

# There are no schools without parents

We have also noted that through the children attending its schools, the Church has an opportunity to reach out to parents. The 900,000 children provide access to parents, very many of whom would otherwise have no contact with the Church.

The diocese of London said in its evidence: ‘The Archbishop of York, as Bishop of London, was fond of pointing out that clergy will meet far more family members in a school than they are likely to encounter in Sunday services.’

As of necessity adults will increasingly be engaged in the practice of lifelong learning. If Church schools can become family learning centres in response to this development, so also the opportunity to reach out to parents will be enhanced.

*The Way Ahead*, paragraph 3.8

If the primary concern of schools is the individual child, then that quickly brings the school into a close relationship with the parents of that child. In this chapter the term ‘parents’ will be used to cover a wide range of individuals and circumstances. Some children have only one parent living with them. Some will have several adults who care for them and are involved in their nurture and are concerned for their future. The school will see some of these parents regularly, others hardly at all. It is a great mistake to assume that an unseen parent is an uncaring parent.

Parents are the primary educators of children. Schools must work in partnership with parents wherever possible. Good partnerships start with good communication, mutual trust and respect. It is for schools to take the initiatives that create these conditions.

Schools must plan their relations with parents carefully. Teachers and others, particularly office staff, who communicate regularly with parents, all need to understand what type of relationships the school is trying to establish with parents and how they, as professionals, contribute towards them. This chapter will consider a number of points of contact with parents, all of which are significant in the establishment of good relations between the school and the children's parents.

## **First contact – the school prospectus**

For many parents the first formal communication from the school will be the school prospectus. There may have been informal contact with the headteacher or the school secretary in order to obtain it, and those conversations will have begun to set the tone for future relations, but the first formal statements will be in the prospectus. It is not surprising that many schools have put much effort into the production of these prospectuses. Even so, many schools fail to check the legal requirements concerning them. There is a detailed list of the required contents of a school prospectus. Governors need to satisfy themselves that those preparing or reviewing the school prospectus have checked the legal requirements recently and have ensured that they are all met. They can be found on the DfES web site.

At the time of writing, although there are additional requirements for secondary schools, the legal requirements for all schools are as follows:

- the name, address and telephone number of the school;
- the type of school;
- the names of the headteacher and chair of governors;
- information about admissions;

- a statement of the school's ethos and values;
- details of any affiliations with a particular religion or religious denomination, the religious education provided, parents' right to withdraw their child from religious education and collective worship and the alternative provision for those pupils;
- information about the school's policy on providing for pupils with Special Educational Needs;
- pupil absence rates;
- a summary of the national curriculum assessment results in the school and nationally.

The legal requirements are the minimum that the school prospectus should contain. The governing body should also establish what it wishes to see in the prospectus, to help parents to gain an accurate picture of the school. In particular, Church schools will wish to make the links between the school and the Church community clear. Pictures may help to convey a good image; advertising or sponsorship may help pay for the costs of production but the key question must always be 'how does this prospectus help parents to understand the school and what it offers their child?' It may be worthwhile asking someone outside the school community to check a draft of the text for them with this question in mind.

## **Home-school agreements**

Every school must create a home-school agreement. The governing body must consult with parents on the content of the agreement and a copy of it must be provided to every new parent when their child is first offered a place at the school. Where there is a pre-school meeting with parents this may provide a good opportunity to explain the agreement. Schools must ensure that they

deliver their side of the agreement. This implies that all members of staff know what is in the agreement and how it affects their approach to their work. Parents cannot be required to sign the agreement as a condition of their child being offered a place at the school, nor can there be any attempt to make its terms binding on them. They can, however, be encouraged to sign the parental declaration. The agreement will lay out the school's expectations of parents and pupils as well as how the school will provide for the child's education in partnership with the parents. This should assist and promote good relations with parents, as it will avoid some of the misunderstandings that lead to breakdowns in relationships.

The basic agreements may also be helpful when situations arise that are creating a cause for concern in the behaviour or attitude of a particular child. Renegotiation of the agreement or a clarification of its principles may form part of the discussion with the child's parents designed to develop a joint strategy between the parents and the school to achieve an improvement in the situation.

## **Communication**

Communication between home and school is often a cause of difficulty and frustration. Many factors are involved. These include:

- the telephone manner of the staff in the school office, including the headteacher;
- the linguistic style used in letters home by individual teachers or by the school clerical staff;
- the differences between the language registers used by teachers and by parents;

- the style of leadership adopted by headteacher, teachers or governors at meetings for parents;
- stress levels;
- the accuracy of what is said at the school gate;
- the extent to which pupils are able to facilitate or hinder communication (e.g. through the ‘pupil-post’ system);
- the level of confidence with which some parents approach written communications, particularly if English is not their first language;
- parents’ previous experience of schools, particularly as a pupil.

Not all of these factors are within the control of the school. Some are unconscious habits that may have to be studiously unlearned.

There are some communications that are so important that they must be sent by post. It is unlikely that any school, for example, would be so unwise or insensitive as to send an exclusion letter home by pupil-post or email. But the Government has been consulting about whether it is appropriate for schools to begin sending ‘letters’ to parents by email with a view to allowing most communications to be sent by these means. It would only be possible, of course, where parents have volunteered their email address and can reasonably be expected to access their messages on a regular basis. Many schools take pride in having an attractive web site with appropriate links. A Church school site should have links to the parish church and diocesan web sites.

The school staff and governors must take the initiative to ensure that communications are always of the best. It is reasonable to hope that parents will respond to the school’s best efforts with understanding and courtesy, but it cannot be guaranteed. This is not an excuse for the school to give up making the effort to communicate well. Governors who are prepared to meet with parents or other members of the community, to explain to them

what the school is doing and why, have much to contribute to the school in the development of good communication. Governors who join the parents in pressurizing a school for change may not always be assisting the cause of good communication.

One final thought on communication. Teachers, even head-teachers, do not often have cause to contact the school from outside during working hours. As a result they may be unaware of the impression given to callers over the telephone. The governor who compliments the school secretary, in the hearing of the headteacher, on his or her manner with callers can make a major contribution to the reinforcement of good practice in the school.

## **Annual report and meeting**

The governing body of every school must prepare an annual report for its parents. The annual report must contain all the items required by law. These include details of the action plan following any inspection of the school (under Section 10 or Section 23 of the School Inspection Act 1996) and the latest test or examination results. The report is, however, the governing body's account of their work for the year. This will mean that there are always likely to be items in the report that are not required by law, but which are important to the school.

It is important that the governors are active in the preparation of the report and in its presentation to the parents. This presentation is given at the Annual Parents' Meeting. It is good practice for the chairs of governing body committees to present the section of the report that relates to the work of their committee. This not only makes the presentation more interesting, but also gives parents a feel for how the governors exercise their responsibilities.

Parents must be provided with written notice of the date of the Annual Parents' Meeting. In those cases where it may not be clear

how many people should be regarded as a 'parent' of a particular child, the definition provided in section 576 of the Education Act 1996 is used to form the basis of any decision. For voluntary controlled schools, the LEA will make the decision as to whether a person is to be regarded as a parent of a registered pupil. In a voluntary aided or foundation school, the governing body makes the decision. This can be important on those rare occasions when there can be a vote at the annual meeting. In general terms these meetings are an opportunity for governors and staff to involve the parents in the life of the school and to answer any questions that parents may have. The meetings complement, but should not seek to duplicate, the regular meetings between class teachers and parents, when the progress of their child or children can be discussed. The subjects discussed at the annual meeting should be general ones. Discussion of individual teachers should never be allowed. Wherever possible, it should be clear to parents that there will be interesting and important issues to discuss, so that as many parents as possible are encouraged to attend. It should not be assumed that low attendance indicates that everything is well with the school or that high attendance indicates that there is dissatisfaction.

## **Informal social work**

For many headteachers, one aspect of the maintenance of good relations with parents is both demanding of time and professionally challenging. There are many parents who, having confidence in the school, use the headteacher and, sometimes, other members of staff as a source of advice, help and good counsel. This derives from the knowledge that problems within the family setting have potentially a significant impact on the children's ability to profit from their schooling. Within certain limits, therefore, headteachers become involved in the worries and concerns of the family.

The headteacher is not always the focus of the work. In most primary schools the headteacher will be the member of staff most often

involved, although other staff may also contribute. In secondary schools the pastoral staff are more likely to be involved. In some schools, the school secretary will fulfil the role for some parents. While acknowledging this, this section will, for brevity, continue to discuss the issues as if it were always the headteacher who undertakes the task.

### **What are the limits?**

*Ideally* the headteacher should be in a position of a listener who can then point those who need it in the direction of appropriate sources of help. In Church schools this will include the parish priest as well as other professionals.

*Ideally* the headteacher only becomes involved to the extent that it does not interfere with his or her duty to the children in the school's care.

*Ideally* the headteacher should not become so personally involved in the issues that it affects his or her personal or home life.

The emphasis on 'ideally' in the statements is intended to acknowledge that the best of intentions do not signify much when a parent arrives at the school at five to nine in the morning in a flood of tears announcing that their partner has left the home taking all the family money but none of the debts. Well-ordered schedules for the day's work are put aside in response to the human need of the moment. At the end of the day the head may be in need of someone with whom to talk through the experience. Good resolutions about not becoming involved will have been discarded.

### **What can be done?**

The school needs to acknowledge that responding to incidents such as the one sketched out in the preceding paragraph are part of the school's task. Some thought can then be given to enabling this aspect of the work to be done as effectively as possible.

- The school should have, readily accessible, the contact names and telephone numbers for the local offices of the various agencies who offer expertise, guidance or support across a wide range of problems.
- Support for the headteacher should be well managed. Where possible, supplies of tea or coffee should be made available. The opportunity to complete the interview with the parent in privacy and without interruption should be facilitated by other members of staff, who can ensure that the telephone is answered quickly and that those wishing to speak to the headteacher on non-urgent topics are encouraged to find another time for the discussion.
- All members of staff should observe confidentiality on these incidents.
- The headteacher should have someone who can provide a debriefing service if this is needed. There is nothing sophisticated in this. What is needed is a good listener, not involved in the school or the immediate community, who is prepared to listen while the headteacher talks through what has happened and how it has been handled.

None of these measures solves the problems, but they may help to keep them in perspective. One final point may also help. If governors and colleagues know that this work is done, they should be able to offer support and appreciation without having to be told any details that would breach the trust that the parents have placed in the school.

## **Parent Teacher Associations (PTA) or 'Friends of the School'**

Every good school will have an organization that brings together parents, teachers and sometimes the supporters of the school from

the wider community. The organization may be fairly formally structured or it may operate very informally. What is right for one type of community at one point in time may not be right for the same community ten years later or the next-door community now. From time to time such organizations can become restricted in practice to a small group who, from its own point of view, seems to be doing all the work and, from other people's point of view, seems to operate as a cosy clique. The time is ripe for a change and relaunch.

The prime tasks of such an organization will include:

- support for the school, including but not exclusively fund-raising;
- enhanced communication and partnership between staff, parents and the wider community;
- social and educational activities for parents and families associated with the school.

The PTA may be involved in other tasks, but these seem to be at the heart of such organizations.

Parent Teacher Associations or similar organizations will need to have an established formal structure if they are to raise funds. There are model constitutions available from the National Confederation of Parent Teacher Associations ([www.ncpta.org.uk](http://www.ncpta.org.uk)). Whatever structure is adopted, it should make clear:

- how the committee is elected;
- how the committee's membership will be regularly renewed;
- how the purposes of the organization are defined;
- how it will organize its financial affairs;

- how the organization can be wound up;
- how the organization will relate to the governors and, in a Church school, to the parish church.

One of the problems facing anyone trying to write about parents is the plural. Parents, like children, are individuals made in God's image, who are attempting to bring up their children to the best of their ability. In contrast to the school's stance towards pupils, which will be impartial, every parent will be partial for his or her children; that is, they will take their children's part. It is no good expecting parents to be impartial – to understand both sides; they want the best for their children. They expect the school to provide this, particularly if they have chosen the school themselves rather than leave the choice to chance – the school with a vacancy or the nearest to their house.

Teachers and other members of the staff of the school need to build up an atmosphere of trust, collaboration and partnership between themselves and parents. Where this is created there is a reasonable prospect of harmonious working together in the interests of the child, at least some of the time.

Parents are not always correct in their judgements, of course, nor do they always nourish realistic dreams of what their children will achieve in school or in the world beyond. Sometimes schools will need to protect children from the pressures that parents put on them. Occasionally, teachers may need to sustain the child's dream in the face of parental opposition. Rarely, teachers may have to help to protect a child from abuse by parents. Parents are not always right. They do not always know best. Teachers are not always right either. They do not always know best. The same may also be said for governors and for all other human beings. In the main, all of us will try to do our best and sometimes we may even succeed.

## The rights and responsibilities of parents

Parents do have rights within education law and it is important that the school honours these. Some of these rights affect the curriculum; others are concerned with their relationship with the school, the teachers and the governors. They can be summarized like this:

Everyone who is a parent, whether the child lives with them or not, has the same right to participate in decisions about a child's education and receive information about the child. However, for day-to-day purposes, the school's main contact is likely to be the parent with whom the child lives on school days.

School and LEA staff must treat all parents equally, unless there is a court order limiting an individual's exercise of parental responsibility. Individuals who have parental responsibility for, or care of, a child have the same rights as natural parents, for example:

- to receive information, e.g. pupil reports or summaries of inspection reports;
- to participate in activities, e.g. vote in elections for parent governors;
- to be asked to give consent, e.g. to the child's taking part in school trips;
- to be informed about meetings involving the child, e.g. a governors' meeting on the child's exclusion.

The welfare of a child will be the paramount consideration for schools. However, where a parent's action or proposed action conflicts with the school's ability to act in the child's best interests, the school staff should try to resolve the problem with that parent but should avoid becoming involved in the conflict.

To balance these rights, parents also have responsibilities. The responsibilities include:

- ensuring that their child attends the school regularly and on time;
- collaborating with the school to ensure that their child obeys reasonable school rules and completes tasks set for homework;
- collaborating with the school on measures for the security of all pupils and staff.

The key principle within all these rights and responsibilities is that in any good school there must be a well-developed partnership between the staff of the school and the parents. Without such partnerships very little that is positive can be achieved.

## **Representation**

There are two distinct issues contained in this section. One is how parents can make representations to the school over issues that affect only their children or a small number of others. The second is how parents can make their views known on general issues of school policy and organization.

In the first instance, there needs to be a well-established pattern of meetings with teachers and appropriate levels of school management to ensure that there are good, open relationships and that any issues that arise can be dealt with speedily and effectively. A key point in such a process will be the opportunity that parents have to meet and discuss the issue with the headteacher. Regardless of the size of school and the accessibility of the headteacher, the meeting between parents and the headteacher has formal significance. If the issue cannot be resolved at such a meeting, the options that are open to parents to take the matter further inevitably generate formal action and processes. Parents have the right to take the complaint forward to the governing body if they are not satisfied with the response they have received from the headteacher.

On the more general issues of parents being represented within

the formal structures for the governance and management of the school, they are represented on the school governing body through their elected representatives and, in voluntary aided schools on occasions, by those foundation governors who must also be parents. It is important that the school ensures that all parents are kept informed of the names of their representatives so that they can make their views known to them.

## **Home-school transport**

The issues that arise around the journey to and from school are quite complex. They derive from the concern to ensure that all pupils can get to and from school in a safe and appropriate manner. In 1944 certain assumptions were made about the distances that children of different ages could walk safely. These have been clarified by subsequent judgements in the courts. Over the years, public perception of what is appropriate and safe has changed but the legal definitions have not.

For Church schools the issue also involves the extent to which the appropriate school for the child may be a Church school, even when this is not the nearest school.

For Local Education Authorities the issues of cost are important. The provision of coaches and taxis every day to ensure that all pupils arrive at school on time and are delivered safely home at the end of the school day creates a complex administrative task with a significant cost element. This is particularly important for those pupils who have to be transported to special schools or units, where specially adapted vehicles and trained escorts may have to be provided.

Local Education Authorities must provide free transport to school for those pupils under eight who live more than two miles from their school and for those over that age who live more than three

miles from their school. Local Education Authorities may choose to provide transport to the nearest Church school, if pupils travel to a school further away than the nearest, where this is beyond the travel limits for children, when the parents adhere to the faith or denomination to which the school is affiliated. Most Local Education Authorities have done this for many years. In setting their admissions policies, the governing body will need to be aware of the Local Education Authority's policy on this issue in order to avoid setting up expectations among parents that will not be met.

Several government initiatives in recent years on the issue of home to school transport have aimed at reducing the traffic congestion caused in many areas by the 'school run' and also the perceived growth of car dependency amongst school children. These initiatives have usually focused on the creation of safer walking and cycling routes to and from school. They are important because the method used to reach school each day will set up habits amongst children that are difficult to break later in life. It is important that young people learn to walk and use bicycles or public transport both for their own health and to reduce pollution and traffic congestion. Many schools have taken useful local initiatives in response to the work that has been done by central and local government.



The National Society/Church House Publishing has published:

*Children and Bereavement*, Duffy, Wendy, 1995

*Children and Divorce*, Smith, Roger and Bradford, John, 1997

which are both useful resources for those involved in 'informal social work'.

More details of all the issues raised in this chapter can be found on [www.churchschools.co.uk](http://www.churchschools.co.uk).