

PARENTAL ENGAGEMENT REVIEW

Report of the Children's Services and Education
Scrutiny Sub-Committee

March 2010



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1. **Introduction and background**

- 1.1 The children's services and education sub-committee decided to conduct a review on parental engagement after receiving a briefing on: Building a 21st Century Schools System, Your Child, Your Schools, Our Future at a meeting in September 2010. A key emphasis in the White Paper is the theme of parental responsibility. Research indicated that a common feature of the lowest performing primary schools was a lack of parental involvement with the education process. There are some outstanding Southwark schools in very challenging neighbourhoods that have worked very hard to engage parents more, and parental engagement may be the biggest lever not yet used in the borough to effect further improvements. The review therefore decided to focus on parental engagement in primary schools.
- 1.2 The review took place from September 2009 to March 2010. It became apparent that parental engagement is a huge topic that the sub-committee had limited capacity to review. The review is therefore restricted to noting good practice in Southwark and in recent research.
- 1.3 The primary aim of this report is to suggest further areas for investigation and investment. It is hoped this will compliment the investment Southwark already has made in parental engagement and the action research project currently being led by external consultant, Dr Jan McKenley. This project will use action research to discover how Southwark can best build parental engagement processes with parents in homes where an effective learning culture may not be evident.

2. **Methodology**

- 2.1 The methodology consisted of:
 - Review of research and scrutiny reports from other councils
 - Officer presentation on the theme of 'Parental Engagement'
 - Sub-committee members sharing good practice
 - Visit to parent governor event 'Promoting good parenting; Wednesday, 24 February; led by Commissioner for Parenting and CAMHS and review of 'Incredible Years: Parenting Pathfinder DVD' (see feedback report)

3. **Findings and recommendations**

- 3.1 The sub-committee noted the importance of family learning and the key role that parents play as informal educators. It was noted that reports and research conducted by Professor Alma Harris and Dr Janet Goodall indicated that:

'Parents have the greatest influence on the achievement of young people through supporting their learning in the home (parental engagement) rather than supporting activities in the school (parental involvement). It is their support of learning in the home environment that makes the maximum difference to achievement' (1).

Recommendation:

1. That the council support and encourage parents in their role as informal educators.

- 3.2 Research indicates that children are more disadvantaged by a lack of parental engagement in their learning than by social class (2). The sub-committee considers it important that all parents and families are encouraged to engage with their children's education, particularly the most disadvantaged, and favoured initiatives that communicate to all parents to avoid stigmatising or alienating parents and carers.
- 3.3 The sub-committee heard evidence that the father's role in their child's education is particularly important and there is considerable research demonstrating that a father's involvement is significantly related to positive child outcomes (3). However it was also noted that some children do not have an active father but that other significant males in children's lives can still be engaged. The importance of grandfathers, uncles, stepfathers and others was noted.
- 3.4 Kintore Way Nursery School has successfully engaged male carers in their children's education by setting up regular play themed events. Children are encouraged to send personalised invitations to a significant male in their lives. Around a hundred fathers and carers have got involved and benefited.
- 3.5 Members welcomed this approach and considered that it is vital that initiatives do not undermine fathers but instead promote the importance of their roles and empower both fathers and male carers.

Recommendation:

2. Fathers and male carers of children have a vital role in children's education and this should be promoted and encouraged.

- 3.6 Research evidence and a number of scrutiny reports from London boroughs has demonstrated that transition from Early Years or home into primary school and later from primary school into secondary school is a crucial time. Support at this time is particularly important and can make a significant difference to subsequent attainment. Children from families experiencing multiple stress factors are particularly vulnerable (4, 5 and 6).

Recommendation:

3. That family support is particularly targeted at transition times.

- 3.7 Members heard from the assistant director of children’s services (leadership & learning services) about the latest DEMOS report on parenting as character building (DEMOS is a London-based think tank) (7). This drew attention to growing evidence that what matters most are character capabilities – application, self-regulation and empathy - and that these make a vital contribution to life chances, mobility and opportunity. Confident, skilful parents adopting a ‘tough love’ approach to parenting, balancing warmth with discipline, seem to be the most effective in terms of generating these key character capabilities.
- 3.8 Southwark has a commissioner for parenting and child and adolescent mental health services (CAMHS) and the council runs a valuable scheme, ‘Incredible Years – parenting pathfinder’, which teaches and enhances these skills using peer support in a supportive and non judgmental way.

Recommendation:

4. That the council promotes parenting courses that increase and develop parents’ skills.

4. Summary of recommendations

Recommendations:

That the executive undertakes further research into increasing parental engagement, taking on board the sub-committee’s specific recommendations as set out below:

1. That the council and schools support and encourage parents in their role as informal educators.
2. Fathers and male carers of children have a vital role in children’s education and this should be promoted and encouraged.
3. That family support is particularly targeted at transition times.
4. That the council promotes parenting courses that increase and develop parents’ skills.

Children’s Services and Education Scrutiny Sub-Committee

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References

- 1 Engaging parents in raising achieving; do parents know they matter? A research project commissioned by the specialist schools and academies trust. (2007) Professor Alma Harris and Dr Janet Goodall
(www.dcsf.gov.uk/research/data/uploadfiles/DCSF-RW004.pdf)
- 2 & 3 The impact of parental involvement on children's education. Department for Education and Skills
- 4 Helping families support children's success at school. Published by Save the Children: Professor Alma Harris of the Institute of Education, University of London and Dr Janet Goodall of the Institute of Education, University of Warwick Review of Research Evidence (2009)
([www.savethechildren.org.uk/en/docs/Helping_Families_Review_of_Research_Evidence_\(5\).pdf](http://www.savethechildren.org.uk/en/docs/Helping_Families_Review_of_Research_Evidence_(5).pdf))
- 5 Tower Hamlets scrutiny report on Parental Engagement in Secondary Education (2009)
(www.towerhamlets.gov.uk/lgs/1001-1050/1031_overview_and_scrutiny/scrutiny_reviews.aspx)
- 6 Haringey scrutiny review of parental involvement in education (2004)
(www.haringey.gov.uk/scrutiny_review_of_parental_involvement_in_education.pdf)
- 7 Building character, parents are the principle architects of a fairer society. Jen Lexmond & Richard Reeves (2009)
(www.demos.co.uk/files/Building_Character_Web.pdf?1257752612)

Promoting Good Parenting 24th February 2010
Feedback report

The session began with some role-play. We were placed in the role of a parent or teacher dealing with common communication issues that either may face, regarding a child's education and the negative attitudes from both sides that could hinder a child's progress.

The session then offered some valuable insights into the multiple pressurised roles a mother may face on a daily basis, while trying to juggle home life; work; her child's home-work, as well as other day-to-day issues. The pressures became more acute the more children involved and the lack of regular partner support.

This led onto the issue of 'absent fathers' and the barriers that could cause a lack of support from this group, especially where there had been a break-up in a relationship and feelings were still running high. The challenge of what it means to be a good father today was something that was mentioned quite frequently. However, to what extent fathers felt capable of playing a positive role in their child's education was unclear. Nevertheless, where fathers were able to engage the evidence provided suggested that the benefits to both boys and girls in terms of their character and ability to confidently engage with others was good. It found that girls in particular formed meaningful relationships and were less likely to be promiscuous.

It was mentioned that the traditional male and female roles still appear to be in place i.e. the male going out to work and the female responsible for the children and the home, although this attitude is gradually changing.

In broken relationships, women were described as 'gatekeepers' to the father/child relationship, with regard to access and supporting a child's education. This sometimes can prove problematic, especially if domestic struggles are on-going as mentioned earlier. However, the importance of having both parents involvement was encouraged as of greatest benefit for the child. An excellent short video showed one father emphasising the need for him and his estranged partner to put their differences aside, for the benefit of their child.

Statistical evidence presented to us showed that the impact a family has on a child's education gradually decreases in favour of the school, as they progresses through the schooling system. So as the child becomes older it would seem that the relationship and engagement between the school and parents becomes more important for the child. However, given this fact, it was surprising to learn that very few secondary school governors were present at this event or the previous one.

It was encouraging to see the many varied efforts and initiatives aimed at engaging parents with their child's education; particular successes have been made with reaching fathers through breakfast clubs, monthly meetings at local pubs and making the school environment more male friendly.

In conclusion, I felt that this was a very informative and well balanced meeting that took into consideration the importance of all those involved with a child's education, parents, teachers and the wider community, something which is not only timely, but relevant to the topic of parental engagement.

Colin Elliott