SURVEY OF PARENTS

Introduction

As part of its work on educational attainment, the Education and Culture Committee is looking at how parents and schools can work together to raise all pupils’ attainment, particularly those whose attainment is lowest. An evidence session is planned on this topic for 31 March 2015. As background to this session, the Committee commissioned SPICE to carry out a short survey seeking the views of parents of school age children on their communication with school, involvement with the Parent Council and ideas for how schools and parents might work together.

This briefing provides brief background on the research literature and legislation on parental involvement and reports results of the survey.

Method and distribution

We prepared a short on-line survey, with 6 questions and an option for comments. The survey ran from 14 January to the 5 March 2015 and received a total of 2,599 responses. A British Sign Language version was also produced which attracted 5 responses.

The survey was disseminated in a number of ways, including:

- through twitter and the Parliament’s website, as well as through traditional media contacts
- to organisations that have previously engaged with parliamentary committees, including Scottish Parent Teacher Council and National Parent Forum Scotland
- to major employers

Interpretation of results

It is important to note that a non-probability sampling method was used meaning that those who completed the survey were essentially self-selecting. This results in a loss of generalisability and means that we have to be cautious about attributing the results to the whole population of parents with children at school. The results show an over-representation of parents from Edinburgh (56% of responses) (in particular from Morningside, 11% of all responses), parents with children at independent schools (22% of responses) and parent council members (30% of responses). See appendix 1 for responses by postcode area which illustrates the dominance of responses from Edinburgh.

There is under-representation of parents of children from local authority secondary schools (22% of all responses).

This pattern of responses should be borne in mind when considering the results.
Main themes in results

Most parents find it easy to get information from their child’s school and most find that information helpful. However, there were many comments suggesting that communication could be improved. In particular, a strong theme was the need for more regular, jargon-free updates on pupil progress that make it clear whether their child is making satisfactory progress. There was also a desire for more time to discuss issues with class or subject teachers.

While the vast majority of respondents agree that parents and teachers should work together, there was some ambivalence about whether the Parent Council has a direct role in raising attainment.

In general, answers differed according to whether the child was at state or independent school. In particular, parents of children attending independent schools were more confident that the school would help with concerns about their child’s learning.

Research Literature on Parental Involvement

There are many forms of parental involvement in school learning. Some might be considered part of general parenting (help with homework, discussing school, communicating with the school about your child's progress). Others might be characterised as involvement in the life of the school more generally. This might include volunteering in the classroom, or with school activities, and membership of a PTA or parent council. It is home based involvement that has been found to impact most on pupil achievement and motivation.

The literature on parental engagement is extensive and the following is based largely on a literature review by Desforges (2003). This concluded that:

"parental involvement in the form of 'at home good parenting' has a significant positive effect on children's achievement and adjustment even after all other factors shaping attainment have been taken out of the equation."

It was also clear that "the higher the social class, the more parental involvement was evident."

Sylva et al (2001) have shown the importance of the 'home learning environment' for pre-school children. Studies tended to find stronger effects for pre-school and primary age children than for children at secondary school. Sacker (2002) looked at the mechanism by which inequalities in school achievement are formed.

"At age 7 pupil achievement and adjustment was mainly influenced positively by parental involvement and negatively by material deprivation".

At 16 years of age, parental involvement continued to have a significant effect, but school composition (including peer group influences) had become a more powerful determinant. (Quoted in Desforges, 2003).

Children are also active in mediating parental involvement, and this increases with age. Edwards and Alldred (2000) talked to 70 children aged 10 to 14.

"Pupils saw themselves as autonomous and with a right to some privacy. They saw it as their own responsibility to do their homework for example."
Desforges summarises the findings on how parental involvement works:

"the impact of parental involvement arises from parental values and educational aspirations and these are exhibited continuously through parental enthusiasm and positive parenting style. [...] This has its impact on the students' self-perception as a learner and on their motivation, self-esteem and educational aspirations." [...] "It bolsters their motivation to succeed."

He suggests that parents will get involved to the degree they feel they have the capacity to make a difference.

Menzies (2013) argued against assumptions about low aspirations of disadvantaged families.

"The real challenge for disadvantaged young people is achieving their aspirations [and] working with parents is a highly effective way of doing so." [...] "Engaging parents to help them understand what their children's aspirations involve and what will help achieve them is an effective way of raising attainment."

Blatchford et al (2011) looked at the factors present where children succeeded 'against the odds'. One aspect was parental involvement in learning:

"In the homes of children 'succeeding against the odds' parenting practices took the form of 'active cultivation'. These parents engaged their young children in learning processes, for instance by reading with them, providing them with educational (computer) games and materials, talking with them about school and learning or other joint activities e.g. by cooking together. They continued this involvement throughout the child's learning life-course."

Desforges also considered interventions to promote parental involvement but found that:

"much of it is evaluated in ways that are technically so weak that it is impossible to draw objective judgements as to the quality of the provision and its impact"

As he cautions, this does not mean they are ineffective, only that we don't have robust evidence about whether or not they work.

Goodall et al (2011) and Grayson (2013) conducted more recent literature reviews. They found that parents need clear, specific and targeted information from schools and that information and opportunities to engage can be provided by ICT. They also found that: "parenting styles improve as a consequence of receiving support and training," noting the impact of family learning, literacy and numeracy programmes.

**Discussion**

Much of the above is reflected in the results from our survey. In particular, most of our survey comments relate to how a parent can support their child's learning at home. There were relatively few references to involvement in the broader life of the school. In addition, the strong theme of the need for clear, specific communication with the school also reflects wider research findings about how to engage with parents.

Our survey had a clear over-representation of better-off parents which research shows to be strongly linked to greater parental involvement. Reflecting this, we can perhaps
assume that the responses to our survey generally represent parents who are both interested in encouraging their child's learning and confident that they can do so.

References for this section


Menzies, L. (2013) *Educational Aspirations: How English schools can work with parents to keep them on track*. York: Joseph Rowntree Foundation


Legislation

Parental rights in respect of their children's education are found throughout Scottish education legislation. In particular,

- Education (Scotland) Act 1980
- Education (Additional Support for Learning) Act 2004
- Schools (Consultation) (Scotland) Act 2010

However, the aim of increasing and improving parental involvement in school education is addressed more specifically in:

- Scottish Schools (Parental Involvement) Act 2006, and
- Education (School and Placing Information) (Scotland) Regulations 2012

The 2006 Act requires Scottish Ministers and Education Authorities to promote parental involvement. *Guidance on implementation* defines three types of parental involvement.

- supporting learning at home
- improving home/school partnerships
- parental representation

Education authorities are required to promote the involvement of parents in their own child’s education as well as the education provided by their child’s school to pupils generally. Local Authorities must have a Parental Involvement Strategy and the Act sets out how Parent Forums (all the parents of the school) can be represented by a Parent Council. Very briefly, the functions of a Parent Council are:

- to support efforts of the school to raise standards, secure improvements and develop each child's potential
- to make representations on parents' views to the head teacher and local authority
• to promote contact between school, parents, pupils and community.

Education authorities must respond to any reasonable request for advice and information from a parent on the education their child is receiving. They must also take steps to ensure that the head teacher and staff of the school are available to give advice and information to the parent.

The Education (School and Placing Information) (Scotland) Regulations 2012 set out the information that needs to be contained in the School Handbook. Guidance is available in which the Minister's forward states:

"When parents are successfully and meaningfully involved in their child’s learning, and in the life of their schools, children do better. Good communication, relationships and information are key to successful involvement. The new School Handbook aims to support and strengthen the relationship between schools, local authorities and parents."

The information required includes:

• the arrangements for when a pupil’s parent has a concern about the pupil;
• the opportunities for parents to become involved in the school
• how the school involves parents in their children’s education including how information, support and advice is given to a parent to help them support the pupil’s learning
• curriculum information including, among other things: the different subjects and learning opportunities that are available for pupils and when these are available.
• the school’s arrangements and approaches for tracking and assessing pupils’ progress and planning their future learning.
• the school’s arrangements for ongoing and end of year reporting to a pupil’s parent on that pupil’s progress in curriculum areas, achievements and their future learning

Policy
The Scottish Government’s 2012 Parenting Strategy included commitments to

• explore ways to support parents to engage in their child’s education and create a good home learning environment;
• work with the National Parent Forum Scotland
• provide resources to teachers to help them engage with parents effectively

The Programme for Government 2014/15 included commitments to:

“a new evidence-based, web resource for schools to support their parental engagement strategies, particularly engaging with families living in deprived areas. A refreshed ParentZone website to improve the information provided to parents is currently being developed.”

The issues addressed in legislation, guidance and policy are also reflected in our survey. In particular, the guidance on the 2012 regulations and 2006 Act which emphasise the importance of schools being approachable and welcoming and providing clear information to parents. These are major themes in our survey results.
Analysis of Results

The following analyses questions 1 to 6 by type of school and summarises the main themes emerging in comments. Tables of results are provided in appendix 2.

I find it easy to get information from the school about how my child is progressing at school (question 1)

The information I get from the school helps me understand and support my child’s learning (question 2)

Most parents find it easy to get information from their school about how their child is progressing (62% agree or strongly agree) (chart 1). However, this is more the case for independent schools (86% primary, 90% secondary) than state schools (55% primary, 51% secondary).

Similarly, most parents find the information they get from the school is helpful (64% agree or strongly agree) (chart 2). Again, this is more the case if the children are at independent schools (89% primary, 86% secondary) than state schools (61% primary, 50% secondary).

Generally, there are only small (5 percentage points or less) differences between primary and secondary schools in each sector. The exception to this is that parents of children in local authority primary schools are more likely to find information helpful than those in local authority secondary schools. 61% of local authority primary schools agree or agree strongly compared with 50% of local authority secondary schools (chart 2).

Parents of children in state primary schools are slightly more likely to agree that information is helpful than agree it is easy to get (55% agree/strongly agree its easy to get (chart 1) 61% agree/strongly agree it is helpful (chart 2)).

Chart 1: Easy to get information from the school about how my child is progressing
I am confident that the school will help me if I have questions about my child’s learning (question 3)

The vast majority of parents are confident that the school will help them with questions about their child’s learning (78%) (chart 3). However, this is more true of independent than state schools (57% strongly agree compared to 23%), and slightly more true of primary schools than secondary schools. In state schools, a fifth of secondary school parents strongly agreed compared with a quarter of primary school parents. In independent schools, 54% of secondary school parents strongly agreed compared to 62% of primary school parents.
Are you actively involved in the Parent Council? (question 4)

The parent council should help improve children’s attainment (question 5)

Around a third of respondents with children at state schools are actively involved in the parent council compared with only 6% of independent school parents. As the legislation relating to parent councils only applies to state schools, the following responses also relate only to state schools.

Almost half of parents think the parent council should help improve attainment (47% agree or agree strongly). However, a significant minority are neutral on the issue (31%) and over a fifth disagree or disagree strongly (22%).

Perhaps unsurprisingly, those involved in the parent council are more likely to agree that it should help to improve attainment (60% agree or strongly agree). That said, there is a significant minority, involved in the parent council, who disagree or strongly disagree (18%). (Chart 4). A number of comments were made about parent councils, which are summarised under question 7 below.

Chart 4: The parent council should help improve attainment by whether respondent is actively involved in the parent council. Local authority schools only.

It is important that schools and parents would together in order to help children achieve their best (question 6)

Almost all parents agree or strongly agree with the statement: "it is important that schools and parents work together in order to help children achieve their best."

A large majority strongly agreed (71%). Parents were more likely to strongly agree if they were involved in the parent council or their children were at independent schools (between 74% to 78%). (Chart 5).

Parents of children at state secondary schools who were not on the parent council were less likely to strongly agree with the statement (63%).
Comparing the almost universal agreement with this statement and the more ambivalent responses to question 5, on the role of the parent council on attainment, suggests that while parents want to work with schools to support their child’s learning, they may not see the parent council as the main vehicle for this.

Chart 5: Strongly agree it is important for schools and parents to work together, by school type and parent council.

Despite broad agreement that schools and parents should work together, it is interesting that 2% (61) respondents disagreed or strongly disagreed with it or were neutral on the issue. Some of the comments in this group included:

"achieving their best in education attainment is mainly the responsibility of the school, parents have a duty to ensure their child is supported to be 'in the right place' physically and emotionally to participate fully in learning at school."

"Too much dependence on parents input, leaving the children whose parents who can't or won't help them, suffering."

"It is the teachers' job to educate the child. - It is the parents' job to raise the child."

"I think that education is the business of schools and I don't think I have anything to offer as a parent outside my normal parental responsibilities."

Comments about how schools and parents should work together to help children achieve their best (question 7).

The last question asked for comments, "about how schools and parents should work together to help children achieve their best". Around half of responses included comments (1,281). The following summary is based on a broad analysis of main themes emerging (see appendix 2) and provides only a very general overview.

The main theme overall was parents' need for good communication in relation to how their children were progressing at school and what they were doing at school. The implication, sometimes stated explicitly, is that this would help parents support their child's learning.
Teachers informing parents

There was a concern that school reports were not always clear and specific about how children were progressing.

“There’s no benefit to parents being told that their child is lovely in class if the child then fails all its exams."

“I receive more information on my car testing through an MOT than my child through S1-S3.”

“I think teachers and reports use too much CfE language that is not always helpful to parents”

Parents want more regular updates on progress and more opportunities to discuss issues with the class teacher. If a child was struggling, they want to know quickly, rather than wait for parents night. There could be better use made of IT to inform parents - texts, e-mails, tweets, schools intranets and websites.

Some parents also wanted information about how they can help their child learn. This would include information about how children learn, about what topics the children are covering in class and what teaching methods were used as these might have changed since the parents were at school.

Dialogue between parents and teachers

While many responses focused on communication from school to parents, there was also a strong theme about the need for schools to be approachable and welcoming of parents’ views - that teachers should listen to parents and that there should be a dialogue, trust and respect. (A few referred to the need to involve children in this as well). The type of IT suggestions to facilitate this included skype, discussion forums and providing parents with teachers’ e-mail addresses.

“I feel there are sometimes hoops to jump through before being able to speak to a teacher.”

There was also reference to the need for schools to recognise that most parents work, and to take account of this when considering arrangements for parental involvement.

There were positive comments, praising communication and involvement of parents at particular schools but more often, comments related to a need for improvements.

Role of teachers and parents

A few responses referred to partnership between schools and parents, some describing it as an equal partnership and others as one in which the schools lead. Others thought that schools and parents had different but complementary roles. Opinion ranged from:

"parents and teachers should work together to build a suitable learning schedule"

to, "let teachers do their job"

Where the Parent Council was mentioned, around half referred to it as having narrow membership or having little influence. The more positive comments referred to its role in
supporting the school, supporting dialogue between teachers and parents and holding schools to account. Most respondents who commented on its role did not consider that Parent Councils had a role in improving attainment, except indirectly by supporting and promoting the school, or by fundraising.

Only a very few responses suggested that parents could help out in classes or with school activities, or that parents had skills that schools might use.

**Specific Issues**

There were also some specific issues mentioned in responses including:

- difficulties in dealing with the school for those parents who live apart from their children
- objections to proposals to reduce length of the school week
- poor experiences of parents of children with additional support needs

Camilla Kidner
SPICE
March 2015
Appendix 1: Responses by postcode
Appendix 2: Survey Questions and Results

1. I find it easy to get information from the school about how my child is progressing at school.
2. The information I get from the school helps me understand and support my child’s learning.
3. I am confident that the school will help me if I have any questions about my child’s learning.
5. The Parent Council should help improve children’s attainment.
6. It is important that schools and parents work together in order to help children achieve their best.
7. Do you have any comments about how schools and parents should work together to help children achieve their best.

Results by type of school

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1 Totals by type of school are more than the total number of responses as some respondents had children at more than one type of school. Removing these overlapping responses does not alter the general pattern of results for each category.
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Most common themes in question 7

The main themes in the comments were identified and specific mentions of them were counted. This gives a rough indication of the scale of response on the identified themes. Further analysis would allow further grouping of responses.

Communication - general (139)

Regularity and timing of communications from school (125). Of which 60 would like more regular updates on progress. Don't delay telling us about problems (25).

Better use of IT to facilitate communication between parents/teachers or provide information about pupil progress (87)

More opportunities to discuss issues with class teacher (82)

Mention of parent council (69) - (of which around half were positive)

Listen to parents - (58) Dialogue - (42)

Homework - (55) of which 27 approved, 18 approved of 'meaningful, relevant' homework, 13 disapproved and 7 wanted more support.

Easier access to schools/teachers/ more open/welcoming/approachable - (53)

Additional Support for Learning (54) of which 14 referred to more able children. Remainder referred to resources, staff knowledge/training and school attitudes to parents.

School reports unclear (47) or use jargon (32), are 'bland' or generalised (22), need to be honest if child is not doing well (21)

Positive comments about practice at a particular school (46)

Information for parents on how they can help children learn (37), and teaching approaches used (19)

Working parents not well catered for (37)

Information on topics to be covered at school (31)

Respect/trust - (29)

Partnership - (29), of which 7 referred to schools leading (7).

Parents and teachers have separate roles - let teachers do their job (18)