

Parent support advisers

Practice and impact – summer 2009



Everyone's a learner: the whole-school approach

When Thames View Infants School in Barking, east London achieved an 'outstanding' in its most recent Ofsted inspection, parent helper Hazel Denney was delighted. Not just because her own child, a year 1 pupil, stood to benefit from the high standards being set by the school but because she felt she had played a part in the school's success. Hazel's reaction is a testament to the effectiveness of the school's inclusive partnership approach to engaging parents in their children's learning.

Commitment to learning

Thames View is a mixed community school with 378 pupils aged three to seven. Eligibility for free school meals is twice the national average, 67 per cent of pupils are from minority ethnic backgrounds and 33 languages are spoken in the school. Most children joining the nursery are behind their actual age in developmental terms.

Headteacher Paul Jordan believes that everyone – children, staff and parents – should see themselves as a learner. Shortly after Paul took up his post, the school underlined its commitment to parental involvement by appointing Fi Bashir its PSA. "Parents have to be partners in the process to make it work. To us, engaging parents isn't a bolt on – it's the basis of our approach," says Paul.

Removing the barriers

Fi runs a variety of services and activities inside and outside school, including help with adult education courses and keep-fit classes for parents. She also provides coaching and one-to-one advice and support for parents on anything that might help to improve their and their children's quality of life and remove the barriers that stop them engaging in their children's learning.

As part of the whole-school approach to engaging parents, Fi, who is part of the school's cross-stakeholder leadership team, also accompanies nursery and reception staff on their home visits. This means that parents are aware of Fi, what she does and how she can help them from the outset.

Fi also runs special sessions for children who are not attending the school's nursery but who will be joining its reception class. These are run during the summer term and give children at least seven opportunities to visit the school, meet their future teacher, see their

classroom and spend time with other pupils. This year, Ofsted singled out the sessions for special praise, stating that "partnership with parents, established prior to admission, acts as a foundation to learning success". Fi believes that parental engagement should start as early as possible. "If a parent is alienated at this stage, it can have a negative knock-on effect on the rest of that child's learning career," she says.

Leading and consulting

The school's senior leadership team includes teachers, governors and support staff as well as the PSA. Together, they can use their extensive knowledge of children and their families to identify and deal with potential problems early on. Parents are consulted regularly and their input fed into the school improvement process.

"By providing lots of opportunities for parents to come into the school, we can start to break down the fears and insecurities that stop them from engaging in their children's learning," says Paul Jordan. "We show them that we have nothing to hide and that together we can achieve great things."

Positive impact

Paul believes that increased engagement is already having a measurable effect on key outcomes. He says: "Over the past 18 months, attendance has risen by four per cent and persistent absenteeism has fallen from six per cent to zero. From 2006 to 2008, our level 2b reading and maths results rose by 23 per cent and by 22 per cent respectively and 16 per cent for level 3. For writing, results are up 28 per cent at level 2b and 11 per cent for level 3 and we're expecting further improvements this year."

Fi Bashir also sees at first hand the effect the approach is having on parents. "When I first started, parents were suspicious of me. Now it can take me 30 minutes to park my car and get into the building because so many parents stop and talk to me! The longer it takes, the more impact I feel I'm having." Hazel Denney is quick to support Fi's theory. "I think the school is fantastic," she says. "I feel as if I'm part of it and that I'm valued for what I do. I get a real kick out of seeing the difference I can make to the school community."

Find out more

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