

Governors' Information Bulletin

JANUARY 2008

No 61

INVOLVING PARENTS

PARENTS AS PARTNERS

Local authorities and other providers are increasingly regarding parents and their children as customers and planning and managing their services accordingly. Likewise, for schools to achieve the best they can for their pupils, parents should be seen as genuine partners in the success of the school. This means more parents being more involved in the life of the school.

Some schools may be uncomfortable about the idea of parents getting more involved in school decisions; others may feel that parents don't actually *want* this kind of involvement. Yet Government research shows that many parents would like to get more involved in the way their school is run but for a number of reasons don't or can't. More surprisingly, most parents believe that the responsibility for their child's education should be shared between parents and the school.

However, the reality is that many parents don't get involved. Some may not feel ready to be a parent-governor; for others the pressures of modern life may make it difficult to find the time; while other barriers like language could be getting in the way for many.

Case studies have shown that parents respond positively when they are given relevant opportunities to get involved in school life. Often this means thinking of new ways of reaching out to the more disadvantaged and those who traditionally don't get involved, perhaps because of language or culture.

Of course, increased parental involvement in school management won't happen overnight. It represents a significant step change in culture and behaviour for both parents and school staff. But in the long term, everyone can benefit — the parents, their children and families, the school and the wider community.

So, how can schools encourage *all* parents to get involved in school life? One way is through **parent councils, some schools are also appointing parent champions.**

PARENT COUNCILS

Parent councils are a relatively new way for schools to encourage more parents to get involved in school life. They are informal forums where parents are able to raise issues, be consulted on school policy and give their views. It isn't just about parents' relationships with the school — it's also about their relationships with other parents, and of course with their child's learning.



There is no definitive model — it will depend on the make-up of the school. For example, schools with a high ethnic minority population will need to think about the impact of culture and language and take action such as making sure information is available and understood in the relevant languages or holding women-only meetings.

In many cases, it will require schools to develop new ways of working such as using email to communicate, or having meetings outside normal times so that working parents have a better chance of attending, or developing events especially for fathers or for parents with English as a second language.

It means reviewing how information is communicated — with a shift away from passive information to active consultation — and ensuring that school websites meet the needs of parents as well as pupils and staff.

Like most programmes requiring change in culture and behaviour, an effective Parent Council needs strong and supportive leadership and a clear understanding of roles and responsibilities, consulting parents from the beginning and ensuring staff have the necessary time and funding.

Parent councils can also be a useful way for the governing body to communicate and consult with parents.

Trust schools (where the majority of the governing body are appointed, not elected) are required to have parent councils.

Setting up a parent council

A project funded by the former DfES *Setting up Parents' Councils* explored how school communities could develop parental involvement in their school through setting up a parent council or forum. The case studies report which can be accessed at http://www.teachernet.gov.uk/_doc/9559/parentcouncils.pdf describes what happened in each of the four schools that took part and highlights what worked best for them.

The Calderdale **Parent and Carers' Council** is recommended viewing on the DCSF link about establishing Parent Councils. Contact details Calderdale Parent & Carers Council, Hanson Lane Enterprise Centre, Halifax HX1 5PG
Tel: 01422 343090 . Fax: 01422 365074 . e-mail: parent.council@zen.co.uk

The government's Schools White Paper *Higher Standards, Better Schools for All* expressed a commitment to increasing parental involvement in schools and ensuring that parents' voices are heard. To support this the Government proposes to place a new duty on governing bodies to 'have regard to the views of parents'. Schools will be able to choose how they fulfil the new duty, but the Government has said it was impressed by schools which had already established parent councils.

PARENT CHAMPIONS: SUPPORTING SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT

Greater parental involvement is particularly important where there is poor school performance. To encourage greater parental involvement and consultation, all local authorities are now required to ensure that the parents of children at poorly performing schools are consulted in their plans to turn the school around.

To help them achieve this, local authorities can now appoint a 'parent champion'. A parent champion is independent of both the local authority and school but is sufficiently experienced and skilled to act as the broker between parents and the local authority (or proprietor). The aim is to ensure good communication with parents. The statement of action should include how parents are to be informed of the authority's plans, ensuring that they understand the issues and have the opportunity to offer their views.

A parent champion can be appointed before a school is judged as failing by Ofsted in order to take preventative action. They can also be appointed where the local authority is considering radical changes such as making leadership changes, replacing the governing body, appointing a partner or replacing the school.

PARENT SATISFACTION: PARENTS HELPING TO RAISE STANDARDS

Parents are to be instrumental in driving up standards — in the attainment levels of children and in the quality of the education services that support them.

You may already be aware of the changing nature of the role of the local authority from a 'provider' of education to a 'commissioner'. What this means in practice is that the local authority is developing and improving its services — including the provision of school places — to better meet the needs and demands of parents and their children. This new way of working involves planning, managing and delivering school places to meet the needs of the local community.

As with every service provider, the local authority will need to know how satisfied parents are with the education provided. Indeed, monitoring parental satisfaction is now a formal requirement of the 2006 Education Act and is managed by the new role of the Schools Commissioner.

The Schools Commissioner is responsible for monitoring parents' satisfaction with education services and will publish an annual report. The first is due in April 2008. This report will help the local authority and other education providers, including schools, to identify how well they are doing and in future planning.

PARENTAL COMPLAINTS TO OFSTED – DID YOU KNOW?

From April 2007 Ofsted received new powers to consider complaints by registered parents and carers about their child's school as a whole.

The kinds of complaints Ofsted can respond to include:

- the school is not providing a good enough education
- the pupils are not achieving as much as they should, or their needs are not being met
- the school is not well led and managed, or is not using its resources efficiently
- the pupils' personal development and well-being are being neglected.

Go to

<http://www.parentscentre.gov.uk/educationandlearning/rightsandresponsibilities/complainintofsted/> for additional information.