Research and Library Service
Briefing Paper

Successful Post-Primary Schools Serving Disadvantaged Communities

Part B: School engagement with parents and the wider community

This briefing paper explores how successful schools serving disadvantaged communities have engaged with parents and the wider community and considers the outcomes of this engagement. It finds that some positive outcomes from engagement have been identified; however it suggests that outcomes are likely to be small-scale in nature.

Key points

- There is recognition internationally of the importance of engaging parents and the community with the school, particularly in deprived areas;

- Schools carry out this engagement in a variety of ways, generally with the aim of improving educational and social outcomes for children;

- Examples of engagement include providing training to parents to enable them to support their children's learning; offering pastoral care to families; and developing partnerships with other schools;

- Engaging with parents is thought to be particularly beneficial where they have had negative experiences of education;

- In general, much of the engagement in place relies on a personal approach, depending on personal knowledge and contact;

- Extended schools aim to offer a range of services to children, their families and to the wider community, with provision including breakfast and after-school clubs, and the opening of school facilities for community use;

- Feedback on extended schools from principals has been positive with regard to its impact on school life;

- Evaluations of extended schools have found positive impacts of their work; however, it is important to bear in mind that engagement is likely to be one of a number of factors contributing to school improvement;

- Schools face a number of challenges in effectively engaging parents and the community; these include defining the school's community, resourcing initiatives and reaching the most disadvantaged; and

- Therefore it is likely that schools will have the capacity to drive primarily smaller-scale changes through parental and community engagement.

Introduction: School engagement with parents and the wider community

There is increasing recognition that schools cannot work in isolation from the community, particularly where they serve deprived areas.[1] A community-orientated approach to schooling is viewed as important internationally, particularly with respect to helping and supporting disadvantaged communities.[2]

Schools engage with parents and the wider community in different ways, with the general aim of supporting and improving educational and social outcomes for children. It is important to bear in mind; however, the limited resources schools possess to carry out such engagement, which mean that their capacity to affect significant change through such measures may be limited.

Engagement with parents

Many educationalists and schools believe that it is important to engage children's parents and their families in order to support children effectively in their education. A report by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation[3] found that schools who took this view provided services such as:

- Courses to help parents understand how to improve their children's reading;

- Provision of lap-top computers for the whole family to use; and

- Events to encourage fathers to become involved in their son's schooling.

Research conducted on behalf of the Department of Education in Northern Ireland[4] found that schools serving disadvantaged communities and performing better than might be expected recognised that encouraging parental involvement is a key factor in raising attainment. This was supported in a number of ways in the schools involved in the research, including training parents as reading partners and involving them in workshops in literacy and numeracy.

Involving parents in the school was thought to be particularly important where parents had negative experiences of schooling and may be intimidated by the school setting. In such cases, some schools took an approach involving pastoral care and an element of counselling for families, in order to help them develop a more positive view towards schooling and education.[5]

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[1] Harris, A. (2004) "Leading on the Edge: Successful Leadership in Schools in Challenging Circumstances" *Education Today* Vol. 60. No.1 pp 3-5

[2] Dyson, A., Raffo, C. (2007) Education and disadvantage: the role of community-oriented schools *Oxford Review of Education* Vol.33, No 3, pp 297-314

[3] Crowther, D. et al. (2003) *Schools and area regeneration* York: Joseph Rowntree Foundation

[4] PricewaterhouseCoopers (2008) *Literacy and Numeracy of Pupils in Northern Ireland* Bangor: Department of Education

[5] PricewaterhouseCoopers (2008) *Literacy and Numeracy of Pupils in Northern Ireland* Bangor: Department of Education

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Engagement with the wider community

A research project conducted by the National College for Leadership of Schools and Children's Services[6] found that building and improving the reputation of the school and engaging with the wider community were considered to be essential in schools where improvements in learning outcomes where brought about. The study found that the leaders of such schools had developed positive relationships with community leaders and had built a network of links to other organisations and individuals.

The usefulness of wider engagement is also highlighted by Harris,[7] who notes that school leaders in disadvantaged areas are 'acutely aware' of the importance of engaging with the community. Regular communication with parents and promoting trust by showing genuine care for young people are suggested as possible ways of engaging with parents and, in turn, the wider community.

Collaboration with other schools is a further method of engaging with the wider community. In Northern Ireland, many schools have partnerships in place with other schools, aimed at easing transition between school phases, and also at stimulating interest in literacy among children. These partnerships were reported by school principals participating in them to be very effective.[8]

One report[9] notes that much of the engagement carried out by schools relies on a heavily personal approach, dependent on proactive individuals, personal knowledge and contact. It suggests that this approach is appropriate given the diverse populations served by schools; and that drawing on local knowledge is an important aspect of effective engagement. However, it notes that a degree of formalisation may be useful in engagement.

Extended schools

Extended schools aim to offer a broad range of services to children, families and wider communities in addition to their core business of teaching and learning for pupils. Extended schools can offer services such as breakfast and after-school clubs, and the opening of school facilities for community use.

Research in Northern Ireland[10] found that school principals were positive about the effects of the extended schools programme on school life. The study also found that some schools had engaged in wider community partnerships that sought to address issues such as anti-social behaviour or attitudes to the police, or to promote positive male role models (for example, in providing football training).

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[6] Day et al. (2010) *10 strong claims about effective school leadership* Nottingham: National College for Leadership of Schools and Children's Services

[7] Harris, A. (2004) "Leading on the Edge: Successful Leadership in Schools in Challenging Circumstances" *Education Today* Vol. 60. No.1 pp 3-5

[8] PricewaterhouseCoopers (2008) *Literacy and Numeracy of Pupils in Northern Ireland* Bangor: Department of Education

[9] Cummings et al. (2010) *Extended Services Evaluation; Reaching Disadvantaged Groups and Individuals* Department for Children, Schools and Families

[10] PricewaterhouseCoopers (2008) *Literacy and Numeracy of Pupils in Northern Ireland* Bangor: Department of Education

A review of extended services in England found three key factors for supporting the effective delivery of extended school services and engagement with parents. These factors were:

- Human resources: staff who can engage with the community;

- Strength of relationships with other agencies; and

- Sustainable funding.

It is therefore evident that effective and sustainable engagement with parents and the community through extended schools requires consistent resourcing, and that schools themselves must seek to build effective working relationships with other partners.

Evaluating the effectiveness of engagement

A thematic review of extended services[11] found that the effectiveness of such programmes tended to be evaluated by schools by assessing take up levels and user feedback. Schools in the study often reported individual success stories resulting from interventions, support or guidance to families, and some indicated that greater understanding of children and families arising from engagement had enabled them to target those whom traditional measures of deprivation may not have identified.

The Full Service Extended Schools Initiative in England provides a comprehensive range of services to children and families, including access to health services, adult learning and community activities as well as wrap-around childcare.

An evaluation of this initiative found a positive impact on pupils' attainment in a number of schools, and positive outcomes for families and local people who were facing particular difficulties. Impacts were found to be less strong for communities as a whole. However, the report states that other factors were likely to play a part where positive outcomes were identified, and that such outcomes did not always translate directly into school performance data.[12]

Challenges for engagement

There are a number of challenges and difficulties for schools in seeking to engage with parents and the wider community which should be taken into account. These include:

- Defining the school's community;

- Resourcing initiatives; and

- Reaching the most disadvantaged.

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[11] Cummings, C. et al. (2010) *Extended Services Evaluation; Reaching Disadvantaged Groups and Individuals* Department for Children, Schools and Families

[12] Cummings, C. et al (2007) *Evaluation of the Full Service Extended Schools Initiative: Final Report* Department for Education and Skills

Firstly, defining the school's wider community may be problematic, particularly for schools serving pupils from a variety of communities. One research study found that some schools are surrounded by several distinct communities, and that in a number of cases, only a small proportion of the schools' intake came from the disadvantaged area. The consequence of this was that schools found it more difficult to view the disadvantaged area as a priority.[13] This therefore has implications for how schools' resources are targeted in seeking to engage more widely.

Resourcing initiatives is a further challenge for schools, and this is likely to become increasingly pertinent with the financial constraints facing schools. Research with schools engaging parents and communities has found that they were able to implement initiatives that were relatively small in scale. This has implications regarding the extent to which individual schools are able to affect large-scale cultural change among disadvantaged communities.[14]

A further challenge relates to the take up of services aiming to improve engagement by the most disadvantaged. One study[15] notes that engaging those from the most disadvantaged backgrounds remains a challenge, even where schools work hard at targeted recruitment strategies. By way of example, it states that an evaluation of Sure Start found that the most disadvantaged families were the least likely to seek to access services, and services were more likely to be used by families already doing relatively well. This has implications for schools in terms of how they seek to ensure that the most disadvantaged in the local community benefit from the engagement carried out.

Conclusion

Engaging parents and the wider community is an important area for many schools in seeking to improve educational outcomes for children. In particular, involving parents from disadvantaged families in the life of the school can have a positive impact on children's educational outcomes.

Some positive outcomes have been identified among schools engaging parents and the community and providing extended services; however, it is likely that engagement is one of a number of other factors driving improvements. It is important to bear in mind the challenges facing schools who seek to engage more widely, for example with regard to resourcing initiatives and reaching the most disadvantaged. In particular, it is likely that schools will have the capacity to affect mainly small-scale changes through parental and community engagement.

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[13] Crowther, D. et al. (2003) *Schools and area regeneration* York: Joseph Rowntree Foundation

[14] Crowther, D. et al. (2003) *Schools and area regeneration* York: Joseph Rowntree Foundation

[15] Cummings et al. (2010) *Extended Services Evaluation; Reaching Disadvantaged Groups and Individuals* Department for Children, Schools and Families

Further information on the series *Successful Post-Primary Schools Serving Disadvantaged Communities* can be found at:

Successful Post-Primary Schools Serving Disadvantaged Communities: Overall Summary

Part A: Qualities for effective school leadership