



Developing a whole-school strategy on parental engagement

What does the evidence tell us?

Whilst the current research base does not provide any clear conclusions on which specific interventions work to enhance parental engagement, it does point to the principles and characteristics of strategies that schools successful in engaging families from a range of backgrounds have employed.

Common to schools that have been successful in engaging a diverse range of families in education are a focus on building trusting and collaborative relationships between parents and teachers, a recognition of the different needs among all families, and a persistent belief that no families are unreachable. More specifically, the research also draws out the following characteristics (Desforges and Abouchaar, 2003):

- 1. Parental engagement is treated as a whole school strategy – not as bolt-on activities.** Where there is the most success, the Headteacher leads and champions the strategy and the importance of parental engagement. All staff are expected to own and implement the strategy and this is embedded throughout the school across all policies and practice.
- 2. The strategy is based on a comprehensive needs analysis which includes input from parents.** Rather than the school single-handedly writing and owning the strategy, the most successful are those that seek input from parents to define what is needed, what they would value, and what the barriers are to their engagement. The strategy is developed based on this and owned by both the school and parents. Through this shared process, mutual priorities are identified.
- 3. Engagement with parents is focused on students' learning.** While activities and events that bring parents into the school grounds are an important part of school and community life, the most successful strategies are those that concentrate on supporting parents with their child's learning.
- 4. There are regular reviews which involve parents.** These are used to determine what is and isn't working and build on what is successful.

The research also touches on the extent to which teachers feel equipped to work with parents. This is an area where teachers often lack confidence, particularly when working with families from backgrounds different to their own. Despite this, there is often the assumption that teachers are well equipped for this and that they feel comfortable doing so. Inevitably, as a result, little to no training is provided, even to young and inexperienced teachers new to the profession and with no parenting experience of their own (Goodall and Vorhaus, 2011). A recent survey found that only 28% of school leaders reported that they provided staff with any training on how to engage parents or that they even had a plan for how they wanted staff to work with parents (EEF, 2018).

Where there is the most success the Headteacher ensures the strategy is understood and embedded across the school, that staff are trained and there is a shared set of expectations. On the following pages we provide a series of questions and a possible template as a starting point for developing a parental engagement strategy.

What are United Learning schools doing in this area?

Primary – Cravenwood Primary Academy, a whole-school parental engagement strategy

The work with families and parents at Cravenwood is an example of a whole school strategy that covers the features outlined in the above. At the very heart of their strategy is children's learning and wellbeing and it is around this that any work with parents, whether that be workshops, courses or activities, is based. This includes being directive about what learning and support needs to take place in the home, particularly for those students not on track to reach age related expectations.

One key characteristic of the school's strategy is the extent to which it is based on a needs analysis and takes account of what has worked in the past. Parents are asked what they need or would find the most useful to support their children's learning and this is coupled with the Parent Liaison Officer's own observations and assessments.

This has led to the delivery of workshops on oral and personal hygiene, classes to improve digital skills (at the request of parents), and the ongoing delivery of phonics and English classes to support children's reading at home. It has also led to sensitive conversations about culturally specific issues, for instance, highlighting the importance of routines for children such as a consistent bedtime despite family visitors late in the evening, and supporting directly with the challenges associated with being in a new country culturally different to one's country of birth.

Teachers also specifically target the students and families in most need of support and are increasingly directive about the types of activities that are taking place in the home – particularly

for the children not on track to reach age related expectations. Through 'assertive mentoring' parents and students set and discuss targets together with their teacher and collectively agree what is needed in order move to the next stage of learning. Joint ownership and responsibility is established between all parties. The Headteacher and SLT have developed and led this approach with clear guidance to and expectations of teachers.

Secondary – Accrington Academy, teacher training to support parental engagement

Preparing new teachers to work effectively with parents and families is a key part of the annual CPD programme at Accrington Academy and is an area where senior leaders invest much time and effort. The training is largely based around role-plays, which provide teachers with the space to practise the different kinds of discussions they will subsequently have with parents.

The policies and approaches that have been put in place around parental engagement came about following observations from senior leaders that new teachers were often dealing with situations completely novel to them. In some cases, they were also being asked for parenting advice by struggling parents, which they felt ill-equipped to give.

Role-plays are used to practise the range of conversations they may need to have with parents, including both positive and more difficult discussions. To support these conversations, scripts are shared as part of the training which cover as many kinds of discussions as possible, e.g. tackling absence, poor behaviour, or when sharing positive feedback about something a student has done really well. Trainees work from these scripts and use them as a guide. This primarily helps the trainee, but also provides a consistent approach to these conversations across the school. Training also involves new teachers observing their mentor speaking at parents' evenings, which gives them greater exposure to these events and the different kinds of discussions that take place before they need to take these on themselves.

When teachers are phoning parents there is a policy across the Academy that these calls are done in an open office with colleagues around. This was put in place particularly for new teachers, to ensure they have internal support around them should any discussions become difficult but is also encouraged across the wider staff body.

Due to many of the new teachers travelling to the Academy from outside of the community to work, the school runs a 'get to know Accrington' tour at the beginning of each year. Senior leaders take teachers around the local community to give them a better understanding of the environment parents and students are coming from and some of the challenges that they are likely to be facing. Understanding this context is thought to have helped build the strong relationships that the school has with the students and parents at the Academy.

Possible questions to cover when developing a whole-school strategy on parental engagement

- Based on our consultation with parents, what are the main areas that they would like further support with in relation to their children's learning?
- Based on our own observations and knowledge of the school's families, what are the main areas that we think parents need further support with in relation to their children's learning?
- Which of these are whole school and which are subject specific – and therefore who are the logical owners?
- What is our strategy/plan for putting this support in place? Do we have a good enough understanding of our families' needs to put together a clear plan?
- Who are the owners for each area of our plan and are they clear on what is required of them?
- What is the timeframe for putting this plan and support in place, and are the owners aware of this?
- Is this plan sufficient for all families or are there some that require more or tailored support; if so, what else is needed?
- Does this plan take account of the barriers families might face?
- Does this plan focus on learning (particularly in the home) or is it too focused on bringing parents into the school for activities unrelated to learning?
- For every activity that brings parents into school, can we create an element about learning?
- Have we shared this plan back with parents?
- Have we shared this plan with all staff to ensure that they understand our school approach to supporting parents?
- Do staff need training to ensure they are confident to support and work with parents (should this be delivered to all staff or just new staff?)
- What governance do we have in place for monitoring (and are parents included in this)?
- Do we have review points in place to establish what is working and what isn't?

Strands of activity (examples)	Objective	Activities	Owners	Timeframe	What will progress/success look like?	Review points
Needs analysis/ assessment with parents and staff						
Increasing communications to parents about learning						
Influencing learning at home						
Specific/ targeted support to parents as identified in the needs analysis						
Training for teachers on the school's parental engagement strategy						