



Estyn

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Her Majesty's Inspectorate
for Education and Training in Wales

Good practice in parental involvement in primary schools



BUDDSODDWR MEWN POBL
INVESTOR IN PEOPLE



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Publication Section

Estyn

Anchor Court

Keen Road

Cardiff

CF24 5JW or by email to publications@estyn.gsi.gov.uk

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Introduction

- 1 The purpose of this remit report is to respond to the request from the Welsh Assembly Government in the Minister's annual remit to Estyn in 2008-2009 for information about good practice in how primary schools involve parents¹ effectively to promote pupils' wellbeing and to improve the standards they achieve.
- 2 This remit is undertaken in the context of the strategic direction established by the Welsh Assembly Government in the 'Learning Country: Vision into Action' 2006 that places a key emphasis on improving outcomes for learners. The remit also takes account of the Assembly Government's ongoing programme, 'Making the Connections: Delivering Better Service for Wales', which focuses on improving public service delivery to create better outcomes for citizens.
- 3 Linked to the Assembly's ongoing programme for higher standards and better delivery, the Welsh Assembly Government has designed the School Effectiveness Framework to improve educational experiences and life chances for all children and young people in Wales.
- 4 As part of the School Effectiveness Framework, the Welsh Assembly Government and its partners describe one of the national purposes of schools as being to 'provide a learning community for all engaged in school life, with children and young people and their families at the centre'.
- 5 Research shows that learning outcomes improve when there is shared understanding between teachers, parents/carers and other professionals of the processes that lead to improved learning and wellbeing in the classroom. Opportunities for parents to participate in classroom activities can enable families to build their own strengths as learning mentors. Positive links between school and the home can provide children and young people with more effective assistance and encouragement.
- 6 Parents have an important stake in the education of their children and play a significant part in supporting their children's learning. Effective parental involvement sets aspirations and shapes the child's self-concept as a learner.
- 7 Also relevant in the context of this report is the Welsh Assembly Government's commitment to:
 - respond to the recommendations of the National Behaviour and Attendance Review² report; and
 - raise standards by providing funding to target links between disadvantage and educational attainment amongst pupils in Wales³, the RAISE initiative.

¹ References to parents throughout this report also apply to carers or guardians.

² National Behaviour and Attendance Review (NBAR) Report – an independent review conducted on behalf of the Welsh Assembly Government, chaired by Professor Ken Reid. publ. DCELLS 2008

³ 'Raising Attainment and Individual Standards in Education in Wales' 2006 (RAISE)

- 8 This remit report is a preliminary project to identify good practice in parental involvement in primary schools. The evidence base for the report draws on:
- a survey of all local authorities (LAs) in Wales to identify good practice in their primary schools;
 - visits to a representative sample of 17 primary schools in seven local authorities in Wales;
 - interviews with headteachers, teachers, parent governors and groups of other parent representatives in primary schools; and
 - further documentary evidence, including Estyn primary school inspection reports published in the 2007-2008 academic year.
- 9 The fieldwork included primary schools involved in:
- the School Effectiveness Framework pilot initiative;
 - receiving RAISE funding;
 - a local authority's project to promote the Basic Skills Agency's Family Learning initiative;
 - initiatives to encourage 'hard-to-reach' families; and
 - developing innovative projects in aspects of parental involvement such as governance.

Main findings

- 10 In the schools visited, the nature and scope of parental involvement are very varied. There does not seem to be any clear pattern in how schools involve parents and neither is there any formal monitoring of the extent of parental involvement.
- 11 Where there is particularly effective parental involvement, the single most important driver is the enthusiasm of the headteacher. When a school plans and implements positive policies to involve parents, this can have a significant impact on improving pupils' wellbeing, particularly in relation to behaviour and school attendance. For example, three of the schools visited organise nurture groups (see Appendix 1) for particularly needy pupils. These groups work closely with parents and can show evidence of how pupils' behaviour had improved through work with the parents and children together.
- 12 Almost all schools in the sample believe that they involve parents enough in the daily life of the school. Most, but not all of them, recognise that this involvement has a positive impact on their pupils' learning.
- 13 Parental involvement in the schools visited ranges from a school being described as the 'hub' of the community where parents, including those from disadvantaged groups, feel very welcome in the school and await the next project with enthusiasm to a school where parents are rarely involved beyond a few formal events.
- 14 The schools visited report that they feel most confident with traditional areas of parental involvement such as reporting to parents at parents' evenings, inviting parents to attend school events or in the various fund-raising and extra-curricular activities arranged by many schools.
- 15 The survey confirms that:
 - most parents help their children with reading and homework;
 - a few parents get involved in the school spontaneously, particularly those who are confident and well educated;
 - every school has at least a few parents who are keen to serve as parent governors or fund-raise for the school, but only a few schools make a clear effort to involve parents who would not naturally fall in this group;
 - every school reported that mothers are more likely to become involved in the school than fathers; and
 - those with successful records of parental involvement realise the importance of extended family networks and of including grandparents especially.
- 16 Most schools in the sample plan and carry out a few innovative strategies to involve parents and do so effectively. However, only a very few schools have a consistent approach that results in high levels of parental involvement across a wide range of activities.

- 17 Community focused schools⁴ can show how large-scale projects can enthuse the community and give pride to the school and its pupils. Parents of pupils at these schools feel strongly that they are a part of the school and report that they want to be involved.
- 18 Schools that have the most success in encouraging parents to become involved often provide refreshments as an incentive for 'hard-to-reach' parents.
- 19 Too few activities for parents are designed specifically to encourage the involvement of fathers. A few schools work hard to encourage mothers who speak neither Welsh nor English to become involved and improve their own language skills.
- 20 The good practice we found was mostly in areas where the school had been proactive, had listened to parents, refined its work to take account of their suggestions and built on activities it considered successful.
- 21 Where there is good practice in planning parental involvement, schools understand that parents:
- like to be involved in their child's school and want to feel they are in partnership;
 - want the school to know them personally as individuals and be kept well informed about the progress made by their children;
 - need to receive clear information about induction and day-to-day matters that affect their children;
 - feel more confident if they know the staff and have a basic understanding of the curriculum;
 - are very willing to support school events and provide practical help but are less likely to join a committee;
 - become more supportive, the more they are involved, particularly if they have attended training events; and
 - like to have clear rules for their children that are applied consistently and are followed up appropriately, for example regarding behaviour in the playground or expectations for completing homework.
- 22 The Welsh Assembly Government is currently piloting the School Effectiveness Framework in schools. Part of this initiative is to strengthen the links between parents and schools. This work in the schools involved in the pilot is at an early stage and has not yet been evaluated. Published national data on pupil outcomes are not in a parent-friendly format.
- 23 In 2006, the Welsh Assembly Government introduced a programme for 'Raising Attainment and Individual Standards in Education in Wales' (RAISE) by providing

⁴ 'A community focused school is one that provides a range of services and activities, often beyond the school day, to help meet the needs of its pupils, their families and the wider community.' NAFW Circular No 34/2003

funding to target the links between disadvantage and educational attainment amongst pupils in Wales. Two schools commented that RAISE funding had been essential for operating their nurture groups. The survey did not identify other evidence of RAISE funding being used to target initiatives to encourage parental involvement.

Recommendations

The Welsh Assembly Government should:

- R1 evaluate the impact on pupils' standards and wellbeing where schools in the School Effectiveness Framework pilot have trialled initiatives to strengthen the links between parents and schools and share findings; and
- R2 provide parent-friendly information on pupils' standards and wellbeing to encourage parents to become more involved in working with schools to set realistic targets for their children.

Local education authorities should:

- R3 encourage all schools to plan more ways of involving parents; and
- R4 seek out examples of good practice in their schools, share information between schools and encourage them to emulate good practice.

Schools should:

- R5 ensure that staff build positive relationships with parents by being visible and approachable in the school and the playground, particularly at the start and end of the school day;
- R6 involve parents in initiatives to improve pupils' attendance and behaviour by making expectations and rules very clear, rewarding pupils who improve and including parents in celebrations of success;
- R7 use parents as volunteers during the school day and in after-school hours learning where appropriate;
- R8 involve extended family members as volunteers, including grandparents who often have skills to share and time to spare;
- R9 provide more information for parents, for example by making newsletters more attractive and accessible, by using simple and multilingual text, websites, email and text messaging, and including information about and written by pupils;
- R10 provide parents with a full range of information that includes appropriate details about induction or when there are staff changes or absences;
- R11 monitor and promote gender and ethnic balance on governing bodies and encourage fathers to become more involved; and
- R12 be imaginative and innovative in planning how they could involve parents more effectively, particularly parents who may need help to develop parenting skills.

Impact of parental involvement

- 24 In almost all the schools visited the impact of parental involvement on improving school effectiveness is not monitored in any formal way. However, schools in the sample could provide some evidence of the impact of different kinds of parental involvement.

Standards of achievement

- 25 In the schools visited, parents become involved in improving standards largely through understanding the curriculum, knowing about their child's progress and helping with homework.
- 26 Many of the schools we visited had organised recent curriculum events for parents. These included, for example, events to:
- explain aspects of the curriculum, with each subject co-ordinator giving input;
 - present a new reading scheme and explain the 'big book' approach;
 - teach reading games that parents could play with their child at home;
 - explain aspects of mathematics at a workshop, followed up by putting better explanations on pupils' homework sheets;
 - explain RAISE funding and how it is used in the school; and
 - help parents improve their understanding of their children's learning, for example through nurture groups and induction for new pupils.
- 27 Schools report mixed success in running these meetings for parents. Attendance levels are very varied and there is no clear reason for this that schools could offer. Schools try arranging events at different times of the day to raise levels of attendance but the most successful times depend on the individual circumstances of the school's parents.
- 28 One school encourages reluctant parents to help with reading and these helpers complete an evaluation form to help the school identify areas where it could provide training for parents.
- 29 All schools reported that they feel confident about how they share information with parents about their pupils' progress. Parents generally confirm that that their children's annual reports are written in a way that is easy to understand. Arrangements for parents' meetings are well established and teachers expect parents to attend the meetings during which the progress of individual pupils is discussed with parents.
- 30 All schools arrange parent consultations at least twice a year. Many parents commented that schools are considerate in arranging convenient appointment times with a few schools sending parents a questionnaire about this. Schools report that attendance varies between 70-95% and it is often the parents of older pupils who are less likely to attend and particularly Year 6 parents in the summer term.

- 31 Several schools have developed good ideas to encourage parental attendance and plan the use of time carefully. These ideas include:
- combining the parents' evening with the governors' annual meeting or a performance by pupils;
 - using the opportunity to display other work, for example to show DVDs of pupils' activities during the year; and
 - following up issues raised by parents during induction at the first formal parents' meeting in November.
- 32 Two schools arrange for parents to discuss their child's work formally on a regular and more frequent basis. The case study below illustrates how one of them has developed its arrangements.

A monthly 'clinic' for parents

Context

A city school with 275 pupils on a large housing estate in an area of social deprivation where 50% of pupils have free school meals. Pupils are predominantly from deprived backgrounds. The school receives RAISE funding.

Strategy

The school aims to encourage parents to take an interest in their child's school work on a regular basis by increasing the formal opportunities to invite parents into school.

Action

The school holds a formal 'clinic' after school on a monthly basis for every Year group and invites parents to attend. Parents and pupils look at the work together and are able to discuss progress with the teacher, including areas of strength and ways that the pupil can improve.

Outcomes

The school finds that there is a significant improvement in the quality of pupils' work during the week before the 'clinic'. Pupils are keen to do well and display their work to their parents. Parents say that they find these opportunities very helpful. The school reports that attendance at the 'clinics' varies but the school notices that parents of new pupils are particularly keen to attend.

- 33 All schools require pupils to do some homework. For pupils aged 5-7 years, this usually includes reading practice and learning spellings, while older pupils in key stage 2 often have additional project work to research and complete at weekends. All schools visited reported that they find parents are usually supportive to homework, although pupils in key stage 2 receive less help from parents as they get older.

- 34 Almost all schools provide a home/school reading record or diary for parents and staff to record progress and make comments. Parents say they find these very helpful.

Identifying good practice

In the schools with good practice in the effective involvement of parents in promoting and supporting improved standards of achievement, schools:

- offer flexible arrangements for parents' evenings by planning the event over three evenings and send a second invitation letter to parents who do not respond initially;
- provide translators for parents who do not speak English and record questions for follow-up translation if necessary;
- provide parents with clear information about their expectations regarding the homework policy and set appropriate homework with enough information so that parents know how to help;
- provide parents with a topic or subject sheet outlining the half-term's or term's work and choose topics where parents could help easily;
- record stories for parents who do not speak English to follow the book with their child at home; and
- encourage parents to borrow 'story sacks' to use at home with their children.

Standards of behaviour

- 35 Behaviour is the area where most schools comment that parental involvement has a positive impact.
- 36 Schools and parents feel that mutual respect is an important factor in improving pupils' behaviour. The atmosphere is positive in every school visited, but in a few schools the excellent relationships between everyone are particularly striking. In these schools, most pupils are polite and respectful, and parents are confident about their own importance in supporting learning. Parents say they like to feel that the school community is pulling together.
- 37 At one school, the headteacher makes daily checks on attendance and behaviour, gives clear messages to parents about his expectations and will follow up issues personally. As a result, he considers the achievement and attainment of pupils at the school is better than in comparable local schools.
- 38 Headteachers play an important role in setting the expectations for pupils' behaviour in their schools. Parents comment that having clear rules helps them to manage their children better both to support the school and at home. Schools notice an improvement in the behaviour of pupils where the school has worked closely with parents to help them improve their parenting skills, for example in a nurture group.
- 39 A change of headteacher usually changes the culture of a school. For example, one new headteacher had worked hard to improve pupils' challenging behaviour before

the start of the school day by setting clear rules for staff and pupils, ensuring that parents understood the expectations and managing the new arrangements personally. The improvement in behaviour was significant. Parents say that they like to have rules, are now much happier and have more trust in the school.

Attendance

- 40 In 2007-2008, the average attendance rate for primary schools in Wales was 93.3%. Just over one quarter of pupils account for over half the total number of absences. There is a correlation between the proportion of pupils entitled to free school meals and the rate of absenteeism.⁵
- 41 When a school plans and implements positive policies to involve parents, they can have a significant impact on improving pupils' wellbeing, particularly their behaviour and attendance.
- 42 Most schools in our sample make genuine efforts to ensure good attendance and comment that the poor attendance of children from a very few families can affect the overall figures.
- 43 Schools we visited generally had attendance rates of more than 90%. The exceptions were schools where families take extended holidays to visit relatives overseas. Only one school we visited had attendance rates of 95% or better.
- 44 Where pupils take extended holidays during term time, one school provides pupils with packs of appropriate homework tasks to complete. Another school requires pupils who take holidays in term time to send a postcard to the school and give an oral report of the holiday to the school in assembly on their return.

Identifying good practice

In the schools with good practice in the effective involvement of parents to improve pupils' attendance and behaviour, schools:

- reward pupils appropriately for full attendance and this often takes the form of acknowledgement in a special assembly to which parents are invited;
- target families with a record of poor attendance and work closely with the Education Welfare Officer who will visit pupils' homes;
- ensure that the headteacher makes their expectations very clear to parents personally on parents' evenings and has a consistent approach to contacting parents by phone if pupils are absent;
- have points systems with rewards for good behaviour that are well understood by all and are applied consistently, and give opportunities to celebrate success, for example in assemblies to which parents are invited; and
- send praise postcards to children's homes by mail or send text messages and emails to parents to report their children's good behaviour in school.

⁵ 'Absenteeism from Primary Schools, 2007/08' Welsh Assembly Government Statistical Data Release February 2009

Improving adult learning

- 45 In the schools visited, support and training are provided for adult learning. This involves offering personal training for individual parents to improve their own education and qualifications. As well as helping the adults involved, this has an impact on their children's view of the importance of learning and can motivate children to become lifelong learners.
- 46 Family learning, particularly in literacy and numeracy, can raise educational attainment for children and parents. The Basic Skills Agency's Family Programmes in Wales consist of programmes and workshops run in all local education authorities to help parents improve their own basic skills and to get them back into learning whilst helping their children. Family programmes also give advice to parents about progression to further education.
- 47 Several schools offer information and communications technology courses for parents that are popular. A few schools had offered Welsh language classes for adults but demand for these was limited.
- 48 The survey identified a few parents who before their child had joined the school had had few, if any, qualifications but via their involvement with the school had advanced their own education. For example, a parent who started as a nurture group mother progressed to providing voluntary help in the school and then to gaining GNVQ qualifications in childcare for paid employment. As a result, she reported she has become a better role model in promoting the benefits of education to her child.

Involvement in induction and nurture groups

- 49 Nursery induction is reported as particularly important for new parents to the school especially if a crèche is provided for younger children. In good practice, schools provide packs of useful information, show parents the classroom and provide good opportunities for them to meet the staff. Parents stated it is important for schools to make sure that induction for new parents happens whenever new pupils join during the year and not just for the main intake of pupils.
- 50 In three schools visited, we met with parents of pupils in nurture groups. These schools identify a small number of pupils who have emotional and developmental needs and provide special learning opportunities within a small group. As part of the nurture programme, parents are encouraged to become involved in the group's activities to develop their parenting skills. For example, these parents would join the children for a morning snack, learn how to play games with their children and see how school staff use a consistent approach to manage behaviour. In one school, the nurture group parents said they had particularly enjoyed learning practical literacy activities, for example writing a 'j' in jelly.
- 51 In 2006, the Welsh Assembly Government introduced a programme for 'Raising Attainment and Individual Standards in Education in Wales' (RAISE) by providing funding to target the links between disadvantage and educational attainment amongst pupils in Wales. Two schools commented that this funding had been essential for operating the nurture group.

Identifying good practice

In the schools with good practice in the effective involvement of parents where they operate nurture groups, the following features are evident:

- the school builds close relationships between the staff and parents in the nurture group that give parents confidence;
- parents value the help they receive from the school;
- parents know that they can seek advice from nurture group staff about how to manage their child's behaviour and recognise the benefits of the improvement in their child's behaviour at school and at home;
- parents are very positive about the school's arrangements and do not feel there is any stigma as a result of their child's involvement in the nurture group; and
- the schools notice an all-round improvement in the standards achieved by nurture pupils whose parents have been involved.

- 52 No schools visited have provided specific projects for parents and their children to learn alongside each other. For example, schools in Birmingham and Wakefield have piloted the 'Inspire' project where a parent (or grandparent) and child developed a project together in class for a week. Schools developed schemes of work around themes that included 'survival' and 'shipwrecked'. These project weeks proved to be very popular with everyone and motivated parents to be more involved in their children's learning.

The extent of parental involvement

- 53 In the sample of schools visited, the parent representatives⁶ met were mostly female, white and British. In many cases these parents reflected the ethnicity of the school's pupil intake but overall, parents from minority ethnic groups were under-represented in the sample. The exception was a school where 84% of pupils do not speak English or Welsh as a first language. This school has a governing body that includes seven parents from minority ethnic groups, who largely represent the ethnicity of the school community.
- 54 In almost all the schools visited, parents report that they do not like to belong to committees or attend formal meetings but are willing and do help with practical tasks.
- 55 Every school in the survey reported that mothers are more likely to become involved in the school than fathers. The main reasons given for this include fathers' employment commitments, single-mother families, cultural issues and, in a few cases, lack of interest. The survey did not identify any examples of innovative practice to encourage more involvement of fathers.

⁶ The survey team interviewed different groups of parent representatives in each school visited; not all were parent governors.

- 56 A few schools work hard to encourage mothers who speak neither Welsh nor English to become involved and to improve their own language skills. For example, one school targets these parents to attend a regular coffee morning and provides translation, while another involves parents in practical group projects such as making 'story sacks'.
- 57 Schools with successful records of parental involvement emphasised the importance of targeting extended family networks and grandparents especially. In the best practice, grandparents are always encouraged to become involved and, in their turn, can encourage the parents and fathers, in particular, to play a stronger role in their child's education. The influence of the family hierarchy makes a notable impact in a school with a large pupil intake from traveller families and this school has worked hard to build a relationship with key family members.
- 58 One community focused school has extended its network beyond family members to encourage others in the community to see the school as the centre of local life. As a result, the school has become highly regarded by parents and gained positive publicity. For example, parents and other local people have been involved in developing the school's outdoor play environment and the school welcomes their attendance at social activities such as 'bingo' sessions and Christmas lunch.
- 59 A more general finding is that parents of young children are more likely to be involved in the school but gradually lose interest as their child gets older. The reasons cited for the lack of involvement in schools included parents':
- low aspirations for themselves and their children;
 - poor key and basic skills that create personal barriers to their own learning;
 - own negative experience of school that results in disaffection, low self-esteem and fear of school;
 - inability to help, for example with homework as children get older and work becomes more advanced; and
 - cultural and language differences.

The 'open door' policy

- 60 Overall, parents say that they feel welcome in schools. Every school we visited reported that they have an 'open door' policy but this means different things in different schools.
- 61 The 'open door' policies vary considerably. In the best practice, the headteacher and staff create an atmosphere of trust and find ways to ensure that parents feel very welcome to come to school at any time. In other schools, arrangements are more formal and the 'open door' means that the headteacher is readily available for parents to make appointments to see him or her.
- 62 One headteacher commented that he believes that 'anything that gets parents into a school is to be welcomed'. Many schools visited commented on the importance of raising esteem where the community as a whole has very low self-esteem, because of socio-economic difficulties, for example.

- 63 In the schools visited, the best examples of effective practice as a result of 'open door' policies were in schools where:
- the headteacher and staff have a high profile in the playground at the beginning and end of the school day and make a point of speaking to parents informally and knowing them personally;
 - parents of Foundation Phase pupils are encouraged to spend the first 30 minutes of every working day in the classroom so as to gain an understanding of what the children are doing and how they are learning, on a daily basis;
 - a translator works in the school office and is available every day from 8.40 am to help parents to understand correspondence and school procedures; and
 - there are informal opportunities, that often involve sharing food, where parents feel comfortable to meet staff and each other in a situation that parents do not find threatening, for example coffee mornings where parents meet to make costumes for school productions.
- 64 One school reported that the 'open door' policy took time to become embedded but the alternative of 'keeping parents out' creates mistrust on both sides.

Governance

- 65 The schools visited all reported that they have very little difficulty in finding parent volunteers to serve as governors, although there is rarely a need for schools to arrange an election as few candidates come forward. All these schools reported that they have good informal links with parents and know who is likely to be interested. Headteachers say they usually write friendly letters or occasionally approach an individual parent.
- 66 In the schools visited, most parent governors are in employment, many within the school. All are described as supportive and fully involved, and are well regarded by the staff and other parents.
- 67 Parents almost always come forward having either served as a member of a parent teacher association or similar group beforehand, or having worked as a volunteer and then become employed by the school as a support assistant. Parents in many schools commented that, although they might be keen to be involved in the life of the school, they are over-awed by the parent governor role. A few schools report that parents do not wish to play such a formal role but are happy to support practical initiatives.
- 68 Most schools have arrangements to link governors with a curriculum area. This involvement varies considerably. In the best practice, parent governors are very familiar with the curriculum, observe lessons, have annual reports on subjects, meet regularly with subject co-ordinators and have a good understanding of how their school operates.
- 69 Parent governors feel they can be the 'eyes and ears' of a school and that regular communication between governors, parents and staff is important to create an effective learning community. Parents report that they raise issues via parent governors only rarely although they are not afraid to do so and issues are usually

minor. In almost every case parents feel confident to speak to school staff. Only one school gave an example of an issue that was raised via a parent governor that opened useful debate, where parents had been uncertain about the school's homework policy.

- 70 At one school, where 86% of pupils do not speak English at home, parent governors play an important role in helping parents to understand the curriculum so that they can help their children. These governors have been instrumental in persuading parents to support school initiatives, for example ensuring that pupils of different cultures all wear appropriate uniform for physical education.
- 71 Two of the schools visited organise special events to encourage parents to attend the governors' annual meeting and report presentation. Both schools see this as an opportunity to combine the presentation with a performance by pupils, an opportunity for parents to meet staff, to view pupils' work and visit classrooms or to make it a more social event, for example a wine and cheese party. Parents' attendance at the presentation has improved in both schools as a result.
- 72 One school holds an annual stakeholder day for governors, staff and parents that is not attended by the headteacher. The session is well attended and provides useful feedback for the school development plan; for example, on one occasion, parents identified a need to improve the playground and provide play equipment. Parent governors find this kind of event useful although they would like more parents to attend.
- 73 Another positive initiative is one where the chair of governors sends out letters to parents with a personal touch, for example "I am a parent of xx in Yr2 and xx in Yr 4". Parents reported that they like this approach.

Identifying good practice

Schools that involve parents fully tend to have parent governors who:

- are key people in the overall running of the school, with a recognised role in explaining and interpreting policies and initiatives to parents and translating at meetings where necessary;
- send a regular questionnaire to parents, analyse the information in detail and follow this up with an extensive response to every point raised to say how the school will act on the issues raised;
- work with the school to encourage parents to attend the annual meeting to learn more about the work of the school by planning activities involving pupils at the same event; and
- show prospective parents around the school on open day.

Developing resources and provision

- 74 The three key areas of resources and provision that parents are often involved in are:
- classroom support;
 - fund-raising; and
 - extra-curricular activities.
- 75 These activities encourage parents to get to know their child's school, to develop good relationships with staff and to improve the provision of school resources for their children.
- 76 The level of voluntary support in classrooms varies in the schools visited. A few of these schools see parental involvement as essential for raising standards and involve volunteer parents and other adults in the community in a range of initiatives. Parents are generally keen to be supportive. All schools find enough willing volunteers to support school trips and sports fixtures.
- 77 Almost all the schools we visited have some form of parent teacher (PTA) or friends' association. These are generally responsible for arranging fund-raising and social events, for example discos, barbeques and subsidising trips. An important factor is that parents need to feel confident to offer ideas. Parents say they like to get to know the staff better and feel that events offer good opportunities for good team building.
- 78 Organised events work best when schools create a culture where parents want to be involved, by organising imaginative events that parents are keen to support. The result is that the schools raise funds successfully almost as a by-product. One school finds that community events are very popular and arranges successful bingo evenings for school families and the wider community. Another school makes it clear to parents that fund-raising activities must be child centred and these, too, are well supported and equally effective.
- 79 Successful events have also included film shows, 70s' and 80s' evenings and skittles. One school organised a popular 'Stars in their Eyes' show that involved parents, staff, pupils and even the school taxi drivers, who raised a large sum of money for the school.
- 80 These groups also help the school by seeking funding from charities and other sources. For example, one school PTA had gained funding from the Community Council to improve the playground. Parents say they like to know where the money is spent.
- 81 Where schools are active in soliciting support, they also tend to be the ones that describe parents' support as 'superb' and there is clear visual evidence of the impact, for example in attractive school libraries, gardens and IT suites.
- 82 This is in stark contrast to schools where parents are left to arrange events such as a school fair with little enthusiasm from the school staff.

- 83 The case study below illustrates how one school's PTA developed an award-winning project that involved the whole school community and raised funds.

The seed project

Context

This project was organised by a small infant and nursery school in a mid Wales town. The school has a diverse intake of pupils from local families and a transient army population including British Army and Ghurkha Regiment families.

Strategy

The school's Friends Association devised a fund-raising scheme, 'The seed project', which would include every pupil and their family. One of the aims was to ensure that families who did not speak English at home would feel included.

Action

Each pupil at the school was given £1. Their challenge was to carry out an enjoyable task that would allow the money to 'grow'. Examples of activities the families carried out included using the money to buy buckets and sponges and charging for car washing, and buying ingredients to make cakes to sell.

Outcome

Families responded very well to the challenge. The idea was popular and involved the whole school community well. The school noticed the benefits of the stronger partnerships between everyone as well as gaining the funds raised. The Friends won a national Gold Star PTA award for their work that was presented at Buckingham Palace.

- 84 Where there is good practice in involving parents in extra-curricular activities, parents say they find schools busy and fun, and feel comfortable because they know their involvement is valued.
- 85 Parents value opportunities to work alongside staff to make improvements. For example, in more than one school, the headteacher and a group of parents decorated part of the school premises during a school holiday. While this may seem beyond the expected role of the headteacher, the close involvement of those concerned had an impact on reinforcing the already good relationships between adults involved in the school.
- 86 Parents respond well to invitations to help with practical activities and clubs for pupils. For example, parents are often involved in gardening projects to plant bulbs and trees. Schools reported they have varying success in maintaining parents' interest after the initial enthusiasm wanes and, in a few cases, such help has dwindled after a first flowering.
- 87 Parents offer very good support for breakfast and after-school clubs and these activities are highly valued by staff and families alike. Parents are also usually very supportive in providing help with costumes, trips and providing transport for sports events.

- 88 Parents like to attend school and class assemblies and we found that the opportunities for parents to become involved in assemblies vary considerably from school to school.
- 89 School events such as concerts and shows are usually well attended by parents. One school uses a parent as an 'entertainment manager' who enthusiastically engages parents of both genders to support school productions, for example by doing pupils' make-up for school shows. At the time of the school visits, parents in many schools were particularly excited about forthcoming end-of-term productions, with one school organising family carol-singing in the playground.
- 90 A few schools provide useful activities for parents, which also have the specific purpose of encouraging them to play a bigger part in school life. For example, parents at two schools with a high percentage of families from minority ethnic groups had opportunities to visit the 'cooking bus' to learn more about 'healthy eating' initiatives.
- 91 Other successful ideas reported include:
- activities that have a community focus, for example Easter Bonnet or Lantern Parades or the school that arranged a dramatic town send-off as its pupils left by train as 'evacuees'; and
 - a careers day where parents come into school to talk to pupils about their work.

Identifying good practice

In the schools that involve parents well:

- parents listen to guided reading groups, a grandparent with appropriate experience leads school music sessions and pupils practise speaking Welsh with local retired people;
- a community centre crèche near to a school makes it easier for parents with babies to help in school; and
- the school arranges themed activity weeks, for example on healthy eating, international or green weeks. Pupils are involved in related activities during the week and parents are encouraged to support the project work at home and provide artefacts. The week ends with an open day that parents are invited to attend to find out about how pupils developed the topic.

Meeting parents' needs

- 92 Many schools report that some parents are fearful of a school environment. Some may have a history of personal failure at school. This can create a barrier to their involvement and also their ability to support their children. One headteacher commented that parents' self-esteem is raised when they are able to contribute to school life. This school notices a huge difference in the attitude of parents who attend workshops because they become more knowledgeable and supportive.

- 93 Parents like the headteacher and staff to be highly visible and available. In the best practice they describe the school as 'being like a family'. Parents say that they like a personal approach and appreciate the school making contact so they can help to resolve difficulties with their children. Parents in a few schools feel the school makes good opportunities for them to get to know their child's teacher early in the school year and then feel comfortable talking with them.
- 94 All parents like to be well informed and appreciate it when the school makes a good effort to keep them informed. Schools do this in different ways. For some schools, meetings and workshops provide good opportunities. Other schools prefer to use newsletters, text messaging and email.
- 95 Parents like newsletters that contain information about what their children's classes are doing and that include pupils' contributions as well as more general information. Almost all schools aim to produce correspondence in a style that is straightforward for the reader.
- 96 A school with a large number of Muslim pupils learned that the pupils were not allowed to eat the meat served at school because of their religious beliefs and their parents were very concerned. These parents worked with the school to find a solution and, as a result, the school now provides acceptable meals and offers taster sessions for other pupils, and their parents have more confidence in the school's willingness to address difficult issues.
- 97 Parents report that schools are less good at ensuring that parents are fully aware of arrangements to cover for absent staff, for example during maternity leave. Parents and pupils can feel particularly uneasy in these circumstances and are more likely to be supportive of the school if they know what is going on.
- 98 Most of the schools visited report that they involve parents well but such judgements are difficult to prove. One way is by using questionnaires effectively. Schools that do this well devise questions that are specific to their particular circumstances. At one school, the school council had designed and sent out a questionnaire to seek parents' views about how they would like to be involved. The responses had given the school useful information about the extent of parents' computer and internet access but also revealed that 33% of respondents said they did not want more involvement in the school.
- 99 Another school sent a questionnaire to parents about its bullying policy. The school learned for example that, although 62% of parents knew that the school had a policy about tackling bullying, only 19% of parents knew what the school did. As a result, 86% of parents said they wanted more information.
- 100 A few schools have made physical changes to the school environment to make it more accessible to parents. For example, if offices are upstairs parents are less likely to visit the headteacher, particularly if they have small children with them. Improving the decor can make school premises more inviting for parents and pupils alike.

- 101 The Welsh Assembly Government is currently piloting the School Effectiveness Framework in schools. Part of this initiative is to strengthen the links between parents and schools. This work in the schools involved in the pilot is at an early stage and has not yet been evaluated.
- 102 The Welsh Assembly Government provides information on pupils' standards and wellbeing at a national level but this is not always in a parent-friendly format. This does not meet parents' needs well enough when they want to become more involved in working with schools to set realistic targets for their children.

Appendix 1

Nurture groups

Nurture groups are made up of a small number of children, from infant or primary schools, between the ages of four and seven years. A typical group would comprise between six and 12 children with identified special needs reflected in insecure or demanding behaviour in the school setting. A shared characteristic is that of significant and unmet social and emotional needs, and a requirement for more adult time and attention than can readily be provided in the ordinary class.

The whole concept of nurture groups, based upon clear models of child development including Attachment Theory, has existed since the 1970s, but groups have become increasingly popular over recent years given their observed efficacy in facilitating mainstream inclusion of children showing social and behavioural needs.

The children selected will register with their mainstream class each morning and then join other children in the nurture group, which will follow the national curriculum but with additional components designed to reduce the negative behaviours and to enhance social skills, thus enabling the children to take full advantage of their school experience. They will rejoin their class for certain activities such as PE or games and class trips; and participation in the nurture group will extend to anything between six and 18 months.

M.J.Connor
Chartered Educational Psychologist

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The remit author and survey team

Rosemary Lait HMI	Remit author and survey team
Gwen Davies AI	Survey team
Iwan Roberts AI	Survey team