

Parents' views on improving parental involvement in children's education

Executive Summary and Conclusions

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

BACKGROUND

This report details findings from qualitative research addressing the issue of parental involvement in the education of their children. The need for the research derived from a growing recognition of the importance of the role of parents and home-school partnerships in improving levels of achievement and attainment in schools and the overall quality of the educational experience. The Scottish Executive Education Department (SEED) is committed to improving the involvement of parents in their children's education and in the work of the school itself. This research explores the level of involvement that parents currently have in different types of educational and school related activities and aims to identify barriers to involvement, so that strategies can be introduced to overcome these and ultimately improve parental involvement.

A key aim of the research was to speak to a wide range of parent stakeholders, particularly those who would not normally express an opinion on this type of issue. Hence the sample targeted parents from a variety of cultural and social backgrounds including parents with disabilities, low formal educational levels, foster carers etc..

Note that the term "parent" is used throughout the report to refer to the wide range of individuals who are responsible for the care and upbringing of children and young people across the country. Occasionally, the report makes use of other terms, but this is where the view expressed is attributable to a particular type of carer only – for example, foster carers or asylum seekers, refugees.

OBJECTIVES OF PROJECT

The specific objectives set for the research were as follows.

- To gather feedback and views from key parent stakeholder groups about their current involvement in their children's education.
- To include the opinions of groups who, in the past, have been reluctant or unable to provide appropriate feedback.
- To reflect the views of parent stakeholders from all parts of Scotland and include those individuals resident in cities, towns and rural areas.
- To help raise awareness of SEED's developing policy and contribute to the overall communication of the concepts among the target groups in the course of conducting the research.
- To identify actions and recommendations that will help to improve the quality of parental involvement.

KEY FINDINGS

Current perceptions and expectations of involvement

- There is a variety of perceptions and expectations about what parental involvement means, and the range of roles and responsibilities that parents expect the school to offer.
- Most parents recognise that they are required to offer some fundamental support and input into their children's learning, for example to help them be punctual, behave well and respect others. These are generally regarded as basic expectations that schools can reasonably expect of any parent.
- Parents have expectations for how the school interacts with them and their children, for example through the welcoming ethos, communications and responses to issues raised.
- The majority of parents currently have relatively low levels of involvement whilst perceiving that what they already do is all that is needed. Some parents are not satisfied with current levels of active participation and wish to change this.
- Many parents hold fixed assumptions about the division of labour between home and school and it may be challenging to overcome these.

There is a need for comprehensive information and support to overcome some existing mindsets, convince parents of the significance of their role and support them in helping their children to succeed.

Forms and patterns of parental involvement

- Parents are involved in many different ways. Parents are most likely to be involved in informal activities requiring a lesser amount of commitment and time. Few parents participate in active, formal and school based activities, such as membership of the PTA and the School Board¹.
- Pressure of time, due to work or family commitments was the most quoted reason for any lack of involvement.
- There are a number of key factors affecting variable degrees of involvement. The age and stage of the children is one such factor with parents being more involved when their children are younger.
- Parents are also primarily concerned for the welfare of their own child. The concern to keep track of their own child's educational experience is what motivates parents to participate in school events or formal bodies.

In any marketing or promotional campaign directed at parents, SEED should note that parents

¹ Parents interviewed used the term PTA / School Boards interchangeably and did not always distinguish clearly between them. For that reason, the report uses the term PTA / School Board or 'parental representation' as best suits the context.

are more likely to participate if they perceive a direct positive impact on their own child as a consequence of their involvement. There are a number of key messages that illustrate the benefits of parental involvement that can be exploited in promotional activities.

Patterns of communication

- Parents depend on effective channels of communication to know where and how they can be involved. There are many different channels of communication between the home and the school.
- The effectiveness of each varies according to what type of information is to be conveyed, school and family specific criteria and the age and stage of pupils through or about whom communication is delivered.
- Parents feel that certain forms of communication can work well at particular stages in the education system. In general, the channels of communication work most effectively at the earlier educational stages (pre-school and primary) when children are young and parents have more opportunities to communicate with the school and teachers on an informal basis.
- As pupils progress to secondary school, communication becomes less effective and is also more formalised. Children become increasingly independent and try to distance their parents. Sometimes they become less communicative and may not always pass on information to their parents.
- As a result, some parents, especially those of older children, suffer from information deficits and find it extremely hard to keep track of what is going on at school both in terms of academic affairs, social events or parental representation.

There is scope for improving the channels of communication. Many that are currently used with success at pre-school and primary could be developed at later stages of the education system. Details and examples are provided throughout the full report.

Language

- There is also an issue concerning the language used to communicate with parents by schools, local authorities and SEED. Without care, some terminology can imply that parents are not playing their role, or that very basic parental responsibilities are not being met.

Attention should be paid to the style and tone of language in all types of communication to parents to capture their attention in a positive and motivating way, and foster their interest and commitment.

Information requirements

- Parents have particular requirements concerning *the type of information* they wish to have, *the time of year* that they wish to receive it and *the format* in which the information should be conveyed.

- Parents' most important requirements are ongoing feedback about their child throughout the school year, feedback about performance and behaviour on a more regular basis, and immediate contact if there is a problem.
- In addition to receiving historical information about levels of performance and achievement, many parents believe that they need to be better informed, in advance, of what their children will or should be doing.
- Parents take particular notice of facts demonstrating that parent/child support activities can have a significant impact on learning and achievement. By helping parents to better understand how critical their actions can be, and what they need to do, they will be more likely to take steps to be more actively involved in different ways in their children's education.
- The form of communication that is best suited for one type of information transmission is not necessarily right for another, and certain forms of communication work better for certain families than others or at certain stages in the education cycle.

There is scope for improving communication and information requirements. There is a need for a more flexible approach to communication by using different mediums. Communication works best when it meets local expectations. Communication formats could, therefore, usefully be tailored to meet local circumstances.

Barriers to parental involvement

- Parents identify a range of factors that limit their ability to get involved in their children's education.
- It is significant that parents perceive the school to present a number of obstacles such as lack of encouragement, not informing parents of what they can do and too few flexible forms of involvement to fit in around busy working and family lives.
- Parents are reluctant to participate in formal bodies such as the PTA and School Board because they perceive these to be formal and closed, and they do not identify with the other parents who are members of such groupings. Some parents are intimidated by such bodies.

There is clearly scope for steps to be taken to overcome the barriers to parental involvement. Parents would benefit from advice and support that show them different ways of getting involved. Some families would appreciate services to overcome personal obstacles and enable them to attend events, such as child care or transportation and the availability of teachers outside standard school times. Parents with limited time wish for more opportunities for small or infrequent forms of support for the school itself. There is also a need for reforms to parental representation, both by working to overcome the current image of PTAs and School Boards, broadening Board membership, and offering alternative options for parents to voice their opinions.

Improving parental involvement

Parents we spoke to brought a number of suggestions and examples of best practice to our attention, and these are detailed throughout the full report. We recommend that particular strategies that are used in some schools could successfully be developed in others. The provision of a good practice guide in chapter nine of the full report aims to identify the most useful examples and sets out a basis for further development by SEED and others.

To ensure the success of the introduction of new measures in schools across the country, SEED also needs to help parents understand fully the difference they can make to their children's education. A first step to bringing about change is to inform parents of the importance of improved involvement, explaining the particular benefits that involvement will have, and ensuring they have help in giving their children practical support. A campaign should aim to challenge the existing assumptions that are held by parents by using key messages which detail the ways that involvement impacts on the progress of their own child. This will encourage parents to realise the real significance of getting involved both at home, and at school.

Key messages and guidance for a campaign are provided in chapter six of the full report and in the recommendations below.

SEED's developing policy broadly reflects the expectations, requirements and changes expressed by parents in the course of this research. This indicates that the developing approach is well placed to tackle the key issues and lead to improvements in parental involvement in education.

CONCLUSIONS AND THE WAY FORWARD

CONCLUSIONS

This chapter sets out our conclusions and key points for further consideration. George Street Research recognises that the findings will inform developments in improving parental involvement. They are not directed specifically at SEED, education authorities, schools, parent bodies or Higher Education Institutions, but each may be able to identify their relevant roles in addressing key issues. A coordinated approach across all partners may deliver changes effectively.

The principal conclusions from the research are listed below.

- **Parental involvement means different things to different people.**

What the term “parental involvement” refers to is variable and, therefore, covers a wide range of different activities. In this analysis these have been grouped according to whether they are active or less active, formal or informal and conducted in the home or at school. Our research has shown that the majority of parents engage in a limited range of activity covering mainly less active and informal forms of involvement, mostly conducted at home.

- **Most parents perceive that they are doing all that is required.**

The majority of parents consider that what they are currently doing is all that is required. Parents have fixed assumptions about what level of input is required from them which are difficult to change. Parents have little understanding of how important their role is in supporting their child to do well at school and most labour under the idea that they are playing a secondary role to the teachers. However, any suggestion at national, local authority or school levels that parents are not doing enough and that they “must” or “should” be more involved, is likely to offend the majority of parents.

Key Point: Rather than coercing parents to be involved by telling them what they “must” or “should” do, parents prefer the hard facts on what impact they can have and how important their input is. Then, it can be left to the parents to make their own decisions about what they do based on the evidence with which they have been provided. They are more likely to be encouraged to build on what they currently do if there is clear evidence to show that this will have a positive impact on their own children.

- **Parents are primarily motivated by the needs of their own children.**

The extent to which they get involved is directly influenced by the significance of involvement for their own child. For most people, their motto is “if it ain’t broke don’t fix it.” If things are going well at school and their children seem to be happy and are achieving well, parents prefer to let things continue without change. Only if a child has a problem will these parents get involved. Parents also recognise that their children are resistant to their presence at school as they get older and become more independent and this is considered to be a normal and natural part of growing up.

- **The parents who are most involved do so because they believe it will benefit their own child in some way.**

Only if parents believe that involvement will specifically and directly benefit their own child, will they consider taking steps to greater participation in school activities and affairs.

Key point: Again, this emphasises the importance of clarifying to parents the impact that their role can have. There are **key messages** that can be used for this purpose. It will be important to spell out to parents that things like understanding what the goals of the schools are and becoming familiar with the way that the school operates can have an important benefit to their own child directly.

- **Some parents lack information that they feel is necessary for them to keep track of how their child is doing at school and how they can support them.**

There are many forms of communication but some of them work more effectively than others, meaning that some parents feel that they are not kept adequately informed. Parents require specific types of information in particular formats at specific times of the year or stages in their children's education. Certain forms of communication suit some families better than others depending on their specific circumstances. Where schools recognise and understand parents' varied expectations about what kind of arrangements and information are needed to help them get involved, parents respond positively, are more likely to get involved and be more interested in school life.

Key point: In terms of communication it is clear that one size does not fit all. There is a need to provide information variety in a variety of formats to suit the differing requirements.

- **Parents can be distanced or even offended by certain styles and tones of language.**

Certain styles of language used by schools, teachers or local authorities in communication with parents may actively put them off getting more involved or make them resistant to proposals for change that the school or SEED present to them.

Key point: Avoid the use of language that implies that parents are not doing their job properly, that is patronising, simplistic, that states the obvious or that is overly complex.

- **There are a number of factors affecting parental involvement.**

Apart from not knowing the importance of their involvement, parents offer many reasons for not being more involved than they currently are. These include barriers that they face as a result of their social and economic circumstances, such as work patterns, family circumstances, and economic status, and external barriers such as those that are perceived to exist at the school. These may continue to preclude parents from greater or better involvement.

- **Parents perceive there to be barriers to involvement at school.**

Some parents perceive that barriers exist at the school. For example, parents feel that they are not told about the different ways that they can help; the opportunities for

occasional participation tend not to exist, teachers are not always as encouraging as they could be, and there are fears concerning safety and protection issues as a result of working with children.

Key point: Introduce a range of strategies to improve parental involvement, to challenge the barriers that currently exist or to overcome the image that parents may associate with the school. Many of these have been discussed in chapters eight and nine of the full report and include measures to overcome some of the practical problems such as child care and transportation, and others to improve relationships between parents and the school, such as offering more flexible forms of involvement and clarifying the different ways that parents can get involved.

- **There are specific barriers faced by certain social groups.**

Often some of the barriers facing the majority of parents are exacerbated for certain social groups, or certain communities may face problems specific to their circumstances. These have been identified throughout the full report, but a significant point to note is that socially excluded communities such as asylum seekers, refugees and Gypsies/Travellers may be in greatest need of community building facilities and structures, but often live in areas where poor facilities are in place.

Key point: Foster community building by creating a focal area for members of local communities to meet and hold community events throughout the year. This can be through the use of existing community facilities, by using school facilities in the evenings or providing new community facilities. This will be particularly important in socially deprived areas where some families suffer social exclusion.

- **Parents are reluctant to participate in the PTA and School Board.**

The majority of parents lack the opportunity to give voice to their opinions or to have any real influence over the policy and direction of the school. Current forms of representation are not working and although many parents are not terribly interested in being involved in this type of activity, there is a need for a more effective form of consultation and representation.

Key point: Broaden the membership of parent representative groups and develop alternative forms of consultation such that parents have a range of opportunities to give their opinions. Make parental representation less formal.

A key finding of the research is that there is clearly scope for improving parental involvement. Examples of a range of ways of doing so have been discussed in chapters eight and nine of the full report. However, before these new measures can be implemented, there is a need to challenge the existing mindsets of the majority of parents and convince them of the importance of improving the quality of their involvement. This will require an educational and informative campaign targeting parents throughout Scotland. Thus, our central recommendation is for parents to be better informed about what parental involvement means and how it can benefit their children.

THE WAY FORWARD

This section contains some suggestions of how these findings can be usefully applied. All parties could usefully consider the following.

- **Disseminate key, meaningful messages.**

One of the biggest challenges facing the Scottish Executive and key stakeholders is overcoming the established assumptions held by the silent majority of parents, that their level of parental involvement is adequate. There is firstly, therefore, a need to challenge the existing mindset of the majority of parents about what constitutes an acceptable and desirable level of parental involvement, highlighting the difference they can make. Messages can most effectively capture the attention of parents if they make use of key messages that are meaningful to parents and which will, therefore, trigger greater participation.

“Your own child will benefit.”

One of the most significant findings of this research is that parents are motivated primarily by the needs of their own children. If parents can, therefore, be convinced that greater participation will help their own child, they will be far more likely to get more involved. This is the message that the Scottish Executive and others can use in communication with parents.

A number of other hard hitting messages discussed in chapter six of the full report, usefully illustrate how the role of parental support in the home impact on educational achievements and progress. Parents would appreciate clear advice on how they can support their children.

- **Raise awareness of teachers and other staff.**

The research highlights a range of issues that are important for all staff who work in schools, education authorities and other bodies to be aware of. Parental involvement components of training programmes, including Initial Teacher Education and Continuing Professional Development opportunities could usefully take the findings of this report into account.

- **Consult parents in a broader range of ways.**

Parents should be consulted about possible new initiatives using a broader range of channels and forums. These should both **inform** parents about the planned policies and offer them the opportunity to provide their **feedback** and **response** to these proposals. The range of ways should both complement the existing PTAs and School Boards but, more importantly offer alternative channels of information to include parents who do not usually have the opportunity to offer their views. We would recommend using an informal approach and emphasising this to parents to encourage their participation:

- Information evenings
- Panels
- Informal discussion forums
- Questionnaires

- Tear off slips.

Any advertising or educational campaign should use hard hitting messages to draw parents' attention to the importance and benefits of increased involvement.

- **Continue to improve the quality and availability of information.**

There are already many different forms of information that are disseminated to parents about the many different aspects of school life. This includes information about how schools operate, curriculum and subjects, exams and qualifications, homework, performance and what parents can do to help and support their children.

We recommend that SEED, schools and local authorities continue to develop and disseminate this type of information on a regular basis. In addition, there is scope for experimenting with new forms of publishing information and additional ways of disseminating information in line with the changing requirements of parents today. One way would be to experiment with the use of email and school websites.

- **Use flexible approaches to informing and communicating.**

It is also important to offer parents flexibility in the way that they give and receive information and communication with the school in line with their own requirements, thus respecting the social and cultural differences that characterise contemporary Scottish families.

- **Use language carefully.**

Another key issue concerns the style of language that is used in communication with parents. This applies to language that is used by the school and local authority, and language that is used at an overarching level by SEED.

There is often a tendency for some communication to be loaded with negative connotations or implications, which can be interpreted (or misinterpreted) in a variety of different ways. As we noted earlier in the report, the notion of “parenting classes” implies that parents are failing to do their basic parenting job properly. In fact, the very term “parental involvement” has its own set of problems as we also identified earlier, as parental understandings of what involvement constitutes are somewhat different from what it could be. The term does not stimulate the majority parents to conceptualise the wider range of active participation that SEED hopes to achieve.

There is thus a requirement for specific terminology that more accurately refers to the specific range of activities that SEED would like parents to be active participants in. Terms such as “commitment” or “active partnerships” might be more effective. It would also be helpful for any term when newly introduced to be followed by a clear set of definitions as to what types of activity it refers to.

Care needs to be taken in the style and tone that is used in communicating with parents. It should at all costs avoid being patronising or simplistic, as parents will be unlikely to pay heed to it.

- **Offer a range of opportunities for parents to share skills.**

In the attempt to get more parents actively involved in any type of activity, it should be noted that people are always far more likely to agree to participate if they have been asked directly and personally. Rather than asking them to sign up for a regular, term or year's worth of commitment, it helps to invite parents to a specific single event in the first instance. By offering them a "taster", they are more likely to agree to come along, and getting their foot through the door for the first time is an invaluable first step in fostering a longer term involvement. Sometimes parents are unaware of the skills that they have and there is a need to clearly point these out. There is also a requirement for the provision of more infrequent opportunities for involvement that do not require such a high degree of commitment, to make it easier for time pressured parents to get involved.

- **Explore and develop ways of sharing best practice.**

The research has also indicated that there are substantial differences between schools both within and across local authority areas. We have found many examples of useful strategies that are used in one school that others might equally find useful. There are also particular activities that are exploited at pre-school or primary school level that could be adapted and introduced at later stages of the education system. There is clearly a need to develop a system for sharing best practice between schools. A starting point for this could be the publication and distribution of a best practice guide which builds on chapter nine of the full report.