

# Evaluation of Home School Agreements

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School of Education  
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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Research into the relationship between school and home has provided a body of evidence that improving parental involvement with education and schooling has many benefits including, for parents, better understanding of schools and education, for teachers, encouragement to raise expectations of pupils and parents and for pupils, improved self esteem, stronger social networks desire to go further in education.

Against this background, the launch of Home School Agreements took place in 1999, in accordance with the School Standards and Framework Act 1998, alongside other measures to develop parental relationships with school and education including extra funding for study support and the introduction of guidelines on homework. This study reports on a research project examining Home School Agreements in English schools, which took place between November 2002 and May 2003. The study aimed to identify models of practice involving home school agreements and measure the impact of the statutory introduction of HSAs.

The study consisted of two phases. In the first, 567 questionnaires were sent out to schools in 8 English local authorities, selected to give geographical and socio-economic spread, of which 361 (64%) were returned. The questionnaire focused on the introduction of the HSA, consultation and monitoring and the impact of the agreement. As part of this phase, 270 examples of home school agreements were received from the schools surveyed, which were then analysed. In phase two, 8 schools, 5 primary schools, 3 secondary schools, one middle school and one special school, drawn from across 7 of the 8 authorities, were selected as case studies. The cases involved interviews with the headteacher or key person involved in the implementation of the HSA, another teacher, parents and a group of pupils alongside other stakeholders where appropriate. The cases examined the implementation of the HSA in the context of the wider home school relationships and other policies in the school.

Section 1 of the full report discusses the findings from a survey of around 360 schools across 8 English local authorities. Key findings include the following:

- HSAs have been introduced in 99% of these schools, using a variety of sources of help, in particular the Department for Education and Skills Guidance for Schools, used in 4 out of 5 schools.
- Consultation with parents was reported in 96% of cases, although in almost half of schools less than 25% of parents responded to the consultation. Other groups consulted included teachers (92% of cases), governors (84%), pupils (53% and teaching assistants (47%).
- The reported rate of parental signing of HSAs was relatively high, with over three quarters of schools surveyed reporting that at least 75% of parents signed the agreement.
- Around two thirds of schools used some method to encourage signing, most commonly by letter (37%), with reasons given for not signing including antipathy towards HSAs, fear and concern over signing and apathy. Just over half of the schools asked pupils to sign.

- 42% of schools had monitoring and reviewing arrangements in place, and around 60% of the schools with arrangements in place intended to review the HSA every 2 to 4 years.
- More than half of the schools that took part thought that the introduction of HSAs had had a positive impact on communication of school expectations and responsibilities, and 30% or more thought it had had a positive impact on parents and teachers working together, parents supporting their children's learning at home, communicating the school role, pupil behaviour and homework.
- Concerning other aspects of their work, the majority of schools thought HSAs had made no impact, with the exception of administrative procedures where 17% saw a negative impact.
- Consultation with pupils, and pupils signing the HSA, were associated more positive impact, as was consultation with governors and teaching assistants.
- Further comments on Home School Agreements included HSAs being a burden, having no impact and being part of wider home school practices.

Section 2 includes an analysis of 270 actual agreements sent with questionnaires. Key findings include:

- The analysis revealed that a school signature was required in 91% of cases, and a parental signature required in 94%.
- Most HSAs had separate sections for signing for parents, teachers and pupils, in line with examples given in DfES Guidance.
- Content was mainly in line with DfES Guidance.
- The tone of the agreements was examined, and it was found using these measures that primary schools tended to use more 'friendly' styles than secondary.

Section 3 provides detailed discussions of 10 case studies focussing on the implementation of HSAs. Each case discussed background to the case, parental and community relationships, the HSA and a summary. The key findings are complex to draw out in this section. However, in most cases, the HSA was not being used in a way that was seen as successful by all parties involved.

Section 4 examines responses from three groups involved in the case studies - teachers with responsibility for the HSA, parents and pupils.

Themes from the teachers' responses included:

- the relationship between the HSA policy and the specific context of each school
- the use of the agreement as contract
- different audiences for the agreement

Themes from the parental interviews included:

- the predominantly low level of awareness of HSAs
- the HSA as a reminder of good practice
- the lack of need for the HSA in some schools

Pupil themes included:

- caution about involvement of parents
- content and style of HSAs
- the wish of pupils to have a voice

The report concludes with a section synthesising key findings and providing suggestions for policy and practice. The key suggestions concerned:

- the importance of integrating HSAs with wider home school relationships
- the need for wide consultation including pupils
- a suggested review of the statutory nature of Home School Agreements

## INTRODUCTION

### *Background to the Study*

Under Sections 110 and 111 of the School Standards and Framework Act 1998, schools were legally obliged to take reasonable measures to ensure that all parents and carers of pupils of compulsory school age sign the Home School Agreement (HSA) and associated parental declaration (Department of Education and Employment, 1998:2). Prior to its adoption, governing bodies were required to consult with parents of pupils at school. In addition, they were required to take reasonable measures to ensure that all parents and carers of pupils of compulsory school age sign the Home School Agreement and parental declaration (Department of Education and Employment, 1998a:2). "Parents," the education minister Jacqui Smith explained at the launch of the initiative in 1999, "will be better aware of the importance of helping their child at school... In signing these agreements, parents will be acknowledging their partnership with the school to help educate their child."

School governing bodies were charged with introducing the agreement and for reviewing the agreement from time to time. Despite the importance of home-school agreements, breaches of the terms of the agreement by parents and staff however were not to be actionable through the courts (see DFEE, 1998a:1), since the aim was to situate Home School Agreements as part of a strategy to improve partnership, rather than a punitive contract. This was emphasised by its launch alongside other measures to develop parental relationships with school and education including extra funding for study support and the introduction of guidelines on homework

Following the 1998 Act, the then Department for Education and Employment published two documents for schools and parents, which are referred to throughout this report. The first, a guidance booklet addressed to schools and entitled, "Home-School Agreements: Guidance for Schools" (DfEE, 1998a) provided a description of:

- The reasons why the Home-School Agreement was introduced;
- How schools could go about introducing and reviewing agreements;
- What agreements should contain;
- What agreements should not contain;
- What makes for effective home-school agreements.

It also provided several samples of Home-School Agreements.

The second, a leaflet addressed to parents and entitled, "Home-School Agreements: What Every Parent Should Know" (DfEE, 1998b) described:

- A reiteration of the reasons why the HSA was introduced;
- The timescale for the introduction of the agreement;
- What areas the agreement would cover;
- How parents would be involved in the introduction of the agreement;
- Why parents needed to sign the agreement; and
- What happens if their children - or they - break the agreement.

The requirement placed upon schools since 1999 to have written Home School Agreements is an acknowledgement of the crucial role parents play in helping their children to learn. It supports the view that parents can help more effectively if they

know what the school is trying to achieve and how they can help. The aim was for Home School Agreements to promote partnerships between schools and parents: with better home/school communication, parents and teachers, will be able to work together on issues of concern, parents will support and help their children more effectively, and issues of concern will be identified.

This study aims to add to the growing understanding of the impact of HSAs, through a two stage approach.

The aims and objectives of the study were:

- To identify models of Home School Agreements. An effective Home School Agreement in this case is defined as one which sets the right tone for the home-school relationship and clarifies roles and responsibilities for both sides;
- To identify examples of good practice that have resulted in improving home-school relationships;
- To measure the impact of the actions specified on student outcomes;
- To measure the impact of the actions on perceived parental involvement.

The research questions to be investigated were:

- What impact do Home School Agreements have on parents' engagement in their children's education?
- What are the common identifiable features of home-school agreements?
- What are teachers' views of home-school agreements?
- What are parents' views of home-school agreements?
- What arrangements do schools have in place for monitoring and reviewing the arrangements?
- Based on the information what changes could be made to the statutory guidance on home-school agreements in order to make their use in school more effective?

The two-phase approach uses the following principal methods of data collection:

Phase One: Questionnaire survey of a sample of schools

Phase Two: Ten detailed case studies involving stakeholder interviews and group interviews of children in a sample of schools.

In addition to the analysis of this data, 270 examples of Home School Agreements were returned with questionnaires and a broad thematic analysis of these took place. In the remainder of this report, following a brief review of literature, Section One presents the analysis of the questionnaire survey data. Section Two contains the

analysis of HSA documents, and Section Three contains the Case Studies. A thematic analysis of the participants in the case studies is presented in Section Four. The final section concludes a discussion, and suggestions for policy and practice, based around the aims of the study.

*Parental Involvement in Schools and the Home School Agreement:  
A Brief Review of the Literature*

For decades, many parents, particularly those from working class backgrounds, have been excluded from, or at least peripheral to, educational debate and decision-making, largely because, due to perceived shortcomings, they have often been seen by school officials "as unable to participate" (Hanafin and Lynch, 2002: 36). In spite of the 1944 Education Act's emphasis on parental responsibility in terms of ensuring that their children receive full time education, it was not until the publication of the 1967 Plowden Report that parents' and school's role within education were clarified. The Plowden Report emphasised that parents were as accountable as schools for enhancing or limiting pupils' academic attainment. Thus, for the first time the partnership between home and school was introduced as a necessary ingredient to the success of students in schools.

In the 1980s, parents were given enhanced rights in relation to their children's schooling. The authorities were given new responsibilities for ensuring that parents are granted the right to express a preference for a school, the right to access information (1988 Education Reform Act); and the right to participate in school decision making through representation in the governance of schools. There were also many development projects particularly with regard to reading which pioneered the close involvement of parents in work at home with their children to aid work in schools.

With this increased interest in involving parents and teachers together in education, and with the introduction of many parental engagement programmes, the 1990s was a time of experimentation and evaluation. Issues that were extensively studied during that period included the reasons why parents become involved in schools, the benefits of home-school relations, the impact of parental engagement programmes and the effect of power relations and parents' criteria for choosing schools.

In an attempt to understand the reasons why parents get involved in their children's schooling, Ramsburg (1998) reviewed the available literature, and found that parents' decisions tended to be influenced by three factors:

- (1) Their beliefs about what is important, necessary and permissible for them to do with and for their children;
- (2) The extent to which they believe they can positively influence their children's education, and
- (3) Their belief that their children and their school welcomes their involvement, for example by exhibiting welcoming signs at the school gate, using non-jargon words with parents, providing assistance and asking parents for their opinions and suggestions, and sharing information with them.

Other studies endorsed parental involvement in schools, identifying many advantages including the benefits to:

- (1) Parents and children, in that it enhances their self worth, strengthens social networks, and encourages the desire to continue their own education (Cairnery, 1996);
- (2) Parents, because they come to understand their schools and teaching and learning activities in general (Davies, 1988; Lontos, 1992);
- (3) Teachers, because they become encouraged by parental support to raise their expectations of both the children and parents (SOED, 1996)

Other studies provided evidence of the problems that teachers have in working with parents as partners. For example, Cullingford and Morrison (1999) found, despite efforts to enhance links between parents and teachers, that relations were strained to the limit as a result of the legal requirement placed on staff to engage parents in school, and in education at home. Restricted by what they could and could not legally do, many staff were reported to feel insecure and threatened. Consequently, many teachers were found to be alienated from parents altogether.

Nuutinen (1999) examined the power relations between parents and decision makers or partners, and found the relationship between administrators and politicians problematic. Though at the grass-roots level, especially in the classroom, the teachers' autonomy did not seem to be challenged, Nuutinen found that, as far as their relationships with parents were concerned, teachers felt reluctant about sharing their professional power with parents. Issues of privacy and the need to distance the home from the school were some of the issues cited as reasons for this.

Likewise, Stoker (1996) and Bastiani (1998) provided evidence of how parental involvement as partners with teachers could very well end up negatively affecting their confidence and self-esteem. Stoker found that although many schools seemed to welcome parental involvement - particularly with reading - few had thought through the implications of what they ask of parents, especially parents with literacy problems or who did not speak English. Similarly, she found that many schools, even when they are aware of the problems, rarely suggest alternatives or solutions (Stoker, 1996: 39). As a result, Stoker (1996) and Bastiani (1998) recommend that schools should explore their current practices and work towards clearer, more relevant and realistic objectives. Furthermore, Stoker (1996) and Atherton (1991) note that schools should encourage parents, and exploit their skills in order to enhance their children's achievement.

Similarly, Reay (1998) in her ethnographic study of two inner-London schools, found that working class women who had poor educational attainment tended to feel rejected by their children's teachers. Even though all the working class women in her study helped their children with their education at home, the women's support, Reay noted, was characterised by lack of knowledge of appropriate educational standards, and uncertainty and self doubt about their competence as educators.

In addition to sometimes disempowering staff and alienating parents, Chapman (1996) felt that, despite the presence of students within the home-school rhetoric, and the fact that most home-school activities appear to establish the importance of students in principle, students, like many parents, were still being excluded from any form of decision making in schools. Justifying their exclusions by their 'immaturity,' 'unrefined reasoning process,' 'limited experience,' and 'non financial stake in school', students were thus excluded and disempowered.

As a result of awareness of these issues and of discussions such as Macbeth's work (1989) and the (National Association of Headteachers (NAHT) discussion paper ("Home-School Contract of Partnership" programme, 1990), the concept of using contracts to assure commitment and clarify school's aims and ethos, expectations of students and parents, and the responsibilities of the school has steadily gained ground.

On the one hand, politicians saw the introduction of home-school contracts as a valuable tool because it promised to enhance home-school relations and aid attainment. Similarly, according to one participating LEA (Bastiani, 1996: 13), the contract was seen as beneficial for several reasons:

- A contract highlights the awareness of the partners;
- Both partners begin with a shared set of aims;
- A contract reminds parents and teachers of the commitments they have made;
- A contract provides guidance for working together;
- The school could use it as a basis for reviewing the effectiveness of the partnership;
- When one of the partners is not playing their part the written statement provides a starting point for exploring issues.

On the other hand, some researchers (see reports in Bastiani, 1996) saw it as a "nonsense approach to sorting things out" (1996:12) and as a government attempt to deprive parents of their "freedom... to do things on their own terms and in their own way." (Ibid, 13). Similarly, the contract was seen as a statement combining expectations and demands without much consideration to families' disagreement with expectations.

Taking into account the advantages and disadvantages of contracts, the DfES proceeded, in The School Standards and Framework Act 1988, to require that all schools introduce a Home-School Agreement. Soon after this, in the most comprehensive published study of Home School Agreements, Ouston and Hood, (2000) reviewed the impact of the agreements on stakeholders. The study which focused on school's progress in implementing the Home-School Agreement and the school's attitudes towards the initiative found, following the analysis of a large questionnaire survey, and a small number of case studies, that there were no significant differences in attitudes towards home-school agreements between primary, secondary and special schools. Nevertheless, they did find that schools that did introduce the agreement before they were legally required to do so, tended to believe their teachers and governors were more enthusiastic than schools that were in the process of working on their agreement.

## SECTION 1: FINDINGS FROM THE QUESTIONNAIRE SURVEY

### *Methodology*

The questionnaire survey (phase one of the evaluation) had the broad aim of identifying the level of success of the introduction of Home School Agreements (HSAs).

The content of the questionnaire (included in Appendix 1) was decided in consultation with members of the project steering group, and was piloted with a small number of teachers in local schools.

The questionnaire was sent to a sample of schools in 8 LEAs across England, selected to give a broad geographical spread, a mix of urban and rural localities and an appropriate mix in terms of ethnic and socio-economic backgrounds, with the aim of providing a sample broadly in line with the characteristics of the country as a whole. The research took place in December 2002 and January 2003. The sample includes four broadly urban authorities, three broadly rural authorities, and one London authority. Questionnaires were sent to all secondary, middle and special schools in each authority and a sample of primary schools. Secondary, middle and special schools were over sampled to allow comparisons to be made. Analysis was conducted separately of different school types, but this is only presented where significant differences were found. The details of questionnaires sent out and received are outlined in Table 1.1.

The questionnaire data were entered into SPSS, checked and cleaned. Frequency and - for some questions - contingency tables are used, with chi-square tests for independence conducted using school type and a broad measure of impact (see below) as the explanatory variables. Where this test is used and presented, significance is measured at the 5% level. The term 'invalid missing' is used throughout this report as shorthand for responses that are missing but not accounted for by routing (in the case of, for example, questions that some schools were expected to miss out because they did not have monitoring arrangements in place).

### *Profile of the Sample*

Table 1.1: Responses received by authority

<b>Authority Code</b>	<b>Questionnaires sent out</b>	<b>Responses received</b>
A	55	37 (67%)
B	123	82 (67%)
C	56	37 (66%)
D	51	25 (49%)
E	61	32 (52%)
F	49	30 (61%)
G	69	47 (68%)
H	103	71 (69%)
<b>Total</b>	<b>567</b>	<b>361 (64%)</b>

As can be seen in Table 1.1, the response rate for each authority varied, with many authorities providing around two thirds response. However, Authorities D and E had a much lower response rate. This may be related to 'questionnaire fatigue': both of these authorities are frequently the target for evaluative research (in fact, one school actually sent back a questionnaire for a different survey by mistake). The overall response rate of 64% is reasonably high for a postal survey of this kind.

Table 1.2 below shows that just over half the sample was made up of primary schools, with 39 per cent of the sample made up of secondary or middle schools and the remaining 10 per cent being special schools.

Table 1.2: School intake of sample<sup>a</sup>

School intake	Number of responses	Percentage of sample
Primary	186	52
Secondary	96	27
Middle	42	12
Special	36	10

<sup>a</sup>Sample size = 360; 1 response missing

Of the sample, 279 (80%) were community schools, 8 (2%) were foundation schools, 37 (11%) were voluntary aided and 23 (7%) were voluntary controlled. 14 respondents did not reply to this question.

There were 16 specialist schools (4.5%) and just one City Technology College in the sample.

Table 1.3 shows that in four out of five cases, the respondent who completed the questionnaire was the Headteacher.

Table 1.3: Role of respondent<sup>a</sup>

Role of respondent	Number of responses	Percentage of sample
Headteacher	289	80
Deputy Headteacher	45	13
Assistant Headteacher	15	4
Other Teacher	12	3

<sup>a</sup>Sample size = 361; no responses missing

### *Drawing up and introducing the HSA*

Respondents were asked when their school had first introduced the HSA. The results are shown in Table 1.4 below. Over 90% of respondents reported that their school had introduced the HSA between 1997 and 2002. However, one in 5 (one in 4 primary schools) had not done so by 2000, despite the legal requirement. By 2002/3, the number of schools who had not yet introduced an HSA was very low indeed, at 1%.

Table 1.4: Responses to question - When was the HSA first introduced?<sup>a</sup>

<b>When introduced</b>	<b>Number of responses</b>	<b>Percentage of sample</b>
Before 1997	29	8
1997-1999	248	70
2000-2002	73	21
Working on introduction	5	1

<sup>a</sup>Sample size = 355; 6 responses missing

There were some differences between types of school with regard to this question, as shown in Table 1.5. On the whole, secondary schools were more likely to claim to have introduced the HSA at an earlier date than other kinds of schools.

Table 1.5: When HSA was introduced by school type (percentage within school type in brackets)<sup>a</sup>

	<b>Before 1997</b>	<b>1997-1999</b>	<b>2000-2002</b>	<b>Working on it</b>
<b>Primary</b>	9 (5%)	126 (69%)	46 (25%)	1 (1%)
<b>Secondary</b>	18 (19%)	60 (63%)	16 (17%)	1 (1%)
<b>Middle</b>	1 (2%)	36 (86%)	5 (12%)	-
<b>Special</b>	1 (3%)	25 (71%)	6 (17%)	3 (9%)

<sup>a</sup>Sample size = 354; 1 response missing

Before introducing the HSA, 321 schools (92%) stated that they had used some examples of good practice when drawing up their HSAs (11 missing responses).

Of these 321 schools, the types of examples used are shown in Table 1.6 (schools were asked to mark as many responses as were applicable). The most commonly used examples, used by four out of five schools, were from DfES guidance (DfEE, 1998a), however only one in five schools had made use of the DfES leaflet for parents (DfEE, 1998b).

Table 1.6: Types of good practice used in drawing up the HSA (percentage of valid responses in brackets)<sup>a</sup>

<b>Type of good practice used</b>	<b>Number (percentage) who used this method</b>
DfES guidance	257 (80%)
LEA documents	170 (53%)
Examples from other schools	196 (61%)
DfES leaflet for parents	68 (21%)
Other type	20 (6%)

<sup>a</sup>Sample size = 320; 14 responses invalid missing

Respondents were asked about groups that had been consulted when the HSA was being drawn up.

It is a statutory requirement that schools consult all parents (See DfEE 1998a: 1), therefore schools were not asked whether they had done so. However, schools were asked what methods they had used, the responses being shown below in Table 1.7. It should be noted that 13 schools that should have answered these questions did not, which may indicate that at least some of these schools did not consult parents at all.

Table 1.7: Methods used to consult parents (percentage of valid responses in brackets)<sup>a</sup>

<b>Method used</b>	<b>Number (percentage) who used this method</b>
Questionnaire	162 (47%)
Meetings	102 (30%)
Parent School Associations	111 (32%)
Parent Governors	218 (63%)
Working Groups	73 (21%)
Other method(s)	33 (10%)

<sup>a</sup>Sample size = 344; 13 responses invalid missing

Under two thirds of respondents consulted parent governors specifically and few schools used the methods that were most likely to gain a high response (questionnaires and meetings). Since so few schools used methods likely to reach all parents, it is perhaps to be expected that the response rate to the parental consultation was low in many schools, as indicated in Table 1.8 below. 71% of respondents reported that less than half of all parents responded to the consultation.

Table 1.8: Proportion of parents responding to the consultation<sup>a</sup>

<b>Proportion responding</b>	<b>Number of responses</b>	<b>Percentage of sample</b>
Less than 25%	149	49
25-50%	68	22
51-75%	43	14
76-90%	25	8
91-100%	21	7

<sup>a</sup>Sample size = 306; 48 responses invalid missing

Respondents were asked which other groups they consulted. Table 1.9 shows the results. Over 90% of schools consulted teachers, and 83% consulted governors (more than the 63% who stated they had specifically consulted parent governors). However only 15% consulted LEAs, and even fewer consulted school volunteers (although this low rate may in part be due to confusion as to the meaning of this term).

Table 1.9: Groups consulted in drawing up HSAs (percentage in brackets)<sup>a</sup>

<b>Group</b>	<b>Number (percentage) who consulted this group</b>
Teachers	314 (92%)
Pupils	179 (53%)
Governors	285 (84%)
LEA	52 (15%)
Teaching Assistants	160 (47%)
School Volunteers	28 (8%)

<sup>a</sup>Sample size = 340; 16 responses invalid missing

There were some differences between schools of different types in terms of who they consulted. Only 85% (76) of secondary schools stated they had consulted teachers compared with 93% (167) of primary schools, 98% (39) of middle schools and 97% (31) of special schools (16 invalid missing)<sup>1</sup>.

<sup>1</sup> p=0.029

However, whilst 62% (55) of secondary schools and 70% (28) of middle schools consulted pupils, only 47% (84) of primary schools and 38% (12) of special schools stated they did so (16 invalid missing)<sup>2</sup>.

Whilst 57% (101) of primary schools, 63% (20) of special schools and 43% (17) of middle schools consulted teaching assistants, just 25% (22) of secondary schools did so (16 invalid missing)<sup>3</sup>. Of the 28 schools who said they had consulted school volunteers, 26 were primary schools, one was a secondary school and one a middle school.

There were no significant differences between schools in terms of consultation with governors and local authorities.

Schools that stated they had consulted pupils were asked how they did so. The responses for these schools are shown in Table 1.10 below (schools were asked to note all of the methods they used). Lesson activities and school or class councils were most commonly used, with letters or after school clubs being used by only a handful of schools.

Table 1.10: Methods used to consult pupils (percentage of valid responses in brackets)<sup>a</sup>

Method used	Number (percentage) who used this method
Letter	9 (5%)
Lesson Activity	83 (44%)
After school club	5 (3%)
Class/School council	108 (57%)
Other method(s)	25 (13%)

<sup>a</sup>Sample size = 191; 20 responses invalid missing

### *Responses to the HSA*

Schools were asked what proportion of parents in the school had signed the agreement. Table 1.11 shows that over 90% of parents signed the HSA in almost half of the sample schools, and more than 75% of parent signed in over three quarters of schools surveyed. There were no significant differences between school types in terms of the proportion of parents signing.

Table 1.11: Proportion of parents that signed the HSA<sup>a</sup>

Proportion signing	Number of responses	Percentage of sample
Less than 25%	23	7
25-50%	19	6
51-75%	38	11
76-90%	94	28
91-100%	166	49

<sup>a</sup>Sample size = 340; 16 responses invalid missing

<sup>2</sup> p=0.005

<sup>3</sup> p<0.001

Respondents were asked whether they used any methods to encourage parents to sign the HSA. Table 1.11a shows the responses to this question. Although no single method was used by more than 37% of schools, around two thirds of the schools used some method to encourage parents to sign.

Table 1.11a: Methods used to encourage parents to sign the HSA<sup>a</sup>

Method used	Number of responses	Percentage of sample
Letter	134	37
Phone Call	64	18
Other Method	115	32
At least one method	237	66

<sup>a</sup>Sample size = 357; no responses invalid missing

Schools were asked if they knew any reasons why some parents did not sign up to the agreement. 99 responses (27% of the sample) were received. A thematic analysis of these responses has been conducted, and this is presented below. It is important to note the methodological problems with this question. Since in this survey teachers and not parents themselves were asked to complete the questionnaire, the responses are second hand. In addition, there is some evidence that some of the problems that respondents see with HSAs are being put forward as difficulties noted by parents. The qualitative case study analysis, presented in Section 3, examines some of the reasons why parents do not sign from their point view.

Respondents in this survey mentioned a range of different factors that they believe account for parental reluctance to sign the HSA. The themes were coded into the categories in Table 1.11b. Some respondents gave more than one reason, which is why the responses do not total 100 per cent.

Table 1.11b: Reasons given for parents not signing the HSA<sup>a</sup>

Reason	Number of responses	Percentage of sample
Antipathy towards HSAs	34	34%
Fear and concern over signing	27	27%
Apathy	15	15%
Literacy and language problems	8	8%
Antipathy towards school/education	7	7%
Oversight	7	7%
They all sign	5	5%
They are not asked to sign	3	3%
Mid term entrants	2	2%
No idea	1	1%

<sup>a</sup>Sample size = 99; 272 responses invalid missing

Sub-categories of the larger themes were able to be identified. Responses identified as citing antipathy towards Home School Agreements could be subdivided into three further categories. Some responses cited disagreement with the principles behind Home School Agreements. Examples included:

"Disapproval of the concept." (Secondary School)

"Some said they disagree in principle with this type of initiative." (Primary School)

"Those with philosophical objections to it." (Secondary School)

"Some [parents] said they do not agree in principle with this type of DfES initiative which some view as worthless as they already fully support the school in demonstrable ways." (Primary School)

What the particular principle referred to, whether it was the notion of contract or the notion of an agreed set of responsibilities, which are two of the different ways schools have interpreted the requirement, was not clear. See Section 3 for more on the different conceptions of HSAs held by schools.

Other respondents felt the antipathy was due to the fact that HSAs are not legally binding:

"Lack of 'bite' to the agreement – it is not a legal document." (Secondary School)

"They think they are a waste of time as they can be ignored at will." (Secondary School)

Other parents were reported to be against Home School Agreements because they felt they were unnecessary:

"They see no point. They fully support the school anyway." (Secondary School)

"Only two have refused both on the lines of 'I do this anyway and support the school. It is pointless and patronising to put it in writing.'" (Secondary School)

Fear and concern over signing as a theme could also be further categorised. Some teachers felt that parents had a suspicion of officialdom, which meant they were wary of signing:

"Big brother syndrome." (Primary School)

"Anti-authority culture." (Primary School)

"[There is a] suspicion of the politics behind introduction of Home School Agreement." (Secondary School)

Other parents were reported as not signing due to worries that they could not keep to the agreement:

"They did not feel they could do what it asked [one family]." (Primary School)

"Worried they won't be able to keep to the contract." (Primary School)

And some respondents stated that parents were concerned that children were too young to sign (in primary schools). It appears that these respondents were discussing parents not asking their children to sign.

"Felt child too young." (Primary School)

"They feel it is inappropriate to ask primary age children to sign an agreement."  
(Primary School)

Responses that mentioned parental apathy included the following (many were just one word responses – 'apathy').

"Cannot be bothered/do not wish to sign any documentation." (Secondary School)

"Too lazy." (Primary School)

"Apathy." (Primary School)

Literacy and Language problems included parental literacy, highlighting the need for clear, simple language:

"Parental literacy." (Secondary School)

"Low literacy levels." (Special School)

Other respondents mentioned language problems, highlighting the need for translation into community languages (for more on how schools deal with this issue, see the case studies in Section Three):

"Find it difficult to read English." (Primary School)

"HSA not translated into community languages." (Primary School)

Antipathy to school/education as a category comprised those who felt that education was the school's responsibility:

"They feel some clauses are entirely the school's responsibility." (Secondary School)

"Education is the school's job, not parents." (Primary School)

There were also those parents termed by one respondent 'the usual suspects' by which was meant those who rarely respond to school requests or with whom it is difficult to make contact.

"We had a small handful didn't sign – the sort that rarely respond to school anyway."  
(Secondary School)

"A small minority." (Secondary School)

Oversight was due to forgetfulness or the agreement being lost, according to the respondents who mentioned it. Around 3% of this sample did not ask parents to sign the agreements, which accords with the evidence presented in Section Two that some schools are using an agreement that does not require a parental signature (as required in law), and two schools appear not to require mid-term entrants to sign an HSA.

An analysis was conducted comparing the method of parental consultation with comments on why parents did not sign. No real differences were found, except that

schools that consulted parent governors were most likely to cite antipathy to the HSA as a reason why parents did not sign, followed by fear and concern over signing, whereas those who did not consult parent governors were most likely to cite fear and concern over signing followed by apathy.

At this point in the questionnaire, respondents were asked whether they had approached pupils to sign the HSA. 264 schools (76%) stated that they had asked pupils to sign (14 missing). There were no significant differences between types of schools in terms of whether they asked pupils to sign or not.

Schools were asked where they kept the HSA. 60% of schools (212) stated it was kept in the pupil file, with only 8% of schools (30) stating it was kept in a contact book and 27% (95) stating it was kept elsewhere (10 missing).

20 schools (6% of the sample) stated that the HSA was available in community languages (16 missing). However, a number of schools annotated this question with a comment noting that the population of the schools was such that there was no necessity for it to be translated into community languages.

#### *Monitoring and Reviewing arrangements*

141 schools (42%) stated that there were monitoring and reviewing arrangements in place (27 missing). There were no significant differences between different types of school in terms of whether or not such arrangements were in place.

Those that said they had such methods in place were asked to note which methods they used. Table 1.12 shows that none of the methods suggested were used by large numbers of schools, and other methods were used by nearly a third.

Table 1.12: Methods used to monitor and review the HSA (percentage of valid responses in brackets)<sup>a</sup>

<b>Method used</b>	<b>Number (percentage) who used this method</b>
Parental Questionnaire	34 (24%)
Working Group	50 (35%)
Discussions with Parents	44 (31%)
Discussions with Pupils	32 (22%)
Other Method(s)	44 (31%)

<sup>a</sup>Sample size = 144; 23 responses invalid missing

The schools that had monitoring and reviewing arrangements in place were next asked to note all group(s) which had responsibility for reviewing the HSA, the results of which are shown in Table 1.13. In more than four out of five cases, the leadership group (senior management team) had responsibility, whereas parents had responsibility in just 11 cases.

Table 1.13: Groups having responsibility for reviewing the HSA (percentage of valid responses in brackets)<sup>a</sup>

<b>Group responsible</b>	<b>Number (percentage)</b>
Leadership Group	133 (82%)
Governors	77 (47%)
Parents	11 (7%)
Others	16 (10%)

<sup>a</sup>Sample size = 163; 19 responses invalid missing

Schools were asked how often it was intended to review their HSA. Table 1.14 indicates that in around 60% of cases it was intended to review the HSA every 2 to 4 years.

Table 1.14: How often is it intended to review the HSA<sup>a</sup>

<b>How often</b>	<b>Number of responses</b>	<b>Percentage of sample</b>
less frequently than every 5 years	11	7
every 5 years	20	12
every 2 to 4 years	101	62
every year	31	19
more frequently	-	-

<sup>a</sup>Sample size = 163; 21 responses invalid missing

### *The Impact of the introduction of HSAs*

Schools were asked a series of questions about the impact of the introduction of HSAs. For each aspect, for example impact on communication of school expectations, schools were asked to state whether they felt HSAs had had a very positive impact, a positive impact, no impact, a negative impact, or a very negative impact. Responses are show in Table 1.15.

Table 1.15: The impact of the introduction of HSAs on aspects of schooling and education (percentage of valid responses in brackets)<sup>a</sup>

Aspect	Very positive	Positive	No impact	Negative	Very Negative
H/S Communication of school role	11 (3)	139 (42)	177 (54)	2 (1)	-
H/S Communication of school expectations	21 (6)	167 (50)	142 (43)	2 (1)	-
H/S Communication of school responsibilities	14 (4)	162 (50)	150 (46)	1 (-)	-
Pupil attainment	4 (1)	57 (18)	257 (81)	1 (-)	-
Pupil behaviour	7 (2)	99 (31)	217 (67)	2 (1)	-
Attendance at school	8 (3)	64 (20)	249 (77)	1 (-)	-
Homework	6 (2)	91 (28)	226 (70)	1 (-)	-
Uniform	14 (4)	77 (24)	227 (71)	1 (-)	-
Parents and teachers working together	14 (4)	123 (38)	188 (58)	2 (1)	-
Administrative procedures	4 (1)	42 (13)	222 (69)	47 (15)	7 (2)
Parents supporting and helping their children's learning at home more effectively	8 (3)	98 (30)	215 (66)	2 (1)	2 (1)

<sup>a</sup>Sample size = 322 minimum;

34 responses invalid missing maximum

For the vast majority of these questions, the number of negative responses is tiny, with the exception of the impact on administrative procedures in the school. However, in most of the categories the majority of respondents felt that the introduction of HSAs had made no impact. The exception was on communication of school expectations and responsibilities. In those cases, more than half of respondents felt the introduction of HSAs had made a positive or very positive impact.

Other areas where at least 30% of respondents felt the introduction of the HSA had made a positive or very positive impact were on pupil behaviour, homework, parents and teachers working together and parents supporting and helping their children's learning at home.

An analysis of these questions revealed no significant differences by school type.

An overall measure of a school's view of impact was created by grouping all those who were generally positive about the impact, those who were generally neutral (i.e. thought there was no impact) and those who were generally negative. The responses to the other questions were analysed using these categories, and no clear differences were found between the two groups with the following exceptions.

Schools that were more positive were more likely to have consulted pupils than others (57% of positive schools, compared with 50% of neutral schools and 27% of more negative schools), and more generally tended to have consulted more widely. ( In particular, schools that were positive about the impact of HSAs were more likely to have consulted governors (87% of more positive schools, compared with 79% of neutral or more negative) and teaching assistants (51%of positive schools, 40% of neutral or negative schools). It was also the case that schools that believed that HSAs had made a more positive impact tended to have a higher proportion of parents

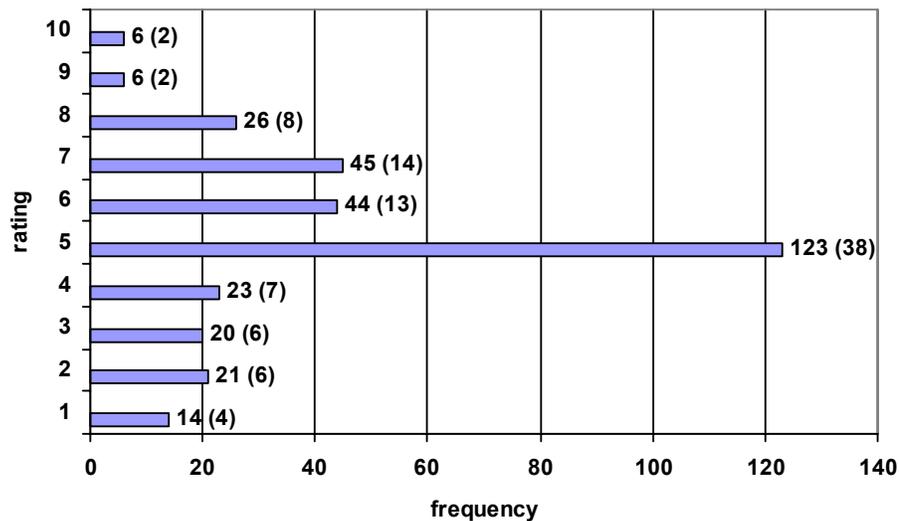
signing the HSA: for example, 18% of neutral or negative schools reported that 50% of parents or less signed the HSA, compared with 9% of more positive schools.

In addition, schools that were more positive about the impact of HSAs were more likely to have asked pupils to sign the document than others (79% of more positive schools, compared with 67% of neutral schools and 70% of more negative schools). These results add some evidence to support the view expressed in the Guidance for Schools that it was good practice to involve pupils in the HSA where possible, and also the wider call for more involvement of pupils' voices in schools generally.

An analysis of reasons given for not signing the agreement made by schools that were more positive, more negative and neutral indicated that there were some differences (bearing in mind that there were a relatively small number of responses to this question, therefore we must be careful when interpreting this). The most common reasons cited by schools that were more positive about the impact of HSAs were fear and concern over signing followed by antipathy to the HSA. However, neutral or negative schools were most likely to cite antipathy to the HSA, followed by parental apathy, and fear concern over signing. It is unclear whether these differences indicate a real difference in attitudes to parents' involvement in school more generally.

Schools were also asked to give an overall rating of the introduction of HSAs from 1 (very negative) to 10 (very positive). This question was asked primarily to give a rough measure of a school's overall view of HSAs to help with the selection of case studies, and the results should be treated with caution since the question is so broad that its validity and reliability are in question (a view shared by some teachers, as evidenced by annotated comments and the relatively high number of missing responses). Nevertheless, the results are presented here in the form of a graph (Chart 1.1) to provide a flavour of schools' overall 'feel' about the introduction of HSAs.

**Chart 1.1: Rating for the introduction of HSAs  
(percentage of valid responses in brackets)**



n=328 33 responses missing

The mode and median values are both 5; the mean value 5.26. 38% of respondents felt the introduction had been neutral, with 39% being broadly positive and 23% being broadly negative (33 responses missing).

#### *Further Comments on HSAs*

Respondents were invited at the end to comment if they wished on the Home School Agreement or this questionnaire: 78 schools (24%) made some other comment on the HSA. It is important to note that those who commented were broadly much less positive about HSAs than the others. For example, only 46% of those who commented were broadly positive, whereas 64% of those who did not comment were broadly positive.

Table 1.16 shows the categories of responses received. More than one comment was made by some respondents, so the percentages add up to more than 100 per cent.

Table 1.16: Other comments made on HSAs<sup>a</sup>

<b>Comment</b>	<b>Number of responses</b>	<b>Percentage of sample</b>
HSAs are a burden on schools	21	27
HSAs have had no impact	19	24
HSAs are part of the wider home school work	10	13
HSAs are unnecessary	6	8
HSAs are a symbol/piece of paper	6	8
Face to contact is more useful	5	6
HSAs would be useful to some schools	5	6
HSAs formalise what is already in place	4	5
HSAs have proved useful	3	4

<sup>a</sup>Sample size = 78; 283 responses invalid missing

Comments on the burden caused by HSAs focused on the administrative and bureaucratic problems:

"The HSA is an additional unnecessary piece of paperwork." (Primary School)

"It is only occasionally used for referral to behaviour issues etc. Unnecessary costs to school budget." (Secondary School)

"They may be of use somewhere, but for this school, HSAs have been a costly waste of very expensive time and material." (Primary School)

Comments on the lack of impact of HSAs were often just two or three word responses (e.g. "made no impact") but other responses could be subcategorised into two groups. Some respondents felt that they had made no impact because they are voluntary:

"No legal impact!" (Secondary School)

"Difficult to enforce." (Secondary School)

"The HSA is not statutory so nothing can be enforced by it." (Secondary School)

Others felt that there was no impact because links were already good:

"Communications and parent/family links were well established prior to the intro of HSA so not sure that impact of HSA has made any real difference." (Primary School)

"A piece of paper makes little impact. It is the ethos of the school and the quality of a good communication system that will make relationships with home positive." (Primary School)

"Those who already worked in partnership continued. A lot of work and it altered nothing!" (Primary School)

Several schools mentioned that they felt the HSA was a part of the wider home school work of the school, in line with the Guidance for Schools:

"We are proud of our home school partnership programme – this HSA is just a very small part of the picture." (Secondary School)

"Good practice and good relationships exist already (and continue to exist) with home links. The HSA reinforced what is already a good relationship." (Primary School)

"The HSA is only part of a much larger focus on home/school liaison." (Secondary School)

On the other hand, other schools did not see HSAs as an integral part of their home school work, but rather something separate and unnecessary:

"They have been a complete waste of time. They duplicate what we have in place anyway. We only do them because we are expected to." (Primary School)

"An unnecessary addition to work load and paperwork." (Primary School)

"Most parents, all governors, all staff feel the exercise has been a futile waste of time." (Primary School)

Other schools saw it as merely a 'piece of paper', again something separate from the wider work:

"Personal contact between parents and tutors and other staff is far more effective than a paper based Home School Agreement." (Secondary School)

"A piece of paper makes little impact. It is the ethos of the school and the quality of good communication system that will make relationship with home positive." (Primary School)

"It is a paper exercise, it has merely reinforced our practice. However, where there is little support at home a piece of paper won't help – the personal touch is all that will work." (Primary School)

## SECTION 2: ANALYSIS OF HOME SCHOOL AGREEMENTS

Schools that were surveyed were asked to send a copy of their Home School Agreement. 270 schools agreed, and these agreements were analysed using a quantitative coding frame (see Appendix 2). The frame was developed after a research team exercise in coding a sample of documents qualitatively. The main analysis of content uses categories derived from the Guidance for Schools document (p8 - 9), although some commonly found categories were not included in this guidance (such as pupils being asked to look after their environment). Some examples of Home School Agreements, showing the variety of documents produced, are included in Appendix 2.

### *Signatures*

In 91% of cases (246 schools), a signature from someone at the school was required (there was no requirement in the other 24 cases). Table 2.1 below shows the school signatures that were required:

Table 2.1: School signatures required<sup>a</sup>

<b>Signature</b>	<b>Number of responses</b>	<b>Percentage of sample</b>
School	64	24
Headteacher	148	55
Class teacher	52	19
Other teacher	10	4
Governor	37	14

<sup>a</sup>Sample size = 270; 0 responses missing

In the majority of schools, the Headteacher's signature is required. Only 14% of schools had a specific requirement for a governing body representative to sign. In around a quarter of the schools that required a signature, more than one signature was required (for example, Headteacher and Head of governors or Headteacher and class teacher).

Parental signatures were required in 94% of cases, with 6% - 16 schools - not requiring a parental signature, despite the legal requirement to do so. Children's signatures were asked for in 77% of cases (209 schools).<sup>4</sup>

### *Order of sections in the agreement*

Most agreements are divided into sections, with a list of responsibilities of the school (e.g. the school will: provide a broad and balanced curriculum; set appropriate homework; etc), a list of responsibilities of the parent, and a list of responsibilities of the pupil. The sample agreements provided with the Guidance for Schools used different orders of sections, although always with the child's section after the others. The order of the agreements we examined are presented in Table 2.2.

<sup>4</sup> This is slightly higher than the figure given by questionnaire respondents since the samples were slightly different

Table 2.2: Order of sections in the agreement<sup>a</sup>

Order of sections	Number of responses	Percentage of sample
School, parents, pupils	110	41
Parents, school, pupils	57	21
Parents, pupils, school	25	9
School, parents	24	9
Pupils, parents, school	23	9
Parents, school	14	5
School, pupils, parents	14	5
Pupils, school, parents	2	1

<sup>a</sup>Sample size = 270; 0 responses missing

The two most common forms of ordering are also the ones used in the examples from the Guidance for Schools. 14% of schools had no section on pupils' responsibilities, despite the expectation, in the Guidance, that pupils' responsibilities should be included (some of these schools may have used a separate document such as 'school rules' which we did not receive). However, one example given in the Guidance for Schools had no pupil section, so some schools may have thought that this was acceptable.

#### *Tone of the agreement*

The tone of the agreement is difficult to establish, yet there are differences in how accessible and 'friendly' agreements appear (this is made very apparent from discussions with students: see comments made in Case Studies in Section 3). Three measures were selected after much discussion within the evaluation team. These were clear and less subjective than some other means (such as attempts to define agreements in terms of how cluttered the page is). However, it is important to note that these can only be seen as indicators of tone. We do not intend them to be seen as indicating that schools which use particular forms of wording or symbols in fact have better partnerships with parents.

The first method used was to examine what form of wording was used to describe the list of responsibilities for each group. Word forms were grouped together as either of the form 'will' or the more 'friendly' form 'will try to'. Agreements that used the form 'will' typically stated, for example, that 'the school will: ensure that parents receive written reports, provide three parents meetings each academic year....', or 'parents will: contact the school as soon as possible if their child is absent; take holidays with their children outside of term time'. Agreements that used the form 'will try to' mentioned that parents 'will try to ... or will do their best to...'.

Agreements using both the 'will' and the 'will try to' forms were provided in the Guidance for Schools. Of the 270 agreements, 172 (64%) were of the form 'will' and 95 (35%) of the form 'will try to'.<sup>5</sup> Secondary schools were less likely to use the form 'will try to' than other schools: 22% of secondary schools used the 'will try to' form, compared with 39% of special schools and 38% of primary schools.

<sup>5</sup> Three agreements could not be coded in this form.

Although most agreements had sections for the responsibilities of pupils, parents and schools, some had a further section on what the groups would do together: often in the form 'together we will', for example, 'together we will: support children's learning; support the ethos of the school...'. This form, which explicitly recognises joint responsibilities, was used by 44 schools (16% of the sample). Secondary schools were also less likely to use this form than other schools: 5% of secondary school used this form, compared with 27% of primary schools and 12% of special schools.

A third broad measure of tone was whether agreements used a 'partnership symbol' of some kind, for example shaking hands. 35 schools (13% of the sample) used a partnership symbol. 21% of primary schools and 15% of special schools used such a symbol, whereas none of the secondary school agreements examined did so.

### *Content of agreements*

Table 2.3 includes the content of the Home School Agreements received, with the percentages of schools that mentioned each topic for school, parent or pupil. The broad categories taken from the Guidance for Schools are presented in bold, with sub-categories drawn both from the Guidance and derived from the questionnaires where they were not mentioned in the Guidance but have been used by a number of schools. These sub-categories are marked with an asterisk.

Table 2.3: Content of the agreements (Percentage of agreements)

	School	Parent	Pupil
<b>Standards</b>			
teaching quality	70		
balanced curriculum	58		
reflect the diversity of the school in teaching	5		
set individual targets	36		
pupils to work hard/ achieve to the best of their abilities*	58	22	71
praise/reward children*	10		
<b>Ethos of the school</b>			
attitudes of staff/pupils			40
respect and consideration for others			69
talk to teacher/ school staff if have a problem or concern*			15
foster link with community	2		
spiritual/moral/cultural/social development	33	10	13
physical appearance/equipment*		77	62
school environment*	17		49
<b>Attendance</b>			
attendance	43	94	56
punctuality		89	56
contact school when child is absent		58	
take family holidays out of term time*		11	
collect child from school on time*		5	
<b>Discipline and behaviour</b>			
work with the school on rules/behaviour codes		79	63
tolerance and bullying issues			12
support the school (general)*		33	
<b>Homework expectations of pupils, teachers, and parents</b>			
homework expectations of pupils, teachers, and parents	55	92	59
<b>Communication and information issues</b>			
comply with use of notes/slips		4	13
provide written records of progress	37		
share with parents progress report	77		
contact if problem/respond within 24 hours	22	78	
provide/ attend parents evening, other meetings, and consultations	43	87	
communicate with parents	52		
listen to parents*	13		
provide information for parents	71		
work with partnership/Involvement in education	52	49	

In terms of standards, the majority of schools mentioned providing teaching of high quality, providing a broad and balanced curriculum and encouraging pupils to work to the best of their abilities. A small proportion of schools mentioned praising and rewarding children and reflecting the pupil population in teaching.

Where schools mentioned ethos, the most common categories referred to pupil responsibilities in terms of respect and consideration for others and physical appearance/equipment (principally uniform - which was also given as a responsibility for parents in more than three quarters of cases). Links with the community were mentioned by very few schools, and although around a third of schools mentioned the school's role in spiritual, moral, cultural and social development, only around one in 10 schools mentioned pupils and parents responsibilities in this regard.

Parents' responsibilities for attendance and punctuality appeared on around 9 in 10 agreements, and over half of agreements mentioned pupils' responsibilities. One in ten schools mentioned taking holidays out of term time, and around 4 in 10 schools mentioned schools' responsibilities for attendance (for example, to contact parents if there was a problem with attendance).

Parents' and pupils' responsibilities for working with the school on behaviour codes or school rules were mentioned in 8 in 10 and 6 in 10 cases respectively, whereas schools' responsibilities in this area were not mentioned by any schools. One in 10 schools mentioned bullying from the viewpoint of pupils' responsibilities, but many other schools have separate bullying policies that were not included in HSAs provided to the evaluation team. Homework in terms of responsibilities of all parties was mentioned in most agreements analysed, although this can be a contested area (see Case Studies in Section 3).

In terms of communication and information, most schools mentioned providing progress reports, providing information in general terms and providing communication routes. Just over 1 in 10 schools agreed to listen to parents, and 2 in 10 agreed to contact parents within a short period of time if there were problems. More than three in four schools mentioned parents' responsibilities in terms of contacting school in good time if there were problems and attendance at parents and other meetings. Around half of schools agreed to work in partnership in pupils' education, and asked parents to do the same.

## SECTION 3: CASE STUDIES

### *Methodology*

Case studies, based on semi-structured interviews with a number of participants and study of the available documentation and reports, were used to enable a more detailed examination of how Home School Agreements were implemented in schools. This complements the survey data and analysis of Home School Agreements presented in Sections One and Two. The predominantly qualitative methods of the cases studies were used to understand what the events and processes associated with the HSAs meant for the stakeholders, and to contextualise other findings in the study.

The data gathered for the case study element included the schools' Home School Agreements, the questionnaire responses to the survey, other literature including Ofsted reports, school prospectuses, news bulletins, and, centrally, semi-structured interview data with stakeholders. Staff and parents were interviewed individually and in groups; and pupils were interviewed in focus groups and friendship groups.

Semi-structured interviews were employed to supplement the questionnaires because we believed it to be the most appropriate instrument to gain a thorough understanding of the stakeholders' expectations and experiences of teaching and learning, school problems and issues, home-school relations and the Home School Agreement.

Interview schedules were developed as the core for each case, but were slightly modified in each case, to take account of differences in questionnaire responses, and any specific issues that emerged from reading the documentation available on the school. The core interview schedules were piloted in order to assess the relevance, appropriateness, and clarity of the semi-structured questions. These core schedules are included in Appendix 3.

The interview schedule explored the stakeholders' views on the following issues:

#### Teacher Interviews

- Views on the effectiveness of agreements in improving parental involvement.
- Views on the effectiveness of agreements on pupil outcomes.
- Identification of successful practice in these two areas.
- Monitoring/ reviewing arrangements.
- Other views on the effects of Home School Agreements within school.
- Views on the place of Home School Agreements within the wider home-school practices/ policies employed.

#### Parental Interviews

- Effect of agreements on pupil outcomes.
- Effect of agreements on parents' involvement with school.
- Elements of good and poor practice in their experience.

- Broader issues of home-school relationships and policies in their experience.

### Student Interviews

- Extent of students' involvement in drawing up/monitoring the agreements.
- Perceptions as to advantages and disadvantages of the agreements.
- Experiences of the impact of parental involvement in relation to entering into such agreements.

### *Data Analysis*

Two analyses were conducted using the case study data. The first, which is presented in the remainder of this section, involved the creation of a set of case study narratives. These contain background information on the school, different interviewees' views of parental relationships in general terms, and views of the Home School Agreement. Each concludes with a summary of the key issues for that case.

The second, contained in Section Four, involved the categorisation of the interview data according to the interviewees: teachers with responsibility for the HSA, parents, pupil and other teachers/staff. This transcribed data were used to create main recurring themes.

### *Profile of the sample*

One purpose of the questionnaire survey was to provide the research team with a sample of schools for the case study phase of the research: schools were asked if they were willing to be contacted for this purpose.

48 schools indicated they would be willing to be contacted - 26 primary schools, 10 secondary schools, 7 middle schools and 5 special schools. Between 3 and 9 schools in each of the 8 authorities were willing to be contacted, and from these an initial selection process produced a list of 10 first choice schools across the 8 authorities, with first choices in each. 4 primary schools, 4 secondary schools, 1 special school and 1 middle school were selected. Many of these were engaged in good practice, according to Ofsted reports, with respect to home-school partnership work (although some were not) and there was a mix of schools in terms of their views on the impact of HSAs: most were neutral, with some positive or very positive.

There were particular difficulties obtaining the hoped for sample of secondary schools, and eventually the sample was drawn from 7 of the 8 authorities, to enable the research to include three secondary schools. Table 3.1 below shows the spread of schools across the selected authorities:

Table 3.1: Sample spread

AUTHORITY	SCHOOL	TYPE
Authority A	School Number 1	Primary School
Authority B	School Number 2 School Number 8	Middle School Secondary School
Authority C	School Number 3	Special School
Authority D	School Number 4 School Number 10	Primary School Secondary School
Authority E	School Number 5 School Number 9	Primary School Primary School
Authority F	School Number 6	Secondary School
Authority G	School Number 7	Primary School
Authority H	<i>No schools</i>	<i>No schools</i>

### *Participants*

Within each school, it was initially proposed to conduct interviews with the following (see also Appendix 3 which includes an information sheet sent to schools involved, and a recommended script for the first contact with the school):

- (1) One selected member of staff involved with the Home School Agreement (such as the Headteacher);
- (2) One member of teaching staff without Home School Agreement responsibility;
- (3) Two parents with insight into the workings of the agreement such as, parent governors, members of the PTA, or other parent with close contact with the school; and
- (4) A small group of students.

However, the research team were mindful of the need to be flexible, and in some cases these ideal numbers could not be achieved (see the individual case study narratives for details). The profiles of the case study interviewees are outlined in Table 3.2.

Table 3.2: Details of data collection in each of the case study schools and roles of interviewees

Case	Area	School type	Teacher with responsibility for HSA	Parents	Teachers/ other staff	Pupils
1	A	Primary	Headteacher	1 parent governor 1 PTA member	1 Head of Year 6/classroom teacher	Group 1: 4 Year 6 pupils Group 2: 4 Year 4 pupils
2	B	Middle	Headteacher	1 PTA member/learning support assistant 1 learning support assistant/parent	PHSE coordinator/classroom teacher	2 Year 8 pupils
3	C	Special	Headteacher	2 parents		
4	D	Primary	Headteacher	1 parent 1 learning support assistant/parent	Classroom teacher/ science coordinator	Group 1: 2 Year 6 pupils Group 2: 10 Year 4 and 5 pupils
5	E	Primary	Headteacher	2 parents	Learning assistant/ school governor	
6	F	Secondary	Assistant Headteacher	2 parent governors	Classroom teacher / Form Tutor Transition mentor	3 pupils: 2 Year 9, 1 year 13
7	G	Primary	1 Headteacher	1 parent governor 1 parent		
8	B	Secondary	Deputy Headteacher	2 learning support assistants/parents	Classroom teacher / Form Tutor	Group 1: 6 Year 9 pupils Group 2: 6 year 9 pupils
9	E	Primary	Headteacher	1 parent governor	Early Years Coordinator Home-Liaison Officer	
10	D	Secondary	Assistant Head	1 Carer	Classroom teacher	2 Year 7 and 2 Year 8 pupils

As can be seen from Table 3.2, most of the parents interviewed have some role within the school, so this must be borne in mind when reading the analysis. The characteristics of the sample in terms of gender are as follows. Of the teachers with responsibility of the HSA, 7 were female and 3 male. They were all white. Of the other staff, 8 were female and two were male. One female teacher was black and the

rest were white. 15 of the parents interviewed were female, 2 were male. There was one black male, the rest were white. 21 of the pupils interviewed were female, and 20 male. Of these, 5 were black, 6 were from South Asian backgrounds, and two were from Chinese backgrounds, the rest were white.

## Case Study 1: 4-11 Primary School

### Background

School 1 is a mixed, 4 to 11 community primary school, situated in an affluent suburb of a major conurbation in northern England. In the region of 250 pupils attend the school. Around 95% of the pupils come from white ethnic backgrounds, and there is a high proportion of pupils who come from professional, middle class homes. Around 18% of the intake have Special Educational Needs, and the school has a Moderate Learning Difficulties Unit attached to it. This case study is based on interviews with the Headteacher, another teacher, a parent governor, one other parent and a group of 4 pupils in Year 6 (2 boys and 2 girls) and 4 pupils in Year 4 (2 boys and 2 girls).

The school has received very good inspections from Ofsted in recent years, focussing on high quality teaching, leadership and excellent relationships between teachers and pupils, and between school and home. School 1 is a Beacon School, with areas of expertise including parental involvement (with specific reference to Home School Agreements), leadership and curriculum development. The performance on the national key stage tests is well above the local and national average in all subjects, and has been for many years.

The main development issues taking place in the school at the moment are related to their Beacon activities. These include developing training for classroom assistants, working on transition between years and developing ICT, although the Head says the school is “well ahead with ICT, but we keep looking forward and wanting to move on”.

The school ethos was mentioned approvingly by all adults interviewed. Part of this ethos is the school’s ‘open door’ policy – the Headteacher says “We don’t have locks on the doors, so they [parents] know they can come in, talk to us, they can talk to staff about things that are worrying them and that ethos has to be there before anything else”. One parent noted that the school is “very, very friendly” and that in contrast with some schools where parents are “not even allowed to set foot on the premises”, at School 1 “you can walk in and accost your child’s teacher almost! They always seem to have time for you... They’re very good at making you feel that you are the most important parent in the world, that sort of thing”.

Equally important is the development of the whole child. Again, there was a high degree of consistency between interviewees regarding this aspect of the school’s ethos. The Headteacher makes it clear that the school is not about performance in tests, even though test results are high: “this year the level 4s were actually the top in [our town] and we’ve come 4<sup>th</sup> in [our LEA]... We got that despite the fact that we’ve got a broad and balanced curriculum where we let the children know ... they’ve got to enjoy learning, you’ve got to enjoy it, it’s got to be relevant. We’re not here to get them to perform for a few days”. The other teacher says the school is about producing children who are “nice, balanced, rounded individuals who are happy with themselves and that may not be an academic route for some people”. One parent stressed “it’s the welfare and the education of the child which is central to everything and I don’t know how to put this diplomatically – the pressures being imposed... targets and stuff, are of secondary importance, and this school will not be bullied into making sure you get

100% Level 4 SATs [national key stage tests] in Year 6 because that's not what School 1's about".

The Head provides strong leadership and a clear personal commitment to the school's ethos, to the extent that she has clashed with the local authority over the use of numeracy and literacy hours: "We had more problems with the LEA because they kept coming in and saying it's the law. I said to them it's not the law. The National Curriculum is statutory, this isn't ... the maths people jumped on us and said literally 'Have you been doing the numeracy hour? – Your numeracy will be harmed'. I said 'in that case, you come in and look and see how my teachers are teaching.' We got everybody from the advisers from maths to all the numeracy team in checking up and saying 'Yes, we couldn't improve on it'. But they didn't like it".

The Head is also committed to bringing the parents along with the school, and communicated, by letter and meetings, why she felt the recommended teaching strategies were not right for the school. The Headteacher has understood the importance of communication with parents since she first started working at the school as Head of KS1 when part of her role was parental communication. Prior to that, having been a parent, she was aware that there was a view that School 1 was regarded as a school that had low standards – where "as a parent I was told [by other parents] 'Send your children here if you want them to be happy but if you actually want them to be educated, send them to the school round the corner.'" This still seems to be the case according to one of the parents interviewed: "We're not from this area, we're from [county], and when we moved here we were told it wasn't a good school, we were told the children never learnt anything but that they had a lovely time, there was no discipline". The Headteacher began a series of meetings and consultations to explain why the school, for educational reasons, took their own different approach (group work, not seating children in rows, project work) and this approach, involving trying to bring parents along with the school's ethos, continues today.

### **Parental and Community Involvement**

By the Head's admission, the school does not have well developed community links. Local church representatives come into school, groups use the facilities out of school hours and carol concerts for retirement homes are held but, in the words of the Headteacher, "there's not actually a lot to grab hold of, ... people tend to be very self-contained [in this area]".

Parents are introduced to the school's ethos before they start in a well developed induction process, known as 'stepping stones' where parents come to a series of meetings and are provided with letters and information, are shown around the school and progressively introduced to ethos and workings of School 1. In these early stages, parents are already told how the school operates. The Head notes "We've said to our parents all the way through if you're the sort of parent who looks for a high place in the league tables then don't come to this school." The other teacher noted "I think that's one of the advantages of the stepping stones, we can explain that to parents before they set foot over the threshold if you like. This is what we are about – so if all you are about is 5 A's at Key Stage 2, if you have a very academic child, that may be what they should achieve but it's not the be all and end all. They will achieve academically but we will also keep this side of the curriculum and ethos in mind."

The parents we spoke to supported this view. For example, one parent said School 1 was "a warm, friendly, caring school that is more bothered about the whole child than about just the children who are going to be top. They will find what is good in the child and they will bring it out and they won't put children under pressure at all, but they achieve fantastic results."

However, some parents still have to be 'schooled' in this ethos, according to the Headteacher: "So they really know what we are doing and why we are doing it. But then I feel that there are still times when they need to be reminded of it - I mean this mother in the PTA with a child in reception who was the most supportive parent possible... at the end of one of the year group meetings she said 'What I really don't understand is why you don't have the children in rows' - *[laughing]* All these years and I haven't got through to you why our children aren't sitting there in rows being taught!"

Within this ethos of openness, there are many opportunities for parental involvement with the school. For example, some parents are involved as classroom volunteers, or more formally as classroom assistants (one parent moved from becoming a lunchtime supervisor, to a classroom assistant and is now training to be a teacher within the school). There is an active PTA, which is involved with fundraising activities. Three parent governors are part of a governing body described by the Head as "very supportive - I don't know about pro-active - but very supportive, very hard-working". However the parent governors themselves were described as proactive: "the third one is quite a proactive one who has got two children here and is very much progress-minded and wanting to get them going but I think she meets with lethargy when she really wants to get them trained up!"

Friday assemblies to which parents and families are invited were mentioned in very positive terms by parents and teachers. For example one parent said: "If you go to Family Assembly, there is such a feeling of sharing, good and bad, and just the way they teach children [in these assemblies] is very, very clever". Other initiatives include the biannual 'Grandparents Day', described by the parent governor: "I think the grandparents really appreciate it. Obviously there is that issue of children not having grandparents - either they've died or they're not local so they adopt a granny - as they come in through the door - you can adopt someone else's granny! And the grandparents seem to love it. In terms of making school feel like a community, it's an excellent way to do it."

In addition to the stepping stones meetings, three termly year group meetings are held, an innovation introduced by the Headteacher who describes them: "At the beginning of each term for each class in the school there's a different night and the Head and the Deputy, the key stage coordinator and the class teacher meet with all the parents. It's deliberately set informally so there's a big circle and we scatter ourselves around so it doesn't look as if we're in a little group at the front and it starts with coffee and a chat as they come in and then the class teacher will talk about class issues like things children will be doing that term, a letter will already have gone out saying that we will talk about it in greater detail and ways by which the parents can help the children or support the class teacher or whatever. The parents then get the chance to ask their questions. If I've got issues I need bringing up I will bring those up with them and then any issues that the parents want to do generally ... but they tend now, for the

most part, to be fairly good social evenings ...". These are viewed supportively by the teachers (despite being very hard work) and parents.

The key word in all these aspects of the home school work of School 1 is "supportiveness" - a model of parents working with the school to achieve the ends of the school, although without as much emphasis on a shared 'partnership' approach.

### **The Home School Agreement**

In the context of the schools' well developed home school policies, the HSA policy requirement arrived as something that was seen by the Headteacher as being quite separate. The timing was unhelpful, as "it was a bad time because it was the time just before the [previous] Head was dying and it was a case of really this is the least of our worries at the moment", for example, "the Friday morning assemblies whilst she was ill were just absolutely packed with parents wanting to be there, wanting to find out how things were going". Therefore, the Headteacher drew up the HSA without consultation, having looked at guidance and rejected it: "We got the directive that there had to be Home School Agreements and we looked at some of the sample copies that were around - 'I will have my child in bed at 7 o'clock will be at school by ten to nine ...'. For a start I thought they were just ridiculous in that I really couldn't see how you would get anybody to stick to that and more than that, I was worried because I thought we have got our structures in place, we've also got this nice, open atmosphere." Therefore, the agreement was a short document, asking parents "to sign a very simple thing saying that 'You'll support us and we'll do the best for your child'. And where the child was up to understanding it that they would do their best at school as well, just to keep it very simple."

In addition, the Headteacher saw the document in the same terms as government policy on homework and the 'numeracy hour': "just another of these directives, as far as we could see, of the DFES wanting to interfere with the way we were running the school". Therefore, although the school complied with the requirement, it was seen by the Head as "a waste of time. It's paperwork. It goes in, gets signed and then gets filed away."

This view seems to have filtered through to parents, not least because the HSA was first sent out to parents "with a letter explaining that I didn't like it but that really we were only just abiding to the letter of the law; it wasn't really what the Government was wanting from us and the number of replies that came back supporting what we were actually saying and saying 'we think it's ridiculous but we'll sign it for you'".

The other teacher felt that the HSA may have been useful to formalise certain aspects of the school's home school policy, but clarified this by saying "It was just like another layer of bureaucracy really but it hasn't made any difference because our relationship with our parents is so good and if we want to see them or they want to see us they know they can come in at any time". The parents' views of the HSA were similar. One was supportive of the concept of the agreement, but felt it was unnecessary: "It was underlining what already goes on. Pretty unnecessary because the school is so ... the school/parent cooperation at the school is so strong, I didn't think we really needed this [...] [but] I think it's a good idea [...] I didn't object to

signing it I just thought well, 'hang on, isn't this what we're already doing?'. I would imagine that in some schools it would be quite valuable."

The HSA is not, according to teachers and parents, used on a daily basis at all. After signing when the child is in reception (or when they arrive), it disappeared from view. The teacher interviewed explained why, from the viewpoint of the school, it would not be used: "If you got to the point where you had to start quoting a signed piece of paper then you're in trouble aren't you? [laughing]. There isn't an underlying ethos that goes with it - you've reached a point of no return if you're saying 'You signed this bit of paper!'" The parents had never seen it used either, and had no need for it themselves, feeling that if they had any problems they could always talk to a teacher.

One parent was concerned that it may not be appropriate for young children at the start of their school career to sign the agreement, but the other noted that it had to be a three way document: "The Agreement is between all three of you isn't it? It's what you are doing with your child, it's no point me signing it, them signing it and the child's no idea what you're doing."

The pupils interviewed did not recognise or remember seeing the HSA (although this may have been linked to the fact that they would only have signed it once when they were much younger), however they had strong views on what should be in the agreement, specifically, that teachers ought to take more time to listen to individual pupils' problems and concerns, and provide for more independent learning. It is worth mentioning here that the school had for the past two years had a school council and class councils that were a new source of gathering pupil views that had, according to the Headteacher, made a major difference: "it is a really good vehicle for getting to know how children feel about things. The number of changes that it has brought around at the school, that I just wouldn't have been aware of. Some fairly major, some minor, but things that in any other way you wouldn't have found out about."

Given the low profile of HSAs in the school, alongside the opposition of the Headteacher, it is unsurprising that the HSA was not thought to have had any real impact in the school, from the viewpoints of teachers, parents or pupils. The Headteacher mentioned that there had been some administrative burden in introducing the HSAs, but this was the only effect of their introduction.

There was no intention to review the HSA, although in conversation the Headteacher ruminated on the possibility of removing the pupil signature for younger children (in line with some of the comments reported above by the other teacher and one of the parents).

## **Summary**

School 1 is a successful, well regarded school, with a clear, open and whole-child focused ethos. The induction process for staff and parents makes this ethos clear, so parents that choose the school are very well informed, and make their choice based on these values. This, alongside the constant information flows and open door policy, ensures a high degree of consistency between the school's and parents' views of education: parents are thus very supportive of the school. It appears to be strongly led by the Headteacher, who has strong views of how the school should be run and how

this relates to government policies. Most of the parents, it appears, share this view. Those that do not tend not to choose to send their children to the school, according to parents and teachers at the school: there are many academically strong alternatives close by. Staff share the ethos, and are encouraged to immerse themselves in it, as the teacher interviewed states: "any new teacher who comes in, the Key Stage Coordinator will – I mean I did, I sat down with the new teachers – you have to go through all the policy documents before you start and start with the ethos and the teaching and learning policy – [I say] ‘ I want you to come back with it covered with post-its asking questions and if it isn’t, I shall be a bit suspicious because I want you to realise that that’s the cornerstone of what we do and if you have any fundamental disagreements with it then we need to iron them out early on because we do operate in a different way educationally’."

Therefore, the partnership with parents in this school is genuine; yet based around a shared consensus led by the Head. This is not say the ethos is entirely led from above: according to the teacher interviewed: "We do spend a lot of time talking to the parents. In fact they were involved recently in an appraisal review of our ethos statement and our teaching and learning policy – they took a hand in commenting on that ... it was also put to the children to discuss and the staff so it’s not just a policy that is plucked out of the air because somebody says you have to have one. I have to say I think that that appraisal and review is driven by our Headteacher a lot. She’s got a very strong philosophy and wants to ensure that you are all in agreement with that, it’s not pushed from the top down, it’s built from the bottom up as well, so everyone understands what the school is all about – it works well."

The HSA was seen as a document imposed from ‘on high’ at the time of its introduction, and this did not fit with the school's view of the home school relationship, therefore they have complied minimally with the requirements, whilst leaving it peripheral to what is seen as the ‘real’ home school work. For School 1, HSAs have not been a success, because they were never engaged with as a useful addition to, or framework for, the home school policies and practices already in place.

## **Case Study 2: 9-13 Middle School**

### **Background**

Interviews were conducted with 2 Year 8 students on the school council; 2 parents on the PTA (known as Friends Association); a classroom teacher (and personal and social health education coordinator); and the headteacher.

School 2 is situated in a busy residential rural area in the South-East of England. Founded in the 1860s, it has developed from a boys school, to a girls school, to a grammar school, to a secondary modern school, and then to a middle school in the 1970s. The school today serves approximately 540 pupils from the town and the surrounding rural area. The pupils' socio-economic background characteristics are broadly average with almost 11 percent of the pupils receiving free school meals. While the majority of the student population are White British, there are a few who are of different ethnic backgrounds. Approximately 7 percent of the pupils have special educational needs.

Having been awarded a Chartermark for its good practice and for its high academic expectations, appealing school ethos, and dealing swiftly and appropriately with parents and students' complaints, the school is very popular. Asked to describe the school, the parents felt it to be a "good school" because it is run "very traditionally"; it has similar expectations to those of the parents; it has a "general school ethos that encourages children to achieve to the best of their ability;" and "it sorts problems fairly quickly." Parents felt, in spite of the fact that every now and then "there's always the odd grumble about, 'oh, we didn't get a letter about this'", parents are generally very happy with the school.

To enhance its profile, the school has been moving towards adopting multiple intelligences theory in its school curriculum in the hope of building upon the students' various intelligences (such as linguistic, logical-mathematical, musical, intrapersonal, and naturalist intelligences).

Furthermore, the school is attempting to create a more democratic school. Hence, parents' views are sought on a whole range of subjects including the composition of the Home School Agreement. Similarly, pupils' views and concerns are shared with staff on the school council. Discussing the school council, the students interviewed described their pride in their Council's accomplishments especially in regard to their role in purchasing a vending machine and a new bench for Years 5 and 6.

Homework, which reinforces classroom learning, is valued by the school and so every week, four primary subjects (maths, English, science, French or German) and another secondary subject (such as geography, history, or art) are assigned to all middle school students. Students who are unable to do their homework at home are offered support during lunch time and after school by the Homework Club. If, however, they fail to complete it after that, students receive an initial warning and then detention for their uncompleted work.

In relation to behaviour, the parents described the school as experiencing "the general hubbub in the playground..." which the school attends to immediately.

## **Community and Parental Involvement**

To enhance the school's relations with the community, the school offers its premises during weekends and evenings to local community groups such as sports groups, slimming clubs, concert bands, and other organisations. The school also holds open house social events for parents and the community.

To encourage parental involvement in school life and in their children's education in school and at home, the school has established several avenues for communication such as Friends Association meetings, parents meetings, writing to the school via post, electronic mail, student logbook, or via telephoning the school. Illustrating parents' involvement with and influence on school policy, the parents interviewed described how Year 5 homework which was initially seen by some parents as too much for these children was stopped altogether thanks to many parents' complaints to the Headteacher. Similarly, to demonstrate parents' partnership with the school, the parents interviewed described how the school proceeded to hire a modern maths consultant to tutor parents who were experiencing difficulty in supporting their children in modern maths.

Describing parents' relations with the school, the Coordinator of Personal and Social and Health Education and Year 6 teacher felt the parents are "ever so obliged [sic] to help out;" for example, not merely by signing their children's logbook, but also by running school fairs, and attending and cheering the football club in football tournaments. In his words, he summed up parents' support as, "Excellent support. Excellent support."

In spite of the many accomplishments brought up by parents, such as purchasing a van, refurbishing the school's computers and science laboratories, and reducing the amount of homework, the school finds it difficult to involve new parents. The reasons for this according to parents include: poor parental commitment, lack of motivation, and busy work lives.

Asked if the governing body is active in school, the senior staff maintained that "there is an involvement in what's going on in school life." Unfortunately, however, as far as the PTA's activities are concerned, he believed there is poor parental attendance because the activities do not match up with parents' needs. To increase the involvement of the "odd 20 percent (of parents) who we never see," the senior staff claimed the school was doing its best to involve parents by, for example, asking them to sign their children's logbook which notifies them about their children's behaviour, learning, and school activities.

Similarly, to assist parents in their role at home, the school holds occasional refresher courses for parents. Also, to encourage parents' and students' involvement in school and out of school life, music, sports, computer activities, and annual educational visits to local and European destinations are offered.

Asked whether they would like more parental involvement in school, the two students interviewed believed that parents have enough involvement in their academic and social life in school. One student said: "I think they're involved enough really." When asked for examples of parental involvement in school, the students interviewed, cited:

students' log book, Friends Association, parents evening, and drop-in meetings with teachers.

### **The Home School Agreement**

The Home School Agreement is perceived by the headteacher as identifying "the school's commitment to involve parents and pupils in improving learning for everyone through positive dialogue." Developed in 1999 for Year 5 students, parents, and staff, the Home School Agreement was introduced by the school as a venture to introduce good practice and to retain its educational award for excellence, the Chartermark.

After reviewing other schools' Home School Agreements and consulting with students on the school council, parents, and staff, the final draft was fine tuned and published. Since its development, however, the students explained that the document has been altered and has become part of their classroom code of practice. Recalling its developmental phase, the students remembered that parents and students were asked to sign it, merely "to show that everyone's seen it..."

Today, the new version of the Home School Agreement which is known as the "Classroom Code" for students, according to the students interviewed, shares the same basic principles such as encouraging the collaboration and support between peers during lessons. Whether the Home School Agreement makes any difference to parents and students, the students interviewed believed they do because, they felt, they set out the responsibilities of parents and students.

Unlike the students, the headteacher and the Year 6 teacher could not recall if parents and students were invited to sign. Nevertheless, the headteacher felt it would be practically impossible to expect any school to require parents, students, and staff to sign the document because it is not legally binding.

When questioned about the impact of the Home School Agreement on enhancing home-school relations, increasing attainment, homework participation, and attendance, the Year 6 teacher felt it was difficult to answer because data were not collected and analysed immediately before the document started and shortly thereafter.

Similarly, the Headteacher believed the impact of the Home School Agreement is difficult to assess because, he felt, one cannot rule out the impact of other school initiatives that are running concurrently with the Home School Agreement. Because the impact of the Home School Agreement was seen by the headteacher and the interviewed teacher as "difficult to measure," the school has thus excluded any future prospect of revisiting the document.

### **Summary**

Despite 20 percent parental disengagement, the stakeholders felt that their school enjoyed good support from parents and the wider community. Describing parental relations with the school, the headteacher and senior staff expressed their gratitude to parents not merely for the financial benefit they were generating for the school as a

result of their fundraising activities, but, due to, as the headteacher said, their pursuit to "improve learning for everyone."

Asked about the impact of the Home School Agreement, the staff were unwilling to answer for two reasons: first, because they thought it was hard to illuminate or detach the effects of other initiatives that were running parallel with the Home School Agreement from the equation. Second, because they felt it was difficult to tell the impact when the desired outcomes on the Home School Agreement have not undergone a pre- test, post-test evaluation.

Occupying a small part of the home-school work of the school and without legal status, we found the Home School Agreement has become absorbed in School 2 by other activities, and overtaken by priorities such as reducing undesirable classroom behaviour and composing a classroom code of behaviour for students. This, however, did not make the Home School Agreement irrelevant. On the contrary, it continued to be published in the school prospectus and students' logbook, but with some alteration to its content in order to make it more useful for the school.

### **Case study 3: 4-19 Special School**

#### **Background**

Interviews were conducted with the headteacher and two parents in this special school. The headteacher felt that it was not appropriate to interview the pupils who are autistic. The classroom teachers worked intensely with small groups of pupils and the headteacher did not want their routine broken to take part in the case study.

School 3 is a day special school for pupils aged 4-19 with approximately seventy pupils in a city in the midlands. The pupils are predominately boys with just five girls on the school roll. Five of the pupils come from homes where English is not the first language. Pupils attending the school are not drawn from the immediate surroundings within the city but come from a wide geographical area. All of the pupils have statements of special needs which in the majority of cases related to autism. The school originally provided for children with a variety of special needs but has over the years increasingly become a school which caters specifically for children with autism. A small proportion of secondary age pupils at the school have moderate learning difficulties, however when they leave over the next few years the school will cater entirely for children with autism. A key issue within the school is the admissions procedure: the school is widely recognised in the area as giving excellent provision for autism and ever increasing numbers of parents apply for the limited places. There are no significant issues surrounding behaviour of pupils, attendance or punctuality.

The school was described in the most recent Ofsted report as "a good school with many outstanding features...it is managed effectively with sensitivity and a strong commitment to providing for the individual needs of its pupils". The headteacher has been at the school since 1994 and according to Ofsted provided "very good leadership and a clear sense of purpose."

#### **Parental and Community Involvement**

The school has many links with the wider community and makes good use of the local environment and facilities such as parks, the supermarket, post office and library whereby the pupils learn to improve their social contact skills and get accustomed to new environments. The pupils also visit the local swimming pool and some enjoy riding lessons at the local stables. It has well-established links with the local colleges and businesses which enables pupils to enhance their experiences. There is a proactive governing body and well established PTA.

The parents are very supportive and, because of the nature of their children's special needs, have considerably more contact with the school than would be the case in mainstream provision. The parents are encouraged into and made very welcome within the school. As one of the parents interviewed points out "I think it is an excellent school, you couldn't wish for better....if you have problems at home they help you out. You work together as a team. It is quite a close involvement. You feel very closely involved with the school." (Parent 1)

A number of parents call in to the school frequently for informal discussion with staff about their children's progress and several parents help out at the school with activities such as swimming. There is also a parents group which meets monthly within the school, with the aim to make the parents feel less isolated and to discuss with others strategies which work for them.

The school is in daily contact with parents through the operation of a home-school diary in which both the staff and the parents write a daily report of approximately half a page on the pupils' progress, setbacks and any other relevant issues. The diary is a plain, hard backed book and it is the key daily form of communication between the school and the home. The parents interviewed gave a flavour of the content: "we put whether they've slept well. Whether they're generally happy, that sort of thing... I mean maybe if one of them perhaps got a sore mouth or something and they've got to put some medication on it, maybe mention about that. I would generally ... I'd just sort of say, you know, what they've been doing at home really."(Parent 1) "I'd write out what kind of evening [my son] had. If he's had a bad evening that may carry on to the next morning, so if he doesn't behave well at school they can look at the diary and say, "Well, this happened last night." (Parent 2)

The parents appeared to appreciate the effort and time the school staff spent in writing the home-school diary: "I really admire the fact that they make that effort every evening to do that for us because our children don't correspond with us, you know, so we need it written down really. And I think that's probably what [aids] the Home School Agreement more so in special schools than probably in mainstream."(Parent 2)

### **The Home School Agreement**

The HSA was introduced in 1998 using LEA guidance and in consultation with the Governors. It appears that little thought was given to the content and the LEA example was used rather than an individually tailored document which reflected the ethos and needs of the school. As the headteacher points out, "there was no thinking behind it; we just did what was the requirement from the LEA to be honest."

The HSA is sent out only once when each child starts the school for parent and pupils to sign and 99 percent of parents sign the agreement. The headteacher suggests that one parent did not sign due to unwillingness on principle. The headteacher did not press the parent to sign it because "I did not think it signified much anyway." He explains that the fact that the parents are so committed to and cooperative with the school is more important to him than signing a piece of paper. In his words, "We have actually got better relationships with our parents than this process represents.... They already take their responsibilities very seriously indeed."

The school specialises in teaching pupils with autism and by its very nature has set procedures and approaches which prospective parents are required to discuss and agree to before their child attends the school. An example of this would be a specific type of behaviour rewards and sanctions system which requires the parents' cooperation. With this system the parents have already 'bought into' the principles by which the school is run.

The two parents interviewed had different views as to the usefulness of the HSA. One parent argued that, "it's just another bit of gubbins, do you know what I mean? I think it's like anything in life. I mean if you ... you know, you're either committed to something or you're not and a bit of paper's not going to make any difference... if you have an issue, then you take it up with the school. To me that's part of being a parent. It's nothing to do with whether you've got a piece of paper or not... doesn't mean anything, does it? It doesn't give you any clout as a parent." (Parent 1)

In contrast, the other parent was generally more supportive of the overall concept; "It's nice to know that we're all sort of pulling in the same direction, you know. I think that's what it made me think really when I read it. I thought, "Well, you know, we're signing this and we're saying we agree with your policies and we know that we can come to you, you know, if we don't agree sort of thing.....I think it's about respect, isn't it? About respecting the school and the teachers that our children are under." (Parent 2)

The school is currently revising the agreement and it appears from the headteacher's discussion on the issue that he is giving the document more thought as to the specific content this time around and is planning to consult more widely with parents and incorporate it with a number of other documents which require signing.

The headteacher stated that the HSA has had no impact on behaviour, attendance or home school communications. He has never had cause to refer to it in communications with parents and nor have the parents referred to it in communication with the school.

## **Summary**

The school has excellent communication with the parents. The parents are already significantly involved in the life of the school and it appears that the concept of working together in partnership is so deeply embedded in the ethos of the school that the Home School Agreement is deemed to be unnecessary. This is compounded by the fact that the headteacher did not develop an agreement which was specifically designed for the needs of the school. He just used the LEA example and therefore has no ownership of the documents and indeed questions its relevance. He is, however, about to review the HSA and modify it to meet the needs of the school community.

School 3 has sophisticated methods of home school communication, such as the diaries, which are more detailed and central than in other schools, and the pupils have particular needs, which require real partnership between school and home. These factors make the Home School Agreement feel less relevant to those interviewed in this school. This partnership is far more than just communication or support from parents, important though these things are: as one parent says, the support works both ways: "if you have problems at home, they help you out". The document is soon to be reviewed and there is an expressed intention to engage in the process more thoroughly than before. It may be that as a consequence the new document will be more in keeping with the existing home school partnership.

## **Case Study 4: 4-11 Primary School**

### **Background**

Interviews were conducted with 12 students from Year 4 to Year 6, 2 parents, 1 Science Coordinator and classroom teacher, and the Headteacher.

School 4 is a very small overcrowded infant and primary school situated in an impoverished working class residential area in the inner London Borough. The pupils' population comprises of approximately 430 pupils, 80 of whom attend on a part-time basis in the Nursery and 110 pupils are on the special educational needs register (mainly with emotional and behavioural difficulties). About 70 percent of its population are of ethnic minority backgrounds, mainly Black African, Black Caribbean, Bangladeshi, Indian, and Pakistani heritages. Half of the pupils are non-English native speakers. Because the pupils' attainment levels are below average, the school has been involved with several initiatives to raise attainment, for example it is part of an Education Action Zone, and it is involved with the Excellence in Cities initiative.

The number of exclusions in the school is high for a primary school and, according to the OFSTED report, it seems to be rising every year. Since 2000/2001, the school recorded 50 fixed-term and one permanent exclusion together involving 22 pupils.

According to the 2001 OFSTED report, approximately 53 percent of the pupils receive free school meals, which is well above the national average. Admission out of school term and recorded incidents of students leaving school before the end of the academic year is high. In 2000/2001 alone, 67 pupils joined the school outside school admission time, and 54 pupils were recorded as having left the school before the end of the scholastic year. Similarly, teachers' leaving rates before the end of the academic year are high. In 2000/2001, 15 teachers were recorded by the 2001 OFSTED report as having left the school and 18 new teachers were appointed. Even with the appointment of new staff, the school continued to rely heavily on temporary supply teachers.

Since its establishment, the school has had male school heads. It was only four years ago that the first female headteacher was appointed to run the school. In an attempt to improve the school, the new head employed a consultant and a school development officer from the LEA. During the first 18 months of the new head's appointment, the school witnessed a massive turnover in staff, although this has since slowed down.

For the past four and a half years, the OFSTED report noted an improvement in students' end of key stage academic achievement test scores. This improvement was attributed to very good teaching and leadership. In fact, when one of the teachers was interviewed about the school, she expressed her satisfaction with the new management because it not merely increased homework participation, and reduced extreme behaviour such as children throwing chairs at teachers, but it also managed to offer parents the opportunity to "come in through the door and do more in the school." Asked if they have any concerns with regard to the school, the parents' views conflicted. While one parent said he is satisfied with what he described as well

balanced homework, another parent criticised her children's homework because it demanded access to reference books and the internet.

### **Community and Parental Involvement**

To "get to know the silent majority" of parents, a small room has been allocated to parents in the school. Described by the headteacher as "a bit like a surgery," parents, staff, and school governors meet every week to share their views on different school issues.

Also, to enhance parental involvement, especially with non-English speaking parents, the school has endeavoured to recruit parents with different language proficiencies as interpreters to help staff communicate with non-English speaking children and their families. Moreover, to increase non-English speaking parents' involvement on the governing body, the school has appointed the Deputy Head as a translator.

Similarly, to establish better relations with parents, the school works with the Adult Education Service to offer family literacy, numeracy, and family computer workshops for all parents. Likewise, in an attempt to engage parents in school life, the school has paved the way for many parents to come and volunteer to work as learning support assistants to teachers. Though many parents were unable to get involved because of work commitments, the headteacher felt it has managed very successfully to "build up much closer links" between volunteering parents and the school. Also, by making staff visible to parents in the morning, the headteacher felt the school has managed to represent itself as "a human place" where staff "really exist."

In spite of the school and the local authority's efforts to bridge the gap between non-English speaking families and the school by translating official documents and school correspondence into various foreign languages, many languages failed to be translated due to a shortage of translators. The school improvises by inviting the older bilingual children to act as a translator for the school and the parents. In some instances, however, when "there were difficult things to talk about," young translators were replaced by bilingual staff members.

In addition to translating documents, the headteacher maintained that recruiting students on to the school council has proved a challenge because, according to the headteacher, much of the student population, around 30 students a year, are late admittants who have been "admitted during the mid phase admissions," and "many of whom don't have English as a first language."

Asked about their views on parental involvement, the two parents interviewed felt that despite the school's varied initiatives to involve parents, parents' support of the school varied. While some parents would not always attend parents meetings, PTA meetings, join the governing body, or go to school activities, others would refrain from getting involved altogether. Reasons offered by the parents interviewed for this lack of support were not "having got the confidence," being busy, not being bothered, or feeling "negative towards the school." Hence, some disengaged parents, the parents interviewed explained, prefer to "just dump their children off and that's it."

Despite many parents' decisions not to get involved in school life, the parents interviewed felt that, in general, since the appointment of the new headteacher several years ago and the introduction of different initiatives such as arranging volunteering opportunities for parents and scheduling several parents' evening sessions during and after school to meet with the demand of working parents, parental involvement has increased. Similarly, since the change in management, they believed that inappropriate behaviour has decreased because complaints and concerns are dealt with more swiftly and efficiently.

To improve communication between the school and the parents, the teacher interviewed recommended the start of a newsletter to "keep parents up to date with what's going on." With time and work constraints and poor parental and school commitment to develop a newsletter, the teacher, however, felt this is unlikely to happen soon. Asked if teachers' concerns and views are heard, the teacher responded, "Yes, but, *acted upon*, maybe not necessarily that." Hence, she would like to see more consultation with teachers.

### **The Home School Agreement**

Introduced in 1999, the headteacher adopted the document in the hope that it would clarify the school, family, and pupils' roles in learning, establish better home-school relations, improve pupils' behaviour, and more importantly engage, for the first time, all parents in decision making. After consulting with some parents, teachers, and pupils, an EAZ consultant was invited to school to discuss different issues raised by parents and the children.

During the consultation phase with parents, approximately 20 to 25 percent of parents were reported by the headteacher to have refused to sign the document for "a whole range of different reasons." While some were thought to have been against the document because of its choice of words, other parents were thought not to engage themselves because, in the words of the headteacher, "they were just derogatory about the whole thing- that it didn't make any difference;" and still there were some parents who were thought to have voiced protest at the document because they believed "it was the school's responsibility to educate the children not theirs." Similarly, during the consultation phase, some children refused to sign the document because, according to the headteacher, "they didn't want to wear school colours."

The Home School Agreement has undergone considerable changes since its first introduction three years ago. Realising that the Home School Agreement had become a "dated document", and it had "been kind of superseded" by other urgent targets, such as improving behaviour management in the classroom, the document was reassessed and replaced by the headteacher with a list of expectations in the form of a poster that endeavours to describe the rights and responsibilities of students such as, "the right to feel safe, the right to learn, and the right to be treated with respect."

When questioned about the Home School Agreement, the two parents interviewed found it difficult to remember the 1999 document. However, after a short pause and a skim through the document, parents described the Home School Agreement as appropriate in that it meets their expectations of the school, their children, and themselves. Despite being satisfied with the document, however, one parent criticised

the school for not encouraging pupils to implement their Home School Agreement responsibilities in "taking care of their surroundings." Consequently, students, he believed, continue to abuse the school's property.

Similarly, another parent criticised the school for not implementing its Home School Agreement responsibilities in "inform[ing] parents about what the teachers aim to teach the children each term," and engaging parents in decision making in school. As a result of this, the parent believed, parents are ending up unable to "help at home" because, she believed, they are given "no idea of what their children are doing in school."

When questioned about the Home School Agreement's aims of committing students to different school and home responsibilities, the two parents conflicted in opinion. While one thought it was a good idea, the other parent criticised the Home School Agreement's intention because, he believed, "a child is a child": expecting irrational children to commit themselves because they have simply signed their name on paper was too ambitious.

Asked about the Home School Agreement's aim to entrust parents with different school and home responsibilities, the two parents agreed that it would be unfair to expect all parents to commit themselves verbally or on paper to an institution's expectations if their ideology, upbringing, and parental expectations differ.

When questioned about the Home School Agreement, many students, like their parents, found it difficult to recall its content and whether their parents or themselves had read it and/or signed it. In general however, after reading the document, they were unanimous that students should not be asked to sign it because, in their opinion, "they're young and then they don't know what they're signing for, and they'll forget." The pupils found the document very ambitious in thinking that "if there's someone who behaves badly, they're just going to read that and sign and then change themselves just because of what they've read." Hence, the pupils interviewed believed, students are likely to "just sign it for no reason," and "they might not even read it."

Asked if the Home School Agreement would be helpful for parents, the pupils were divided. While some thought it would be helpful to parents because it would remind them of their responsibilities, for example, of dropping their children early to school so their children do not get in trouble with their teacher, others were critical. They felt the Home School Agreement "put[s] parents back in school again" and "parents don't need rules. They don't need people to take control over them so they can do what they want." Asked if the school should have a set of rules to abide by, the overwhelming majority, however, agreed because they thought it is only fair that if parents have rules that the school should have ones, too.

Despite efforts by the school and the EAZ to make the Home School Agreement "look as good as possible" because according to the headteacher, "it says something about you as an organisation", the pupils recommended that "stuff with pictures" should be added to the document to improve its "boring looks" and make it more appealing to students. Also, to enhance its readability, they recommended that the document be translated into different foreign languages because, they felt, not all new incoming pupils to their school are English speakers

Similarly, the pupils believed in addition to enhancing the Home School Agreement's "boring" layout, its content should be revisited. First, they recommended that incentives ought to be highlighted in the document to reward good conduct or achievement because, in their opinion, "it makes people want to do it." To illustrate this, one boy explained: "if you get the amount you need... it's about your behaviour. So, if you get everything good you get 20 plus or something like that." By the same token, they believed punishment in the form of "detention," needs to be indicated in the document to help deter undesirable behaviour.

Second, the pupils felt some of the document's items need to be revised because they tend to encourage poor decision making by students. For example, the school should not insist that students should bring their equipment to school "because," in the voice of one pupil, "people steal them and then people start moaning, and go, 'oh, you've done this, they've done that.'"

Likewise, the pupils felt the school should not insist that students should not talk in class because there are instances when they have to speak. For example, one pupil explained, "when someone's talking to you and you need to tell them to shut up and then you just get angry you just say it to them, and you end up getting in trouble."

Finally, the pupils felt the document did not "make good points about the things that we've done that we should keep up." Hence, they believed by sharing its students' accomplishments, the document will more likely to "encourage children to keep on doing it."

Having been "an issue all the time," according to the headteacher, the school's attendance has fluctuated throughout the years due to the movement of families from and into the area. Unfortunately, in spite of the school's Home School Agreement's established policy on attendance, the impact of the document on attendance "didn't make a scrap of difference," according to the headteacher.

Equally, the Home School Agreement document was not seen by the headteacher as having had any positive impact on homework because the school already had a strong homework policy established prior to the development of the Home School Agreement. Parents in general, the headteacher explained, support their children at home. Even if parents are non-English speakers, "they still attempt to support their children in the sense that they've asked them to do their homework, they make sure their homework comes back and so on" because the assigned homework "tends to be...either reinforcement of things that they've been working on in class, or it's preparation for something that they're about to work on."

Similarly, the headteacher maintained, the Home School Agreement had had no "huge impact," on reducing misbehaviour. Yet it "did at the time give some more importance, to give more of a sense of importance, of self importance to those children who were kind of hidden by all this behaviour stuff."

Like the headteacher, the teacher interviewed did not find the document had generally had any direct positive impact on homework, behaviour, or home-school relations. The reason for its failure to impact, she believed, can be ascribed to stakeholders' negative views of the document for not being "bound by law" and not explicitly

“say[ing] what happens when you don’t stick to it.” In spite of its lack of impact, however, the teacher described the items on the Home School Agreement document as “nice to sort of draw it back to their attention.”

## **Summary**

It appears that since the Home School Agreement was first introduced some three years ago the school has withdrawn any reference to it. Instead, it has used the Home School Agreement as a starting point to initiate an alternative shorter student-centred document that emphasises the school's aim to eradicate inappropriate behaviours and poor attendance.

In spite of having been overshadowed by different priorities, however, the school did not seem to have sacrificed its ambition to establish good home-school relations. On the contrary, following its first Home School Agreement consultation exercise with parents, staff and pupils, the school has endeavoured to expand and invest its resources into creating additional opportunities to enhance its parents' professional development and their commitment to improving their children's education. Some of the opportunities introduced range from establishing a school council for students, holding parents evenings at flexible times to meet the needs of working parents; employing bi-lingual staff on PTAs and governing body meetings to serve as translators for non-English speaking parents, to offering parents opportunities to serve as learning support assistants in school, to attending parenting, numeracy, literacy, and computer adult education classes.

Though the Home School Agreement has been described by the headteacher as having had no impact on school issues, there is evidence to the contrary. The school's Home School Agreement consultation exercise with pupils, parents, and staff may in fact have contributed positively towards empowering stakeholders and encouraging staff to involve and offer other innovative initiatives for parents such as computer literacy courses to parents. Also, the shorter student-centred document appears to be a successful descendant of the HSA. Of course, not having evaluated the effect of other programmes and initiatives, it is difficult to attribute any effect with confidence specifically to the Home School Agreement, but it has been part of a concerted effort, which has begun to show some successes, to involve parents in the workings of the school.

## **Case study 5: 4-11 Primary School**

### **Background**

Interviews were conducted with the headteacher, one learning support assistant and two parents. The headteacher arranged an interview with a classroom teacher and a group of year six pupils but had to cancel due to unforeseen circumstances.

The school is situated on the outskirts of a city in the Midlands. It is a 4-11 primary school with just over a hundred pupils who are drawn from the surrounding residential area. The socio-economic circumstances of the local population are below the national level and an above average number of pupils are eligible for free school meals and have special educational needs. Seven percent of pupils speak English as an additional language and there are a number of refugee children at the school. The vast majority of children enter the school with little or no pre school experience.

The headteacher has been at the school since 1990. The school was described in the most recent Ofsted report as “effective and the headteacher provide good leadership and management in challenging circumstances and is well supported by the staff and governing body.” There are a number of issues at the school surrounding behaviour of pupils, attendance and punctuality. Both of the parents interviewed suggested that there was an issue with minor bullying within the school.

### **Parental and Community Involvement**

The school has some established links with the wider community in terms of a network of community groups in the area who work together on community initiatives and also a cluster of local schools who work closely together. There is a well used Mother and Toddler group based at the school. The PTA is active but there are just a small number of parents willing to take on the roles. In terms of parental involvement in the school in general the headteacher suggested that it is not as good as they would want it to be and that there has been some lessening of parental involvement over the past five years. The number of parents coming into the school to help has slowly declined which the headteacher attributes to more parents entering paid work. Attendance at parents’ evenings is approximately eighty percent. The headteacher pointed out that home- school communications in general is “a little hit and miss”. In her words, "I like to think that the staff are open to discussion. I have an ‘open door’ policy if you can call it that. I try to go out and talk to people, I try to catch people if I hear that someone has a grumble or anything like that.... you can think you’re communicating, you can think you’ve got channels for them to come in and talk about things and then you hit a real ‘biggy’, a nasty thing in the playground that you didn’t know anything about and everybody is talking about and all of a sudden it comes and blows up in your face..... I’m not quite sure how they want me to be.” The parents interviewed suggested that there was a lack of communication at the school." at this moment there is a lot going on in the school.....I think there should be more communication between the parents and the teachers, they're in there, they learn and then sent home and that's the end of it. Well to me, no, that's not the end of it. If we don't know what's going on with our children how can we help them at home?"

## **The Home School Agreement**

A form of home-school contract was introduced in 1993 when the headteacher decided to formalise what the school was trying to do with parents, what their expectations were and what they should expect from the school. It was similar to the Home School Agreement currently in use. The rationale behind its introduction according to the headteacher was that it was “a result of parents seeming constantly to be unclear about what the policies were in terms of attendance and lateness and communication and our expectations of them and their expectations of us.” The headteacher acknowledges that the agreement was developed more as a reaction to the parents’ lack of understanding of the content of the prospectus rather than a proactive introduction. “It was in a way possibly less positive because it came from a point of having to tell parents in a much more succinct way, because they didn’t read the prospectus so they didn’t know the policy that was in the prospectus, and we were finding out that we were sending out the same letters over and over again to parents or saying the same things in the newsletters and it seemed more simple to do this.”

The HSA was reviewed during 1997 when guidance and training on HSA became available. The school based their revised agreement upon a model supplied by the LEA. The HSA includes a section to be signed by the pupils. The headteacher says that this is because it is also their responsibility. In her words; “It’s bound to have had some impact on them because they were part of it and I remind them of that. Sometimes the punctuality problem, the attendance problem is normally due to minority factors...You can have a small minority of children who nobody can get through to them – they are threatened with fines and things and you still don’t get them to school.”

The learning support assistant stated that the HSA is occasionally referred to with the pupils, “ Well the class teacher might go over it, you know if she has an odd five minutes or if the child has done something wrong and they have crossed the boundaries of our own Home School Agreement then they might say, “Now your parents have signed to say and you know you’re not following it through” you know that sort of instance.”

The HSA was originally sent out annually for parents and pupils to sign and since 1997 it is given out when a child starts school. Notably only approximately 20 percent of parents sign the agreement. A letter is sent home to parents who do not sign. The headteacher suggests that some parents do not sign due to general apathy whilst others disagree with it. In her words; “It’s difficult to know why they disagree and what they disagree about. That’s why I feel I need to get these groups together and talk about it...They wrote on it or they told the staff they weren’t signing it and some ripped them up. Some were quite strong – but they wouldn’t say why. Some were just quite rude about it. Sometimes they’re not very positive about school anyway.”

The headteacher stated that there are approximately now one third of pupils from minority ethnic background. The HSA is not however available in community languages. The headteacher points out that they get by with the children or neighbours explaining the contents. She also noted that the low response rate of HSA was not from this particular grouping.

The headteacher overall viewed HSA in a quite favourable light and claims it has had an impact in a number of areas. In relation to homework, the headteacher claims, "It has had an impact because when parents weren't sure about what homework was supposed to be set we were able to refer them to it and refer them to the bit that was in the prospectus from the HSA ...these are what the expectations are and this is what we are following and trying to do." One of the parents interviewed also suggested that the concept of HSA was welcome, "I think it's quite normal to have your child there on time etc. but to actually have it reiterated I just think it is a very good thing. It makes things a lot clearer, I'm happier knowing that I can confide in the school and issues will be dealt with."

The learning assistant is less positive about the impact: "They all say ok you know, we agree with it or until something happens to their child, when they cross the boundary shall we say, and then some of them are not quite so happy about our decisions, but they had signed to say they agree with them."

The headteacher suggested that initially the HSA helps to clarify "grey areas" and helps to raise issues parents seemed unaware of, "It's just made people understand what we were all about and what we were trying to do rather than sending letters out because they weren't coming to school or that they had a low attendance, but that it was a partnership and we were trying to explain our role and what they could expect from us as well."

## **Summary**

The headteacher has taken a proactive approach to the concept of Home School Agreements and introduced a form of it a number of years before it was a requirement. The agreement has been used in an attempt to ensure parents would take responsibility for issues such as regular attendance and punctuality. There appears to be a somewhat uneasy relationship in terms of home school communications, with many parents refusing to sign the HSA.

It appears that the headteacher has not been able to carry the parents with her regarding the changes she has needed to make, and therefore has not been able to create a sense of joint ownership of the Home School Agreement. Because home school communications and relationships in general appear not to be good, the Home School Agreement has not developed as a shared, valued document.

## **Case Study 6: 11-18 secondary School**

### **Background**

This Case Study is based on an interview with the Assistant Headteacher with responsibility for HSAs, a year 9 teacher, a joint interview with two parents, a telephone interview with the transition mentor and a joint interview with three pupils (one male in Year 13, one male in year 9, one female in year 9). The pupil interview was very poorly recorded, so the quality of analysis from this is very limited.

School 6 is an oversubscribed 11-18 secondary school with around 1300 students on roll. It was formed from the amalgamation of an upper and lower school in the late 1990s. The school population is around 97% white, with about a quarter of these entitled to free school meals, and an above average proportion of students with special educational needs. The school is situated between two contrasting areas in an industrial town close to a large northern English conurbation. The academic attainment of pupils at Key Stage 3 and 4 is well below the national average, but average for similar schools. The school received a positive inspection in autumn 2002, although Ofsted picked out some weaknesses in relationships with parents. School 6 became a technology college around 2 years ago.

The Assistant Headteacher interviewed explained that the background of the pupils in the school is mixed since "our school's in [area] ... a leafy suburb of [town] so you get the impression that you would have lots of lovely suburban type children here, but we also stretch out in the other direction to [other area 1] and up to [other area 2] ... which are areas ... inner city areas, really, where there's quite a bit of deprivation". The school has received financial assistance for students in these areas, including funding for a 'transition mentor' who works with vulnerable children and their parents.

Key aspects of development for the school at present include attendance, which had improved in recent times due to the use of a 'swipe card' system which every child uses in each lesson. This had also reduced in-school truancy. But the key area of improvement was behaviour. The Assistant Headteacher explained that the school takes an inclusive approach to behaviour management: " I think our approach here is to try and look at the causes of a child who's misbehaving or whose behaviour isn't what we'd expect to try and look at the causes and try and look at the whole person with all the outside agencies. But when you're doing that it's very difficult. It makes it difficult. It's much easier just to ... to kick somebody out and, you know, forget about them, but we don't do that. But that's what some people think we should do. There's this notion that if we do that then they'll just disappear off the face of the earth and we'll never see them again, but as you know it isn't true because they're still out there causing problems in the community. So, we feel if we can, as a school, deal with individual students and their personal and social problems and we do that as best we can for the benefit of the whole community really."

## **Parental and Community Involvement**

The school is situated close to a very large industrial estate, and the Assistant Headteacher notes that the school has strong links with industries based there, including industry days which representatives of businesses attend, although the other teacher thought that these links could be extended. There are "very good links with the police" according to the Assistant Headteacher, with two attached community police officers, as well as work with the community via social services and behaviour support services.

Parental links are wide and varied. Many focus on communication, such as a termly "glossy" newsletter, other letters sent out on a termly basis and what is seen as a very important part of students' schooling and communication with parents, the pupil contact book (which will be returned to). There is no PTA in the school - it "died out" according to the Assistant Headteacher because "the teacher who was running it left and I think nobody else has really taken it on... it was very teacher led I would say at that time."

It is apparent from comments made by teachers and parents that parental relationships have not always been good, particularly in the area of communications. There were a number of comments made regarding the need to improve communications.

From the viewpoint of the school, the main issue was getting generally reluctant parents more involved. For example, the classroom teacher interviewed noted that parents were not proactive in supporting education in the school: "They will support you if you raised it as an issue rather than support generally across the board. I mean we do have instances of parents ringing up and saying, you know, for instance, "Such and such hasn't had any homework recorded in their diary for the last couple of weeks. What's happening?" But they're rare instances, you know." The governing body, whilst being perceived by the Assistant Headteacher as proactive and "very supportive", had found it difficult "to get parents to put their names forward. You find that, you know, they need a bit of coaxing and badgering by other governors, you know, to suggest to them and put their names forward, but when they do, the governors we've had have always been ... a strong group of people."

In addition, in the past, parents' evenings had been poorly attended, according to the Assistant Headteacher: "the parents' evenings traditionally would be running at around 50%. Sometimes less. Sometimes a little bit more depending on the year group really." By the time pupils got older, the parents attending dwindled further: "As they get older they just ... they think the school have already sent the report. They don't need to go back. So you tend to see the same ones over and over again."

To try to encourage more involvement with the school, a recent innovation was the introduction of "consultation days" for each year group (except Year 11 and the 6<sup>th</sup> form) in the place of parents evenings. These had been piloted in the previous academic year, and involved parents booking a 20 minute slot between 9 a.m. and 7 p.m. with their child's form tutor to discuss all aspects of their work and life in the school. The Assistant Headteacher explained: "the thinking behind it is that, you know, if you've got a parent who ... whose child isn't doing very well and they're coming in on a parent's evening and they have to go round and listen to 10 or 12 different teachers telling them that their child isn't doing very well, that ... you know,

all they do is go away and be disheartened. Whereas if you've got a tutor who knows everything about the child and all the subjects and everything, you've just got to talk to that one person and it's all very based on, 'Look, these are the targets. This is what the child needs to do to get there,' and, 'Right, you know, they might not be doing very well, but we know what steps need to be taken to get them to improve.' So it's a much more positive report."

The improvement in attendance in the pilot was dramatic, with around 96% attendance, so it was to be rolled out into the rest of the school in this academic year and would replace traditional parents evenings if it proved to be successful. The parent governors, who had children in the pilot year group were enthusiastic about them because there was less "waiting on" teachers, and traditional parents evenings could take an hour and a half rather than twenty minutes during which the form tutor "tells you everything you need to know". The transition mentor, who was interviewed after the first consultation meetings after the pilot, reported that there was a relatively high level of attendance, and that it was generally supported by parents there: "I was walking around the school and when I heard parents it seemed to be very successful and because the children were there I think that was successful because they heard where they could improve or where they were doing well with their parents sitting next to them which I think was beneficial."

The school is introducing other initiatives to try to increase parental involvement with the school, including Internet classes for parent and child, which have been promoted through local primary schools. The involvement of parents from the stage where their children are still in primary schools is important for the school's development, and the appointment of the transition mentor, and her work with primary school children and their families, has also been introduced with this in mind.

The parent governors reported that communication with the school was sometimes a problem from the viewpoint of parents they had spoken to. The use of an automated telephone operation system, where parents could leave voicemail messages, could cause difficulties since "parents have left things on the voice mail, but if that teacher is not available to listen to the voice mail, it mightn't be until half past three, so therefore there's a day gone and parents feel as though nothing's been done by the school." This illustrates how a system that was introduced to provide easier communication could create a further barrier for some parents. The contact book was also a source of some parental complaints.

The contact book is at the heart of the child's experience of school. It is a multi-purpose document - in the words of the Assistant Headteacher "it's a diary. It's a homework book. It's a notebook. It's got all the school rules and everything in. It's got the Home School Agreement in there which the parents sign at the start of year 7 and it's a very valuable tool." The contact book has to be brought to every lesson, and it is one of the ways the school communicates with parents, through noting down such things as homework that is to be done and messages from tutors. This importance has a downside from the viewpoint of pupils: one of the interviewees said that contact books are sometimes stolen and defaced, which sometimes meant that the victim had to pay for it to be replaced.

One of the key aspects of the contact book from the viewpoint of the school is that it contains targets for pupils, in terms of national curriculum levels and expected GCSE

grades, which are intended to enable both teachers and pupils to focus on meeting these targets. The diary is even used in mentoring sessions between teachers and pupils to try to raise attainment, according to the Assistant Headteacher: "we've actually got our tutors spending more time mentoring the students now about their work in [what we call] 'diaries lessons' " The class teacher was enthusiastic about the contact book: "I would consider it essential. But it's ... the contact book itself, every child in the school has one and it's ... you know, it's just their communication, it's their diary, it's their ... you know, everything. It's our [link to] parents because obviously, you know, we write in the contact book. They write to us."

However, from the viewpoint of parents, the contact book can be a source of frustration and complaint. Firstly, parents are often concerned that homework is not being written in the book when it should be set. Secondly, parents found the information on their children's achievement and progress sketchy and difficult to interpret. One of the parent governors explained: "I don't think there's enough information for you to be able to say, "Well, okay he's on four ... he's on five, but what does he need to improve on?" And I believe seriously that unless they do tell you, you can't help your child. And I want to help mine, but until I know exactly what's wrong, I can't do anything. [...] I feel as though they give us information, but not what we actually need."

Therefore, the impression gained overall is that despite recent changes and initiatives to try to improve matters, communications and relationships with parents could be improved.

### **The Home School Agreement**

The Home School Agreement, known in the school as the partnership agreement, was based on a home-school contract which was used in the lower school before the merger. Despite the change to more participatory language, the agreement is still referred to as a contract, and the tone of the discussion around it with teachers and parents made it clear that it is still regarded principally as a contract between parents and school, rather than a policy for home school partnership.

Within the last year, the agreement was overhauled by one of the Deputy Headteachers (not the interviewee), and the Assistant Headteacher interviewed was involved in the consultation for this review, although no parents, pupils or other non-teachers were involved: it is the responsibility of "somebody from the senior management team".

The agreement is introduced as part of the year 6 induction, and is included with the handbook given to all year 6 pupils whose parents have accepted a place at School 6. It is explained by the prospective year 7 tutor, according to the Assistant Headteacher, at the induction meeting and signed that evening by parents. The agreement is sent home with the child at the beginning of the autumn term for those parents who are not present.

The Assistant Headteacher believes that pupils take the agreement seriously, "at the time of signing", at the beginning of their school career, although sometimes there are problems afterwards. For example, wearing of jewellery is not allowed, yet some

pupils have earrings put in over summer that have to be kept in for several weeks at the start of the following term “and you end up in a confrontation situation and you think ‘Well, you know, these people have signed it, that was in the contract. Why aren’t they adhering to it?’” The Assistant Headteacher gave examples of where the agreement is referred to by teachers (as in the jewellery example here) and parents. Still using the jewellery example, the Assistant Headteacher explained that “parents say ‘I’ve signed the contract that my child won’t wear jewellery, and yet I’ll stand there at the gate and there’s loads of kids walking out with jewellery on’. You’ll get them throwing it back at you – ‘Well, I’m sticking to it, why aren’t you as a school making everyone stick to it?’ – and so from my point of view, it makes the school take their responsibility seriously as well”.

The pupils interviewed had not come across the agreement being mentioned in this way, although teachers often talked about classroom rules, and the other teacher interviewed said that “I never use that at all”.

There was a clear impression given by the parents and pupils that they would like to have had some input into the development of the agreement. The pupils were keen to discuss possible additions and changes to it, and one of the parent governors said he would “love a chance” to be involved in its redrafting. The class teacher thought the revisions had been made by other teachers at “a higher level”, yet had clear ideas about how it needed to be overhauled. She explained that she felt that the document was “not user-friendly. It’s not in the language that they [pupils] would appreciate – it’s not in a format that would excite them”. The agreement had never been used by this teacher with parents either, and the parent governors had not heard of its use by school or other parents.

The HSA was seen as a framework for home school relationships by the Assistant Headteacher: “I explained before about having parents’ consultations and having tutors mentoring their tutees. All of that is working towards everybody being more aware of what we expect of an individual student, and where we expect them to go to [...] and, you know, what’s in the contract, that’s all part and parcel of that”. The other teacher did not feel this was the case, and saw the HSA as something that needed to be made more useful – in her words, “more real”.

Despite the HSA not being seen as a document that was used on a day to day basis by parents, pupils and the class teacher interviewed, the principle of a statement of responsibilities in the form of a contract, is supported. The class teacher uses her own contracts in the classroom and with her tutor group. They are agreed with pupils and based around a set of rules. The parent governors were also supportive; one said “I think it’s a very good idea to be honest, because otherwise the students are not going to take any responsibility ... and the parents won’t take any responsibility either. I think they’ve both [parents and pupils] got to work together [with the school] anyway”. However, the parent governors were unsure about the content of the agreement. For example, they felt that some aspects were not in force and some perhaps should not be included. This was the case with regard to a ban on mobile phones, which was not strictly enforced, and the parents discussed circumstances where they may be necessary. There was a similar discussion regarding parents taking holidays in term time.

Despite this, the Assistant Headteacher felt that the HSA had made a positive impact, because the agreement provided the responsibilities of all parties with high status. "You could just say all these things or you could write them in their handbooks, that this is what we expect, nobody has to agree or disagree. But when you put the piece of paper in front of somebody, and say "Right, we've said all that. Now, do you agree?" and they've put their names to it. Then I think it makes it more significant".

## **Summary**

The HSA is seen by the school management representative as a useful framework for the recent changes and improvements in home school relationships in the school. It is regarded as a contract that sets out the responsibilities of all parties who can use it in discussion and to remind each other of their commitments.

However, other interviewees felt that home school relationships could be improved, particularly communication issues, and that the HSA was not a document in regular use in their experience. The content, from the views of pupils and parents interviewed, was open to dispute or at least discussion, and the format and make up of the agreement was not meaningful or "real" in the words of the classroom teacher.

The agreement had been put in place by the school management team – those at "a higher level" – and as such was not a real partnership agreement, despite its name. The agreement's agenda was set entirely by the school, without consulting parents or pupils, and its practical usage, for example, its introduction to parents in induction, with an expectation that they would sign it at that point, served to emphasise the differing power relationships of those involved. Without the involvement of those outside the management of the school, the agreement could not form this framework or be a genuine partnership document, despite the shared belief that such an agreement, in the form of a contract, was both valuable and worthwhile.

## **Case study 7: 4-11 Primary School**

### **Introduction**

Interviews were conducted with the headteacher and two parents. The headteacher felt that it was not appropriate to interview classroom teachers as they had little involvement with Home School Agreements.

The school is situated in a rural area in the South West. It is a small school with less than one hundred pupils who are drawn from surrounding villages. The area has significant rural deprivation and many families are dependant on seasonal work. The socio-economic circumstances of the population are well below the national level and over 12 per cent of pupils are eligible for free school meals and one third of the pupils have special educational needs. The school has an open door policy and was described in the most recent Ofsted report as "very welcoming and there is every opportunity for parents to approach staff informally at any time in order to discuss their concerns." There are no significant issues surrounding behaviour of pupils or punctuality, however attendance is below national average as a large number of parents who depend upon the seasonal tourist trade take their children out of school to holiday during term time. The headteacher has been at the school since 1996 and according to Ofsted provided "astute, purposeful and very good leadership."

### **Parental and Community Involvement**

The school has excellent links with the wider community and actively encourages the community to get involved in the life of the school and vice versa. The pupils are involved in local beach cleaning projects and National Trust activities in the area and the school provides access for the community for training in ICT skills. The school has a very well established PTA and proactive governing body with a good mix in terms of business interests, parish council representatives and parent governors from various social backgrounds. The governing body was described in the most recent Ofsted report as being "effective in fulfilling its responsibilities and provides good support for the headteacher and effective oversight of the school development."

The parents are generally very supportive of the school and a number of parents help out with classroom activities and some parents with specific skills work on occasions with groups of children. The Ofsted report stated that the way in which the school works with parents is a particular strength. The school is welcoming and prides itself on its "open door" policy. The staff take every opportunity to meet parents informally at anytime to discuss their children's progress. This point was reinforced by one of the parents interviewed who appreciated how open, welcoming and supportive the school is.

The school has taken a number of initiatives to involve parents more fully in their children's education. This is particularly the case in terms of developing reading and writing skills. The school runs special story telling activities with the pre school children in the school playgroup in an attempt to enthuse parents to read with their children at an early age. They have reading schemes and book fairs which involve parents. They also have adult education strategies in place in conjunction with the

local college to raise the literacy and numeracy skills for some parents. As the headteacher puts it; "One of the things we're trying to do is raise the profile of the fact that parents can do so much to support the children's education at home."

### **The Home School Agreement**

An agreement between school and home was introduced prior to 1996, before it was a requirement. The headteacher considered that it provided a useful framework for helping to develop strong home school partnerships. Once the school was required to introduce a Home School Agreement, it was redrawn, initially using DfES and LEA guidance and in consultation with the Governors, PTA and wider parental consultation. The school revised the agreement several times in the light of the feedback and encouraged pupils to comment upon early drafts. As the headteacher points out, "We introduced it before it was a requirement. We thought it was a good initiative. It took a while to get it up and running to start with – the first year was a bit hit and miss. We fine tuned it over the years and every year we review it and update it."

The pupils formed a key part of the HSA consultation and the school was keen to include the pupils' views and get them to buy in to the expectations and responsibilities of their roles as pupils. The headteacher explains, "It's aimed at the Key Stage 2 children so that they are actually made aware, very clearly at the beginning of the year, these are the expectations of the school, that we would like you to attend regularly, bring all the equipment they need and by signing they're saying 'yes, we think that's reasonable' and then if they don't we can actually face them and say 'you thought this was a reasonable thing to do'".

Only key stage two pupils are asked to sign the HSA, however the headteacher points out that many key stage one pupils also sign it when the form is returned from home. The headteacher said it is apparent from discussions with parents and pupils that the document was discussed at home and parents and children shared ideas about roles and responsibilities. The HSA is sent out annually for parents and pupils to sign and approximately 80 percent of parents sign the agreement. A letter is sent home to parents who do not sign. The headteacher suggests that some parents do not sign due to general apathy rather than unwillingness on principle.

The headteacher regularly reviews the HSA and is currently modifying it in an attempt to reduce administrative burden upon staff by including a number of other policy documentation which requires parental signatures or some kind of acknowledgement. The school is going to include agreements for children to take part in school activities, medical checks and internet usage policy. He points out the benefit of this, "So the document is getting rather more lengthy but it is only one document per year and parents can sign up to it and it saves lots and lots of notes going home and a lot of time in terms of staff producing notes and chasing up replies. So it's actually reducing teacher work load."

The headteacher had envisaged that the HSA would be used in scenarios whereby if problems occurred with a child's behaviour and there was a query from a parent they would use it to say "you have agreed to this you have signed up to it" however the school has never been in that position "It's not the way we operate, we're very open,

there's ready access for parents in the school and to a certain extent we've not needed to go back to the Home School Agreement but at the beginning of the year we set out our stall, if you like, to say this is what we expect from the children, this is what we'd like you to be able to do to benefit the children and both the parents and the children sign up to it".

In terms of the impact of the HSA, the headteacher reported that it is difficult to separate the impact from other policy initiatives in terms of behaviour attendance and homework. He suggests, however, that the greatest impact it has had is that at the beginning of the year it gives everyone a clear picture of what is expected. The headteacher regards the HSA as being incorporated into wider home school practices and policies. It is mentioned in the school prospectus and the staff handbook and occasionally referred to in school newsletters, say for example, in terms of attendance issues and can be used in both a positive and negative way.

The school does not refer to the Home School Agreement in its verbal communications with parents. Indeed the headteacher suggests that it could be used in ways that would be detrimental to home school communications. "It could be used in ways that put up a barrier between school and the home. That can actually turn parents off. At the bottom of the Home School Agreement and in almost all communications with parents, 'if you've got a problem come and talk to us about it'. That's an open door policy."

### **Summary**

The school has embraced the concept of having an agreement which lays out expectations of both the home and the school. It does not, however, require it as a means of bargaining with parents. This is unnecessary as good partnerships are already in place. The school is making an attempt to make positive use of the HSA by seeking to add value and avoid duplication of effort in incorporating many other documents into the agreement. Even though the school is not able to separate out the impact of HSA, it is attempting to send out a message about partnership working between the home and the school.

## **Case Study 8: 13-18 Secondary School**

### **Background**

Twelve Year 9 students, 1 classroom teacher, 2 parents (who worked as learning support assistants), and a Deputy Headteacher were interviewed.

Located in the South-East of England in a busy, small, affluent residential area a few minutes away from the cosmopolitan town centre, the school is situated on a large attractive site with a well furnished sports centre dominating its entrance. The interior of the school is very well maintained, with a small reception area for visitors, but a large welcoming staff room.

The school has an open policy for the GCSE examination, with students encouraged to enter for ten subjects. Fifteen years ago, the school accommodated not merely students from this county, but also from other counties. However, since the establishment of new schools in other counties, the school has concentrated its efforts on accommodating its 650 mainly White British 13 to 18 year old students and their families' needs.

Concerned with expanding their students' and their families' involvement in school life, the school today offers various opportunities such as a school orchestra, foreign exchanges and visits to European and non-European countries, and sports related activities. If students are financially unable to meet the expenses, the governing body can provide part or all of the cost of activities.

Similarly, to enhance students' esteem and sense of responsibility, the school offers students the opportunity to get involved on the school council or in the school library. Sixth Formers and other year groups are also offered the opportunity to produce the school magazine. To enhance its students' academic achievement, the school provides its staff and students with a well-stocked library, seven science laboratories, three large computer rooms, and a media studies room; and it offers first class provision for art, home economics, and craft, design and technology; and a Sixth Formers' suite of common room and study rooms for all students.

In an attempt to enhance achievement and root out unauthorised absence especially for Sixth Formers at registration periods, the school has invested in a £10,000 electronic registration system. Amidst all these services, however, many of the county's affluent parents still prefer to send their children by train 30 minutes away to the neighbouring prosperous and prestigious schools.

### **Community and Parental Involvement**

In addition to attempting to promote high standards in teaching, learning, attitudes and behaviour, the school has been described by parents as investing a lot of time and effort in establishing and improving relations with its governing body, PTA, parents and the local community.

To enhance its relations with the community, for example, the school hosts a multi-storey nursery school. The school also offers parenting and literacy classes, as well as access to its sports facilities. Also, to improve relations with the local businesses, the school joined the county's Business Action Group. In return for membership, local businesses offer a two week work experience placement for Year 10 students and they donate approximately £1000 towards the school's annual awards evening to celebrate achievement.

In addition, because close relationships with parents are seen as essential "to enhancing the school's aims and objectives in providing the best for its students and families," the school prides itself on its PTA. By charging its 200 members a fee of £2 a month, the school has managed to secure a source of regular income to refurbish its library and update its computer and chemistry laboratories; and to hold several educational events and forums for parents and staff throughout the year.

To emphasise the school's interest in enhancing its relations with the governing body, the school invites its governors and parents on a regular rota to visit the school for a whole day, and report back to its governing body. Reflecting on the governing body, the mathematics teacher felt the governors in the school are active and interested in making a "difference in the running of the school." For example, he cited the governing body's involvement in fund-raising opportunities and the rescheduling of the 8:45 school tutorial session to 10:30. based on consultation with governors.

Asked to describe parental involvement in their school, the parents interviewed felt their school, as any other school, represented "a quite wide spread." While some parents consistently attend school meetings and help their children with their education, there are others who prefer to distance themselves altogether. Illustrating parental involvement, the parents interviewed cited the school's requirement that parents sign their children's planner every week. Although they felt it did not mean that parents should "sit down for two hours every night and tackle the homework with the children," it did, they felt, ensure that parents have "registered the fact that [their] children do have homework and that [they] physically see that." If parents fail to sign their children's planner, the class tutor automatically proceeds to contact the parents to remind them of their responsibilities. And so, according to parents, "it seems to be a good system and it seems to work."

Asked how parental involvement in school could be improved, the two parents interviewed recommended that parents ought to refer to the school's website for information on opportunities for parental involvement. Also, they recommended that the school ought to offer parents similar opportunities to theirs to work in school or to shadow a learning support assistant or a teacher to "find out how the school's actually run on a day to day basis without actually being that guest position sort of thing" because "it definitely opens your eyes." Despite efforts to engage parents, the two parents interviewed felt that there will always be factors that will interject to prevent parents from taking part in their children's education and school life. Some of the reasons cited were, "the children wanting to be independent and parents being independent, and...also pressure of time." They recognised that, given their other responsibilities in life, "parents do what they can when they can."

Describing the home-school relations, the teacher interviewed felt that in spite of the school's efforts to involve parents, the school has remained "a bit weak on that" because parents fail to keep to or meet their responsibilities. For example, they maintained that, despite the school's efforts to reduce teachers' workload and eradicate student absenteeism by employing electronic registration equipment, parents still produced a note justifying their children's absence. Other cases of a "breakdown in communication," were mainly attributed, the teacher interviewed believed, to "written communications to students that go astray quite easily." In the hope of attending to this, the school has tried to "chase them up on a sort of individual basis," yet unfortunately, the teacher recounts, "things sometimes get lost in the list of priorities." In the midst of this, the teacher interviewed recommended that when important issues arise, the school should "communicate with parents... through the post confidentially or whatever it is, to try and ensure that they get the message."

Because none of the parents of students' interviewed were actively involved in their school in the past, students were asked whether they would like their parents to have a more active role. After reflection, the students overwhelmingly agreed that they did not because "it'll be quite embarrassing," they'll have "no space" and "no privacy," and their parents will "know what you're doing."

### **The Home School Agreement**

The Home School Agreement was initially introduced following consultation with parents and teachers between 1997 and 1999 to meet the legal requirements. Because families are mostly English language speakers, the document was not translated into any foreign language. Printed in the students' school prospectus and inside the front cover of the students' planner, the Home School Agreement is shared with all new students and their families on their school intake day from Year 8 to 9.

Despite not having been referred to by the school in its correspondence or its discussion with parents and students, the Home School Agreement is, according to the Deputy Headteacher of the school, seen by the school community as an important standard of expectations that demands the commitment of all partners: parents, students, and teachers.

Unlike the Deputy Headteacher, however, when one teacher was asked to describe the status of the Home School Agreement, he felt the Home School Agreement "doesn't have the prominent role that it should have", and perhaps the school "should take it a bit more seriously at the end of the day." Asked whether the document can be credited for attendance, good behaviour, and good home-school relations, the teacher was unable to answer.

Having not read the Home School Agreement document for some time, and having been handed the document a day prior to our visit, students were also asked what the document means to them. The students interviewed overwhelmingly agreed it is "the same as the school rules." Given that students were not consulted about the Home School Agreement, the students interviewed were asked if they had any reservations about any item on the Home School Agreement. The students felt the school's expectation that "students and parents need to support the school" was unrealistic and

unfair because they felt it forces them and their families to donate money and attend school activities regardless of whether they had the time, interest, or financial means.

In addition to their criticism of the Home School Agreement document, the students interviewed expressed their concern for what they saw as the school's double standards especially in regard to enforcing its dress code and students' rights. Also, the students criticised the Home School Agreement documents' appearance and commented that none of the students, apart from those who "are geeks" or "love school" are likely to conform or take the documents seriously unless the school "puts some pictures in it," and/or "laminates it." Only then, they maintained, will "people want to read it more." For the time being, however, students will continue to "cover theirs up" with their own pictures and drawings.

When questioned about the impact of the Home School Agreement, the staff, parents, and students interviewed refrained from responding because they felt there are other factors that need to be considered such as, the influence of the newly installed electronic registration service and the newly appointed government's truancy patrol officers on students' attendance. In the light of their reservations, the school has refrained from evaluating the Home School Agreement or setting an evaluation date.

Despite the failure to establish with certainty the impact of the Home School Agreement, the parents interviewed recommended its continuation provided, however, that it is revisited not merely with consultation with parents but also with students because, they thought, only then would students "take a more active part in it," and see "the opportunities are there if you want them."

## **Summary**

The parents, students, and teachers interviewed described the school relation with parents as good, but they recommended that more steps needed to be taken to improve relations and parental involvement in school.

Though the school has "gone through the motions" of introducing the Home School Agreement, students, parents, and staff's views have not been sought. By excluding stakeholders' views, and giving it no prominence or importance in the home-school relationships by the school, it is seen as having little meaning. It seems as though the stakeholders did not have a sense of ownership of the document.

Because other initiatives have been running since the introduction of the Home School Agreement between 1997 and 1999, parents and staff did not feel they were able to judge its impact.

To enhance and elicit individuals' interest, commitment, and ownership of the Home School Agreement, the stakeholders interviewed suggested that they, including students, should be consulted. Moreover, they recommended that the document should accentuate and celebrate their achievement and good practice. In addition, they recommended, the document should reward people's commitment and reprimand their non-commitment and non-engagement. Finally, they recommended, if the document is to meet its targets and take precedence, it should be consistent and realistic in its

expectations. Only by taking on these issues will the document become more than a piece of paper.

## **Case study 9: 4-11 Primary School**

### **Background**

Interviews were conducted with the headteacher, Early Years Coordinator, the Home Liaison Officer and one parent governor. A focus group of pupils had to be cancelled due to the disruption of rioting (during the Iraqi war) in the local area.

The school is situated in an impoverished district of an inner city in the Midlands. The area has diverse religious and linguistic communities with the majority language being Gujarati. There are an increasing number of asylum seekers moving into and attending the school. Overall 95 percent of pupils have English as an additional language. The area has significant social deprivation with the socio-economic circumstances well below the national level. Over 25 per cent of pupils are eligible for free school meals and 35 percent of pupils have been identified as needing additional learning support. The school was described in the most recent Ofsted report as having "a very positive ethos which is underpinning the school's programme for improvement. The head and the staff are united in their commitment." There are no significant issues surrounding behaviour of pupils or punctuality, however attendance is below national average as a number of parents take their children out of school during term time on extended holidays to relatives abroad.

The headteacher has been at the school since 1995 and, according to Ofsted, provides "good leadership, a positive attitude to learning of the pupils, support to bilingual pupils and sensitivity to the pupils' culture" The school has a well established PTA and proactive governing body.

### **Parental and Community Involvement**

The school has excellent links with the wider community and in particular the local neighbourhood centre which runs a mother and toddler group. They have also built up good links with the local Islamic Nursery and have regular contact with leading figures within the local mosque who occasionally speak at school assemblies. The school holds an annual summer fair which draws together members of the local community and not just the parents but also wider community groups and support from the local shops. The pupils make visits to older people's homes in the area and undertake history and geography activities locally to enrich the curriculum.

The parents are generally very supportive of the school and appear to be involved with numerous initiatives designed to help parents help their children to learn. The parents are encouraged to be involved with their children's education right from the start in reception class. As the Early Years Coordinator points out; "It's an open door policy – we involve parents in all areas of children's learning and involve them right from the start, when the child starts in the Nursery ". The courses and activities include computer skills courses, including an 'ICT for Dads' course and numeracy and literacy courses for parents with specific emphasis on helping parents to help their children with homework. The Home Liaison Officer points out that the language barrier can be problematic, "the parents don't know how to actually help their child (because of language barriers) so once you show them they stick. They are the first

teachers, we always say to parents ‘you are the first teacher, we come second, but we will work as a team, as a partnership.’”

The school holds women only social evenings which are a way in which Muslim mothers within the school community can get together socially without their children and discuss issues of common interest. These evenings are well attended by the mothers and some female members of staff and they provide an opening for hard to reach members of the community. The Somalian and Bosnian families who are seeking asylum are also encouraged to come into the school in a social setting. The Early Years Coordinator suggests “because we had so many new Somali children we had a meeting with all the Somali parents, invited them for a cup of tea and coffee with the headteacher and a translator, just to talk about the school, how it works, the curriculum, the homework policy, all the policies – everything – just to get them to know more about the school. They don’t know anything; they are new to the country and everything.”

There is an overwhelming sense of the school staff reaching out to parents in a positive way to offer practical guidance on a whole range of parenting skills. The Early Years Coordinator for example encourages parents to share books with their children. “When I say sharing books with your children, you can’t just say ‘I would like you to share a book with your children’ because, like I mentioned before, the parents need to know how to – how do you teach them initial sounds, how do you teach them numbers? They need to know and we need to show them so they can then do it at home. We do have meetings with parents and workshops. We also liaise with the local College and we’ve got tutors coming in.”

If a child within the school has problems associated with attendance, behaviour or punctuality the Home Liaison Officer makes a visit to support the parent and explore various ways in which the family may receive help to resolve the problem. Parents are encouraged to take part in school assemblies, particularly at festival times, and these are well attended. Pictures of these events are displayed in the school foyer. At the last round of parents' evenings, 98 percent of parents were reported to have attended, which is clearly a reflection of the open door policy of the school. All of the staff interviewed stated that the parents are very supportive of the school. The most recent Ofsted report points out that “Easy and friendly relationships are evident as parents and pupils arrive at the school and are greeted by staff who have comprehensive knowledge of family circumstances”.

### **The Home School Agreement**

The HSA was introduced in 1997 and was drawn up by members of staff who attended an LEA guidance meeting on the key elements of HSAs. The only consultation was with the governing body. The HSA is sent out annually for parents and pupils to sign and over 95 percent of parents sign the agreement. The home school liaison officer contacts any parents who do not sign as part of her daily activities. Before the HSA is sent out to parents it is discussed fully at parents' forum evenings so that parents are clear as to what they are signing.

The headteacher initially regarded the introduction of HSA as “just a scrap of paper that the Government said you have to do” but she has found the concept useful in

conveying to parents the expectation from both the child and the parent and now finds it a useful tool and regards it as "a jolly good idea" which she would persist with even if it was not a requirement. She often refers to the HSA in discussions with parents. "And it's a sort of agreement that, you know, the parents and the school actually sign it. And I mean its usefulness is when you actually do have an issue with a child or a parent, you can fall back and you can actually say, 'But at the beginning of the year we gave this out to you and we said. This is what we expect and this is what...!', you know, and we can use it as a tool for discussion really...otherwise it becomes meaningless to the parents. So say it was an issue about lateness or whatever some of the things are on there. You can refer to that and just use it as a tool and say, 'Well actually you did sign it and you did agree that you would support us on this matter'."

The headteacher regards the HSA as a two way document and acknowledges that parents may also want to refer to it if they feel that the school is failing in its duties.

The concept of pupils signing agreements is used in two other ways within the school. Each classroom teacher draws up a class contract in consultation with the pupils at the beginning of the year. The pupils take the rules home for their parents to sign and it is referred to by the classroom teachers. If there is an issue with behaviour they point out to the parents "you read the rules, now would you reinforce them with your child at home?" The headteacher also draws up individual contracts with pupils. "Sometimes I have a child in my room over a behaviour issue and I'll write out a little contract and I get them to sign it and someone to witness it and me to sign it and they do take that quite seriously."

In terms of the impact that the HSA has had the headteacher felt that although it is difficult to single out what specific impact it is having, there is in her words "bound to be an impact if you are using it as a tool for discussion with parents.....it's a tool to contact parents whether its behaviour or attendance so you can say this is the agreement.....you signed the agreement. Why is your child not doing the homework?"

The parent governor felt as though the HSA had little impact in some areas such as pupils not attending school in uniform, even though this is stated within the agreement. She does, however, feel as though the HSA highlights the fact that parents have responsibility towards the school and their child's education and a key part to play in home working and general involvement in school life.

Even though the school has 95 percent of pupils with English as an additional language, the HSA is not available in community languages. The headteacher explains that the reason for this is that the parents have requested that they have any communication from the school in English. The parent governor expressed some concern about the fact that many parents do not speak English and she suggested that the school works hard to ensure that all parents understand key communication issues.

## **Summary**

The school today seems to invest in building good home-school link and appears committed to supporting the parents to enable them to support their children's learning at home in terms of providing parent activities and lessons and providing parents' forums. Previously, however the school seemed not to have involved parents quite often. For example, it did not consult with parents at the outset of the introduction of the HSA and it did not have the HSA translated into community languages although significant numbers of parents speak little or no English.

The HSA is seen as a working document that has become part of the school's home school strategy, despite this lack of consultation and is viewed positively by stakeholders interviewed. In this school, the HSA has been at least partly successful as a part of the wider policy related to parental links.

## **Case Study 10: 11-16 Secondary School**

### **Background**

Interviews were carried out with the Assistant Head, a technology classroom teacher, a carer of one student, and a group of 6 Year 7 and 8 students.

The school is located in a large borough that is undergoing a massive regeneration plan to create 4,500 residential homes (including affordable housing), retail and leisure space, community and education facilities including a 400 place primary school and a 900 place secondary school and over 8000 jobs. Currently, 14 percent of homes are houses and the rest are flats. According to a survey conducted by a local magazine, 43 percent of residents are reported to want to move away from the area, because of overcrowding, deprivation, unemployment, and high rates of crime that characterises the borough ([LEA name] Working for You, 2003: 23).

The school is described as a small performing arts school, with sports and health facilities, that educates approximately 250 students from the age of 11 to 16. It serves a number of socially and economically deprived areas in the borough. The student population comprises approximately 10 percent refugees and a majority of British residents predominantly from South Asian and African backgrounds, with a very small minority of white students.

Nearly 80 percent of the students receive free school meals, and around 80 percent of the pupils speak English as an additional language. In the school, there are over 50 different languages spoken by students. Unfortunately, because of the heavy financial cost incurred in hiring translators, the school only resorts to translators in special circumstances, for example, when none of the children or staff are able to do the translation for them. Correspondence with parents, the school's monthly news bulletin, Home School Agreement and school prospectus are not translated into any foreign language.

In addition to having approximately 15 percent of students with special educational needs, the school also accommodates students with disabilities (mainly wheelchair users, pupils with visual impairment/hearing impairment). To help meet the needs of different students, the school offers Year 6 to 7 transition support services, a free breakfast to the economically deprived students, rewards for good behaviour and achievement for all students, a peer mentoring scheme, and a school council. As is the case with many schools in the area, the teaching staff are mainly foreign teachers from Australia, the United States of America, Latin America, France, with some new and experienced British teachers.

Attendance in the school is not seen to be a major problem. Thanks to strict measures for monitoring attendance by two attendance officers and promoting attendance by rewarding attending classes with, for example, a pizza party and a non uniform day, attendance has reached 93 percent.

Due to social inclusion "which means," explains the Assistant Headteacher, "that there are no special schools in the borough and we do have a wide range of behaviours and abilities", the school struggles with a "wide range of behaviours" in comparison with other schools. In consequence of this, explains the headteacher, the

school uses “internal exclusion where we don’t have to exclude unnecessarily, but if the children are being unacceptable, they’ll get into the room and they’ll do all their lessons in the one room.” Similarly to concerns about students’ behaviour, parents find the homework “not enough... I mean, I think... there should be something to help them academically... books that they can read maybe...”

## **Parental and Community Involvement**

Overall, the school is described as having good links with the neighbouring feeder primary schools and the community at large. To enhance its relations further, the secondary school teachers visit the feeder schools to meet pupils and work with their teachers. In addition to school visits, the school offers potential students an induction day in the summer, lessons in performing arts each Saturday, and an opportunity for prospective students to visit their prospective secondary school and use its specialist rooms and laboratories.

In spite of one guardian’s description of the community members as “not a friendly bunch,” and that there can be “people living around the village for years, and not really know[ing] anybody,” the school’s relations with the community are described by the Assistant Headteacher as good. In fact, to bridge its relations with the community, the school has given responsibility to a senior manager from the school and a manager from the community to organise community activities. As a result, “a whole programme of community activities,” said the Assistant Headteacher, “go[es] on in the school... such as, the Internet Café and then there’s yoga and various other things.” Also, the “community church uses the art department on Sunday. It’s huge, huge, huge. People hire out the hall for wedding receptions and all sorts.”

As far as parental engagement is concerned, the Assistant Headteacher and classroom teacher interviewed found that the school has attempted to engage parents with measures including (1) invitations to parents to open surgeries every Mondays, (2) involving them with their children’s academic review days, subject progress evenings; (3) the school’s published monthly news bulletin; (4) measures devised by the school to share with parents their children’s profiles, reports, portfolios, record of achievement, and oblige parents to sign their children’s planner. However, parents still do not engage socially with the school, according to the Assistant Headteacher. Hence, initiatives such as the PTA have had to be abandoned by the school.

Asked why parents do not get involved socially, the carer interviewed speculated, “[it’s] because they have a language problem. They don’t speak much English.” Moreover, even when “interpreters and some of the teachers now speak... there isn’t anything else that I would say involves the parents in school.”

When questioned about whether students would like their parents to have more involvement in school, the students overwhelmingly agreed there was “no point” asking their parents to have more involvement because “they don’t seem interested.” Besides, one student added, “I wouldn’t really fancy walking round the playground or whatever and then seeing my parents.”

## **The Home School Agreement**

The Home School Agreement was introduced between 1997 and 1999 by the headteacher primarily as “a fair way for dealing with parents” and so that parents can “come to know we have expectations and certain things - you can’t turn around and say, ‘we weren’t warned.’” After reviewing other schools' Home School Agreements and consulting with the senior management team, the headteacher introduced the school’s own Home School Agreement. The agreement is cited in the school prospectus and discussed in detail with all new incoming Year 7 students and their families, in English, during the orientation day. It is a typical HSA, in which parents’, students’, and the school’s responsibilities are described in detail.

Despite the HSA being introduced at the start of Year 7, two of the Year 7 students interviewed in this study were unable to recall any part of it. Instead, they referred to the rules described in their student planner and the fact that they were asked to sign it on their interview day. After reading some of the Home School Agreement passages, the students interviewed agreed the agreement resembled their school rules (which one student commented, should be “more strict”).

Asked whether the Home School Agreement’s emphasis on establishing parental relations with the school is ever referred to by staff in their discussions with students and parents following the Year 7 orientation session, our interviewees all stated that it was not. In fact, apart from describing the parents’, students’, and teachers’ responsibilities for using the students’ planner and abiding by the school’s code of conduct in the students’ planner, no reference to the Home School Agreement’s sections on parental rights and responsibilities is reinforced anywhere, according to these interviewees.

Since the introduction of the Home School Agreement, and despite the headteacher’s intention to revise it and devise a “mechanism” to consult “conscientious” parents, the school, the Assistant head and Classroom teacher told us, has not had time to review the Home School Agreement.

## **Summary**

It is apparent from our interview with the Assistant Headteacher, teacher, guardian, and the group of students, parental social engagement with the school is minimal. One sign of this, amongst others, is the school’s decision to abolish the PTA committee altogether and replace it with a drop in surgery for parents. The teachers’ comments reveal that there is apparently little trust between school and parents, and communications are poor.

Though introduced as a “fair way for dealing with parents,” the Home School Agreement has not been translated into any community language, and neither have parents and students been consulted about it. In addition despite the school’s intention to evaluate the agreement and consult with parents, the proposal has been postponed.

In School 10, the school’s lack of engagement with the HSA as a true partnership document is mirrored in the school’s poor relationships with parents in general terms.

The introduction of the HSA, therefore, has made no impact on the home school relationships at the school.

## **SECTION 4: THEMATIC ANALYSIS OF CASES**

The purpose of this section is to bring out key issues emerging for the particular groups involved in the cases, to draw out similarities and dissonances within these groups, rather than to provide contextualised examinations of issues for specific cases, as in the case studies presented in Section 3.

### **Themes arising from the interviews with senior managers**

#### *Matching the policy to the context*

The Home School Agreement policy was a universal prescription required to be implemented in the specific contexts of schools. In practice, managers looked at the requirement either with an eye to how it would help improve home school relationships or add to the level of bureaucracy. This depended on the circumstances of the school, the nature of the home school relationship in the school and the timing of the introduction. Where the introduction of an agreement did not fit with the school, either because the relationships were already felt to be very good or the agreement did not sit easily with the school's conception of home school relations, compliance was mechanistic and had little significance. Where senior managers felt it could help them take an ongoing strategy further they used it and because contexts varied widely the uses to which the HSA was put also varied. In one school, it was used to reduce the administrative burden on parents and school staff, in another school it was part of a process of developing more democratic relations between all members of the school community including parents and children.

It was clear from the interviews with senior managers that the introduction of the agreement was contextualised by the existing relationships with parents, and this had an important role in determining how the agreement was used and its acceptance. The prior context included existing relations with parents. Sometimes the senior manager was actively managing this relationship. In School 1, the senior manager was constantly aware of the need to affirm to parents the school's approach and identity in relation to local schools. The senior manager used it to reduce the threat (as she saw it) of parental pressure to be more 'traditional'. The school put a lot of effort into 'educating' parents in order to retain control of the educational philosophy of the school. In School 4, the senior manager was aware that a group of parents were openly hostile to her because they thought that as a woman she could not do the job. They were 'trying to get rid of her'. In the first of these schools the senior manager found the Home School Agreement was an instrument she could use as a way of making a public statement to staff, parents and pupils, about the preferred ethos of the school, in particular the need to change from a focus on teaching to one on learning and an emphasis on pupil's responsibility for their own learning. In such cases the Home School Agreement was a uni-dimensional contribution to a multi-dimensional, complex and ever present problem.

### *Making use of the agreement as a contract*

Senior managers often found the process of drawing up the agreement (whether it was conceptualised as a contract or not) as providing an opportunity to offer an explicit statement of philosophy and expectations and the benefits that discussion around these brought.

Once the agreement was in place, some schools saw this as a way of showing that parents had signed up to the expectations of the school. More than one school used this agreement subsequently to remind parents of what they had agreed and in this way they felt they had a little bit more power to persuade the parent to support the school:

"You can use it as a...tool, as a bargaining thing...if you get into a confrontation with parents who might disagree with some of the school rules. "They're the ones you've agreed to!" (School 6 Senior Manager)

for School 9, explicit agreements were quite extensively used in a contractual way by the senior manager as part of her disciplinary style.

In most cases however the contractual model, where the signing of the paper was seen as a promise to which the person could be held, was seen as either uncongenial or impractical. There seemed little point in insisting on someone keeping a promise where there was no way of enforcing it or where to insist was inappropriate or officious and would damage relationships further. The senior manager of School 6, despite supporting the contractual model, was nevertheless well aware of the limitations of the agreement and so for example she did not use it to enforce pupil's responsibilities concerning homework. For these reasons, even where the Home School Agreement was perceived as useful, the agreement was unlikely subsequently to be invoked in itself and even where it was this was a rare event.

This distinction between the process of agreement and its potential contractual nature was starkly illustrated by one school which in its fulsome use of consultation and the stated aim of furthering democratic relations between all parties fulfilled the spirit of the Home School Agreement policy but would have been quite prepared to break the letter of the law by not asking for anyone to sign the final statement. This, they felt, was not necessary as it was an expression of the general will. This raises the issue of the individualistic conception of the Home School Agreement which assumes a radial model of parent school relations with the school at the centre making essentially individual agreements with a number of separate family units. This school would like to have taken a radically different path.

### *Different audiences*

There are different audiences for the Home School Agreement and some senior managers commented that in contrast with the teachers and parents, the involvement of the pupils, in particular, in the consultation and signing process had given a sense of "self-importance to those children who were kind of hidden...because it was a kind of grown up thing to do to sign this contract." School 4 Senior Manager. Further, the explicit statements made through the medium of the Home School Agreement were addressed by senior managers to different groups for different purposes – e.g. to the

children, or to parents at large as part of establishing the distinctive educational identity of the school, or to develop a sympathetic majority in relation to a hostile group. This again emphasises the complex field within which an apparently clear and simple policy initiative such as this must be implemented.

### **Themes arising from the interviews with Parents**

#### *Level of awareness of the Home School Agreement*

In almost all cases, the parents interviewed had a very low level of awareness of the HSA. Many of them had to be reminded of what it was or had reminded themselves immediately before the interview. There was a low level of awareness of the specific contents of the agreements. There was no memory of being consulted. Some were unsure whether they had signed it or not, others had signed it as one among the many returns to school.

The level of awareness was dependent on the level of importance placed on it by the school. Where the school kept it in parents' minds (for example by requiring a signature at the beginning of each school year) there was far more awareness but even then it was not used or referred to by these parents or their school in their day to day relations with school or their children.

#### *A reminder to all concerned of good practice*

The explicit statement of expectations was in some cases welcomed not as the basis of a contract but as a reminder to all concerned of good practice. Often a distinction was made between 'interested' parents who did not need to be reminded and those who for whatever reason were less engaged or seen as indifferent. This was associated with two views on the universal requirement to sign the Home School Agreement. On the one hand the universal requirement was seen by some as justified because although some did not need it themselves, they felt it had to be done for everybody to reach the few who did. On the other hand, the exercise was seen by others as a waste of time because it would have no effect on either group because those who do the right thing anyway did not need it and those who did need it would not respond. "It's just common sense."

Parents considered that the Home School Agreements simply stated what they considered to be 'common sense'; what any 'parent' (and here they implicitly meant any good parent) would do. Parental response varied and included feeling patronised by the statement of the obvious while others thought that it was useful to make these things explicit especially for the minority of parents who needed to be reminded.

There was another response that raises more philosophical issues. This was that the contractual nature of the process, the making it an explicit agreement in some way jarred with what some saw as the proper ethical stance of parents and schools in which they wanted to include and educate their children. The following quotation illustrates this theme: "She sees that is the correct way to act...How can I explain? I say to her about being on time because it is good manners and wouldn't say, 'Come on we have to hurry up because the agreement says'...I try to (say) to her, 'That is the way you act.' Not because the school want it. That's the way you act!"

*It is unnecessary*

While many parents shared the view that it was the "way to act" or that it was "just common sense" there was also the feeling present that the Home School Agreement was an unnecessary extra burden. Two different kinds of reasons were given for it being unnecessary. One was the familiar one that it made no difference, had no effect on practice and was done simply because it was required. A second was that there were already plenty of ways in which the same objectives could be and often were being achieved without the imposition of the Home School Agreement.

This feeling was particularly strongly expressed by parents of the children at the special school where communication with parents was continuous, detailed and successful through a home/school diary which was filled in every day by school staff and parents and acted as a means of keeping up with the special needs of their children. But in mainstream schools there were a great variety of everyday routines that provided effective means of maintaining and demonstrating parental and pupil commitment. A common means was the pupil planner which required the signature of the parent each week or even more frequently, and there were also year group meetings, 'surgeries', curriculum meetings and summaries of planned work for the term. Added to these were the almost daily requests from school for permission, or 'voluntary contributions' or the many letters giving information that needed to be logged. Compared to these specific, immediate and therefore meaningful requests and requirements the generality and inconsequential nature of the Home School Agreement appears abstract and disconnected from the urgency of day to day school relations.

*Jarring conceptions/conceptual dissonance/cultural differences*

The responses of these different parents highlighted some of the values and attitudes that are implicit in the Home School Agreement and that should perhaps be made explicit so as to be questioned and tested openly.

The Home School Agreement assumes that:

When the school day is over school work should extend into the home life of parents and students;

Children should share in decisions about the way that they behave in relation to school and school life;

School staff should work together in the job of schooling their children in addition to educating them in the broadest sense;

Young people's lives at school should be the shared responsibility of school and parents and is a part of the pupil's life that they should 'share' with their parents.

Although it was far from a dominant theme each of these was found to be questionable by at least some of the parents. However the greatest dissonance was between on the one hand the experience of day to day contact, as part of which difficulties were tackled and resolved in direct engagement on specific issues, and on the other the uni-dimensionality and abstractness of an agreement conceived on the contractual model; between the idea that an agreement should be a matter of shared ethical principles of respect, manners and commitment rather than a contract between parties.

### **Themes arising from the interviews with pupils**

Pupils' experience of school is that they are daily aware, and are made aware, of their responsibilities to the school community. It is a central part of their everyday activity in a way that it is not with parents. Like parents they only had a vague memory of the Home School Agreement. However, they recognised the content and principles of the agreement in many other aspects of their relationship with teachers and school, for example in Class Rules, or expectations about homework written in Homework Planners, or the involvement of parents in signing Home/School Diaries.

There was some caution expressed by secondary children about too much involvement of parents in the sense that it was a potential invasion into a realm that was 'theirs'. They were worried about being embarrassed, given too little 'space', no privacy. This raises again the issue of the, perhaps unintended, effect of the agreement to blur boundaries in this case parents 'invading' the world of the school which students believe is something for them to manage. Parental involvement is not a neutral activity and the fact that it affects power relations between the participants should be acknowledged. Students were aware of the way the Home School Agreement would affect the relations between parents and school when they stated that, 'Parents don't need rules. They don't need people to take control over them so they can do whatever they want.'

There was also awareness of the significant burden on parents implied by the model of involvement in the typical Home School Agreement and the differential ability to meet that burden. Some parents simply have more resources of time and money to meet the requirements.

Despite the requirement to consult students and the now widespread practice of formal pupil representation in schools it is possible that the content of some agreements omit things that are important to students. Those interviewed suggested that there was a focus on things that affected academic achievement but not enough on the provision of good working conditions for students such as equipment, clean toilets and a suitable working temperature in classrooms – things that affected the daily life of students in school.

The issue of style was also raised with a recommendation that there should be more praise for the positive achievements of all concerned rather than a focus on potential inadequacy.

Overall, a key theme emerging from the pupil interviews was their enthusiasm for discussion of, and thirst for a voice, on the content of the Home School Agreement. Although often their priorities were more about their own environment rather than wider issues, it is important to stress that the pupils we talked to wanted to be heard.

## **DISCUSSION AND SUGGESTIONS FOR POLICY AND PRACTICE**

### **Schools' introduction of the Home School Agreements**

Home School Agreements have been introduced in the vast majority of schools. Most schools took a wide-ranging approach to the development and implementation of HSAs, consulting a range of groups in addition to parents, and using a variety of sources of help, in particular DfES guidance. Consultation with pupils was more common in schools that were more positive about the impact of HSAs, which indicates that students should be considered for consultation.

The proportion of parents signing the HSA is high in most schools, and many of the schools that took part in our survey reported that they took steps to encourage reluctant parents to sign. However, schools reported a variety of reasons why parents may not sign some of which could be difficult to overcome (even if some of these reported reasons may in fact be views projected onto parents by teachers themselves). Schools that ask pupils to sign tend to see a more positive impact from HSAs than others, so this ought to be a consideration for schools.

Literacy problems and poor English played a part in some cases. Good examples of simplifying their written documents were found (particularly in primary schools). Very few schools translated their HSA into community languages. Ironically this was true of schools with extremely diverse linguistic populations because there were so many community languages that translation into all would be a huge burden and translation into selected languages would risk appearing exclusive. It would be incorrect therefore to conclude that absence of translation indicated that schools were not taking the issue of language seriously.

There was some suspicion on the part of some parents (in both survey and case studies) of anything perceived to be 'official', especially if it has to be signed. In some cases this was overcome by schools working hard to make clear to parents that the HSA was part of an overall approach to home-school involvement, and not a legally binding contract. There was also the opinion voiced by some parents and school staff that because the HSA is not legally binding it is not taken seriously by some parents.

Some parents and staff saw not signing as a general lack of involvement with school and attributed it to parental apathy. However there were indications that there are many different reasons why some parents do not wish to play an active part in schooling leading to an antipathy to the agreement - see, in particular, responses reported in Table 1.11b.

Schools are beginning to review their HSAs (although at present less than half of schools have such procedures in place). It is important, from the evidence presented in this study, that schools - whilst keeping responsibility for reviewing and monitoring within senior management groups - ensure that parents and governors play a fuller part than has been reported in the continuing development of Home School Agreements.

## **The Make up of the Home School Agreement Document**

The Home School Agreement documents which were analysed tended to be very close in content to the DfES model guidance for schools. As such, they were divided into sections with the responsibilities of the school, the parents and the pupils. Although the majority were closely in line with what the guidance suggested, there are two clear exceptions. Firstly the ways in which the school ethos reflects the community it serves is mentioned in only two percent of agreements. Secondly the guidance suggests that the agreement should make it clear that the pupils will be expected to observe the school's discipline and anti bullying policy, however only 12 percent of agreements mentions bullying from the viewpoint of pupils' responsibilities.

In terms of the tone of the agreements, three measures were used to examine the 'friendliness' of the document (such as the use of the phrase "will try to" as opposed to "will") and for each measure primary school documents tended to be more 'friendly' than secondary schools. However, this is not to say that this indicated that home school relationships in general were any less friendly in secondary schools.

## **The Impact of the Home School Agreements**

In terms of the impact of Home School Agreements, many of the staff within the case studies suggested that it was difficult to single out their specific impact from a wide range of other policies and initiatives particularly in relation to behaviour attendance and home working. A number of staff and parents did, however feel that it was useful to clarify expectations of the school, parents and pupils and also to formalise certain aspects of home school policies.

The main positive impact of the introduction of HSAs, as reported by the questionnaire sample, is in communicating the role, expectations and responsibilities of the school. In addition, one in three schools saw a positive impact in developing parent teacher working, and assisting parents in supporting their children's learning in the home, completing homework and encouraging good behaviour. In terms of other areas of schooling and education, the majority of schools thought the HSA had made no real impact. The vast majority of schools saw no negative impact on schooling, with the exception that some schools felt that it had created an additional administrative burden.

Many schools elaborated on their responses regarding the lack of impact of HSAs, noting that HSAs were unnecessary if there were already good parental relationships and that written communication was no substitute for face to face interaction. However, some saw it as providing an opportunity to formalise school expectations, and utilised HSAs as part of a much larger policy of home-school relationships. The key difference between schools was that whilst some had taken on the HSA as an integral part of their home school work, others had not. Without acceptance of this integration, the impact on schools is likely to be negligible (see Case Study 1, Case Study 2 for example).

## Implementing Home School Agreements

Three major areas emerge from the case study analyses in conjunction with the questionnaire analysis in relation to the implementation of the HSA policy in schools.

### *The Home School Agreement and other home school policies and practice*

In some cases, the HSAs and other home school policies are conceived as separate things with the HSA being shorn off from other elements of home school relations<sup>6</sup>. In some cases<sup>7</sup> the home school partnership was seen to provide a genuine framework for home school policies, but it was more widely conceived as a useful tool as part of the wider raft of measures<sup>8</sup>. In schools that see the HSA as being at least in some way part of the wider group of home school practices, it is more likely to be successful (a finding in common with the Ofsted Survey used in the Guidance for Schools and previous research by Ouston and Hood, 2001).

However, it is important to note that there is no simple causal link between this integration of the HSA with other policies, and the success of the HSA. In fact, the nature of the relationship between HSAs and other home school relations was linked to the school's conception of the HSA and its place in the school. In some cases, the notion of the HSA as contract was supported and seen to be helpful by some or all parties<sup>9</sup>. In others, the HSA as contract was seen to be patronising to parents and anathema to the tone and ethos of the home school relationships in place<sup>10</sup>.

The key factor here was the school's conception of its home school relationships and policy. These relationships and policies varied between schools according to factors including the age range of school; whether a school was a special school or a mainstream school; the expectations of parents; and the needs and expectations of the teachers. In some schools<sup>11</sup>, the policies involved a partnership approach which a Home School Agreement was seen to threaten. In these cases, the HSA would not be integrated with other policies. In others, which took an approach based on a model of parental support or communication, the HSA was more likely to have some possibility of being fully integrated with other policies.

### *Consultation, review and monitoring as an impetus to home school policy*

Clearly, HSAs were not seen to be successful by all stakeholders in our case studies (which was reflected in the responses reported in Table 1.16 from the survey). Even where some stakeholders saw the HSA to be an effective policy, this view was not always shared by all members of the school community. The evidence presented in this report supports the view that the HSA is likely to be successful if the implementation and continued use of the HSA is based on wide consultation<sup>12</sup>.

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<sup>6</sup> See, for example, Case Study 1, Case Study 3

<sup>7</sup> For example, Case 7

<sup>8</sup> See Table 1.16 and Case 6

<sup>9</sup> See Case 6, Case 9

<sup>10</sup> For example, Case 1, comments on page 14

<sup>11</sup> Case 1, Case 3

<sup>12</sup> Case 5, Case 6

Consultation and ownership by pupils was found to be linked to more successful use of HSAs (see above), and there was a thirst for this involvement on the part of the pupils interviewed<sup>13</sup>. Consultation with parents and other stakeholders was seen as an integral part of the development of the school in several of our cases.

However, this consultation and consequent review of school issues was not always related to HSAs. Examples in our cases included the use of consultation on school ethos statements (Case 1), and the consultation with parents before the introduction of the HSA that provided an initial impetus to improved home school relationships with the subsequent dropping of the HSA (Case 4). Therefore, this research adds to the evidence that the wider use of consultation with parents and pupils in school policies - although not necessarily the HSA - is likely to lead to more successful home school policies.

#### *The Home School Agreement as statutory requirement*

The requirement of schools to implement HSAs in 1999 led to varied responses from schools. Some complied minimally, whilst keeping the HSA separate from wider home school policies and practices as described above, and this is linked in some cases to its statutory nature, in addition to a perceived conflict between the home school ethos of the school and the notion of a home school agreement. In particular, the requirement for parents to be asked to sign was reported to be problematic in some cases (see for example p13; Case 1, Case 5).

The requirement for schools to develop and implement the HSA within a specified time period meant that where schools felt a specific need for such a document, or if a similar document was already in place, it was welcomed as part of the wider home school relations<sup>14</sup>. However, in other cases, where the agreement was not seen to fit with the home school policies already in place, compliance was minimal or HSAs ceased to be important shortly after their introduction<sup>15</sup>. But in most of our cases, the HSA is not used on a day to basis according to stakeholders.

In several of our cases, and in other schools according to survey responses, HSAs are divorced from other home school partnerships, yet schools are required to use them. In these cases, they do not have a positive impact in the school. Therefore it may be timely for the statutory nature of the HSA be re-examined; and in particular the requirement for schools to ask parents to sign it. As an impetus to provide better home school relationships, a shared policy - rather than a signed document - developed between school, parents and pupils, may well work better for many schools.

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<sup>13</sup> For example, Case 4, Case 8.

<sup>14</sup> Case 5, Case 6.

<sup>15</sup> Case 1, Case 2.

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# **APPENDIX 1: APPENDIX TO THE SURVEY**

## **Copy of the questionnaire**



# Sheffield Hallam University

Thank you for taking the time to complete this questionnaire on the impact of Home School Agreements. The Sheffield Hallam University research team will use the questionnaire responses to produce an overall report. Individuals and schools will not be identified in any reports or shared beyond the research team. Unless indicated otherwise, please tick one box only for each question.

1. What is your role in the school?  
 Headteacher     Deputy Head     Assistant Head     Senior Teacher     Other
  
2. a) School intake type:  
 primary Specialist     secondary     special school     middle school  
b) Special status:  
 CTC     Grammar
  
- c) Type of school:  
 community     foundation     voluntary aided     voluntary controlled
  
3. When did your school first introduce an HSA?  
 before 1997     1997-1999     2000-2002     working on introducing it  
*→ If not yet introduced, go to question 18*
  
4. Did you use examples of good practice when drawing up your HSA?  
 yes     no  
If yes, which of these did you use? (Tick all that apply)  
 DfES guidance     LEA documents     other schools' examples     DfES leaflet     other
  
5. How did you consult parents when drawing up the HSA? (Tick all that apply)  
 questionnaires     meetings     parent school associations     parent governors     working groups     other
  
6. Which other groups did you consult? (Tick all that apply)  
 teachers volunteers     pupils     governors     LEA     Teaching assistants     School  
If you consulted pupils, which of these methods did you use? (Tick all that apply)  
 letter     lesson activity     after school club     class/school council     other
  
7. Approximately what proportion of parents responded to the consultation?  
 less than 25%     25-50%     51-75%     75-90%     more than 90%
  
8. Approximately what percentage of parents have signed the HSA?  
 less than 25%     25-50%     51-75%     75-90%     more than 90%
  
9. Do you use any of these procedures to encourage parents who do not sign the HSA to do so? (Tick all that apply)  
 letter home     phone call     other
  
10. Do you know of any reasons why some parents do not sign HSAs?  
 no     yes - please explain: \_\_\_\_\_
  
11. Are pupils asked to sign the HSA?  
 yes     no  
Where is the HSA kept?  
 Pupil file     Contact book     other

12. Are there monitoring and reviewing arrangements in place for the HSA?

yes       no → if no, move on to question 13

How is it monitored and reviewed? (Tick all that apply)

parental questionnaire       working group       discussions with parents       discussions with pupils       other

Who has responsibility for reviewing the HSA? (Tick all that apply)

leadership group       governors       parents       others

How often is it intended to review the HSA?

less often than every 5 years       every five years       every 2 to 4 years       every year

13. Has the introduction of the HSA had any long-term impact in the following areas?:

	very positive	positive	no impact	negative	very negative
a) H/S Communication of school role.....	<input type="checkbox"/>				
b) H/S Communication of school expectations.....	<input type="checkbox"/>				
c) H/S Communication of school responsibilities .....	<input type="checkbox"/>				
d) Pupil attainment.....	<input type="checkbox"/>				
e) Pupil behaviour.....	<input type="checkbox"/>				
f) Attendance at school.....	<input type="checkbox"/>				
g) Homework .....	<input type="checkbox"/>				
h) Uniform.....	<input type="checkbox"/>				
i) Parents and teachers working together.....	<input type="checkbox"/>				
j) Parents supporting and helping their children's learning at home more effectively.....	<input type="checkbox"/>				
k) Administrative procedures.....	<input type="checkbox"/>				

14. In general, on a scale of 10 for very positive and 1 for very negative how would you rate the introduction of HSAs for your school? [Write number here:] [ ]

15. Is your HSA available in any community languages (e.g. Urdu)?

yes       no

16. As a follow up to this questionnaire, we will be conducting small case studies to examine the impact of HSAs. Would your school be willing to consider taking part in this research?

yes       no

If yes please provide the school's name, address and contact details below

.....

17. If possible we would like you to include a copy of your school's HSA when you return the questionnaire.

Have you included a copy?

yes       no

18. Do you have any further comments on HSAs, or this questionnaire?

*Thank you very much for completing this questionnaire. Please return in the enclosed prepaid envelope as soon as possible, but by January 17<sup>th</sup> if at all possible. Please note that your responses will be treated as confidential. No school or individual will be able to be identified in any report, whether taking part in case studies or in this survey.*

## Letter to Schools

28 November 2002

Dear (headteacher name)

DfES-funded Sheffield Hallam University Research Project

Sheffield Hallam University has been commissioned by the DfES to conduct research into the impact of the introduction of Home School agreements. Specifically, the aims of the research are:

- To identify models of home–school agreements.
- To identify examples of good practice that have resulted in improving home-school relationships.
- To measure the impact of the actions specified on student outcomes.
- To measure the impact of the actions on perceived parental involvement.

As part of this research, schools across England have been selected randomly to be asked to take part in a survey on this issue. I am writing to ask if you would kindly assist with this research by completing the enclosed short questionnaire, and returning it in the prepaid addressed envelope enclosed before the end of December.

If possible, we would like you to enclose a copy of your Home School Agreement.

Individual schools will not be identified in the report, and you can be assured that any data provided will be treated in confidence. If you wish, you can speak to the project directors about any of this work at the addresses below.

*Thanking you in anticipation of your assistance*

Mike Coldwell  
School of Education  
Sheffield Hallam University

Kathy Stephenson  
School of Education  
Sheffield Hallam University

## **APPENDIX 2: APPENDIX TO THE ANALYSIS OF AGREEMENTS**

## Original coding frame for the analysis of agreements

School Code: \_\_\_\_\_

### Section 1: Non content

**N1 Order - School (1) Parents (2) Pupils (3) Code:** \_\_\_\_\_

code 123 if school first, parents second, children third, 231 If parents first, children second and school third etc

#### *Tone*

**N2 will or will try to/do our best to** \_\_\_\_\_

code 1 for will, 2 for will try to

**N3 Together we will** \_\_\_\_\_

code 1 if there is 'together we will' section, 0 if there isn't one

**N4 Use of partnership symbols** \_\_\_\_\_

code 1 if a symbol of partnership e.g. shaking hands is used, 0 if not

### **Signatures**

<b>Q</b>	<b>Code</b>
N5	school signature
N6	headteacher signature
N7	class teacher signature
N8	other teacher signature
N9	governor signature
N10	parent signature
N11	child signature

### Section 2: Schools

<b>Q</b>	<b>Code</b>
code	school code number (write in)
S1	statement of ethos
S2	balanced curriculum
S3	set homework
S4	contact parents about problems with equipment
S5	contact parents about problems with progress
S6	contact parents about problems with attendance
S7	contact parents about problems with punctuality
S8	contact parents about problems with behaviour
S9	keep parents informed about school activities
S10	encourage pupils to work to their best abilities/achieve potential
S11	praise/reward children
S12	encourage children to take care of environment
S13	inform parents about curriculum
S14	inform parents about child's progress
S15	inform parents about development plan priorities
S16	provide a happy environment
S17	provide a safe caring environment
S18	return calls or contact within 24 hours
S19	listen to parents views
S20	listen to children's views
S21	develop self esteem
S22	ensure high standards of teaching and learning
S23	provide written records of progress
S24	set appropriate targets
S25	work in partnership with parents by joint working
S26	work in partnership with parents by being open and welcoming
S27	maintain religious ethos
S28	provide parents meetings
S29	develop pupils as responsible citizens
S30	reflect the diversity of the school in teaching
S31	develop sense of responsibility

S32 foster link with community

### **Section 3: Parents**

<b>Q</b>	<b>Code</b>
P1	Attendance
P2	Contact School when absent
P3	Take Family Holidays out of term time
P4	Punctuality
P5	Bring equipments
P6	Physical appearance (Uniform, jewellery being tidy)
P7	Collect child from school on time
P8	Encourage child to work hard
P9	Participation in education at home
P10	Ensure homework is completed
P11	Contact school when there is a problem
P12	Behaviour and broader policies
P13	Attend parents evening, other meetings and consultations
P14	Give permission for extra-curricular activities
P15	Get to know about child's life at school
P16	Religious ethos
P17	Involvement with school
P18	Send dinner money and respond slips
P19	maintain school ethos
P20	support school
P21	Check and sign child's planner.

### **Section 4: Children**

C1	Keep the school rules
C2	Attendance
C3	Punctuality
C4	Respect and consideration for others
C5	Work hard to best of ability
C6	Homework
C7	Physical appearance (Uniform, jewellery being tidy)
C8	Bring equipments
C9	School environment, litter wider community etc
C10	Tolerance and bullying issues
C11	Use logbook/homework diary
C12	Classroom
C13	Be responsible
C14	Care for own and others belongings
C15	Listen to others
C16	Talk to teacher/school staff if have a problem or concern
C17	Be independent
C18	Be honest
C19	Pass notes between home and school
C20	Follow school ethos
C21	Celebrate own and others' success

# **Sample Agreements (Anonymised)**

# **APPENDIX 3: APPENDIX TO THE CASE STUDIES**

# **Core Interview Schedules**

Contact Teacher Topic Guide: [Sample from Case Study 6]

Introduction

Thank you for giving up your time to complete the questionnaire and to take part in the study. Just to reinforce- the aim of the research is to examine the impact of HSA and your responses will be anonymous and treated confidentially. Is there anything you wish me to clarify before we begin?

General questions

How long have you worked at the school?

Very briefly, could you run through the key issues in terms of school development?

Are there strong links between the school and the wider community?

Would you say the school has a proactive governing body? -How involved are the parent governors?

Parental questions - general

Does the school have an active PTA?

Can you tell me about your home school communications in general?

Prompt- level of parental involvement, parent evening take-up.

In what ways do you involve parents in school life?

Would you say that parents are generally supportive of the school?

Do you have any concerns within the school around;  
Attendance?  
Punctuality?  
Pupil behaviour?  
Any other concerns?

What is the school policy regarding homework?  
Prompt-set weekly adheres to set rota, etc.

In general, do parent seem to support their children's learning at home?

HSA questions

Moving on to the HSA, what does it mean to you?

I notice from your response to the questionnaire that the school introduced the HSA before 1997: reasons for this? Prompt, how did it develop, did you want a contract, etc.

Before drawing up the agreement, did you ask parents what they expected from the school?

Tell me a little more about how you drew up the HSA -  
Prompt- what examples of good practice?- you said other schools, which ones? Anything else?

Why did you consult parents via PTA, parent governors?

Who else consulted? - state teachers, pupils, governors - how?

Why did you feel it was important to consult pupils? If consulted what feedback did you get from them, after lessons and school/class council?

less than 25% of parents responded to the consultation, was this figure expected? Did you need to modify the HSA in the light of their responses?

more than 90% of parents have signed the HSA- comments on the percentage.

What have you done in order to encourage those who didn't sign to sign?

How do you involve hard to reach parents? - you say "Sometimes it gets lost, some times they just slip through the net"

What is the thinking behind asking pupils to sign HSA?

Do you think students take the responsibility of signing HSA seriously? (if applicable)

Does the school have a school council or similar body?

Explore individual HSA, e.g., why do you have this particular section? How is it presented to the parents? Do they sign once or annually? Explore community languages.

Go on to explore their answers to questionnaire 13 regarding impact - you think it has had a very positive impact overall - refer to individual questions

Do you refer to HSA in communication with; if so which parts do you refer to?

Pupils- PSHE lessons, etc.

Staff- staff handbook, etc.

Governors- meetings

Has the HSA been incorporated into wider home-school practices and policies?

Do you think that it provides a framework for developing strong home school partnerships?

In your opinion, how useful do classroom teachers (Primary), subject teachers, and tutors (secondary) find the HSA- do they adopt subject agreements? Prompt- homework reinforcing.

What are your plans for reviewing HSA?

Anything else you would like to say that we have not already covered?

If appropriate, make arrangements at this stage for interview with relevant parents/ governors/ pupils, etc.

Thank you for your time, if there is anything else that springs to mind later, don't hesitate to contact me.

## Teaching Staff Topic Guide [Sample - Case Study 6]

### Teacher topic Guide

Thank you for giving up your time to complete the questionnaire and to take part in the study. Just to reinforce- the aim of the research is to examine the impact of HSA and your responses will be anonymous and treated confidentially. Is there anything you wish me to clarify before we begin?

### General questions

How long have you worked at the school?

In your view, are there strong links between the school and the wider community?

### Parental questions (general)

Would you say the school has a proactive governing body? - How involved are the parent governors?

Does the school have an active PTA?

Can you tell me about your home school communications in general?  
[Prompt- level of parental involvement, parent evening take-up.]

In what ways do you involve parents in school life?

Would you say that parents are generally supportive of the school?

Do you have any concerns within your class around;  
Attendance?  
Punctuality?  
Pupil behaviour?  
Any other concerns?

In general, do parents seem to support their children's learning at home?

### HSA questions

Moving on to the HSA, what does it mean to you?

How involved were you in the consultation?

90+% of parents have signed the HSA- comments on the percentage. What have you need to do, if anything, in order to encourage those who didn't sign to sign?

How do you involve hard to reach parents?

What is the thinking behind asking pupils to sign HSA?

Do you think students take the responsibility of signing HSA seriously?

Explore individual HSA, e.g., why do you have this particular section? How is it presented to the parents? Do they sign once or annually? Explore community languages.

Go on to explore their answers to questionnaire 13 regarding impact: Has it had any positive or negative impact at all?

Do you refer to HSA in communication with; if so which parts do you refer to?  
Pupils- PSHE lessons, etc.  
Staff- staff handbook, etc.

Do you think that it provides a framework for developing strong home school partnerships?

How useful do you find the HSA- do they adopt subject agreements? [Prompt- homework reinforcing.]

Anything else you would like to say that we have not already covered?

Thank you for your time, if there is anything else that springs to mind later, don't hesitate to contact me.

Parents' topic guide

*Explain nature of research confidentially etc*

How many children at the school, ages?

How are they doing, happy, settled achieving etc?

Do you have much involvement with school life - volunteer, PTA community initiatives etc?

In general would you say that the school is welcoming?

Do you have any concerns regarding your child and the school?

In your opinion are school issues communicated well to parents?

Does your child have much homework? Is the level about right?

*Explain briefly a little about HSA and produce a copy of the school HSA*

Do you remember roughly when you first came across HSA?

(if parent governor) where you involved in drawing it up? deciding on how to present it, etc?

Did you sign (if not explore why not) When did you sign? Who signed (which parent?)

Was your child asked to sign the agreement?

*Go through HSA and explore some of the content*

Did signing the HSA affect your thinking about your child's schooling, responsibilities etc?

How can you envisage drawing upon the HSA in communicating with the school?

Have the school ever referred to it in communications with you?

*Work through the impact question (13) and explore the impact.*

Do you think the HSA helps to make clear?

What you can expect from the school?

What is expected of you as a parent?

Is there anything else we have not covered you wish to add?

## **Topic guide for pupils (school council or focus group)**

### **Introduction**

Hello, my name is xxxx and I am from Sheffield Hallam University. We are doing some work investigating how families of children in schools work together with schools. As part of this work, we are going in to schools all over England, and talking to parents, teachers and pupils in schools about this. I won't be asking anything personal, but the notes and recording I make will not be shared with anyone outside our research team, and when we write about it, we will not name any schools or people at schools including you. Do you have any questions? OK

### **Icebreakers**

[one or more of] what year are you in? what have you been doing this morning? What have you been talking about on the school council?

### **General family related questions**

What does the school do to keep your family involved with your education?

Examples - take from school policies e.g. parent meetings, PTAs, specific innovative schemes

What would you like it to do?

what experience do you have of this?

### **HSA questions**

Have you seen/signed the HSA?

Is it kept at home? In a book? Somewhere in school?

Did you or anyone you know get chance to comment on it before it was sent out?

Do you remember who signed in your home? Did you discuss it? Is it ever discussed or mentioned at home?

### ***Look at copies/copy of the HSA with pupils.***

Does what it says is going to happen actually happen?

Does it help you understand what to expect from the school?

Does it help you understand what your parents have to do? What you have to do?

Is it ever used/mentioned on the school council?

What could improve it?

What is not important?

What is important but not on it?

any other comments

Has the introduction of HSA and other policies made any difference?

To your parents?

To you or other pupils in terms of -  
punctuality and attendance  
homework  
behaviour  
marks and results  
anything else?

specific school-related questions on HSAs e.g.

- you weren't asked to sign it - would you like to have been? Should it be translated into other languages?

## **Information Letter to Respondents**

### **Department for Education and Skills-funded Sheffield Hallam University Research Project**

Sheffield Hallam University has been commissioned by the DfES to conduct research into the impact of the introduction of Home School Agreements. Specifically, the aims of the research are:

- To identify models of Home–School Agreements.
- To identify examples of good practice that have resulted in improving home-school relationships.
- To assess the impact of the actions specified on student outcomes.
- To assess the impact of the actions on perceived parental involvement.

As part of this research, schools in a number of selected LEAs across England have been selected randomly to be asked to take part in a survey on this issue. Responses were received from over 300 schools, and these responses are being analysed at present.

10 schools across the authorities we have selected have been approached to take part in small case studies, focussing on the introduction of HSAs, their impact in the schools and the experiences of the people involved in the school. Wider issues of home-school partnerships will also be covered.

In each of the case studies, the research team would like to speak to the key person involved in the school - the Headteacher, or the person who completed the questionnaire. This is in some ways the most important interview, because it gives us the most detailed data, and we'd want to speak for about an hour. We'd also like to conduct a shorter interview with another member of teaching staff, a form tutor, perhaps - to get a different perspective. This would only require around half an hour.

We will be asking to speak to two parents. One could be someone such as a parent governor who has a good knowledge of the scheme, and the other would be another parent - this could be a telephone interview. Finally, ideally we'd like to speak for a short time to a small group of pupils, perhaps the school council or a group of pupils from different year groups, for around ½ an hour as well. We'd like to conduct as much of the fieldwork as possible in one or two visits, and the rest by phone, to cause as little disturbance as possible. It may also be appropriate to speak to other people informally, such as teaching assistants, governors or community representatives, if this is seen as being useful by the school, and is not too burdensome.

The case studies will be anonymised, school names, and participants names will be changed, and no participant will be identifiable, either as a school or as individuals. We will not be asking anything sensitive to pupils, but if you wish we can send you a copy of a consent letter and details to pass on and personalise.

The research is very important, because it lets the government see how HSAs are impacting in schools, and gives a voice to teachers and parents about it.

If you wish to know more about the research, or wish to clarify any of these issues, you can speak to the project directors about any of this work using the contact details below.

Mike Coldwell  
School of Education  
Sheffield Hallam University

Kathy Stephenson  
School of Education  
Sheffield Hallam University

## Script for first contact with schools

- Make sure that you are familiar with the questionnaire, HSA and OfSTED report beforehand

Hello my name is xxxxx and I'm from Sheffield Hallam University. Recently, you completed a questionnaire about Home school Agreements, and you indicated you were willing to be contacted about becoming involved as a small case study in the next stage of the research.

So I was ringing now to try to set up an initial confirmatory meeting and organise the other data collection we would like to do. We'd like to speak to the key person involved in the school - you or the person who answered the questionnaire - for about an hour. This is the most important interview, because it gives us the most detailed data, and we'd want to speak for about an hour. We'd also like to conduct a shorter interview with another member of teaching staff, a form tutor, perhaps - to get a different perspective, This would only require half an hour.

We will be asking to speak to two parents, one someone such as a parent governor who has a good knowledge of the scheme, and another parent - this could be a telephone interview. Finally, ideally we'd like to speak for a short time to a small group of pupils, perhaps the school council or a group of pupils from different year groups, for around ½ an hour as well. We'd like to conduct as much of the fieldwork as possible in one or two visits, and the rest by phone, to cause as little disturbance as possible.

The case studies will be anonymised- school names, and participants names will be changed, and you will not be identifiable as a school or as individuals. Could we set up an initial meeting now do you think?

Could it coincide with a school council? Do you think you could also arrange for us to speak to a teaching colleague? The parent governor? Other parents?

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