

# EAST AYRSHIRE COUNCIL

## EDUCATION COMMITTEE - 18 SEPTEMBER 2001

### DEVELOPING STRATEGIES FOR INVOLVEMENT OF PARENTS

#### Report by Director of Educational and Social Services

#### 1. PURPOSE OF REPORT

- 1.1 To advise members of the Education Committee of strategies used to communicate, consult with and involve parents in the life of our Educational Establishments.

#### 2. BACKGROUND

- 2.1 A strong link has been established between educational achievement and parental involvement in their children's education. As part of the drive for higher educational standards schools must create opportunities that promote active parental participation in the life of the school.
- 2.2 In addition, parents and young people will face numerous decisions, many of which have serious implications, throughout the child's education. Schools will often be the first point of contact for parents seeking advice (Scottish Council for Research in Education, 2001) and it is vital that relevant good quality information and advice are readily available to *all* parents.

#### 3. METHODS

- 3.1 This paper identifies some of the mechanisms currently used by schools to communicate and consult with parents. Evidence was sought from:
- HMI reports (1997 - 2001).
  - The report "How Good is Our School - East Ayrshire Schools Speaking for Themselves" (2000-2001).
  - The East Ayrshire Directory of Good practice (2001).
  - Discussion with Head Teachers.
  - Discussion with School Board Members.
- 3.2 The HMI and How Good is Our School reports rated how successful schools were in the areas of communication and consultation, while the good practice directory and discussions focused on identifying the methods by which schools communicated and consulted with parents. Additional information was taken from responses to parental questionnaires conducted in East Ayrshire Schools in 2000/2001.

#### 4. COMMUNICATION AND CONSULTATION

##### 4.1 HMI Inspections

**4.1.1** Three full HMI inspections were carried out in East Ayrshire secondary schools and eleven inspections conducted in primaries between 1997-2001. Performance in two relevant areas was assessed:

- (1) Partnership with Parents and the School Board, and
- (2) Communication with Parents.

**4.1.2** These independent HMI assessments rated more than 90% of primaries and all secondaries as being either Good or Very Good in the areas of Partnership with Parents and Communication with Parents.

*...The Headteacher had given priority to improving partnership with parents including the involvement of parents in imaginative approaches to improving children's early reading and problem solving skills...*  
(HMI report)

*The school had high quality arrangements for communicating with parents. These included: surveys of parents' views and opportunities to meet with teachers; very detailed nursery and primary reports and full SLC reports (Supported Learning Centre), complemented by annual meetings to review progress...(and) daily diaries for exchanging information with SLC parents.*  
(HMI report)

**4.1.3** "Partnership with parents" is also a key area within the self-evaluation early years document, The Child at the Centre. Three themes are reflected in the performance indicator, one of which looks at the involvement of parents in the nursery.

Two innovative projects were featured as examples of good practice in the Scottish Executive Early Years Best Practice Initiative:

- "Grumble in the Jungle", an expressive arts project in Auchinleck Nursery School involved children, parents and the local community. This initiative further developed partnerships with parents and the wider community and involved 120 children aged 3-5 years and 80% of the parents.
- The Early Intervention Story Sack Initiative and Playalong Maths project entitled "Involving Parents in Early Literacy and Numeracy in East Ayrshire" were devised to develop the skills of pre-school children in literacy and numeracy which could be continued in the primary school through shared/paired reading or paired maths.

The 33 nursery schools and classes and 3 community nurseries all took part in the initiative in which parents took an active role in the development of their children's learning, both in the nursery and in the home.

## **4.2 HOW GOOD IS OUR SCHOOL REPORT**

**4.2.1** "Partnership with Parents" was also assessed by Head Teachers as part of the systematic review of quality in East Ayrshire Schools based on the "How Good Is Our School" Performance Indicators. The average rating provided by Head Teachers of Primary, Secondary and Special schools was **3.48** on a 4 point scale (4 = Very Good; 3 = Good; 2 = Fair; 1 = Unsatisfactory).

### 4.3 DIRECTORY OF GOOD PRACTICE

- 4.3.1** Head Teachers of Primary, Secondary and Special schools were invited to share examples of good practice in their schools for inclusion in a Directory of Good Practice. A recurring theme across many schools was the issue of Partnership and Communication with Parents.
- 4.3.2** Schools identified a variety of methods currently used to consult with parents including questionnaires, the School Board and PTA meetings. Information is disseminated via a range of media including booklets, school newsletters, community newsletters, workshops and seminars and steering groups.
- 4.3.3** Increased parental involvement in the life of the school is encouraged through projects such as drop-in sessions, establishing parent rooms within the school, and by hosting courses aimed specifically at parents. The schools also reported that support was available to parents to assist them in their roles as partners in their children's education. In particular, several schools made reference to the Early Intervention Project.

### 4.4 DISCUSSION WITH HEAD TEACHERS

- 4.4.1** The information provided by Head Teachers corresponded very closely with the mechanisms identified in the Directory of Good Practice. The following methods of Communication and Consultation with Parents were highlighted:

- School Handbooks.
- Letters.
- Newsletters.
- Questionnaires.
- Parent Helpers.
- Classroom Assistants.
- Early Intervention.
- Information Evenings.
- Parent Partnership Leaflets.
- Special Needs Advice.

*...we're very aware that some of our parents have poorer literacy skills so we now make an effort to mention in conversation what is in the bulletin so that they don't miss anything...*

*(Head Teacher - Primary School)*

*...the organisation for parents' evenings changed this year. It was important for us to find out what the parents felt about the new system - did they have enough privacy? Did they get to spend enough time with the teacher? - things like that...We wanted our parents to have a say...*

*(Head Teacher - Primary School)*

*These women contribute to the day-to-day running of our school...without them the school wouldn't be as well organised.....the HT tries to involve parents that are new to the school or area - parents that might not have a support network. One mother described being involved as a parent helper as a "life-line" where she had companionship and a purpose.*

*(Senior Teacher - Primary School)*

*... we were concerned about poor attendance at information evenings. We found that attendance improved when the children produced leaflets explaining why they felt it was important for their parents/carers to come along...*

*... the student council "advertised" the evening and posted fliers in the school and local shops highlighting that the children had produced a video that showing the life of the school from their point of view. Parental attendance really increased... (Head Teacher - Primary School)*

*... we try to reach as wide an audience as possible so publish Board minutes from the school board meeting on the web as well as on the school notice board...*

*(Head Teacher - Secondary School)*

## **5. DISCUSSION WITH SCHOOL BOARD MEMBERS**

**5.1** The views of School Board members were sought as a point of comparison for the school view points. In short, the School Board members concluded that:

- Schools were very open and welcoming.
- Parents wanted more factual information about their children's performance.
- Some parents perceived an "invisible barrier" between themselves and the school. The schools did not create this barrier, on the contrary, Head Teachers were considered to be friendly and non-threatening. However, this perception was an obstacle that prevented some parents from becoming involved in the school and from expressing their feelings and opinions. Interestingly, a Scottish Council for Research in Education (2001) paper also suggested that parents might be reluctant to take even an informal step towards approaching the Head Teacher or class teacher. Issues such as lack of confidence, and the perception of a poor relationship between parents and the schools were highlighted as possible explanations.
- The efforts of schools to involve parents were commendable. However, it was felt that working parents were excluded from events/activities that took place during the day.

**5.2** The key recommendations of the school board members were:

- More should be done to ensure that all parents (e.g. working/unemployed, male/female) were given an opportunity to get involved in the school.
- The School Board should be more active in its role as a point of contact between the school and parents.
- More could be done to publicise the work of the School Board and to open up Board meetings.

## 6. PARENTAL INVOLVEMENT

6.1 Most schools indicated that, in addition to the methods described above, they tried to use other strategies intended to improve the means by which they consulted with parents and involved them in the life of the school. These strategies tend to be more informal and include:

- Parent Lunches.
- Quality Circles.
- Outdoor Activities.
- Drop-in Times/Parents' Room
- IT and Telephone.

*...after lunch we'll have coffee and gradually turn the discussion round to school issues. It's much more relaxed than a formal meeting and parents tend to be more open about saying what they think...*

*(Head Teacher - Secondary School)*

*...a lot of our activities get mother's (female carers) involved, but not dads. We felt it was important to do things that also appealed to the men, and had a good turn out when we introduced more "masculine" activities like sports or father-and-son events....*

*(Home School Link Worker - New Community School)*

*...the (parents') room allows parents, staff and professionals to meet in an informal and non-threatening environment....*

*(Head Teacher - New Community School)*

*...We realised that many young parents had moved into the new houses and were isolated. Our group has enabled them to join in, meet neighbours, make friends and share experiences...*

*(Head Teacher -Primary School)*

*...I call up a sample of parents who have responded to questionnaires and ask for more in-depth thoughts and feedback...*

*(Head Teacher - Secondary School)*

## **7. CONCLUSIONS - EFFECTIVENESS OF MECHANISMS**

- 7.1** Significantly, the strategies used in East Ayrshire to involve parents in the life of the school through communication, consultation and partnership corresponded very closely with the examples of good practice outlined in the recently published document "Better Behaviour: Better Learning" (2001).
- 7.2** However, an emerging concern, also highlighted in the Better Behaviour: Better Learning paper, was that many of the methods of communication and consultation failed to reach a proportion of parents. Concerns included:
- The prevalence of written communication & consultation methods (handbooks/newsletters/questionnaires/information leaflets). This format may exclude parents with poor literacy skills.
  - The return rate for questionnaires was often low and varied according to the subject of the questionnaire as well as the school. In addition, "Comment" boxes specifically included on the questionnaires as a means of allowing parents to express their opinions were rarely used.
  - Attendance at information evenings/workshops was often poor.
  - Lack of understanding of the work of the School Board, or use of the Board as a point of contact with the school (the results of one questionnaire indicated that almost 50% of respondents did not know what the School Board did).

## **8. IMPROVEMENT STRATEGIES**

- 8.1** Any information that is normally produced in a written format should also be available in audio-format (i.e., tape) and could also be published on an internet web page.
- 8.2** Schools should consider using the telephone as a way of consulting with parents in addition to the current paper and pen consultation exercises. Telephone surveys allow information to be collected quickly, directly and economically and may yield a higher response rate than paper and pen exercises. However, although the level of telephone ownership is high in Scotland, the rate falls amongst single parent families and in areas of high deprivation. Thus, results of telephone surveys may not be fully representative of all families.
- 8.3** Schools should make more use of technology to liaise with parents and keep them informed about the work of the school. This should include an increased use of web-based technology in addition to more traditional paper forms.
- 8.4** School Board Meetings should be "opened up" more to non-member parents - this could be as simple as holding meetings in a venue where extra chairs were available for any parents who chose to attend.
- 8.5** More should be done to use the Board as a contact point between school and parents. The Scottish Council for Research in Education (2001) suggested that an information officer or designated person (e.g. a School Board volunteer) could be established to deal specifically with queries from parents.

- 8.6** Schools should attempt to involve male guardians more in the day-to-day life of the school.
- 8.7** Schools should consider involving parents when creating (drafting) school handbooks.
- 8.8** Classroom Assistants should be more involved in work higher up the school and in secondary schools rather than working primarily in infant classes.
- 8.9** Contact information for additional sources of support or information available to parents (from the school and external agencies) should be publicised via leaflets, packs, school handbooks, prospectuses and parents evenings. The need for particular attention in this area for Special Educational Needs information emerged as a key concern in The Scottish Council for Research in Education (2001) paper.

## **9. POINTS FOR ACTION (2001-2003)**

- 9.1** The Standards in Scotland's Schools (etc) Act (2000) formalised a statutory obligation for schools to consult with parents on the school development plan and on a range of policies and strategies involving the school and young people.
- 9.2** As a consequence schools should look to:
- Involve parents more fully in decisions relating to curricular development and strategies for learning.
  - Develop existing opportunities for parents to participate in their children's learning by expanding the Early Intervention beyond P1-P3 to include middle and upper stages in Primary Schools.
  - Communicate the school's priorities for development more fully to parents and create opportunities for parents to input into the Development Plan.

## **10. FINANCIAL/LEGAL/POLICY IMPLICATIONS**

- 10.1** Nil.

## **11. RECOMMENDATIONS**

- 11.1** It is recommended that Elected Members:
- (i) endorse the strategies for communicating, consulting with and involving parents in the life of educational establishments in East Ayrshire
  - (ii) invite the Director to monitor the effectiveness of these strategies and report back in due course; and
  - (iii) otherwise note the contents of this report.

John Mulgrew  
Director of Educational & Social Services

KMcK/MTC  
23 August 2001

### **LIST OF BACKGROUND PAPERS**

Nil.

Members wishing further information should contact Graham Short, Head of Schools, Tel: (01563) 576118 or Kenneth McKinlay, Principal, Quality Development, Tel: (01563) 555650.

**IMPLEMENTATION OFFICER: GRAHAM SHORT, HEAD OF SCHOOLS**

**AGENDA**