



A Circle OF COMMUNICATION

STRONG PARENTAL ENGAGEMENT IS KEY TO STUDENT SUCCESS – DR NICOLA DAVIES EXPLORES EVIDENCE-BASED WAYS TO MAKE IT HAPPEN...

“I feel like I’m on the outside with my nose pressed against the glass looking in, so I have a general overview, but I don’t really get a say,” says Vanessa Chapman on whether she feels included in her children’s education. Vanessa is a mother of two children who attend grammar schools in Canterbury, as well as the Communications and External Partners Manager of a partnership programme that works in secondary schools to raise the education attainment of children from disadvantaged backgrounds.

Vanessa isn’t alone in feeling like she is on the outside looking in – despite the Department for Education’s 2010 Schools White Paper and the 2010 Field Review on Poverty and Life Chances highlighting a central role for parents in helping schools to achieve improved student outcomes. So, what can schools do to involve parents in a way that creates and maintains a circle of communication?

Janet Goodall and John Vorhaus have shed some light on this in their 2011 review of parental engagement strategies, conducted for the Department for Education. Evidence was found for five key ways to engage parents:

1 Home learning – supporting parents to get involved in homework through the use of information communication technology (ICT) or classes to build confidence to help with homework.



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2 Communication – not only between school and home, but also between home and school. Examples include ongoing feedback on student performance and utilising ICT for email, texts, and learning platforms.

3 In-school activities – opportunities for parents to volunteer, help in classrooms, and attend parents’ evenings.

4 Decision-making – encouraging parents to become members of PTAs or other committees involved in decisions.

5 Community contributions – raising awareness of community support that can aid education such as access to counsellors, social clubs, and community liaison.

It is important for schools to educate parents on these avenues for involvement. Vanessa says, “I like to know what my children are doing, and I get that mainly through three channels – seeing and helping with homework, reports that come home six times a year, and parents evenings, so I feel informed and I have plenty of occasions to become aware of any problems.”

BEST PRACTICE

Based on the evidence, a model of effective practice has been offered by Goodall and Vorhaus, which involves four elements:

- 1 Planning:** Research suggests that parent engagement needs to be planned for and embedded into a whole school approach; attempts to engage parents are unlikely to be successful if they are merely bolted on to mainstream activities. A whole school approach requires interventions based in parental needs assessment and the training of staff on how to effectively engage parents.
- 2 Leadership:** There needs to be a senior leader overseeing parent engagement strategies in order to maintain a clear vision of shared school and parent goals.
- 3 Collaboration:** Engagement with parents needs to be active rather than reactive, as well as sensitive to the circumstances of individual families.
- 4 Sustained improvement:** Parental needs assessments should be ‘live’ and ongoing in order to integrate the changing needs of all involved.

The model offered by Goodall and Vorhaus places emphasis on an outward facing strategy comprising two-way communication through home-school links. Building home-school links can be achieved in a number of ways:

- Provide parents with clear, specific and targeted information on how to be involved.
- Organise out of hours clubs and classes, such as classes to build parents confidence to assist with homework.
- Problem-solve logistical barriers to engagement through car shares and scheduling around parents.
- Use ICT to provide parents with homework tools and access to up-to-date information on their child’s learning.

Interestingly, one study found that only 25% of parents received information about their child’s learning via online tools; 84% reported that schools provided little or no resources to help support learning at home. Levels of parental engagement could be improved substantially if schools made more use of technology to support at-home learning.

Teachers are no longer broadcasters of information as this diminishes parent and student involvement and removes the ‘voice’ of those who should be at the centre of education. Involving parents can be difficult for time-starved teachers, but strengthening the home-school link is becoming increasingly feasible in the information age. The remaining challenges are the ‘digital divide,’ (where not all families have internet access at home), parent confidence, and the embedding of new skills into teacher training.