booth** has the winning formula

Over the past ten years or so, research evidence has demonstrated the close relationship between parental engagement and pupils' achievement in schools. The findings of Desforges and Abouchar¹, Smith and Hausafus² and Harris and Goodall,³ for example, have been significant. The strength of research findings has led to a stronger commitment from government to ensuring that

schools develop strong partnerships with parents and carers – highlighted, for example, in *Schools: Achieving Success*⁴ and *Every Parent Matters*.⁵ It is not surprising, therefore, that the evaluation schedule for schools,⁶ implemented by Ofsted from September 2009, should place more emphasis on engaging parents and carers in their children's education.



The overall judgement Ofsted makes is about “the effectiveness of the school’s engagement with parents and carers”, and it is important to note that this falls under the broader heading of “How effective is leadership and management?” In terms of the leadership and management of parental engagement at whole school level, senior leaders may like to consider the following three areas.

1. Who takes responsibility for the following aspects of parental engagement across the school, who works with them on it, and which external agencies provide support?

- reception, welcome for parent visitors
- response to parents’ letters, emails, phone calls
- quality of the school environment and display
- opportunities for family and lifelong learning
- opportunities for joint parent/child learning
- induction for all new parents
- provision of general information for parents
- provision of curriculum information for parents
- feedback for parents on their own child’s progress
- parental involvement in the classroom – sharing learning
- parental involvement in celebration and success
- seeking parents’ views, responding and providing feedback
- parental involvement in transition to the next stage or education, training or employment
- co-ordinating parents’ volunteering and contribution.
- (based on the Leading Parent Partnership Award (LPPA) framework)

Through careful analysis, senior leadership teams (SLTs) often find that the parental engagement process in school is more complex than they realised, and that more needs to be done to co-ordinate activities in order to achieve a coherent approach.

2. Is the school clear about its overall strategy for parental engagement, and what outcomes it is aiming to achieve with parents and carers in each year group?

As an SLT, address the following questions.

- For each year group in the school, what do we want to offer to parents? The LPPA framework may provide a useful starting point.
- For each year group, what would we like parents to contribute to the school and to their children’s development?
- As a school, how can we systematically engage all parents in the above ‘giving’ and ‘taking’ process?

If all parents, including ‘harder to reach’ parents, are to become engaged with the school, and understand the importance of their involvement, a well-managed overall approach is essential.

3. Does the school know which of its parents and carers are involved and to what extent?

Once a school has developed an overall strategy for parental engagement, it will become quite straightforward to create a system for keeping records of individual parents’ participation. This will then provide a clear basis for providing further support and encouragement to those parents and carers who are least involved,⁷ and recognising and thanking those who make a significant contribution.

With an overall system in place for the coherent leadership and management of parental engagement, close attention can then be given to Ofsted’s three specific requirements for good practice. Let’s look at these in turn.

Ofsted priority 1: “The extent to which the school takes account of parents’ and carers’ views and how well they are involved in contributing to decision-making about whole-school issues”

Taking account of parents’ and carers’ views is vital if they are to feel valued as partners in their children’s education. It may be useful to think of this as a four-stage process:

- clarifying the areas in which parents’ views are to be sought
- identifying the appropriate methods through which parents’ views can be heard
- taking parents’ views seriously and acting upon them
- reporting back to parents about what has been done (or not done) and why.

Parents’ views can be sought at a number of different levels, from consultation about the progress of their own child, to feedback on specific events and activities, to engagement in key policy discussions such as home learning, attendance and punctuality or the school rewards system.

The McKee Centre, a short-stay secondary school which works with students at risk of permanent exclusion, developed an ‘open ear’ policy. At least one positive phone call home is made each week by the student’s key worker, providing feedback and encouraging parents and carers to talk openly with staff. The contact is particularly significant for parents who live many miles from the school.

It is important to offer a wide range of listening opportunities which are appropriate for the situation and enable all parents to participate. Avoiding ‘death by questionnaire’ is vital, particularly for parents who are not confident readers or writers. Some alternative approaches might include:

- short written ‘post-it’ comments at the end of events
- a ‘what do you think?’ page on the website or virtual learning environment (VLE) seeking views about a particular issue
- follow-up telephone surveys on, for example, the welcome received by a sample of recent visitors to the school
- recorded oral feedback from participants at the end of a course or activity
- ‘parent champions’ talking with other parents in the playground or at school events
- a single issue focus group of interested or invited parents to take part in policy review or development.

St Gabriel's with St Mary's CE Primary School worked with parents on a project called Teapot Time. This has developed into a series of discussion and consultation sessions for parents held at the end of the school day with a crèche provided. There is now a growing list of joint areas for development, with as many as 25 per cent of parents attending individual meetings.

At Norfolk Community Primary, a school in a challenging socio-economic setting, parents' evenings have provided a golden opportunity to gauge opinion. Staff sit alongside parents and seek their views on a range of issues via questionnaires and open discussion. All parents get heard, especially the 'less vocal majority', and parents' contributions have really led to changing the practice of the school.

Having sought their views, feedback to parents and carers is essential in order that they know that they are really being listened to. Feedback can be in written form: in newsletters, posted on the website or VLE, displayed on parents' noticeboards or the plasma screen. Feedback can also be given orally through assemblies or meetings, to parents' groups or informally through parents' discussions with staff or governors.

A simple feedback strategy to use is 'We asked', 'You said', 'We did': with a short bullet-pointed summary under each heading.

Ofsted priority 2: "The extent to which the school enables parents and carers to support and make decisions about, their own children's learning, well-being and development"

The school's capacity to support parents in terms of Ofsted's second priority relates back to the leadership and management areas discussed above. There needs to be a clear plan of action which covers year groups or other large groups of parents, targeted small groups of parents, and individual parents.

It may also be useful to think about the provision of support as a three-stage process:

- curriculum and other information provided for parents
- written guidance for parents as to how they can support their children's learning, well-being and development
- practical activities to enable parents to gain 'know how' in providing support.

Figure 1 combines these ideas, and provides a small number of examples.

At Manchester Creative and Media Arts Academy (Girls' Division), a programme of 'fun' family learning activities has enabled parents and students in years 7 and 8 to learn more about different areas and subjects across the school. Events have included a murder mystery (forensic science), a 'lurking in the library' activity trail and 'mind, body and soul' evenings to promote healthy lifestyles. More parents are becoming involved and their confidence in supporting their children is increasing.

The LPPA framework focuses on three key areas in terms of helping parents to support and make decisions about their children's learning and development:

Figure 1: Types of support for parents

Scale of activity	Type of support		
	Provision of curriculum and other information	Written guidance for parents on how they can provide support	Practical activity to support 'know how'
Year groups or other large groups of parents	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Termly curriculum information sheets ■ Year 1 'Supporting Reading' guidebook 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Simple suggestions of support that can be given with learning at home ■ Tips for supporting reading 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Materials posted on website or VLE for parent and child use ■ Short, focused reading workshops held in school
Targeted small groups of parents to meet identified need	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ 'Coping with Your Teenager' handbook ■ Year 5 boys: 'Improving Writing' DVD 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Suggested websites that parents may consult ■ Pack of materials for use at home 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Support group or short course provision ■ Parent and child workshop sessions
Individual parents	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Special arrangements for primary transition for a vulnerable child ■ Welcome pack for parent whose child joins the school during the year 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Guidance on the part the parent can play ■ Guidance for parents on how to help the child to settle in 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Engagement of parent in transition activities with the child ■ Parent 'buddied' with a parent volunteer to provide support

- provision of adult learning opportunities: adults learning primarily for their own development
- provision of family learning opportunities: adults learning to support their children's learning and development
- provision of enrichment activities: adults and children learning together.

It is useful for schools to think about a wide range of locations where they might offer support to parents, and to be aware that not all activities need to be provided by the school itself. Extended services teams, local training providers and charitable organisations may all be able to help, and schools can refer parents to these. Consultation with parents and carers about their needs and preferences is also a key to engaging with them successfully.

Figure 2 provides a framework for consultation which may help parents, school staff and other providers in managing parental engagement in their children's learning and development. An illustrative example is provided in each box.

At Winchmore School, a multicultural secondary school, a programme of family learning activities have been provided through which parents and children can learn together. This has included ICT classes, digital photography, holiday Spanish and dance classes. Parents have got a better understanding of the work their children do in school, and parents and children have bonded closely together during activities.

At Marsden Community Primary School, the Fathers and Kids Together group (FAKT) has been established to encourage closer family links and a social network for dads. A wide range of activities has been provided including outdoor pursuits, arts and crafts and healthy cooking and

eating. Fathers have gone on to attend other adult learning courses and more of them have become involved with their children's learning.

Quality of communication

Ofsted priority 3: "The quality of the school's communication with parents and carers"

Consider this basic checklist of good practice.

- Is the school's external and internal signage helpful to parents?
- Do parents receive a warm and professional welcome from receptionists?
- Are there effective formal and informal channels through which parents can contact school staff?
- Is the system for receiving and responding to parents' telephone calls, emails, letters and texts effective and efficient?
- Are letters and other written communications easy to read and jargon-free?
- Are newsletters, the prospectus and other publications attractive and informative?
- Is provision made to support communication with parents who have English as an additional language?

Is the school increasing its use of the website and VLE as a means of communication, gradually enabling parents to receive key communications electronically rather than on paper? Is the school supporting families that do not yet have a home computer and internet access?

Email and texting as means of communication are increasingly popular with many parents. Posting newsletters on the website or VLE, for example, means they can be

Figure 2: Parental engagement – a framework for consultation

	Lifelong learning (adult's own learning)	Family learning (how to support children's learning)	Enrichment (joint parent and child learning)
On-site (school staff provided)	Basic IT course	Key stage 2 calculations workshop	Bring an adult to school activity morning
On-site (external provider)	EAL course (community learning)	Makaton signing (family learning)	Visiting theatre group child and parent show
Off-site (school staff provided)	Parent group-supported visit to local college to find out about courses	Parent group-supported visit to start course with local training provider	Joint parent and child GCSE theatre visit
Off-site (external provider)	First aid training (Red Cross)	Referral of parents to health authority's healthy lifestyle programme	Referring families to holiday activities
Remote (IT-based)	Online training (Open University)	Holiday craft ideas for published on VLE	Family-friendly homework on VLE



presented in full colour with a text message sent to parents to let them know a new issue has been posted.

Werneth School worked with parents to design and produce a new parents' handbook. This is located in the parents' zone of the school's website, as well as being produced on paper in full colour. The handbook provides a wide range of information, including curriculum and home-learning information, a guide to school reports, useful websites aimed at parents, access to family and adult learning and tips on securing good attendance. Both parents and students have responded very positively to this new publication.

Turves Green Primary School has completely reworked its reception area with a view to simply "getting more parents across the threshold". This has seen the introduction of an open reception desk area with easy access to key members of staff, exciting displays of pupils' work, including the use of an LCD screen, well-presented information boards, a range of seating options for parents and children, and the availability of daily newspapers. Parents can visit any time from 8am to late afternoon.

Digging deeper

The requirements of the three key Ofsted priority areas considered above are supplemented with more specific examples throughout the schedule, such as the particular issues on which schools should consult with parents, and the involvement of parents in terms of learning and development in the early years foundation stage and the sixth form. A detailed breakdown of more detailed requirements can be found on the LPPA website at www.lppa.co.uk.

The guidance and examples above provide a range of good practice that all schools can aspire to. To achieve that 'outstanding' judgement, the school needs to operate at a very high standard in a number of key areas set out in the schedule:

- working with all groups of parents and carers, "particularly those... who might traditionally find working with schools difficult"
- having "well-established" procedures to involve parents in decision making
- ensuring that parents are "exceptionally well-informed" about their own children's progress so they can be "strongly engaged" in their learning and school work
- providing "tailored" guidance and information about supporting children's learning
- communicating with parents through "a range of media".

Aiming for outstanding in partnership with parents and carers will bring real benefits to pupils, students, parents and staff alike. An outstanding Ofsted judgement is the icing on the cake!

Margaret Booth is a regional director for Prospects, which runs the Leading Parent Partnership Award programme.

References

1. Desforges, C; Abouchaar, A (2003), The impact of parental involvement, parent support and family on pupil achievement and adjustment, DfES
2. Smith, FM; Hausafus, CO (1998), 'Relationship of family support and ethnic minority students' achievements in science and mathematics', Science Education 82:1
3. Harris, A; Goodall, J (2007), Engaging parents in raising achievement: do parents know they matter?, University of Warwick
4. DfES (2001), Schools: Achieving Success, White Paper
5. DfES (2007), Every Parent Matters
6. Ofsted (2010), The evaluation schedule for schools
7. Booth, M (2008), 'Reach a little further', Managing Schools Today 18:1