"Review of best practice in parental engagement: Practitioners summary"

Goodall, J., and Vorhaus, J., with the help of Carpentieri, JD., Brooks, G., Akerman, R., and Harris, A.

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1.   INTRODUCTION

Benefits of parental engagement

Parental engagement has a large and positive impact on children's learning. This was the single most important finding from a recent and authoritative review of the evidence:

> Parental involvement in the form of 'at-home good parenting' has a significant positive effect on children's achievement and adjustment even after all other factors shaping attainment have been taken out of the equation. In the primary age range the impact caused by different levels of parental involvement is much bigger than differences associated with variations in the quality of schools. The scale of the impact is evident across all social classes and all ethnic groups (Desforges 2003).

It is therefore a priority for schools to identify interventions that are effective in supporting parental engagement, particularly for those parents who are not significantly involved in their children's education.

Aim and scope of this summary

This summary covers research on parents of children aged 5-19, and includes evidence-based messages on interventions to support parental engagement in their children's learning. Whilst some evidence refers to primary education it is included here because the principles and behaviours referred to also apply to older children. All messages are aimed at schools, service leaders, practitioners and policymakers.

There is distinction between the types of evidence and interventions summarised here:

- The general features of parental engagement strategies are the subject of extensive and high quality research; many are strongly supported by the evidence. Examples include strong leadership, targeted approaches, and effectively involving parents in school-home links.

- Each general feature is associated with a set of specific actions and practices. For example, effectively involving parents in school home links will include activities such as offering flexible arrangements for parents' evenings and encouraging parents to ensure that homework diaries are completed. The evidence on specific activities is much less robust than it tends to be for the general features of good practice.

Whilst the evidence is less robust in relation to many of the specific activities required of parents, schools and other services, studies often reach similar conclusions on what is effective, and there is now a sufficient body of information to provide a focus for ongoing development and research. The activities included in this summary are, therefore, offered as examples of good or promising practice that warrant further trialling and experimentation.

The **context** for this research is described in section 2, and in section 3 the **evidence** is presented in three categories:

- School – home links.
- Support and training for parents.
- Family and community based interventions.

The summary concludes (section 4) with a **model of effective practice** comprising four elements:

- Planning
- Leadership
- Collaboration and engagement
- Sustained improvement

2.   CONTEXT

The Schools White Paper (Department for Education 2010) sets out how the Coalition Government will improve the outcomes and life chances of all children. Schools will be increasingly accountable to parents for the progress and achievement of pupils. The White Paper presents the Government's strategy for raising achievement levels, improving pupils' behaviour, and lowering the attainment gap. The Field Review on Poverty and Life Chances (Field 2010) identifies a central role for parents in meeting each of these goals, particularly in the early years. The White Paper and the Field Review reinforce the need to involve parents in education, and to create a good home learning environment.

In recent years, schools have increasingly recognised the importance of involving parents in their children's learning. This has been supported by developments such as the emergence of online technology and Parent Support Advisors. Since September 2009 Ofsted has been considering how effectively schools engage with parents. The focus has been on building positive relationships with parents, the quality of communications, reporting to parents on progress, and the mechanisms for helping parents to support their children's learning. Evidence from Ofsted suggests that a critical dimension of effective teaching and learning is the relationship between the teacher, their pupils and their parents. Just as the quality of teaching and leadership in schools is the key determinant of educational attainment, so the degree and quality of engagement that parents have with their child's learning is a crucial factor outside the school environment.

The more engaged parents are in the education of their children the more likely their children are to succeed in the education system. School improvement and school effectiveness research consistently shows that parental engagement is one of the key factors in securing higher student achievement. Schools that improve and sustain improvement engage the community and build strong links with parents. Where schools build positive relationships with parents and work actively to embrace racial, religious, and ethnic and language differences, evidence of sustained school improvement can be found.

3.   SUMMARY OF EVIDENCE

School Home Links

<u>Whole school approach</u>

- Attempts by schools to engage parents in their children's learning are unlikely to be successful if they represent a 'bolt-on' to mainstream activities.

- A parental engagement strategy should be integrated into a whole school approach to parental engagement.

- Interventions should be informed by an ongoing parental needs assessment in the context of a school improvement strategy.

- School based family and parent support activities should have the improvement of children's learning as a clear and consistent goal.

<u>Staff needs</u>

- To engage effectively with parents staff require training and coaching, particularly when working with parents whose backgrounds are very different to their own.

- School staff should receive parental engagement training through initial teacher training or continuing professional development.

<u>Parents' needs</u>

- Parental engagement with children's learning is effectively supported when parents receive clear, specific and targeted information from schools.

- Schools which successfully engage parents make use of a broad understanding of parental engagement, and their parental engagement strategies accord with the interpretations and values of the parents they are aimed at.

<u>An outward facing strategy</u>

- A parental engagement strategy should be outward facing, involving not only the views of parents, but the evidence and expertise of other schools and services in the community.

- The transfer of knowledge and understanding should be part of a two way process: not only from school to home but from home to school.

- Building home-school links through out of hours' clubs, parenting classes, extended schools and outreach work can lead to improvements in completion of homework, learning behaviours and improved attendance.

Barriers to engagement

- Parental engagement strategies should consider barriers that inhibit parental involvement, including the practical barriers of cost, time and transport.

- Solution to these problems include car-pools, involving children in school based parental activities, and taking account of parental work schedules when organising programmes and activities like meetings with teachers.

- More parents believe that they have a responsibility for their children's education at a time when their confidence to help with homework is declining. This presents schools with an opportunity to support parents by improving home-school links.

Information and communication technology

- ICT can contribute to improved parental engagement by: providing a convenient means for parents to access up-to-date information about their child's learning; enabling parents to be more engaged with their child's learning; supporting more flexible working arrangements for staff.

- In a Becta study only 25 per cent of parents received information about their child's learning via online tools; 84 per cent of parents reported that their child's school provided them with little or no resources to help support their child's learning at home.

- Levels of parental engagement could be improved if schools made more use of the potential of technology to support at-home learning.

Challenges

- Teachers often lack the confidence and knowledge to work with parents, and schools do not always recognise or value the ways in which parents are already engaged with children's learning.

- Engagement strategies often lack a clear, consistent focus on raising children's achievement.

- There are numerous logistical barriers to improving parental engagement and effective interventions are often resource intensive.

- Schools generally do not collect sufficient data on their own interventions, particularly relating to the impact on academic outcomes.

Support and Training for Parents

<u>Benefits</u>

- Significant outcomes of parental support programmes include: parents' acknowledging that a problem exists; gaining knowledge and skills to manage children's behaviour, and the confidence and empathy to use these skills effectively.

- Programmes can have an impact on how well children bond with school staff, and how involved they become with the school. Parents report a reduction in parent-teenager conflict and an improvement in parenting styles.

- Interventions for parents targeting children's reading outcomes bring significant benefits. Training parents to teach their children reading skills can be more than twice as effective as encouraging parents to listen to their children read.

<u>Literacy and other curriculum areas</u>

- There is extensive evidence on the positive impact of parental engagement programmes on children's literacy.

- Effort focused on some aspects of literacy – for example, training parents to teach specific reading skills to their children – is more likely to be effective than effort focused on other aspects – for example, encouraging parents to listen to their children to read.

- With the partial exception of numeracy, very little is known about whether interventions have an impact on outcomes relating to other parts of the curriculum.

<u>Approaches</u>

- Effective programmes and interventions are informed by a needs analysis and targeted at particular types of parents – for example, minority ethnic parents, disadvantaged parents and fathers.

- Parental support programmes which focus on both academic outcomes and training in parenting skills are more effective than interventions that do not include such training.

- A supportive, non-judgemental attitude is most likely to lead to parents internalising and using tools provided by a programme aimed at supporting parenting skills.

- Parents need specific, detailed guidance on programmes and on their expected contribution.

<u>Understanding parents</u>

- The evidence confirms the importance of a parental needs analysis, along with understanding what parents already do with their children and how they are most likely to respond positively to attempts to engage them (further) in their children's learning.

- Programmes should be targeted at particular groups of parents and show sensitivity to their cultural norms and expectations. Examples: the Supporting Parents on Kids Education programme (SPOKES) which has been shown to yield a benefit for children equivalent to six months of reading age; the Strong African American Families Programme (SAAF) includes an emphasis on communicative parenting, which reduces the likelihood of young people using alcohol and engaging in early sexual activity.

- Effective resources include specific, detailed and directive advice and guidance, produced in ways that motivate parents to become involved, and include parents as partners in a respectful and collaborative endeavour.

<u>Costs</u>

- There is very little information about the costs of interventions.
- Interventions are unlikely to be sustained over time if their costs are largely unknown or likely to prove prohibitively expensive.

- A value-for-money assessment of two or more programmes cannot be completed without a clear profile of costs.

Family and Community Based Interventions

<u>Benefits</u>

- The evidence of the impact of family literacy, language and numeracy programmes on children's academic and learning related outcomes is extensive and robust, particularly in the case of literacy, but also numeracy and other learning related outcomes including motivation and achievement.

- Family literacy and numeracy programmes can have a positive impact on the most disadvantaged families, including the academic outcomes of the children. The benefits have been shown to last beyond the duration of the intervention.

<u>Literacy</u>

- The evidence on family programmes, particularly for literacy, is sufficiently robust that these should be considered as a priority.

- Whilst it is desirable that interventions should generally form part of a whole school engagement strategy, family literacy interventions in particular may be effective even if offered as a discrete programme.

Approaches

- Strategic leadership, monitoring and sharing data, and pro-actively going out to meet and work with parents, families and community leaders are elements of a successful model.

- An evidence-based model that looks to build relationships across the family, the school, and the community can improve outcomes for low-income, culturally marginalised families.

Partnership and multi-agency arrangements

- Partnership and multi-agency arrangements are an essential component of a comprehensive strategy for parental engagement.

- Multi-agency arrangements enable schools to share information with partners, including the police, social services and the voluntary sector, and to draw on external expertise from agencies specialising in mental health, nursing and community activities.

- Sustaining partnerships and parental engagement in partnership activities requires not only monitoring and investment but initiatives that will sometimes extend beyond the involvement of schools and children's services.

Sharing information

- Schools are in a stronger position to respond to their communities when they receive data on how their performance compares with other schools and services.

- Information needs to be shared between schools and other services when learners move from one stage or location to another.

- In the best practice local authorities and individual educational settings shared information effectively.

- Giving parents written information containing simple, specific techniques for helping their children's reading yields greater benefits than providing parents with more general information.

Challenges

- Partnerships present challenges in the way of gaining access to and sharing data on parents and children.

- Information was not always shared across partners, or communicated at points of transition from one location or school to another.

- Data on the impact on children's academic outcomes is largely absent.

4.   MODEL OF EFFECTIVE PRACTICE

A model of effective practice will include, as a minimum, the following four features: planning; leadership; collaboration and engagement; and sustained improvement.

Planning

Parental engagement must be planned for and embedded in a whole school or service strategy. The planning cycle will include:

- a comprehensive needs analysis
- the establishment of mutual priorities
- ongoing monitoring and evaluation of interventions
- a public awareness process to help parents and teachers understand and commit to a strategic plan.

Parental engagement interventions are more likely to be effective if they are informed by a **comprehensive needs analysis** and are **targeted at particular groups of parents.** A needs assessment is particularly important for minority ethnic parents, disadvantaged parents and fathers. The assessment should be informed by information on **barriers to engagement**.

Estyn 2009 reports that, where there is good practice in planning parental involvement, schools understand that parents:

- like to be involved in their child's school
- want the school to know them personally as individuals and be kept well informed about the progress made by their children
- need clear information about day-to-day matters that affect their children
- feel more confident if they know the staff and have a basic understanding of the curriculum
- are willing to support school events and provide practical help but are less likely to join a committee
- become more supportive the more that they are involved, particularly if they have attended training events
- like to have clear rules for their children that are applied consistently.

Planning also includes the effective **co-ordination of roles and services**. This requires:

- effective communication with staff, parents and families
- clear expectations of staff and parents as to their role and contribution to a parent engagement programme
- models of good practice to inform and guide programme participants

The National College 2010 concludes that the critical factor is **clarity of roles:** where leadership and operational roles are clear and well understood by staff, parents and

members of the community, the structure is more likely to support the development of trusting relationships and effective practice.

> **Challenges**
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> The most effective school based programmes have a **clear focus on raising children's achievement** and this goal should feature in the planning and design of a parental engagement strategy.
>
> Parents can perceive the **school as presenting obstacles** in the form of: lack of encouragement; not informing parents of what they can do; having too little scope for fitting around busy working and family lives. Many schools acknowledge the need to **go out and meet parents in the community** instead of relying on the expectation that they will come into the school.
>
> Parents face numerous **logistic barriers**: lack of transport, lack of child care, competing family demands, work schedules, lack of time and the programme placing too great a demand on parents. Solutions included organising car-pools, inviting children to the diabetes sessions, taking work schedules of parents into account when setting times for programmes, and reducing the number of programme inputs across the year.

Leadership

Effective leadership of parental engagement is essential to the success of programmes and strategies. This applies to:

- Schools
- Services
- Local authorities

A parental engagement programme is often led by a **senior leader**, usually but not always the head teacher. Leadership may also be distributed in the context of a programme or cluster of schools and services working to a clear strategic direction, articulated and pursued by a strong leader who continues to shape the vision as the work progresses. In this context leaders may include not only head teachers but also cluster strategy managers and cluster co-ordinators.

In a 2010 National College study of leadership for effective engagement all effective leaders shared a set of common attributes. The leaders were:

- driven by a strong sense that children and families matter
- focussed on people – able to develop relationships built on trust and integrity
- effective role models – doing what they say they will do and setting standards for others in how they conduct themselves
- passionate about what they do
- focussed on outcomes

- highly effective networkers who engage support and commitment from a wide range of stakeholders (National College 2010).

Effective leaders articulate and promote a clear vision and set of values that underpin the programme, and which are communicated to and shared by all staff. A vision for an effective parental engagement strategy will vary from one school and community to another but critical features include:

- a strong leader who drives the vision
- a clear belief that engaging parents will make a difference to the achievement and learning outcomes of children
- a vision that is shared by all staff who are committed to supporting it
- a focus on evaluating the impact and identifying what difference the programme is making
- involving parents in decision making and not only consulting them (National College 2010).

Local authorities also have a leadership role, and a responsibility for creating strong partnerships and a clear strategic direction. In the context of understanding and supporting local communities Ofsted finds that local authorities have a pivotal role in:

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Challenges

A significant challenge is sustainability, and in particular retaining:

- committed and inspiring senior leaders
- high levels of commitment across distributed leaders and staff teams
- access to the funding streams and resources that successful programmes require.

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Collaboration and engagement

Parental engagement requires the engagement of all parents, and collaboration should:

- be pro-active rather than reactive
- sensitive to the circumstances of all families
- recognise the contributions parents can make
- aim to empower parents.

Estyn 2009 reports on good practice in **parental involvement in primary schools.** Schools that involve parents in supporting achievement:

- offer flexible arrangements for parents' evenings
- provide translators for parents who do not speak English
- provide enough information on homework so that parents know how to help

- choose topics for school work where parents could help easily

Ofsted 2008 undertook a survey of 29 secondary schools to identify good practice in **re-engaging disaffected students in their learning.** A close partnership with parents or carers was fundamental to re-engaging students. Schools were flexible about the timing of meetings to allow students to attend with their parents or carers. All schools had home–school liaison teams; the most effective focused on specific families and visited homes and other places where the community met regularly.

The Manchester Transition project (Dyson 2007) demonstrates the importance of a **whole school approach to parental engagement.** The aim was to increase the capacity of staff in schools in Manchester to support parents, particularly during transition stages. Features of schools reporting the largest impact included:

- head teacher commitment
- staff member responsible for parental involvement with the skills and commitment to make contact with disengaged families
- training for the staff in school
- networking between schools
- formalisation of effective practice.

Schools which effectively engage parents operate with **broad definitions of parental engagement and parental involvement**, including:

- learning at home: help with homework, skills, attitudes, values, behaviour
- communication: school-home; home-school
- in-school activities: volunteering; helping in classrooms, parents' evenings
- decision making: membership of Parent Teacher Associations or other committees and advisory groups
- collaborating with the community: community contributions to schools and families; family and school contributions to the community

Home-school knowledge activities are effective if they are the result of a two-way process – from home to school as well as from school to home – and are supported by school home support practitioners, Parent Support Advisors or learning support assistants providing targeted support.

A parental engagement strategy often extends beyond schools. The National College describes 10 services clusters in England, including schools and children's centres. All clusters engage with stakeholders beyond the schools and children's centres, and:

- share data with partners including the police, social services and voluntary sector
- draw on external expertise from agencies engaged in mental health, nursing and community activities
- employ staff whose expertise is different from teaching – including counsellors and community support workers.

Ofsted 2010 reports on a survey to evaluate how a sample of **local authorities and education providers knew and understood their local communities**. Extended services, children's centres and family learning were found to be central to local provision, designed to engage the wider community and bring together different generations.

<u>**Challenges**</u>

A significant challenge is reaching and involving **parents who have chosen not to engage** either with their children's school or with their children's learning. A related challenge is finding the most appropriate **methods for identifying what parents want and need**. Some home-school activities can be **resource intensive.** Feiler 2006 describes a project that made use of disposable cameras and videos as a cost effective means of sharing information between school and home.

Sustained improvement

A parental engagement strategy should be the subject of ongoing support, monitoring and development:

- strategic planning which embeds parental engagement in whole-school development plans
- sustained support, resourcing and training
- community involvement at all levels of management, from initial needs analysis through to monitoring, evaluation and review
- a continuous system of evidence based development and review
- a supportive networked system that promotes objectivity and shared experiences.

Schools and children's services that **continuously monitor and evaluate data** on their interventions are thereby able to assess the effectiveness of their activities and the outcomes they lead to. They can also build an evidence base to inform an ongoing programme of development and research.

Data collection and monitoring should include the following features of interventions:

- children's attainment and learning related outcomes
- children's behavioural outcomes
- parents' demographic profile
- parental attitudes to education and parental attendance
- barriers to parental engagement

Data collection should also give priority to what parents spontaneously do to support their children's learning in the home. Schools require data on these activities if they

are to recognise and value existing parental efforts to support their children, and to use information about these activities to inform their own interventions.

Ofsted 2010 reports that schools were in a stronger position to respond to their communities when they received **information and data identifying how their performance compared with other schools and services**. In the best practice local authorities and individual educational settings shared information effectively.

Many staff do not have the knowledge and confidence to work with parents, particularly parents from deprived communities (Dyson 2007). There is a need for **teacher training**, in the context of initial teacher training or continuous professional development. Built on a clear understanding of parental engagement, this will include:

- Information about parents served by the school
- Teaching and learning in a family learning setting
- Working with adults and children
- Implementing the parental engagement activity

Teacher and staff training should be monitored, evaluated and up-dated following changes to the parent group or the content of the parental engagement programme.

<u>Challenges</u>

There are two areas on which the evidence is generally poor:

- **the outcomes of interventions** – academic and other learning related outcomes such as motivation and achievement. Too little is known about the impact of interventions on children's attainment.

- **How effectively staff and parents implement or follow activities prescribed by an intervention**. Too little is known about how faithfully staff and parents carry out the activities prescribed by a parental engagement programme, and about the impact on the success of the programme.

Partnerships present challenges to sharing data. **Information was not always shared across partners**, or communicated at points of transition from one location or school to another. It is a priority for local authorities to share their data and knowledge of local communities more systematically, and for schools and children's centres to explore how best to transfer information between locations.