

HOME-SCHOOL AGREEMENTS: A TRUE PARTNERSHIP?

A research project for RISE by

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RISE

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Summary of the Main Findings

Schools were required to have home-school agreements in place by September 1999. These should have been drawn up in consultation with parents, who are then 'invited to sign'. Pupils may also be invited to sign where governors consider that they have sufficient understanding to do so. But there is no obligation to sign, and there are no penalties for refusing.

The DfEE intended that these agreements should provide a framework for improved partnership between parents and schools. While there is consensus about the educational value of good home-school relationships, the idea that signed agreements might help to achieve this has provoked considerable debate among politicians, educationalists, professional associations and parents' organisations. The research has examined the initiative by recording the experiences and views of teachers, parents, governors and students. It also aimed to investigate the extent to which home-school agreements were perceived to improve, or be likely to improve, partnerships between parents and schools and to provide suggestions for good practice.

The study was funded by the Nuffield Foundation and carried out by the Research and Information on State Education Trust (RISE) between December 1998 and March 2000.

Views and experience of headteachers

There were no significant differences in attitudes towards home-school agreements between primary, secondary and special schools. However, schools which had introduced a home-school agreement before they were required to were considerably more likely to report that teachers and governors were enthusiastic than schools which were currently working on, or yet to begin work on, their agreement. These 'early implementers' were also more likely to have given the initiative a higher priority and to have had a home-school policy in place.

Drawing up the agreement:

- Nearly all schools consulted the DFEE's published Guidance
- Of those working on their agreements in 1999, nearly all had consulted parents, but only two thirds had consulted parents *individually*, as required in the legislation. The remainder had held meetings with parents, or had consulted through the PTA
- Parental response rates were very low: the majority of schools had responses from less than 25% of parents. But these were mainly positive.

The most commonly cited advantages of home-school agreements were that they:

- Clarified roles, responsibilities and expectations
- Enhanced partnership, communication and involvement with parents
- Made the school's values and vision clear.

The most commonly cited disadvantages of home-school agreements were that:

- There is no compulsion to sign and they are not enforceable
- They will not be signed by those parents whom schools would particularly like to sign
- They add to the burden of schools' administrative work and may be costly to implement.

Teachers' and governors' positive views and experience:

Home-school agreements:

- Can 'encompass' established school ethos and behaviour policies
- Can provide a useful summary of expectations to be introduced at the beginning of the child's school career
- Can provide a useful reminder to be used *throughout* the child's school career
- Can be 'tailored' to the needs and circumstances of the individual school
- Are meaningless without a framework of established values, practices and policies.

Their negative views and experience:

Home-school agreements:

- Will fail to reach those parents who are unsupportive of the school
- Are unnecessary where home-school relations are already good
- Are unnecessary as they duplicate existing school material
- Are of little value without sanctions attached
- Introduce an unwanted formality to home-school relations, particularly in primary schools
- Are problematic to implement as it is difficult to ensure that all parents and students sign, understand and 'own' agreements, particularly in secondary schools.

Parents:

- Thought agreements were a good idea because they emphasised that parents had a role to play, alongside schools, in the education of children
- Thought that the school's responsibilities as set out in the home-school agreement amounted to no more than what was *required* of schools
- Thought that the parents' and students' responsibilities were fundamental and should be accepted without needing to be written
- Were *largely* unconvinced that agreements would have any significant impact.

Students:

- Supported agreements in principle, but saw many problems with the idea in practice
- Were concerned about the number of points that they were required to comply with
- Were *divided* about whether agreements would have any impact
- Were increasingly sceptical with age: year 10 students were notably more sceptical than those in years 6 and 7.

Teachers, governors, students and parents agreed that:

- Agreements are unlikely to make any difference to those 'supportive' parents and students who already 'comply'
- Agreements are unlikely to make any difference to those 'unsupportive' parents and students who will not 'comply', whether or not they sign
- Agreements *may possibly* make a small difference to *a few* parents and students who will benefit from being informed or reminded of their responsibilities

The study has provided information about schools' progress in implementing home-school agreements and about the responses of key participants to the initiative. The findings highlight widespread support for the underpinning principles of good home-school relationships together with significant concerns about the idea of home-school agreements 'in practice' While agreements are viewed positively in some schools, there is a considerable degree of scepticism among teachers, governors, students and parents concerning their likely impact and the potential they have for enhancing partnership between home and school.

It is important to note that home-school agreements were new to the majority of schools at the time of the research. The responses of key participants may change as agreements are more widely used.

1: Introduction

This research project investigated the implementation and early impact of one of the measures included in the School Standards and Framework Act, 1998: the introduction of signed parental agreements between parents and schools. Schools are allowed to write their own agreements within the DfEE's guidelines¹ and after consultation with parents. While there is widespread agreement across education that close and supportive relationships between schools and parents enhance the quality of education, and that all schools should have a policy setting out their intentions on home-school relationships, there is wide ranging disagreement about how this is best achieved.

Specifically the research was intended to:

- Investigate the extent to which the wish expressed in the White Paper *Excellence in Schools* that home-school agreements will 'build even stronger partnerships' was being achieved. The research explored teachers', governors', parents' and students' experience of the drafting and adoption of home-school agreements and their attitudes towards the initiative using a range of approaches: a survey of headteachers, a case study of schools and analysis of consultation documents and home-school agreements.
- Contribute to the development of good practice. As well as adopting home-school agreements by September 1999 schools are required to review and evaluate them regularly. The research findings will inform this process.

Many reservations have been expressed about this initiative and are reflected in this report.

The report

The report has an executive summary and eight further sections:

1. This introduction
2. A discussion of the issues around home-school relations and agreements, and a review of the relevant literature
3. An analysis of the responses to the DfEE's consultation on the draft HSA Guidance
4. An analysis of national postal survey completed by 1385 schools in England and Wales
5. An analysis of 90 HSAs
6. Case studies of four schools
7. Concluding discussion and suggestions for good practice
8. Appendices

The sections of the report relate to different phases of the introduction of HSAs:

- Section 2 is concerned with research on, and the analysis of, home-school relations before HSAs were introduced to all schools (before summer 1998).

¹ DfEE (1998) *Home-School Agreements: Guidance for Schools*. London: DfEE.

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- Section 3 focuses on the responses to the Draft DfEE Guidance and their impact on the final version of the Guidance (in autumn 1998).
- Section 4 presents the views of schools in the term before the HSA had to be introduced in all schools (in summer 1999).
- Section 5 HSAs returned with the questionnaires are examined (also summer 1999).
- Section 6 explores the early implementation of HSAs in four schools (autumn 1999 and spring 2000).

The findings of each of the two longer sections (4 and 6) are summarised at the end of the section.

The picture which emerges is complex. It is a jigsaw puzzle, but one where the same shaped pieces keep recurring. Our research suggests that there are positive benefits to the initiative, but that many of the anxieties reviewed in section 2 remain.

It will be appreciated that the longer-term impact of this initiative on schools cannot be fully assessed at this point. Further research is needed.

2: Discussion of the Issues and Relevant Literature¹

Introduction

The School Standards and Framework Act (1998) Sections 110, 111, require all maintained schools, city technology colleges and city colleges for the technology of the arts to have a written home-school agreement and associated parental declaration in place by September 1999. The Act defines a home-school agreement as a statement specifying:

- the school's aims and values
- the school's responsibilities,
- the parental responsibilities, and
- the school's expectations of its pupils.

Schools are required to invite all registered parents of pupils of compulsory school age to sign the agreement as soon after September 1st 1999 as is 'reasonably practicable', and pupils may also be invited to sign where governing bodies consider that they have sufficient understanding of the agreement.

The DfEE Guidance (DfEE, 1998) on home-school agreements sets out their rationale in the following terms:

'Parents are a child's first and enduring teachers. They play a crucial role in helping their children learn. Children achieve more when schools and parents work together. Parents can help more effectively if they know what the school is trying to achieve and how they can help. Home-school agreements will provide a framework for the development of such a partnership.' (DfEE, 1998, paragraph 4, page 3)

Governing bodies must also consult with parents before adopting or revising the agreement, and the Guidance notes that:

'The processes involved in introducing and reviewing the agreement will clarify what the school is trying to achieve, and the agreement will set out the role of the school, parents and pupils in this vital partnership.'

The first idea expressed here - that close and supportive relationships between parents and schools are an important factor in educational outcomes - is by no means new. David (1998) suggests that this theme can be traced back as far as the framing of current educational policy in the Education Act, 1944. Other writers (for example Hughes, Wikeley and Nash, 1994, and Crozier, 1998) refer to the Plowden Report (Central Advisory Council for Education, 1967) as one of the earliest documents to give official recognition to the positive gains for individual children which result from developing closer links between parents and schools. Educational legislation in the 1980s has continued to incorporate this thinking: for example, the 1980, 1986 and 1988 Education Acts all give more prominence in law to the role of parents.

However, whilst a considerable consensus has developed over many years that improved relationships between parents and schools are likely to result in higher levels of pupil achievement, the question of exactly how this improvement is to be achieved has raised a great deal of controversy. Research evidence from a large and growing number of studies supports the consensus that parents do have an important

1 An edited version of this review has been published: Hood, S (1999) 'Home-School Agreements: a true partnership?' *School Leadership and Management*, 19, 427-440.

influence on the extent to which their children benefit from schooling (see for example the National Commission on Education, 1996). But as Macbeth (1989) notes, the question of which interventions are the most effective remains largely unanswered:

'Unfortunately the evidence, substantial though it is, lacks the finality and precision which would enable us to define exactly which home-based initiatives would most heighten pupils' educational advance.' (page 7)

The idea promoted by the government that signed home-school agreements might play an important part in strengthening 'partnerships' between parents and schools has proved particularly contentious amongst politicians, within and between professional associations, and within parents' groups. While representatives from all these interest groups have stated their strong support for the principle of developing improved home-school relations, critics continue to raise a number of questions about whether the proposed agreements represent the *best means* to do this. Some critics argue that such agreements represent at best a worthless paper exercise and that at worst that their use risks alienating the most 'co-operative' parents and achieving nothing with the least 'co-operative'. A central focus for controversy has been the question of whether such agreements can and should be enforceable; and the short history of this initiative has witnessed a terminological progression from 'home-school contract', to 'contract/agreement', to 'agreement', in part reflecting public policy attempts to 'iron out' some of these difficult questions of enforceability.

Underlying much of this controversy about *the most appropriate methods* for achieving change in home-school relations are some more fundamental and complex debates about what the *end goal* for home-school polices should be. Although consensus that parental involvement is 'a good thing' may have existed since Plowden, prevailing ideas about *the kinds of relationships which should be fostered between parents and schools*, and about *the proper balance of rights and responsibilities within these relationships* have changed and developed in recent decades, in response to the broader social, economic and political context. And distinctive perspectives have been adopted both between and within the various interest groups who are concerned with such relations. Educationalists, professionals, parents' groups and politicians have – to a greater or lesser degree – contributed to and influenced the course of debate in this area. 'Home-school' terminology has changed also according to wider contextual influences. For example, 'partnership', referred to twice in the DfEE rationale for home-school agreements (DfEE, 1998, paragraph 4, page 3), is probably today's most fashionable word. Implicit (and sometimes explicit) in the responses of both supporters and opposers to home-school agreements are a range of models of what home-school relations *should be*, a variety of ideas about what constitutes a 'good parent' and differing perspectives on what '*partnership*' actually means.

This literature review focuses on this new and contentious policy-initiative. It aims to provide a full analysis of the controversy which has greeted the idea of home-school agreements. More specifically, it aims to:

- Detail the arguments for and against agreements made within the various interest groups (politicians, professionals, academics, parents)
- Analyse these arguments within the broader context of debates about home-school relations
- Identify some of the key questions which warrant study in the implementation of the home-school agreement initiative.

The review is in three parts and is structured as follows:

- Part 1 places home-school agreements in the wider context of policy around home-school relations, by describing and analysing public policy developments and debates in this area from Plowden to the present day
- Part 2 discusses the development of the home-school agreement initiative and sets out some of the key themes deriving from an analysis of responses to it prior to the Draft Guidance
- Part 3 offers a brief discursive conclusion to the review.

Part 1. Home-School Relations: a Historical Analysis

A recent report of a study by the Centre for Educational Research and Innovation (CERI) (1997) analyses policy and practice in home-school relations within nine mainly European countries. The report points to a widespread increase in policies which encourage the involvement of parents, families and communities in school education. This pattern is, in part, a response by governments to the notion that, in the light of changing family structures and increased socio-economic stress, schools may have an increasingly broad task of socialisation. It also reflects government concerns to provide the levels of education which are required in an increasingly competitive global market. As the authors summarise:

'... so one answer to the question as to why governments are becoming interested in the educative role played by parents is that for good economic and social reasons the children of working class, ethnic minority and other excluded families now need to be drawn into the circle of education, which in the past tended to keep them out.' (page 22)

The shift in policy-direction in Europe is also linked with research findings which suggest that parental involvement is associated with high achievement in schools (see for example the National Commission on Education, 1996), with pressure which has been exerted by parents themselves through a range of parents' associations, and with a tendency for governments to decentralise their administrations, making schools more accountable to those who use them. The CERI paper authors also note that it is often the values which are 'deeply embedded in the political culture' which effectively determine the particular rationale that governments adopt to guide their policies (page 26). In many countries, for example, parental involvement in education is seen as a right that accompanies democratic values. Other countries give greater emphasis to parental involvement as a means towards school accountability than as an outright democratic right, and others still are influenced by a consumerist philosophy within which parents, as consumers, have the right to choose schools and to influence their operation.

Writing about home-school relations in this country, Macbeth (1989) outlines five reasons why parents should be considered relevant to what happens *inside* schools. In summary, these are that:

1. Parents are responsible in law for their children's education: they are the school's legal clients
2. Much of a child's education happens outside school - in the home. If parents are co-educators of children with teachers then it is logical for the two elements of school learning and home-learning to be made compatible, and for teachers to use home-learning as a resource
3. Research indicates that family-based learning influences the effectiveness of school on a child
4. The teacher is also, to a degree, an agent of the education authority and the state, with implied functions of checking upon parents' fulfilment of duties and of providing an educational 'safety-net'
5. Parents are stakeholders on behalf of their child and should be able to influence school policy through representation.

These five clear statements convey a series of rationales for involving parents in the work of schools. Underlying such apparently straightforward claims, however, are different understandings of the kinds of relationships that should be fostered between schools and parents. These understandings can in turn be viewed as representing *different models of the parent*. The parent here is a 'customer or consumer' (1 and 5), a 'supporter (2 and 3), a 'partner' (2 and 3), a 'client' (1 and 4) and a 'problem' (4) in relation to the school. The teacher who acts as an agent of the state (4) operates in a surveillance role, through which 'problematic' and 'difficult' parents are identified. The parent who acts as a stakeholder (5) is a modern-day 'consumer' of school education. The statements also imply different balances between the rights and responsibilities to be exercised by schools and by parents; for example, the parent stakeholder exercises his or her *rights as a consumer*, and the teacher has a *responsibility to monitor parents* as an agent of the state.

Present-day education policy in England and Wales places particular emphasis on consumer choice *for parents* and on school accountability *towards parents*. Within this policy framework parents' *rights* to make schools more accountable to them are to be balanced with a stronger emphasis on parental responsibilities to contribute to their child's schooling and education. In many respects, home-school agreements can be understood as a policy measure which aims to reflect this particular balance between the rights and responsibilities of parents within education. The emphasis which the initiative gives to parents' rights and

responsibilities within a home-school 'partnership' differs significantly from prevailing ideas about parental involvement just several decades ago.

Interestingly, home-school agreements also offer a role for children as contributors to a parent, pupil, school partnership, although, the extent to which they are constructed in the initiative as active participants with rights (as opposed to passive signatories to their responsibilities) is questionable.

Home-school relations: a brief history

The 1944 Education Act (now Section 7 of the 1996 Education Act) places a duty on parents to cause their child to:

'... receive efficient full-time education suitable to his age, ability and aptitude, either by regular attendance at school or otherwise.' (Section 36)

This legislation makes clear that parents are responsible in law for ensuring that their child is provided with an education whether in school or by other means. However, as Macbeth (1994) notes 'education' can easily be equated with schooling and the wording can imply that:

'... schooling is the totality of a child's education and that parents, having regularly delivered their child to school, have fulfilled their task.' (page 81)

This idea, implied in the 1944 Act, that schools are the key providers of education, and that parental responsibility is limited to ensuring attendance, underpinned much of the thinking on home-school relations during the post-war years and on into the 1960s. This was a period of tremendous optimism in education (as in other public services). The teaching profession was flourishing, and expansion of the state system was expected to lead to a period of economic growth and increased social equality. During the 1960s a number of social research studies pointed to high correlations between home background and in-school performance, and children from socially disadvantaged families were shown to be achieving less well than children from the middle classes. However, where schools saw themselves as the prime providers of education, the solution to this problem was largely seen as lying within the schools themselves rather than within the realm of home-school relations. Indeed, parents were frequently positioned as the 'cause' of educational problems with little or no role to play in working together with schools. The school's role here was effectively understood as one of providing compensation for social disadvantage.

The 1967 Plowden Report reflected a different – though not markedly changed – understanding of parents' roles within education. It gave a new emphasis to parents as a source of potential educational benefit and argued that schools had a duty to encourage parental interest in their children's education, linking such involvement with higher levels of achievement for children. But the assumption still remained that schooling and education were equated, and whilst parents were no longer necessarily viewed as the 'cause' of educational problems, the prime goal of working more closely with them was to involve them as individual 'supporters' of schools and school values. Widlake (1986) has characterised these two different and developing understandings of parents' role in education in terms of the 'compensatory' model and the 'communications' model. He advocates also a third 'participatory' model which recognises that parents and teachers both contribute to the child's education, but also that there should be co-operation between home and school.

During the 1970s there was some development of this important idea of parental participation in schools. Greater parental involvement in education was advocated by a number of progressive educators including community educators, who were particularly influential during this period. Macbeth (1994) observes that during the 1970s and 1980s there was a developing participatory movement, but he notes that whilst the word 'partnership' was increasingly used in writings about home-school relations, such partnerships were still rather one-sided.

Critically, for those who advocated parental involvement, the 1970s also witnessed the breakdown of consensus regarding the powers of social democracy and what Vincent (1996) has termed:

'... the beginning of a reconstruction of 'parent power' to serve a Conservative discourse.' (page 26)

While the comprehensive system had been expected to expand educational opportunity for all, research in this period had begun to indicate the limitations of the school as a key instrument in reaching this social

equality. Only a year after Plowden the first of several 'Black Papers' appeared calling for a return to traditional educational methods and values. The right wing authors of these Black Papers were instrumental in fostering a widespread 'moral panic' about standards in education during the mid to late 1970s - and in paving the way for major legislative changes in education services - changes which introduced a new and pervasive model of the parent as a consumer of education.

The marketisation of education in the 1980s: the parent as consumer

During the 1980s there was a widespread transformation in the provision of education in England, Wales and Scotland. This was characterised by a raft of education legislation which sought both to increase state intervention in the content and the range of provision and to increase deregulation within the range of provision in order to stimulate an internal market.

Key legislation here included the Education Acts of 1980, 1981 and 1986 and the Education Reform Act, 1988. The 1980 Act allowed parents to express a preference for the school of their choice, established the assisted places scheme, gave parents increased representation on governing bodies and the right to information about the curriculum and the school. Under the 1986 Act parent and teacher representation on governing bodies was strengthened (parents beyond that of teachers) and Local Education Authority (LEA) representation was reduced. The 1988 Education Reform Act introduced the National Curriculum and required schools to give parents information concerning the curriculum and the child's progress with it. It also gave parents the right to vote to take their school out of LEA control; it established open enrolment and it delegated financial and management control to schools.

Two central related concerns of government underpinned this recent 'revolution': a concern to improve educational standards and a concern to increase the levels of parental choice. A key rationale here is broadly that if schools are made more accountable to parents, and if parents are given greater powers to influence the operation of schools and to choose between schools, then standards will rise in response to parents' needs and wishes. These two areas of concern continue to be central to the education policy of the Labour administration today. They reflect an emphasis on *increased consumer rights for parents* and *increased responsibilities for schools* to be accountable to parents.

Also important, however, was the view that if children (and particularly disadvantaged children) are to achieve their full potential then their parents need to be involved with their learning and to be confident about the quality of their schools. The emphasis here is on *increased responsibilities for parents* to become involved with schools and possibly also on terms of *increased rights of schools* to expect this parental involvement.

Parental involvement in schools in the 1990s: a critical analysis

The review turns now to a more critical debate about the extent and nature of present-day parental involvement in schools. This debate will open up the issue of parental involvement to closer inspection, questioning exactly what is meant by the term and exploring the kind of roles that are open in practice to parents in the 1990s. It will serve to complete the contextual framework for the discussion of home-school agreements which follows.

The literature on home-school relations provides a bewildering array of typologies of parental involvement in education and in schools. Key distinctions appear to be those which are made between:

- The roles of parents as co-educators with the school in providing their child's education, and parents as involved in school-based education
- The role of parents in 'educational/learning' aspects of the school and in 'administrative' aspects
- Individual and collective forms of involvement.

Epstein (quoted in CERI, 1997) offers a useful typology which recognises that co-operation between parents and schools is a 'two-way' process. She identifies six categories of involvement:

- Family obligations and support for children's school learning
- Communication between home and school

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- Family involvement at school
- Parental involvement in children's school learning at home
- Participation of parents in decision-making, governance and advocacy
- Partnership between parents, schools, businesses and other community organisations.

However, the simpler typology offered by Vincent (1996) is possibly even more useful. This includes the parent in supporter/learner, consumer, and participant roles and significantly a fourth category - which is notably absent in the typologies offered by many educationalists - the *independent parent* who wishes and/or chooses to maintain minimal contact with the school.

Supporter/learner roles

There is considerable emphasis in UK educational policy and practice on the role that parents can play as helpers in the classroom. It is argued that this can offer parents useful insights into the classroom environment and serve to free up teachers from some of the more mundane elements of their work. Other initiatives give parents a greater role in contributing to the curriculum, in particular via home-reading and home-maths projects with primary children. The breadth and diversity of locally funded home-school initiatives is considerable. The focus in the majority of locally funded home-school initiatives has, however, been on the contribution that *individual* parents can make to supporting teachers in their role as educators of *individual* children.

Parents as consumers and as participants?

The transformation in education of the 1980s was expressly intended to increase parental rights as consumers of education - but what has this meant in practice? Do parents actually have increased rights as consumers - and if so - does this also mean that they have greater rights as participants in education? How far are parents able to influence both educational policy *and* what happens within their child's school?

Unlike in many other European countries, parents in England and Wales do not have any legal rights to form a collective body to represent their views, at national, local or school levels. There is also no legal right or requirement to form a parents' association or parent-teacher association within a school (CERI, 1997, page 100).

The legislation of the 1980s has given parents the right to choose their child's school and increased levels of representation on school governing bodies. However, as several writers suggest (for example Vincent, 1996; Crozier, 1998; Hughes, Wikeley and Nash, 1994), the extent to which these measures have effectively increased parental influence on education is questionable. Hughes et al (1994) note here that:

'It is a curious irony that whilst parents have been given unprecedented power and influence by the reforms, they have not been given an effective voice.' (page 203)

And, as Vincent notes, parents' consumer power derives now from their capacity to 'withdraw' custom from schools, rather than to participate in their running. They have power of 'exit', rather than power of 'voice'.

Vincent suggests that because individual governors take on their power from being part of an integral body it is difficult to see how they can be representative of parents' views in general. A similar point is also made by Golby (1993) who notes that:

'... in asserting the parental point of view, the stance of parent governors must be mediated by the governing body as a whole.' (page 70)

Importantly, Munn (1993, page 72) also notes that there is no legal requirement on parent governors to report back to their constituencies, nor is there any obvious way in which they can systematically do so.

Perhaps one of the most important criticisms which has been levelled at the introduction of the market-place into education is that this effectively ignores both issues of inequality in power between professional teachers and lay parents, and inequalities and differences between parents themselves. This has been a long-standing concern for writers about home-school relations. Teachers making judgements about 'co-operative' or 'unco-operative parents' have commonly been seen to neglect such inequalities. Vincent

(1996) suggests that recent participatory initiatives are primarily designed to legitimate the more general action of the institution concerned. This view is supported by Crozier (1998) who suggests that 'partnership' in education is a device for monitoring parents: a form of surveillance. In her study of parents and teachers in secondary schools Crozier finds that:

'... the development of partnership is carried out through a process of teacher domination and on the basis of the teachers' agendas. For those parents who share this agenda this may be acceptable; for others they are either left without a voice, or tensions are created in the relationship.' (page 126)

Vincent also notes that:

'... parental choice policies overlook the ways in which individuals differ markedly in their ownership of social and economic resources, differences which profoundly affect their ability to compete in the educational market place.' (page 34)

Parents are not a homogeneous group. Class, ethnicity and gender may be important factors in determining both parental willingness and opportunities to participate in education. The significance of these differences is illustrated in a number of recent studies. Choice of school, for example, is constrained in the real world by many inter-related factors, including finances, home location and access to transport. Hughes, Wikeley and Nash (1994) show how many of the parents in their study did not have any realistic choice about which school to use for their child. It is almost always mothers - rather than fathers - who are regarded by public care organisations as responsible for their children. Maclachlan (1996) discusses the role of gender observing that 'current forms of parental involvement locate women primarily in their mothering role and thereby reinforce existing gender inequalities'. And in relation to ethnicity, Stoker (1996) uses a case study of Syeda - a woman who came from Bangladesh to Tower Hamlets twelve years ago, to illustrate some of the difficulties she, and many others, experienced when schools asked them to support their children's reading at home.

Many of these points, made in response to those who take an 'uncritical' view of 'partnership' in home-school relations, have been key to critiques of home-school agreements. Such agreements, critics argue, aim to strike a balance between the *rights and responsibilities of parents* and the *rights and responsibilities of schools*, but they ignore power differentials between school and parents and particularly the limited capacity of parents to act collectively to influence school policy. Additionally, home-school agreements are predicated primarily on an idea of parents as a homogeneous group, thus they may be oppressive to those whose circumstances make it difficult to comply; or indeed to those who, for a variety of reasons do not wish to do so.

Children: home-school relations and home-school agreements

Britain signed up to the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child in 1991. The Convention includes important clauses on children's rights to participate in decisions that affect their lives. To date, however, educational legislation in this country affords very little consideration to children as participants and, despite the existence of initiatives such as school councils, children have limited opportunity to play an active role in influencing either the ways in which schools operate or the content of their education.

With a few notable exceptions (for example Chapman in Bastiani and Wolfendale, 1996) children are remarkable for their absence in the literature on home-school relations. Moreover, children's views on home-school relations appear to be unsought, although a recent study (Edwards and Alldred, South Bank University, personal communication) has explored children's ideas about how school and home should relate together.

Home-school agreements are of interest here, because, the initiative designates a role to children as *contributors to a parent, pupil, school partnership*. Indeed, the Guidance refers to a 'triangle' between these three parties. Clearly, if the home-school agreement initiative is ultimately premised upon improving children's achievement, their role within the initiative deserves some separate analysis.

Part 2. Home-School Agreements: Development and Key Themes

Introduction

Home-school or pupil 'contracts' of varying kinds have been in use in schools in this country since at least the mid 1980s and schools have made extensive use of the 'behaviour modification' model (Blair and Waddington, 1997) in which pupils, school staff and (sometimes) parents enter into individually negotiated agreements which are targeted at specific behaviours with a system of rewards and sanctions.

The idea that parents might be asked to sign a document confirming that they have obligations relating to schooling was first introduced by Macbeth in 1984 in a report to the EEC. Macbeth suggested that such a 'signed understanding' could be the basis of:

'... heightening awareness among all parents and of applying moral pressure on defaulting parents.' (1989, page 24)

In 1989 the Royal Society for the Encouragement of Arts, Manufactures and Commerce (RSA), supported by the National Association of Head Teachers (NAHT) set up a two year development programme, 'the home-school contract of partnership', followed in 1993-5 by another project 'Parents in a Learning Society'. Both projects drew on good practice from schools which used contracts/agreements as part of a wider approach to the development of home-school work and partnerships.

Supporters of home-school contracts, including the NAHT, note their value in clarifying for parents the aims and ethos of the school, the expectations of parents and pupils and the responsibilities of schools. This position has also been supported in some schools where signed contracts have already been used. For example, headteachers report that these documents may be particularly useful when problems or misunderstandings occur:

'Since we introduced these contracts there have been fewer parents challenging teachers and there is more understanding of our system.' (Headteacher quoted by Spencer, 1996)

The NAHT also locate the home-school contract within a wider framework of partnership arguing that contracts can enhance this partnership by giving it clarity of meaning and a framework of reference. Interestingly, a recent OFSTED survey (quoted in the DfEE Guidance, 1998) notes that parents also benefit from this process of clarification:

'Parents, in particular, feel more confident about what is expected of them.' (page 3)

Importantly, Macbeth's rationale for contracts (1989, page 24) and the term 'home-school contract of partnership' encapsulate important tensions between the notions of 'partnership' and 'contract'. As Bastiani (1996) notes the combined effects of trying to integrate both agendas and approaches simultaneously, is problematic:

'... for the first is aimed at all parents, across a wide range of backgrounds and walks of life; the second is targeted at those parents who, it is assumed, have negative attitudes and unhelpful behaviour.' (pages 12-13)

The term 'home-school contract of partnership' also raises more fundamental questions about whether it is possible or indeed desirable to draw in elements of enforcement (implied by the word contract) into what is ideally an equal and reciprocal relationship (implied by the word partnership). These basic tensions have been central to much of the policy debate on this initiative. This analysis will focus primarily on two key inter-related themes: enforceability and partnership.

Enforceability issues

Both the Labour and the Conservative Party have been supportive of home-school contracts/agreements. However, as Bastiani notes (1996, page 13) while the Labour Party has tended to frame proposals to use such contracts against the background of its commitment to 'stakeholderism', the Conservative Party has viewed them as a feature of its market view of school provision and performance. Conservative party policy has promoted the connections between a framework which sets out expectations of parents (and pupils) and a school's admission policies:

'All schools should decide for themselves whether interviewing parents and children should play a part in the admissions procedure and if there should be a home-school contract imposing responsibilities on the parents. ... Contracts would be binding. ... Parents who failed to keep to their side of the agreement would be putting their children's position in the school at risk.' (Gillian Shephard, *The Guardian*, 9.1.96, quoted in Bastiani, 1996, page 13).

This link between home-school contracts and the admission policy of schools was formalised by the Conservatives within the provisions of the Education Act, 1997 which allowed admissions authorities to offer a place subject to 'the agreement of parents or pupils to specific undertakings' (Section 13 and Schedule 3). On election to office, however, the Labour Party repealed these provisions of the Act and they have never come into force. Analysis of documentation from 1988-1998 also shows a terminological shift from 'contract' to 'contract/agreement' to 'agreement' linking in with public policy concerns about enforceability issues.

Clearly strong opposition to the use of sanctions may have played a role in the Labour government's repeal of the clause relating to admissions in the 1997 Act, and undoubtedly the term 'agreement' sits more happily with the 'partnership' ideal than 'contract'. The thorny question of enforceability, however, has continued to plague deliberations about the value of home-school agreements, even since the repeal.

Positions in these debates have ranged from those who consider that the introduction of signed documents which have no sanctions attached to be a 'toothless', meaningless and ineffective measure to those who are fervently opposed to the use of any form of compulsion or sanction on grounds of principle alone. Opponents view such measures as punitive to those who cannot comply and as potentially counter-productive. Their use as sanctions may alienate those whom agreements are intended to attract and may also serve to increase the number of school exclusions. Whilst schools and LEAs have been particularly likely to question both the point and the effectiveness of 'toothless' home-school agreements, a significant faction has also expressed concern about the litigation which might result from parents who believe that the school is not meeting their side of the bargain. Also, in a climate where schools are increasingly expected to meet target standards laid down by government, the use of home-school agreements may lead, it is argued, to more examples of pupils suing their former schools for having to re-take their exams and for time lost in seeking employment (for example see Rafferty, 1996).

The uncomfortable dilemmas raised by the issue of enforceability are well captured by Letwin in the course of Parliamentary debate on the School Standards and Framework Bill:

'... the agreements are not enforceable, although in a sense they might be morally enforceable. It must be the hope of the Secretary of State that by signing the document, parents will somehow implicate themselves in the policy, and having implicated themselves will feel a moral obligation to fulfil their part of what he would describe as a bargain.' (Hansard, 1998, page 340)

The DfEE Guidance on home-school agreements states that parental failure to sign should not be used as a basis for decisions about admissions (paragraph 40) and that failure to sign or to comply should not be taken into consideration in decisions about exclusions (paragraph 36). However, the Guidance does not adequately respond to the request by many schools and LEAs for clarity concerning measures to take where parents or pupils refuse to sign or comply. And this removal of sanctions does not fully address the fundamental conflicts between the ideals of partnership and questions of enforceability and compulsion. These contradictions - explicit in the term contract - remain implicit in the notion of a signed agreement.

Partnership issues

Writing critically about the complex idea of 'partnership' Bastiani notes that:

'Perhaps it is more helpful to see partnership as a process, a stage in a process or something to work towards rather than something that is a fixed state or readily achievable.' (1993, page 113)

Much of the earlier debate about home-school 'contracts' and the more recent debate about home-school 'agreements' focuses on process issues. Issues discussed here have included: the processes by which contracts/agreements are reached and signed; the processes by which they are applied after they are signed; and linking in contracts/agreements with home-school policies. A key concern has been to ensure that, as far as possible, ways are found to work with parents on a fully consultative and equal basis.

Earlier concerns that inviting parents and children to sign agreements before the child starts attendance might limit the opportunity for full consultation are addressed in the Guidance which states that:

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'Schools or LEAs must not invite a parent or child to sign the parental declaration before the child has started to attend the school.' (DfEE, 1998, paragraph 40, page 13)

The DfEE Guidance emphasises the importance of 'the process of finding out what parents, pupils and staff want from one another' (paragraph 6, page 3). Within such a process it is important to adopt a combination of approaches to engage with as many parents as possible including those who may not speak English, or those who may have difficulty in reading (paragraph 19, page 6).

Home-school agreements and home-school policies

The understanding that agreements should be situated within home-school policies is frequently referenced by supporters of the idea. Bastiani (1996) is clear here that the 'process' by which agreements are reached is vital to their success, arguing that they should provide a 'framework for continuing discussion about what parents, pupils, teachers could expect from one another' rather than 'blunt instruments for beating unsuspecting parents into submission'.

Opponents of home-school agreements have also rested their case on the value of home-school *policies* as a more worthwhile alternative - effectively arguing that the home-school agreement initiative is unnecessary, bureaucratic, time-wasting and diversionary from the real business of partnership. For example, the Parent Teacher Association of Wales has noted that:

'There are many good examples of successful partnerships at school level, through which effective home-school policies have emerged. Let us help to build on the evidence of good practice, and not impose the illusion of partnership through this proposed legislation.' (letter quoted in Hansard, 1998, page 332)

Arguments that home-school agreements are unnecessary are based on the belief that the more co-operative parents will just be signing up to a summary of their duties which they already value and adhere to, while they will do little to draw in the least co-operative. There is also the view that the information which is set out in agreements can be conveyed equally clearly in school prospectuses which are distributed to parents when a child is admitted to school. Similarly, others suggest that the 'school side' of home-school agreements amounts simply to a summary of teachers' job descriptions: whilst teachers are clearly responsible for these duties, it is suggested, parents have rights and arguably responsibilities to be involved in their children's schooling, but they are not paid to do this.

Campaigning pressure to focus on the development of home-school policies *in place of* home-school agreements has come from a range of organisations (in particular from the Advisory Centre for Education, the Association of Teachers and Lecturers, the Campaign for State Education, the National Association of Governors, the National Union of Teachers and the Parent Teacher Association of Wales). In March 1998 these organisations requested an amendment to the School Standards Bill requesting that - instead of signed home-school agreements - governing bodies should be required to draw up a home-school policy, following a genuine consultation which included parents and staff. Parents, teachers and governors could then decide at school level if they wished to have a signed agreement as part of their home-school policy. Their request was discussed at some length in Parliament (24.3.98) but it was not granted.

The comments of Hayes about the differences between policies and agreements are significant for this discussion and warrant further analysis:

'A policy is a planned, coherent approach; a way of doing things; a set of ideas; whereas an agreement implies some sort of binding relationship between parties or partners ... surely agreements imply partnerships in a way that policies do not ... such policies do not equal specific agreements that confirm the expectations of the school and the parents on what each of these parties will deliver.' (Hansard, 1998, page 330)

Hayes' statements ignore the issues of 'process' which are central to the consultation that informs policy-making. He also equates the notion of 'partnership' with agreements, and the notion of agreement with a 'binding relationship'. Again, in this vision of 'an agreement', we see the two themes of this analysis linked together in an *uncomfortable alliance of partnership and enforceability*.

Part 3. Discussion and Conclusion

This review has shown how the home-school agreements initiative has been a focus for heated debate amongst policy-makers, academics, teaching staff and organisations, parents' groups and others. As

Bastiani notes the subject has 'a compelling fascination' and a 'burning topicality' (1996, page 23). What, then, are the key concluding points about home-school agreements to emerge from this review?

To suggest that something is 'an agreement' also suggests that parties to the agreement enter into it on a willing and an equal basis. This review has highlighted some fundamental questions about the extent to which home-school agreements can be understood in this particular light. Over recent years the terminology has adopted a less quasi-legalistic tone in response to widespread concerns about enforceability and sanctions. But the initiative continues to embody an idea of a 'binding' relationship, which in turn sits uncomfortably with the partnership ideal.

Models of parent as 'problem', as 'partner' and as 'consumer' have respectively held precedence in the recent history of home-school relations. The transformation in education in the 1980s has given explicit emphasis to parents as both partners and consumers and these emphases are reflected in the home-school agreement initiative. However, the model of parent as 'problem' - prevalent in the 1960s - continues to hold sway. This model is also reflected, though less explicitly, in the initiative.

Writing in 1997 Blair and Waddington note that:

'Despite much agonising over exactly what the role of parents is in relation to their child's education, it seems that there is still a fundamental lack of agreement over how parents should be characterised; are parents in the late 1990s consumers of education, partners with the school in the education of their child or simply a problem which schools have to negotiate? We suggest that neither the teaching profession nor the state have been able to decide which of these models should govern policy and practice and that the current state of thinking on home-school 'contracts' reflects this fundamental lack of clarity.' (pages 291-2)

The authors were discussing home-school 'contracts' here, but their argument still applies in 2000. Home-school agreements are explicitly intended to promote partnerships between parents and schools, but how far do they have an implicit agenda of surveillance? It remains to be seen, in the course of this research study, whether the implementation of home-school agreements can incorporate a satisfactory balance between models of parent as consumers, partners or problems: a balance which is acceptable and of benefit to all parties concerned, schools, parents and importantly pupils themselves.

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3: Responses to the DfEE's Consultation on their Draft Guidance

The discussion in Part 2 focused on research and debate before HSAs became part of legislation. This section summarises the responses to the DfEE's consultation on the Draft Guidance, published in July 1998¹. It should be noted, however, that by the time this was published, the introduction of the initiative was inevitable. The DfEE consultation was, by its very nature, prescriptive. Respondents were not asked whether they agreed or disagreed with the initiative itself - rather they were asked whether they were broadly happy *with the contents of the Guidance*. Nevertheless, many of the key themes raised in the preceding analysis are both explicit and implicit in the respondents' views.

This section will focus first on general comments about the Guidance: what is welcomed and what is less welcome. It will move on to look at some of the suggestions and recommendations that were made and will discuss how and whether these were incorporated into the Final Guidance.

General comments on the Draft Guidance

The 133 respondents to the Draft Guidance were drawn from a wide range of groups. Many of the respondents claimed to be broadly happy with the contents of the draft Guidance. Respondents liked:

- The use of helpful examples
- The balance reached between the rights and responsibilities of parents and pupils, and schools
- The process of partnership which is advocated in the 'getting started' section
- The use of the 'triangular' model which emphasised the importance of parents, pupils and schools
- The emphasis given to consultation with all parents
- The lack of sanctions and the emphasis on agreement, rather than contract
- The tone of the Guidance which is seen as not too prescriptive
- Pupil involvement in designing the agreements
- Pupils being asked to sign the agreements.

However, the following concerns, many *the converse* of the above, were also raised:

- The examples were not helpful
- The Guidance was too specific about the responsibilities of parents and pupils and was vague about the responsibilities of schools
- There was inadequate emphasis on agreements as part of a home-school policy
- The Guidance did not fully address the measures needed to involve particular groups of parents, such as those who may not speak English, those who bring different cultural attitudes to education
- The Guidance did not address the issue of engaging uninterested parents
- Home-school agreements might still be open to misuse despite the removal of sanctions

¹ We would like to thank the DfEE for allowing us access to these responses.

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- The Guidance was too prescriptive - giving inadequate recognition to variations in schools' home-school work and practices
- There was inadequate emphasis given to the part that pupils might play
- Home-school agreements would not be effective - they were at best a bureaucratic requirement - and at worst they will aggravate home-school relations.

Many also mentioned serious concerns about the resources needed to implement effectively the DfEE requirements. Resources here included the time of teaching staff and governing bodies in carrying out the consultation with parents (and with others - see below) and in preparing the necessary paperwork. It was suggested that the proposed time scale was unrealistic and that schools should have an agreement in place by September 2000.

Broadly, groups representing parents were more likely to raise concerns. Respondents from schools, LEAs, teaching and governing bodies, were notably divided - some were very much in favour, others were 'broadly happy' but reported concerns, while others still were strongly opposed to both the Draft Guidance and the initiative itself.

Suggestions and recommendations

Respondents made a series of general suggestions, and more specific suggestions for amendments that might be included in the Guidance. Unsurprisingly, many of these suggestions were directly related to the comments above. Thus they included:

- More, or less, use of examples and a better choice of these (avoiding emotive words such as promise)
- More emphasis on the 'partnership' process
- A concern that children should have a central role
- The need to address the particular needs and status of children who were 'looked after' by the local education authorities
- More guidance on schools' reporting of information to parents and on how parents can monitor whether schools are complying
- More emphasis on how to engage parents with English as an additional language, particularly if they are not fully literate in their first language
- More acknowledgement that the process of introducing home-school agreements may differ between individual schools and catchment areas
- More information on how parents can help schools as co-educators
- A concern that all aspects of the agreement should be free from stereotyped assumptions and sex discrimination.

Further guidance was also requested on what might be an 'appropriate' age for inviting children to sign. School and LEA concerns about the lack of sanctions, were reflected in a considerable number of requests for greater clarity regarding what measures to take where parents and/or pupils do not sign the agreements.

The consultation form also asked respondents to say whether they thought the Secretary of State should require governing bodies to consult with any persons - other than parents - before adopting or reviewing the home-school agreement. Forty two of the 133 respondents thought no-one else should be consulted as a requirement. Many others who listed people to be consulted said that this should not necessarily be a requirement, but rather a matter of good practice. Twenty suggested pupils should also be consulted and 20 also included teachers and other school staff. Other suggestions included the LEA, local voluntary and statutory groups, particularly those with an interest in supporting children at school (education welfare officers, social services staff, education psychologists).

The final guidance

Detailed comparison of the final Guidance with the Draft Guidance highlights a number of amendments: many of these tally well with the suggestions made in the consultation, suggesting a reasonable degree of responsiveness.

For example:

1. The examples themselves were changed and the unpopular examples were removed.
2. Attempts were made to give more emphasis to parents as 'equal' partners with schools. Thus:
 - 'What you can do to bring in the missing parents' was replaced with 'What you can do to establish an effective working relationship with the 'missing' parents
 - 'Parents and teachers need to work together to maintain good behaviour and discipline' replaces 'parents will support the school in maintaining good behaviour and discipline'
 - The revised Guidance also suggested that governing bodies should consider 'what priority do teachers give to working with parents' before attempting to draw up an agreement
 - While the revised Guidance gives more detail about the kinds of expectations that the school may have of parents and pupils (paragraph 20, page 8) more detail is also given about the kinds of information that parents should expect to receive from the school and about the processes for communicating with the school (page 10).
3. There appears to be a greater focus on engaging with all parents. 'Schools may wish to adopt a combination of different approaches to reach as many parents as possible' is replaced with 'schools *will need to* (italics added) adopt a combination of different approaches to reach as many parents as possible'.
4. There is also a greater focus on engaging with particular groups of parents.
 - The revised Guidance gives more suggestions about ways of involving parents with first languages other than English, and with difficulty in reading
 - It also states that 'all comments and undertakings which form part of a home-school agreement should be free from discrimination in any form and stereotyped assumptions about particular groups.' (paragraph 28 page 10).
5. The involvement of pupils in home-school agreements is given slightly greater prominence.
 - Governing bodies are asked to consider 'what does your school do to listen to the views of pupils before drawing up agreements?' (paragraph 9, page 4) and a new point is added about school councils: 'if your school has a student council in place, you may find it beneficial to consult with this body when drawing up your home-school agreement.' (paragraph 17, page 6)
 - The Guidance also notes that 'the pupil's commitment is very important to the success of the home-school agreement.' (paragraph 42, page 13).
6. Pupils are, however, omitted from the list of those who may be consulted.
 - While paragraph 12 confirms that the requirement to consult before drawing up or reviewing the agreement is still with parents alone, it is of considerable interest that pupils are omitted from the earlier and prominent list of those *who might be consulted* (paragraph 12). School staff, the local education authority the diocese, the education welfare service and other agencies working with schools are listed - in direct response presumably to the 20 people requesting this in the consultation, but the requests (of the same number) to include pupils is ignored.

The Guidance effectively places pupils in a role where they can be invited to sign agreements (if considered of sufficient age and maturity). Pupils' commitment is seen as very important, but significantly they are not seen as essential participants in drawing up and revising the agreement that they may sign.

Conclusions

Analysis of the responses to Draft Guidance reveals a diversity of opinion between and within many of the interest groups concerned. It is of considerable interest that the greatest diversity is among schools themselves, the key players in the implementation process.

While the Guidance has successfully incorporated some of the key suggestions emerging from the consultation, there is little doubt that opinion about the initiative which it introduced remained divided. The contentious idea of home-school agreements has been implemented. Schools in England and Wales were issued with the Guidance in November 1998. During 1999 school governing bodies were required to draw up agreements in consultation with parents and these agreements were to be in place by September 1999.

The next section presents the views of schools in summer 1999.

4: A National Postal Survey of Schools' Views

This section of the report focuses on a national survey of schools undertaken almost exactly mid-way between the publication of the DfEE Guidance in November 1998 and the HSA implementation date of September 1999. The survey focused on two main issues:

- Schools' progress on implementing an HSA
- Their attitudes towards the initiative.

The questionnaire is included in Appendix 1.

Results of the survey are presented in three ways:

- Detailed analyses are presented
- The findings are summarised
- 'Free' responses, directly transcribed from the questionnaires, give the 'headteacher's voice'. These are included in Appendix 2.

Four thousand questionnaires were distributed to a randomly selected sample of schools in England and Wales. A pre-paid return envelope was included. Several respondents commented positively on the design of the questionnaires, and also that they were pleased that the research was being undertaken.

The total number of questionnaires returned was 1385. This is a 35% response rate, about what might be expected from a postal survey. The questionnaire included a mix of precoded questions, that required a 'tick in a box' and associated open questions where the respondent could expand on the tick. Some completed these items and some not: throughout the questionnaire there is an appreciable amount of missing and incomplete data. It is, therefore, summarised here mainly in percentages using the number of respondents as the 'base'.

The questionnaires arrived in school in the first week of June, 1999. Over all the schools 84.2% were completed by the headteacher, 10.3% by the deputy head and 5.4% by 'another'. In primary schools 91.4% were completed by the head and in secondary 50.2%.

In reading the questionnaires the diversity of views among schools was very striking. The introduction of home school agreements (HSAs) is a policy initiative which the respondents feel very strongly about, both for and against. These are illustrated by quotations from the comments added to the questionnaires, which are included at the end of this report.

Detailed Questionnaire Analyses

The schools responding to the survey were representative of the whole sample, and of the numbers of primary, secondary and special schools nationally.

Table 1: School sector of respondents

	<i>number</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>all 'primary' inc. middle % (% in whole sample)</i>
<i>Infant and first</i>	204	14.8	77.7 (80.0)
<i>Junior</i>	131	9.5	
<i>Primary</i>	716	51.8	
<i>Middle</i>	22	1.6	
<i>Secondary</i>	231	16.7	16.7 (15.2)
<i>Special</i>	77	5.6	5.6 (4.8)
<i>total</i>	1381	100.0	100.0
<i>missing</i>	4		

Welsh schools were included in the survey and 49 replied. Education policy in Wales was administered by the Welsh office until the establishment of the Welsh Assembly. Guidance on HSAs, issued by the Welsh Office, was very similar to that from the DfEE for England. In England guidance was issued in November 1998. In Wales, however, it was not published until May 1999.

Experience of HSAs

Respondents were considered in four groups according to the information they provided:

- those with HSAs before 1999
- those with HSAs introduced during 1999.

These two groups were asked to report on how they had implemented their HSA.

- those who described themselves as 'working on' HSAs or were revising earlier HSAs.

This group were asked to report on what they intended to do to implement their HSA.

- those who had not taken yet any actions to introduce an HSA.

Table 2: Experience of HSA

<i>group</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>number</i>
<i>HSA pre-1999*</i>	12.1	167
<i>HSA in 1999</i>	17.6	244
<i>'working on HSA'</i>	65.9	913
<i>'nothing yet'</i>	4.4	61
<i>total</i>	100.0	1385

*Of these schools, 60 reported revising their questionnaires to meet current requirements.

Comparing the experience of HSAs within each school sector:

- 71% of primary schools were 'working on' their HSA compared to about half of secondary and special schools

- 32% of secondary schools had an HSA before 1999 compared to about 10% of primary and special schools.

It should also be noted that one-third (18) of the Welsh schools had not made any progress on their HSA. There was some overlap between the groups:

- Those who reported that they had an HSA before 1999 were asked to report on this HSA and any subsequent HSA *separately*. Some did, but others appeared to have conflated their two HSAs
- Some of those who said that they 'had an HSA in 1999' were rather over-stating their progress. Many of them were still working on their HSA in the summer term, but on the whole they do seem to have been in advance of those who said they were 'working on' them. These schools should be seen as 'early adopters'.

Differences between groups will be explored in more detail below.

Home-school policies

Respondents were asked to say whether their schools had a home-school policy.

Table 3: Does your school have a home-school policy?

	%
<i>yes</i>	51.8
<i>no</i>	48.2
<i>(number)</i>	<i>(1378)</i>

But there are marked sector and group differences:

- 48% of primary schools had a home school policy compared to 69% of secondary, and 59% of special, schools
- Over 90% of those with HSAs before 1999, and those with HSAs in 1999, had a home-school policy. Only 36% of those 'working on' an HSA had a policy, and 10% of those who had made no progress
- There was also a marked difference between schools with a home school policy, and their governors' and teachers' enthusiasm for a home school agreement. 'Enthusiasm' and 'priority' was higher in schools with home school policies.

Aware of the requirement to introduce an HSA?

Respondents were asked if they were aware of the HSA requirements before receiving the questionnaire. Nineteen schools (1.4% of the total) were not, and of these 6 were in Wales and 13 in England. In England, 99% of schools were aware of the requirement, compared to 88% of Welsh schools. (The Welsh Office published its guidance in May 1999, six months after it was published in England.)

Schools with HSAs pre-1999

The earliest reported HSA was written in 1967. The distribution of dates is shown in table 4.

Table 4: the introduction of HSAs

<i>date</i>	<i>%</i>
1967-89	4.4
1990-94	14.6
1995	12.7
1996	22.2
1997	20.3
1998	25.9
<i>(number)</i>	<i>(158)</i>

HSAs are a relatively recent initiative for most of the sample.

Preparing and implementing the HSA

Sources of information used?

Schools were asked to say whether they had used examples of good practice to draw up their HSA. These are presented according to the school 'group'.

Table 5: Sources of information

	<i>HSA pre-1999</i>	<i>HSA in 1999</i>	<i>'working on'</i>
	<i>%</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>%</i>
<i>DfEE</i>	-	90.6	87.3
<i>other schools</i>	52.1	52.5	64.4
<i>LEA</i>	10.2	18.4	29.9
<i>other sources</i>	14.4	13.5	14.8
<i>(number)</i>	<i>(116)</i>	<i>(239)</i>	<i>(912)</i>

Note that percentages do not add to 100% as respondents could choose any, or all, of these sources. The 'other sources' included publications, NAHT and SHA publications, diocesan authorities and courses.

Table 6: Is the HSA written in community languages?

	<i>HSA pre-99</i>	<i>HSA in 1999</i>	<i>'working on'</i>
	<i>%</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>%</i>
<i>yes</i>	6.6	5.4	10.2
<i>(number)</i>	<i>(166)</i>	<i>(242)</i>	<i>(911)</i>

Schools were asked to give details of the languages used for their HSAs. Note that some schools prepared their home-school agreements in several languages:

- Urdu (33 schools)
- Bengali (20)
- Punjabi (16)

- Welsh (7)
- Cantonese, Arabic, Turkish, Gujerati (6)
- Somali (4)
- Portuguese (3)
- Yoruba, Farsi, Spanish, Italian (2)
- Albanian, Korean, Serbian, Tamil, Filipino, Sylheti (1).

In addition three schools used symbols for students with severe learning difficulties.

Consulted parents and carers?

Schools were asked whether they had consulted parents and how they had done this. Some schools had several phases to their consultation: parent governors, then a working group, then a draft HSA to all parents, for example. The most widespread consultation was recorded for analysis. In this case it would have been coded as an 'individual' consultation. An invitation to a meeting to discuss the HSA would be coded as 'meeting'.

Secondary schools with HSAs before 1999 were less likely to have consulted parents than other groups (77%). Ninety percent of primary and special schools with HSAs before 1999 reported that they had consulted their parents. Those 'working on' their HSAs were more likely to have consulted parents, reflecting the current legal obligation to do so. Here 96% of primary schools, 95% of special schools and 91% of secondary schools reported consulting parents.

Table 7: Were parents consulted about the HSA, and how?

	<i>HSA pre-1999</i>	<i>HSA in 1999</i>	<i>'working on'</i>
	%	%	%
<i>yes</i>	70.7	95.1	96.4
<i>how?</i>			
<i>individually</i>	38.0	61.9	66.8
<i>at meetings</i>	26.0	11.3	21.8
<i>through PTA</i>	24.0	9.3	2.3
<i>working group</i>	10.0	10.3	6.1
<i>parent governors</i>	2.0	6.2	2.9
<i>parents could ask to see HSA</i>		1.0	0.5
<i>total number of responses to 'how'?</i>	50	97	554

Since the introduction of legislation concerning HSAs, schools have been more likely to consult parents, and more likely to do it individually as required, rather than through the smaller groups such as the PTA.

Table 8: Parents' responses to consultation: how many responded?

<i>% of parents responded</i>	<i>pre-1999 HSA</i>	<i>HSA in 1999</i>	<i>'working on HSA'</i>
<i>%</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>%</i>
0-25%	57.4	57.7	62.2
25-50%	22.6	20.9	24.0
50-75%	13.0	15.0	12.0
75-100%	7.0	6.4	1.7
	100.00	100.00	100.00
<i>total</i>	<i>(115)</i>	<i>(220)</i>	<i>(458)</i>

The majority of schools who consulted parents had a rather poor response.

Table 9: Parents' responses to consultation: positive, negative or mixed?

<i>Parents' responses</i>	<i>pre-1999 HSA</i>	<i>HSA in 1999</i>	<i>'working on HSA'</i>
	<i>%</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>%</i>
<i>most positive</i>	93.1	89.6	81.0
<i>most negative</i>	0.0	0.9	3.1
<i>mixed</i>	6.9	9.5	15.9
	100.00	100.00	100.00
<i>total</i>	<i>(116)</i>	<i>(221)</i>	<i>(479)</i>

Clearly, the majority of the consultations were positive, but with a minority that were less so. But schools where a smaller proportion of parents were consulted reported more positive outcomes. Headteachers reported that at 48 schools parents were 'indifferent' and at 40 they questioned whether the HSA was 'really necessary'.

DfEE leaflet

The DfEE issued a leaflet for parents. Schools 'working on' their HSA were asked if they had distributed it: 67% had. Others commented that they did not know of its existence, or that they could not get enough copies.

Consulting other stakeholders

Schools were asked to report other stakeholders they had consulted about their HSA. Two questions were asked: have any other groups been consulted, and, if yes, which groups. Those who were 'working on' their HSAs could choose 'not yet decided' but this was not available to the other two groups. The pre-coded answers were: students, teachers, other school staff, governors, the LEA, the diocese. They could choose any of these, or tick an 'other' box and provide details.

Table 10: Consulted other groups?

	<i>pre-1999 HSA</i>	<i>HSA in 1999</i>	<i>working on</i>
	%	%	%
<i>yes</i>	92.0	97.9	88.8
<i>not yet decided</i>	-	-	8.0
<i>no</i>	8.0	2.1	3.2
<i>(number)</i>	<i>(162)</i>	<i>(243)</i>	<i>(913)</i>

Those who had an HSA before 1999 were less likely to consult other stakeholders than those who introduced one later.

Table 11 below shows the other groups consulted. (Schools could report any, or all, of these. The calculations are based on all those who answered 'yes' to the previous question.)

Table 11: Which groups were consulted?

	<i>pre-1999 HSA</i>	<i>HSA in 1999</i>	<i>working on</i>
	%	%	%
<i>students</i>	32.9	29.8	39.7
<i>teachers</i>	93.3	95.4	94.7
<i>other school staff</i>	52.3	59.7	64.9
<i>governors</i>	95.3	96.2	96.5
<i>the LEA</i>	7.4	11.8	18.7
<i>the diocese</i>	2.7	8.4	10.1
<i>other</i>	4.0	13.8	8.6
<i>(number)</i>	<i>(149)</i>	<i>(238)</i>	<i>(811)</i>

The percentages are quite similar across the three experience groups: the increasing proportion of schools consulting their LEA and diocese probably reflects their provision of materials in recent years. The main group included in 'other' are staff from other schools.

What proportion of parents signed the agreement?

Table 12: Parents signing the HSA?

	<i>pre-1999 HSA</i>	<i>HSA in 1999</i>
	%	%
<i>0-25%</i>	7.3	26.4
<i>25-50%</i>	9.3	12.3
<i>50-75%</i>	14.7	17.9
<i>75-100%</i>	68.7	43.4
<i>(number)</i>	<i>(150)</i>	<i>(106)</i>

The decline in the proportion reported to have signed the HSA reflects two factors: those with pre-1999 HSAs often 'required' parents to sign as part of the admissions process. Under recent legislation this is

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now not permitted. Also some of those who 'had HSAs in 1999' had not got to the point where parents were asked to sign.

Parents expected to sign?

Those who were still 'working on' their HSA were asked how many parents they expected to sign. These responses are shown below.

Table 13: Parents anticipated to sign the HSA

	<i>'working on' the HSA</i> %
<i>none</i>	1.3
<i>uncertain</i>	5.9
<i>yes, some</i>	61.5
<i>yes, all</i>	31.2
<i>(number)</i>	<i>(910)</i>

Of the 61.5% who reported that some parents would sign, 67 (11.6%) added that 'most but not all' would sign.

Do you do anything about parents who don't sign?

Table 14: Any action taken to encourage those who don't sign?

	<i>pre-1999 HSA</i> %	<i>HSA in 1999</i> %
<i>yes</i>	47.7	58.5
<i>no</i>	22.8	32.4
<i>we don't need to as all sign</i>	29.5	9.2
<i>(number)</i>	<i>(149)</i>	<i>(142)</i>

Table 15: Intentions to follow up parents who don't sign?

	<i>'working on' the HSA</i> %
<i>yes</i>	51.5
<i>not decided</i>	38.7
<i>no</i>	9.8
<i>(number)</i>	<i>(905)</i>

What actions were taken or planned to be taken?

Of those who replied that they would take action, about 85% said they would take individual action: a letter, a home visit or a telephone call; 15% said they would raise the issue at a parents' evening or in the school newsletter.

Headteachers held very different views about what actions should be taken. Some clearly felt that parents should be encouraged to sign, while others considered that parents had a legal right not to sign and that this should be respected.

Relationships between social disadvantage, and parental and schools response

These relationships are complex. The main points to emerge are:

- schools with HSAs before 1999 had higher levels of free schools meals
- among schools with HSAs before 1999, those with higher levels of free meals had higher parental participation rates in the consultation
- among schools who are 'working on' an HSA, those with higher levels of free schools meals had lower rates of parental participation
- schools with lower levels of free schools meals reported higher percentages of parents signing, or expected to sign, the HSA
- schools with higher levels of free school meals were more likely to report that they take action, or intend to take some action, to encourage parents to sign.

Are students asked to sign?

Table 16: Percentage of students asked to sign

	<i>pre-1999 HSA</i>	<i>HSA in 1999</i>	<i>working on</i>
	%	%	%
<i>yes, all</i>	54.4	51.1	45.3
<i>yes, some</i>	7.6	15.0	21.4
<i>no</i>	38.0	33.9	19.2
<i>not decided</i> <i>('working on' only)</i>			14.2
<i>(numbers)</i>	<i>(158)</i>	<i>(227)</i>	<i>(908)</i>

Those currently introducing HSAs are more likely to ask students to sign. This decision is clearly influenced by the age of the children. In 83% of secondary schools, all students are asked to sign. Students are also asked to sign in 41% of primary schools and 32% of special schools. In primary schools the youngest children in reception and/or key stage 1 are often not asked to sign. In special schools often only secondary aged children are asked to sign, or those for whom it is considered to be appropriate.

Does/will a member of staff sign the agreement?

Overall 76% of schools said that a member of staff would sign the agreement. This proportion was slightly higher in secondary schools, than in primary or special schools.

When will the HSA be in place?

The schools who said they were 'working on' an HSA were asked when it would be in place. Overall 87% of schools said that it would be in place by September 1999. An additional 10% would be in place during the Autumn Term 1999; 2% would be in place by January 2000 and 1% after this. There were no marked differences between school sectors.

Regular review of the HSA?

Schools are expected to undertake regular review and evaluation of the HSAs. Table 17 below shows schools' evaluation practice and intentions. Those who are 'working on' the HSA appear to be more aware of this requirement.

Table 17: Review of the HSA

	<i>pre-1999 HSA</i>	<i>HSA in 1999</i>	<i>working on</i>
	<i>%</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>%</i>
<i>no</i>	33.8	39.9	1.5
<i>yes</i>	66.3	60.1	76.7
<i>not decided</i> <i>('working on' only)</i>			21.8
<i>(numbers)</i>	<i>(160)</i>	<i>(238)</i>	<i>(908)</i>

The most frequently reported method of evaluation was the annual review.

Attitudes towards HSAs

Enthusiasm of governors and teachers for HSAs

Headteachers were asked to report how enthusiastic their governors and staff were about HSAs. Both answers were precoded:

- all enthusiastic
- most
- about half
- less than half
- very few.

There were no significant differences between primary, secondary and special schools, but marked differences between schools with different HSA experiences.

Out of a total of 1385 responses, responses concerning governors were provided for 1366 schools, and teachers 1365. The analysis below includes a 'not known' category when this was explicitly written in; but some of those who left this section of the questionnaire blank may also have not known their teachers' and governors' views.

Table 18: Proportion of governors who were enthusiastic about HSAs, by HSA experience

	<i>those with HSAs pre-1999</i>	<i>those who had HSA in 1999</i>	<i>those who were 'working on' HSA</i>	<i>those who had made no progress on HSA</i>
	%	%	%	%
<i>all</i>	44.2	32.5	19.7	6.6
<i>most</i>	36.2	41.7	41.2	23.0
<i>about half</i>	6.7	9.6	11.9	9.8
<i>less than half</i>	3.1	2.5	8.4	8.2
<i>very few</i>	8.0	11.3	15.4	31.1
<i>not known</i>	1.8	2.5	3.3	21.3
	<i>100.0</i>	<i>100.0</i>	<i>100.0</i>	<i>100.0</i>
<i>(number)</i>	<i>(163)</i>	<i>(240)</i>	<i>(902)</i>	<i>(61)</i>

As might be expected, governors are most enthusiastic in schools which had HSAs pre-1999, and least enthusiastic where little progress has been made.

Table 19: Proportion of teachers who were enthusiastic about HSAs, by HSA experience

	<i>those with HSAs pre-1999</i>	<i>those who had HSA in 1999</i>	<i>those who were 'working on' HSA</i>	<i>those who had made no progress on HSA</i>
	%	%	%	%
<i>all</i>	30.1	27.5	15.6	11.5
<i>most</i>	47.2	41.3	38.0	21.3
<i>about half</i>	11.0	8.8	12.8	9.8
<i>less than half</i>	2.5	6.7	11.2	13.1
<i>very few</i>	6.7	12.9	19.1	31.1
<i>not known</i>	2.5	2.9	3.3	13.1
	<i>100.0</i>	<i>100.0</i>	<i>100.0</i>	<i>100.0</i>
<i>(number)</i>	<i>(163)</i>	<i>(240)</i>	<i>(901)</i>	<i>(61)</i>

Comparing tables 18 and 19, governors are perceived as being slightly more positive than teachers. Governors (but not teachers) are also slightly more keen on HSAs in schools with over 50% of students eligible for free meals.

Within any individual school, governors and teachers tend to be reported as holding similar levels of enthusiasm for HSAs. Table 20 shows this relationship. The entries in bold show the pattern of agreement.

Table 20: Governors' and teachers' enthusiasm for HSAs

	<i>all</i>	<i>most</i>	<i>about half</i>	<i>less than half</i>	<i>very few</i>	<i>total</i>
<i>Teachers</i>						
<i>Governors</i>						
<i>all</i>	193	119	9	1	4	326
<i>most</i>	55	364	62	33	19	533
<i>about half</i>	7	27	64	34	14	146
<i>less than half</i>	1	6	20	47	17	91
<i>very few</i>	1	9	4	12	171	197
<i>total</i>	257	525	159	127	225	1293

Why should it be that teachers and governors seem so much in agreement? It should be remembered that the data were provided by one 'third party' (usually the headteacher). It may also reflect the culture of the school and its values.

Priority given to developing the HSA

Respondents were asked to indicate the priority they had given to developing their HSA. Again this was a pre-coded answer:

- very high (117 schools)
- high (563)
- moderately high (495)
- low (185).

The reported priorities, and reasons given for these have been explored in some detail as they give an insight into the school's attitudes towards HSAs, and how these influence management decisions.

There were no significant differences between primary, secondary and special schools, in the priority given to HSAs nor any relationships between the percentage of a school's students eligible for free school meals. There were, however, some differences according to whether schools had a home-school policy, and marked differences between schools with different HSA experiences. These are shown in the tables 21 and 22 below:

Table 21: Priority given to HSA and having a home-school policy

<i>school has a HS policy</i>	<i>yes</i>	<i>no</i>
<i>priority given to HSA</i>	%	%
<i>very high</i>	11.6	5.5
<i>high</i>	47.9	34.5
<i>moderately high</i>	31.2	42.1
<i>low</i>	9.3	17.9
<i>total</i>	100.0	100.0
<i>(number of schools)</i>	(698)	(655)

Schools with a home-school policy are more likely to give the HSA a higher priority.

Table 22: Priority given to HSAs in different groups

	<i>for pre-1999 HSA</i>	<i>for those who had HSA in 1999</i>	<i>for those who were 'working on' HSA</i>	<i>for those who had made no progress on HSA</i>
	%	%	%	%
<i>very high</i>	19.1	12.9	5.9	3.3
<i>high</i>	44.4	50.4	40.9	4.9
<i>moderately high</i>	29.0	30.4	39.8	29.5
<i>low</i>	7.4	6.3	13.4	62.3
	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
<i>(number)</i>	162	240	897	61

This pattern of answers, with early implementers giving a higher priority to the initiative is not surprising.

Schools were asked to give reasons for their decisions about priority. Table 23 below shows the reasons given by more than 1% of schools.

Table 23: Reasons for decisions about priority

<i>reason</i>	%
<i>statutory requirement</i>	27.2
<i>it was important for our school</i>	19.5
<i>pressure of other initiatives</i>	17.8
<i>already had good relationships</i>	10.3
<i>to get parents involved</i>	6.5
<i>generally sceptical about the value of an HSA</i>	4.5
<i>not enforceable so of little value</i>	4.3
<i>already had an agreement</i>	4.0
<i>our existing policy needed review</i>	1.3
<i>we had an OFSTED inspection coming/in our report</i>	1.3
<i>(number of schools replying)</i>	<i>(842)</i>

These 'reasons' were also analysed according to schools' experience of HSAs. Some of the labels have been shortened, but relate to the same issues as above.

Table 24: Reasons for priority by experience of HSA

	<i>pre-199</i>	<i>in 1999</i>	<i>'working on'</i>	<i>nothing yet</i>	<i>all</i>
<i>reason</i>					<i>%</i>
<i>statutory requirement</i>	4.6	27.7	33.0	0.0	27.2
<i>it was important</i>	25.3	30.6	17.3	2.0	19.5
<i>pressure of other initiatives</i>	10.3	9.0	19.1	41.2	17.8
<i>had good relationships</i>	6.9	7.6	10.0	27.5	10.3
<i>to get parents involved</i>	21.8	6.3	4.8	0.0	6.5
<i>sceptical about HSA</i>	2.3	4.9	5.2	0.0	4.5
<i>not enforceable</i>	3.4	3.5	4.6	3.9	4.3
<i>already had agreement</i>	13.8	4.9	2.5	2.0	4.0
<i>policy needed review</i>	4.6	2.1	0.7	0.0	1.3
<i>OFSTED inspection/report</i>	0.0	1.4	1.6	0.0	1.3
<i>(number of schools replying)</i>	<i>(87)</i>	<i>(144)</i>	<i>(560)</i>	<i>(51)</i>	<i>(842)</i>

Schools that were 'early adopters' were most likely to see it as an important aspect of their school's practice, while those that were 'working on' cited the pressure of other initiatives. Over a quarter of those who had taken no action said that they already had good relationships.

Below, the reasons given by those who gave it a high priority are analysed first, then those of those who gave a low priority.

High priority given to the HSA

Here schools choosing 'very high' and 'high' priority schools are considered together. There was a total of 680 schools in this category, and 420 gave a reason for their decision about the priority given to the HSA. Table 25 below shows the percentage of schools (greater than 1%) who gave a specific reason:

Table 25: Reasons to give the HSA a high priority

<i>reason</i>	<i>%</i>
<i>it was important for our school</i>	37.9
<i>statutory requirement</i>	37.6
<i>to get parents involved in the school</i>	11.9
<i>already had good relationships</i>	2.4
<i>pressure of other initiatives</i>	2.1
<i>our existing policy needed review</i>	2.1
<i>we already had an HSA</i>	1.7
<i>we had an OFSTED inspection coming/in our report</i>	1.4
<i>(number of schools)</i>	<i>(420)</i>

Lower priority given to the HSA

Here schools choosing 'moderately high' and 'low' priority schools are considered together. There was also a total of 680 schools in this category, and 421 gave a reason for their decision about the priority given to the HSA. Table 26 shows the percentage of schools (greater than 1%) who gave a specific reason:

Table 26: Reasons to give the HSA a lower priority

<i>reason</i>	<i>%</i>
<i>pressure of other initiatives</i>	33.3
<i>already had good relationships</i>	18.3
<i>statutory requirement</i>	16.9
<i>generally sceptical about the value of an HSA</i>	8.6
<i>not enforceable so of little value</i>	7.4
<i>already had an agreement</i>	6.4
<i>school amalgamating/closing</i>	1.2
<i>important to us</i>	1.2
<i>get parents involved</i>	1.2
<i>we had an OFSTED inspection coming/in our report</i>	1.2
<i>parents unsupportive</i>	1.2
<i>(number of schools)</i>	<i>(421)</i>

Finally, the reasons given for decisions about priorities are analysed according to whether the school had a home-school policy.

Table 27: Decisions about priorities and home-school policy

<i>had home-school policy?</i>	<i>yes</i>	<i>no</i>
<i>reason</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>%</i>
<i>statutory requirement</i>	28.1	26.4
<i>it was important for our school</i>	24.2	14.9
<i>pressure of other initiatives</i>	11.6	24.1
<i>already had good relationships</i>	8.2	12.3
<i>to get parents involved</i>	8.7	4.5
<i>generally sceptical about the value of an HSA</i>	2.7	6.4
<i>not enforceable so of little value</i>	4.4	4.0
<i>already had an agreement</i>	6.1	2.1
<i>our existing policy needed review</i>	1.9	0.7
<i>we had an OFSTED inspection coming/in our report</i>	1.2	1.4
<i>(number of schools replying)</i>	<i>(413)</i>	<i>(424)</i>

Schools with and without home-school policies are similar on most reasons. The most marked differences are that those who had a policy were more likely to see it as important, while those who did not were more likely to mention the pressure of other initiatives.

Perceived advantages and disadvantages of HSAs

Respondents were asked to report their views on the advantages and disadvantages of HSAs. There were no restrictions on how these were recorded, they just wrote in their comments. These were then coded according to coding frames developed from their replies. Up to four advantages and disadvantages were coded; only 4% of schools recorded four different advantages or disadvantages.

A specific coding was only used once for each school even if the respondent made the same point several times.

Advantages of HSAs

Table 28 below shows that 10.4% of those who responded to this section of the questionnaire said explicitly that there were no advantages to HSAs.

Table 28: Schools perceptions of the advantages of HSAs

	<i>% schools</i>
<i>some advantages</i>	89.5
<i>no advantages</i>	10.5
<i>(number of schools)</i>	<i>(1213)</i>

Table 29 shows the advantages of HSAs reported by schools. These are calculated as a percentage of all schools that gave at least one advantage (ie 1087 schools). Note that these add to more than 100% as each school could give more than one response; on average each school gave 1.7 advantages. Advantages mentioned by less than 1% of schools are not included.

One hundred and twenty six schools saw no advantages of HSAs. There were no differences between primary, secondary and special schools. As might be expected governors and teachers in these schools were reported to be much less enthusiastic than those where advantages were seen. Similarly, these schools gave a much lower priority to the HSA initiative.

Table 29: Schools' perceived advantages of HSAs

<i>advantage</i>	<i>%</i>
<i>clarifies roles, responsibilities and expectations of all</i>	65.3
<i>enhances partnership, communication, involvement with parents</i>	43.2
<i>makes school's values and vision clear</i>	14.0
<i>puts pressure on parents</i>	12.3
<i>can be used in 'difficult' situations: eg disputes, non-compliance with rules</i>	6.5
<i>stresses school rules/code of conduct/behaviour</i>	6.5
<i>the process of developing the HSA worthwhile</i>	5.0
<i>helps parents to contribute to the work of the school</i>	4.0
<i>makes the school clarify its aims and priorities</i>	3.5
<i>engages and values the students</i>	3.3
<i>helps to improve standards of attainment</i>	3.0
<i>written down, therefore more 'serious'</i>	2.8
<i>ensures accountability of school</i>	1.2
<i>stresses importance of education to parents</i>	1.0

Disadvantages of HSAs

Table 30 below shows that 14.0% of those who responded to this section of the questionnaire said explicitly that there were no disadvantages to HSAs. These were most likely to be special schools (24%) followed by secondary (16%) and primary schools (13%). Governors and teachers in these schools were reported to be

mainly enthusiastic about home school and agreements, and more likely to give the initiative a higher priority.

Table 30: Schools perceptions of the disadvantages of HSAs

	<i>% schools</i>
<i>some disadvantages</i>	86.0
<i>no disadvantages</i>	14.0
<i>(number of schools)</i>	<i>(1212)</i>

Table 31 shows the disadvantages of HSAs reported by schools. These are calculated as a percentage of all schools that gave at least one disadvantage (ie 1042 schools). Note that these add to more than 100% as each school could give more than one response; on average each school gave 1.8 disadvantages. Disadvantages mentioned by less than 1% of schools are not included.

Table 31: Schools' perceived disadvantages of HSAs

<i>disadvantage</i>	<i>%</i>
<i>not compulsory to sign/not enforceable</i>	62.2
<i>the parents we would like to sign won't</i>	26.4
<i>demands of time/workload/cost</i>	22.9
<i>won't be effective/just a piece of paper</i>	8.2
<i>may damage good relationships with parents</i>	8.1
<i>bureaucratic/ centrally directed initiative</i>	7.5
<i>some parents unhappy about signing</i>	7.4
<i>may be used against the school</i>	6.1
<i>poor response from parents</i>	5.8
<i>creates an undesirable formality</i>	5.1
<i>parents resentful/insulted/patronised</i>	4.5
<i>unnecessary - we already have good relationships</i>	3.1
<i>repeats material already in our brochure and other publications</i>	1.7
<i>dissatisfaction of those parents who sign with those who don't</i>	1.3
<i>reduces a school's flexibility and discretion</i>	1.2
<i>cannot be signed as a requirement for admission</i>	1.0
<i>may cause confusion for parents</i>	1.0

Table 32 presents information about whether the schools reported *any* advantages and/or disadvantages. Those who have a longer experience of HSAs are more positive, while those who have less, or no experience, are more negative.

Table 32: Perceived advantages and disadvantages by experience of HSAs

	<i>had HSA pre-1999</i>	<i>had HSA in 1999</i>	<i>'working on'</i>	<i>'nothing yet'</i>
	%	%	%	%
<i>has advantages</i>	96.5	89.6	89.2	77.4
<i>has disadvantages</i>	70.9	83.9	88.8	90.6
<i>(number of schools)</i>	<i>(141)</i>	<i>(211)</i>	<i>(808)</i>	<i>(53)</i>

Tables 33 and 34 show that schools reported advantages and disadvantages also vary according to their experience of HSAs. Note that the items are the same as those in tables 29 and 31. Their labels have been shortened. The percentages are calculated using the number of schools which reported advantages or disadvantages.

Table 33: Schools' perceived advantages by experience of HSAs

<i>advantage</i>	<i>pre-1999</i>	<i>in 1999</i>	<i>'working on'</i>	<i>'nothing yet'</i>	<i>all</i>
	%	%	%	%	%
<i>clarifies roles</i>	59.6	65.1	67.3	51.2	65.3
<i>enhances partnership</i>	56.2	34.9	42.2	48.8	43.2
<i>values and vision clear</i>	20.6	13.2	11.9	31.7	14.0
<i>puts pressure on parents</i>	7.4	2.1	16.1	9.8	12.3
<i>'difficult' situations</i>	9.6	6.4	6.4	0.0	6.5
<i>school rules</i>	5.2	9.0	6.4	2.4	6.5
<i>process worthwhile</i>	2.9	5.8	5.3	2.4	5.0
<i>parents contribute</i>	1.5	5.8	4.0	2.4	4.0
<i>clarify aims and priorities</i>	1.5	6.4	3.3	0.0	3.5
<i>values students</i>	0.0	5.8	3.5	0.0	3.3
<i>standards of attainment</i>	2.2	2.1	3.6	0.0	3.0
<i>written down</i>	0.0	0.5	4.0	0.0	2.8
<i>accountability</i>	0.0	0.0	1.8	0.0	1.2
<i>importance of education</i>	0.0	0.0	1.5	0.0	1.0
<i>(number of schools)</i>	<i>(136)</i>	<i>(189)</i>	<i>(721)</i>	<i>(41)</i>	<i>(1087)</i>

There are no very marked differences between the different groups of schools.

Table 34: Schools' perceived disadvantages by experience of HSAs

<i>disadvantage</i>	<i>pre-1999</i> %	<i>in 1999</i> %	<i>'working on'</i> %	<i>'nothing yet'</i> %	<i>all</i> %
<i>not enforceable</i>	52.0	55.4	66.2	47.9	62.2
<i>some parents won't sign</i>	29.0	23.7	27.3	16.7	26.4
<i>demands of time/workload/cost</i>	19.0	22.0	23.0	33.3	22.9
<i>won't be effective</i>	7.0	6.2	8.8	8.3	8.2
<i>may damage good relationships</i>	7.0	8.5	8.4	4.2	8.1
<i>bureaucratic</i>	7.0	10.2	7.3	16.7	7.5
<i>unhappy about signing</i>	6.0	6.2	7.4	2.1	7.4
<i>may be used against the school</i>	3.0	5.6	7.0	2.1	6.1
<i>poor response from parents</i>	2.0	4.0	7.1	0.0	5.8
<i>creates an undesirable formality</i>	2.0	2.3	6.1	6.3	5.1
<i>parents resentful</i>	0.0	6.8	4.7	2.1	4.5
<i>already good relationships</i>	0.0	3.4	3.2	6.3	3.1
<i>repeats materials</i>	0.0	1.1	2.2	0.0	1.7
<i>dissatisfaction of parents</i>	0.0	2.3	1.1	2.1	1.3
<i>reduces a school's flexibility</i>	0.0	0.6	1.5	0.0	1.2
<i>not a requirement for admission</i>	0.0	2.3	0.8	0.0	1.0
<i>may cause confusion</i>	0.0	1.7	0.6	6.3	1.0
<i>(number of schools)</i>	<i>(100)</i>	<i>(177)</i>	<i>(717)</i>	<i>(48)</i>	<i>(1042)</i>

With the exception of those who have taken no action to implement a HSA, the pattern of perceived disadvantages is similar. Those who have not made progress see it as more bureaucratic and costly than the other groups; they also see it as potentially confusing. They are slightly less concerned about HSAs not being enforceable, and that those parents they would wish to sign will not.

Summary of findings from the postal survey

- The schools responding to the questionnaire were representative of the numbers of primary, secondary and special schools nationally, but results from a response rate of 35% should not be over-interpreted.

Progress on the HSA and home-school policies

- Only 4% of those responding had taken no action on their HSAs by June 1999. 12% reported that they had had an HSA before 1999
- 99% of English school (88% in Wales) were aware of the requirement to introduce a HSA before the RISE questionnaire was received
- 9% of schools have prepared their HSAs in community languages
- A higher proportion of secondary schools (69%) reported having a home-school policy than primary schools (48%)
- 87% of schools expected to have their HSA in place by September 1999.

Sources of information about HSAs and consultation

- The DfEE leaflet for parents was distributed by 67% of schools
- Over 90% of schools consulted the DfEE Guidance

Home-School Agreements: a true partnership?

- Over 90% of schools consulted teachers and governors about the HSA. Over 30% consulted students
- 96% of schools working on their HSA in 1998-1999 reported having consulted parents, but only 67% had consulted all parents as required in the Guidance. Only 2% had received responses from more than 75% of parents
- The parental responses in 81% of these schools were mainly positive, but the larger the proportion of parents consulted the more negative the response.

Early adopters

- Schools reporting HSAs before they were required to have them were much more likely to have a home-school policy, and to be enthusiastic about the HSA initiative
- Early adopters were much less likely to have consulted parents individually about the agreement.

Parents, students and school staff members signing the HSA

- 62% of schools working on their HSAs in 1998-99 expected 'some' parents to sign, and 31% expected all parents to sign
- Over half of the schools were intending to follow up parents who didn't sign, in the main by an individual approach to the parents concerned
- 83% of secondary schools were planning to ask students to sign the agreement as were 41% of primary schools and 32% of special schools
- 76% of schools reported that the HSA would be signed (often photocopied) by the school.

Attitudes towards the HSA initiative

- Teachers and governors in early adopting schools were more enthusiastic than those who were working on their HSAs in June 1999. The least enthusiastic were those who had made no progress in June 1999
- Teachers' and governors' levels of enthusiasm were similar: schools with enthusiastic governors tended to have enthusiastic teachers and *vice versa*
- Schools with a home-school policy gave HSAs a higher priority
- Early adopters gave the highest priority to HSAs, and those who had made no progress the lowest.

Main reasons for schools' decisions about the level of priority to give HSAs

High Priority

- It was important for the school
- It was a statutory requirement
- To get parents involved in the school.

Low Priority

- The pressure of other initiatives
- They already had good relationships
- It was a statutory requirement.

Perceived advantages of HSAs

- 89% of schools thought that HSAs had some advantages
- The four most frequently mentioned were:
 - It clarifies roles, responsibilities and expectations of all
 - Enhances partnership, communication and involvement with parents
 - It makes a school's values and vision clear
 - It puts pressure on parents.

Perceived disadvantages of HSAs

- 86% of schools thought that HSAs had some disadvantages

- The four most frequently mentioned were:
 - Signing is not compulsory and the HSA is not enforceable
 - Parents the school would like to sign won't
 - Demands of time/workload/cost
 - Won't be effective, just a piece of paper.

The findings from the survey raise many of the same issues that have already been discussed in the previous sections, and will recur in the report of the case studies of four schools.

5: An Analysis of Home School Agreements

Our research narrative continues with an analysis of home-school agreements submitted with the returned questionnaires in June 1999.

Schools responding to the questionnaire were asked to send copies of their HSAs and any other relevant material. A total of 93 were received. In reading the following analysis it must be kept in mind that it is not based on a random sample of HSAs, but on those respondents chose to contribute. It must also be remembered that, in some schools, the HSA was part of a larger document while for others it was seen as 'free-standing'. Some schools sent completed HSAs while others sent drafts. This analysis should not be over-valued. It is based on a very small number of self-selected schools. It raises some interesting issues about how HSAs might be written, but is not a national survey of current practice. The data should be seen as providing a broad picture rather than specific findings.

Table 35: HSAs received by school sector

<i>Sector</i>	<i>Number of schools</i>
<i>Infant</i>	9
<i>Primary</i>	42
<i>Junior and Middle</i>	14
<i>Secondary</i>	25
<i>Special</i>	3*
<i>Total</i>	3

*The three HSAs from special schools were not included in the analysis as they were very different from each other in response to their own pupils' special needs.

In writing their HSAs, schools are required to include their 'aims' and 'values'. Clearly these overlap, but while almost all schools made their aims clear, values were less frequently referred to. The inclusion of these was coded either 1, included in some way; or 2, given a high profile. Values might be set out in the school's statement of its aims, in its mission statement, or in religious terms in church schools.

Table 36: Aims and values included?

<i>Sector</i>	<i>Aims included</i>		<i>Values included</i>	
	<i>1</i>	<i>2</i>	<i>1</i>	<i>2</i>
<i>Infants</i>	77.8%	11.1%	11.1%	11.1%
<i>Primary</i>	2.4%	90.5%	21.4%	33.3%
<i>Junior and middle</i>	21.4%	78.6%	14.3%	14.3%
<i>Secondary</i>	24.0%	64.0%	16.0%	40.0%

Home-School Agreements: a true partnership?

Schools are required to set out their responsibilities, and the responsibilities of parents. Over 95% of all schools did this, but fewer set out their expectations of students. As might be expected the percentage of schools focusing on the expectations of students increases as the students get older.

Table 37: Expectations of students in HSA?

<i>Sector</i>	<i>Expectations of students included %</i>
<i>Infants</i>	55.6%
<i>Primary</i>	78.6%
<i>Junior and middle</i>	85.7%
<i>Secondary</i>	92.0%

Those expected to sign the HSA were also recorded. It should be remembered that some schools sent copies of the HSAs in draft form, and decisions about who would be expected to sign might not have been made at that stage.

Table 38: Who signs?

<i>Sector</i>			
<i>Who signs?</i>	<i>Parents</i>	<i>School</i>	<i>Students</i>
<i>Infants</i>	88.9%	66.7%	55.6%
<i>Primary</i>	90.5%	83.3%	59.5%
<i>Junior and middle</i>	92.9%	85.7%	78.6%
<i>Secondary</i>	96.0%	92.0%	88.0%

Finally, two codings concerned the overall impression and style of the document, and a third the order of presentation. The first was a rating of whether the HSA seemed 'wordy' and/or 'daunting' to the researchers. The second concerned the style of the school's communication with parents, whether it had a 'bossy' style, or not. These codings are inevitably impressionistic but they raise important issues about how HSAs should be written. The codings used were 0, no evidence; 1, some evidence; 2, stronger evidence.

'Wordy or daunting' HSAs often seemed over long. They covered several pages, often in small print, and were 750 words or more in length. They included many long sentences and would not, in the opinion of the researchers, enable some parents to feel true partners in the education of their children. In contrast other HSAs were very clearly and concisely written on one side of A4 in 150 words. The longer HSAs seemed intent on covering all eventualities rather than setting out a general framework.

It was considered that 'bossy' HSAs would not promote true partnership. Some included instructions to parents about their behaviour towards teachers, for example, where more positive statements might have been more encouraging, and all had a lot of 'wills', 'musts' and 'shoulds'. Some focused on school rules, and behaviour which the school would not tolerate. Again, it must be remembered that these analyses are based on small numbers of self-selected schools.

Table 39: Style of the HSAs

<i>Sector</i>	% 'wordy'/'daunting'		% 'bossy'	
	<i>1</i>	<i>2</i>	<i>1</i>	<i>2</i>
<i>Infants/first</i>	33.3%	0.0%	22.2%	0.0%
<i>Primary</i>	23.8%	4.8%	2.4%	2.4%
<i>Junior and middle</i>	57.1%	14.3%	7.1%	0.0%
<i>Secondary</i>	24.0%	16.0%	4.0%	12.0%

A related issue is the way in which the school presents the HSA. The majority were very clear that its intention was to enhance partnership between the school and the home, and in this spirit put the school's obligations first. A minority, however, put the school's expectations of parents (or students) first. Putting the school's interpretation of the parents' obligations first could make the HSA seem more concerned with 'bringing parents into line' than in developing true partnership.

Table 40: Obligations placed first?

<i>Sector</i>			
<i>First section in HSA</i>	<i>Parents</i>	<i>School</i>	<i>Students</i>
<i>Infants</i>	33.3%	55.6%	11.1%
<i>Primary</i>	21.4%	76.2%	2.4%
<i>Junior and middle</i>	35.7%	64.3%	0.0%
<i>Secondary</i>	41.7%	50.0%	8.3%

Conclusions

The diversity in the HSAs was striking and clearly schools need to respond to the needs of their students and their families. Some followed the DfEE's examples given in the Guidance very closely while others had developed an HSA which was quite distinctively their own. Some headteachers commented in their questionnaire responses that the *process* of developing an HSA was valuable as it led to a discussion of issues which were often not made explicit. Following another school's HSA very closely, or the DfEE's examples, would not allow this to take place.

The requirement to set out 'the school's ethos and character' (DfEE Guidance, page 8), which would provide a general framework and underpinning rationale for the agreement, was frequently not met. But it was also not met in the examples given in the appendix of the Guidance (pages 28-30). A broad statement of the school's aims and values would meet this requirement, and also allow the agreement to be clearer, more concise and more accessible to both parents and students.

6: Case Studies of Four Schools

The previous sections of this report have taken a national perspective through the analysis of academic writing and research, the analysis of DfEE documents and HSAs, and a national postal survey. The final phase of the research was a case study of four schools: two primary and two secondary undertaken between November 1999 and February 2000. Information was collected from school staff, governors, students and parents. Again the focus was twofold, on their experience of implementing their HSA and on their attitudes towards the initiative.

This section of the report is in three parts.

Part 1 describes:

- the processes of selecting and gaining access to the four case study schools
- accessing, interviewing and data collection in the schools
- data analysis.

Part 2 presents:

- the findings from the respondent groups (teachers, governors, students and parents) in each of the four case study schools.

Part 3 provides:

- a summary of the key findings.

Part 1. Gaining access and collecting data

Selection of and access to schools

Selection

We began by identifying all the schools in the Greater London¹ area that had returned a questionnaire (N=126). From these all schools in which the headteacher's² response to the home-school agreement initiative could be reasonably categorised as broadly negative or broadly positive were selected (N= 47, 37 primaries and 10 secondaries). Finally, schools with a notably high or low proportion of students entitled to free school meals were excluded.

Access

Twenty schools remained after this selection (13 primary schools and 7 secondaries). Letters were sent to the headteachers of these schools asking if they would like to consider taking part in the study (see Appendix 3) and these were followed up by telephone calls.

1 Selection of case study schools was restricted to Greater London (ie the inner and outer London boroughs) because of the need to visit the schools regularly.

2 Questionnaires were sent to school headteachers, and headteachers usually completed them. A minority were completed by deputies or other senior managers.

A minority of headteachers were not able to consider participating in the research. Others were interested but uncertain about whether they were able to give any time in the light of current work pressures. Visits were arranged to a small number of schools where the headteacher had shown an interest, and agreement for the research to proceed was secured in one primary, one junior school and two secondaries. Two of these schools had clearly shown a positive response to home-school agreements and two were clearly negative.

The four case study schools

1. School P- (A 'negative' primary school)

A co-educational junior school in an inner suburb with just over 300 students. 30% of the students receive free school meals. Approximately 60% of students are white UK and the remaining 40% include children from the Indian sub-continent and from a wide range of ethnic and cultural origins including Turkish/Kurdish, Somali, Eastern European, and African-Caribbean.

School P- and home-school agreements

This school had recently introduced an HSA in response to the DfEE's Guidance. This home-school agreement was viewed as a pilot exercise and the headteacher planned to introduce a finalised document during 2000.

2. School P+ (A 'positive' primary school)

A co-educational primary school with just over 600 students in a residential suburban area. Approximately 20% of the students receive free school meals. 30% of students are white UK - the remaining 70% include a large proportion of children from the Indian sub-continent, and other ethnic groups include African-Caribbean and Japanese.

School P+ and home-school agreements

This school had previously had an HSA but they had recently revised this in response to the DfEE's requirements.

3. School S- (A 'negative' secondary school)

A very large comprehensive school with a sixth form in a residential suburban area. The school has just over 2000 students. About 25% of students receive free school meals. Approximately 70% of students are white UK. The other main ethnic groups are African-Caribbean and Turkish Cypriot.

School S- and home-school agreements

This school had been using an HSA (termed a 'contract') for several years. However, this document did not comply with the DfEE Guidance and the school had recently revised it.

4. School S+ (A 'positive' secondary school)

A very large comprehensive in a residential area with nearly 2000 students. Just over 40% of students receive free school meals. Approximately 20% of the students are white UK, over 50% are from the Indian sub-continent and the remainder are mainly Black African and Caribbean.

School S+ and home-school agreements

This school had had an HSA in place for several years. Senior managers believed that this complied with the DfEE Guidance and they had no plans to review it in this light. However, the agreement was subject to regular review by the school governing body.

Access and interviewing in the case study schools

Teaching staff and school governors

Access to the teaching staff and school governors was arranged via the headteachers in the primary and junior school and via senior staff in the secondaries. Interviews were carried out with 16 teaching staff (including senior managers and class teachers) and 14 governors in total (see summary in Table 1). Six of the 14 governors were designated parent governors and several governors also had children in the study schools.

Data collection at *School P-*, the junior, also included an interview with the infant school headteacher as the HSA was used by both schools and the infant headteacher had collaborated with the junior headteacher in drawing it up.

All the interviews with teaching staff took place during the school day on school premises. Seven of the school governor interviews also took place in the schools; of the remaining seven, six were telephone interviews and one interview took place at the governor's home.

Students

The original design specified that small group discussions would be held with eight students in each of the four schools, 16 from Year 6 in the primaries and 16 from Year 10 in the secondaries (N=32). However, we decided to include more secondary than primary students to reflect the larger numbers of students in the secondary schools. Students from Year 7 (as well as Year 10) were also included as these younger students were likely to have had recent experience of signing agreements. The method of selecting and accessing students differed between the primaries, but was the same in the secondaries.

In *School P-* the headteacher wished to seek parental consent for interviews. Consent letters were sent (via the students) to the parents of *all the Year 6 children in one class* anticipating that perhaps half would agree. This resulted in five small group discussions with a total of 18 students (considerably more than had been anticipated).

In *School P+* we suggested that the headteacher (who saw no need for parental consent) might select two small groups of Year 6 students who were broadly representative of the gender and ethnic make-up of the school. A total of nine students were interviewed in two small groups in this school.

Senior teaching staff in each of the secondaries were asked to select eight students from Years 7 and Years 10 (16 in total in each school) who were broadly reflective of the gender and ethnic make-up of the school. A total of 17 students were interviewed in four groups in *School S-* and a total of 18 in four groups in *School S+* (see summary in Table 41)

A total of 62³ students were interviewed in fifteen groups across the four schools. These included 34 girls and 28 boys. Some of the groups were with boys or girls only and some were mixed. Overall, boys were slightly under-represented⁴. The ethnic make-up of the groups was, as we had requested, broadly representative of that of the schools.

Parents/carers

In line with the sample of students, we hoped to interview eight parents in both *School P-* and *School P+* (N=16) and 16 parents in both *School S-* and *School S+* (N=32). Parents were interviewed by telephone in order to facilitate access. We envisaged that it might, nevertheless, be difficult to access our desired sample.

A random stratified sample of students from the school registers (stratified by gender and by ethnicity) was selected. In *School P-* 16 students were selected from the Year 6 register. In *School P+* eight students were selected from Year 1 and eight from Year 6 (N=16). In *Schools S-* and *S+* the sample included 17 students from each of Years 7 and 10 (N=34 in each school).

Letters were sent to the parents/carers of these students (N=100) (via the students) with a tear-off return slip specifying whether or not they agreed to being contacted by a researcher (see Appendix 3).

3 27 of these were from the two primaries and 35 from the secondaries. 35 children were from 'negative' schools and 27 from 'positive' schools.

4 The under-representation is more than the figures suggest as *School S+* has a notably higher proportion of boys than girls.

Surprisingly, 13 of the 16 parents/carers from *School P-* returned their slips and telephone interviews were carried out with 11 of the 13. This was a very high response rate. The response rate from the other three schools was considerably lower: 4 responses were received from *School P+* (resulting in 3 interviews); 5 responses were received from *School S-* (resulting in 4 interviews) and 10 responses were received from *School S+* (resulting in 7 interviews). In total 25⁵ parents (5 fathers and 20 mothers) were interviewed by telephone. However, the responses of parent governors and governors with children in the study schools provided additional information about parents' views.

There were no marked distinctions between those parents who responded and the wider sample in terms of gender or ethnicity of the child. However, the secondary schools parents of Year 7 students were considerably more likely to respond than parents of Year 10 students (9 of the 11 secondary school parents interviewed were parents of a Year 7 student - only 2 were Year 10 parents)⁶.

The interview schedules

A similar semi-structured interview schedule was used with all four groups of respondents (see Appendix 3).

Information was collected on the following areas:

- the interviewee's understanding of home-school agreements - their meaning and purpose
- the perceived advantages and disadvantages of home-school agreements
- the process of drafting and implementing an HSA
- monitoring and reviewing agreements
- the likely outcomes of agreements
- and more general views on home-school relations.

Interviews with parents and small group discussions with students emphasised the respondents' *experiences* of the drafting and implementation process (eg experience and views on consultation, signing, review etc) whereas interviews with teaching staff and governors⁷ emphasised the *opportunities and constraints* which were associated with these processes.

The interviews were tape-recorded with the respondents' permission (two parents refused permission and notes were taken). Interviews with adult respondents (teachers, governors and parents) lasted between ten and thirty minutes (depending on the level of response). The focus group discussions with students generally took longer (between twenty and thirty-five minutes).

5 15 interviews were with parents from 'negative' schools and 10 were with parents from 'positive' schools. 14 were with parents from the primary schools and 11 with parents from the secondaries.

6 Many of the parents also had children in the same, or different, schools, and their responses were undoubtedly influenced by this.

7 Where governors were also parents emphasis was given to both areas.

Table 41: Summary of data collected

	Teaching staff	Governors	Students	Parents/carers
School P-	4 interviews	3 interviews	5 groups with 18 Year 6 students (11 girls/7 boys)	11 interviews (13 responses)
School P+	4 interviews	3 interviews	2 groups with 9 Year 6 students (4 girls/5 boys)	3 interviews (4 responses)
School S-	4 interviews	4 interviews	4 groups with 17 students 9 from Year 7 (5 girls, 4 boys) 8 from Year 10 (5girls/3 boys)	4 interviews (5 responses)
School S+	4 interviews	4 interviews	4 groups with 18 students 9 from Year 7 (5 girls, 4 boys) 9 from Year 10 (5boys/4 girls)	7 interviews (10 responses)
Totals	16 teaching staff	14 governors (including 6 parent governors)	15 groups (62 students) 34 girls/28 boys	25 parents (32 responses)

Interview analysis

The tape-recorded interviews were transcribed and coded to identify key themes within each respondent group in each school (teaching staff, governors, students, parents). Further analysis sought to explore common themes both *within* and *across* the primary and secondary school sectors, and *within* and *across* the respondent groups.

Analysis of *the pattern of responses* highlighted the following:

- Belonging to a ‘negative’ or ‘positive’ school was a more significant factor in teachers’ (and to a lesser extent governors’) response to HSAs than was school sector (eg being in a primary or secondary school)⁸. However, teaching staff (and governors) did link perceived advantages and disadvantages of home-school agreements to sector issues
- Age was a more significant factor in students’ responses to home-school agreements than belonging to a ‘negative’ or ‘positive’ school. (Thus Year 10 students were, on balance, considerably more negative than those from Year 7 and Year 6). However, students from ‘negative’ schools were marginally more likely to stress the disadvantages of home-school agreements than those from ‘positive’ schools

8 In general, teaching staff in schools which we had categorised as ‘positive’ were notably more positive in their response to home-school agreements than those in schools which we had categorised as negative. This is unsurprising as we had selected the schools on the basis of the headteachers’ questionnaire response.

- The responses of parents did not appear to be particularly related to either their child's age or to being a parent at a 'positive' or 'negative' school⁹. However, analysis of the data from the whole group of parents highlights some key themes across the schools
- There was a *high degree of convergence* in the responses of all respondent groups - thus school staff, parents and students from *all* schools highlighted similar advantages and similar disadvantages of home-school agreements.

Part 2. Findings from the case study schools

Introduction

The findings are presented in a structure which best reflects the pattern of responses derived from the analysis. Thus, the responses of teaching staff and governors are discussed separately from those of students and of parents¹⁰.

Each school's HSA is reviewed and the responses of teaching staff and governors to it are discussed - first in the two primaries and then in the secondaries. The responses from the 'negative' schools are followed by those from the 'positive' schools in each sector to allow for immediate contrast between the two.

The data from the students are then presented by the students' year group (Year 6, Year 7 and Year 10) and by school. Finally, the data from parents are presented by school¹¹.

It is important to note here that in *School P+* and *School S-* particularly, the total number of parents interviewed is small so the findings cannot be interpreted as representative of the general views of parents from these two schools. However, interviews in these two schools introduce some important new themes and lend weight to themes which are highlighted elsewhere.

Responses of teaching staff and governors

School P- (the 'negative' primary school)

School P- had recently introduced an HSA in response to the DfEE initiative. The junior headteacher had drawn up a first draft together with the infants' headteacher. This draft home-school agreement was shown to the school Parent Teacher Association (PTA) and to governors and staff. It was agreed at a subsequent governors' meeting that all parents should be sent two copies, one to keep and one to sign and return, but that comments would also be invited. At the time of interview with the *School P-* headteacher (November 1999) no comments had been received but approximately 85% of parents had signed and returned a copy of the agreement. The headteacher viewed this as a pilot exercise and planned a fuller consultation towards a final document for the year 2000.

School P-'s HSA covers both the junior and the infant schools. It includes two sections laying out the respective responsibilities of the parents and of the school, though there is no separate section for the child and the child is not included as a signatory. The signatures of the two headteachers are included on the bottom of the agreement and there is space for the parent to sign.

9 Although parents from *School S+* were less likely to see disadvantages in home-school agreements than parents from other schools, the small numbers of parent interviews creates difficulties for this kind of analysis of the pattern of responses. It is not possible to comment with any certainty on differences in parent's views between positive and negative schools or between the primary/secondary sector. However, the particularly poor *response rate* from Year 10 parents may be indicative, in itself, of these parents' relative lack of involvement with the schools.

10 The structure also reflects the differing emphasis of interviews with the respondent group.

11 Arguably, the parents' data might have been presented as a whole in keeping with the analysis of responses, but we have chosen to do so by school as much of the parents' data are concerned with the particular school and its home-school agreement.

The responses of teaching staff

Teaching staff in *School P-* were sceptical about the government's motivation for the HSA initiative, and they were unconvinced that the introduction of an HSA would have any benefits for their school.

The junior and infant headteachers described how they had given the initiative low priority at a time when they had been working hard on other initiatives (eg numeracy and literacy). They had felt obliged, however, to comply with the DfEE's requirement to introduce an agreement within a prescribed timescale - thus the consultation process had been carried out quickly and had not been as full or as lengthy as they might have wished.

HSAs were understood by teaching staff to have very little relevance to the school where relationships between parents and school were believed to be very good already; and where children's behaviour was perceived as generally unproblematic:

'... and from a teaching point of view to be quite honest it just felt like another letter that was being sent out - we collected up the reply slips ... but it hasn't really affected anything because our home-school liaison is pretty good ...'

Staff saw the school's good home-school liaison as evidenced in regular parents' evenings with high attendance rates, approachable teaching staff, a termly newsletter for each class, large numbers of parents coming in to the school to help (particularly in the infants); and the use of a home-school diary in Years 5 and 6 with a homework book for younger junior children. The home-school diary was thought to offer a particularly valuable avenue of communication between teachers and parents and to offer useful preparation for similar diaries or planners in use in secondary schools. Additionally, a number of systems were in place to monitor and address any attendance and punctuality problems.

Respondents thought that the agreement was likely to be signed by the majority of parents who were already involved with and supporting *School P-*, and that the minority of parents where liaison was poor were unlikely to sign and return it:

'We were worried that families that we may have been having some difficulties with or that we may have wished to call to account would not have signed such an agreement in the first place.'

The experiences of one class teacher appeared to confirm this belief:

'The ones that came back were those that we predicted - and the ones that you might wish to chase up saying you signed this agreement and your child isn't sticking to it are the ones who didn't bring it back anyway.'

Further, it was thought that parents from *either* group might not read, digest or take much notice of the content of the agreement and that the existence of well-used communication mechanisms such as the home-school diary negated the need for it. Respondents thought that the majority of parents had a clear sense of what the school's aims and expectations were regardless of the agreement (and these were included in the school brochure). Essentially, the HSA served to duplicate what was there already:

'I don't think this has added anything - I think it's just an extra on top of what we already have.'

Its lack of relevance to the school was further underlined by a common concern that there were no sanctions attached if the agreement was broken.

The interviews with teaching staff at *School P-* also raised concerns about future implementation of the agreement, both with regard to procedures for signing and with regard to making it a 'live document' rather than something that was filed away and forgotten. Although it was recognised that new parents might be more likely to sign at a face-to-face meeting at the school, the introduction of an agreement as part of the induction process appeared overly formal. Similarly, staff found it difficult to imagine having recourse to the agreement when problems arose as they favoured a more discursive and less formal approach.

The responses of school governors

Governors at *School P-* saw little value in HSAs :

'I think a lot of parents fulfil it anyway and if the school wasn't fulfilling it then parents would be taking it up whether or not there was an HSA - so I wonder whether it's just a PR exercise on behalf of the government.'

Governors echoed the concerns of teaching staff that agreements have no legal status and that those parents whom the initiative may be designed to target may be those whom it fails to reach:

'I think parents who have problems with school authorities or who have problems in general are going to have problems with this [home school agreements] - they are going to say either we are not going to sign or if we sign then what can you do to us [if the agreement is broken].'

And they shared teachers' doubts about how much the HSA might be called upon once in place:

'I can't really see the headteacher pulling one out and saying you're not keeping to it.'

However, one governor also noted the existence of an opposing 'purist' view which emphasised *the process of drawing up the agreement* as a way of involving parents. It was noted that HSAs might have an important role here in promoting social inclusion for those who feel that they have no voice or are not 'part of' the school.

School P+ (the 'positive' primary)

Senior teachers at *School P+* had drafted an HSA before this was a legal requirement, but this agreement - though signed by the majority of parents and children - had not been used or referred to again within the school. This first document was used by the headteacher as a draft for the development of the current agreement. The headteacher revised it in line with the DfEE Guidance and inserted clauses relating to her current concerns (see below). A process of consultation then took place with the senior management team, the whole school staff, and the Parent Staff Association (PSA). The resulting HSA includes three sections laying out the respective responsibilities of the school, the parent and the child. There is space at the bottom of the agreement for each party to sign.

The agreement was introduced by the headteacher to the children in a school assembly; and subsequently all the teachers discussed it with their students in class time. Children (from reception upwards) were invited to sign individually in class. Copies of the HSA were then sent out to all parents. They were asked (at a parents' evening) to sign the copy which had already been signed by their child, and teachers signed also. All children were reported to have signed, as were the majority of parents.

The responses of teaching staff

The teaching staff in *School P+* were noticeably less sceptical about HSAs than their counterparts in *School P-* and there was clearly a greater commitment within the school to using the HSA as a 'live' document.

The headteacher of *School P+* viewed HSAs as primarily intended to address the behaviour of children (and parents) but only a minority of her students' behaviour gave cause for concern. Although she thought that agreements might be more relevant to schools where behaviour was a pressing issue, she was keen to make the new HSA 'work' for her school. She described how the school already had a well-developed behaviour policy, school rules, and a strong ethos and she envisaged that the HSA would provide a useful framework for all matters of school discipline:

'... the umbrella under which everything else to do with ethos, behaviour and attitude [in the school] is contained ...'

The agreement (which included clauses on current areas of concern, such as punctuality and non-authorised absence) was to be given to parents along with other admissions papers, and regularly referred to within day-to-day school life:

'It's a talking point that you can keep referring to, a strategy to use if something is breached - it's a living document.'

In *isolation* from its wider context, however, it was thought to be no more than a piece of paper.

'We sign lots of things - it doesn't mean a thing unless the structure is in place.'

The headteacher considered it highly unlikely that it would have any marked impact on children (or on parents)

'I don't think it's going to mean that my naughty children are suddenly going to behave. I think it's going to be something where we can say "you signed this - you have actually not done this bit - what are we going to do now" ...'

Teaching staff shared the headteacher's view that the agreement might serve as a useful reminder for both parents and children. It was thought to be more useful in this context for juniors rather than infants, although one respondent expressed a view that the agreement could be reinforced with even the youngest children (and children from reception upwards signed). Some of the Year 6 students were reported to have taken the signing of the agreement very seriously - to feel very 'mature' about it - and it was envisaged that breaches of it might be usefully referred to in the classroom and in 'circle time'.

An over-riding concern amongst teaching staff - even in this 'positive' school - was that the introduction of the agreement would make little difference to the behaviour of either parents or children; and that those parents who would take notice of it would be those who were supportive of the school anyway.

The responses of school governors

Governors at *School P+* were broadly supportive of the idea of HSAs, noting that they offered a potential for improved partnership and dialogue. In particular they thought that agreements represented an important initiative for parents - observing that they serve to give parents clearer information than has commonly been available about what to expect from schools.

However, they expressed some concern that agreements might lead to parents requesting the inclusion of a whole range of specific requirements, and that dissatisfied parents may sue.

Governors shared teachers' doubts about whether the HSA would have any impact, particularly given the lack of sanctions attached. Like the respondents in *School P-*, they remarked that some parents would not read it and some might see it as 'authoritarian'. Although they thought that the agreement might make a marginal difference to those who would *like* to help their children more *but didn't know how*, one also noted that:

'The minority of people we want to influence, where children are not being supported as much as they ought to be, will drop it in the bin.'

School S- (the 'negative' secondary)

School S- had had an HSA in place for several years (termed a 'home-school contract'). Parents were asked at their child's post admission interview to tick boxes on this document to indicate their support for a range of school policies. The document was signed by a member of school staff and by the parent, though not by the child.

Senior school staff recognised that this agreement, which was weighted towards the parents' responsibilities towards the school, did not comply with the DfEE Guidance. Prompted by the government's legislation, they set out to develop a new one. A working party wrote a new draft which was taken to school staff, the school council and the Parent Teacher Association (PTA) for comments. The resulting document was sent out to all parents during the Autumn term 1999 with a covering letter asking them to sign¹².

School S-'s HSA takes the form of a small leaflet. A statement on the front page emphasises the value of school and parents 'working together' to ensure that students achieve their best. Listed on each of the following three pages are the respective responsibilities of the parents/carers, the school and the students. There is space on the last page for the signatures of the student, school representatives (including the headteacher) and the parent/carer.

Senior school staff envisage that this new agreement will be signed at post admission interviews, and that it will go into the student's planner. It is also envisaged that the agreement might be signed annually, although the logistics of achieving this was a topic of some concern to teaching staff and governors (see below).

12 Full information about the return rate was not available at the time of data collection.

The responses of teaching staff

Interviews with teaching staff (and governors) at *School S-* highlighted a diversity of views about the *idea* of HSAs and extensive concerns about some of the more practical issues of implementation.

Teaching staff at *School S-* were broadly supportive of the principles behind HSAs. They welcomed the style of their new agreement with its new emphasis on the responsibilities of the school and its inclusion of the student. However, like staff at *School P-*, *School S-* staff had felt pressured to introduce an agreement quickly in order to comply with the DfEE requirements. Parents on the PTA had been consulted, but the short-time scale had afforded little opportunity for dialogue with the wider parent group. Concern was expressed by one respondent that the process of speedy introduction of the agreement might lead to a focus on the *rights* of both school and parents rather than the *responsibilities*. It was thought that the HSA might be interpreted in a 'chapter and verse' way rather than in the spirit of partnership within which it was intended, and that this might result, for example, in parents questioning whether the school was meeting particular clauses, and in school staff taking too rigid or prescriptive an approach to implementation. Additionally, the new emphasis on the school's responsibilities *together with the lack of sanctions* was of particular concern to another respondent as it suggested (for this respondent) a clear imbalance *in favour of parents*.

While some teaching staff thought (like the staff at *School P+*) that the agreement might act as a useful reminder when a student or a parent was failing to comply¹³ others were very doubtful that any benefits would result from it at all. Like teachers in *School P-*, respondents expressed the view that this was ultimately a DfEE PR exercise with little substance. They thought that the agreement would have little impact on the minority that it was primarily targeted at - and, interestingly, one respondent was concerned that it may even have a minor adverse effect:

'I don't think it will have a dramatic effect - but I think that a small minority of that small minority will discover the limits of our powers on insisting that parents fulfil the responsibilities that they have promised - and I think that will have a mild undermining effect on school discipline - the opposite of the government's intention.'

Finally, respondents pointed to some of the practical problems associated with introducing an HSA in such a large school. The new agreement had been sent out to all parents to be signed (as in *School P-*), but it was recognised that signatures could often be 'perfunctory': thus even those who had signed may not have understood, agreed with or taken in the content. With future intakes there would be opportunities to discuss and sign the agreement at post admission interview. The question of whether and how it might be signed annually was problematic.

The responses of school governors

Governors pointed out the initial difficulties which the school faced in developing an agreement which was meaningful to the school's ethnically and socio-economically diverse parent group. Respondents thought that agreements needed to be simple and basic in order to be understood and heeded by the majority of parents, though not so basic as to be bland. The inclusion of too much detail might run the risk that parents might 'pull up the school' complaining that it was not keeping to its side of the agreement. And it was noted that for some parents the whole concept of an agreement might even be alienating:

'It might seem to them that they were being told off for not supporting their children and their local school and that they had to sign this piece of paper which could be used in the future in criticising them.'

Like the teaching staff at *School S+*, governors were clear that agreements also needed to be 'owned' by both parents and students. But creating and maintaining a sense of 'ownership' was viewed as particularly problematic in a large secondary school. Governors noted that secondary schools have to work a lot harder than primaries at nurturing a relationship with parents. Here it was thought that the HSA might only be of use as a 'building block' within a far wider school communication strategy.

13 Examples here included situations where a parent or carer failed to supply their child with a school uniform, or where there were persistent punctuality or attendance problems.

In relation to students it was pointed out by one respondent that the child who signed the agreement at aged 11 is likely to be a very different child from the young person of 13 or 14, and that many youngsters of 15 are profoundly cynical about such exercises. Another governor commented that teenagers who are asked to sign an agreement will have developed attitudes towards school and teaching staff which are based on their own personal experience - and they may be reluctant to sign or comply with something that does not accord with this.

Governors thought that some of these student ownership issues could be tackled by developing strategies to review and implement agreements on an 'individualised' basis (perhaps within tutor groups in the first instance) and by improved involvement of the student body in the formulation of policies and in school regulation.

The view was also expressed that these were in many senses intractable issues for secondary schools in general: both because there are large numbers of students and parents involved, and because the consensus which is reached between school, parents and students at admission often breaks down in later years. One respondent observed that one of the only ways to make HSAs meaningful would be to give students a much more active involvement in determining the kinds of educational opportunities that they are given.

School S+ (the 'positive' secondary)

School S+ first introduced an HSA in 1994. The agreement begins with a paragraph about the schools ethos and values, and this includes a statement of the school's belief that high standards can only be attained through the co-operation and support of three parties - the parents/carers, the students and school. The agreement goes on to list key areas in which the parents are asked to support the school. There is room at the bottom for the signature of the parent/carer, the student and a school representative.

The content of this agreement has been subject to minor changes since its introduction and a slightly modified version¹⁴ is now used for Key Stage 4 students. But the basic layout and the core content have remained the same.

The Key Stage 3 agreement was introduced and discussed in the school induction interviews - and parents/carers and students are asked to sign during these meetings. Parents/carers are given a copy of the agreement to take away and a copy is retained by the school. A copy of the agreement is also attached in the student's homework diary to be signed on an annual basis. Year 9 parents' evenings present an opportunity for discussion of the Key Stage 4 agreements.

Senior managers report that there have been no examples of parents or students refusing to sign either at induction interview or at entry to Key Stage 4¹⁵. The homework diary is monitored and reviewed in pastoral periods and class tutors check that the copy in the diary has also been signed¹⁶.

The responses of teaching staff

Interviews with teaching staff at *School S+* highlighted a quite remarkable consistency of views both about the values and ethos of the school, and about the role and function of HSAs within this.

School S+ is perceived by teaching staff to have a strong and explicit values base. The school expects high standards for all its students, and there is a clear code of conduct. Students are actively encouraged to develop responsible behaviour and attitudes, and achievement is prioritised. Students are described as being key participants in school policy development - for example, in reviews of the school behaviour policy and in the 'classroom expectations' which forms part of this. The school has a well-developed transition and induction programme with its partner primaries, extensive after-school and study support provision, and a commitment to promoting its role as a resource within the local community. Parents' role in their child's education is seen as vital and the school tries to actively promote their involvement in a range of ways.

Senior teaching staff at *School S+* view the HSA as a reflection of the school's strong values base:

14 This has more of an emphasis on GCSE and course work.

15 Although, in relation to Key Stage 4 students in particular, it was also noted that signing does not necessarily lead to compliance.

16 If the agreement has not been signed the form tutor will ask students to remind their parent(s). Where this fails, the Head of Year writes to the parent(s).

Home-School Agreements: a true partnership?

'The HSA works because it reflects the values and ways of doing things at the school.'

The introduction of the agreement in the induction interview was viewed by respondents as valuable; as the school also sets out its expectations and parents are given clear information about what they can expect 'right from the start'. A large team of school staff receives prior training for these interviews and 'all staff speak with the same voice'. Where necessary, translation and interpreting facilities are made available¹⁷.

Interestingly, after this point, (and until Key Stage 4) the agreement is rarely called upon :

'Not that we're referring to it [the agreement] week in and week out but it reflects our style of doing things and we are very rigid in sticking to that way of doing things.'

Respondents explained how classroom teachers will tend to make more frequent reference to documents such as 'the classroom expectations', 'the school expectations' and the school rules. In instances where an issue is unresolved in the classroom, the class teacher may refer it to the form tutor, who in turn may refer it on to the head of year and so on through the school management hierarchy. At some point in this system (usually later rather than earlier) the HSA may be referred to - and parents and students reminded that they have signed. Teaching staff described how this process gives a valuable message that incidents are not dealt with in an 'ad hoc' manner, but rather that they are responded to as part of a coherent system. This is viewed as critical both for the parents and student; it also serves to protect teachers from complaints of unfair treatment.

The responses of school governors

Governors at *School S+* confirmed the view of teaching staff that the school has a strong ethos, and a good transition scheme which introduces the ethos and high expectations of behaviour. They also confirmed the value of the agreement as a document which clearly lays down expectations at the beginning of the secondary school career and which reminds parents of the importance of their *continued involvement* throughout that career.

The two parent governors spoke enthusiastically about what they saw as the very welcoming approach of *School S+* to parents. The HSA was perceived (by other governors also) as just one of a whole range of ways that the school sought to improve contact with parents including, for example, regular parents' evenings, curriculum meetings, parent drop-ins, the homework diaries, a regular newsletter, and information about how parents might help their children with exams.

Like the respondents in the other schools governors at *School S+* thought that the agreement amounted to no more than the majority of parents 'would expect' and that it might have little impact on students who were 'not interested in learning' or parents who were 'unsupportive'; though it may have some minor effect on a small group 'in between':

'I think they're quite good for the middle group of children - where they may go off the rails a little bit - the agreement can be produced and the parents will agree - yes we did sign this agreement.'

The agreement itself was seen as simply a piece of paper, worthless unless it was respected:

'It's a bit like getting married really - is that bit of paper worth anything? Well if you've made a commitment it is ... I respect the school so I have respect for the bit of paper.'

Responses of students

The primary schools: Children from Year 6 (aged 10-11 years)

School P-

The headteachers at *School P-* had decided not to include a section for children on their HSA, or to invite their signatures. They were concerned about the timing implications and logistics of doing so, for example,

17 49 languages are spoken amongst the families of pupils at the school.

they were uncertain whether to ask the parents to involve their children or to do this in school. Also, the junior and the infants' schools were to share an agreement and the infants' school headteacher thought that it would be inappropriate to involve younger children.

In the light of this, it was interesting that many of the children interviewed in *School P-* were able to talk with considerable knowledge about the meaning and purpose of HSAs¹⁸. Although a few children had no idea what these were¹⁹ others defined them as a means of encouraging parents to meet their responsibilities, as a way of ensuring that both school and parents took care of children and helped them with their work. They saw it in terms of an exchange of commitment:

'It's between teachers and parents to say that if teachers will educate them (children) properly and keep them disciplined, then the parents will take them to school on time and make sure they do their homework and that sort of thing.'

Most of the children at *School P-* thought that HSAs were a good *idea* in principle: they described how their teachers were not solely responsible for their learning and how if parents helped at home they might learn more. They thought that children had some responsibility for doing their homework but that parents also had a responsibility to remind them to do so (and the home-school diary was frequently mentioned as of value here). They viewed the exchange of letters between home and school concerning school absences as an important way of ensuring that children attended school and were safe.

However, children also pointed to many problems with the idea in practice. Echoing the concerns about alienation of a *School S-* governor, one girl commented that HSAs may be interpreted by parents as judgmental:

'But it's a bit rude - it's like saying to parents that you're not looking after your children properly and we're setting out some rules to make sure that you treat them properly.'

Several children pointed to the difficulties which might be faced by parents who did not speak good English²⁰, some noted how the circumstances of parents might make it difficult for them to keep to elements of the agreement: for example, parents who worked shifts may have little time to help with homework. One girl observed that parents didn't always prioritise helping their children with their learning:

'... because with some parents you might go "can you help me with a bit of homework?" And they'll go "No you go up to your room and do your homework" instead of "I'll help you". Or something like "I'm in the middle of reading this not very important article in the newspaper"...

Additionally, children commented that some parents may sign the agreements without reading it:

'There may not be parents like it in this school, but some may just sign and they could be signing to say OK I'll wash out the toilets and things like that ...They don't read it. But our parents do - I know that.'

Some may read it but then 'bin' it:

'It's a kind of waste of paper because your parents read it - send the bit at the bottom back and chuck the rest in the bin.'

And, further, that some may not sign at all. Interestingly, these three groups of 'remiss' parents were commonly located by the children in *other* schools and not in their own.

Most significantly, perhaps, many of the children shared the view of many teaching staff and governors that the majority of parents were doing as the agreements required anyway. The agreement itself might have little effect on the behaviour of those who were not:

'It won't really change anything because most parents are doing it anyway - some parents want their children not to be friendly but headstrong - it might not make any difference to them.'

School P+

Most of the children interviewed in *School P+* had a clear view about the meaning and purpose of HSAs:

18 Clearly, the research itself may have played a role here. The parents of these children had received (and signed) consent forms and this may have prompted some discussion of the issue with their children.

19 Although children also spoke of acting as translators for their parents.

20 Although children also spoke of acting as translators for their parents.

Home-School Agreements: a true partnership?

'It's something that the parents have to help the children with and the school have to help the children with and we have to do so we can get everything in order.'

'It's a contract between three parties - the parents, the school and the pupil - to say what they will do ... they have to keep to it tightly and they have to keep the behaviour good. It's to make sure that they have a good education.'

Like children in *School P-*, these children thought it important that parents should help them with homework and that parents had a vital role in supporting them with their education. In marked contrast to *School P-* children, these children - who had been involved as signatories to the agreements - placed far more emphasis on *their own* behaviour and responsibilities than on those of their parents²¹.

Several of the children in *School P+* expressed concern or reluctance about signing the agreement because of the number of clauses and because they were uncertain about whether they might be able to stick to it:

'I had to think hard about whether I wanted to - there was quite a lot to keep to.'

'It was OK but I didn't know if I could stick to it and there were a few things I couldn't do.'

Children observed, for example, that it was sometimes difficult to get to school at 8.45 - journeys can be long and traffic bad; that homework wasn't always easy to do - and it was possible to forget to bring it to school; and that playing sensibly can sometimes be hard when others 'annoy you'. And, like the children in *School P-*, they also pointed out that the responsibility for compliance with some of these clauses did not rest solely with them:

'Sometimes it's not the pupils - they could be early, but it could be the adult who was causing them to be late ... but the child gets the blame so it's not fair.'

Finally, *School P+* children were notably divided about the possible impact of the HSA. One boy thought it might *add* to the stress of school life:

'You might not be able to work so well with the pressure of this HSA - you can't relax really in school. You can't just ease up and act normally - you're always being polite. You can't just let your hair down.'

And others thought it unlikely to make any difference, noting like children in *School P-*, that most children did try to abide by the rules and that signing a piece of paper would make little difference to the behaviour of those children (or adults) who chose not to.

Others were notably more positive:

'I thought it was quite good because it could change people in a way and it could make them a lot better than they were and it could make them stick to the rules rather than being naughty.'

'I think it will go very well and it will improve the school.'

The secondary schools: Children from year 7 (aged 11-12)

School S-

The majority of Year 7 children from *School S-* remembered the school's new HSA and most of them had signed it at home along with their parents. In general they thought that the agreement was a good thing. They thought that 'scruffy' children gave the school a bad reputation and it was important that parents should support the school and its policies. Children should try and stick to the agreement so that they could learn and eventually get 'a good job'.

Those who had signed were happy to do so commenting that these were just 'school rules', it was no 'big deal' to sign to them. They wouldn't have signed if they hadn't agreed. Like some of the primary students at *School P+*, they thought that their section of the agreement included a lot of points:

21 This difference in emphasis was probably linked with two related factors: the direct involvement of *School P+* children as signatories to the agreements (unlike *School P-* children) and the emphasis on behaviour in *School P+* 's understanding and implementation of home-school agreements.

'It's a good idea but a lot of rules for a child to remember - so if you are Year 7 and not very bright it might be hard to remember.'

And one girl was unhappy with the wording of the agreement noting that it should read 'the student *should* agree' rather than '*will* agree' as the term *will* sounded too forceful and might even promote dissent²².

These children were also divided about whether the HSA would make any difference. On the positive side, they noted that if children don't know the rules they are more likely to get into 'bad' behaviour (such as vandalism) and that the agreement could make a difference to parents who may be more strict with their children. They also noted a range of difficulties: the school would not always stick to its side of the agreement and nor would all children or parents; parents might sign the agreement without reading it; children might agree with the agreement when their parents didn't; and parents themselves may have different views about it:

'Some parents say it's rubbish and some it's good then the parents would disagree and what would you do?'

School S+

All the Year 7 children who were interviewed from *School S+* remembered signing the HSA at their induction interviews along with their parents/carers. They were familiar with the agreement and aware that a copy of the document was attached to their home-school diaries.

Views about their introduction to the agreement varied. Some children thought that it was important to know about the school rules before they started, however, in a similar response to a *School S-* student, one girl said that:

'You know what you're supposed to do and what you're not - most school rules are the same.'

The act of signing was seen as important to one child because it showed proof of commitment; however, another expressed concern about keeping to the agreement :

'When I signed it I thought I don't know what's going to happen - because one day you can be good, one day bad.'

And, as in *School S-*, this view that the agreement might be difficult for children to keep to was more generally shared:

'Just having the paper there with the signature on it doesn't mean they [children] will do what it says. No-one in school has kept to everything on the agreement.'

Children also thought that parents who may not have the time to support homework or the money to buy the correct equipment may have some problems with compliance.

Children liked some elements of the agreement - for example, the emphasis on high standards of uniform, and the way in which it provided information so that parents could help at home. They were also critical, particularly of elements of the rules concerning school dress, jewellery and areas that were 'out of bounds'.

And these children, like Year 7s in *School S-* and Year 6s in *School P+*, were divided as to whether the HSA would make any difference.

'If you didn't have it [the agreement] people will do whatever they want - but with something like this they can't really do that because the teachers and parents keep in contact all the time.'

'But a piece of paper won't make any difference - you just do what you would anyway.'

The secondary schools: Young people from year 10 (aged 14-15)

School S-

Most of the young people in *School S-* were familiar with the school's new agreement and they thought that the principles behind the HSAs were sound:

22 This respondent also thought that the parents section should use *should* rather than *will*.

Home-School Agreements: a true partnership?

'Schools would be fighting up an uphill battle if parents weren't bothered about the schoolwork that the kid was doing.'

These young people were notably more sceptical about HSAs than children from the primaries and Year 7. They observed that their own school's agreement might not be read, heeded or complied with by parents or by children and young people, and that it would have little impact:

'But it's a letter you look at, you sign it, and you give it back - if you want you will and if you don't you won't. There's nothing that a piece of paper can do.'

And significantly, they related these problems directly to elements of the new agreement's implementation process. Thus, it was considered unwise for the agreement to be sent home (by student post) for signature:

'There's no point in taking that home - it's going to get lost in a couple of weeks - if it gets home.'

And it was thought that instead it should have been introduced by some form of face-to-face contact:

'The idea is good but it needs a different way of going about it like an interview and not just a piece of paper.'

Young people suggested here that it might be helpful in the future to go through the agreement at parents' evenings (and that these should be more frequent) and that the key point of contact here should be between the parents and tutors as tutors know the young people best. They also noted that the agreement could be more detailed - perhaps in booklet form - with explanations of what was meant by terms such as 'racist behaviour' and that it should perhaps be less forceful and more couched in terms of advice.

A few young people at *School S-* also had more fundamental criticisms of the HSA which were linked to much broader concerns that their views were not listened to or acted on in the school.

These young people also noted that the school responsibilities (unlike those of the student) were simply those that are an integral part of the job of school staff:

'But it's what the school does anyway - sends home regular reports - it's part of their job - it's not part of ours to be respectful and friendly and endeavour to meet tutor targets.'

And they noted that the agreement itself was imbalanced:

'It's more oriented to what the school wants from the students rather than what the student can get from the school.'

In the eyes of these young people the way forward lay, not in the introduction of HSAs (in their present form at least) but in the development of improved teacher-student relationships, for example, through different approaches to managing classroom behaviour, and in the greater involvement of the young people themselves in choosing their own curriculum (see also *School S-* governors):

'They tell us what we're good at and say we should do them [subjects] - but we should be able to choose from Year 9.'

'They should make some of our subjects optional - if you want to be a nurse what is technology going to help you with - if you want to be a mechanic what is language going to help with ...'

School S+

Young people at *School S+* had experience of HSAs at their induction interviews *and* at their entry to Key Stage 4. They had a more 'extended' experience of agreements, therefore, than any of the other student groups. The interviews with these students provided an opportunity for discussion of the HSA at both stages of their school career.

The young people highlighted some interesting differences here. They noted that at the induction interview the HSA was:

'... really a piece of paper that you sign - like an admissions thing ...'

'My dad read it and signed it - gave it to me - and I just signed it.'

However, by Key Stage 4 their *own role* within the agreement had become more important:

'At that time [Key Stage 3] it was really the parents and the school, now it's for the students as well.'

This changing role was viewed by the young people in terms of increased maturity and responsibility for themselves and their learning:

'You have more responsibility ... it's outlining the fact that you're the one that's going to do the exam - more adult now ...'

This process of taking on increased responsibility was not always described in positive terms. For example one boy described how 'getting trained up for adulthood' (his words) could be 'a bit of a hassle' as *School S+* required the young people to sign many pieces of paper *in addition to* the HSA. Although these young people from *School S+* were rather less sceptical than their Year 10 peers from *School S-*, they were, nevertheless, uncertain about whether and how the HSA might be of benefit.

On the positive side, one boy noted that:

'It [the agreement] might change things because if they didn't sign our diaries²³ our parents wouldn't have a lot of communication.'

And another that:

'It's like a receipt to say that if anything goes wrong it can be referred back to ... it helps with achieving - now we know what's expected of us and we know what we want to achieve.'

Others expressed the less positive views that:

'It [the agreement] gets the parents' attention but not [the] kids - kids still misbehave.'

And that:

'There might be some people that sign that don't take notice of it or really read it - some parents don't want to take notice of it or be involved - [it's] just a piece of paper.'

Responses from parents

School P-

Two of the eleven parents who were interviewed had not heard of HSAs prior to receiving the letter from the researchers. These parents had no recollection of ever having received or signed an HSA from *School P-*. The remaining nine parents remembered receiving the agreement and they had all signed and returned it.

Parents from *School P-* thought that HSAs were intended primarily to improve the relationships between school and home and they were broadly supportive of this intent, though noting also that their personal experiences of relating to *School P-* were generally positive. They emphasised that their children's education was their responsibility as well as that of the schools:

'I do feel I want to acknowledge I have responsibilities.'

'But it is a joint responsibility to bring up children - when things go wrong with the child's education school often gets the blame.'

In talking about their responsibilities many parents placed particular emphasis on ensuring that homework was done, and of their active use of home-school diaries.

While the majority of parents emphasised *their* responsibilities in supporting the school *at home*, a minority stressed that schools *also* had an important role to play in the development of improved relationships between school and home - by providing greater opportunities both for better understanding of the curriculum and involvement in children's *school-based learning*. Parents generally welcomed the fact that HSAs were 'two-way' :

'I would expect the school to do the things that they say - and if they didn't I could turn round and say [that] this is the agreement - I'm glad it's a two-way system.'

Parents from *School P-* thought that it was helpful for standards and expectations to be set out in writing in an agreement. But it was also recognised that the HSA simply formalised existing practices.

23 *School S+*'s agreement refers to the homework diaries.

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Several parents said that they were clear about the school's expectations anyway (confirming the view here of teaching staff) and that this clarity made the agreement look rather redundant:

'Well, it's a paper exercise - it's not telling me anything new about the school - when you first start they are quite good with a school information pack and school routines and policies.'

'It does create a written record but that is so implicit anyway I don't think that it needs to be made explicit.'

One respondent noted the importance of parents being informed about 'what it would mean' if they chose not to sign the agreement. And several parents made specific comments about the content and style of the agreement itself:

A few thought that it was too 'bland', too 'basic' and not sufficiently 'aspirational'. It was thought that it could be more tailored to the individual child - for example, where a child was getting learning support there might be specific information given about how the parent could help the child; and that it might also give details of school policies and additional opportunities, such as after-school provision:

'Things like after-school arrangements might be good to include in a home school agreement, increasing the community aspects ... also [perhaps] information technology.'

Some concern was also expressed about the use of the phrase '*we will try to*' in relation to the school responsibilities as these were viewed as responsibilities which the school was *required* to fulfil. A few parents also commented on the absence of a section for the child, observing that as the agreement is ultimately centred on children, they should be involved in the process of drawing it up and they should be given an opportunity to sign²⁴.

'It's about our children at the end of the day - teachers speak gospel - parents speak rubbish - it would be helpful for them [children] to know there is an agreement between school and parents.'

Finally, parents from *School P-* expressed a range of views about the likely impact of HSAs in general - and the agreement in *School P-* in particular. Some thought that if parents were fully consulted in drafting and reviewing an agreement - in a process which reached out to those who might need support in working with the school - then this process might of itself promote parental participation and social inclusion (see also governors *School P-*). But the majority of parents raised questions and concerns about the implementation of the HSA. In summary, it was thought that whilst the agreement might provide an 'eye-opener' or a reminder to a few parents, it was generally likely to be signed by those that were involved with and supportive of the school and to remain unsigned by those who were not:

'Those who will take it seriously are those who will do these things anyway - and those who are not involved wouldn't bother to sign and if they did they wouldn't keep to what they're signing.'

And while the act of signing was viewed as an indication of commitment, it was thought that many of those who signed might, nevertheless, forget the contents of the agreement they had signed their names to. The lack of sanctions attached to the HSA was viewed as fundamentally problematic. These parents thought that keeping the document 'alive' in the school presented a considerable challenge.

School P+

The three parents who were interviewed from *School P+* all recollected signing an agreement at the school and, like parents in *School P-* they were broadly in favour of the idea of the HSA. The document was viewed as a potentially useful means of raising parents awareness that they have responsibilities; as an indicator that the school was taking its responsibilities seriously; and as beneficial for children as it would help them to realise that 'everyone was working together as a team'.

Like some of the parents in *School P-*, *School P+* parents thought that the responsibilities listed on the agreement were 'no more than you would expect' from the school. They believed that putting these

24 Though parents, in general, differed in their views about the age at which children might be invited to sign agreements.

expectations in writing would not result in any significant changes in either teachers or parents both because what actually mattered was underlying attitude:

'A piece of paper will not do anything - the most important thing is teachers' and parents' attitude to co-operating together for their children.'

And because:

'... the school should be doing what they'd said they'd do all along - and parents may have signed, not read and not bothered about it or referred back to it - but carried on as they usually do.'

Interestingly, also these parents gave greater emphasis than those in *School P-* (or indeed in any other school) to their perception that the agreement also listed responsibilities which were 'no more than you would expect' from both *parents* and *children*. Such responsibilities - or expectations of behaviour - were described as fundamental and thus accepted 'without question' by these parents. One respondent was particularly surprised that the school should see it as necessary to write down the expectations of children - explaining how in her culture the expectation that children *would* behave in certain ways was quite simply 'taken for granted'.

The children in *School P+* had been asked to sign the HSA and parents from *School P+* talked about their responses to this. In summary, they were surprised that infants children were being invited to sign and they questioned whether they had sufficient understanding to do so. However, the experiences of a mother of a Year 6 child lent support to the view expressed by *School P+*'s teaching staff that older children took the signing in the classroom very seriously:

'For them it was quite an important thing - having it read to them and having signed it.'

This mother also read through the agreement with her child afterwards:

'I read it to her and explained to her what her bit was ... I think it was exciting [for her].'

School S-

Four interviews were carried out with parents from *School S-* (one Year 10 parent, three Year 7 parents). Like the teaching staff and governors from other schools these parents showed a diversity of views and experience.

All four parents remembered receiving an agreement, and three of them signed it and returned it to the school, although one could remember very little about either its content or purpose. The fourth parent did not sign or return the agreement. Three of the four parents thought that the responsibilities that were laid down in the HSA were:

'... common sense things that should be done anyway ...'

'... something that just happened ...'

Only one of them thought that the HSA might have any impact. This parent thought that the agreement would be ignored by those parents who 'didn't care' but that it might have an effect on a few parents who hadn't given much previous thought to supporting the school:

'Some are not doing it [supporting the school] through ignorance and some don't really care either way. So if it helps the ones who haven't thought about it to do it, then it helps a few children.'

This respondent also recognised, however, that even where parents' behaviour changed, it might be difficult to influence children. Parents could not 'make children' behave in the ways that they wished, and this was particularly the case as they (children) got older.

Interviews with two of the parents raised some interesting new themes for the research. One mother thought that the agreement was perhaps not tough enough on the young people of today whom she viewed as increasingly resistant and likely to ignore the initiative altogether. This respondent thought that the focus of the agreement should be on parents and teachers and not on students as they could not be seen as on 'a par' with adults. She also thought the agreement was unlikely to have any effect in a social climate where parents (primarily mothers) were increasingly likely to be working and to have less contact with schools and where young people in their teens were commonly disenchanted with school and education.

Another parent who had minimal contact with the school found the whole idea of the agreement to be patronising and unnecessary. This parent believed strongly that he had no need of the school's intervention in telling him how to look after and educate his children at home and that relationships with the school were essentially one-sided – the school expected support and interest in their activities, but school staff had no real interest in either the social circumstances of children or in supporting parents.

School S+

All seven parents who were interviewed from *School S+* had some recollection of seeing and/or signing an HSA, although four of the seven were unsure what an HSA was until the researcher talked about the document within the context of the induction interview. Six of the seven respondents were Year 7 parents and one was a Year 10 parent.

Parents from *School S+* generally welcomed the HSA. They thought that it was useful for both themselves and their children to receive information at induction about the school and its expectations. They generally saw themselves as having an important role to play alongside the school in the education of their children, recognising for example, the importance of attending parents' evenings. And they liked and supported the content of the agreement, in particular what they saw as its emphasis on uniform and discipline.

Parents' experiences of introduction to the agreement in the induction interview appeared to vary: some remembered having the agreement explained to them, some felt that it was not discussed much. One mother thought that it all felt a bit like a 'paper exercise' rather than anything of particular significance and this respondent thought that the interview could be more structured *around the agreement* and more could be made of the importance of signing. In general, parents thought it important and useful that their children were asked to sign and involved - and for some parents this was particularly important as an indicator of the increased responsibility for the child:

'It puts more responsibility on the child and parents - especially the child - otherwise they just carry on doing what they like.'

A minority of *School S+* parents were concerned that the HSA might have little impact:

'If just done for the sake of it it's another piece of paper and it doesn't mean much.'

Unlike almost all other respondents, parents at *School S+* were broadly hopeful that the HSA might be beneficial and this was most clearly viewed in relation to ensuring children's good behaviour (rather than parents' compliance):

'He is new to [the school] but as the years progress they [students] influence each other and it will give [him] encouragement to stick to the regulations.'

'Sometimes the kids don't want to work but when you tell them "This is the school rules you have to stick with it whether you like it or not".'

Also, unlike the majority of other respondents, they did not refer to possible difficulties in implementation. This may have been linked with a number of factors - including for example, their early trust in the school built up through transition work and the fact that their experience of the school was, as yet, relatively limited. They also appeared to be more preoccupied with finding ways of helping their children settle into school *in the here and now* and less willing or able to think, therefore, about what might happen *in the future*.

Discussion of the findings and conclusions

This final section of the report will draw together some of the key themes which emerge from these data.

The data from all respondent groups highlight consistent support for the underpinning principles of HSAs. Thus, teachers, governors, students and parents believe that schools, parents and students all have responsibilities and a role to play within the education process. And the view that parents, schools and students should communicate well in a spirit of 'partnership' is generally undisputed. But teachers' (and governors') views about the value of HSAs differs markedly between the 'negative' and 'positive' schools and (less markedly) according to school sector.

Teachers and governors in ‘negative’ schools stress that agreements will fail to reach those parents who are unsupportive of the school and that they are unnecessary where home-school relations are already good and where they duplicate existing school material. They note that they are of little value without sanctions attached and that they are problematic to implement as it is difficult to ensure that all parents and students sign, understand and ‘own’ them.

Teachers and governors in ‘positive’ schools give emphasis to the ‘added’ benefits of agreements. They note that agreements can be ‘tailored’ to the needs and circumstances of the individual school and they observe that they can:

- Encompass established school ethos and behaviour policies
- Provide a useful summary of expectations to be introduced at the beginning of the child’s school career
- Provide a useful reminder or lever to be referenced *throughout* the child’s school career.

However, they emphasise that agreements are meaningless without a framework of school ethos and policies.

Data from students suggest that young people in Year 10 in *both* schools are more sceptical about HSAs than students from Year 7 and 6. Data from Year 10s in the ‘negative’ secondary adds weight to many of the ‘ownership’ concerns of this school’s teachers and governors. The data from parents suggest that whilst some welcomed the explicit ‘two-way’ process of the agreement, many question the need for a written document as they *take their own responsibilities for granted* and they view the responsibilities of the school as *requirements*. Some also view the students’ responsibilities as fundamental and ‘accepted without question’.

Finally, and perhaps most significantly, whilst the majority of respondents from all groups support the idea of HSAs, many believe that agreements *are unlikely to have any significant impact on either parents or students*.

A *key response* across all respondents groups is that:

- Agreements are unlikely to make any difference to those ‘supportive’ parents and students who already ‘comply’ (the majority)
- Agreements are unlikely to make any difference to those ‘unsupportive’ parents and students who will not ‘comply’ (the minority), whether or not they sign.

And a common, though less significant view, is that:

- Agreements *may possibly* make a small difference to *a few* parents and students who would benefit from being informed or reminded of their responsibilities.

In common with the earlier sections of this report the case studies have provided information about:

- The progress of four schools with the implementation of HSAs
- The responses of key participants to the initiative.

The findings highlight:

- Considerable support for the underpinning principles of HSAs

together with:

- Significant concerns about the idea ‘in practice’.

Findings in the ‘positive’ case study schools suggest that agreements will do very little in themselves to improve school-parent relationships, but that they can provide a useful ‘extra’ document within a broad strategy for involving and communicating with parents *and* students. Findings within the ‘negative’ case study schools suggest that agreements are viewed as an extra administrative burden of dubious worth.

These findings lend little support to the DfEE's view that HSAs will promote partnerships between schools and parents. However, it should be noted that in *School S+* the responses of teachers and governors were particularly positive. This school had had an agreement for many years. Teachers and governors in *School P-* were particularly *negative* but this school had only recently developed its first agreement. This research has documented the *implementation process* of a new initiative and it is possible that the responses of key participants may change over time.

Part 3. Summary of key findings from the case study schools

The responses of teaching staff and governors

Teachers and governors in 'negative' case study schools emphasised that agreements:

- Will fail to reach those parents who are unsupportive of the school
- Are unnecessary where home-school relations are already good
- Are unnecessary as they duplicate existing school material (eg the school prospectus)
- Are of little value without sanctions attached
- Are problematic to implement as it is difficult to ensure that all parents and students sign
- Understand and 'own' agreements .

Teachers and governors in 'positive' case study schools emphasised that agreements:

- Can 'encompass' established school ethos and behaviour policies;
- Can provide a useful summary of expectations to be introduced at the beginning of the child's school career
- Can provide a useful reference point, reminder or lever to be referred to *throughout* the child's school career
- Can be 'tailored' to the needs and circumstances of the individual school
- Are meaningless without the framework of established ethos, practices and policies of the school.

Primary school issues

Teachers and governors in school P- noted that:

- Agreements introduce an unwanted and unhelpful formality to parent-school relations
- There may be logistical difficulties in involving children as signatories to agreements.

Teachers and governors in school P+ noted that:

- Agreements can be given out (and signed) along with other admissions papers
- Children are key participants to agreements and their involvement as signatories can be reinforced and made meaningful in the classroom.

Secondary school issues

Teachers and governors in school S- noted that:

- 'Ownership' of agreements is particularly problematic for secondary schools because of the large numbers of parents and children involved
- It is difficult to introduce a new agreement across a whole school, where older students have established attitudes and behaviours
- It is difficult to devise and administer systems to keep the document 'alive' such as an annual signing.

Teachers and governors in school S+ noted that:

- Agreements can be part of an *overall strategy* for involving both children and parents in the development of school policies and ethos.

The responses of students

- most children and young people thought the agreements were a good idea in principle, but they saw many problems with the idea in practice
- Children and young people were divided about whether agreements would have any impact
- Children in *School P+* (who had signed agreements) emphasised the expectations placed on them by the agreement - whereas children in *School P-* emphasised the expectations that were placed on their parents
- Young people in Year 10 were, in general, more sceptical about agreements than children in Year 7 and Year 6
- Year 7 children expressed particular concern about signing the agreement because there were 'a lot' of points for them to keep to and because they didn't know if they would be able to comply.
- Young people in Year 10 in *School S-* were more likely (than Year 10s in *School S+*) to link agreement 'problems' with the implementation process and with broader concerns that their views were not always respected within the school
- Young people in Year 10 in *School S+* thought they were less involved in the Key Stage 3 agreement and more involved (and responsible) at Key Stage 4.

The responses of parents

- Most of the parents recollected receiving an HSA
- All but one of the parents who remembered receiving an agreement said they had signed it
- Most parents thought that they had an important role to play, alongside schools, in the education of their children
- Many parents thought that the school responsibilities as set out in HSAs were 'no more than you would expect' - a summary of what the school was required to do
- Parents in *School P+* viewed the children's (and parents') responsibilities as fundamental and 'accepted without question'
- Parents in *School S+* were more likely than those in the other schools to think that agreements might have a beneficial effect
- The majority of parents were unconvinced that agreements would have any impact.

The convergence of responses from teachers, governors, students and parents

While almost all the respondents supported the underpinning principles of an HSA key responses across all respondents groups was that:

- Agreements are unlikely to make any difference to those 'supportive' parents and students who already 'comply'
- Agreements are unlikely to make any difference to those 'unsupportive' parents and students who will not 'comply' whether or not they sign.

A common, though less significant view, was that:

- Agreements *may possibly* make a small difference to *a few* parents and students who would benefit from being informed or reminded of their responsibilities.

7: Concluding Discussion, Postscript and Suggestions for Good Practice

A summary of the main findings of the research is included at the beginning of this report. More detailed summaries have been provided for the postal survey and case study phases at the end of sections 4 and 6. The findings highlight widespread support for the principle of good home-school relationships together with significant concerns about the idea of home-school agreements 'in practice'. While agreements are viewed positively in some schools, there is a considerable degree of scepticism among teachers, governors, students and parents concerning their likely impact.

The research has been concerned both with the implementation of HSAs and teachers', governors', parents' and students' attitudes towards them and their likely impact on home-school relations. In the Introduction the area was likened to a complex jigsaw puzzle with many similar shaped pieces. Throughout the research the same issues have recurred, and many have the same theoretical underpinnings as the issues raised in the literature review in section 2.

There is little disagreement that children benefit when school and home work closely together, and when parents are enabled to support their children's learning. How this is best achieved is fraught with conflicting values and assumptions about the role of parents in relation to that of schools. There are few objections to HSAs as general statements of intent about home-school relations, setting out the school's aspirations and expectations of students and their parents, in other words a home school policy. With Agreements the problems seem to result from three sources: the confused notions of the parents' role, the practical costs and benefits of implementing such an agreement and their lack of enforceability.

First what is meant by partnership between home and school, when one partner is so clearly unequal in power to the other? It is a curious definition of partnership when the school's commitments appear to be what they should be doing anyway as part of their daily work, while parents and students are instructed as to their behaviour. There may be little possibility of this becoming a more equal relationship when education is so centralised and there is little room for parental wishes and expectations to be met. In practice, parents can have little influence except through withdrawing their children from one school and transferring them to another.

Looking again at the possible models of 'the parent' proposed in section 2: 'customer', 'supporter', 'partner', 'client', 'problem' and 'independent'. Does the HSA initiative fit within any of these models? Given the inequality of power only 'supporter', 'client' and 'problem' seem to be plausible. The 'client' role seems unlikely within the current patterns of publicly-funded education, leaving the 'supporter' and 'problem' roles. Does this confirm the interpretation that 'good' parents are seen as 'supporters' while 'bad' parents are 'problems'? This dichotomy has been seen throughout the research: the majority of parents are seen by most respondents as being 'supporters' already. Are HSAs merely there to keep the 'bad' parents in line?¹

¹ Interestingly parents of children in private boarding schools do not seem to be conceptualised in such stark, or demanding, terms. These parents are not expected to be in partnership with the school – they are clearly 'customers' buying a service. But their lack of partnership is not seen as damaging to their children's learning.

An analysis of 90 HSAs showed considerable diversity in length, tone and content. Some were positive about their commitment to develop partnership with parents based on a more equal relationship between home and school, while others focused on parents' obligations. These differences probably reflect the school's underlying assumptions about the role of parents, and it may therefore be useful for schools to analyse their own HSAs critically using the 'partner', 'supporter', 'customer', 'client', 'independent' and 'problem' models.

The postal survey of 1,385 schools showed that some schools had HSAs in place as early as 1967 whereas others were drawing up their first ever agreements in response to the DfEE Guidance. Schools which were working on their HSAs after the Guidance was published were more likely to have consulted parents, reflecting the legal obligation to do so. It is surprising, however, that only two thirds had consulted all parents. The Guidance is quite clear on this point:

'There is great advantage in having an association within the school to represent the views of parents. If one does not already exist, governing bodies are urged to encourage parents to set up an association. This could then be consulted on a regular basis. It is still important that every parent, including those who are not members of an association, is consulted about the agreement before it is adopted by the governing body.' (page 5)

Our case studies have demonstrated that in these schools 'consultation' with *all* parents about the content of home-school agreements was sometimes conflated with asking parents to sign the agreement.

The most positive headteacher responses came from schools which had had an HSA in place before they were required. Governors, teachers and parents in these schools are also perceived to be more enthusiastic. These findings seem likely to be a reflection of the school's values and culture, but they may suggest that once HSAs are established parents respond more positively.

The practical problems of implementing HSAs relate, in the main, to the absolute costs in time and resources – considerable in a large school - and the costs considered in terms of their benefits. HSAs are not enforceable, and it would be difficult to see how they might be without penalising those children most likely to be in need of a good education. Thus the benefits may be very small: schools may spend a considerable amount of effort on a scheme which parents are not required to join, and which has little direct impact.

Looking to the future, there is little disagreement that home-school policies - defined by schools themselves - are widely accepted as a valuable way of setting out the school's aims and values concerning relationships with their parents. Home-school agreements are generally not opposed, but there is little confidence at present that they will enhance home-school relationships. However, this research was undertaken just before, and just after, HSAs became a statutory requirement. It is possible that they will lead to schools examining and reviewing their home-school policies, and the role of parents within the school. Their impact on parents and students is also difficult to predict. Since parents are not required to sign them, and there are no adverse consequences to either signing or not signing, their main impact will be through any changes in school values that they might lead to. More research is needed to explore these issues once the HSA initiative is well established.

Postscript

Since this research project started, two surveys which included the issue of HSAs have been published. The DfEE have also recently clarified the regulations in response to a parental request.

In January 2000 the Opinion Research Corporation International undertook a survey of teachers' views of parent-school relationships for the Association of Teachers and Lecturers². Teachers were asked whether they agreed with the statement:

'In signing home-school agreements, parents are acknowledging their partnership with the school to help educate their child.'

2 Morris, R and Ellison, G (2000) *Teachers and Parents: survey of teachers' views (prepared for Sheila Dainton, Association of Teachers and Lecturers and Joe Hallgarten, Institute of Public Policy Research)* London: Opinion Research Corporation International.

The researchers reported that:

'Just under two-thirds (64%) stated that they agreed or tended to agree, but with nearly one-in-five (18%) tending to disagree or disagreeing, a significant proportion were unconvinced. Looking more closely at those disagreeing, respondents teaching in primary education were less supportive than their colleagues from secondary education. From the open comments this primary school teacher wrote:

"Many parents sign these forms with no intentions of carrying out the agreement. They only mean something to parents who are already supportive towards the school.'" (page 11)

The research statement here is only concerned with teachers' views of parents' intentions *at the time of signing*. Our own research has been concerned with teachers' and others' views about their likely impact - a more demanding question. Even with this question only two-thirds of teachers thought that parents were taking HSAs 'seriously'.

In a recent NAHT survey³ of headteacher's workload the researchers commented:

'While this [the HSA initiative] is not seen as particularly high in workload or stress, it is particularly low in value and has been seen as largely unnecessary. The large majority of schools have very good relationships with the families they serve. If the school does not, a home-school agreement is unlikely to change it. OFSTED or the LEA should provide supportive intervention. The requirements for Home-School Agreements should be abandoned and arrangements left to the school's discretion.' (page 5)

The findings of both surveys are broadly in line with our own conclusions.

It has also recently been agreed by the DfEE that parents may change the terms of their HSA⁴. In this case the DfEE permitted a parent to delete aspects of the HSA concerned with religious values that he disagreed with. The DfEE wrote to the school's chair of governors:

'To clarify the position: under the law a parent may modify an agreement that has been presented to them. ... The Government sees the Home-School Agreement as a measure to give parents added confidence in working in partnership with teachers.' (January 11th, 2000)

In their 'customer' or 'client' role, and accepting that parents are not a homogeneous body, an individual contract between the 'provider' and 'user' of a publicly-funded service may be a responsive way to go forward. But can that be the case in a mass public education service with a centralised curriculum? How will schools be able to use HSAs to improve home-school relations generally if individual parents negotiate their own agreements?

3 Osborne, D (2000) *Survey into Headteacher Workload on behalf of the National Association of Headteachers* Haywards Heath: NAHT.

4 'Parents allowed to delete the Almighty' *Times Educational Supplement*, February 25th, 2000 (page 6).

SUGGESTIONS FOR GOOD PRACTICE

This research report has reported the sceptical views of many of the participants in HSAs. While they are positive about improving home-school relationships they see the introduction of HSAs as unlikely to make a major impact. Suggestions for good practice are, therefore, more difficult to offer than they would have been had the initiative been more enthusiastically received.

But clearly some schools have used the initiative to develop their own relationships with parents as part of a wider commitment to home-school relations. Reviewing our findings the following suggestions seem likely to be useful:

- ✓ An explicit home-school policy should be agreed, of which an HSA is part.
- ✓ An explicitly agreed statement of school aims and values will provide clarity for teachers, parents and students.
- ✓ An agreed statement of roles, responsibilities and expectations will also provide clarity.
- ✓ All parents should be consulted about the content of the school's HSA.
- ✓ Although schools are not required to consult their students, they will have a valuable contribution to make.
- ✓ Other stakeholders may also contribute to the development of the HSA.
- ✓ These discussions will enable the school's stakeholders to understand the perspectives of others, and to come to common understandings. These are worthwhile in their own right.

THESE GENERAL PRINCIPLES WILL PROVIDE A CONTEXT FOR THE AGREEMENT.

- ✓ Agreements should be written in a style that is positive and accessible to all parents and students.
- ✓ They should set high expectations stated in general terms, not list all those things that 'should *not* be done' or attempt to cover all eventualities.
- ✓ The tone of the HSA should enhance home-school relationships, not put pressure on parents.
- ✓ Agreements should attempt to be balanced and fair, not appear to make demands on parents and students which are in excess of the obligations of schools.
- ✓ Thought should be given to how all the stakeholders might develop a commitment to the agreement - to take ownership of it.
- ✓ Consideration should be given to how the agreement is to be kept meaningful and 'alive', rather than becoming a piece of paper to be signed, filed, and forgotten.
- ✓ There is clearly a decision to be made in each individual school about the likely cost-effectiveness of their HSA, and how much time and resources it wishes to invest in the initiative.

8: Appendices

Appendix 1 Questionnaire mailed to schools in May 1999

Appendix 2 Comments added to the questionnaire

Appendix 3 Case study documents: letters, study description and interview topics

Appendix 1

Questionnaire mailed to schools in May 1999

The Questionnaire and Covering Letter

RISE

The Research and Information on State Education Trust
Correspondent: Barbara Collins 54 Broadwalk London E18 2DW 0181 989 4356
www.mandolin.demon.co.uk/rise.html

June 1st, 1999

Dear Headteacher

RESEARCH ON HOME-SCHOOL AGREEMENTS

The Research and Information on State Education Trust has received a grant from the Nuffield Foundation to research Home-School Agreements. I am leading the research programme for RISE and am an experienced educational researcher from the Institute of Education, University of London.

Many schools already use home-school agreements. You will know, however, that the DfEE is expecting all schools to have such agreements in place by September 1999.

Our research will record schools' progress on the implementation of this policy. Information will be collected through questionnaires, and, at a later stage, by interviews. A report will be published in March 2000 which will set out schools' views on the initiative, and details of their experience.

We hope that you will be willing to complete and return this questionnaire. Please don't be put off completing it if your school hasn't yet made any progress or if you are rather sceptical about home-school agreements. Your experience and views will be just as valuable. We would also welcome any relevant documentation you could send us, for example, a copy of your home-school agreement if you already have one, or your home-school policy.

The final report will be based on general findings from the research. We assure you that it will not be possible from the report to identify any of the schools that have taken part.

Yours sincerely



Dr Janet Ouston

Trustees: Hilary Chamberlain, John Coe, Tony Edwards, Ada Fordham, Fred Jarvis,
Melian Mansfield, Maurice Plaskow, Joan Sallis, Margaret Tulloch
Registered Charity No. 283726

RISE

The Research and Information on State Education Trust

HOME-SCHOOL AGREEMENTS A QUESTIONNAIRE FOR SCHOOLS

This research programme is planned to find out how schools are responding to the DfEE's requirement for schools to have a Home-School Agreement. We are aware that schools have very diverse views on this initiative, and are at very different stages in implementing it. Some schools have had home-school agreements for many years, while others have not started work on them yet. It is important these differences are reflected in our research findings. Your contribution will be welcomed.

The questionnaire is divided up into sections according to your progress, so for many schools it is not actually as long as it looks. Please tick the relevant box, or write your answer after the question. Any other comments about any aspects of home-school agreements will be appreciated. We would also welcome copies of any relevant documents.

All replies will be treated in confidence. At no point will any respondents be identified.

please tick

1. Does your school have a home-school policy? Yes No

2. Were you aware of the DfEE's requirement to introduce a home-school agreement before you received this questionnaire? Yes No

3. Does your school have a written home-school agreement?

Yes, we already have a home-school agreement (please go to question 4 on page 2)

No, but we are working on it at present (please go to question 18 on page 4)

No, we have not done any work on it yet (please go to question 32 on page 6)

No, we have not done any work on it yet (please go to question 32 on page 6)

No turn to the appropriate question as indicated above ...

SECTION 1:

This section is only for those schools which ALREADY have a written home-school agreement in place.

4. When was your home-school agreement introduced? Month Year

5. Did you use any examples of good practice to help you draw up your home-school agreement? No Yes

(if yes, please tick any of these you used)

DfEE Guidance
 Examples from other school(s)
 LEA document
 Other sources

(please give details of other sources)

6. Is your home-school agreement written in any community languages? No Yes

(if yes, please give details of community languages)

7. Did you consult parents and carers about the home-school agreement? No Yes

(if yes, please give details of the form of consultation)

8. What percentage of parents and carers responded? 0 - 25%
 25 - 50%
 50 - 75%
 75 - 100%
 Not consulted

9. How did these parents and carers respond to the consultation? Mostly positively
 Mostly negatively
 Mixed
 Not consulted

(any comments about parents' and carers' responses?).....

10. Did you consult others about the agreement? No Yes

(if yes, please tick any of these you consulted) Students
 Teachers
 Other school staff
 Governors
 The LEA
 The diocese
 Others

(please give details of others consulted)

11. How many parents and carers have signed the agreement? 0 - 25%
25 - 50%
50 - 75%
75 - 100%

12. Do you do anything to encourage those who don't sign to do so? Yes
No
No, we don't need to as all parents sign

(if yes, please give details of what you do)

13. Are students asked to sign the agreement? No
Yes, all
Yes, some

(if yes, some, please give details)

14. Does a member of the school staff also sign the agreement? No
Yes

15. Do you have a review process for your agreement? No Yes

(if yes, please give details)

16. In your view, does your agreement comply with the DFEE Guidance? No
Yes
Not sure

17. Do you intend to modify your agreement to comply with the Guidance?

No, it already complies with the Guidance
(please go to question 32 on page 6)

No
(please go to question 32 on page 6)

Not yet decided
(please go to question 32 on page 6)

Yes, but we have not done any work on this yet
(please go to question 32 on page 6)

Yes, we are working on this at present
(please continue with question 18 on page 4)

Now turn to the appropriate question as indicated above ...

SECTION 2: This section is only for those schools which are currently WORKING ON drawing up a home-school agreement, or modifying one.

18. Are you / will you be using any examples of good practice to help you draw up this home-school agreement? No
Not yet decided
Yes

(if yes, please tick which of these you are, or will be, using) DFEE Guidance
Examples from other school(s)
LEA
Other sources

(please give details of other sources)

19. Will this home-school agreement be written in any community languages? No Yes

(if yes, please give details of community languages)

20. Have you consulted / will you consult parents and carers about this home-school agreement? No Yes

(if yes, please give details of the form of consultation)

21. What percentage of parents and carers responded? 0 - 25%
25 - 50%
50 - 75%
75 - 100%
Not yet consulted

22. How did parents and carers respond to this consultation? Mostly positively
Mostly negatively
Mixed
Not yet consulted

(any comments about parents' and carers' responses?)

23. Did you / will you distribute the DFEE's leaflet on home-school agreements to parents and carers? No
Yes

24. Have you consulted / will you consult others about this agreement? No
Not yet decided
Yes

Home-School Agreements: a true partnership?

(if yes, please tick any of those you have consulted, or may consult)

- Students
- Teachers
- Other school staff
- Governors
- The LEA
- The diocese
- Others

(please give details of others consulted)

25. When you introduce this home-school agreement do you anticipate that parents and carers will agree to sign it?

- Yes, all
- Yes, some
- Uncertain
- No

(please write any comments you have about this here)

26. Will you do anything to encourage those who don't sign to do so?

- Yes
- Not decided
- No

(if yes, what do you think you might do?)

27. Will students be asked to sign the agreement?

- Yes, all
- Yes, some
- No
- Not decided

(if yes, some, please give details)

28. Will a member of the school staff also sign the agreement?

- No
- Not decided
- Yes

29. Will this home-school agreement be in place by September 1999?

- No Yes

30. If no, when do you expect to have it in place?

by

31. Will you have a review process for this agreement?

- No
- Not decided
- Yes

(if yes, please give details)

Please continue by answering question 32 on page 6 ...

32. How many of your governors are enthusiastic about home-school agreements?

- All
- Most
- About half
- Less than half
- Very few

33. How many of your teachers are enthusiastic about home-school agreements?

- All
- Most
- About half
- Less than half
- Very few

34. What priority has your school given to the home-school agreements initiative?

- Very high priority
- High priority
- Moderate priority
- Low priority

(why did you give it this level of priority?)

35. In your view, what are the advantages and disadvantages of home-school agreements?(complete both if you wish)

Advantages.....

.....

.....

.....

Disadvantages

.....

.....

.....

Please continue by answering question 36 on page 7 ...

And finally, please tell us about your school

36. The school's name and address.....
.....
.....

37. The school is

infant	<input type="checkbox"/>
junior	<input type="checkbox"/>
primary	<input type="checkbox"/>
middle	<input type="checkbox"/>
secondary	<input type="checkbox"/>
special	<input type="checkbox"/>

38. It is located in

inner city	<input type="checkbox"/>
suburbs	<input type="checkbox"/>
country town	<input type="checkbox"/>
rural area	<input type="checkbox"/>

39. Number of students

40. Percentage of students eligible for free school meals%

41. This questionnaire has been completed by

headteacher	<input type="checkbox"/>
deputy headteacher	<input type="checkbox"/>
other	<input type="checkbox"/>

(if other, please give details)

42. Please add any other comments here, or on the reverse of this page.

Thank you
Please return in the enclosed pre-paid envelope to
RISE, FREEPOST LON6049, LONDON E18 2BR
by the end of June

Appendix 2

Comments added to the questionnaire

'Free' responses to the questionnaire

The first set of comments have been selected as typical of reported 'advantages and disadvantages' of HSAs. These are included to give the flavour of replies; all were coded and summarised.

Other comments were added at the end of the questionnaire in an 'optional' section. All these have been included. Note that the infant, junior and primary schools have all been called 'primary' to increase anonymity.

Advantages: Parents working as partners fully, involved and informed about their child's work, development and progress.

Disadvantages: The formality of actually signing a written agreement - in the past agreements made have been voluntary and non-threatening and worked out mutually - I hope this spirit will be continued. (Infant school headteacher)

Advantages: Commits parents to their responsibilities. Makes it clear to teachers/pupils what their responsibilities are. Establishes in the mind of the teacher that parents/pupils are customers with rights. It sets an agenda for all concerned with the school.

Disadvantages: There is a danger of, on the one hand, making unrealistic commitments and, on the other, making the agreement bland and wishy washy. It can be used as a stick? (Secondary school head)

Advantages: Clarifying issues, structured.

Disadvantages: 'Another bit of paper' (parent's comment) It won't affect those parents we have to chase anyway. I suspect quite a number of parents barely read it, just signed ...' (Primary school headteacher)

Advantages: The process itself was very valuable for all concerned.

Disadvantages: I have reservations about how many will actually sign it - as a process it has been very valuable. (Primary school headteacher)

Advantages: It draws attention to the need for children, teachers and parents to work together, which parents who already agree with this will salute.

Disadvantages: *To judge by the nil return at the consultative stage, it seems unlikely parents wish to take the agreement seriously. Given it has no 'teeth' complacent parents will ignore it - so it makes little or no difference to the current situation re any apathetic parents.* (Primary school headteacher)

Advantages: Chance to state school aims/priorities. Reminder to parents of their roles and responsibilities. Both parties make a commitment to each other.

Disadvantages: A paper exercise. Some parents may resent being asked to sign the agreement. It can open up other issues, for example, parents asking for child care at the start/end of days. The exercise implies some 'negotiation' over issues which are not negotiable, ie school rules. (Primary school headteacher)

Advantages: Gives clear outlines of the school communities' rights and responsibilities to governors, staff, parents and pupils.

Disadvantages: Reduces managerial flexibility of the headteacher. Implies that the present home school partnership is not enough and requires a written agreement to be effective. (Primary school headteacher)

Advantages: Might alert some parents to the fact that they need to contribute some effort to their child's education. Similarly might alert some children that they are also responsible for their own progress. Makes the school assess its priorities.

Disadvantages: Not legally binding in any way. Those most in need are least likely to read and sign. Another piece of paper to prepare, chase and file. (Primary school headteacher)

Advantages: It sends a clear signal to parents both about the importance of education and about their role in what needs to be an effective working partnership. It is also an effective tool for disseminating good parental practice where role models are few and far between.

Disadvantages: The current government initiative is toothless. I would have been happier to have our document seen as school practice, which it is, rather than a response to statutory guidelines. I feel it has undermined the partnership between school and the community without adding any statutory strength. (Secondary school headteacher)

Home-School Agreements: a true partnership?

- Advantages:* The basic values are established in writing; the school has a forum for highlighting expectations; children's expectations were also shared.
- Disadvantages:* Those children and families who really need targeting do not wish to comply or be involved; staff are very cynical with respect to its real value; extra burden. (Primary school headteacher)
- Advantages:* It can make the school look more professional to some parents
- Disadvantages:* Can alienate supportive parents who feel that they do not need this. If parents do not have to sign this agreement it seems to serve nobody. The governors did not discuss the issue at length because it is compulsory and parents do not have to sign. (Primary school headteacher)
- Advantages:* Sets out the school's expectations, and gives new parents a flavour of what we are about. Makes us list our main responsibilities in a simple way - provoking us to say from time to time - 'oops - did we really commit ourselves to doing that?'
- Disadvantages:* What do we do if parents refuse to sign? Well, nothing obviously. But you can conceive of a strange situation where parents/students might justify non-compliance with basic school rules on the grounds that they'd never accepted them by signing in the first place. And a possible stick to beat staff with 'you say in your agreement that you're committed to such-and-such but you haven't been doing that for my child'. (Secondary school deputy headteacher)
- Advantages:* Clear guidelines for everyone's role.
- Disadvantages:* Parents object to being 'told'. (Primary school headteacher)
- Advantages:* Enables one to reflect on school aims.
- Disadvantages:* Waste of time. No-one has to sign, no budget for photocopying etc. Another example of voluntary governors giving time to paper chase. To what effect? (Primary school chair of governors)
- Advantages:* Only if the parent signs it. It does at least focus the parent's mind on their responsibilities even if they refuse to comply.
- Disadvantages:* It creates problems where there were none before. Several of my parents, including governors have been quite antagonistic about it. (Primary school headteacher)
- Advantages:* Our HSA reflects values we feel are important; it gives the parents an idea of what we expect; it indicates that we share responsibility with parents and children.
- Disadvantages:* As it is not a legal document it is hardly worth the paper it is written on. It could be seen as controlling and authoritarian. (Primary school headteacher)
- Advantages:* May be useful in cases where there is a lack of understanding or acceptance of the roles and responsibilities home and school should undertake in education.
- Disadvantages:* Slightly insulting to parents/carers who take an active interest in their children's education and the life of the school. (Primary school chair of governors)
- Advantages:* Formalises mutual responsibilities. We intend to use it as a living document as part of each pupil's school journal and use in pastoral work on a day-to-day basis.
- Disadvantages:* Only as good as the home school relationships which already exist. May antagonise supportive parents. Tokenism if completed and filed away. (Secondary school deputy headteacher)

All comments included at the end of the questionnaire

Contracts and agreements are only successful if both parties understand the value of what is being agreed. The overwhelming majority of parents already understand what is required. The ones who don't and hence the ones this is aimed at will ignore this agreement as they ignore other rules and regulations. It is a 'cosmetic paper tiger'. (Secondary school headteacher)

We think it's a complete waste of time. We have an excellent induction programme and excellent relationships with parents. It's not enforced by law - what do you do with it when signed? (Primary school headteacher)

Infant schools have so much contact with parents and most schools have a well developed policy on parental involvement. I think the actual DfEE directive for all schools to have a written agreement is yet another burden and more bureaucracy. (Primary school headteacher)

I begin to get very cynical about 'initiatives' like this at this stage in the summer term. I expect it will be more work for my holidays. (Primary school headteacher)

Our parents respond well to verbal one-to-one encouragement and do not respond well to letters or formal documentation. (Primary school headteacher)

We have a weekly newsletter for parents, and an effective complaints procedure. We operate a biennial questionnaire on parental satisfaction. We have just completed a telephone campaign in which we spoke to every family about their views of the school, and their concerns. A whole school agreement is not particularly relevant. (Secondary school headteacher)

DfEE did not provide advice for special schools. It was very difficult to introduce this concept, considering all our pupils have complex learning difficulties. For some a home-school agreement, in its full sense, is not appropriate. (Special school headteacher)

We have tried to comply with the spirit of what is required, by seeking to highlight the school's distinctive features. In doing so we have met with a complete lack of interest. Please could DfEE stop imposing requirements on all schools in an attempt to manage the minority who aren't adopting minimum standards. HSAs should be advisory and open to school's professional judgement as to whether they are likely to have any value. (Secondary school member of SMT)

When governments actually begin to believe their own 'spin' we end up with policies that appear logical, supportive, etc but in reality are designed for the image rather than the content or purpose. I fear this is another such policy - it creates work for schools which reduces the time we need to do the job we should be doing - teaching. I am afraid the returns will not reflect the effort schools need to apply. After all, parents cannot be held to honour these agreements! (Primary school headteacher)

How much is all this costing? (Primary school headteacher)

A general feeling by all involved was that since the agreement could in no way be reinforced, the status quo may well exist. The agreement would have to be seen as part of the school ethos. (Primary school headteacher)

The idea is very good as it encourages good communication between home and school. Most of our parents will support it as they already do. Those who do not, will not sign it and do not believe it. It therefore changes nothing, unfortunately, at present. Perhaps we are one of the schools who already enjoy good communication. (Primary school headteacher)

We have, for the last four years, asked parents to sign it when they visit the school in June to discuss entry, polices etc. This is very much at odds with the DfEE guidelines but it does ensure that nearly all parents understand it and sign it. We intend to continue with this policy. Please note that it is not used as an instrument to insist on signature in order that we grant a place. (Secondary school deputy headteacher)

Can't help thinking this is just window dressing for politicians. (Primary school headteacher)

The concept is a good idea but does it really carry much weight? Many families at our school will simply dismiss this and they are the families whose children cause most disruption in our classes. (Primary school headteacher)

Many parents expressed the view that this was totally unnecessary, as we already agree. A waste of time and paper, but will make a nice file to keep on a shelf, or prop up one of our broken tables. (Primary school headteacher)

The two key points under disadvantages (not legally required and no action against those who don't sign) are key and central to future effectiveness. Regrettably I foresee a good idea floundering on a sea of apathy and non-compliance. But I hope I'm proved wrong. (Primary school headteacher)

All that the agreement requires, as per DfEE guidelines, appears in the School's Prospectus or elsewhere. We were told by the LEA that the process is the vital element, not the document itself. Overall feeling is that this was yet another 'initiative' costing time and money, and which schools are dealing with already. (Secondary school deputy headteacher)

We tried a draft agreement from the DfEE model, but found it did not meet the requirements. There was a poor response - one parent - to the consultation. One of our school priorities for next year is increasing parental involvement and an in-depth questionnaire and its responses should make the home school agreement a valid document. (Primary school headteacher)

Any opportunity to link with our parents is valuable, though it can be difficult to fit in with imposed time scales. (Primary school headteacher)

We are a Beacon School and therefore our parents are very supportive of any new documentation which they know we have to have in place by a given time. Our parents are happy about a HSA as we have had a home school link for some time. (Primary school headteacher)

If the agreement has no legal backing it is effectively unenforceable - anyway, how dire relationships would be if it needed to be. This is again extending the role of the school into areas where EWOs should be involved. (Primary school headteacher)

Although the agreement will come into force in September 1999 it marks a long period of time during which we have discussed the content and format of the agreement. It replaces a behaviour statement/agreement which was previously in place. (Secondary school deputy headteacher)

The junior and infant schools drew up a common agreement so that we had consistency and continuity. We are separate schools but most children follow on. (Primary school headteacher)

This process is a waste of time when one side of the partnership has a choice about taking part. (Primary school headteacher)

I feel this is an exercise which will not greatly affect the children's learning. It has taken a lot of time in drawing up, consulting and refining. I am still sceptical as to its value but may be pleasantly surprised. (Primary school headteacher)

Despite my answers we approach initiatives positively. We have many parents who follow our current unwritten agreement but sadly formalising responsibilities and rights without any backing if the agreement is broken will result, in my view, in little if any change. I hope I am pleasantly surprised. (Primary school headteacher)

I am very pleased that some research is being conducted into school's reactions to such initiatives. In my opinion it is the overload of externally imposed initiatives such as this which is crippling the education system. (Primary school headteacher)

In the consultation parents and boys seemed glad to have the opportunity their school and what they expect from it. (Secondary school governor)

Home-School Agreements: a true partnership?

The school decided that the governing body could take on a co-ordination role which they did with wide consultation. It really was a co-ordination role. (Primary school deputy headteacher)

As the headteacher I am very serious about the development of home school agreements. The initiative has urged the school to proceed, but to a longer time scale. The inclusion of families of pupils of non-compulsory school age would have been of greater value. Many families of nursery pupils in this school will feel offended to be excluded from the initiative. I shall ignore advice, therefore, and include them in the final document. (Primary school headteacher)

Could we receive 1,700 DfEE leaflets re home school agreements. Thank you. (Secondary school head of department)

This is a further administrative burden we could do without. (Primary school headteacher)

Don't usually have time for questionnaires. This one was quick to do. Well done. (Primary school headteacher)

We might as well have a 'national agreement'. Most models are difficult to disagree with. Once it's been sent home they will be discarded. It's a waste of time and paper. (Secondary school headteacher)

Feel that a home school agreement is a must for our school to develop the way we need it. We are very concerned over the homework issue. (Primary school headteacher)

Although considered important there are many additional priorities which need to be met: literacy hour monitoring; numeracy hour introduction; target setting and achieving the targets; appraisal; national curriculum review; new additions to the curriculum. (Primary school headteacher)

How much more meaningless, useless, agreements, documents, legislation is going to be sent to schools? What an absolute waste of everybody's time and efforts. (Primary school headteacher)

Good schools set great score by the ongoing good relationships they build with parents. Part of this is clearly stating expectations for parents, children and the school. A piece of paper is irrelevant! (Primary school headteacher)

We had devised our own HSA and feel quite incensed the the government has been so prescriptive. It is quite (extremely) demotivating. (Primary school headteacher)

A waste of time. More paperwork for the head and staff. A meaningless exercise. (Primary school headteacher)

Yet another piece of paper to fill in! To what effect? (Primary school headteacher)

In theory a good idea, in practice more bureaucracy for little return. (Primary school headteacher)

I can see this initiative failing. (Cultural diversity forms - remember them?) We have introduced an homework policy which is supported by our parents. Why do we need more? We don't want to alienate them. (Primary school headteacher)

Those parents who responded at length all said the same - some cynicism over effectiveness. The often repeated phrase was 'Those parents who care will follow, the rest will ignore it'. (Primary school headteacher)

We are concerned about the way the agreement is presented. We would probably wish to include it as part of the parent consultations ie after baseline assessment at the beginning of year 1 and 2. And what about the nursery? (Primary school headteacher)

Busy time of year for headteachers to fill in yet another piece of paper!! I'd be interested to hear what the response rate is!! Maybe a sweetener would have been a good idea!! (Primary school headteacher)

Yet again it is an example of the government initiating something for all schools when it is only necessary for a few. Many of our parents were offended at the prospect of being asked to sign such a document. (Primary school headteacher)

We know we are in a privileged area and have worked to develop a good relationship with parents but this has been a time-wasting exercise which has disrupted our own plans for school improvement. Thank you for an opportunity to contribute. (Primary school headteacher)

The idea of home school agreements is a good one, but too many aspects do not seem to have been thought through by DfEE. A pity really! (Primary school headteacher)

HSAs are a waste of time. They cannot be effective in opening a dialogue with parents and school. They state the obvious, they create a bureaucratic barrier between home and school. (Primary school headteacher)

I think the HSA was a brilliant idea. Schools need to know their rights and responsibilities as well as parents and children ... but all this does at present is to ask and fail to enforce. (Primary school headteacher)

Government imposition of such initiatives with strict timelines are difficult when schools are supposed to have their own development plan/action plan to be working on. It is difficult to invent time for fit such initiatives into an already overwhelming workload. Every one is very fed up! However, I do believe this is a worthwhile activity which will help this school, so have decided to invest time and energy in it. (Primary school headteacher)

Home school agreements are only of value if parents wish to keep them. I believe they do not advance the sum of human knowledge. However, we are obliged to undertake them. (Special school headteacher)

We are drowning in paperwork! Anything which does not have significant, rapid, input is not helpful. (Primary school headteacher)

Another example of a DFEE sledge hammer to crack a nut. Solutions to school problems need to be tailored to individual schools. (Primary school headteacher)

Agreement drawn up by a cluster group by a working party of teachers, parents and governors. A commonly agreed home school agreement is in place for all primary and secondary schools in the cluster - 12 schools in all. (Primary school headteacher)

Too many initiatives at present particularly if one works in a small primary school. Delegation is almost impossible. Parents governors are encouraged to take a lead on this one. (Primary school headteacher)

This agreement will and has taken up a lot of time in preparation. It will also cost a considerable sum on photocopying paper. I hope that it will cement good relations between parents and the school. (Primary school headteacher)

The home school agreements seem an extension to the contracts we have been using for targeted pupils. (Special school headteacher)

Home School Agreement requirements have been introduced in a fashion that typifies the authoritarian style currently in vogue. Potential value is being obscured by a heavy handed approach from the top. I wish that the government would listen to parents. (Primary school headteacher)

I hope this info is useful. No more initiatives, thank you!! (Primary school headteacher)

We already have a number of home/school agreements in place eg School Code (behaviour), homework, but we are currently putting them into one unit. (Primary school headteacher)

I'd be interested to hear the overall findings/analysis. Finally, let heads run their schools without interference. If we're not doing a good job we should be told very clearly. (Primary school headteacher)

We needed more time to complete the consultation. (Primary school headteacher)

I feel the agreement is not worth the paper it is written on. (Primary school headteacher)

Two years ago we had a home/school contract but it didn't seem to affect behaviour etc. Those who needed to sign it didn't bother so we abandoned it. (Primary school headteacher)

The agreement will help to clarify the school's procedures and policies. As a result, the parents will be clear as to what the school expects and what parents expect from the school. (Primary school headteacher)

We are about to work on a HSA. (Secondary school headteacher)

The school has 80% EAL pupils, with an extremely wide range of educational experiences. Parents, too, have a wide range of understanding of UK education, recognising progress and how to help at home. Some have had good to higher education, most have not with some not literate in their own language. (Primary school headteacher)

I highly recommend this sort of Agreement - we are a school that takes children from a large housing estate. Classes are calm, children are on task and enjoying the teaching. (Primary school headteacher)

I need to study recent legislation to assess whether our present contract meets the statutory requirements. (Primary school headteacher)

Appendix 3

Case study documents: letters, study description and interview topics

Letter to headteachers (accompanied by information about the study)

RISE

The Research and Information on State Education Trust

Registered Charity No. 283726: Correspondent: Barbara Collins

54 Broadwalk London E18 2DW 0181 989 4356

www.mandolin.demon.co.uk/rise.html

October 1999

Dear

Home-school agreements: a true partnership? A national study funded by the Nuffield Foundation

Thank you very much for returning your completed questionnaire for this study. Through preliminary analysis of the questionnaires we have identified your school as one (of several) where we would welcome the opportunity to collect further information. We are writing to you, therefore, to ask whether you might consider taking part in this next stage of the research.

In summary, we hope to learn more about responses to and progress with the home-school initiative by talking with a sample of teaching staff, governors, parents and students from your school. Where possible, we would like to include the views of both those who have been more and less involved with the initiative : and we would also like parents and students to be randomly selected. However, circumstances will differ between schools, and we would be keen to work together with you - at your convenience - to plan the best way forward for your particular school.

This study has considerable policy-significance; and the findings will be broadly publicised and disseminated (please see attached sheet for further information). However, we can assure you that those who take part will be neither identified or identifiable.

We do hope that you are willing to consider being involved in this next stage. One of the research team - Suzanne Hood - will telephone you within the next fortnight to discuss this further. When Suzanne contacts you she will be pleased to answer any questions you may have either about the study in general or about your participation in the research.

Yours sincerely



Dr Janet Ouston

Trustees: Hilary Chamberlain, John Coe, Tony Edwards, Ada Fordham, Fred Jarvis,
Melian Mansfield, Maurice Plaskow, Joan Sallis, Margaret Tulloch
Registered Charity No. 283726

Home-school agreements: a true partnership? December 1998 - March 2000.

A national study by the Research and Information on State Education Trust (RISE)
Funders: The Nuffield Foundation

Background to the study

The government has legislated to require schools in England and Wales to introduce a signed home-school agreement from September 1999. The home-school agreement initiative aims to provide a framework for the development of partnerships between parents and schools. However, whilst there is consensus about the educational values of improved relationships between parents and schools, there is considerable disagreement about whether signed agreements are the best way to achieve this.

What is the research focus?

This study will evaluate the responses of teachers, governors, students and parents to the initiative; and the progress of schools with its implementation. The research aims to:

- investigate the extent to which the home-school agreement initiative may promote improved partnerships between parents and schools;
- contribute to the development of good practice.

What does the research involve?

The study has two stages:

- a questionnaire for headteachers in 4,000 randomly selected schools in England and Wales.
- interviews in four schools (two primaries, two secondaries) with headteachers, and a sample of teachers, governors, parents and students.

How will the findings be used and reported?

At the end of the study the researchers will write a report on their findings, and a summary of good practice guidelines for schools. They will also write articles for relevant education journals. Those who take part in the research will be neither identified or identifiable in anything that is written.

Who are the researchers?

The study is being carried out for RISE by Dr. Janet Ouston, a senior educational researcher, and by Suzanne Hood who has considerable research experience in schools.

Letter to parents

RISE

The Research and Information on State Education Trust

Registered Charity No. 283726: Correspondent: Barbara Collins
54 Broadwalk London E18 2DW 0181 989 4356
www.mandolin.demon.co.uk/rise.html

/ 2 / 00

Dear Parent/Carer

Re: Research on Home-School Agreements

I am currently working on a national research study on home-school agreements (the attached information sheet tells you more). As part of this research I would like to hear parents' and carers' views about home-school agreements.

Your name has been 'randomly' selected from all the parents/carers at school (this means that everyone had the same chance of being chosen) and I am writing to you to ask whether you might consider being interviewed by me. This would involve a discussion on the telephone or, if you prefer, I could meet with you at home.

Please could you complete the slip below to say whether or not you agree to me contacting you to discuss this further. I do hope you agree as it is important that the views of parents and carers are included in this study. With many thanks.

Yours sincerely

Suzanne Hood (Project Researcher)

.....
I AGREE / I DO NOT AGREE to Suzanne Hood contacting me about the home-school agreement research (please delete as appropriate).

Your name.....Child's name.....

Address.....

Tel No: Day..... Evenings.....

When is the best time to contact you?.....

Please return to the school as soon as possible. Thank you.

Trustees: Hilary Chamberlain, John Coe, Tony Edwards, Ada Fordham, Fred Jarvis,
Melian Mansfield, Maurice Plaskow, Joan Sallis, Margaret Tulloch
Registered Charity No. 283726

Topics covered in interview schedules

Headteachers, teachers and governors

- Progress with the home-school agreement initiative to date.
- Understanding of purpose of home-school agreements
- Understanding of and views on home-school relations and home-school policies
- Views on value of home-school agreements - advantages and disadvantages - for schools; for parents; for pupils
- Developing an agreement: the initial planning stages; how was this done? Who was involved?
- The consultation process; who was involved; and how; view on the effectiveness of this process
- Parents signing the agreement - how is this arranged? Response of parents to date? Expectations for the future
- Students signing the agreement - will this / does this happen? Which students? How? Response of students to date? Expectations for the future
- Expected outcomes for the agreement : will it enhance partnership?
- How will school review home-school agreement / evaluate its success?

Students / parents

- Understanding of home-school agreements and their purpose
- Views on advantages / disadvantages of home-school agreements: for schools, parents, children?
- Experience of and responses to the school's home-school agreement
- Views on signing
- Will the home-school agreement make any difference / change anything?
- What might you do differently? Review processes?
- Ideas and views on home-school relationships.