6 Steps to Better Parental Engagement

A Practical Guide for Schools

edulink one

Engagement and management suite

6 steps to better parental involvement and engagement

A 'toolbox' of strategies, bespoke to both the school and individual children and families, is necessary to improve the level of parents' involvement with both their child's education and the wider school community. Here we consider 6 considerations to help achieve just that...

1 - Pursue face-to-face contact

There's no substitute for face-to-face contact, something which became blatantly apparent during the Covid pandemic.

Staff training is crucial - never expect school employees to be 'naturals' at engaging with parents. You should also take steps to ensure that all parent interactions are as positive as possible. This is particularly important in schools with a high number of socially and economically disadvantaged children as well as those with a high proportion EAL families.

Remember that some parents may be anxious about the thought of school as an institution due to their own negative experience of being a pupil. From the very first touchpoint and in every interaction, parents must be made to feel comfortable to come into school. It's imperative to always provide a warm welcome and avoid educational acronyms. It's also of pivotal importance to dedicate time to those who may appear to be withdrawn, and not be overly attentive to the vociferous ones!

Improved engagement with learning activities will depend upon how these activities are promoted and the manner in which they are delivered.

Whilst 'parents evenings' remain an important opportunity to further parental interaction, informal face-to-face interactions between teacher and parent as well as between parents should be encouraged – and they do not always have to focus on a specific aspect of learning as these can help helps build and develop engagement for more formal activities, as well as provide an opportunity to promote engagement with them.

One key development that took place during the pandemic was the normalisation of a more blended learning approach and the introduction of tools that facilitated online communication, such as 'virtual parents' evenings'. Whilst online parent interactions are a useful stepping-stone to connecting with certain harder to reach groups, meeting in person whenever possible helps build the parent-school relationship.

Remember to remain flexible about the location and timing of services to accommodate families' needs.

This might even mean offering home visits or providing transport for families who lack means of travel. And always ensure you make services welcoming, convenient and less intimidating (possibly even providing food and childcare).

Some schools have even seen greater success by incentivising attendance at events - by allocating a budget for gift cards, for example, or running raffles.

2 - Build positive perceptions of the school

Poor Ofsted results or other previous negative situations, such as complaints about a newly introduced school policy, or poorly executed communications or events, can have a long-lasting negative impact on parental perceptions of the school.

To mitigate this, schools should use a range of techniques to show parents what the school offers and to instil child and parent aspiration.

We've highlighted the importance of getting parents into school with regularity so they can understand its culture, feel its values and be inspired by the great work you do for the children.

Beyond that it's about continually building, embedding and developing a relationship with parents based on mutual trust.

'Marketing' is a word that suffers from a negative connotation in many settings, however your mission and values must be clearly articulated and be replicated consistently across every communications touchpoint.

3 - Link with the Community

Beyond the school and the family, a third major factor influencing engagement is the vibrancy of the local community. The more a schoolsupports community transformation, the more thatcommunity will be likely, in turn, to support education.

Whilst we've talked about the importance of getting parents into school, it's also important for the school to

be represented in creative ways off-site: it could be by fundraising to support the homeless, year 6 pupils reading to younger children at the local pre-school, or helping elderly community members with computer skills.

Also consider holding events at venues other than the school, such as the village hall or community centre. This can help those who feel uncomfortable about going into the school to make connections and begin to feel more comfortable about joining events in school in the future.

4 - Appoint parental engagement 'key-workers'

We've already mentioned that some schools are turning to 'key-workers' to help fast-track parental involvement and engagement and foster increased community liaison. These could be engaged parents from similar cultural or socio-economic backgrounds, or male staff to better reach fathers.

The important thing is that they should be non-teaching members of the community. As such they have time to build relationships and follow up on actions, but also understand the issues faced by parents and so are relatable and provide a neutral and non-threatening point of contact.

Whilst a dedicated staff member would obviously come with an associated cost, alternative options may be worthy of consideration. For example, you might entertain appointing parent ambassadors, or encouraging already engaged parents to foster 'snowball' referral of certain initiatives or events.

5 - Foster a culture of celebration

Some schools fall into the trap of misjudging the balance of communication, with parents being informed about behaviour points or attendance shortcomings with greater regularity than positives.

This can be demoralising and counter-productive to parents who feel they are doing their best when the odds are stacked against them.

It's fundamentally important to celebrate success. Take some time to identify, measure, recognise, and reward meaningful efforts and achievements and celebrate often with those involved.

This could involve sending a brief message to parents when things are going well, not just when there is a problem, and celebrating evidence of learning beyond

the completion of specific homework tasks.

If a parent is told their child has done something positive, they are more likely to demonstrate pride and show positive encouragement for that behaviour. We are, after all, in this together and the carrot usually works better than the stick.

6 - Streamline communications

A host of published research points to the effectiveness of well-thought through school communications for improving engagement, attainment and a range of other outcomes, such as attendance in all age groups.

Schools' approach to communications may be particularly important for engaging parents who could play an important role but often have less contact with school. Research by Hurwitz et al. (2015) and Kraft et al. (2017) found text messaging had particularly positive effects on involving other family members besides the primary contact, who might not be as engaged (such as fathers).

School communications are likely to be more effective if they are personalised, linked to learning and focused on promoting positive interactions, such as celebrating success (Doss et al. 2017).

Many schools use text-messaging (or push notifications to an app) to prompt conversations about learning at home, highlight the importance of particular skills, provide tips for short and simple activities for parents to do with their children or simply to encourage and reinforce best practice. Parents generally also find information about upcoming tests, homework assignments and grades useful reminders and prompts.

However careful thought needs to be given to the frequency, timing and targeting of messages to ensure that your communications programme doesn't irritate parents in any way.

It's also important for your school to standardise on a single communications tool. Remember that only a percentage of your community will be active on social media platforms such as Twitter or Facebook, and expecting parents to interact on diverse applications is only likely to result in confusion and the likelihood of certain messages getting 'lost'.

Overnet Data is the developer of Edulink One, the all-in-one engagement and management application that supports parents, staff and students in and out of the classroom.

For more information about how we can help your school improve parental engagement, please contact:

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