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National College
for School Leadership

Schools and academies

Research Associate Summary report

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Resource

How to involve hard-to-reach
parents: encouraging meaningful
parental involvement with schools

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Introduction

The purpose of this research was to explore and capture successful practice in the field of parental engagement.

A literature review showed that the more intensely parents are involved in their children's education, the more advantageous the effect on pupil achievement. However, there is significantly more evidence of parental engagement in the early stages of primary school than in secondary schools (Cotton & Wiklund, 1989). Irrespective of school phase, there remains a significant group of hard-to-reach parents for whom the practicalities of effective engagement present a real challenge for many school leaders.

This research has sought to produce creative ideas and strategies to support schools who seek to involve parents from hard-to-reach groups more effectively, and to structure these strategies within Epstein's (2001) taxonomy of parental engagement across the overlapping spheres of family, school and community which impact upon children's progress.

The key research questions were:

- What do school leaders mean by hard-to-reach parents?
- What are the perceived barriers to parental engagement?
- What strategies do school leaders use to encourage parental involvement and overcome these barriers?

Methods

The research questions were explored using a combination of in-depth interviews with 20 school leaders involved in the Greater Manchester Challenge from schools perceived by Ofsted to have good or outstanding parental engagement strategies in place, and questionnaires completed by 50 school leaders from schools across the country, covering pupil referral units, special schools, primary schools and secondary schools in varying contexts of geographical location, size and socio-economic background. Feedback was obtained from a focus group of 12 inner-city Salford parents deemed hard to reach and supplemented by a further 18 Greater Manchester parents, and 2 health professionals with experience of working with hard-to-reach community groups from the Salford and Stafford primary care trusts (PCTs).

Findings

Section 1: What do school leaders mean by hard-to-reach parents?

This study drew together the issues identified in a literature review and the views of school leaders who were invited to put themselves in the shoes of parents and reflect on factors influencing parental engagement and in particular the barriers to be overcome in securing it. In doing so, the study defined hard-to-reach parents as those who:

- have very low levels of engagement with school
- do not attend school meetings nor respond to communications
- show high levels of inertia in overcoming perceived barriers to participation

Consideration of the perceived barriers to engagement allowed the creation of a toolkit of appropriate strategies to overcome these barriers and secure greater parental participation from this hard-to-reach group.

Section 2: Barriers to parental engagement

The majority of respondents in this study felt that barriers to parental engagement are attributable to parental factors rather than factors stemming from the school. For example, inertia or a lack of responsiveness by parents with school may be caused by low parental self-esteem, previous bad experiences of school, or gender and boundary issues.

Parents with high self-esteem are more likely to become involved in their children's education. Whilst home learning, such as homework, is seen as a positive engagement strategy, recent research (Shaw, 2010) has shown that over 50 per cent of children are confused by assistance from parents and some 83 per cent of parents report that helping with homework has proved particularly challenging. This is particularly acute for parents whose self-esteem may be low and whose previous experience of education has been less than positive.

Hard-to-reach parents indicated that negative relationships with school were linked with their own previous bad experience of unfriendly or unwelcoming encounters with school staff or indeed other parents, and a perceived lack of avenues of

redress and explanation readily available to them.

Research evidence regarding the effect of gender on parental involvement shows that children benefit from higher academic achievement and social and emotional wellbeing if fathers are involved (Morgan et al, 2009:167). In seeking to secure greater involvement of fathers, school leaders identified the barriers faced as:

- absent fathers who do not regularly see their children, or only at weekends
- working fathers who do not pick their children up, or drop them off at school
- men entering into home-learning practices that have already been established by mothers, for example reading, helping with homework
- gender role modelling due to a majority of women staff in primary schools

Traditional boundaries between school and home have become increasingly porous, yet there remains a lack of full recognition by school leaders as to the degree of parental involvement in children’s education which goes on unseen in the home. It therefore is a priority for school leaders to identify, strengthen and support existing home efforts using the strategies outlined below.

Section 3: Strategies to encourage parental engagement and overcome barriers

School leaders identified in interview and questionnaire responses a significant number of specific strategies to improve parental engagement. These creative ideas are captured in detail in the full report of this study. The strategies can be categorised using a version of Epstein’s (2001) overlapping spheres of influence concept to produce a toolkit of creative ideas for enhanced parental engagement. Examples of such strategies may be considered under the categories in Table 1 (adapted from Epstein’s taxonomy).

Table 1: Categories of strategies to improve parental engagement

Category	Strategy
Parenting	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Drop-in workshop sessions of practical ideas to use at home • Bespoke support from home liaison officer • Home visits from school staff
Communicating	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Formal involvement through parent council and parents’ evenings • Informal opportunities through school-gate contacts
Volunteering	PTA and seasonal fair involvement to use the often hidden expertise of parents
Family learning	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • After-school and Saturday morning clubs • Parent-child homework sessions • Fathers’ story-telling weeks
Decision-making	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Governing body and parent council service • Regular parental feedback questionnaires • Parental contributions to school development plan
Community collaboration	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Involvement in special projects such as Healthy Schools • Concern for parent friendliness and accessibility of school buildings
Remote involvement	Harnessing the power of ICT, eg school blogs and podcasts, website (regularly updated), text messaging, online questionnaires to reach those unwilling to engage with the school in person

Conclusions

In summary, the strategies described by school leaders taking part in this research cover the following areas:

- implementing training programmes for parents, where they learn to communicate and work directly with their child
- helping parents recognise that they are partners and consumers in the educational process, and providing them with suitable arenas to critique and formulate agendas
- making it easier for parents to participate by giving them meaningful roles in school decision-making
- emphasising to parents how needed and valued their involvement is
- communicating to parents that their involvement and support makes a considerable difference to their child's performance

School leaders need to be committed to identifying their hard-to-reach parents and to persist in including them in their child's education for the benefit of pupils, the school and the school community as a whole. If hard-to-reach groups resist, the message from successful school leaders is clear - don't give up, keep trying to canvas opinion and keep inviting them, even if they turn you down. The key is to plan ahead and to involve all staff, so that everyone is delivering the same message: that parent involvement is highly valued.

Positive collaborative working in the variety of ways described above and in detail in the full report can bond parents to the work of the school through a sense of belonging and ensure that:

“Successful schools are those where parental engagement is at the centre of the school ethos as opposed to being at the periphery.”

Healthy Schools co-ordinator, Salford PCT

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