

PRINCIPAL'S SABBATICAL  
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“STRENGTHENING FAMILY INVOLVEMENT IN LOW DECILE SCHOOLS

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*Nottingham City*

Key Contextual Features.

- ✓ Population of approximately 640,000 in the conurbation.
- ✓ Third richest city in terms of GDP per head of population.
- ✓ Higher than average number of young people between the ages of 10 – 29.
- ✓ Approximately 15% of the population black and minority ethnic groups compared to an England average of 9%. In Nottingham the BME population in schools is considerably higher than the national average: 27% compared to 14%.
- ✓ There is a significant dual heritage population which is growing. 8% of 0-17 year olds, 10% of 0-4 year olds.
- ✓ Statistics 2005 showed Nottingham unemployment rates , claimants, stood at 3.7% compared to a national average of 2.4%
- ✓ Domestic violence represents 25% of all violent crime and is the biggest source of violence to city residents, second only to alcohol related violent crime.
- ✓ Nottingham has the highest number of children between the ages of 5 and 15 receiving a subsidy for free school meals.

Why relationships between schools and families matter?

*“Both the school and parents have crucial roles to play and the impact is greater if schools’ and parents work together”.*

*(The Impact of Parental Involvement on Children’s Education: a summary – DfES 2003)*

Most people working in educational settings – and those who support their work- now accept that parents and caregivers have a vital contribution to make both to their children’s progress and development and to the life and work of the schools they attend. Such a claim can be supported by a growing body of research, professional experience of development projects and widespread good practice.

There are several important lessons that can be learned from the extensive evidence that has been collected over the years, which is relevant to all those who work in, and support, the life and work of schools.

- Families are by far the biggest set of influences on the way that children turn out – on their attitudes, behaviour and achievements. For many children, formal schooling seems to be simply an extension of what they already know and can do; for other children however, it is not. For them, school, for a variety of reasons, can be an alien and troublesome world, which creates problems.
- When schools are compared in a fair and even handed way, the schools that do well by their pupils are those who work with parents and caregivers. This is, amongst other things, a positive strength. Home and school liaison is, a key factor of good schools, in all contexts and circumstance and a key task for all schools and staffs, **not an optional extra.**
- Although it is, like many things, easier to talk about than to achieve, many schools are able to establish a shared wavelength with their children’s parents and families and develop a genuine, two way dialogue, together with a range of practice that reinforces practical cooperation.

Effective practice in this area brings tangible and lasting benefits. Some of these are immediate, occasionally dramatic; others are more indirect and long term.

There are several additional lessons to be drawn out of research evidence.

First, families and schools share a responsibility for the development of strong, positive attitudes and a commitment to lifelong learning, which is crucial for long term success and which need to be laid down early in their lives. These can be reinforced, (or undermined,) in school subsequently.

Second, for many adults, being a parent of school-aged children is a catalyst for their own learning and development. This applies particularly to areas of learning that are the product of educational change (e.g. working with computers, art and craft, design technology, new ways of doing maths and citizenship).

For many others, particularly with negative memories of their own school days or limited access in other cultures, schools often provide both a welcoming environment and a practical base for many of the learning experiences they missed out on the first time round.

This can be through informal contact and encouragement, associated with their children’s learning and development, or through a rapidly growing repertoire of adult and community groups and classes that are located in schools. (e.g. family literacy / numeracy, basic computing, ESOL and parenting classes).

## SOME KEY FINDINGS

- ✓ Between the ages of 5 and 16 children spend only a small proportion (15%) of their lives in school.
- ✓ By contrast, children have acquired much of all the language they'll have as adults at an early age. (50% by three years and 85% by five years)
- ✓ Parental involvement in a child's schooling (between 5 and 16) is a more powerful factor than family background, family size or the level of their parent's own education.
- ✓ Family influences have a much more powerful effect upon children's attitudes and achievements than either school or neighbourhood factors- even when added together. In particular, parental 'at home' support for children's school learning outweighs the benefits of attending the most effective schools.
- ✓ Although the effects of parental involvement and support for young children are generally known, parental and family influences on children's behaviour and academic achievement **continue** to be powerful as children get older. Children of parents, who take an active interest in their school learning, progress 15% more in numeracy and reading between the ages of 11 and 16.
- ✓ A lack of parental interest in children's progress is often associated with children's underachievement; in particular, a father's interest has come to be seen as strongly linked to children's educational performance at school.
- ✓ In higher decile schools most parents believe that the responsibility for their child's education should be shared between home and school. The challenge to educators in lower decile schools is to attain a similar attitude from the bulk of their parent body.
- ✓ When comparing schools that are similar, (in their location, intake size etc....) those that do best have, amongst other things, strong links with parents and families: the reverse is also true.
- ✓ Successful parental involvement programs produce a range of lasting benefits- for schools, parents and children alike.

## THE BENEFITS OF WORKING TOGETHER

Relationships between parents, caregivers and schools continue to be a major concern for all those who have an interest in education, welfare and development of children and young people and are increasingly a feature of major educational policies at all levels. Increasingly, these policies recognise the possibilities of an **educational partnership** based upon complementary roles and relationships, mutual respect, reciprocal effort and joint action.

Whilst this is now recognised as a considerable professional challenge, its benefits are becoming clear too. There is a growing awareness; rooted in wide ranging professional experience that practical cooperation between schools and families actually works, often spectacularly. It is clear to, from a combination of research evidence and inspection data that schools that have learned to work well with parents can expect significant, consistent and lasting benefits in terms of:

- ✓ increased parental involvement and support in the life and work of schools, and support for their main tasks.
- ✓ a greater willingness to share information and to tackle misunderstandings and problems at an earlier stage.
- ✓ the active encouragement and support of parents and families produce the kinds of attitudes and learning behaviour that leads to longer term benefits and achievements.

Such partnerships, which can only be achieved by steady and consistent effort over time, seem to have both broad appeal and wide application. They can be found in schools of all types.

## RATIONALE

Parents are a child's first and most enduring educators. They are the prime educators until the child enters a pre-school setting or starts school, and they remain a major influence on aspirations, attitudes to learning and achievements throughout their child's school life and beyond.

A successful home-school partnership is a key factor in a school or early years setting becoming more effective. This can be manifested in the following ways.

- Improved levels of achievement – parents' active involvement in recognising and supporting their children's learning has a real impact on achievement.
- An improved sense of belonging by the family and their subsequent inclusion in the school and community.
- Increased aspirations of all involved.
- A greater sharing of information, including assessment evidence, with all partners having an equal role.
- More positive pupil attitudes and behaviour.
- Increased parental participation in all aspects of school life.

Successful home-school partnerships impact on the achievement of all children, and in particular on groups of under-attaining and underachieving children and their parents.

*Extract from Supporting Parents: Guidance for schools (Primary National Strategy 2004)*

## WORKING WITH PARENTS CAREGIVERS AND FAMILIES

What Did Schools Visited Think They Did Well.....

- ✓ Many of the schools were very positive and up beat about the quality of their general relationship with parents and caregivers. They quote their:
  - **'Welcoming'** and **'accessible'** reception arrangements and 'open door' policy; the approachability of staff.
  - their willingness to meet, **'make time for' and listen to parents** and respond to their concerns, (often without appointments, where there is a need).
- ✓ Some schools stressed the importance of initial efforts to build good working relationships through tested **admission arrangements and induction programs**. These might include, for example, home visits and special arrangements for newly arrived or transient families.
- ✓ **Regular contact**, both formal and informal, is sometimes strengthened by arrangements to meet parents in the playground, before and after school.
- ✓ **Basic communication** is reinforced, in many schools through:
  - procedures to inform and discuss children's achievements and progress.
  - alerting parents when there was a concern at school: responding to parental concerns.
  - regular newsletters, events and activities.
  -
- ✓ Many schools **targeted their efforts** and give emphasis and priority, in different ways, to
  - parents of children with special educational needs.
  - parents of children with challenging behaviour.
  - families with problems.

Surprisingly few mentioned, or appear to make, special arrangements for families where parents have demanding jobs or work long hours which make involvement or participation difficult.

- ✓ A number of schools stressed the importance of parental **involvement in, and support for**, their children's learning, in and out of school. Arrangements here include:
  - curriculum related information (booklets, leaflets)
  - practical workshops.
  - parent's consultation meetings.
- ✓ A few schools involved parents / caregivers in discussions about how they can help their children, through **target setting**, occasionally with the children present; they provide practical advice about **helping with homework** and, sometimes, suggest **family learning activities**. Some schools provided positive endorsement of **home-school diaries**, often linked to class and playground achievement and behaviour.
- ✓ A significant number of the schools visited illustrated the current government led interest in a **wider role for schools**, which included:
  - **Breakfast and after school clubs.**
  - **Links with other agencies** which work with families and children.
  - **Adult and family learning classes**, which included 'Stress free Parenting, Healthy Food and Cooking classes, and Computer classes for parents'.
  - The establishment of **Parent Pods**; geographically arranged meetings of parents hosted by specifically chosen parents in their home. These **Pod** leaders would meet with the Principal and be briefed on a matter for discussion. Following meetings with their group they would report back to the Principal the outcome of their discussions.
- ✓ Some schools clearly worked hard to listen to parents and to give them a voice in the life and work of the school. They did this by **consulting and seeking the views of parents and caregivers**, on a range of issues, in both formal and informal ways. A few mentioned the benefits that accrue from a healthy PTA that organised events, fundraised and generally supported the school. Many were positive about the recruitment, involvement and training support of parent volunteers.
- ✓ A small number of schools had a **coordinated policy** for working with parents and families (one had this as part of their school improvement plan).
- ✓ Only one of the schools visited involved the parents in **educational policy and decision** making, whilst two other schools involved parents in the 'continual update and reviews of plans' and were trying out and evaluating different ways of getting parents involved.( Refer to "wider role for schools" above). It needs to be noted that these parents were not members of the Board of Governors.

What Did Schools Visited Believe They Could Do Better.....

It was apparent that the schools visited had different strengths and weaknesses. What was a source of pride and positive achievement in one was a sense of limitation and work yet to be done in another. I put these differences down to the size of the school, type and catchment area, ethos and leadership; of collective experience, historical legacy and local reputation.

Here are some things that were mentioned:-

The need to increase parental participation and involvement:

- ❖ In their children's learning
- ❖ In the life and work of the school by means of holding:-
  - curriculum workshops, parent evenings and celebration days.

- helping children at home, generally and through tailored home-school / family learning programs.
- ❖ Extending the range and repertoire of parental involvement.
- ❖ Increasing the involvement of parents as volunteers in and around the school, supporting reading, running groups and activities.
- ❖ Providing guidelines, training and support to strengthen existing efforts.
- ❖ Targeting additional and unmet individual and group needs and responding to them positively. These might include:-
  - fathers and other male carers.
  - working parents.
  - parents and families with ESOL needs.
  - parents with little previous schooling and little confidence.
  - other “hard to reach” parents.
- ❖ Reviewing and strengthening a schools collective efforts, through:-
  - identifying effective practices; tackling gaps and weaknesses.
  - producing guidelines for staff.
  - prioritising work with parents; persuading staff of its importance.
  - working to implement and develop a whole school policy and approach for work in this area.
- ❖ Providing better support for pupils, parents and families during key transitions (Starting school, moving to high school).
- ❖ Encouraging, supporting and providing for parents’ own learning and development. Initiatives included parenting classes (cooking and computing), adult basic skills, and family literacy.
- ❖ Consulting, seeking the views of parents and giving them representation in school planning and decision making through:-
  - Informal contact / drop in areas.
  - Parent pod groups.
  - Parent and joint staff parent working groups.
  - Involving parents in the formulation, review and development of policies in key areas e.g. pupil behaviour, homework, anti racism, sex and religious education.
  - Funding and supporting a room for parent and community use and encouraging its broad and varied use.

What Had The Schools Visited Learned About Their Performance in Strengthening Family Involvement.....

They had found some particular surprises which suggested underdevelopment.

These included the need to introduce:-

- ✓ Clear procedures, known to parents, for raising concerns with the school
- ✓ Practical workshops on relevant topics.
- ✓ Meetings and activities arranged specially to target parents who worked long hours and fathers and other male carers.
- ✓ They could obviously do more to ensure parents and caregivers have a voice in the life and work of the school, in consultations about policy and developing effective partnerships.
- ✓ There was much they could learn from each other.
- ✓ Developing robust procedures for sharing information about children.
- ✓ Tackling concerns, on both sides, before they became bigger issues.

The base line data collected from school inspections provided a clear picture of surface features of the landscape of general practice but it told schools very little about the quality of their current efforts or their effectiveness.

As a result of this position schools developed a number of key questions.

These are:-

- What do staffs think of our current efforts?
- What do parents think of our current efforts?
- Are there important differences between staff and parental views and experience?
- What are the most effective arrangements in terms of building parental partnerships and helping children's learning?
- What combinations of arrangements and activities work best; for which parents and children?

In order to develop useful answers to these important questions they needed a clear and principled vision of how things might be, together with up to date, consistent and reliable evidence on which to base decisions.

A working example of such a framework and approach is currently used by schools in the London Borough of Tower Hamlets and was to be adopted by the Nottingham Schools visited.

The framework included:-

- Developing a welcoming school.
- Supporting and celebrating children's learning at home.
- Ensuring that parents have a voice.
- Parents' own learning and development.
- Parents, families and the community.

Schools used the following matrix to focus their thinking and provide future direction.

THE SCHOOL .....	QUALITY OF CURRENT WORK			
	Weak 1 point	Basic 2 points	Good 3 points	Excellent 4 points
.... has a clear vision of what it is trying to achieve through its home – school work and why.				
.... makes all parents and families welcome, and works hard to build and maintain strong relationships and a productive dialogue.				
.... does as much as it reasonably can to encourage involvement of all parents in their children's learning, both in school and at home.				
.... provides all with a range of opportunities to have a genuine say in, and be an active part of, the life and work of the school.				
.... is sensitive towards, and supportive of a range of backgrounds, needs and circumstances of all pupils and their families.				
.... is an integral part, and an active and responsive member of, the community in which it is located.				
.... views its work with parents and families, as both a key feature of its current work and a major element in its efforts to improve.				
.... bases its work on available up-to-date information and evidence.				

## RATING SYSTEM

\* (up to 10 points)

Rather basic and or underdeveloped: some weaknesses. Little impact on life and work of the school.

\*\* (up to 16 points)

Uneven provision: variable quality and effectiveness. Some gaps or obvious limitations.

\*\*\* (up to 22 points)

Some clear strengths and strong practice. Possible need to review, overhaul and monitor in certain areas. Also to develop a more coordinated approach throughout the school.

\*\*\*\* (up to 28 points)

Parental involvement is seen as a key feature and a major strength of the school. This is recognised and supported by all main partners

At the time of my visits schools were adapting this format and some of the questions to develop a questionnaire to parents and caregivers.

## APPENDICES

What sort of Program attracts Fathers?

- ✓ Programs where school staff welcomes fathers and feel comfortable about their inclusion.
- ✓ Programs where schools are persistent and creative in recruiting and involving fathers.
- ✓ Programs and activities where local fathers have been consulted on factors such as content, design, publicity, recruitment, timing and venue.
- ✓ Well planned programs and activities built around dynamic and active learning styles with not too much discussion.
- ✓ Programs and activities explicitly targeted at fathers- events labelled for 'parents' tend to attract predominantly mothers.
- ✓ Programs built around father-child activities ('family learning'). These are not necessarily father-son activities although this may be particularly relevant for some children.
- ✓ Fathers get more involved in wider family learning programs than in Family Language, Literacy and Numeracy programs-particularly when courses are shorter and run outside working hours.

Some schools had developed successful programs for involving fathers that are not based on the traditional models of activity based family learning.

Examples include:-

- ✓ Engagement with individual fathers about a specific child's learning and behaviour.
- ✓ Open House events for fathers. Dads into School days, Dads breakfasts, Dads lunches and 'Celebrate Fathers Day' evenings.
- ✓ Making use of fathers' specific skills to support work in the classroom and also to support children in a mentoring capacity.
- ✓ Father- support networks and adult learning programs for fathers as part of an 'extended school' program.

Why some parents stay away from school?

- ✓ Long hours and other work commitments.
- ✓ Family pressures.
- ✓ Childcare and transport problems.
- ✓ Bad memories of their own school days.
- ✓ Problems of communication, culture and language.
- ✓ Low confidence and self esteem.

- ✓ Fear of going out alone.
- ✓ Intimidated by formal atmosphere.
- ✓ Not knowing anyone; feeling that you don't belong.
- ✓ Nervous of learning 'bad news'.
- ✓ Not seeing the point of meetings.
- ✓ Not necessary; schools should be 'left to get on with it'.
- ✓ Many older pupils don't want it.

#### Contacting 'hard to reach' parents

12 practical ideas.

- ✓ Set up pre-entry home visit.
- ✓ Use children as active agents.
- ✓ Focus on children's current (class) work.
- ✓ Base some events and activities on families.
- ✓ Make good use of more experienced and confident parents.
- ✓ Use ICT imaginatively (text messaging for example).
- ✓ Try different types of meetings: in different venues: at different times.
- ✓ Suggest bringing a friend to a meeting.
- ✓ Pilot class parent meeting/representatives.
- ✓ Work with other agencies and voluntary groups as appropriate.
- ✓ Have a member of staff with special responsibility for home-school work.
- ✓ Set up small, informal working group(s) - (either a cross section of parents or a mix of staff, parents, BoT, etc...) to review arrangements and come up with good ideas.

#### Improving transition in challenging circumstances: some practical strategies.

- ✓ Make a video (with soundtrack in appropriate languages) for new families, which will:-
  - Welcome them to the school.
  - Address likely parental concerns and anxieties.
  - Suggest ways in which families can support young people's learning.
  - Use at meetings for new parents: copies available for home loan.
- ✓ Set up special transition groups and arrangements for vulnerable children and their families.
- ✓ Use parents who are already familiar with the school to establish and maintain early contact with new parents.
- ✓ Involve parents in the review of existing arrangements and in suggesting improvements.
- ✓ Strengthen and sensitise the admissions process for children from unusual, difficult and challenging family circumstances.
- ✓ Where initial contacts do not work, consider the use of an initial home visit, by an appropriate member of staff or the use of outreach workers.

#### Developing a welcoming school.

- ✓ What arrangements are there for welcoming parents and visitors and making them feel at ease? How parent friendly are front-line staff? Is someone readily available to interpret for parents?
- ✓ How welcoming is your reception area? Do displays reflect the whole school population? Have families themselves contributed to making the reception area more friendly?
- ✓ What kinds of special help and support are available to meet the cultural and linguistic needs of families during the admission of new pupils?
- ✓ Do staffs tell parents about the school and go through written information with them, rather than relying on handouts?
- ✓ Does the school have a befriending scheme for new parents?
- ✓ How sensitive is admission arrangements for all children, taking particular account of the needs of those with complicated, or challenging, family circumstances?
- ✓ Are home visits a part of your current practice?

When there is a concern.

- ✓ What practical arrangements and procedures are there for responding to parental anxieties and concerns as quickly as possible?
- ✓ What recognition is there of the special needs of:
  - parents who lack confidence.
  - parents who lack knowledge of the education system.
  - parents who are not fluent in English.
  - parents who work long difficult hours and are not available during normal school hours.

Parents as partners.

- ✓ How do we acknowledge the contribution that parents are already making to their children's development?
- ✓ What practical ideas and materials does the school give families to help their out-of-school learning? Do these change as children get older? Who is responsible for this?
- ✓ How does the school encourage family learning (i) on a regular, everyday basis, (ii) through specially organised events and activities?
- ✓ Does the school make use of ICT to help with this?
- ✓ How do parents contribute to homework policy and practice?
- ✓ Does the school communicate effectively and keep in touch with all parents? Are there some families and/or groups who are more difficult to reach?
- ✓ Do all parents know that there is at least one member of staff who knows their child well and with whom they can communicate comfortably?
- ✓ Which lines of communication work best? And which work least well?
- ✓ Does the school have regular dialogue with others who might have a contribution to make to children's welfare, learning and development?
- ✓ What kinds of educational materials and help are available to children during extended family visits and leave?

## A FINAL THOUGHT!

Whilst the above ideas contained in the appendix have a number of implications when considering implementation a number of schools had identified them as areas which they intend to strengthen and develop their work.

It is agreed that they share several underlying features.

- ✓ They build on, and extend, existing strengths. These include the building of positive relationships and recognition of the importance of parental participation in and support for, children's learning and development and the provision of a range of accessible information.
- ✓ There is increasing recognition of partnership values and approaches, based on mutual respect and co-operative action.
- ✓ There is, too, a growing conviction that much is to be learned from listening to parents- both informally and systematically- and taking their views into account.

Taken together, the topics identified suggest something of a more strategic whole school approach, albeit one with strong practical implications.

This includes:-

- A broader, rather than a more limited view of what is possible.
- A sense of the importance of partnership working (including staff/parent cooperation, staff teamwork and positive interagency links).
- Making and taking opportunities to develop joined up policy and practice.(e.g. involving parents and caregivers and, where appropriate, children themselves, in key areas of policy and decision making).
- A responsiveness to information and evidence-led development, based on what has had an impact and what has worked.