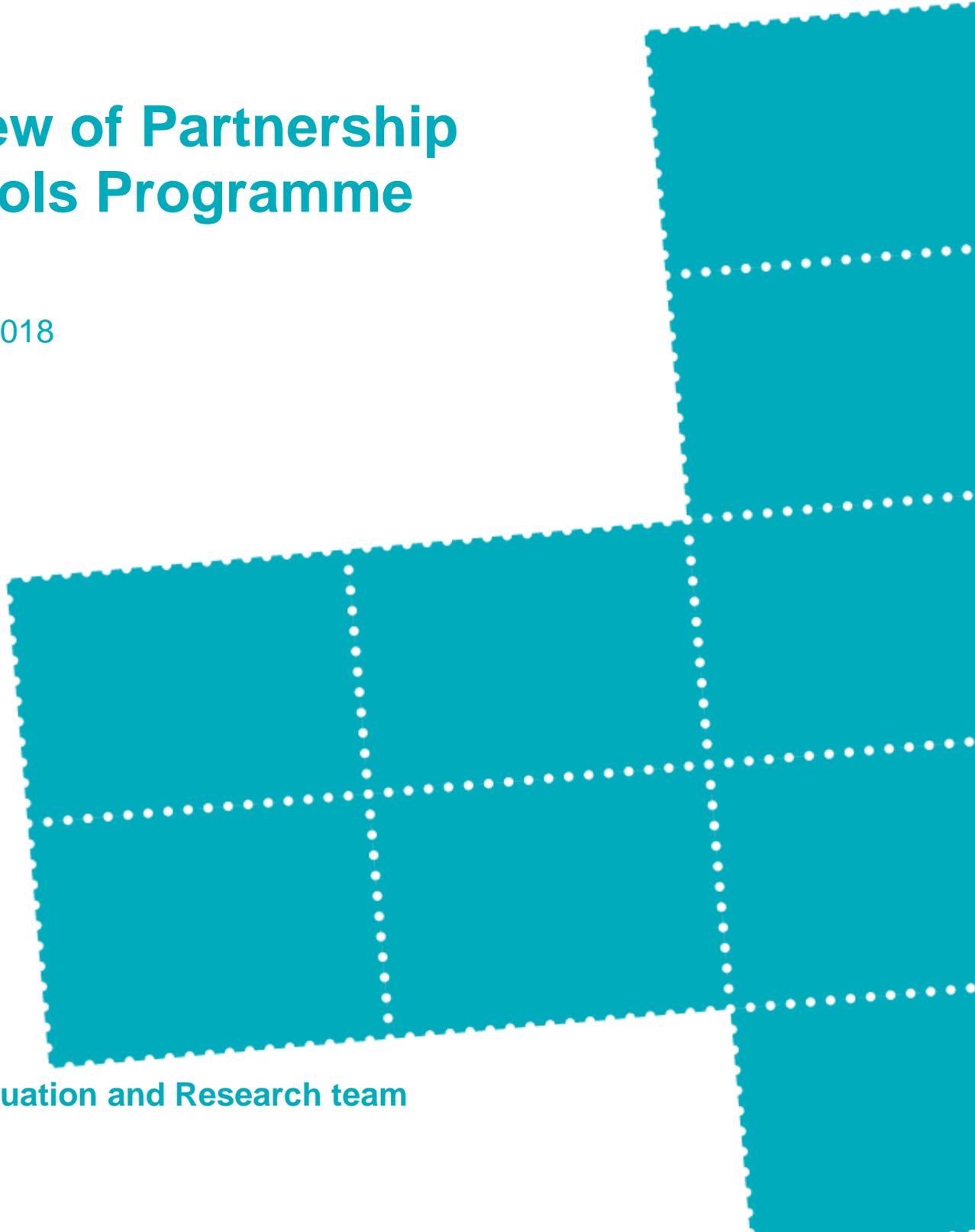


Review of Partnership Schools Programme

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SDS Evaluation and Research team



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1. Review of Partnership Schools Programme

1.1 Introduction

This report provides detail on the approach that was taken to review the Partnership Schools programme and produce the case studies. It sets out the background to the research, evaluation objectives and research methodology. It also provides an assessment of the outcomes and benefits of the programme and the lessons learned from the case studies that were produced.

1.2 Programme Background

Partnership Schools Scotland (PSS) is an evidence-based, practical and flexible model for school, family and community partnerships. Its purpose is to improve outcomes for young people in school and has a strong record in involving more and different families, and community partners, in the life and learning in its member schools. It links directly with school improvement.

It was designed, developed and evaluated by a team based at Johns Hopkins University in the US over almost 30 years. Led by Dr Joyce Epstein, the National Network of Partnership Schools (NNPS) now has members in the USA, South America, Australia and Republic of Ireland. The focus is on generating a shared understanding and belief system around learning: family-like schools and school-like families.

SDS recognises the importance of family engagement in schools as part of the Developing the Young Workforce (DYW) agenda, the influence of positive family involvement in career planning and the importance of partnership with schools to achieve this.

Connect is the only Scottish charity dedicated to supporting effective family engagement in schools and is a membership organisation for parent groups in Scottish schools. They provide information, resources and training for parents and school staff designed to support this goal.

To support these shared organisational goals, Skills Development Scotland (SDS) and Connect developed a partnership with the aim of introducing PSS to Scottish schools over a five-year period. The pilot of PSS was established with the following key objectives:

- utilise existing strong connections with local authorities, schools, parents and other partners to establish a Partnership Schools Network in Scotland.
- using the research, resources and models available through the Network to test a Partnership Schools model for Scotland over a five-year period. The extent and duration of support required by participating schools from Connect was considerably greater than anticipated and progress in rolling out the programme was consequently much slower. As a result, the original and highly ambitious target of 25% of schools

(circa 650) across all local authority areas being involved by the end of the pilot was scaled down at the end of the second year. Instead, the focus shifted to a deeper and more sustained involvement with a smaller number of schools across eight local authorities.

- develop and test mechanisms for introducing the programme to schools and embed it within day-to-day practice – making it an integral part of how the schools work with partners.
- shift ownership of the programme to schools and the local level, with monitoring and support from Connect, ensuring it is sustainable and has a clear plan for growth, with the aim of empowering all Scottish schools to access the programme and reap the benefits of planned and focussed family and community partnerships.

The programme delivery partners identified that there was a need to develop and agree an approach for reviewing the Partnership School Programme. The SDS Evaluation and Research (E&R) team worked collaboratively with Connect and the SDS Education team to design, deliver and report on the findings.

2. Scope of the review

2.1 Research objectives

The overarching objective of this review was to measure the following:

- the wider impacts and benefits of the programme on pupils, parents, teachers and the wider community;
- the impact of the programme on school's perceptions of parental engagement;
- the impact of parents being involved in leadership within the school, particularly in terms of expectations; school connections with the wider community; attainment and achievement in the school.

The review also sought to identify lessons from the delivery of the programme in terms of:

- what worked well; what were the challenges and how effective and meaningful parental engagement has been achieved;
- how broader community engagement had been achieved;
- the advantages/challenges for parents around being more involved with learning and the school;
- the critical success factors to overcoming barriers to parents becoming more engaged in schools.

2.2 Methodology

The SDS evaluation and research team developed a logic model as a framework to evaluate the partnership schools programme which set out key input, activity and outcome measures in October 2017. Using this model, the team sought to work collaboratively with SDS Education team and Connect to design a methodology for gathering evidence to report against the measures.

Over the months of January, February and March 2018 a review of the programme was undertaken through a series of focus groups. The findings were reported in the form of three case studies. The SDS E&R team facilitated focus groups with senior leadership teams, teachers, community members and parents in the following three schools:

- **Moray Primary (Falkirk)** – including the Headteacher, two teachers and four parents.
- **Masondieu Primary (Angus)** - including Headteacher, Depute Headteacher, Nursery manager, two teachers and eight parents.

- **Anderston Primary (Glasgow)** - including Headteacher, Depute Headteacher, two teachers, eight community organisation members and eight parents

There are some limitations in the research that should be noted. The E&R team found it challenging to secure participation from the schools in the research and this led to the fieldwork taking longer than planned. In addition, the team sought to engage a larger number and wider cross-section of schools including those in different socio-economic areas, rural/urban and those where delivery had been both successful and less successful. The feedback in the case studies of the schools that were engaged are not representative of the experience of the 35 schools that have participated in the programme to date. However, they do give some good examples of what the programme achieved and a flavour of good practice and lessons learned. More research with schools is needed to achieve a more comprehensive and robust assessment of the programme.

3. Success and lessons learned

3.1 Introduction

This section provides some examples of what the programme achieved based on evidence from the three case study schools. It also provides detail of some of the lessons learned.

3.2 Programme outcomes and impact

Enhanced richness of the learning environment - Pupils have benefitted from the links made with local communities in the delivery of local goals. For example, they have competed in competitions, received support with developing their skills and there has been investment in school resources and infrastructure.

Schools have been able to capitalise on the reservoir of skills, experience and cultural knowledge of a wide range of parents through their involvement and support in activities and projects. This has benefited pupils in a range of areas from literacy, numeracy, STEM skills, religious and cultural awareness to health and well-being.

Teachers and parents talked about how this had helped pupils feel more positive about their education and the environment in which they learn. They have enjoyed activities, learned new skills and widened their knowledge. Teachers and parents identified pupils are proud of their parents being involved in the school and of what they have achieved.

Enhanced school and parent relationships - The programme has helped support the development of warmer school and parent relationships. Schools reported that this makes it easier to discuss other more general day to day pupil issues.

The various activities and projects have provided parents with opportunities to see what their child is doing and what they are achieving.

Parents felt they had got to know the teachers in the school through the activity they had been involved in, which enhanced informal communication. They talked about feeling more involved and linked in to the school. School representatives reported that this may have had a positive effect on attendance but this was marginal and challenging to evidence.

Facilitated networking between parents – Parents highlighted that being involved in school projects and activities had provided them with opportunities to meet and chat informally with other parents. Some found this helpful as they could discuss some of the things going on at home or challenges they were facing as a parent. It helped them understand they were not alone and that others were facing similar issues. The mental health and well-being projects were particularly important for facilitating a supportive environment amongst parents, allowing them to discuss solutions and approaches.

Pupils have benefited from consistent messaging from parents and teachers - many parents reported that being more involved in their school was bringing school and home closer together for their child. Parents had noticed that their child was more likely to talk about school life and they are now more aware of homework/ home learning activities. In one of the case study schools, parents and teachers had worked hard to develop a shared and consistent approach to understanding and supporting good mental health and well-being with pupils.

Empowered parents – Parents and teachers described a genuine partnership. Parents reported feeling involved in the school and that their ideas were genuinely being listened to and taken forward. They reported having both the confidence and mechanism to approach the school about any areas of concern or interest.

3.3 Lessons learned

The analysis of the feedback across the three case studies identifies the following lessons with regards to achieving successful parental engagement:

- The importance of a receptive and proactive Headteacher to making progress in involving parents in children’s learning and school life. The schools involved in the fieldwork placed parental engagement high on their agenda and were already keen to do more to improve and develop their approaches.
- Encouraging communication between parents and school at the start and end of the school day and providing an “open door” culture within the school so that parents feel able to chat through any issues. The case study schools have worked hard to build strong informal relationships with parents. Their focus has been very much about trust and collaboration with parents and designing mechanisms for two-way communication.
- Encouraging a wide range of communication channels including newsletters, leaflets and social media. The case studies highlighted some good examples of how a range of social media platforms could be used to maximise engagement and involvement.
- Schools highlighted some examples of how positive relationships with parents had been used to encourage attendance at school, however, it was unlikely these examples would be detected in a measurable way through school statistics.
- Schools can capitalise on the fact that both parents and children often feel proud about being involved and contributing to both learning and school.
- Schools can also capitalise on the skills and talents of parents. Examples were given on support to the curriculum from parents with expertise in STEM, archiving, religion, health and well-being, moral education and modern languages. Some parents may not have considered themselves “experts” but their lived experience was valuable to schools in demonstrating diversity. Schools also benefitted from parents’ skills and ability to identify and apply for programme and investment funding.
- Improved parental engagement led to shared learning approaches between school and home. Examples of shared approaches were given in modern languages, numeracy,

mental health and wellbeing. Teachers and parents both highlighted the value and importance of consistent messaging.

- Paperwork and administrative activities should be flexible to fit with existing school processes and plans (e.g. school improvement plans).

Case Study 1 – Moray Primary

Introduction

Moray Primary School is a non-denominational primary school situated in the heart of Grangemouth.

The school hosted two focus groups, one with five parents and one with two teaching staff as well as a consultation with the Headteacher.

Description of activities

The school was working on embedding parental engagement within their school improvement goals at the time of initially engaging with the Partnership Schools programme. This included health and wellbeing, RME, modern languages, library and their parental engagement goals.

To support this, school staff and parents described some of the wide range of parental engagement activities and approaches they have recently introduced in the school.

- The use of social media to communicate with parents around opportunities to be involved in the school, and to undertake research with parents about their interests and needs. Twitter polls were described as a valuable mechanism for interacting with parents in these ways.
- Parents helped to revamp the library space and resources and volunteered in the library one day a week so pupils could drop in and borrow books.
- The Headteacher encourages parents/carers to wait for children in the school playground at pick up time and encourages all teachers to come into the playground with the children at the end of school. This approach was designed to facilitate more informal communication between teachers and parents.
- Parent and child French classes were offered where parents were encouraged to participate in language learning with their child, and take resources home. This was designed to encourage the links between school and home learning. French theme days were also held with food, and dressing up and homework activities in French sent home via Twitter.
- Moray Mudder is a sports day which involves families across the whole school. Parents help to plan and organise the day, as well as taking part in the sports with their children.
- There was also a focus on community links: one teacher worked with an outdoor learning charity and parents to run a boys' group. The aim of the boys' group is to encourage resilience and confidence through outdoor activities along with dad and significant males.
- Parents came to talk to the children about their religious beliefs and values: the local minister came along to support this.

Connect Support

School staff highlighted that parental involvement was already part of the work the school was doing and that it was high on the agenda. However, they decided to engage with the Partnership Schools programme because it aligned with their current approach whilst offering more approaches that could be used to extend this. The school were keen to trial new approaches to parental engagement. They also viewed it as an opportunity to link in with some of the work they were delivering using the Pupil Equity Fund.

Connect launched the parental engagement work with parent council, staff and Headteacher. They ran two training sessions about the programme and its aims, and supported the team to set four goals linked to the School Improvement Plan. The Headteacher and head of the Parent Council engaged with Connect on a one-to-one basis and cascaded learning to teachers, parents and community partners. Approaches used in other schools were shared by the Connect team. Moray Primary found this useful and informative.

'At the workshop, we looked at approaches in other schools and started planning for our school right there and then.' (teacher)

The school felt the action plan documentation was initially quite onerous for the school but found a way to include it and align it with their School Improvement Plan.

The team at Moray Primary were very satisfied with the support they received from Connect and described it as valuable, as it helped to keep parental involvement high on the school agenda and improved the school's thinking about how to include parents. They felt it enabled them to make more progress on parental involvement than they would have done, had they been working in isolation. The work was viewed as fitting in nicely with the activities of the school rather than being a stand-alone programme.

'It gave us an idea of the bigger picture and ideas of how to extend partnerships with parents.' (teacher)

'SPTC (Connect) has enabled discussions with parents and kept involvement in the front of mind. Parental involvement has been part of the way the school works rather than as an add on.' (teacher)

Benefits and outcomes

School representatives feel the new approaches have led to increased informal communication between teachers and parents, and have helped to establish relationships with parents previously not engaged.

The Headteacher reported that because she has strong relationships with parents she can offer support during times of family stress. This was also reflected in the feedback from parents who felt they had got to know the teachers in the school through the activity they had been involved in, and

by chatting to them in the playground. They now felt they would be more likely to approach teachers to ask questions more generally about their child, or to discuss any issues or challenges they were experiencing. They also talked about feeling more involved and linked in to the school. School representatives reported that this may have an indirect knock-on effect on attendance but in a very small or indirect way and that it was something they would find difficult to measure.

'By improving communication and relationships it is possible to improve attendance but probably not in a measurable way.' (teacher)

'It has helped us to get to know parents better, particularly those of the younger ones.' (teacher)

Teachers felt the French programme had built the children's capacity to learn French by supporting home learning through involving parents.

The boys' group was described as making a huge difference to boys' confidence and self-esteem, giving them a firmer footing to enable learning in the classroom.

Parents really enjoyed the Moray Mudder, they were really pleased to be involved and described the event as a lovely atmosphere with families, teachers and children coming together for an enjoyable day.

Parents talked about the benefits of the library both for themselves and the children. They felt more involved in the school and proud of the contribution they were making, and also felt it was encouraging the pupils to use the library and its resources more often.

Parents also reported the Parent Council had successfully secured funding for improvements to the facilities and infrastructure in the playground through partnership working with the school in submitting a funding bid. They anticipate this will improve the children's learning environment.

The school believes they are now working with a wider group of parents than before and they have achieved this by having focus and a framework to use.

'If a member of staff is leading a working group, then parental engagement is part of the group. It is always at the forefront of our minds.' (teacher)

Staff feel they now have a different perspective on how to involve parents in learning. Staff are all developing leadership skills through school improvement working groups formed in partnership with parents. They also feel more informed and aware of the value and benefits of engaging parents.

'SPTC (Connect) has helped made clear the importance of developing relationships with parents and ensuring their engagement in the development of activities. Parents will be more involved in plans going forward.' (teacher)

'All staff are now aware of involving parents in various ways. This filters from management.' (teacher)

School staff and parents described the impact of the work on pupils. Although there was no measurable data available to demonstrate impact on attendance or attainment, it was felt the programme had helped pupils feel more positive about their learning. They had enjoyed it and were proud of the parents being involved in the school.

'Parents are working alongside them, different people coming into the school have different ideas and this is refreshing for staff and pupils' (teacher)

The school collects feedback from parents on the programme via their Twitter polls: feedback was described as 'very positive'. This feedback is used to continuously improve the work the school delivers around parental engagement.

Examples of good practice

The following were described as good practice mechanisms for successful parental engagement:

Importance of informal relationships – fostering informal relationships was seen as key to helping parents feel comfortable and confident about becoming involved in the school and with their child's learning. 'Moray Mudder' is an example of a well-received opportunity to engage in informal ways.

Maximising the value of social media – The team at Moray has made extensive use of social media platforms and found this very valuable for sharing information about class and school activities and generating dialogue between parents and the school staff. They have also used social media as a medium for testing and assessing new approaches such as using polls on Facebook and Twitter. Parents highlighted that social media makes it much easier for them to find out about things and teachers reported that it has created a mechanism for parents to feedback more generally.

'Let's face it, we are always on our phones so we would be less likely to miss things. It means we can forward it on to or tag other family members too.' (parent)

'Electronic communication seems to work better than letters, that often end up at the bottom of the bag' (parent)

Thinking about and plan how parents can be engaged in planning and action - teachers highlighted the importance of taking the time to think about involving parents when developing a new initiative or programme and planning for how parental involvement is to be integral.

'Planning helped to make the RME club successful; it was fast-paced, fun, active. It was pitched at the right level. Initially, we didn't have many children to participate so the teacher went to speak to children to encourage them to come. Similarly, the teacher spoke to individual parents to encourage them to come and support the club and talk about their own faiths.' (teacher)

Challenges and Learning

Parents were described by teachers as 'out of their comfort zone in RME' and this created a bit of a challenge. On reflection, teachers felt activities where parents felt more informed and/or able to contribute might have worked better.

Teachers thought the Connect documentation was quite unclear and found the planning stage challenging. It was suggested the guidance could be improved and changes to the documentation should be made to make it fit better with the School Improvement Plan.

School staff feel making the time to consider parental engagement and plan for it in the day to day activities can be time consuming and challenging, and this might influence sustainability. However, they recognise the importance and value and plan to continue to do this going forward.

Key lessons

School staff highlighted the value and importance of finding creative ways of communicating with parents to increase engagement and communication. Sending information electronically now and using social media platforms has been found to be very effective. The school are also thinking about developing an App to further support communication.

Case Study 2 – Maisondieu Primary

Introduction

Case Study 2 was based in a small town in the north of Scotland. The school hosted two focus groups, one with a group of eight parents and one with five teachers, including the Headteacher, Depute and nursery manager.

Description of activities

Parents reported being involved in a range of activities including:

- Pop-up charity shop to raise funds for the school
- Wellbeing event which included healthy eating, cyber bullying, sleep, depression, coping strategies
- Pupil and parent surveys on wellbeing
- Joint work with staff to support a child with additional support needs
- Numeracy packs which support home learning
- Community engagement, particularly around mental health

The school described approaching parents with a 'blank sheet' in terms of parental engagement. They involved parents in developing their vision, identifying gaps and pulling together ideas about what they would like to do and what they would like the school to focus on in terms of activities and projects. The aim was to give parents ownership, influencing activity and to provide them with the opportunity to shape what is needed for their child.

'It gives the ownership over to the parents, they are the primary educators in their children's life. We see our parents as co-educators' (Senior school staff)

The school provided ideas for discussion at parent's meetings and asked parents what they would like the school to offer

'They see it as liberating – they are able to make a difference for their children' (Senior school staff)

The team has also engaged with a range of local community organisations and involved them in key projects within the school around well-being and mental health.

Teachers felt the school had a strong culture of parental engagement. They reported keeping parents engaged throughout their time with the school from nursery and through primary.

"The door is always open in this school" (Teacher)

Connect Support

Teachers reported parental engagement was strong in the school before Connect worked with them. However, prior to their involvement the school was setting the agenda and working with a smaller number of parents. With Connect support the school has been able to work with parents, community members and third sector from the start to co-create a programme of work.

“Parent voice is far clearer. I see a big difference in the school.....it has changed how we work with parents” (Teacher)

Connect has influenced the school to take a “bottom-up approach” by offering training, support and resources. The school valued Connect making themselves available to discuss ways forward. Joint events with other schools were facilitated by the Local Authority and were felt to be useful in sharing ideas and approaches.

The school reported they are now more effectively tapping into the local community and third sector provision and parents had recognised how keen local community groups are to be involved in supporting the school.

‘I think these groups are trying to help without having a base or a mechanism to communicate and link into the school. This project has provided a bridge for that.’ (Parent)

However, the school thought the Connect paperwork was rigid and did not necessarily fit with School Improvement Plan templates. Over time the school has managed to merge the approaches and to take a more streamlined approach to planning and recording.

“We have made it flexible and made it work with our school and context to avoid it being bureaucratic” (Senior staff member)

Benefits and outcomes

Teachers and parents both mentioned the importance of using informal approaches to building relationships. For example, fun activities, such as “Fudge Fridays” provided a bridge to encourage parents and community members into schools, to build relationships and develop parental involvement in the school.

“A lot of parents want to get involved in the school but they are not sure or confident. If they can come to an informal event and find out how things work it helps to get their involvement” (Parent)

Teachers reported the partnership a “*genuine partnership, not tokenistic*” and this was backed up by a parent who commented “*I thought it would be helpful to be involved in the vision of the school instead of being dictated to ... I feel I have been involved in the school and they are taking on my ideas*”. Other parents felt they now had confidence to ask the school about any areas of concern and there was more open communication.

Both parents and teachers remarked that seeing parents in the school is a “*totally natural thing for our children*”. It is not an unfamiliar or strange situation and children like parents to be involved. Teachers remarked that parents can bring local knowledge and insight, and may have specialist skills which can support the school and the learning. An example was given of a parent who was an archivist and identified WW2 stories of the town which supported the team’s work.

Both teachers and parents highlighted the value and benefits of working with SAMH and other mental health community groups. Topics such as well- being, mental health, how to stay well and coping with anxiety have been covered with both teachers and pupils. The feedback suggests that this has started to change mindsets of children in school and at home. Teachers also feel more informed and capable of addressing some of these issues with their pupils.

‘The children go home and speak to their parents about the conversations and the feelings that they have expressed. (Teachers)

'Teachers have gone away equipped to continue the conversations with the pupils.' (Senior school staff)

Parents highlighted that the topic on mental health helped remove the taboo of discussing this with their child and with other parents and teachers. It was highlighted that parents often look for support and reassurance that they are doing a good job. The mental health project has been discussed informally and there is a feeling that it encourages other people to come to school and talk about their child's anxieties without worry about the stigma attached.

'It got people talking which can only be a good thing. Makes you realise that everyone has problems and not everyone is perfect. Know you are not alone. There is an openness and willingness to help in the school.' (Parent)

Parents also highlighted that activities and projects would not happen without parents helping and supporting the teachers to organise and deliver these. Importantly the youngsters get a lot of fun, enjoyment and learning from these activities.

Teachers and parents identified that some of the work they are collaborating on (e.g. mental health or careers) doesn't have a 'quick fix solution' but parents are now working with staff in the school to start the change and supporting it to keep the momentum going. The fact the work continues to carry on in a visible way helps built support and parents can see it is becoming embedded rather than being a one-off initiative with no follow up.

'Working together makes sure that things don't drop off and that they become embedded in the culture of the school – I can see that changed mindset and changing approaches in the school.' (Parent)

One teacher mentioned they had developed a partnership with Dundee University and parents with STEM careers to support curricular work in this area.

Teachers felt the programme had no measurable impact on attainment or attendance as yet but there is still huge value in the softer outcomes and benefits described above.

"the plan is to keep developing, keep giving parents what they are asking for useful websites and resources ... it is about empowering parents." (Teacher)

Examples of good practice

The school had recently started to explore wellbeing. They organised a wellbeing evening which covered a range of issues. This was followed up with further events such as storytelling, where books were used to encourage communication about feelings. Similar approaches are used at school and at home. Positive feedback was given about the event.

They used a traffic light system to think of green (positive) thinking, red (negative) thinking, and consider how thoughts can impact on wellbeing. Work had also been conducted on positive/growth mindsets with parents, pupils and teachers. This enabled the school and wider community to have a common language in which to explore wellbeing.

Other strategies used include a box labelled "I wish the teacher knew that...." where pupils can post messages to the teacher. This created a new channel to make it easier for children to have conversations about issues which are important to them.

Challenges and Learning

Rather than challenges, the school reported on the need for a flexible approach to encourage participation. For example, providing childcare to enable parent participation in curriculum evenings.

Encouraging open communication between the school and parents was felt to be key to encouraging parental engagement in school and learning.

Key lessons

Teachers mentioned the importance of planning, to guide the approach to involving parents in school and learning. They noted that handing over the agenda to parents has given a more sustainable model for parental engagement.

“We acknowledge the importance of parental voice: parents are more likely to be involved (when they have voice)” (Senior staff member)

Parental involvement has been beneficial for this school in that it has drawn on local expertise to increase the richness of the learning environment. However, the school acknowledge that parental participation has been and continues to be a journey.

Case Study 3 – Anderston Primary School

Introduction

Case study 3 is a multicultural urban school. The school hosted four focus groups which included two community organisation members (voluntary agencies that were supporting the school), eight parents, two school senior management team members and two teachers.

Description of activities

At the start of engaging with the Partnership Schools programme, senior school staff looked at their aims as a school and undertook research to understand the aims of the parents and then compared them against each other. Following this they did some work to align them and develop an action plan of activity and initiatives. Connect supported the school in undertaking this process.

Following on from the action plan, parents were involved in many aspects of school life including:

- After school clubs including school choir, cooking club, chess clubs
- Storytelling and language of the month
- Governance of the school including Parent Council and involvement in school improvement plans
- Extra curricular events such as school sports day, music classes
- Support for learning including paired reading, library support, outdoor classroom, homework clubs for parents, mentoring project
- Technical support (sound, lighting and ICT support)
- Celebration of cultural and religious festivals including Diwali, Holi and Eid
- One-off events such as a school fete, trips and pop up restaurant
- STEM and coding work

The school noted the catchment area of the school had changed (following re-zoning) in recent years, which had led to more parents from academic or professional backgrounds sending their children to the school.

Connect support

The school decided to engage with the Partnership Schools programme to access support with embedding and adding depth to their existing relationships with parents.

Senior school staff engaged with Connect at the beginning of their journey. They accessed help with looking at their School Improvement Plan and thinking about how they could link parental engagement activities to contribute to this.

‘Connect helped the school to focus and think about how we could embed parental engagement within our activities.’ (Senior staff member)

The Connect team were described as knowledgeable, supportive and providing some good ideas. One of Connect’s Regional Advisor team is a parent at the school and was intimately involved in supporting the work. Senior staff describe the school as very open, keen to listen to parents and local communities and get them involved in the school activities.

‘We have a very open-door approach.’ (Senior staff member)

'Parental engagement has always been important to us. It was always something we did well but we wanted to understand how we could be more comprehensive, with parents more at the heart of driving activity.' (Senior staff member)

The parents and community members had limited awareness of the support received from Connect. Whilst community members had noticed a change in culture at the school they attributed this to the change in leadership in the school. This was reflected in the feedback from teachers who also attributed the shift in focus towards more parental involvement in the school to the appointment of their Headteacher three years previously.

One community member noted the school was already engaging parents but Connect supported this by providing a structure to this work.

The cultural shift would have happened anyway, it did not need Connect, what Connect did was put a structure and framework and a knowledge base to parental involvement....the Headteacher allowed the involvement to take place.....however, if a new Headteacher came into place it would be difficult to unravel the parental engagement in this school because it is so well established now....structure is helpful but structure is only as good as the people who implement it.....other schools are doing perfectly well without it" (Community member)

Other projects with similar aims to Connect were operating in the city. They included: Family Support workers, Family Learning Workers and a Save the Children project called "Families Connect". Families Connect was also felt to have a strong approach because of the quality of the material, training and the train the trainer approach it took to fostering parental engagement in schools.

Benefits and outcomes

School representatives feel their parental engagement activities have been focussed on benefitting all pupils in the school whereas in the past it may have been more focussed on pupils on an individual basis.

'Much more inclusive and involving everybody rather than parental engagement being about how 'my child is doing in school'' (Teacher)

Projects focussed on parental engagement have helped the school to deliver against their aims and achieve goals in many areas including careers, healthy eating, numeracy and literacy. The school has reported the pupils have really enjoyed the projects and activities and they have helped build their skills and confidence in a range of areas. It was also highlighted that pupils like to see their parents involved in the school and taking an interest in their learning as it makes them proud.

'They are very proud when the parent comes in and reads to the class. Every month it is a different language.' (Teacher)

Teachers also highlighted the importance and value of the culture and pride of the school and the important contribution parents from a range of backgrounds and cultures have made by being involved.

'We take pride in our school and community and the fact we are connected to the world.' (Teacher)

'When we say our school, we mean us (teachers), pupils, parents, teachers, the dinner ladies, everybody!' (Teacher)

The Headteacher reported how having a warmer relationship with parents has really made a difference. The informal communication makes it easier to address other issues and for parents to come into the school and speak to them if they want to ask questions or discuss their child.

Teachers also emphasised every parent wants to know their child is happy and doing well at school. The various activities and projects have provided them with opportunities to experience this first hand by coming in and getting involved.

The pupils have also benefitted from the links made with the local community in the delivery of the work. Some examples include: pupils competing in a car design competition with a local car dealership; the Salvation Army supporting young people to develop their music skills; a local company carried out improvements to the children's play area and provide resources, enhancing the play environment.

The team has been able to capitalise on the reservoir of talent and skills of parents in the local area. Parents have helped the school develop an online App and they have supported some of the children to learn coding. A writer has been working on a literature project. The school also has parents who have helped them identify funding sources and write funding bids to access resources for the school.

'Pupils are exposed to far greater skills than us teachers have – they (parents) cover things I (as a teacher) don't know much about.' (Teacher)

Parents have also supported work in RME. The parents commented that activities have brought the whole school community together.

Community members noted where parents had influenced the wider school life. The school fete used to happen in the summer term, however, because of discussions with parents it was moved to August as a way of welcoming new P1s to school and encouraging P1 parents to participate in the school from an early stage.

An increase in communication with parents was noted by parents and community members. This ranged from informal communication with parents in the playground before and after school, to increased use of newsletters and a range of social media. There are more parent driven projects (the pop up restaurant was given as an example). One respondent commented

'Parents are now more willing to work with the school rather than against the school.... parents feel empowered to become involved in the school.... previously there were just a few parents' (Parent)

In contrast, another respondent felt parental involvement was the "usual suspects" while another felt parents would be involved if they were approached directly:

[If] we can speak to most of the parents they will help. There is a reluctance to be involved in something formal like the Parent Council but they will get involved in the fete there were 30 parents involved in the fete from a school roll of 140: that's quite a lot of parents (Community member)

Parents spoke glowingly of the Headteacher and the availability of staff within the school

'The Headteacher talks to individual parents, we are free to go anytime to speak to her ... we feel like we are blessed ... the teachers know us by our names.' (Parent)

Some parents mentioned increased skills as a result of being involved in the school. For example, one had increased her English language skills, another had received a Food Hygiene Certificate. Whilst another felt she had increased her understanding of the Scottish education system.

Many parents mentioned how being involved in the school brought school and home closer together. Children were more likely to talk about school life, parents felt more aware of homework/home learning activities, one parent commented *'it feels connected'*. Another mentioned she did

not have to wait until parents' night to resolve an issue about her child, the support was more immediate and resolved issues more quickly.

Examples of good practice

Case Study 3 is a multicultural school and has used this as an anchor to encourage parent participation. The school celebrates different festivals such as Eid, Diwali and Holi by proactively inviting parents into the school to share in activities associated with these celebrations (eg: dancing, sharing costumes, pattern making and food).

The school ensure they always evaluate their projects by speaking to their pupils and teachers about their experiences, they ask if they enjoyed them or if they were beneficial. This is always done on an informal basis to ensure they are reflective and continuously improving.

The school has made extensive use of social media platforms for their parental engagement activities through Facebook, Twitter and interactive blogs where parents can see what their child is learning, follow-up learning and homework, and comment or ask questions about topics.

The school has worked hard to build strong informal relationships with parents. Their focus has been very much on trust and collaboration with parents and having two-way communication. Parents are encouraged to move in and out of activities as they please. They don't need to be on the Parent Council or come to meetings, but can still get involved in a way that is easiest for them. Teachers are also encouraged to write newsletters in a very informal and chatty style.

'Previously we were told to write reports and feedback in a very formal and jargon heavy way.'
(Teacher)

'Just normal language we use now.' (Teacher)

They have also been able to successfully capitalise on the skills base of their parents who have a wide range of knowledge, skills and expertise. In addition, being a very multicultural school with young people from different backgrounds has informed and raised awareness of different religions and cultures amongst their pupils. These parents are invited to participate in assemblies, and all religious holidays and traditions are represented in projects.

'We see the school as a community and are keen to have everyone involved in the school. We want to represent different religions and backgrounds and inform and raise awareness of these amongst young people.' (Teacher)

Challenges and Learning

School staff identified the main challenges facing the school to be funding, resource and time. It is difficult to develop, design and deliver projects and to dedicate resources to doing so alongside teaching commitment. They emphasised how much they value and appreciate the support, time, donations and commitment from the parents and communities.

'We are really lucky and value very much the support we get from parents and local community partners to deliver all the activities.' (Senior staff member)

'Parents are so generous with their time and donations' (Senior staff member)

The school's circumstances had made working with parents challenging. For example, whilst parents from professional backgrounds were generally considered an asset to the school, it was noted working parents could find it challenging to engage in school life. This school also noted the transient nature of some families who were attending the school for short periods of time while their parents studied at University.

One participant felt more could be done to draw on the expertise of highly skilled parents, particularly in the STEM area. She felt the main barrier to this was teacher confidence in that it could be daunting to co-ordinate a STEM lesson when faced with an expert.

One parent commented on the need to promote the importance and value of parental involvement:

'I don't think some parents realise what difference it makes to the children there could be a campaign like a healthy eating campaign ... that informs parents about the difference they can make and the importance of being involved in their children's education.' (Parent)

Key lessons

Community members reported using community development techniques as a way of working in their own organisation and that Connect had not influenced their approach. That said community members, teachers and parents did reflect on ways of working that supported parental engagement. These included:

- Regular communication with parents. This includes informal communication as a way of building relationships with parents and regular communication about the life of the school and opportunities for parents to help
- Responding to need: exploring the needs of parents and families and responding flexibly to enable a broader range of parents to be involved (the school celebration of international women's day was given as an example. This was a woman-only event to encourage mothers from cultural backgrounds where mixed gender socialisation was not acceptable, to participate in school life)

Harnessing the passion of parents: many examples were given where the school had benefited from the individual interests and skills of parents, including a parent who shared Diwali celebrations, a parent who shared her love of books and storytelling; a parent talking about their job as a rocket

