

Parents Driving Improvement



Summary:

We will ensure that all parents can support their child's education and drive improvement across the school system by:

- requiring all schools to give parents timely information on the progress of their child, with regular opportunities for face-to-face discussion;
- expecting schools to use home-school agreements to agree concrete commitments about how schools and parents can work together;
- establishing a new right for parents to complain to Ofsted where they have concerns which the school is failing to address;
- requiring all governing bodies to seek and respond to the views of parents and encouraging them to establish Parent Councils;
- providing tailored information to parents when their child starts primary school and makes the move from primary into secondary; and
- encouraging schools to involve School Councils in decision-making.

- 5.1** Parents (including guardians, foster parents and others in a parenting role) have high aspirations for their children and understandably place high demands on schools. They want the best for their own child and also to have a strong stake in the performance of the school as a whole. The most powerful influence on a child's learning and progress is the support and commitment they receive from their parents.
- 5.2** Parents have been the driving force behind much that we have achieved in early years' policy. We are successfully transforming the lives of children from disadvantaged families through Sure Start Children's Centres. Parents are getting involved, making sure that what is delivered is right for them and their children. In schools, well-informed and engaged parents must also be at the centre of everything we do.
- 5.3** We describe in Chapter 7 the firm steps we propose to take where parents fail to take seriously their responsibilities for ensuring that their child attends school and that their behaviour does not disrupt the learning of other pupils.
- 5.4** Schools achieve most when they draw on real and effective parental engagement. Yet many parents still feel unsure about how to relate to schools, particularly when their child starts at secondary school. And where parents have real concerns about their school's progress, their voices can still be ignored or overlooked. We are determined to redress the balance and to remove any sense that parents' role stops at the school gate. We need to harness the energy and commitment which parents can bring to shape the education their children receive and the progress of their school.

Better information to help parents support their children's learning

- 5.5** Realising the personalised support for every child described in Chapter 4 must include ensuring that parents have the information and tools they need to help their child learn. In particular, we need to ensure that the school system welcomes parents who may find it difficult to be involved, perhaps because they are working, caring for a relative; or parents whose own experience of education was poor and they do not feel confident engaging with schools.
- 5.6** All parents have the right to regular and high quality information about what their child is learning, how well they are progressing and areas for development. Schools now have a much greater range of data about individual pupils and can use this detailed information about the performance and progress of individual pupils to target particular learning needs and provide tailored support.

- 5.7** Making this information available to parents can help them understand how well their child is progressing at school and how they can support them to do better. We will amend the Regulations which set out the expectations for communication with parents so that all schools, primary and secondary, are required to give information on progress to parents at least three times a year and that there is the opportunity for parents to have face-to-face discussion with teachers about what their child needs to do to progress further and how they can support this.
- 5.8** We will also encourage schools to provide a single point of contact for parents. For primary schools this already exists. But in secondaries, it is sometimes less straightforward. Some schools have a designated member of staff for each child – a home-school contact. We see the merit in this approach and will work with partners to explore how the model could be developed.
- 5.9** To ensure we learn from best practice, we plan to launch a national campaign, led by the Specialist Schools and Academies Trust and including other key partners such as the Secondary Heads Association and parents' organisations, to develop further and share schools' experience of the benefits of parental engagement.
- 5.10** ICT offers real potential for sharing information quickly and easily with parents. Over 80% of secondary schools now have websites. Many schools are using e-mail and text messaging. Some have password-protected sites. Technology allows us to increase the range of information available online, which helps parents make more informed choices about schools in their area and make representations to the local authority about provision.
- 5.11** During the time their children are at school, parents will be able to access wider information about their child, for example whether their child is registered in lessons, and information on behaviour and rewards, as well as how they are performing academically. This will not replace face-to-face meetings, but will mean parents have regular and up-to-date information about their child's progress.

Online information for parents at Kemnal Technology College, Sidcup

Kemnal Technology College is one of the fastest improving schools in the country, with very high value-added performance scores. It is an 11-18 comprehensive boys school, with a mixed sixth form, in the south London borough of Bromley.

They wanted to improve the way they communicate with parents, so they introduced a new ICT system, which means that parents can receive up-to-date information on their child at any time of day. Parents can use computers in the school library every weekday, and they can also ask for printed copies of the information.

Parents can access three reports a year online, as well their child's timetable, attendance records and information about their homework. The school keeps an events log for each child, which means parents can keep up with their child's progress. The system is popular with parents, and also with teachers, who report that it takes them less time than traditional paper-based information.

- 5.12** Information alone is not sufficient. Schools need to consider what tools will help parents support their child's learning. This is particularly the case for more deprived parents. They will often have the same commitment to their child's learning, but not always the same resources to draw on. That is why we will provide materials for parents to use at home to support their child's learning and study skills, with specific activities designed to support the kind of catch-up activities described in more detail in Chapter 4.

Home-school agreements

- 5.13** Home-school agreements can be a powerful tool in making clear to parents what they can expect from their child's school – particularly when they join a new school – and also setting out parents' own responsibilities in supporting the school.

Home-school agreements at Oulton Broad Primary School, Suffolk

In an area historically challenged by low expectations and lack of interest in learning, Oulton Broad views its home-school agreements as a way to promote the value of education within its community.

The home-school agreement is displayed in the school's entrance hall, and sets out clearly the expectation that both the school and the family will play their part in the child's education. The school consults parents about reviewing the agreement every three years, and it is used in day-to-day conversations, where necessary, with parents to clarify responsibilities, and emphasise the role that both sides play.

Chris Harrison, the headteacher, believes that the agreement has helped the school put its policy on involving parents into practice. "Partnership must be successful for all involved if we are to achieve a positive school experience for the child, teacher and family. We also want to ensure that children are confident with the relationship between their family and school".

- 5.14** Home-school agreements have been a requirement since 1999, but many schools have not yet exploited their potential. We therefore plan to update and relaunch guidance on home-school agreements to ensure that all schools are aware of the potential benefits and to provide more information about good practice. We want to learn more about where home-school agreements work best and to enable schools to exploit the energy and commitment of parents. We will set a clear expectation that schools should keep agreements both updated and practical.

Driving school improvement

- 5.15** As well as ensuring that parents are more involved with their own child's learning, we want to open up new ways to ensure that parents' voices are heard. At present, parents can feel frustrated and powerless where they have serious and well-founded concerns about their child's school – for example where there has been a breakdown in school discipline or standards are too low – but the school management is unwilling to hear their concerns or to take action.
- 5.16** To ensure prompt action where parents have legitimate concerns, we propose to give Ofsted a new statutory power to investigate and, where justified, require a school to call a meeting with parents to discuss their complaints. We would expect parents to have exhausted local complaints procedures, including with the local authority, before contacting Ofsted. Ofsted will then determine what action should be taken to respond to the complaint. This could include calling an immediate inspection. If serious failure is found, this would then trigger the decisive action set out in Chapter 2 – including a possible change in school management.

- 5.17** Even where things are going well in a school, more can be done to harness the energy and commitment of parents. Most schools recognise the value of engaging parents but too often their involvement can be token and unsystematic. Individual parent governors play an important role in bringing a parental voice to bear on the leadership of the school, but many parents lack the time and the skills to make this kind of sustained commitment. 72% of parents say they want to be more involved in their child's education but only 48% feel that the school makes it easy to get involved.
- 5.18** The new school inspection arrangements now require all schools to demonstrate the quality of their engagement with parents. Ofsted will inspect a school's links with parents and the extent to which they canvass and act on parents' views.
- 5.19** We now propose to go further and place a new statutory duty on the governing bodies of all schools to have regard to the views of parents. We will leave it to individual schools to decide how to do this most effectively, in the light of their existing arrangements for involving parents. But we are impressed by the experience of those schools which have taken steps to involve a wider group of their parents directly in the running of their school through the establishment of a Parent Council.

The Parent Council at Ladybridge High School, Bolton

Ladybridge High School is a new school opened in 2004 which has already started to benefit from having a Parent Council.

Ladybridge opened on the site of a school which was in Special Measures and which subsequently closed. Parental involvement in the previous school was poor and the new school was determined to improve this. They set up a Parents' Forum in the Autumn term 2004; and it has already begun to have a positive impact on the school. Parents are consulted on key school policies, which helps drive up standards. Parents now have access to their children's homework on-line, and the school has set up a system to respond promptly to parents' enquiries.

Ladybridge takes children from ages 11- 16 from a range of backgrounds. The school was keen to involve parents who had previously been disengaged from school life; as well as establishing the parents' forum, home-school liaison staff visit parents at home, and specialist language and cultural interpreters help reduce language barriers.

The parents on the forum have recognised that it takes time and hard work to get parents involved, but they are committed to its expansion. The plan is now to encourage participation by parents of the incoming Year 7 students, so that these parents expect to be involved right from the beginning.

- 5.20** Parent Councils provide a forum for parents to express their views and influence the running of their school. They tend to be relatively informal and engage people who may not have the confidence or desire to be a parent governor. We believe that they offer an effective way for schools to consult parents on specific issues likely to be of particular concern, such as uniform, school meals or changes to the curriculum.
- 5.21** Parents will continue to make up one-third of the governing bodies of all maintained schools, including the Trust schools described in Chapter 2. Where Trusts appoint a majority of the governing body, this will mean a reduction in the number of *elected* parent governors. We will therefore require Trust schools to establish a Parent Council with an advisory and consultative role to enable parents' views to be taken into account. This will build on the new duty on governing bodies to take account of the views of parents. To support this, we will produce statutory guidance for Trust schools on working with their Parent Councils. We will also encourage other schools to establish Parent Councils and support them with informal guidance on how they can support Parent Councils in practical ways, for example, by providing a place to meet.
- 5.22** We expect that Parent Councils will work in an informal and flexible way. A recent pilot project showed that this was key to getting parents involved. The issues that most concern parents will also vary from school to school. They are likely to include the school's sex and relationships education policy and its home-school agreement, along with behaviour in the school and the quality of school food. More broadly, Parent Councils will also provide a way for parents to take part in any review of the school's vision or in the development of plans for extended services.
- 5.23** We continue to recognise the huge contribution that Parent Teacher Associations (PTAs) make to the life of schools in very diverse settings and circumstances. PTAs are getting parents involved in school life, often for the first time. They can be the cornerstone of effective partnerships between parents and teachers whether in village schools or those in our inner cities.

School Councils

- 5.24** The Education Act 2002 and subsequent guidance to local authorities and schools provided for much greater pupil participation, including consulting children and young people on decisions that affected them. As a result, the number of effective school councils has increased substantially. Pupils can have a real say in how they learn and achieve and can be much more involved in how the school is run, for example helping to interview new members of staff or contributing to decisions on school meals.
- 5.25** We are working closely with School Councils UK, an educational charity, on guidance for primary schools, giving our younger pupils a greater chance to

participate in school life. We have asked School Councils UK to establish a network for schools and their councils to talk to each other and share good practice. We will also be updating guidance to secondary schools, including special schools, to give stronger encouragement for school councils to be engaged in decision-making. School Councils have a vital role to play, alongside better parental engagement, in promoting schools as strong community institutions.

Wider support for parents

- 5.26** The vast majority of parents will grasp the opportunity to engage more with their child's education. But sometimes parents need other support and information. Chapter 6 highlights the support available to children beyond the classroom. In the early years our Ten Year Childcare Strategy will see Sure Start Children's Centres in every community providing information and advice to parents.
- 5.27** Schools can also play an active role in offering parents (particularly those who may have missed out on a formal education) access to adult and family learning opportunities so they can update their skills, stretch their aspirations and understand how they can support their child's learning.
- 5.28** Because parents want easier access to information at all ages, we plan to refocus the remit of Children's Information Services. Instead of focusing just on early years, they will provide information for parents of children up to age 19. And we are committed to improving the national parents' helpline and parents centre web service. This will mean that more parents will be able to get help with parenting over the phone at times to suit them and that information will be more relevant, comprehensive and easy to access.
- 5.29** Many parents face particular difficulties and uncertainties when their child starts or moves school, particularly when they move from primary to secondary school. Some parents find secondary schools less intimate and approachable.
- 5.30** To meet these concerns, we will provide additional funding to enable schools to offer information sessions to parents when their child starts at primary or secondary school. In these sessions, parents will receive advice on issues ranging from how to help their child with their homework to how to deal with bullying. There would also be links with other family support services to which some parents could be referred.
- 5.31** The challenges faced when children change schools may be even greater for those from poorer and minority ethnic backgrounds. At the same time these parents may feel less confident to come forward and ask for support, especially if they do not speak English fluently. This makes it important that schools make a particular effort to reach out to those parents who might not normally be engaged – including parents, often fathers, who do not live with their children.

Some schools now employ dedicated home-school outreach workers and we would like to see a greater use of these in encouraging and supporting disengaged parents to attend parents' evenings, target setting events and information sessions, and to provide practical help in accessing transport to and from school and child care.

- 5.32** In addition, we expect schools and local authorities to take extra steps to ensure that the benefits of positive parental engagement in learning are not lost for children in local authority care. This may be through additional pastoral support, but also through more proactive links between foster and other carers locally.