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SETTING UP PARENT COUNCILS

Case Studies

Ideas for governors, teachers, other professionals and parents setting up a parent council or parent forum.

By Fiona Carnie

INTRODUCTION

When parents and carers are involved in their children's education, children do better. This is evidenced by a growing body of research*. Parental involvement is thus a lever for raising pupil achievement. The research to date has, however, focused on how parents can support their children's learning. Very little work has been done in the UK to explore the role of parents (other than as members of governing bodies) in school decision making and how this might benefit school communities.

Human Scale Education, who project managed the work described in this report, believes that for schools to do their best for the children in their care parents should be seen as genuine partners and this requires that they are democratically involved in the life of the school. Schools in England have parent governors, and as members of the governing body these parents participate in developing school policy. This project aimed to look at ways in which schools could engage with the parent body on an ongoing basis.

The recent Schools White Paper expressed a commitment to increasing parental involvement in schools and ensuring that parents' voices are heard. Schools will be able to choose how they fulfil the new duty to 'have regard to the views of parents', but the Government said it was impressed by schools which had established Parent Councils. In a number of other countries such as Denmark, Holland and Germany it is normal practice for all parents of children in one class or tutor group to meet with the teacher on a regular basis – usually termly or half termly - to discuss issues of mutual interest such as class routines, topics to be covered over the term and excursions. Such meetings make it possible for teachers to get to know parents well and as a result of this feel better able to support the children. It also gives them the opportunity to discuss with parents ways in which they can support their child's learning. Parents themselves are provided with the opportunity to get to know the parents of their child's contemporaries as well as developing a better understanding of school life. Parent representatives from each class might also represent the group on a whole school parents' council or forum. At these council or forum meetings, issues which affect the whole school rather than individual classes or tutor groups are discussed. Through such meetings parental views can feed into school decision making.

Some would argue that parents in England would not welcome involvement of this kind and that it is already difficult enough to get them to come to school other than for meetings about their own child. They believe that in this country there is not a tradition of this sort of home/school collaboration and that parents see it as their job to get children to school but do not feel that their views on wider school issues can make a difference. However, the following case studies illustrate how parents can respond positively when they are given opportunities to get involved in these ways, including an enthusiastic response to meetings where parents with children in the same class all meet together with the class teacher, parents reaching out to other parents and parents showing a willingness to participate in new ways.

To explore how parents might become more involved in the life of the school and in the education their child receives there, Human Scale Education received funding of £29,100 from the Department for Education and Skills (DfES) for a one year project (2004-5). This involved work with four schools in England to set up parents' class committees, parents' councils and parents' forums. In June 2004, schools were invited to submit applications for funding and in July, four schools – two primary and two secondary - were selected to receive a grant of £5000 each to develop ways of involving parents more democratically in their children's education. Human Scale Education received funding to support these schools in their work.

The successful schools were:

- Beech Hill Primary School, Luton
- Bruce Grove Primary School, Haringey, London
- George Green's School, Tower Hamlets, London
- Ladybridge High School, Bolton

The project, which was called *Setting up Parents' Councils*, aimed to explore new ways in which parents could be involved in schools to encourage a culture of genuine participation and collaboration. It was recognised at the outset that the term "Parents' Council" would mean different things to different people and that the schools would have the freedom to develop models that suited their own circumstances. Through this project the four schools have been supported in establishing new structures and processes. The DfES stipulated that the grants should go to schools which are in challenging circumstances and so there has been a particular emphasis throughout on working to reach disengaged parents and parents from minority ethnic communities.

Human Scale Education and the DfES would like to thank the participating schools.

*** Key Research**

- Parental involvement has a significant effect on pupil achievement throughout the years of schooling ⁽¹⁾
- Most parents believe that the responsibility for their child's education is shared between parents and the school ⁽²⁾
- Many parents want to be involved in their children's education. In a study in England published in 2002 72% of parents said that they wanted more involvement ⁽³⁾

1. Desforges, C., (2003) *The impact of parental involvement, parental support and family education on pupil achievement and adjustment*, DfES Research report 433

2. Williams, B., Williams, J. and Ullman, A. (2002) *Parental Involvement in Education*, DfES Research Report 332

3. *ibid*

CASE STUDIES

1. BEECH HILL PRIMARY SCHOOL, LUTON

Beech Hill Primary School in Luton has over 500 children, mostly from an Asian Muslim background. The school is situated in one of the poorest areas of Luton and a significant number of families have arrived in the UK recently. The main community languages are Bengali and Urdu and many parents do not speak English. Communication between home and school can therefore be problematic and it is difficult for some parents or carers to help their child with their work. Letters home are not effective and the school has had to find others ways to reach the parents. Prior to the project, the school had little parental involvement, as this is not part of the culture to which many families belong. Staff at the school were very keen to change this as they considered it an important way to raise children's attainment. They identified increasing parental involvement in their children's school education as a key objective for the year 2004-5 and their aim was to find new ways to draw parents into the school. The school had a new Headteacher, David Meredith, who had only been in post for a year. He felt that involvement in the Setting up Parents' Councils project was very timely for the school.

Plans for the project

The Parents' Councils project was based on the Headteacher's idea to establish a system of class representatives. Each class would have two parent representatives who met with the class teacher each half term. The school would also organise regular whole class parents' meetings to enable parents to come in to school and have the opportunity to meet with their child's class teacher. The class representatives would play an important part in communicating with other parents about these meetings.

The plan was that first of all Family Workers at the school would undertake a survey of parental opinion to establish what parents came to school for, what they liked when they came to school, what put them off coming to school and what the school could do to encourage greater involvement.

The project

The Beech Hill Community Primary School Parent Teachers Association (PTA) was re-launched at the beginning of the Autumn term 2004. It set two specific aims. These were:

- to increase the number of parents belonging to the PTA and broaden their involvement
- to involve parents as part of the decision-making process within the school and to maintain their commitment to the PTA

The PTA decided to achieve these aims by holding class parties; by identifying class parent representatives and through organising a telephone tree for each class. They set about these tasks in the following way.

First of all each class held a class party for which the PTA provided food and drink. The aim was to have an event at which the teachers, teaching assistants, parents/carers and children could meet together. These parties, which were held towards the end of the Autumn term, during the Eid festival, were all a huge success and turnout was high. Staff reported that parents enjoyed themselves very much to the extent that some were reluctant to leave at the end.

From each class, the staff identified and approached two parents and invited them to become class parent representatives. One of the parents approached in each class spoke Bengali and one of them spoke Urdu, the idea being that they would be able to reach out to the two main communities and make contact with those parents who do not speak English. These representatives were to attend a meeting with the class teacher every half term. To get this system off the ground the Head decided to use the DfES grant to offer the representatives £100 each as remuneration for their participation over the course of the year.

The aim of the class parent representatives was to try and encourage all parents to become more involved in school life. They would communicate parents' views, concerns and ideas to the class teacher. The role was to consist of:

- Talking to other parents/carers in the playground first thing in the morning, at home time or by telephone
- Finding out parents/carers' views about issues that affect their child's class such as bullying in the playground, school trips, lost property
- Explaining and discussing these issues with the class teacher at half-termly meetings
- Listening to and discussing issues that the class teacher wished to raise, for example, children learning their spellings at home or bringing a PE kit to school each week
- Feeding back to parents and carers what had been said at these meetings
- Attending whole school PTA Committee meetings and taking part in wider school issues

Supply cover was arranged to enable all members of the teaching staff to meet with their own class parent representatives. At the initial meetings a wide range of issues were raised including homework, methods of communicating with other parents and fundraising.

Work then began to set up a telephone tree for each class to facilitate communication between parents, class representatives and the teacher. If the teacher wanted to communicate something to the parents, he or she could contact the class representatives; these representatives would then phone two other parents with the information who would then phone another two parents and so on until all parents had received the message.

All class representatives were invited to a PTA meeting with some members of staff with a view to creating a forum where parents could express their views. These meetings of the PTA with class representatives and the deputy head have continued and a wide range of whole school issues have been discussed including school trips, organising the Year 6 leavers' assembly, detentions, holiday play schemes and supply teaching. As a result of these meetings parents' ideas and concerns have contributed to decisions that have been made.

Staff and parents are pleased with the progress that has been made over the course of the year and recognise that an important turning point was a social event organised by the PTA for staff and families. This event broke down barriers between home and school and helped to build up trust.

Plans for the future

Plans include ensuring that every class has an effective telephone tree; providing ways for parents to be more involved in the classroom, through training days, courses and volunteering; and further fundraising.

Outcomes

This has been a short project but the outcomes so far include:

1. Relationships between home and school have improved, with the teacher having a way to reach all families quickly.
2. If parents or carers have a concern they can get this addressed quickly through the class representatives.
3. There is better communication amongst the parent body and many parents feel less isolated as a result.
4. Because the school community is almost entirely Asian, the school has needed to think about how to reach parents taking account of the cultural context. As one example, the class parties were held to coincide with the Eid festival.
5. The PTA (including class representatives) has a direct link to the Governing Body through the deputy head who attends both meetings. Issues raised by parents can therefore be addressed by governors.

Comments

From staff:

"More parents are getting involved with their children's learning now"

"Four teachers have driven this. If they withdrew it would not carry on as there is no lasting effect yet. It needs a few more years for this work to become part of the culture of the school."

"Some class reps attend more regularly than others"

"There is huge support for parental involvement amongst the staff"

"It is good if the head isn't around at the meetings. Parents are hesitant to speak out if he is there."

From parents:

"We have become close as a group"

"I really enjoy being part of the PTA"

"Representatives can do translating for parents, for example at the school gate"

"The PTA group reaches out to the community. It helps the school with this"

2. BRUCE GROVE PRIMARY SCHOOL, HARINGEY

Bruce Grove School is in Haringey, which is one of the most deprived boroughs in London and indeed, the whole country. The school has 475 children in 15 classes. Around 50% of children come from white families and African Caribbean families who have been in the area for a long time. The rest of the school population consists of families who have arrived more recently from abroad. Many are refugees and asylum seekers. Over 40 different languages are spoken at the school and the school has a 35% turnover of children each year as many families move into and out of the area. Furthermore many of these families are from cultures where involvement with the school is not the norm. A lot of work was already being done using interpreters and translators, and outreaching through home visits or using community centres in order to encourage parents to take an active role in their child's school education.

In order to address the issue of inclusion the school works with a number of outside agencies and a Home School Coordinator is employed. The Home School Coordinator, who acts as a valuable bridge between home and school, has been instrumental in supporting initiatives to encourage increased parental involvement. The Head of Bruce Grove, Geraldine Waterman, had been in post for eighteen months. She was keen to find ways to bring parents into school more. A community room had been set up near the school entrance for parents to use for a range of different events.

Plans for the project

As part of the *Setting up Parents' Councils* project the school planned to hold parents' class meetings to enable greater consultation and involvement with families. The school realised that to involve parents actively in the process of decision making there was a need to develop a safe and inviting environment where parents felt their views would be heard and respected. They recognised that small class meetings might make it possible to have more effective communication with parents and carers. The hope was that these meetings would have a positive impact on the child/teacher relationship through closer contact with families.

The school also aimed to set up a Parents' Council, along the lines of the student council, involving parents from each class. The idea was that parent governors would sit on the parents' council to provide a link with the governing body. Nothing was pre-planned for the council as the Head was keen that parents set the agenda. She aimed to support the parents in achieving their aims.

The project

In October 2004, an event was held to launch the project and to encourage as many parents as possible to come to the school. As part of this event class parents' meetings were organised at which parents of children

in each class had the opportunity to meet together and with their child's class teacher to discuss the forthcoming year. The turnout for this event was the best the school has ever had. The school identified parent representatives from each class who could form the Parents' Council.

Following on from this event a Parents' Council meeting was arranged, at which parent representatives and school staff involved with the project met to discuss issues of concern to parents and to explore ways forward for the Council. A member of staff had been appointed to oversee the project and liaise with parents. She was to work with the Home School Coordinator and a Learning Mentor. The Head was keen that this meeting was for the benefit of parents and that they should determine the way forward. A number of issues were raised by parents – in particular the question of security within the school and also the state of the children's toilets. However there was a lack of clarity amongst the parents at this stage about what the project funding of £5000 was for and how to proceed. They had understood that the grant could be used for improvements suggested by the parents, rather than specifically to set up a Parents' Council and so there was initial disappointment when they realised it could not be used in this way. However, the issues that had been raised were relayed to the head so that she could address ways in which to take them forward.

After several further meetings parents requested that they meet on their own without school staff present so that they could clarify their ideas amongst themselves and decide how to develop the Council. The parents felt that they would be able to speak more freely without staff at the meeting. The school was somewhat surprised by this development but accepted and understood the need for parents to meet together in this way. At this stage the Head took over the coordination of the project. The small group of parents – including two parent governors - who had continued to meet gradually developed greater clarity about the purpose of the Council and what they wanted to achieve. They took on the role of encouraging other parents to become involved with the school.

As more parents began to participate there were requests for workshops to be put on, and the first of these, organised by the Home School Coordinator in collaboration with the Science Museum, attracted a good turnout. Further workshops were requested and organised on themes such as parenting; how parents can help their children with homework; and literacy and numeracy. More workshops are being planned, for example on sex education and on nutrition. English as an Additional Language (EAL) courses were already being held for parents from abroad and a group of Somali mothers have requested their own group.

The parents have continued to meet, and have been able to propose different activities and events. They have been supported throughout by the Home School Coordinator. The school had originally envisaged that the Parents' Council would be set up along the lines of the Student Council, involving parents from each class and also parent governors so that there would be a link to the governing body. However the group is constituted more loosely than this, involving any parents who are interested in participating. It is driven by a small group of committed parents who spend time in the playground talking to other parents and listening to their views. They can feed these views back to staff and have thus become an important link between home and school.

Those parents who are involved are working hard to find ways to draw other parents in. They recognise that to be inclusive there is a real need to vary the time and settings for meetings, such as day-time or evening or weekend; in school and out of school venues, plus offering childcare facilities and transport. They have found that a good time to hold sessions for parents is at the beginning of the day, directly after parents have brought their children to school. They have also realised the need to provide interpreters at events. Over the course of the project they have come to understand the challenge that this presents and the impact that it has on a meeting, but are committed to continuing with this so that all parents can feel included.

The school realises that to involve parents more actively there is a need to develop a safe and relaxed environment where parents feel their views will be heard and respected and they have worked hard to achieve this. Class meetings, where parents have the opportunity to meet together with their child's teacher will continue to be held annually.

At present the numbers involved on a regular basis are fairly small but growing. These parents feel that they have made a lot of progress and that the situation in terms of parental involvement is considerably better than at other schools in similar circumstances.

Plans for the future

There are plans now to set up a Family Forum at which parents will have a regular opportunity to meet the Headteacher informally to discuss education and school policy issues. Further workshops and sessions will be arranged at the request of parents. The parents' group will continue to meet on a regular basis.

Outcomes

1. Parents have a way to make their voice heard through the parents' forum. If they have an issue they wish to raise they can do it in this group and know that it will be taken further.
2. A number of parents are helping the school to reach out to other families informally in the playground and at the school gate.
3. Concerted efforts have been made to draw in families from different ethnic groups by providing interpretation and translation and investigating how best to meet their needs, for example through a women-only group.
4. Events have been held at different times in order to include as many different parents and carers as possible.

Comments

From staff:

"You have to create the right atmosphere"

"Parents might come with more ideas of their own if we leave them some space"

From parents:

"The school is very approachable"

"There is an open door. The head and staff make you feel very welcome"

"There has been a transformation at the school."

3. GEORGE GREEN'S SCHOOL, TOWER HAMLETS

George Green's School on the Isle of Dogs in London is a multi-cultural, multi-racial community with nearly 1400 pupils and staff. 52 different languages are spoken by students at the school. It is a full service extended secondary school with an extensive community programme. It has Training School status, which means that it is able to train teachers.

The school has a reputation for being at the forefront of educational developments. The head teacher, Kenny Frederick, acknowledges that the school is constantly changing and developing and that it never stands still. They are always looking for ways to improve their performance and offer more opportunities to their young people.

The school plays a key role within its community. Its commitment to working with the local community is evidenced by the resources it deploys in employing staff to forge links. It recognises that the school's relationships with parents and carers are of critical importance in supporting young people and wished to build on this work and give all parents a means of contributing to school decision making. It already had a strong record of involving and consulting parents and had carried out an ambitious community consultation during 2004 to which there was an encouraging response. The outcomes of this exercise helped in the planning of future work in this area.

Plans for the project

With the grant for work on the *Setting up Parents' Councils* project the school intended to:

- set up a parents' forum for parents of African-Caribbean boys, initially in Year 7
- hold termly forum meetings for parents of pupils with statements of special educational needs
- run training sessions for parents of pupils with special educational needs, including sessions led by parents on strategies for supporting pupils with specific learning difficulties
- establish a help-line for parents of pupils with special educational needs
- establish a parents' council, initially involving parents from the fora mentioned above, but ultimately to include direct representation from all parents, to act as an "authentic voice" of parental opinion

The project

In order to give parents a voice and contribute to school decision making the school decided to work towards developing a Parents' Council. It recognised however that this is a major development and that there were interim steps to be taken.

In the first instance a Forum for parents of African Caribbean boys was established with the aim of raising achievement. A member of staff was given responsibility for this area of work and her role was to liaise closely with parents. The Forum has been successfully started up and an on-line discussion group was set up so that these parents could contact support staff as well as each other without the need to physically attend a meeting and this is proving very valuable.

The school has also set up a Forum for parents of pupils with statements of special educational needs. Staff began by organising regular meetings for these parents and by conducting a survey to establish what they wanted to see at the school. As a result of this a number of workshops were held on themes such as: helping with homework; supporting children with special educational needs, literacy issues and a question and answer session. A help-line was set up so that parents could contact governors directly to discuss any problems. In fact, this help-line has not been used but instead parents have made direct contact with governors on the school's Committee on Inclusion and as a result of this a number of different issues have been addressed. Governors have made home visits when requested.

Parents involved in the above agreed that there was a need to develop a form of Parents' Council at the school so that all parents could be involved in decision making. A brainstorming session was held to discuss how such a council might work. It was suggested that parents of students with special educational needs would set the council up and that once it was up and running other parents who were involved in different Fora and who attended other sessions at the school would be able to become involved. It was recognised that it was important that there was ownership of this council by the parents themselves.

In May 2005 tensions developed between the police and pupils, where pupils were meeting in the vicinity of the school. Some parents and pupils felt that the school was working with the police against the pupils and this was creating a rift in the home/school relationship. Parent support staff at the school used the embryonic council as a means to get parents together to discuss this problem. Parents and the school's senior management team met with the police to resolve the issues. Through coming together with parents to seek a solution, the school demonstrated clearly that they were part of a partnership with their parents and pupils and this has had a positive impact on many parents' perceptions of the school.

Some of the parents who have been most difficult to reach have been involved in these discussions. When interviewed about the development of the council, staff at the school felt that the work that they had done to build up relationships with parents had made it possible for the school to respond quickly and positively to this very difficult situation. They also felt that there was growing recognition by parents that the council could be used to address issues that are of concern to them.

Discussions are continuing about how to develop the council further so that there is the possibility for all parents to make their voice heard and the school is currently considering setting up parents' class meetings for individual classes, with representation on a parents' council.

One of the biggest challenges for the project as a whole is in getting information to parents. The school is working on this in a number of different ways - through the website, weekly newsletters, text-messaging, email, home visits and telephone calls. An innovative scheme whereby the school can send a text message to all parents at the same time is proving extremely valuable in improving home-school communication.

Staffing of the work with parents has been a key issue and the school has allocated a number of people to different roles to ensure that the work is driven forward. A member of staff who has responsibility for supporting parents of children who are out of school had her role extended in March 2005 to become the Parental Involvement Coordinator. She now works closely with the Coordinator for parents of African Caribbean boys and the Home School liaison officer to extend opportunities for the school to make links with parents.

The school is making good progress. However it is agreed by those members of staff involved with the project that this work is about trying to change parents' views of education and that this is a difficult and lengthy process. However they are pleased with the start they have made.

A number of staff have said that it is too early to say how this project is affecting students but that they expect it to have a positive impact. Students who were interviewed (they were students who had some form of difficulty at school) each said that the increased contact with their parents had been helpful. It made them feel as though the school was on their side and cared about the pupils. They also felt as though the school was being pro-active in dealing with pupils who were causing difficulties for others. They saw it as helpful that parents could get to know each other through forum or council meetings and that it helped to build up a sense of community.

Plans for the future

It is increasingly recognised that all staff at the school have responsibility for developing relationships with parents and different initiatives are being planned for the future, so that there are lots of opportunities for parents to be in contact. One head of year, for example, is organising drop-in sessions on different subjects and also sessions on revision, higher education and study skills. An evening is being organised for new families to address their concerns and the IT department at the school is planning to work with students in Year 13 to develop an area on the school website for parents. This is in direct response to requests from parents wishing to access the curriculum and resources on-line.

Outcomes

1. There is more individual contact with parents - more parents are contacting the school to get advice or help in connection with their child.
2. Parents who have become more involved with the school are now posting themselves at the school gate to reach out to other parents.
3. Parents are helping more with school events, such as sports days.
4. Parents have been involved for the first time in a staff quiz night (at the request of staff) – contributing to improved relations.
5. Considerable progress has been made in communication with black families and with white families who had previously been hard to reach. It is recognised that more work needs to be done, in particular to reach out to Bangladeshi families.
6. Staff have congratulated the team who are working to develop links with parents as they have seen the benefits of this work.

Comments

From staff:

"This project is having a lasting effect. It will definitely be continued."

"This work has given the school a way in to parents. There is a core of parents they can approach."

"Relationships with parents have improved generally."

"It is difficult to say whether [the project] has impacted on achievement."

"Not all parents want more involvement. Some see what goes on in school as the school's problem."

From parents:

"It's good to be a part of the school and welcomed by staff."

"It is good to be involved and consulted about my child's education and welfare and feel valued as a parent."

From students:

"I have definitely benefited"

"I couldn't ask much more. The school couldn't have done any more to sort out this problem."

"It has really changed things. I have done so much better."

4. LADYBRIDGE HIGH SCHOOL, BOLTON

Ladybridge High School in Bolton is a new school which opened in September 2004 on the site of a school which was in special measures and which had been closed. This new school is working in close collaboration with another school in the town. This collaboration has resulted in a number of innovative positions being established including the Executive Principal (with overall responsibility for both schools), a Community and Business Development Officer and a Community Secretary. All three members of staff have played an important part in developing the partnership with parents.

Ladybridge takes children from ages 11-18 and from a range of backgrounds. The school opened with the student population from the previous school and a new Year 7, which was under-subscribed. Around half of the students are white, many of whom are from low income families. 25% are from the Asian community which is well-established in the area. The other 25% of the student population is made up of the children of recent immigrants, asylum seekers and refugees – from Africa and from a number of eastern European countries. The proportion of African students has rapidly increased in the past year. 21 languages are spoken at the school. Mobility of students is an issue as a significant number of students are only at the school for a short time.

Plans for the project

Parental involvement at the previous school was poor and the new school was determined to improve this. As part of the *Setting up Parents' Councils* project the school aimed to set up a Parents' Forum to enable parents and carers to have greater input into their children's learning and a voice in decision making. Learning Coordinators were to be appointed with dedicated time to meet learners and liaise with parents, involving them in decision making on issues which affected their child. There was a desire to establish a listening culture at the school so that everyone – parents included - felt that their voice would be heard. The Parents' Forum was to give parents the opportunity to voice their views. It would meet regularly and parents would be encouraged to get involved in whole school issues.

The school was going to work particularly hard with parents of students in Year 7, setting up a focus group to help determine the course of the project. This group would contain parent governors so that there could be a link with the governing body. The intention was to get students to bring their parents into school from time to time, again starting with Year 7, to build up a culture of parental participation.

A community room had been newly fitted out at the school which was to be used for parents' meetings and activities.

The school was keen to involve parents who were disengaged from school life. Home School Liaison staff were being appointed to visit parents at home and specialist language and cultural interpreters would be used when there was a language barrier.

Links with the local community were already being developed and it was hoped that the Parents' Forum would help to widen the dialogue across the community. This project was seen as an opportunity to find out what parents wanted the new school to offer to the community as a whole.

The project

A Parents' Forum was set up in the Autumn term 2004. A number of parents, parent governors and staff were invited by the Head teacher to join in the first place to get it started. An open meeting was then held and a number of issues were raised which the school has subsequently been working hard to address. A small group of parents and parent governors have continued to meet and discuss different aspects of the school such as building plans, ICT, and cross-age tutor groups. Some of these meetings have taken place without members of the school staff present, at the request of parents.

The school has responded to requests from the Forum to put the curriculum online so that parents have access to it. Furthermore a new school website gives parents a wide range of information about the school. The school has also entered into discussions with parents about the uniform as a number of parents had issues they wanted to raise. Parents have asked the school to organise workshops for parents on raising awareness about drugs and bullying and the school is liaising with the LA to put these on. Another request was that parents could email the school and have their enquiries dealt with promptly and the school has set up a system for this. The school is creating more opportunities for parents to meet staff on an individual basis. The Forum continues to meet and those parents who have participated are keen to involve many more parents. There are plans now to ensure that two parents on the Forum can report back to the Governing Body on a regular basis. The school also plans to ask students how they would like their parents involved and to create a link to the school council.

The school began this project by sending a questionnaire to parents and is continuing to sample parents' views as a way of evaluating progress and to help inform the development of the project.

Plans for the future

Those parents who are on the Forum see that it takes time and hard work to get parents involved but are committed to expanding the Forum. The plan now is to encourage the participation of the parents of incoming year 7 students so that these parents begin their association with the school with an expectation of being involved. Current members of the Forum plan to attend induction sessions for new parents so that they can talk about the purpose of the Forum and encourage them to join.

The school is keen to address the question of engaging with parents from different minority ethnic groups. One way in which they intend to do this is through English as an Additional Language (EAL) provision. The EAL tutor will contact each new family individually, and it is hoped that this will help to establish a link with the school.

Outcomes

1. The school has been able to establish a range of strategies to increase parental participation and look at how these strategies can be linked together.
2. The school is moving away from big parents' meetings towards meetings with small groups of parents and their children's Learning Coordinator.
3. These meetings can be informed by discussions that have taken place at the Parents' Forum.
4. The school now sends an annual questionnaire to parents and this feeds into a quality review. The Parents' Forum will be involved in discussing this.

Comments

From staff:

"We value the positive contribution the Parental Forum makes in moving the aims and objectives of Ladybridge High School forward, together in true partnership."

From parents:

"As a parent I feel I have a voice in this school. The Parental Forum helps me to understand the issues that affect our children and helps me to become involved in the school."

OUTCOMES

The *Setting up Parents' Councils* project has developed differently in the four project schools and each school is establishing means of consulting with parents and involving them in school decision making. In summary there have been the following outcomes:

Improvement in information sent to parents

There is evidence of an improvement and an increase in the information sent to parents. It is also clear that schools are endeavouring to find a variety of ways to reach parents – using technology where appropriate such as through the website or by text messaging – but also through newsletters. The emphasis is shifting from sending out information-giving letters towards communication which seeks parents' views and aims to engage them in school life.

Increase in number and range of opportunities for parents to communicate with schools

All of the schools have increased the number and range of opportunities for parents to communicate with them. Parents' council and forum meetings; class parties and whole class parent/teacher meetings; interviews; surveys and questionnaires; online discussion groups and telephone trees are all examples of methods schools are using to communicate with parents.

Development/Improvement of area for parents on school website

Two of the schools have already done considerable work to develop their websites for use by parents. The improvements that have been made were directly requested by parents. The other two schools are considering ways of updating their websites to meet parents' needs.

Number of consultative meetings held involving parents

All of the schools show an increase in the number of consultative meetings involving parents. Each had previously reported difficulties in getting parents to come to school for discussions other than those concerning their own child individually and wanted to address this. Each school is now putting structures in place which will ensure that consultation with the parent body is an ongoing part of their work.

Wider range of parents involved in school life

The project schools are all exploring ways of involving a wider range of parents. Different ways of providing translation and interpretation at meetings are being trialled. In some cases the students are being used as interpreters/translators. Parents and staff are actively discussing ways of reaching different minority ethnic groups particularly by taking account of cultural differences. Disaffected parents are being targeted through a range of means such as home visits; phone calls; meetings in venues away from the school site. Efforts are being made by the primary schools in particular to see parents or other family members when they collect their children at the end of the school day.

SUCCESSES AND BARRIERS

Commitment of the Head teacher

The commitment of the Head is essential to the success of the project. A Head teacher's full backing enables work of this kind to transform relationships with parents, and consequently the experiences of students.

Involvement of the staff

The full support of the whole school staff achieves the greatest impact. The work is about *all* relationships between the home and school. Where all or most staff are involved greater progress is made in terms of embedding this work in the culture of the school.

Team Working

All of the project schools have had a small team of teachers and support staff or teachers and parents driving this work. Good relationships and effective communication promote the success of the work.

Clarity of roles and responsibilities

All those involved in leading the project need to be clear about their roles and responsibilities. It has been valuable to write this down to avoid misunderstandings.

Consultation with parents from the beginning of the project

It has generally been important to consult with parents from the beginning of the project so that they have been able to help determine the course of the project. Presenting them with a ready-made plan of action runs counter to the aims of this work.

Not moving too fast

As this work is about a major change in the way in which schools work with parents it has been important not to move too fast, but rather in slow and steady steps. In this way it is assured that as many people as possible are brought on board and understand how the project is developing.

Early wins

In order that parents can see for themselves that the school is committed to developing a true partnership it has been beneficial to have some early tangible effects of the project. Where issues that have been raised by parents early on have demonstrably been addressed this has helped to secure parents' commitment to this work as they have been able to see that the school is taking their views seriously.

Supporting parents

Parents need a lot of support in this work. They are being invited to participate in the life of the school in new ways and all of the project schools found that they needed to develop the capacity of parents to take on and develop this work

Making time

All the schools involved have made time for this project by releasing or employing staff -the extra resource was helpful, but the key factor was making the support and success of the parent council a priority for staff involved.

PARENTS' MEETINGS

Do's and Don't's

Ensure that:

- Groups and meetings are inclusive and all parents have the opportunity to be involved
- Parent groups feed back to the governing body – parent governors are an important link
- Meetings are held at parent friendly times – different things suit different families. Varying the timing can help
- Different cultural needs and language requirements are taken into consideration
- Some meetings are held in small groups and in a relaxed environment so that no-one feels intimidated
- Parents have the opportunity to meet on their own without staff if they so wish

Avoid:

- Meetings with little opportunity for discussion
- Agendas that are too full
- Having too many meetings

SUMMARY

Innovative work to build collaboration with parents has taken place in each of the four project schools and all the schools have made significant progress. Each school has taken the notion of participation seriously and worked to develop ways of listening to parents and involving them in decision making. One school reported that by strengthening the feelings of ownership of all those involved this work had transformed the school.

However, each school has recognised fully that this kind of change takes time as it is about radically altering the way in which schools work with parents – and this is not something that can be introduced quickly. Human Scale Education agrees with the project schools when they say that it will take several years to bring about the cultural shift that is needed amongst parents and amongst staff.

Parents have to get used to the idea that their views are genuinely being sought and also that the school is looking to establish a real partnership with them. School staff need to be prepared to work in different ways and to be convinced of the benefits of working more closely with parents. Some staff are unprepared for this, feeling that they were trained to work with children, not with adults. Furthermore concerns that their professionalism may be undermined by developing such a partnership need to be addressed early on.

It is interesting that the four schools approached this project in very different ways. From the outset it was made clear that there is no blueprint and it was up to each school to develop ways of working that suited their own situation. None of the schools has yet developed a fully fledged, democratic parents' council with representation from each class or tutor group. However each school now has a mechanism in place through which any parent or carer can make his or her voice heard, whether it is a parents' council, a parents' forum or a representative parent teachers' association.

The evidence from the project to date is positive and points to what can be achieved by introducing the sort of structures and processes described to facilitate parental participation. The parents and schools that participated in this pioneering work achieved some very positive outcomes for their school communities.

Fiona Carnie
January 2006

About Human Scale Education

Human Scale Education is an education reform movement committed to small learning communities based on the values of democracy, fairness and respect.

A human scale approach to education:

- meets the needs of the whole child
- is based on caring relationships
- involves young people democratically in decisions about their learning and in how their school is run
- requires schools to work in partnership with parents and the local community
- is underpinned by environmentally sustainable values
- takes place in small scale settings which allow children to be known and valued as individuals

Further Resources

Parents and Schools Working Together – Free leaflet for schools (Human Scale Education, 2005)

Pathways to Child friendly Schools: A Guide for Parents by Fiona Carnie (Human Scale Education, 2004)

Setting up Parents Councils Project – Evaluation Report (CCCI, London South Bank University, 2005)

Human Scale Education

Unit 8

Fairseat Farm

Chew Stoke

Bristol

BS40 8XF

Tel. 01275 332516

Email. info@hse.org.uk

Website. www.hse.org.uk

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