Parent Network Scotland (PNS)
Response to call for evidence from Education and Culture Committee

Role of parents and guardians in helping to raise attainment

Parent Network Scotland commends The Scottish Government and the Education and Culture Committee in their ambition to raise attainment for all children and young people and their recognition of the correlation between parental involvement and children and young people’s attainment.

Scotland’s communities today are extremely diverse and family structure therein may also be complex. The parenting role has many faces including parents who are biological, adoptive, step, sibling, kinship and corporate parents. In addition, our communities have a complex cultural diversity where customs and parenting style can be very different from family to family. These factors, we feel, would make it difficult to see how a ‘one size fits all approach’ could hope to achieve full parental participation across education in Scotland.

PNS recognise, from our parents feedback, that whilst schools find some parents ‘hard to engage’, parental engagement in education is an area which most parents wish to become actively involved in, however, for some there are many barriers which must first be overcome, including: time, family commitments, understanding of the education system, language, social and cultural experience and the parents own past experience of learning or their perception of being involved with or judged by professionals.

That said, our 20 plus years of working with parents demonstrate that the main barrier, regardless of culture, experience or language is confidence and here is where we would suggest that the Scottish Government concentrates efforts to attain the positive impact that parent’s involvement in both their children’s learning journey and wider community setting has on raising ambitions, expectations and economy through positive attainment of education, training and employment.

1. Whether schools always explain clearly to parents how children learn throughout their school years and how parents could help their development (e.g. with reading and wider literacy approaches)?

Parent Network Scotland recognises that Early Years and Schools work hard to engage and communicate with parents, although levels of success is different across the country; One parent commented on the vast amount of communication from school via letters which is difficult for parents where English is not their first language. Other parents commented that they cannot attend meetings due to family and work commitments and therefore miss vital information for their child’s education. Therefore, to close the gap it is clear a variety of communication formats are essential.

2. Whether schools are always flexible enough to allow parents to be involved in their child’s education (given parents’ work commitments, for example)?

This area raises a question that requires further definition, that is, “what is the definition of involvement?”
If parents are clearer on the expectation of involvement they are more likely to understand the routes to becoming involved and actively participate with confidence. Parents have discussed that school flexibility differs dependent on stage of learning (early years, primary and secondary). Our parents’ voices state that often early years and primary school engagement is easier to access than at secondary school level where often they are only encouraged to participate when there is a problem with their child.

3. The extent to which schools offer particular support to the parents of pupils from the most disadvantaged communities, in order to improve the attainment of those pupils?

PNS recognise that children & young people’s educational experience via school cannot be measured as a separate entity from their experiences gained from their families and communities. Environmental factors have a real and measurable impact on children and young people’s development, formation of attitudes, resiliency and therefore directly impact on their learning and ultimately their attainment.

Therefore, school support would need to be highly robust to offer the full breadth of support required. PNS believe that schools would benefit from engaging with community partnerships to ensure they can effectively sign post parents to gain the appropriate support required. In addition, support appeared to differ from school to school, parents commented that often school to home support is seen as a negative connotation; that is, that the intervention is due to unacceptable behaviours, low attainment, absenteeism, lateness or non-progress of their child. Pupils and parents are often supported via Home Link Officers, Guidance, School Nurse and other interventions, however, if parent-school partnerships were to become the norm these services could take on a more positive slant and parents would have the confidence to see referrals as supports rather than labels on their children.

4. Whether there is evidence to demonstrate which approaches used by schools have been most successful and whether these are being used, as appropriate, throughout Scotland?

Early year’s establishments demonstrate a strong success on involving parents as partners and offer a collaborative approach which develops parental confidence in their child’s learning and often this is then continued into the primary school. However, parents commented that often as their children becomes young adults the partnership approach reduces and there is little opportunity to engage directly with the secondary schools. An opportunity to share success between early years and secondary establishments may be beneficial to the attainment of children and the wellbeing of parents, many of whom stated a sense of loss as their input was no longer required.

5. Whether greater parental involvement in school education through the Parental Involvement Act (2006) has led to an improvement in pupil attainment?

PNS recognises that the Parental Involvement Act (2006) goes some way in ensuring that parents have a right to become involved with their child’s learning. However, we recognise that the right to become involved is not enough and some work must be done to ensure we increase parent’s confidence, knowledge, understanding and networks to ensure all parents feel they have the skills, confidence and ability to become involved.
6. Whether there are any new measures that could realistically be taken (for example, by the Scottish Government, local authorities, parents’ forums, the voluntary sector, etc.) to help parents raise their child’s attainment?

At Parent Network Scotland, we specialise in building community capacity through effective parental involvement programmes that focus on helping parents to build techniques, confidence and informal networks to support their child’s development and learning. Working with trained parent facilitators, our programme creates the confidence in parents to become active citizens within their communities by developing the confidence to become engaged.

Graduates from our core programme can opt to continue their development via our ‘Parent Link Volunteer’ programme where parents are supported to become facilitators of groups broadening the impact of our toolkit to more families. This method of peer to peer learning has grown the confidence and transferrable skills of parents to not only supporting other parents to rediscover the joy of parenting, raising their aspirations for their children’s education, regardless of their personal experience of learning.

We believe our approach of working in partnership with parents, where they build their confidence through experiencing learning in leadership, communication, relationship and nurturing toolkit directly impacts on families ability to support their child(ren) to be confident, responsible, effective and successful learners.

Our model has been developed with parents over 20 years and has been externally evaluated by Dr Barbara Kelly as having a real impact on family relationships, resiliency and confidence.

The PNS parent journey strengthens parent-child understanding, bonds and communication which has a positive impact on the parent, child and the wider community.