

**Trafford Council
Community Wellbeing Select Committee:
Review of How Schools Engage with Parents
2010**

Chairman's Introduction:

I am pleased to present this report on behalf of the Community Wellbeing Select Committee which presents the findings and recommendations from its review of how schools engage with parents.

Trafford Council is especially proud of its excellence in education and this is testament to schools, teachers and all staff within the Children and Young People's Service.

Without the continued support of parents, working with our schools, we would not be able to support our young people to be high achievers.

This review has demonstrated how much influence parents have in the educational outcomes of their children and the review's recommendations aim to further support schools and parents. It became clear, when visiting schools, that there is a huge amount of best practice waiting to be collected up; and this is reflected in recommendation 6.

I would like to take this opportunity to thank all those who have given up their time to talk to the Committee about parental engagement and hope that this report further supports the excellent work undertaken in our schools.

Cllr Susan Williams and Cllr Stephen Adshead

Chairman and Vice Chairman, Community Wellbeing Select Committee.

Introduction:

*"Give me the child until he is seven
and I will show you the man".*

This well known Jesuit phrase demonstrates how the characteristics of an adult are ingrained by such a young age. It is therefore essential that all children are given the appropriate support in life by those who deliver primary socialisation - parents.

"Parental involvement takes many forms including good parenting in the home, including the provision of a secure and stable environment, intellectual stimulation, high aspirations and positive attitudes to education. In addition to contact with schools to share information, participation in school events, participation in the work of the school and participation in school governance",

(DeForges and Abouchaar,2003).

However, for some children and young people parental involvement can be limited and its affects are long lasting on a child's educational, social and emotional development.

The Community Wellbeing Select Committee undertook a review of how schools engage with parents to support Trafford Council's corporate priority of preserving and improving educational excellence.

There were additional national policy drivers such as the creation of the Big Society in which the public are key to the maintenance of a civic and responsible society.

Background Research

Save the Children in a recent report, *Helping Families Support Children's Success at School 2009*, state that there are a number of key facts relating to the importance of parental involvement upon a child's educational and cognitive development;

1. Children who are malnourished in the first two years of life have poorer levels of cognitive function and educational attainment;
2. Periods of educational transition (going from primary to secondary school) are key times where families need greater support;
3. The earlier the intervention the better and more durable for the child;
4. Family based, multi agency support, is crucial for successful outcomes for young people in high poverty areas.

Charles DeForges (2003) noted that the most important finding of his review was that parental involvement in the form of at-home good parenting had a significant positive effect on children's achievement and adjustment; even after all other factors shaping attainment have been taken out of the equation. The scale of the impact is evident across all social classes and all ethnic groups. However, differences between parents in *their* level of involvement are associated with social class, poverty, health and also with parental perception of their role and their levels of confidence in fulfilling it. Some parents are put off by feeling 'put down' by teachers.

The evidence suggests that barriers to achievement by low income families tend to be social, emotional and behavioural rather than cognitive. Many low-income children enter secondary school with high levels of cognitive ability, but because of their social, emotional and behavioural difficulties and those of their families, they fail to reach their potential (Hill and Ramirez, 2003).

A lack of social and coping skills can often lead young people to be frustrated, disruptive, abusive and even violent. With adequate preparation for transition, and the active development of coping skills and strategies for managing anxiety, conflict, etc, the possibilities of exclusion or removal to another school could be reduced (Action for Children).

The achievement of pupils from lower income families could be significantly enhanced if we systematically apply all that is known about parental involvement. A programme of parental involvement development initiatives taking the form of multi dimensional intervention programme, targeted on selected post code areas and steered by a design research process is implicated (Deforges 2003).

It is with this Deforges's research in mind that Members of the Community Wellbeing Select Committee wished to focus on parental engagement and its affects on educational attainment.

Recommendation 1: That the Council ensures, through the Early Intervention Grant¹ and new methods of service delivery, that parental engagement is a priority.

Background Research: Scrutiny Reviews in Other Councils

Sandwell MBC undertook a similar Scrutiny review and noted the importance of sustained parental engagement in the achievement of positive educational outcomes for children and young people.

Overview of Sandwell's Review:

The review focussed on primary school children in Oldbury as parental involvement is more crucial (at this age) than the quality of the school attended, family background indicators such as social class, family size and the level of parental education. In comparative studies of similar schools those with strong home-school links have fewer problems in respect of pupil work and behaviour.

Key findings included:

1. There was significant support for schools and parents to further develop working together;
2. Clear communication in terms of standards and expectations, and the purpose of meetings appear to contribute significantly to the level of parental involvement;
3. Schools need to be flexible around the lives of parents in terms of offering a variety of times for parents to come into school and to when necessary to arrange a specific meeting.

Evidence Gathered: Sure Start

Parents are engaged through a number of means whilst their children attend the SureStart Children's Centres.

¹ The Early Intervention Grant is not a new grant but a collection of old grants, grouped together, under a new name.

Within the governance structures of the service, parents have their own forum in order to put their views across.

The Centre's Participation Worker engages parents to make informed choices relating to their children's development, advises on employment/vocational matters including signposting training opportunities. SureStart can work with parents to train them to work for the Centre, for example, as a breast feeding coordinator. This enables parents to build their self esteem and capacity.

SureStart is very responsive and flexible to the needs of its users and has set up bespoke services to meet the needs of different communities.

It was noted that data is an issue and more pro active work could be undertaken if the relevant NHS bodies, associated with Making it Better implementation, share information which can avoid duplication and ensure that the right information is received at the right time.

Recommendation 2: That CYPS review the ways it captures and distributes data to SureStart on expectant/new mothers with a view to reducing the ability for parents to slip through the gaps.

Evidence Gathered: Schools

Members of the Select Committee met with the Head teachers of Acre Hall Primary School, Pictor Special School, Seymour Park Primary School and Loreto Grammar School.

All the schools visited encourage parental engagement as they understand the benefits of creating a learning community which extends from the school and into the home.

Key Quotes From Teachers:

'Text service is excellent'

'Newsletters are a really useful resource'

'Open door policy, as much as possible'

'A policy would be a good idea'

'We could do more with the BME community'

'Whole family engagement is crucial'

'We have a folder full of best practice and a parental engagement policy'

'There are 42 languages spoken within our school'

'Internet classes in the evening support parents....many don't know what their child can access'

'Parental experience of school create barriers that are difficult to overcome'

'Parents need to work and when schools want to engage with them it clashes with their work'

'Language can be a barrier, but cultural barriers and a lack of interest all apply'

Best Practice:

'We take time and trouble to get to know our parents. This enables us to build good relationships where we listen, share information and welcome them into school. Sounds obvious, but it works!'

'The weekly coffee morning has increased parental activity in school and galvanised hard to reach parents to access courses, help out in school and raise money for a project in school.'

'Questionnaires were particularly useful last year and texting has also been very effective'

'Generally speaking, we find the less formal the format, the more successful it is likely to be'

'A parent who was unhappy with the school, did not want second child to join us. First year was very difficult but parent is now one of our champions'

Recommendation 3: That the Local Authority supports all schools to develop the parent text service.

Questionnaire for Headteachers:

Members of the Select Committee wanted to gather evidence from the widest possible base and agreed that a questionnaire would enable the Committee to gather further evidence.

The data collected highlighted a number of key points:

1. An overwhelming response (72.7%) of those responding to the survey were from primary schools;
2. 90.9% of schools thought parental engagement was extremely important;
3. All respondents held parents/carer evenings and had newsletters;
4. 77% used parent text and 50% organised family fun days;

5. 50% of respondents said that was a lack of financial and human resource to engage parents and 38.9% noted that parents' lack of interest was a barrier also.

It was equally important to ask parents/carers about the methods of parental engagement at their child's school.

Questionnaire For Parents:

Question: How have you been involved with your child's school in the past year?

1. 84.2% of parents/guardians met with their child's class teacher more than once in the past year
2. 42.1% of respondents had attended a school social event in the past year
3. Only 7.9% of parents had attended an annual parents meeting with governors
4. 65.8% of parents had attended a school play, concert or presentation in the past year
5. 73.7% of parents had attended a meeting to discuss their child's progress and/or behaviour
6. 18.4% of parents/guardians had visited the school for a community use/activity

The Select Committee welcomed the liaison between schools and parents but acknowledged the response to question 6 could suggest how schools can be seen as formal places of education and not as a hub for the community. Members have heard, throughout the review that parents' own perceptions of their time at school can affect how they interact with their child's school.

Recommendation 4: That CYPS consider collaborating with schools and the asset management service to market schools for community/business use. This would seek to break down traditional barriers of how parents see schools and generate income.

Question: Please tell us about your child's school

1. 95.6% of respondents concluded that the school is welcoming for parents/guardians
2. 92.1% of the parents/guardians agreed that it is easy to talk to the head-teacher and staff.
3. 97.2% of parents/guardians agreed that their child's school was part of the community.
4. 94.7% of parents/guardians agreed that the information they got from their child's school was easy to understand, against 52.6% who disagreed

5. 83.3% feels that their schools listens to any concerns that they have and acts on them
6. 83.7% of respondents feel that their school understands how they can help their child's education
7. 76.3% of parents/guardians feel that their school keeps them well informed about the work their child is doing in school

The data collected would indicate that parents do see their child's school and school staff as approachable and informative and the Select Committee notes that this is testament to the work between CYPS and schools themselves.

Question: Please tell us how you think parents/carers and schools should work together.

1. 94.7% felt that parents/guardians can help their child's education at home
2. 70.3% of respondents felt that teachers know best what children should learn
3. 65.7% of parents felt that parents/guardians should be more involved in making decisions about what schools do
4. 94.8% of parents/guardians felt that parents/carers and schools could work together to improve levels of attainment
5. 100% of respondents felt that they could work with their child's school to increase their involvement and interest in their child's education
6. 89.2% of parents/guardians felt that they could work together with schools to increase teachers' understanding of the importance of the home in education
7. 100% of parents/guardians felt that parents and schools could work together to enable problems to be solved at an early stage
8. 97.1% of respondents felt that parents and schools could work together to improve levels of attendance for pupils
9. 94.4% of parents felt that they could work together with schools to address social issues like litter, healthy eating and obesity.

Question: Do any of the following prevent you from becoming involved in school?

1. 52.6% of respondents felt that they did have time to attend meetings and events **at schools**, as against 47.4% who felt that they did **not** have time
2. 94.6% of parents/guardians felt that they were comfortable or confident coming into their child's school
3. 70.2% of parents felt that their family commitments did **not** make it difficult to get into their child's school.
4. 97.3% of parents did **not** feel that visiting their child's school was pointless

Question: Would any of the following help you to work more closely with your child's school?

1. More flexible arrangements for meeting teachers in school – 50% strongly agreed and 39.5% agreed
2. More written information from the school – 45.7% strongly agreed and 25.7% agreed this was necessary
3. Sending information to parents by email, voice or text message – 55.3% strongly agreed and 31.6% agreed
4. Home visits from teachers - 57.9% disagreed
5. An opportunity to have a say in making school policy – 21.6% strongly agree and 54.1% agree

Recommendation 5: Schools consider investigating ways of providing temporary childcare for parents while meetings or events are taking place.

Recommendation 6: That the data gathered from questionnaires and meetings with head teachers as part of this review be collected and support CYPS to develop a draft parental engagement policy.