

What parents think of schools

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'Parent power' is a phrase that has been increasingly used by politicians and the media in recent years. New legislation, initiatives and a general shift in attitude mean that parents have more influence in how schools are run than they did in the past.

The purpose of this review is to summarise what is currently known about what parents think of their children's school by reviewing the most recent quantitative and qualitative research into their views. It will also draw on a range of research to identify what parents want and expect from schools.

The review focuses almost exclusively on research carried out in England in recent years. Throughout the review the word 'parents' should be taken also to include guardians and carers of children.

1. How can parents influence schools?

There are a number of ways in which parents are empowered to influence school policy.

Schools have a statutory duty to survey and respond to parents' views on a range of issues, and to involve parents in decision-making. Schools are required to include evidence of how they do this in their Self-Evaluation Form (SEF) for the purposes of Ofsted and an assessment of how well a school works with parents is a mandatory part of inspections.

Since the start Ofsted has invited parents to give inspectors their views about their child's school through a questionnaire, and initially a meeting was held with parents to discuss the inspection result. Since April 2007, it has also had powers to consider whether to investigate certain complaints made about schools by parents and other individuals. To qualify, a complaint must relate to concerns about a school in general rather than issues concerning specific pupils. In 2008-09, there was one immediate inspection triggered by a parental complaint.

Parents can elect parent governors on to the school governing body. All schools are encouraged to set up parent councils and this is a statutory requirement for Trust schools if the trust appoints the majority on the governing body. Trust schools are state-funded foundation schools supported by a charitable trust. A parent council acts as a forum to facilitate consultation with parents by the senior management and governors and to provide a conduit

Key points

- Research suggests that academic results are not as important to most parents as is often assumed.
- Parents value factors such as good discipline, the happiness of their child and good communication between school and home more than exam results.
- Ease of communication with the school and the provision of clear, accessible and regular information about their child's progress is a priority for many parents.
- Many parents are keen to be more involved in school life and in supporting their children's education outside school.
- Parents recognise that there is a need for some form of standardised testing of children as they progress through primary school but they are concerned about the stress tests can create for children.
- Although recent research suggests parents of children with SEN are generally satisfied with the support their child is receiving, provision seems to be patchy and many parents are not as involved as they would like to be.

for those views to reach those in charge.

Parents also have the right to set up their own schools with state funding by setting up a trust or charity on which a voluntary or foundation school is established. However, the bureaucracy currently involved in the process is a significant obstacle to parent groups wishing to do so.

2. How satisfied are parents with schools?

2 i. Surveys by the Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF)

The most recent research available from the DCSF at the time of writing, the *Survey of*

parents in England 2008 (DCSF-RW-041), involved a telephone survey of a nationally representative sample of 2,000 parents of children aged four to 16. It found the majority of parents (94%) to be 'satisfied' with their children's school, with 73% 'extremely' or 'very' satisfied.

Only 4% of parents reported being dissatisfied, with half of these extremely or very dissatisfied. Among the dissatisfied parents, the main concerns were poor quality teaching, antisocial behaviour, bullying or discipline problems, exam results and academic standards, and special needs provision.

Some 58% of parents thought their child's school very good at dealing with parents' concerns, 29% fairly good and 5% felt it was poor.

In the DCSF's three-year *Customer Perception Tracking Study* (DCSF-RR-256), 1,207 parents of children and young people aged up to 19 were surveyed by telephone. The surveys took place in three waves concluding in January 2009.

The study found primary schools consistently rated more highly than secondary schools with 92% of respondents rating them as very or quite good whereas 75% gave this rating to secondary schools.

In the final wave, only 6% of parents rated behaviour at their local school as poor (down from 12% in the first wave).

2 ii. Schools' own surveys

Many schools have been carrying out surveys of parents' views for years. However, the process has become increasingly important since Ofsted inspections have been required to assess how well schools engage with parents. Areas inspected include the quality of general communication, how well information about children's academic and personal development is communicated, how parents are consulted and their views acted upon, and how they are supported to become involved in their children's education. Schools must offer evidence of their practice in these areas in their Self-Evaluation Form (SEF).

A number of bodies and private companies survey parents on behalf of individual schools and use the findings to produce benchmarking figures against which schools can compare their own parent responses. This review focuses on data from two of the largest specialists in school self-evaluation.

2 ii a. Data from the Centre for Successful Schools (CfSS)

The main function of the Centre for Successful

Schools at Keele University is to support schools by carrying out a range of attitudinal surveys of pupils, staff and parents. Most participating schools are maintained secondary schools from a wide range of different locations and socio-economic environments.

The CfSS keeps a database of average respondent satisfaction levels for comparison purposes. The following figures are drawn from responses from 21,213 secondary school parents surveyed between 2006 and 2009. Parent response rates vary but most schools return between 20 and 50% of questionnaires sent out.

Analysis of the surveys suggests that most respondents are satisfied with their child's school:

- 90% say they would recommend it to friends
- 76% agree that it is achieving high educational standards
- 79% believe that the standards of teaching are high in most cases
- 92% are generally satisfied with the progress their child is making
- 86% say their child is happy at school all or most of the time
- 69% feel it is maintaining high standards of behaviour; just under a quarter of parents would like to see stricter discipline but only 9% say the school could do more to deal with bullying.

2 ii b. Data from Kirkland Rowell

Kirkland Rowell is a company specialising in school self-evaluation which undertakes surveys for just under half of the schools in the UK and is a recommended partner of the Association of School and College Leaders (ASCL). It has been collecting data since 1998 and has used this to refine its survey questionnaires and produce benchmarking figures which allow schools to compare their results with those of other similar schools.

Kirkland Rowell questionnaires ask parents to rate a wide range of academic and non-academic aspects of the school on a scale of 1 to 5. This information is used to calculate average satisfaction levels across all schools for the purposes of benchmarking. These are expressed as overall percentages of parents who are satisfied with the aspects of their children's schooling. The following represents a selection of percentages of satisfied parents:

- Progress in core academic subjects (English, maths, science): between 70% and 75% for both primary and secondary schools
- Discipline: primary 77%, secondary 68%
- Teaching quality: primary 80%, secondary 70%
- Teaching for special needs: primary 73%, secondary 70%
- Encouraging and listening to parents' views: primary 71%, secondary 62%
- Promoting racial harmony: primary 75%, secondary 70%

3. What do parents want from schools? An overview

The Kirkland Rowell questionnaires also give parents a list of 20 areas that are usually considered to be important to parents. They are then asked to pick the 10 they feel are most important. The top three priorities for both primary and secondary schools are (average percentage selecting each):

- Teaching quality: primary 87%, secondary 86%

- Discipline: primary 87%, secondary 86%
- Happiness of child: primary 86%, secondary 80%

Exam results were seen as a priority for only 49% of secondary school parents.

Parents are then asked to choose one thing from the list that would be their priority for improvement at their children's school. The following represents the average percentage of parents selecting each across all schools:

Secondary

- Discipline 10%
- School communication 9.97%
- Teaching quality 9.81%

Exam results are quite a long way down the list at 3.44%.

Primary

- Developing potential 11.47%
- School communication 10.79%
- Suitable class sizes 9.60%

Use of testing and exams was only top priority for 1.54%.

A poll to find out what parents really want from schools was undertaken in 2009 by Ipsos MORI on behalf of *Prospect* magazine. Results were reported in the April 2009 issue of the magazine. The poll, which involved just over 1,000 parents, identified a number of priorities and provides a useful general overview of what parents want.

When asked about what makes a good school, the percentages of parents who considered these things to be essential were as follows:

- Good discipline 82%
- Well qualified teachers 81%
- Full and stable staffing levels 79%
- Provision of computers and technology 73%
- Regular communication about their child's progress 70%
- Clean, well-maintained premises 66%
- Good academic results 56%

Only 10% of respondents considered a selective intake to be essential with just over half saying they felt selection was unnecessary. For 74%, a broad ability intake was either essential (35%) or desirable (39%). Unsurprisingly, smaller classes sized of around 20 were preferred to larger ones.

When asked whether they supported the idea of schools being run by private companies or charities, 22.7% were for the idea while 40.1% were against it. Almost half of parents are welcoming of a scheme which allows them to set up their own schools, although only 10% said they thought parents were the most appropriate people to manage schools; 39% felt it was more appropriate for local authorities to be in charge and 32% cited teachers as the most appropriate group to run schools. Profit-making companies and charities were far less popular choices being named by only 3% each and religious groups by less than 1%.

When asked about good ways of getting involved with the school, face to face contact scored highly with 75% of parents surveyed saying that being invited to regular meetings was either essential or very important. Regular access to their child's teacher was essential or very important for 53% of parents.

4. What do parents want from schools regarding specific issues?

4 i. Communication and involvement

Parental involvement in children's education (DCSF-RR-034), a 2007 telephone survey of over 5,000 parents of children aged 5 to 16, found that just over half of parents reported feeling very involved with their child's school life. In the view of 86%, the school provided clear information and 92% said they felt the school was welcoming to parents.

Informal discussions with school staff were seen as the single most useful way of finding out about children's progress in school with 28% stating that they found them the most useful. This form of communication was particularly valued by parents of primary school pupils.

The *Parental Opinion Survey 2009* (DCSF-RR-194), which consulted a representative sample of 2,384 parents with children aged up to 19, found that many parents who currently don't feel involved with their children's education are keen to be so. Parents' evenings played a major role in transferring information and three quarters of parents had attended a parents' evening in the past year. A quarter would like parents' evenings to be more frequent.

The charities Parentline Plus and the Teacher Support Network surveyed parents via their websites and the results are reported in *Beyond the school gate* (2009). In the surveys, 57% of parents reported having a positive relationship with their child's school. However, 62% complained that they had been 'patronised, sidelined or ignored' when they had tried to deal with an issue in the school with which they were not happy.

Other surveys have found that parents would like changes in the frequency and nature of communication from the school. *Parents as Partners* (DCSF-RR-110), a report commissioned by the DCSF which summarises qualitative research carried out at three deliberative events involving parents and practitioners held in London, Leeds and Birmingham in September 2008, reveals that many would like more access to teachers and schools. Some parents said that the only communication they have with teachers is at parents' evenings or when there is a problem with their child.

These feelings were echoed in a poll of 1,300 parents in England carried out by Opinion Matters for the Training and Development Agency in early 2009 to assess the impact of the introduction of Parent Support Advisers into schools. It found that more than half of parents (53%) would like more interaction with their child's school. A significant percentage (40%) were unclear about who to contact with a concern regarding their child's behaviour or attendance and a third wouldn't know who to talk to about a family issue affecting their child's schooling.

The 2009 '*Oh nothing much*' report from Becta (formerly the British Educational Communications and Technology Agency), which surveyed 1,000 parents of children aged 7 to 14, found that 43% find it difficult to get their child to tell them about what they have been doing at school. It also found that 82% of parents would like schools to keep them better informed.

Schools and Parents: A new partnership, another 2009 Becta survey of over 2,000 parents and 1,000 teachers, found that over half of parents contact their child's teacher only once a term or less and 37% would like advice on how to improve their relationship with the teacher.

I'm stuck – can you help me?, a Becta survey of 2,000 children aged 9 to 13 and their parents conducted in January and February 2010, focused on learning outside the classroom. It found that the majority of parents surveyed (81%) want more guidance and advice on how best to support their children's learning outside school. A large number of parents (84%) reported that their child's school provides them with few or no resources to support their child's learning at home.

4 ii. Online communication

By September 2010, secondary schools will be expected to report online to parents about their child's progress. Primary schools will be expected to report online by September 2011.

For 70% of the parents in the Prospect survey, regular communication of their child's progress was seen as essential. Weekly progress updates available on the internet would be welcomed by 68%, while 11% considered this to be essential.

Of respondents in *Parental involvement in children's education*, 80% said they would like real-time reporting of progress on a secure website.

Informality, openness and ease of access to information is particularly important to 'hard to engage' parents. *Parents as Partners – 'Harder to Engage' Parents* (DCSF 2009) – small scale qualitative research based on discussions with focus groups – found that the parents favoured communication by email and text message and would like to see a regularly updated parents page containing essential information on the school website.

An internet poll of 2,058 parents by Populus in December 2008 echoes these sentiments. It found that 95% of parents believe that effective use of technology can help their child to learn, 65% of parents believe their child's school is making the most effective use of technology to support learning and 72% think the school is keeping pace with technological development. However, despite the fact that virtually all the parents interviewed had access to an email account and mobile phone and 94% said they find it easier to keep in touch via text and email, only 30% said their child's school used these methods to communicate with them.

4 iii. Special educational needs

Around 20% of the school population has special educational needs (SEN).

The Lamb Inquiry was set up to investigate how parental confidence in the SEN assessment process might be improved. The Inquiry commissioned a web-based survey involving almost 2,000 parents of children with SEN, which was carried out during May and June 2009. A series of consultation events was also held during July 2009.

The survey found that 85% of parents of children with SEN are satisfied with the current school placement for their child. Those who expressed dissatisfaction frequently mentioned inadequate understanding of their child's special needs on the part of the school, teachers and support staff, reluctance to listen to parents' views and respond flexibly to their child's needs and leaping to conclusions about parenting skills, especially regarding behaviour.

The Inquiry found that 'good, honest and open communication' is one of the important things parents want from schools. They voiced

a preference for face-to-face communication and want to be treated as equal partners who have expertise in their children's needs.

They also want the system to be ambitious in terms of their children's achievement, not just in academic terms, but also in emotional, social and behavioural terms. However, 39% of parents said that their child's school had not discussed specific aims and outcomes for their child with them.

In addition, *Parental involvement in children's education* found that although parents of children with SEN statements were more likely to feel very involved in their child's education (63% as opposed to 51% of all parents surveyed), 73% wanted to be even more involved.

The General Teaching Council for England's *Parents' views on testing in schools* found that parents of children with special needs who were being educated in mainstream schools wanted more regular updates on their child's progress.

4 iv. School choice and admissions

The *Survey of parents in England 2008* found that 71% of parents felt there was a good choice of state-funded schools in their area, while 25% disagreed with this; 66% of parents felt that it was important to have a variety of types of school in the area to choose from.

The *Local Authority Commissioning Pathfinder Study: Report to the Department for Children, Schools and Families*, published in March 2010, includes parental surveys conducted in 2008 and 2009. Each survey involved a national sample of 2,000 parents of children aged 5 to 16 in England plus samples of 500 parents from each of five different local authorities: Bolton, Essex, Gloucestershire, Kent and Sheffield. One of the purposes of the surveys was to find out about factors affecting parents' choice of school.

The surveys found that proximity was the most important consideration for parents when choosing a school – cited by 59% of parents in both years. Academic standards and reputation of the school were cited by only around a quarter of parents, although academic factors were more likely to be mentioned by parents of higher socio-economic status.

Parental choice of primary school in England: what 'type' of school do parents choose? (Burgess et al), a report by the Centre for Market and Public Organisation at the University of Bristol, used a sample of 11,533 parents drawn from the Millennium Cohort Study, a longitudinal observational study of babies born in the UK between September 2000 and January 2002 co-ordinated by the Centre for Longitudinal Studies at London's Institute of Education. It also used a range of administrative data from the DCSF.

The study also found proximity of the school to be the most important factor, with a quarter of parents citing this. Only 16% of parents cite academic standards as being of most importance in their choice. Again, the more educated and socially advantaged parents were more likely to be concerned with academic standards than those with lower educational attainment and socio-economic status.

However, the report looks not only at what parents say, but also what they do when it comes to actually choosing a school. It found that socially advantaged parents are more likely than the above figures suggest to choose a

school with better academic performance and, even more markedly, tend to choose schools with lower numbers of children receiving free school meals. In effect, parents are considering social composition when choosing schools, even though they do not admit to it. It was also noted that parents of lower socio-economic status are less likely to apply to schools in more socially advantaged areas.

Hansen, Joshi and Dex (2010), again using the Millennium Cohort Study, found that between 4% and 7% of parents of primary children would have preferred another school but did not put it on the list as they knew they were unlikely to be successful.

Earlier research, *Secondary School Admissions* (DCSF-RR-020, 2008), a study carried out by Sheffield Hallam University and the National Centre for Social Research, involving a telephone survey of over 2,000 parents, looked at the factors influencing parents when they visited prospective secondary schools. It found they were most influenced by the behaviour and appearance of the pupils and records on attendance and bullying. Just under half of parents also said they were influenced by facilities and school staff and leadership. Only a third of parents mentioned academic results or 'league tables'.

4 v. Parental satisfaction with school placements

The most recent figures, released in March 2010, show that 83.2% of families were given a place at their first preference of school. The figure is the same as the previous year. However, the situation is different in some parts of the country such as London and Birmingham which both had 66% of families given a place at their first choice of school.

The 2009 *Statistical First Release* (DCSF SFR 13/2009) provides information about appeals by parents during the academic year 2007-08 because their child had not been admitted to the school of their choice. The number of appeals across all schools was slightly up from the previous year – 86,020 appeals were lodged of which 19,150 were decided in favour of the parents. Of the 80,010 appeals lodged in 2006-07, 19,450 were decided in favour of the parents.

The research report *Secondary School Admissions* (DCSF-RR-020, 2008) looked at satisfaction levels among parents of children who started secondary school in September 2006. In that year, around 85% of parents had gained their first choice school, although the figure for London was 72%. Nationally 93% of parents gained either their first or second choice. Once children were at the school, 95% of the parents who gained their first choice were satisfied and 82% of parents whose child did not attend their first choice school were also satisfied. Some 81% of parents surveyed said they were satisfied with the choice of schools in their area. More than 90% of parents were satisfied with the provision of information to enable them to make their choice.

4 vi. Parents' views on attainment data

As the Prospect survey shows, good academic results were considered to be essential by only 56% of parents, coming well down the list of priorities. In the Kirkland Rowell surveys, exam results were seen as an important factor

in what makes a good school for only 49% of parents of secondary school pupils – a much lower percentage than that which chose teaching quality (86%), discipline (86%) and happiness of child (80%).

When asked about their top priorities for improvement, based on the average number of parents selecting each across all schools, exam results were a long way down the list at 3.44%. In primary schools, exams and the use of testing generally, was a top priority for only 1.54%.

In the *Survey of parents in England 2008*, the school's academic success was cited by only 25% of parents as a factor they took into consideration when choosing a school.

The *School Accountability and School Report Card Omnibus Survey*, which questioned 550 parents in November 2008, found that 87% thought that the school's exam and test results were an important indicator of success and should be made publicly available.

With specific regard to the proposed School Report Card (dropped from the Children, Schools and Families Bill to facilitate its quick passage prior to the recent election) *Customer Voice Research* (DCSF-RR-112, 2009), which involved discussions with groups of parents of primary and secondary school children, found that achievement and progress were seen as the most important things to measure. However, parents also wanted the report card to focus on well-being and development rather than just provide statistics on academic achievement.

4 vii. National Curriculum testing

The data from the CfSS at Keele University shows a gulf between parents' views of national tests and their views of teachers' diagnostic testing with 47% viewing the government's national testing programme as helpful to learning against teachers' own tests, which are seen as helpful by 87%.

Parents' views on testing in schools, published in October 2007 by the General Teaching Council for England, was the result of qualitative research involving 36 parents who were asked detailed questions about their children's experience of assessment tests and their own views of them. The survey found that parents generally saw the results of tests taken at the end of key stages results as more to do with the reputation of the school than with the progress and achievement of individual pupils.

They also voiced concerns that the emphasis on tests influences teaching methodology and encourages teachers to teach to the test. It also puts a lot of stress on children and does not recognise achievements in other areas of the curriculum, such as the arts. In general, they saw teachers as being best placed to assess children due to their regular contact with them.

Parents of children at special schools or of children with special needs who are attending mainstream schools felt that national test results at the end of key stages were not so important for them and that continuous assess-

ment would be a more appropriate method of gauging progress.

National Curriculum Testing at KS2 (DCSF-RR-092) reports the findings of interviews with 936 parents of children aged 5 to 16. The report found that 44% were happy for the tests to stay as they are, while 36% said they should be replaced with another system. Almost a quarter of parents said the tests did not reflect their child's real progress.

Customer Voice Research: National Curriculum Testing (DCSF-RR-093), consisted of qualitative research carried out by discussions with eight groups of parents with children aged 0 to 11 years old from a range of socio-economic backgrounds (48 parents in total) in March 2009.

The majority of parents said they were in favour of testing in principle as they felt it necessary to measure the progress of children against their peers and to assess the effectiveness of schools.

Concerns expressed tended to be about the way some schools managed testing and a minority felt that their children were put under unnecessary stress prior to the tests.

Key points and conclusions

Despite the emphasis placed on academic results by policy makers, the research contains much evidence to suggest that they are not as important to most parents as is often assumed. Parents frequently say that they value factors such as good discipline, the happiness of their child and good communication between school and home more than exam results.

Ease of communication with the school and the provision of clear, accessible and regular information about their child's progress is a priority for many parents. A shift towards parents wanting more regular updates electronically is evident in recent surveys. Opportunities for informal, face to face communication are welcomed, particularly among parents of primary school children.

Surveys also show that many parents are keen to be increasingly involved in school life and in supporting their children's education outside school. They would welcome guidance from schools on how to achieve this.

There is general recognition among parents that there is a need for some form of standardised testing of children as they progress through primary school. However, there is some dissatisfaction with the system of National Curriculum tests currently in place. Parents' concerns centre on the issue of the stress they can create for children and there are also doubts as to whether the test results are representative of children's achievements.

Although recent research suggests parents of children with SEN are generally satisfied with the support their child is receiving, provision seems to be patchy and many parents are not yet as involved with their child's education as they would like to be. Some parents feel that schools do not work with them effectively to support their children and do not take their views into account.

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Acknowledgements

Thanks to the following for making data available for the purposes of this review:

Centre for Successful Schools, www.keele.ac.uk/cfss

Kirkland Rowell, www.kirkland-rowell.com

Prospect magazine, www.prospectmagazine.co.uk

RISE Reviews are published by RISE, the Research and Information on State Education Trust, and cover a range of education issues. RISE is an independent registered charity (No 283726) administered by volunteers. Its aims are to commission research and provide accessible information on state education. RISE depends on donations to continue its work.

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