SPTC welcomes this opportunity to submit evidence to the Education and Culture Committee of the Scottish Parliament on the topic of parental involvement and its impact on young people’s attainment. A great deal is said and written about the positive impact of parental involvement on educational outcomes for young people: we believe it is entirely appropriate that the committee undertakes a critical analysis of both practice in Scottish schools and impact of that activity on outcomes.

1. **SPTC Background**

   SPTC is a long-standing parent-led charity and membership organisation providing help, advice and support to parents up and down the country. Our focus is on making parental engagement with education as good as it can be, by supporting parents and working with local authorities, schools and other stakeholders to build and share good practice. Parents are involved with school because of their child not for themselves. Any activity therefore must be directed at making the educational experience for young people as positive as it can be.

   We have had both formal and informal contact with thousands of parents and carers over recent years: they have responded to our surveys, emailed and phoned with their queries and worries, spoken to our team as we work with them face-to-face at our information sessions. Our membership comprises almost 2000 Parent Councils and/or PTAs in state schools, representing tens of thousands of parents and carers.

2. **Parental Involvement in Education**

   While much has been written and said about parental involvement in education, there is very little research into the topic in the UK and particularly in Scotland, where the Parental
Involvement Act of 2006 established the notion of the Parent Forum (all parents and carers with children at a school) which has the right to establish a Parent Council to represent them and take forward matters of parental interest in the school. The legislation was written to be non-prescriptive and inclusive (in contrast to the previous model of parental involvement, which was rigid and formal), with the ambition that this would encourage a more inclusive and engaging model of involvement and, as a result, improve attainment.

Nine years on, it is unclear whether this ambition has been realised. While Parent Councils have been established in most schools there is little or no evaluation of impact. School inspections by HMIe do look at parental involvement but impact is not measured and the role of parents in the school community is not currently a measure by which schools are evaluated. In the school self-evaluation tool How Good is our School (HIGIOS), parental involvement is not regarded as being a high priority in the school’s performance.

In our experience, the level of support being provided at local authority level to parents and parent groups – through Parent Officers and similar – has declined significantly over the years since the Parental Involvement legislation was enacted. At that time, a great deal of time and effort was made to support the establishment Parent Councils but this has fallen away even though, by its very nature, the parent population is constantly moving and so those receiving training and support inevitably move on. A good deal of SPTC’s work is in supporting parents and parent groups as part of membership and, through that work, we aim to develop and share examples of successful partnership working between parents and schools. We have also developed a training session for school leaders which has proved to be an extremely popular and welcome support for those head teachers and senior school staff, who are often unsure about the role of parents in schools, and how to involve them.

Our view is that parental involvement continues to be seen as peripheral, not central, to the effectiveness of a school and the desire to close the attainment gap. In fact, the tenor of the dialogue in schools around parents is often negative, with parents portrayed as difficult and there to be managed or controlled: indeed they are often portrayed as part of the problem around children’s attainment, rather than part of the solution. Parents and carers are often treated by schools and local authorities as a passive audience to receive communication,
rather than partners with whom schools/authorities should work. Communication is often top-down based on what local authorities or schools want to tell parents, rather than being based on information which parents and carers want to receive.

Research has shown that family is as influential to outcomes as high quality teaching and effective schools: we therefore hold the view that the mind-set in many schools and among education professionals remains an issue to be addressed.

SPTC’s perspective on parental involvement has been heavily influenced by the academic work, and practice, of Dr Joyce Epstein, who leads the National Network of Partnership Schools based at Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore. Dr Epstein’s work is founded on the principle that schools, parents and communities have a shared sphere of influence in relation to our children and that planned and purposeful partnership between all of those parties in this shared space makes a positive impact on outcomes for young people. Dr Epstein and her team have researched and evidenced the impact of this approach, which makes parental and community involvement integral to the work of a school.

3. **Committee Questions**

3.1 *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).*

There is little which can be said to happen consistently across all schools in Scotland and advice/information for parents is no exception to this. Without doubt there are examples of schools which do this very well, but much of this good practice rests with individual class teachers, head teachers or projects. What good practice there is tends to be in early years and the primary sector. Parents are rarely given this information at secondary school level (though the most engaged and persistent parents will pursue it). More able parents will research approaches and seek advice. The result is that, for the most part, children from more advantaged backgrounds are likely to benefit most from parental support in learning.

3.2 *Whether schools are always flexible enough to allow parents to be involved in their child’s education (given parents’ work commitments, for example).*
Again, there are examples of schools which work very hard to ensure flexibility, so there are many and varied ways for parents to be involved with school. However this is by no means universal and parents often complain that their opportunities for involvement are limited by inflexible and ‘one size fits all’ approaches at school. The further through school a child goes, the less flexible approaches tend to be and parents tell us conversations tend to be around issues rather than being proactive and constructive.

3.3 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.

We know from research that every school has issues of deprivation and disadvantage: it is therefore incorrect to see this issue as one of difference between schools and communities – the difference is within schools. Schools – and other public services - therefore require to offer support to the most deprived families in all of our communities. Experience tells us that this is not happening consistently or effectively: once again there is good work going on but it tends to be in isolated pockets.

In many cases, the third sector and externally funded projects play a significant role in taking forward this work, rather than the school itself. The reasons for this are complex, however the flexibility and creativity of the third sector are likely to be significant factors. The capacity of local authorities and schools to define and adopt the most successful models of intervention is a challenging topic on various levels, particularly within the context of local authority funding which is leading to significant reductions in service.

3.4 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.

The Joseph Rowntree Foundation research – Closing the Attainment Gap in Scottish Education - published in 2014, identified clearly that, while there is good practice within our schools, there is insufficient emphasis on evidence-based practice and insufficient consistency of practice. In other words, we could do a great deal better if practice were evidenced and shared, and if there were co-ordination of activity.
3.5 Whether greater parental involvement in school education through the Parental Involvement Act (2006) has led to an improvement in pupil attainment.

As indicated in Point 2, there is no evidence to support or reject this hypothesis. This would require longitudinal research, which we would very much support.

3.6 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.

We believe there is sufficient evidence available regarding strategies which make an impact on children’s attainment, including the Partnership Schools model which SPTC is currently trialling with the support of Skills Development Scotland.

There is a body of evidence which supports the premise that parents have a significant influence on the educational attainment and achievement of their children: our experience of working with parents and parent groups tells us that parents – and teachers – generally look for evidenced models and practical support which they can use to guide their work. As highlighted in the JRF Foundation report mentioned earlier, we have to focus our energies on evidence-based approaches implemented consistently.

4. In Conclusion

As a parents’ organisation, SPTC is wholly committed to supporting the involvement of parents and carers in their children’s education, and to ensuring Scotland’s children have the opportunity to achieve the very best they can. We believe the legislation and policies are in place which recognise and support the central role of families in education but there remains a long way to go in terms of changing hearts and minds within the educational establishment, local authorities and schools.

Part of this is around the professional education of school leaders and teachers, where parental involvement is scarcely addressed, if at all. We also believe local authorities and schools should focus on evidence-based, practical measures which school communities are able to implement and which address the inequalities in our schools.

The Committee is well aware of the issues of funding for local authority services and the impact of reductions in services currently being experienced in schools. We also know that poverty is a growing,
not shrinking, issue in our communities. There is a huge challenge therefore to close a gap which is widening.

Eileen Prior
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20 March 2015