Schools and parents

Between September 2009 and March 2010, Her Majesty's Inspectors visited 47 schools to evaluate how effectively the partnership between parents and schools had developed. The schools varied in size, geographical location and socio-economic circumstances. Inspectors also drew on other sources, which included organisations working with parents and parents' groups, and evidence that Ofsted already held, such as data from its parents' panel and school inspections.

Corporate member of
Plain English Campaign
Committed to clearer communication

361

Contents

Executive summary

Between September 2009 and March 2010, Her Majesty's Inspectors visited 47 schools to evaluate how effectively the partnership between parents and schools had developed.[1] The schools varied in size, geographical location and socio-economic circumstances. Inspectors also drew on other sources, which included organisations working with parents and parents' groups, and evidence that Ofsted already held, such as data from its parents' panel and school inspections.[2] These inspections show a successful picture of schools working in partnership with parents: in 2009/10, 80% of schools inspected were graded either good or outstanding in this area.

There were considerable differences from one school to another in the approaches taken to working with parents and in the effectiveness of the approaches. The schools were welcoming to parents and the parents noted improvements in the schools' relationships with them. Although this was at different stages of development, increasingly the schools visited for the survey were using email, mobile telephones and the internet to reach more parents more easily, including parents who were not living with their children. Parents and staff, however, still saw face-to-face communication as very important in helping learning. In the best examples seen, schools tailored their communications to suit the preferences of individual parents.

The parents interviewed for this survey had a better understanding of the assessments that schools made about their children, and how they could use these to encourage further progress, than the parents surveyed for a similar report in 2007.[3] The schools usually gave them accurate, timely information and opportunities for discussion with staff. However, input from parents directly into setting pupils' academic targets was less common. All the schools visited gave parents guidance about how to help their children to learn at home. This differed widely in style and quality across the schools visited.

A fundamental difference observed between school phases was that in the primary and special schools visited, parents often worked directly alongside teachers and pupils, observing and contributing to the learning. This was much rarer in the secondary schools visited, so parents had less understanding about what their children were learning. The secondary schools asked parents to help their children by, for example, ensuring that they had a suitable place for homework and ensuring good attendance. As in the 2007 survey, the schools visited were usually active in communicating with parents whose children had special educational needs and/or disabilities, or needed other particular support.

---

[1] The word 'parents' is used throughout the report to include those who may exercise parental responsibility, or aspects of this, formally or informally, for a child. This includes parents, grandparents, family members, foster carers, friends, social workers and other professionals.
[2] Ofsted's regular inspections of all maintained schools are conducted under Section 5 of the Education Act, 2005; www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2005/18/section/5.
[3] *Parents, carers and schools* (070018), Ofsted, 2007; www.ofsted.gov.uk/publications/070018a.

Most parental complaints and concerns were resolved well. When they were analysed positively as a means of improving provision, rather than handled defensively, they helped the schools to improve. Nevertheless, some of the parents that inspectors spoke to said that they could not always raise questions or concerns easily with their child's school. They felt that they were not able to request something more or different without appearing overly demanding.

Key findings

- All the schools visited valued the key role of parents in their children's education but put this into effect in different ways, with very varied quality and outcomes.

- In the best cases seen, joint working between the home and the school led to much better outcomes for pupils; in particular, this helped pupils with special educational needs and/or disabilities, those with low attendance or who were potentially vulnerable in other ways.

- All the schools visited were using, or experimenting with, new technology in their communications with parents. Such work complemented more traditional methods such as face-to-face meetings and paper-based communication.

- Seven of the 47 schools visited had parent councils or forums. These provided helpful routes for parents to raise issues or contribute to policy development on the initiative of the school but such councils did not represent all parents fully.

- In the best practice, complaints were used as an opportunity to improve services and understand better the wishes and views of parents. These schools had clear, straightforward complaints procedures that were well known to staff and parents.

- In the few cases seen where the schools said that parents had contributed or initiated ideas for strategic improvement, and these ideas had been taken forward, they had been successful.

- Although parents often worked helpfully alongside staff (especially in the primary schools visited), the various skills, qualifications, experience and insights of parents were underused to enhance the schools' provision and curriculum.

- The schools' evaluation of the impact of their work with parents was poor.

- Home–school agreements had a low profile and their impact on the day-to-day work between parents and the schools was very limited.[4]

---

[4] The School Standards and Framework Act 1998 requires that all maintained schools adopt a home–school agreement (sections 110 and 111). For further information, see:
http://www.education.gov.uk/schools/pupilsupport/parents/involvement/hsa/a0014718/home-school-agreements.

Recommendations

Schools should:

- consider auditing, and then using more widely, parents' skills and specific expertise as a resource to improve the school

- tailor their communications with parents to suit individual circumstances

- use parental complaints as a stimulus for improvement and record them to identify trends

- evaluate better the impact of parental involvement and engagement on outcomes for pupils and use this information to focus further improvements

- in the secondary sector particularly, enable parents to engage themselves more directly with their children's learning.

Introduction: working together

1. Parental engagement can be a powerful lever for raising achievement in schools and there is much research to show the value of schools and parents working together to support pupils' learning. Schools have been encouraged to shift from simply involving parents with the school to enabling them to engage themselves more directly with their children's learning. This report evaluates how well the 47 schools visited engaged and involved their parents. An additional secondary school was visited briefly to illustrate a particular feature of good practice. It is listed in the annex to the report but is not included in the analysis of the main sample of 47 schools.

2. The schools varied in size, geographical location and socio-economic circumstances. The main sample consisted of three nursery schools, 18 primary schools, 22 secondary schools, three special schools and one pupil referral unit. They were not, however, fully typical in that inspectors visited a higher proportion of schools that had been judged to be either good or outstanding at their previous inspections than is found nationally.

Parents' contribution to the school's work

3. In each school visited for the survey, two of the judgements made by inspectors were:

- the overall effectiveness of the school's engagement with parents and carers

- the impact of the involvement of parents and carers on the quality of the school's provision.

4. In 16 of the schools visited (including nine of the secondary schools), inspectors judged the parents' impact on the school's provision to be lower than the overall effectiveness of its engagement with parents. No schools were visited in which the reverse was true. The parents' impact on provision was never judged

to be of better quality than the school's overall effectiveness. This indicates that the opportunities given by the schools for parents to contribute their expertise and skills were less well developed than other aspects of the schools' work with parents. None of the schools in the survey had carried out a detailed audit of parental skills, though some of the secondary schools had begun to do this as part of their specialist status.[5]

5. The schools judged by inspectors to be good or outstanding in enabling parents to contribute to the provision had particular strengths in some or all of the following:

■ engaging with parents to assist with pupils' learning in school

■ engaging parents in revision, study support or family learning activities

■ listening to parents carefully in consulting them about whole-school curriculum development

■ using home and school diaries or planners

■ discussing pupils' assessments and information about their targets with parents

■ using websites, email and other electronic media, such as texting, to communicate quickly and effectively with parents about curriculum and teaching matters as well as day-to-day information

■ consulting parents on individual matters relating to the curriculum that their children followed.

6. In the schools judged to be no better than satisfactory in terms of their engagement with parents, the headteacher's leadership on parental partnership was, or had been, weaker. The role of staff in dealing with parents was often not defined precisely or the potential contribution of parents was held in low esteem. Parents could not always relate easily to these schools. They did not attend school events as readily, fill in school diaries or planners, or feel able to give their children active support, leaving this to the school. In addition, parents, although often feeling welcomed as guests in the schools, could not contribute much to the learning. The following example is taken from a school that was starting to move forward from a particularly difficult point.

> In one secondary school, a culture of parental non-involvement had built up over several years. Only those parents with specific problems or issues relating to their children were likely to be in touch. Clear leadership from the headteacher, and changes in staff, meant the school's culture changed and was more welcoming and equipped to work effectively with parents. About half of the parents attended regular parents' evenings, and the rate

---

[5] Secondary schools which fulfil certain criteria may apply to have one or more specialisms. For more information, see: www.ssatrust.org.uk.

had increased as efforts had been made to make the evenings more relevant and worthwhile. Parents were consulted on how the school could do better for them. The school had recently begun to go out of its way to celebrate its students' successes and gave parents opportunities to join in. The school improvement plan specifically included this.

7. A key factor in ensuring that parents and schools could work together, understanding each other's role, was that there was a shared understanding and communication of this. This involved some form of discussion and mutual understanding. It did not matter in practice whether or not this comprised the formal statutory home–school agreement.[6]

8. Although one secondary school considered that a signing event of the home–school agreement each September created a 'common understanding' between home and school, the headteachers of fewer than half the schools visited considered that this was an important document for their school. They did not see it as driving the school's work with parents and it was seen by some as tokenistic.

Schools' communication and engagement with parents

Front of house

9. All of the schools visited were committed to working in partnership with parents and becoming more welcoming in their approach. They saw this as an important 'first step' towards engaging parents more effectively.

10. Almost all the schools visited could show how they had improved their reception or entrance areas, making them more attractive and welcoming to visitors, especially parents. Many of the schools had recently installed television screens, showing school information and photographs, sometimes produced by pupils. School documents and policies were available in pleasant waiting areas with comfortable chairs, usually away from the classrooms. Items such as school trophies and welcome notices, sometimes in community languages were often also prominent.

11. The schools were usually well aware of the importance of good customer service and a good reception area. To this end, some of the schools visited had introduced precise job descriptions and training for staff about dealing with personal callers and answering telephones.

---

[6] All maintained schools in England, by law, must adopt a home–school agreement and an associated parental declaration that schools are asked to ensure that parents sign. It is a statement explaining the school's aims and values; the school's responsibilities; the responsibilities of the pupil's parents; and what the school expects of its pupils. Its wording in each school is the formal responsibility of the governing body, which must consult all parents before adopting or revising it.

12. In most of the primary schools, staff – often including the headteacher – made themselves available to parents at the start and end of each school day. Parents interviewed during the survey consistently said that their children's schools, whether primary, secondary or special, had become increasingly more welcoming places.

Communication

13. As required by law all the schools visited produced prospectuses. These were often available online and often focused particularly on new or prospective parents. These provided some general information about the curriculum and teaching, but did not tell parents much about how they could help to promote learning. Prospectuses were clearer in highlighting school rules and expectations about behaviour and uniform.[7]

14. At the time of the survey, all schools in England were required to publish a school profile online.[8] This is a summary of the school's data and a description of its priorities. The schools visited rarely referred to their profiles when discussing with inspectors what they considered to be key forms of communication with parents.

15. Most of the schools produced newsletters, often in electronic as well as printed formats. Their content and frequency varied considerably but they generally gave useful information about events and dates, celebrated successes and provided reminders about uniform, the wearing of jewellery, road safety and school photographs. However, few of the schools used newsletters to explain aspects of the curriculum to parents or current issues about learning.

16. All the schools visited were using, or experimenting with, new technology in their communications with parents. Such work complemented more traditional methods such as face-to-face meetings and paper-based communication. The methods frequently used included:

   ■ sending general or individual messages to parents by text

   ■ using email to contact parents and inviting parents to email staff

   ■ using digital media to record pupils' work

   ■ using the school website, sometimes including a virtual learning environment or portal, so that parents and pupils could have access to specific, password-protected information.

---

[7] New regulations relating to the publication of school prospectuses came into effect on 1 September 2010 for prospectuses for the academic year 2011–12 and beyond. For further information, see the Office of Public Sector Information (OPSI): www.opsi.gov.uk/si/si2010/uksi_20101006_en_1.

[8] The Education Act 2005 removed the duty on governing bodies to hold an annual meeting for parents and provide an annual report to parents. The report was replaced by the school profile.

17. The schools were at different stages in developing their use of such technology, with varied practice and success. In the best examples, individual text messages or emails from schools enabled parents to understand issues quickly and deal with them. Often, working parents, or those infrequently in schools, particularly appreciated this. Sometimes, such communications led to face-to-face meetings. General text messages which could be sent quickly, for example about cancelled or changed sports events, were also popular among the parents surveyed. In some schools, text messages were also used to inform parents of instances of absence or lateness.

18. Where this was available, parents appreciated the invitation to contact individual staff members by email. This enabled them to get to know staff better and gather useful information about their children's learning. It allowed staff and parents to respond quickly, at a time convenient to them, and was less formal than letters. Most of the schools, however, did not invite or encourage such email use, initially restricting the use of email to the school office or headteacher.

19. Almost all the schools visited had their own websites and used them for different purposes, such as:

   ■ marketing

   ■ providing information

   ■ promoting learning.

20. Developments in the use of websites and in virtual learning environments were at different stages.[9] Some of the websites that inspectors saw were relevant but information for parents on others was out of date. The secondary school websites often displayed useful lists of curriculum content in each subject throughout the school.

21. The increased use of new technology had not replaced traditional methods of communication. Written diaries and planners were common, as were paper-based communications such as letters and newsletters. The parents and school staff whom inspectors met continued to value face-to-face meetings. The best schools visited combined traditional and newer approaches to suit the needs of individual families.

> The active involvement of parents in one secondary school enabled students in difficult circumstances to stay 'on track' academically, improve their attendance, and choose individual curriculum options. This was achieved through judicious and sensitive use of email, meetings, telephone calls and letters, according to circumstances. Flexible,

---

[9] A virtual learning environment is a secure section of a website, which allows pupils, staff and parents to access school learning materials and information. Virtual learning environments are often password protected, so the sites can be used only by those associated with the school.

> sympathetic and quick communication with parents had become part of the school's culture. Therefore students (and pupils) felt they could contact school staff readily, through the channels they chose, and they received helpful responses quickly.

22. In another secondary school, students liked being praised in traditional ways.

> Students really appreciated the fact that, when they did something well, their parents learnt of this through a letter sent home by post. It motivated them and helped to inculcate success. However, the students also felt that the school's contacts with their parents about negative features, for example, poor behaviour or lateness, were ascribed higher status, because the telephone call that was normally used required their parents to respond. They wanted positive and negative contacts with their parents to be made in the same way.

Assessment and progress

23. Parents at the schools visited said that they were receiving increasingly thorough information about their children's attainment and progress. This reflected the introduction of more detailed procedures for tracking pupils' progress seen across the sample of schools. At academic reviews, target-setting days,[10] parents' evenings and similar events, parents commonly had opportunities to discuss their child's attainment and targets with staff. Attendance at these events varied across the sample of schools. The events were most valued by parents if, afterwards, they:

- understood specifically the objectives their children were working towards
- could see that the school knew and cared for their children.

24. The quality of information and advice to parents about curriculum, targets and assessments varied across the schools visited. The best schools in this respect gave parents very clear learning objectives for classes and individuals. They explained plainly and explicitly what such levels meant in practice. Parents felt well-informed and therefore more confident in talking to their own children about what they were learning. Providing general information about topics to be covered, but without specific objectives, was helpful, but less so.

25. All the schools provided reports on each pupil at least annually, as required, using different styles, formats and levels of detail. Some provided mainly cumulative records of what pupils had done or learnt, while others focused more on comments and targets for the future. The parents whom inspectors spoke to valued these as a record, but they often had a lower profile than the

---

[10] This refers to an event where, usually, school staff, parents and students meet together to review and revise or set the students' academic and personal targets.

other, continuing forms of personal communication about assessment between home and the school.

26. Most of the schools used digital media, such as memory sticks or computer hard drives, to record and keep examples of pupils' work, sometimes using video or audio technology. In some cases, the examples kept were rarely looked at or used. In the best practice observed, however, the examples were improved, used to inform assessments of pupils and were shared with parents.

> A special school for pupils with severe, complex or profound and multiple learning difficulties provided parents with an annual record of their child's learning and achievements using DVD technology. Video recordings were partially replacing the conventional paper reporting system, although a written record of each child's progress, as measured against the P scales, was sent home to accompany the DVD, so that parents could understand better what they saw. Paper and electronic systems were judiciously combined. Each DVD had a minimum of three short video extracts, each of which was introduced by a teacher to provide information and a focus for attention. The parents were very positive, saying that this approach brought their child's learning to life and helped them to understand and celebrate it better. It was especially valuable as the learning was often in small steps.

Attendance

27. In the schools visited, it was very common for parents to be contacted quickly, usually on the first day, in the event of a pupil's unexplained absence. Most of the schools also contacted parents of pupils with repeated or particularly high levels of absence. In many of the schools, a secretary or attendance officer carried out the day-to-day work, referring difficulties to a manager. A minority of the schools provided up-to-date information, securely online, to parents about their child's attendance. One school said this had been very helpful for sixth form students where attendance patterns and requirements could be more fluid.

28. The schools described how focused discussions with parents, leading to individual action plans, had brought about higher attendance in particular cases. The schools were keen to be both well-focused and sensitive in this work, seeking to find the causes of any poor attendance. While often prepared to use powers such as issuing penalty notices or, indeed, prosecution in conjunction with local authorities, they were keen to avoid such routes if at all possible.[11]

---

[11] Section 23 of the Anti-Social Behaviour Act 2003 gives additional powers under Section 444 of the Education Act 1996 to local authorities to issue penalty notices to parents in cases of pupils' unauthorised absence from school (www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2003/38/section/23).

Consultation with parents

29. Most of the headteachers arranged for surveys of parents' views to be carried out every year or two, conducted through questionnaires. These provided some useful information and data about what parents thought of the school at that time; but it was very rare for the surveys to be designed or used to elicit parents' views or suggestions about what the school might do next or its strategic plans for improvement. The proportion of completed questionnaires varied from 10% to 75%. This return rate was influenced, to some degree, by parents' views about the extent to which schools took their opinions seriously.

30. Although there were examples of schools giving clear feedback to parents about what the questionnaire responses had said and what the school might do as a result, there were as many where parents felt they had received little or no information about this.

> In one of the primary schools visited, parents appreciated the fact that the school's newsletters published statistical analyses of the regular parental surveys, as well as the key messages from the parents' written comments. This meant that parents felt that the school trusted them. They knew how fellow parents viewed particular aspects and how they thought the school might be improved further.

31. Most of the changes that the schools made in consultation with parents were about matters not directly to do with learning, such as school uniform or meals. But a few changes were more fundamental and also beneficial. The following example of a major change made by a high-performing secondary school, and initiated by parents, exemplifies this.

> The headteacher received representations from some parents that the school's highly academic tradition meant that courses were not available to suit all students' needs. Consequently, when the opportunity came for the school to adopt a second specialism, he proposed successfully that this should be in 'applied learning', allowing many more vocational and practical options to be adopted. The school has become more inclusive, with students with different needs often working alongside each other.

When things go wrong – dealing with parental complaints

32. All the schools visited had published their complaints policies. Most of the schools visited were keen to avoid formal, written parental complaints. About three quarters of them received very few, if any, of these and saw this as a sign of success. They could usually refer to examples of individual parental concerns that had been received sympathetically and dealt with informally to the satisfaction of the parents involved. Generally, however, the schools did not analyse or record systematically any complaints that staff had dealt with. This meant that it was harder to identify matters of parental concern and the frequency with which these concerns were raised.

33. The primary schools visited often said they had 'open door' policies for parents. 'Open door' was rarely defined exactly but indicated that parents were welcome to contact the school at any time. Many of the 22 secondary schools had named members of staff whom parents could approach specifically. The schools felt that these systems allowed any difficulties or concerns from parents to be dealt with quickly and effectively, without concerns escalating.

34. Most of the parents that inspectors spoke to agreed broadly that they could raise concerns with the schools readily and that appropriate solutions were often found. In many cases this had been straightforward, which was supported by evidence from an online survey of Ofsted's Parents' Panel in March 2010. Of the 381 members of the Parents' Panel who responded, 72% of the parents agreed or strongly agreed that their children's schools dealt effectively with any concerns they had about their child's education. This represented a large majority of parents, but satisfaction was far from unanimous.[12]

35. A large minority of parents in the Parents' Panel did not consider that schools dealt effectively with their concerns. Some of the parents that inspectors met found that making suggestions to schools was difficult and daunting. They said that the schools did not encourage parents' contributions or listen to their feedback. Raising concerns or giving ideas could be an isolating experience. In some cases, parents felt that schools 'talked down' to them. Some parents also said that sometimes they were selective about the concerns they raised with the school or backed off from persisting with a concern, even if it had not been completely resolved to their satisfaction, in case they were regarded, in their words, as 'pushy' or 'difficult'. Occasionally, parents said that matters they raised were not followed up at all by schools.

36. In the small number of cases where the schools surveyed had received formal complaints, evidence suggested that those investigated by a senior teacher, the headteacher, or governors were less likely to be resolved amicably than informal complaints. This was particularly the case when complaints provoked a defensive reaction from the schools. In these cases, a lack of flexibility on either side led to difficulties becoming intractable, followed by breakdowns in relationships.

37. However, such difficulties did not occur as readily in the schools visited where complaints were clearly seen as an opportunity to improve services and understand better the wishes and views of parents. These schools had clear, straightforward complaints procedures. These were worded in a straightforward way, were well known to staff and parents, and supported parents in practical

---

[12] The Ofsted parents' panel consists of parents with at least one child in a state school who agree to carry out online surveys from Ofsted. Results from the panel are weighted by demographic factors, but the sample size of 381 respondents is too small to be considered fully representative of all parents in England.

ways in making their concerns known. This is shown in the following two examples.

> In one of the secondary schools visited, parental complaints were usually sent to the student's form tutor in the first instance. Open communication with teachers was very well established. All complaints, or expressions of dissatisfaction, even those of a minor nature, were logged on the school's computer system, as this provided an audit and a way of analysing them. This system was well known to staff. The form tutor had a vital role as an advocate for the parent and, as needed, the student. She or he also provided quick follow-up for the parent.

> In the term of the inspector's visit to the school, a secondary school had received nine formal parental complaints through the very clear system described in its prospectus. It saw this relatively high number as a sign of a successful policy which parents used. The complaints were all carefully recorded and the outcomes were analysed by the headteacher. The school was not at all defensive about these complaints and was willing to apologise. All complaints but one were resolved to parents' satisfaction. The school was quick to ensure that it fully understood the complaint. In each case, it took a very personal approach, including meetings, telephone calls and letters to the parents. Even when the school did not fully accept the complaint, response letters were sensitive and respectful towards the parents. This helped to establish trust. In every case, the school explained how it would learn lessons.

School planning, development and self-evaluation

38. More than three quarters of the schools visited referred explicitly to their work with parents in their school improvement plans. In addition, the 20 schools visited during the survey that inspectors judged were outstanding in their work with parents often had very clear mission statements, referring to parents as being key partners. The schools gave many examples of this in practice. In the best practice seen, the outcomes of consulting parents influenced school improvement planning.

> A high-achieving secondary school's vision statement highlighted the importance of engaging parents directly in the students' learning. A senior leader had researched this, strongly supported by the headteacher. The school frequently invited parents into lessons; encouraged parents to contact members of staff individually by email or in person; and provided parents with detailed individual information about their children's curriculum, progress and attendance. Active consultation with parents led to key changes in the curriculum and the school's approach to discipline involved parents much earlier and reduced exclusions.

39. Success criteria in school improvement plans did not usually state clearly the impact that was expected from involving and engaging parents and so it was hard to measure these systematically. Too often, the schools visited could point only to systems having been established or developed rather than knowing or showing the impact.

40. Self-evaluation of work with parents was also weak in the schools visited for this survey. Although the schools, including those judged to be outstanding, pointed to anecdotal evidence of positive results from involving parents, this information was poorly collated and analysed. Much of the schools' evaluation of such work was in terms only of parents' attendance at events or the response rate to, for example, homework journals.

41. Some isolated examples of good self-evaluation were seen in the secondary schools that had specialist status, where they were required to work with parents. Evaluations from these schools had begun to be more sophisticated, including measures of the impact of parental engagement on outcomes for students.

42. A minority of the primary and secondary schools visited used the findings and indicators from various quality marks and awards, or local authority awards for partnership with parents, to enhance their self-evaluation. Some of the schools provided convincing evidence of improvements in attendance or behaviour for individual pupils, linked to the school's work with parents. Two of the primary schools had tried to identify the impact of parental engagement on spelling scores, mathematics learning and test results but had not yet found methods that were sophisticated enough to distinguish the changes attributable to parents from other factors.

Involving parents in their child's education

Parental engagement with teaching and learning

43. Typically, parents were involved in activities such as:

- working as volunteers on school visits, including residential visits
- listening to pupils reading, helping pupils to change their library books or supporting guided reading in lessons
- helping with school drama productions: organising make-up, lighting or scenery
- supporting or leading activities outside the school day
- helping with practical activities such as art, design and technology, science, and information and communication technology.

Primary and nursery schools

44. In the schools surveyed, it was much more common for parents to be in the primary and nursery schools during school hours or supporting school visits than in the secondary schools. Parents of younger children therefore saw teaching and learning happening, which made them feel closer to the process.

45. In the 20 schools visited that had Early Years Foundation Stage provision, partnerships with parents, especially in the Nursery schools, were routinely well-established in some key areas, namely:

   ■ parents' contribution of their knowledge of their children to initial assessments made by staff

   ■ the regular provision of useful information to parents about how well their children were progressing and what they could do to help

   ■ good opportunities for parents to observe their children learning or to find out about the way in which learning was organised

   ■ parents working supportively together to help each other and the school

   ■ home visits made by school staff to each family before the children began school

   ■ frequent and straightforward sharing of information between school and home; each child's key worker was important in this.[13]

46. All these features were important to the outstanding work with parents often seen in early years' settings. The detailed sharing of information about each child's progress and development, likes and dislikes, and what they were excited about was especially important and enabled children to enjoy activities that were relevant to them. Their parents and the practitioners spoke to them in similar, consistent ways, considering that this led to improved progress in, and attitudes towards, learning.

> An outstanding nursery school in an area of severe social deprivation had an explicit, written commitment to 'work hand in hand together with parents to share and develop children's learning'. All the members of staff had well-defined roles to help achieve this. Each had a personal performance objective linked to better working with parents and received regular training to meet this objective. Consequently, the school had genuinely close contact with the parents of all its children. This led, for example, to personal resources such as video diaries and stories to support parents and children, in areas such as behaviour and toilet training, as well as to support any autistic children. The school engaged

---

[13] Within the Early Years Foundation Stage, it is expected that every child has a named key worker, who may be a teacher or other practitioner. This person should know and help to meet the needs of each child in her or his care, liaising with parents to ensure this.

parents fully with assessment, as well as with planning for their children's particular interests and developing challenge in their learning.

In another nursery school, every Saturday morning, fathers and male carers brought their children to a three-hour breakfast and play session, overseen by members of staff. This allowed the fathers to observe good practice, participate and contribute to their children's assessment and learning. This initiative became so successful that fathers from the local community whose children did not come to the nursery also attended regularly. This was helpful for many of them, including those who did not see their children during the week because of long working hours and those who no longer lived with their children. They used the resource as part of their access visits to their children. This engaged parents who found it difficult to be in school during normal hours. As a result, fathers, grandfathers and other male carers began to build up supportive networks for themselves.

In a primary school, the parents of Reception children were invited into school every Tuesday afternoon for about half an hour for workshops on phonics, where the teacher taught parents alongside their children. Parents learnt strategies and were given a booklet of examples, so that they could reinforce the work at home. Having established this pattern of work with phonics, it was extended to support mathematical development.

As a result, the reading and spelling of children improved quickly. There were spin-offs that had not been anticipated by staff: parents' expectations of learning were raised; they became better aware of expectations of behaviour and came together socially. Some parents improved their own skills and went on to further learning. The programme now includes the Nursery and Years 1 and 2.

An infant school used a commercially produced course to improve pupils' writing. Pupils were assessed before and at points during the process. Parental engagement was a significant part of the strategy. 'Talk homework' was set to generate discussions about a topic at home. Parents were trained in this by letter and at a parents' evening. The school planned writing sessions where the pupils wrote at length about what they thought. Analysis of the writing assessments over two years showed a marked increase in the proportion of pupils attaining the higher National Curriculum levels. There was a sharp improvement, in particular, in the performance of boys.

47. Parents of primary-aged children often attended assemblies in which pupils made presentations about their work and what they had been learning. Primary schools were also more successful than the secondary schools in arranging

parental workshops, family learning events and training to help parents understand how their children were learning and how to work with them at home (or in school). Most of the primary schools offered such sessions, albeit with varied rates of attendance, especially in subjects such as phonics and mathematics.

48. In the following examples of targeted intervention through family learning from one of the primary schools visited, parents became productively involved in reducing underachievement.

> The teachers in Year 5 ran an after-school mathematics club for pupils who had been identified as underachieving. Parents were invited to attend for the second half of the session. They were shown the teaching strategies used and games which could be played at home. Children and parents were shown links to carefully chosen websites which could support learning in mathematics.
>
> Targeted children in Year 2 and Year 4 and their parents attended a reading group on Tuesday mornings. The home–school liaison officers, supported by other staff, demonstrated reading strategies and good questioning when listening to children read, so that the parents could learn more about this.

Secondary schools

49. With some exceptions, the secondary schools did not expect parents to be observing or supporting learning during the school day. Most parental support in the secondary schools related to events outside the school day.

50. Parents accepted this, sometimes saying that they did not feel that they had the skills or knowledge to help their children's learning. They acknowledged that their role had become one of assistance: applying pressure or giving encouragement. While secondary students frequently said to inspectors that they valued their parents' interest in their learning, the staff and the parents often felt that the students might find any direct support from parents in school embarrassing and that the absence of parents reflected the students' greater maturity.

51. In different ways, the secondary schools visited offered information to help parents support their children at home, through websites or printed materials. Typically the schools offered guidance about how they would like parents to support learning through promoting study skills; encouraging good attendance, punctuality, good behaviour; and providing appropriate conditions for homework to be done. However, the schools rarely provided detailed information to parents about how students were taught or the school's view about how learning was best promoted. The secondary schools, albeit by varied means, sought to ensure that parents trusted them to teach their children well,

reported to parents on their progress and involved parents quickly where they felt this was needed.

> A secondary school set up a group for Somali mothers who were recent arrivals in the area. Initially, it was a conversation group, providing support for language and numeracy, but it developed a cultural focus and visits to local historical sites and museums were arranged. Alongside this, the group provided homework support for primary-aged children and worked in a local nursery. While this was useful, the group learnt less about the secondary curriculum being followed by their own children than about that for younger children.

52. Most of the secondary schools were developing virtual learning environments, albeit at very different stages. These resources enabled some parents to understand more about what and how their children were learning at school, and to support them in turn. These three examples, from schools at more advanced stages, demonstrate some successes.

> The pupils spoke very highly of the school's virtual learning environment. It was efficiently maintained, quickly updated and contained much material, including PowerPoint presentations that teachers had used in recent lessons. Mostly, homework tasks were put there quickly. Parents used it as a way of knowing what their children were learning and the pupils gave inspectors many examples of how productive discussions of work at school arose at home as a result. The school was clear that this initiative had played a part in improving standards. Parents said the same; they appreciated the level of information and its ready accessibility.

> The parents considered that the virtual learning environment was an excellent resource to support students working at home or in school study areas. It contained the teacher's notes for each lesson and the associated learning resources. Some parents sat alongside their children and learnt with them, offering support and encouragement. Parents had secure access to up-to-date information on their own child's attendance, behaviour and academic work. Families who did not have computers at home were able to borrow laptops and access the site from a number of study areas in the school.

> A Year 11 student, with high targets for his GCSE grades, refused to attend school. As part of dealing with this, the school ensured that he had a full programme of work at home, including tailored use of the virtual learning environment, and he was supported by his parents. He achieved four GCSEs at grades A and B and one at Grade D. Although this was underachievement for him, it gave him a worthwhile set of qualifications which otherwise he would not have had. He and his parents were delighted and he achieved a college place.

20

Target-setting

53. Although most parents spoken to in the schools visited knew and said they understood their children's academic targets and attainment, it was less likely for them to be involved directly in setting these targets with staff, except in the Early Years Foundation Stage, where it was common practice. This finding is supported by a survey of Ofsted's Parents' Panel in March 2010: while 84% of the 381 respondents felt fully aware of their child's personal targets, only 49% said that they were involved in setting these targets.

54. The following example from a secondary school which had committed significant resources to involving parents with target-setting shows the value of such work.

> Central to the school's engagement with parents were the review days which were held three times a year. Parents received written reports in advance, with information about students' progress, including helpful graphics such as a red, green and amber 'traffic light' system. This enabled parents to see how well their children were doing.
>
> The review meeting was held with the tutor, student and parent. Students' progress was checked, actions to help improvement were identified together and targets were set. Parents said that they were better informed about how to encourage learning. The school's evidence showed that achievement had improved.

Involvement of parents with their child's school

Parents as a learning resource – making use of specialist expertise

55. Across the primary and secondary schools in the survey, there were a few very successful examples of parents with specialist expertise or experience using such skills to enhance or enrich aspects of the curriculum. Examples included the following:

- those with proficiency helping to lead choirs or drama groups

- qualified sports coaches managing school sports teams

- visitors talking in lessons about events they had witnessed (for example, grandparents who had been evacuees)

- bilingual speakers leading sessions in community languages, or translating

- working parents describing their jobs to classes, at careers events, or arranging work experience where they were employed.

56. Despite mixed practice, the primary schools used the skills of parents much more commonly than the secondary schools did. These parent-led activities

were very well received by pupils and staff. There was evidence in the better examples seen that the activities led to improved outcomes for pupils. The requirements of specialist status were helping to promote such work in the secondary schools visited.

> Two parents, who were qualified coaches, volunteered to introduce rugby in a secondary school, working with school staff. This enabled many students to take part in a sport that the school had not provided before.

Parent councils

57. From 2004, the government particularly encouraged schools to set up parent councils or forums. These were intended to be an informal way to encourage more parents to become involved in schools by raising issues, making their views known and being consulted on school policy. Only seven of the 47 schools visited (four secondary and three primary) had established such groups. These forums were organised differently in each of the seven schools. In one, for example, different parental groups were established from time to time to consider particular issues raised by the school. In the others, they were permanent groups.

58. The schools could point to examples where the forums had enabled parents to have a voice on issues that the school wished to raise with them. The membership of the forums was, however, usually small and either self-selecting (those parents wishing to attend could come) or decided largely by the school. This meant that they were not necessarily representative of all parents. Their impact on the life of the school was seen as useful but limited.

Parent–teacher associations

59. Of the 47 schools visited, 32 (16 primary and 16 secondary) had a parent–teacher association or similar body. These groups sought to provide:

- social opportunities for parents
- catering and other services for school events
- fundraising for the school.

60. Parent–teacher associations were much valued by the headteachers, staff and parents that inspectors spoke to, although the proportion of parents actively involved was usually small. They did not usually contribute much to the schools' development of policy. However, as these associations sometimes raised large sums of money, they were often involved in deciding how to spend it.

School governance

61. All the schools surveyed had parent governors and, usually, governors who were also parents but who acted in other capacities. Some of the schools visited had vacancies for parent governors; others had highly contested

elections. It was common for parents, or people who had formerly had children at the school, to occupy key roles on the governing body, including that of chair. Thus, in each school, a few parents had particular opportunities both to represent parental views and to make an impact on the strategic direction of the school. Often, they were able to help to communicate the school's ambitions powerfully to other parents.

62.   Some parent governors were more confident and involved than others. Most of them saw it as their role to keep in touch with the views of parents but did this in different ways. Some held 'surgeries' where other parents could speak to them; others talked to parents at the school gate; still others had networks of friends who were parents. These approaches all enabled parents to make their views known to governors, although some groups of parents could be excluded from these networks because they did not know the parent governors or were not often in school to meet them.

63.   It was rare for the parent governors to give examples of their influence in suggesting policy or promoting opportunities for parents to help to shape the direction of the school, although instances were noted of parent governors taking forward specific parental views. In one school, for example, this had led to the reintroduction of a GCSE course in statistics.

School support for pupils, parents and families

Home–school liaison workers

64.   Of the 22 secondary schools visited, just one employed someone specifically to work with parents. The role was to help parents understand target-setting and their children's progress. Of the 21 nursery and primary schools visited, 13 had appointed members of staff, not usually qualified teachers, specifically to work with parents. Most of these posts were part-time. Sometimes the roles were shared with other schools or combined with another support role, such as teaching assistant or learning mentor. Their work was generally highly valued by other adults in the schools, with evidence of close liaison between them and other members of staff.

65.   Typically, these staff worked directly with families that the schools found more difficult to reach or where parents faced barriers in terms of culture or language in contacting the school. Some of the staff were bilingual, offering useful support for translation and enabling parents and carers, whose knowledge of English was limited, to contact the school quickly.

66.   Roles carried out by such staff varied and several different job titles were used, such as 'family support worker' or 'parent partnership coordinator'. Some roles were more concerned with consulting groups of parents to find out their views about aspects of school policy or practice than about improving liaison generally.

67. The schools which had appointed a specific home–school liaison worker showed a positive and public commitment to parental partnership, especially with the families that were potentially more vulnerable. However, it did not follow that schools without such a worker felt less responsible for working in partnership with parents or were less successful. Often, their commitment was shown through alternative approaches. For example, two of the secondary schools achieved notable success in reaching parents using vertically grouped pastoral arrangements which allowed for responsible staff to be readily available to parents. The primary schools without specialist home–school workers tended to share specific aspects of work with parents widely across class teachers, specialist teachers, teaching assistants or learning mentors.

68. Of the 13 nursery and primary schools with home–school liaison workers, inspectors judged five of the schools to be outstanding for their work with parents, six were good and two were satisfactory. Of the eight nursery and primary schools without such a role identified, four were outstanding and four were good. In this small sample, there was no evident correlation between a school employing staff specifically to work with parents and the success of its work with them.

69. All the schools visited for the survey, whether or not they employed a home–school liaison worker, provided examples for inspectors of how school staff had worked successfully with families whom they found hard to reach, or where there were barriers to communication. This might include contacting parents who did not attend parents' evenings or making follow-up telephone calls. There were many cases of staff going the extra mile, such as helping potentially vulnerable families to receive benefits, find work or gain access to other public services.

> The father of three young children died and their half-brother, aged 18, took over as carer. The primary school community supported the family financially and with furniture and clothing. A learning mentor visited their home at least twice a week and mentored the three youngest children in school. She liaised with social services and supported the young carer to get appropriate benefits. The school brokered his attendance on a parenting course and helped him to attend college to gain qualifications. The school arranged for the three children to attend clubs to give him some respite from caring for them. The behaviour of the three children improved over time as they were more settled and able to learn. They joined in activities they had never experienced before.

70. Whatever the staffing structure, the schools that were the most successful in relating to all parents believed that no parent was unreachable. They were very persistent when they needed to be. Sensitive telephone calls, visits to homes or meetings held at neutral non-threatening locations, such as community centres or supermarkets, often helped to make positive connections.

71. The six schools visited which were judged to be satisfactory were not always as successful, as this example shows.

> The headteacher of a secondary school said that the school found it hard to reach about 30% of its parents and about 20% were not reached in any effective way. A parent support group floundered, with only three parents attending the last meeting. This was attributed to parents' active distrust, apathy and the complications of their lives. The headteacher felt that actively interested parents could be counted in single figures. The school had measured the scale of the problem but had given up hope, blaming the parents. It did not take account of successful practice in similar circumstances elsewhere.

Parents and inclusion

72. In each of the schools visited, inspectors evaluated how effectively the school's work with parents made it more inclusive of all pupils. In eight of the 47 schools (four primary, three secondary and one special), this judgement was more positive than the judgement for the school's overall effectiveness of its work with parents. In no school was the judgement on inclusion less positive than the judgement on the school's overall effectiveness of its work with parents.

73. The most effective examples showed that such work helped to narrow gaps between the attainment of underachieving pupils and their peers. It was very common for the schools, in their different ways, to reach out to families and pupils who were potentially vulnerable or at risk of underachievement or becoming marginalised. The following cases illustrate some of the aspects of inclusion seen during the visits.

> An infant child needed surgery. While she was off school, staff visited her home to provide work and talk to her and her parents about what was happening in school, so that she was included as much as possible.

> One of the primary schools visited had a significant and rapid intake of children from Poland. It quickly appointed a bilingual teaching assistant to ensure that the families felt welcomed and were helped with many practical concerns. The school offered English classes for newly arrived parents and pupils, led in part by other parents. The new families learnt much about the locality, its values and customs. At the same time, all the pupils in school were given taster sessions in Polish language and culture. This enabled the two cultures to mix successfully.

A secondary school decided that students whose truancy or behaviour showed that they were at risk of not being in education, employment or training once they were 16 would be helped and brought back on track. Once the students were identified, school staff visited their homes, involved external agencies and offered further suitable curriculum revisions and options. The school drew on its already good relationships with students and their families. In the most recent cohort, 14 of the 18 students who had been identified as being at risk went on to further education, employment or training.

Parents of pupils with special educational needs and/or disabilities

74. Ofsted's previous survey about parents in 2007 found that: 'Parents and carers of pupils with learning difficulties and disabilities were more closely involved than those of other groups of pupils.'[14] This finding remained true in the schools visited. Very commonly, staff ensured that parents of pupils with disabilities or those who had special educational needs were consulted and included in discussions and reviews about their children's progress and well-being, more so than other parents. Often, such discussions centred on concerns about behaviour, as well as academic progress.

75. While such dialogue was invariably welcomed by parents, it did not follow that all the pupils concerned made the expected progress or achieved well. Much could depend on the quality of the school's own day-to-day work, including the quality of the support provided and the clarity and relevance of the targets set for individual pupils. This accords with the findings of Ofsted's review of special educational needs and disability in 2010.[15] One of this report's key findings was that:

> 'The best learning occurred in all types of provision when teachers or other lead adults had a thorough and detailed knowledge of the children and young people; a thorough knowledge and understanding of teaching and learning strategies and techniques, as well as the subject or areas of learning being taught; and a sound understanding of child development and how different learning difficulties and disabilities influence this.'

76. Parents can assist schools greatly in getting them to know their children very well and helping staff better appreciate wider difficulties. In the schools visited for this survey, success in improving outcomes for pupils frequently occurred when schools and parents shared information and ideas together in partnership, with the expertise and insights of both included. However, the timing and format of meetings between schools and parents of pupils with

---

[14] *Parents, carers and schools* (070018), Ofsted, 2007; www.ofsted.gov.uk/publications/070018a.
[15] *The special educational needs and disability review: a statement is not enough* (090221), Ofsted, 2010; www.ofsted.gov.uk/publications/090221.

special educational needs and/or disabilities were mainly determined by the schools. Parents could make requests and suggestions, but generally fitted in with their school's established practice. This had mixed results as the following examples show.

A secondary school noted the deteriorating behaviour in some lessons of a Year 10 boy who was listed on the school's special educational needs register. A meeting with his mother was arranged, attended by three members of staff. The staff had decided beforehand the outcome they wanted from the meeting, namely an agreement with his mother about the boy's behaviour, with the threat of sanctions if he failed. The meeting was friendly and positive, with the parent broadly supporting the school's line. She had been nervous about the meeting and wondered afterwards if she had made her key point clearly enough. This was that her son behaved well in many lessons and subjects (a fact agreed by the school), depending largely on the kind of relationship her son had with particular teachers and the level of respect they showed him. The staff listened courteously to her and acknowledged her point but did not include it in the agreed record of the meeting. After the meeting, the parent was uncertain whether the school had taken on board her view, still wondering if all her son's teachers had the particular skills she felt were needed to build a relationship with him. She remained concerned rather than reassured.

A primary school developed a consistent strategy for early intervention to avoid pupils with special educational needs and/or disabilities losing ground. Staff listened carefully to pupils as well as parents in refining solutions, recognising that parents knew their children best and had unique insights. A pupil with Down's syndrome had time during each school day to continue therapies. A visually impaired child sat in the most helpful place in class with special arrangements for closing the curtains to counter the effects of the sun.

Since early in his primary school, a Year 10 boy had been poorly behaved. His mother always felt this was a symptom of something else. She felt that staff of the school had shared information with her helpfully over many years but would not listen when she repeatedly suggested there must be more to it than just 'badness'. In Years 7 and 8, the boy had nine fixed-term exclusions for violence, bullying and disruption. His mother continued to request an assessment. As a result, in Year 9, he was assessed and had a diagnosis and received a statement of special educational needs. This was the catalyst for a rapid improvement in his behaviour, brought about not by the statement itself but by the knowledge that there was an underlying cause that could be dealt with. This enabled the school and the home, in their own words, to become a 'team'. In Year 9, the student was excluded only once and not at all in

Year 10. His academic progress also improved. His mother said, 'I don't know what I would do now without the school.'

Parents and pupils from Gypsy, Roma and Traveller backgrounds

77. Historically, the attainment in schools of pupils from Gypsy, Roma or Traveller backgrounds has been very low at all stages. There can often be limits on how parents from these backgrounds are able to play a full part in their children's education, since it can be hard for them to trust institutions, such as schools, outside the family and community.[16] Two schools visited for the survey that worked particularly closely with Gypsy, Roma or Traveller communities were very aware of these difficulties. Solutions were not easy to find and the schools recognised that there could be setbacks. However, sensitive and persistent work paid dividends, as these illustrations from the two schools show.

A primary school's well-established practices had a major impact on outcomes for children from Traveller families, who achieved well in the school. Induction arrangements for reluctant children and parents were arranged gradually where necessary. The school organised education at home for any pupil leaving Year 6 who was not continuing to secondary school. It built up the trust of parents and grandparents painstakingly, improving their belief in the school over a period of time. For example, Traveller families allowed their children to go on school visits, a major step. The school successfully encouraged Traveller children to be involved in activities outside the school day. It consulted Traveller parents regularly, as with any other parent. The school welcomed the families and included their culture firmly in the curriculum so that they felt confident and more likely to come into school.

At Year 7, a student from a travelling fairground family joined a secondary school that had no previous experience of Traveller families. She was away for several weeks each year, especially in the summer. Staff built quickly on the good relationships that the primary school had developed with her parents. The local authority's Traveller service made the school aware of her needs and background, including that, in promoting her high attendance, it would nevertheless be disrespectful and counterproductive to appear to suggest that her education was more important than her family's business.

The student's arrival coincided with the school's first virtual learning environment. E-lamp funding meant that she was able to have a

---

[16] A summary of evidence is included in *Moving forward together: raising Gypsy, Roma and Traveller achievement* (00660-2009BKT-EN), DCSF, 2009;
http://nationalstrategies.standards.dcsf.gov.uk/node/248709.

computer, data card and scanner. She used these when she was away to follow lessons remotely. The staff and her friends sent emails and spoke to her by telephone. She sent her work by email or post to the school for it to be marked. Her parents took a key role, agreeing to support her and also to invigilate her tests. All this was achieved through a 'support learning agreement', signed by the school, the student, parents and the local authority.

The student's parents became aware that absence during GCSE coursework and, eventually, examinations could significantly harm her results. They accepted that their daughter might not remain in the Traveller tradition in future and that decisions were up to her. Should she go into the sixth form and pursue a university career, of which she was capable? The school understood how difficult these decisions were and, at each stage, looked for solutions that respected the family's tradition, knowing that otherwise the school's good relationships with the family could easily break down.

Looked after children

78. Children looked after by local authorities represent another group with historically low attainment. As at March 2010, 45% of children looked after continuously for at least 12 months achieved Level 4 in English at Key Stage 2 and 44% achieved the same level for mathematics, compared with 81% and 80% nationally. For the same period, 26% of children looked after continuously for at least 12 months in the relevant age groups gained five or more GCSEs at grades A* to C, compared with 75% of all students. This did, however, represent an improvement from 15% in 2009.[17]

79. Nineteen of the schools visited gave inspectors evidence of their work with looked after children. Practice and outcomes were mixed. While all the schools concerned were well aware which of their pupils were looked after children and some provided personal care for them, it did not follow that relationships with the children's parents and carers were consistent or well-established. This meant that the pupils received different levels of support and encouragement. A report from the Children's Rights Director in 2007 noted that in its sample of 77 looked after children, 62% of them felt they received 'a lot' of help with their education from their carers, while 22% said they received 'a bit of help' and 12% 'no help' from their carers.[18]

---

[17] For details, see: www.education.gov.uk/rsgateway/DB/SFR/s000960/index.shtml.
[18] *About education: a children's views report* (CSCI-195), Commission for Social Care Inspection, 2007; www.ofsted.gov.uk/Ofsted-home/Publications-and-research/Browse-all-by/Documents-by-type/Thematic-reports/About-education/(language)/eng-GB.

Staff in children's homes 'were not quite so likely as foster carers to go to parents' evenings'. A later report in 2009 from the Children's Rights Director said:

> '[Looked after] children... gave their advice on how children in care can be helped more at school or college... Individual support was important, and about three quarters of the children in one group thought that having a 'designated teacher' to support children in care would be a good idea. This came with a warning though. Children thought it was important not to make children in care feel different in school.'[19]

80. The schools which provided evidence in this area showed how some success was achieved by carefully balancing the need for looked after children to have their needs specifically and sensitively recognised.

> A secondary school had 24 looked after children on its roll. Led by the headteacher, school staff had learnt to treat each student's chief carer more as a parent, with the additional responsibilities that involved, rather than simply as a fellow professional. This helped to ensure that each student had an advocate who focused on her or his particular needs. Each looked after student had a personal education plan, whose format had been refined over several years. This plan, shared and regularly reviewed between staff, parents and carers and students, provided for agreed continuity of practice during periods of upheaval in each young person's life. This process began before the students were admitted. For example, before settling in a children's home, a Year 10 student who was looked after had had eight different placements. Through its well-tried process, the school insisted that the home must provide a care worker, as a parental figure, who, in this case, could stay in school with the student for some lessons, building the child's trust and confidence

Parents who are lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender

81. Not all important matters involving inclusion had a high profile in the schools visited. This was particularly the case for lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender parents. Incidents of homophobic bullying and the use of inappropriate or offensive language towards children and young people who are themselves, or who have parents or carers who are, lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgendered have been well documented. A large-scale survey by Stonewall, for example, found that 95% of secondary teachers and 75% of primary teachers reported hearing the phrases, 'That's so gay' or 'You're so gay' in their schools.[20] Even very young pupils used the word 'gay' as an insult.

---

[19] *Children's messages to the minister* (090117), Ofsted, 2009;
www.ofsted.gov.uk/publications/090117.
[20] *The teachers' report*, Stonewall, 2008;
www.stonewall.org.uk/documents/the_teachers_report_1.pdf.

82. None of the schools visited for the survey provided evidence about parents from lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender backgrounds without inspectors prompting them. While both of the schools below noted the existence of lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender backgrounds in their schools, it was unclear how well they evaluated the effectiveness of their work in this area or knew how affected individuals might feel.

> The headteacher of a primary school said that her school had many parents from lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender backgrounds as well as gay staff. She did not believe it had caused any awkwardness. She also said that, in the playground, pupils were much more likely to say, 'You're gay' than make a racist comment. However, she felt they did so without thinking or deeper motivation.

> A secondary school headteacher said that lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender parents were rare in the school, or perhaps kept very private. The school felt that it was sensitive to parents and avoided, for example, using the phrase 'mums and dads'. Staff were aware of gay students in the school and the need to support them.

Should parents expect more of schools?

83. Despite the wide divergence in the quality and style of practice across the schools visited, in all of them most of the parents interviewed were satisfied with their child's school. This was borne out by the responses to the parental questionnaires instigated by the schools themselves, although the number of questionnaires returned in some was low. Many parents could not speak highly enough of the schools. Some said they were happy for schools to 'get on with it', seeing staff as the experts. Most did not expect to influence school policies or practices, even if they wanted to contribute to school life.

84. Some parents, however, said they were disappointed with aspects of the quality of their children's schooling and might have complained. Others thought the schools could be better but without seeing ways that they could suggest improvements. Some took their children out of the schools when they were dissatisfied. Ofsted's survey, *Local authorities and home education*, reported that some parents chose to educate their children at home because they were unhappy with the child's school experience.[21] This included parents of children who had special educational needs and/or disabilities.

85. A survey published by the former Ofsted in 2006 found that, overall, parents were very satisfied with the schools that their children attended and that, in primary schools particularly, they were often satisfied even when a school's

---

[21] For further information, see: *Local authorities and home education* (090267), Ofsted, 2010; www.ofsted.gov.uk/publications/090267.

effectiveness and the pupils' achievement were less than good.[22] An analysis of parental questionnaires returned to inspectors from the 2,140 school inspections undertaken by Ofsted between September and December 2009 confirms this point.[23] In these questionnaires, provided at every inspection, parents are asked to respond to statements by strongly agreeing, agreeing, disagreeing or strongly disagreeing. The following analysis, based on the statement 'Overall, I am happy with my child's experience at this school', shows the percentages of all 56,820 parents' responses to the statement, compared with the subsequent inspection judgements for the schools' overall effectiveness. These judgements ranged from outstanding to inadequate.[24] Table 1 shows that even when schools are performing inadequately, they can achieve high levels of recorded parental satisfaction. A large majority of the parents in both the outstanding and the inadequate schools strongly agreed or agreed that they were happy overall with their child's experience.

Table 1: Percentage of parent responses to the question 'I am happy with my child's experience at this school' from parental questionnaires at school inspection (by overall effectiveness judgement) September–December 2009

School effectiveness	Strongly agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly disagree	Other response
Outstanding	55	36	1	0	8
Good	50	40	3	1	6
Satisfactory	43	44	4	1	8
Inadequate	41	43	5	1	6
All grades	47	42	3	1	7

Where total percentages do not exactly make 100%, this is due to rounding.

86. However, the evidence also prompts the question whether the parents might help their children better, and help schools to improve, if they:

   ■ had clearer routes for their views, ideas and expectations concerning their child's school

   ■ expected to exert more influence.

---

[22] *Parents' satisfaction with schools* (HMI 2634), Ofsted, 2006; www.ofsted.gov.uk/Ofsted-home/Publications-and-research/Browse-all-by/Education/Providers/Primary-schools/Parents-satisfaction-with-schools.
[23] These were school inspections carried out under Section 5 of the Education Act 2005.
[24] A judgement of 'inadequate' for a school's overall effectiveness means that it is deemed to require special measures or is given a notice to improve.

Notes

Between September 2009 and March 2010, inspectors visited 47 schools: 22 secondary schools (including one academy), 18 primary schools, three nursery schools, three special schools and one pupil referral unit. Some of the schools were chosen because it was known beforehand that there was likely to be good practice. Where possible, inspectors visited events attended by parents, such as parents' evenings, to evaluate these and talk to parents.

Inspectors also gathered evidence from other sources, which included organisations working with parents and parents' groups, through focused discussions with groups of parents and professionals. These are listed in the Annex. The survey drew on other evidence held by Ofsted, including recent data from its parents' panel and school inspections, and evidence from other Ofsted surveys.

Further information

Ofsted publications

Family learning (080265), Ofsted, 2009; www.ofsted.gov.uk/publications/080265.

Local authorities and home education (090267), Ofsted, 2010; www.ofsted.gov.uk/publications/090267.

Parents, carers and schools (070018), Ofsted, 2007; www.ofsted.gov.uk/publications/070018a.

The evaluation schedule of judgements for schools inspected under section five of the Education Act 2005, from September 2009 (090098), Ofsted, 2010; www.ofsted.gov.uk/publications/090098.

The special educational needs and disability review: a statement is not enough (090221), Ofsted, 2010; www.ofsted.gov.uk/publications/090221.

Publications by others

A Harris and J Goodall, *Engaging parents in raising achievement - Do parents know they matter?* (RW004), DCSF, 2007; http://education.gov.uk/publications/standard/publicationDetail/Page1/DCSF-RBW004.

How primary and secondary schools help parents and carers to improve their child's learning (01115-2009), DCSF, 2009; http://publications.education.gov.uk/default.aspx?PageFunction=productdetails&PageMode=publications&ProductId=DCSF-01115-2009&.

Manchester Transition Project: implications for the development of parental involvement in primary schools (015154), DCSF, 2007; www.dcsf.gov.uk/rsgateway/DB/RRP/u015154/index.shtml.

Moving forward together: raising Gypsy, Roma and Traveller achievement (00660), DCSF, 2009; http://nationalstrategies.standards.dcsf.gov.uk/node/248709.

Supporting parents with their children's 'at home' learning and development (RR138), DCSF, 2009; www.dcsf.gov.uk/rsgateway/DB/RRP/u015800/index.shtml.

The impact of parental involvement on children's education (DCSF-00924-2008) DCSF, 2008; http://publications.education.gov.uk/default.aspx?PageFunction=productdetails&PageMode=publications&ProductId=DCSF-00924-2008.

The teachers' report, Stonewall, 2009; www.stonewall.org.uk/what_we_do/2583.asp#Education.

Annex: Schools, local authorities and other providers visited

Nursery schools	Location
Bluebell Valley Nursery School	Bristol
Bognor Regis Nursery School	West Sussex
Ronald Openshaw Nursery School	Newham

Primary schools	Location
Brookside Primary School, Oadby	Leicestershire
Coppice Primary School	Oldham
Corfe Castle CofE Voluntary Controlled First School	Dorset
Coton-in-the-Elms CofE Primary School	Derbyshire
Hanover Primary School	Islington
Hinchley Wood Primary School	Surrey
Laughton All Saints CofE Primary School	Rotherham
Oatlands Community Infant School	North Yorkshire
Orton Wistow Primary School	Peterborough
Queenswell Infant School	Barnet
Scawthorpe Sunnyfields Primary School	Doncaster
St Anthony's Catholic Primary School	Slough
St Augustine's CofE Primary School	Westminster
St Mary Magdalene CofE Primary School	Southwark
St Michael's CofE Primary School, Kings Lynn	Norfolk
Stanley Park Junior School	Sutton
Wells Primary School	Redbridge
West Rainton Primary School	Durham

Secondary schools	Location
Barr Beacon Language College	Walsall
Beaconsfield High School	Buckinghamshire
Egglescliffe School	Stockton-on-Tees
Fallibroome High School	Cheshire East
Falmouth School	Cornwall
Flixton Girls' High School	Trafford
Haringey Sixth Form Centre	Haringey

Harlington Upper School	Central Bedfordshire
King Edward VI Grammar School, Chelmsford	Essex
Lipson Community College	Plymouth
Longfield School	Darlington
Oldbury College of Sport	Sandwell
Plashet School	Newham
Rudheath Community High School	Cheshire West and Chester
Shenley Academy	Birmingham
St Anselm's Catholic School	Kent
St Bede's Catholic High School	Lancashire
St Edmund's Church of England Girls' School	Wiltshire
St Mary Redcliffe and Temple School	City of Bristol
St Monica's RC High School	Bury
St Thomas More High School for Boys	Southend-on-Sea
The Community College Whitstable	Kent
Wyvern Community School	North Somerset

Special schools and pupil referral units	**Location**
Glynn House Short Stay School	Cornwall
Maplewood School	Sunderland
Mayfield School	Birmingham
Sunnydown School	Surrey

Other organisations

Buckinghamshire County Council

National Confederation of Parent Teacher Associations

Northern Support Group

Ofsted's Parents' Panel

Out for our Children

National Association of Teachers of Travellers Plus

National Strategies

Proud 2 b Parents

Rainbow Families

Institute of Education, University of London