

Report summary

Schools and parents

Between September 2009 and March 2010, Her Majesty's Inspectors visited 47 schools to evaluate how effectively the partnership between parents and schools had developed. The schools varied in size, geographical location and socio-economic circumstances. Inspectors also drew on other sources, which included organisations working with parents and parents' groups, and evidence that Ofsted already held, such as data from its parents' panel and school inspections. These inspections show a successful picture of schools working in partnership with parents: in 2009/10, 80% of schools inspected were graded either good or outstanding in this area.

There were considerable differences from one school to another in the approaches taken to working with parents and in the effectiveness of the approaches. The schools were welcoming to parents and the parents noted improvements in the schools' relationships with them. Although this was at different stages of development, increasingly the schools visited for the survey were using email, mobile telephones and the internet to reach more parents more easily, including parents who were not living with their children. Parents and staff, however, still saw face-to-face communication as very important in helping learning. In the best examples seen, schools tailored their communications to suit the preferences of individual parents.

The parents interviewed for this survey had a better understanding of the assessments that schools made about their children, and how they could use these to encourage further progress, than the parents surveyed for a similar report in 2007. The schools usually gave them accurate, timely information and opportunities for discussion with staff. However, input from parents directly into setting pupils' academic targets was less common. All the schools visited gave parents guidance about how to help their children to learn at home. This differed widely in style and quality across the schools visited.

A fundamental difference observed between school phases was that in the primary and special schools visited, parents often worked directly alongside teachers and pupils, observing and contributing to the learning. This was much rarer in the secondary schools visited, so parents had less understanding about what their children were learning. The secondary schools asked parents to help their children by, for example, ensuring that they had a suitable place for homework and ensuring

good attendance. As in the 2007 survey, the schools visited were usually active in communicating with parents whose children had special educational needs and/or disabilities, or needed other particular support.

Most parental complaints and concerns were resolved well. When they were analysed positively as a means of improving provision, rather than handled defensively, they helped the schools to improve. Nevertheless, some of the parents that inspectors spoke to said that they could not always raise questions or concerns easily with their child's school. They felt that they were not able to request something more or different without appearing overly demanding.

Key findings

- All the schools visited valued the key role of parents in their children's education but put this into effect in different ways, with very varied quality and outcomes.
- In the best cases seen, joint working between the home and the school led to much better outcomes for pupils; in particular, this helped pupils with special educational needs and/or disabilities, those with low attendance or who were potentially vulnerable in other ways.
- All the schools visited were using, or experimenting with, new technology in their communications with parents. Such work complemented more traditional methods such as face-to-face meetings and paper-based communication.
- Seven of the 47 schools visited had parent councils or forums. These provided helpful routes for parents to raise issues or contribute to policy development on the initiative of the school but such councils did not represent all parents fully.
- In the best practice, complaints were used as an opportunity to improve services and understand better the wishes and views of parents. These schools had clear, straightforward complaints procedures that were well known to staff and parents.
- In the few cases seen where the schools said that parents had contributed or initiated ideas for strategic improvement, and these ideas had been taken forward, they had been successful.
- Although parents often worked helpfully alongside staff (especially in the primary schools visited), the various skills, qualifications, experience and insights of parents were underused to enhance the schools' provision and curriculum.
- The schools' evaluation of the impact of their work with parents was poor.
- Home-school agreements had a low profile and their impact on the day-to-day work between parents and the schools was very limited.

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