



Llywodraeth Cymru
Welsh Government

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Community Focused Schools

How schools can engage with families, communities and multi-agencies to support the needs of their learners, families and benefit the wider community.

First published: 18 November 2022

Last updated: 18 November 2022

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Introduction

The '[Programme for Government update](#)' commits the Welsh Government to:

'Invest in the learning environment of Community Focused Schools, co-locating key services, and securing stronger engagement with parents and carers outside traditional hours.'

This is a key part of the wider policy for tackling the impact of poverty on educational attainment to ensure high standards and aspirations for all.

This guidance provides support for the development of Community Focused Schools in Wales. It draws together announcements made by the Minister for Education and Welsh Language in [his oral statement on 22 March 2022](#) and [key note speech at the Bevan Foundation on 16 June 2022](#). It also supports our aim to build communities that are thriving, empowered and connected.

Key terminology

We want there to be a shared understanding of our vision and a clear understanding of our guidance.

Please see the [glossary section](#) which explains what we mean when we use certain terms.

Why we want to develop Community Focused Schools

We want all schools in Wales to be Community Focused Schools:

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- building a strong partnership with families
- responding to the needs of their community
- collaborating effectively with other services

All children and young people should be well prepared for their future lives. This is the aspiration of the Curriculum for Wales; enabling them to become ambitious, enterprising, ethical and healthy, supporting their careers, relationships, health and well-being. There should be equity in education and all children and young people should be supported to overcome barriers and fulfil their potential (Welsh Government, 2022, '[Children and Young People's Plan](#)'). This means supporting children and young people to develop a wide range of skills, experiences and dispositions that enable them to thrive.

The school has a key role in achieving this, but the home environment and the wider community are also significant influences. By working collaboratively across school, home and the community we can support our children and young people more effectively.

We believe every child, every family and every community have strengths to build upon. By working in partnership, we are better able to find solutions that meet the needs of the individual learner and their family.

We know many education practitioners have been working in this way for decades but sometimes schools need more help, resources, guidance or funding to fully embed this approach.

We understand there are many competing demands on education leaders and practitioners, especially in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic, and this approach has to support staff so they in turn can support the children and young people.

This guidance explains what a Community Focused School is and why we believe adopting a community focused school approach will help our children

and young people, families and communities. It has been developed in collaboration with a broad range of external stakeholders including representatives from Estyn, the National Academy for Educational Leadership (NAEL), regional consortia, local authorities and third sector organisations. It recognises that we all have a part to play in developing Community Focused Schools in order to tackle educational inequality and achieve high standards and aspirations for all.

The following values underpin this guidance:

- All children deserve the best start in life and everything we do should reflect this. Their rights, as detailed in the **United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child** (UNCRC) are recognised, respected and promoted.
- Parents are important. They are their children's first and most enduring educators and their engagement is crucial. (Early Education, 2021, **Birth to 5 matters**)
- Collaboration is vital to ensure a fully inclusive approach, developed through forming trusting relationships and partnerships.
- Every child, family and community has strengths from which to build.

Estyn, the education and training inspectorate for Wales, has recognised the importance of Community Focused Schools. Their report, **Community schools: families and communities at the heart of school life** provides case studies illustrating aspects of each element of the community focused school approach. They also identify 8 defining characteristics of a Community Focused School:

1. a focus on social, emotional and health needs of all learners including access to a coherent range of services and personal learning plans
2. engagement with families, often including the development of a family support service in school
3. engagement with the wider community, providing both the opportunity and the mechanisms to build capacity in the local community
4. integrated provision of school education, informal as well as formal

- education, social work and health education and promotion services
5. integrated management often supported by an integration manager
 6. services delivered according to a set of integrated objectives and measurable outcomes, a significant feature in many cases being co-location
 7. commitment and leadership
 8. multi-disciplinary training and staff development

Our model for Community Focused Schools



This model reflects a whole-system approach. Working from early years to

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post-16 is crucial to the success of our children and young people.

The elements of family, community and multi-agency engagement are interconnected. Each element does not work in isolation but has an influence and impact on the others, combining to become a self-perpetuating model.

For example, when schools engage with families, they become more aware of the needs of families and are able to offer a broader range of services. In order to access and provide these services the school has to engage with the wider community. Examples of each element may include:

Family engagement

- Working closely with families to give children and young people the best home learning environment possible. Ensuring families have the skills, confidence and resources to actively support their child's learning at home.
- Working in a constructive way with families to address any barriers to engagement.

Community engagement

- Acting as a key part of the local community, offering opportunities to use the school facilities for adult learning, well-being, play, sporting, cultural and other community activities.
- Signposting to other support or advice services.
- Utilising the skills and organisations within the community to extend and enrich learning opportunities and to positively influence change.

Multi-agency engagement

- Collaborating effectively with other key services and agencies to ensure that all children thrive and learn.
- Sharing information so that children and young people and their families are able to access the appropriate support at the right time.
- Supporting access to wider services which may be co-located in a school premises or located elsewhere within the community.

Developing all 3 elements in an integrated way will ensure the greatest impact on children and young people's attainment, behaviour, attendance and aspirations and is particularly required in areas that face socio-economic disadvantage.

While it is recognised that many schools already take this approach to education, the difference between a Community Focused School and other schools is the intentional approach of bringing together these elements to support the children and families who attend the school.

There are 4 key enablers which support the progression between family, community and multi agency engagement.

Collective vision

The need for all stakeholders to help develop and realise the vision for the school, families and communities.

Collaborative leadership

Leadership across stakeholders to ensure shared voice, decision making and

goals.

Trusting relationships

Trusting and non-judgmental relationships between schools, families and community members, and between staff and children or young people allowing everyone to feel listened to, valued and respected.

Connected learning

A strong focus on high quality and connected learning across home, school and the community, maximising the opportunities in each sphere.

Valuing and promoting diversity, equity and inclusion

We know that the most effective approaches are those that are developed in partnership with, and tailored to, the specific needs of the parents and the community (Goodall, J. 2018. A Toolkit for Parental Engagement: From Project to Process. School Leadership and Management). This means that each Community Focused School will look different as it will be meeting the specific needs of its children and young people, families and communities. It will reflect the diversity of children and young people, families and communities in Wales and create an inclusive atmosphere where all people feel welcomed, respected, supported and valued.

Diversity

A Community Focused School celebrates and acknowledges differences in children and young people, families and communities. It also ensures practice is appropriate and reflects those differences.

Equity

A Community Focused School understands the different needs and barriers that children and young people and families face and adjusts the support they provide accordingly.

Inclusion

A Community Focused School creates an atmosphere where all people feel welcomed, are able to actively participate and feel like they belong.

It is through adopting this holistic and interconnected approach, and by focusing on high quality learning and teaching, we will achieve high standards and aspirations for all.

The elements of a Community Focused School

Family engagement

What families do matters and they are crucial to children and young people's

success. What happens at home in the early years of a child's life not only shapes their cognitive development and educational achievement, but also their longer term life success (National Literacy Trust, 2020. [Literature review on the impact of COVID-19 on families, and implications for the home learning environment](#)). Acting early and supporting parents to engage in their child's early learning is key (Finnegan, J., Telfer, C., and Warren, H. 2015. [Ready to Read: closing the gap in early language skills so that every child in Scotland can read well.](#)) and schools who develop their relationships with parents are well placed to do this. However, it is important for schools and families to work in partnership with each other and this can only be achieved if trusting and respectful relationships are created. Within a Community Focused School approach, families are made to feel welcomed, listened to and valued. Their strengths, skills and the role that they have in supporting their child's learning and development is acknowledged and valued. Schools should be proactive in building relationships with families and take the time to understand how best they can engage with them. This is even more important if the families own experience of school was difficult, as they may feel anxious or intimidated by the school environment.

Families should be made to feel welcomed and encouraged to feel a part of the school. Then schools are best placed to work with them to develop wider strategies which support engagement in children and young people's learning, acknowledging the emphasis of the home learning environment. By listening to and collaborating with families, specific and targeted advice on how to help children at home with their learning can be devised with supporting resources provided (Welsh Government. 2014. [Guidance for using the Pupil Deprivation Grant, What Really Works?](#); Estyn, Her Majesty's Inspectorate for Education and Training in Wales. 2018, [Involving Parents - Communication between schools and parents of school-aged children](#)).

For family engagement to be successful, a strong vision and a whole school approach is required. However, research has also shown that when schools identify a staff member to lead family engagement, their practice is more

effective (Goodall, J. and Vorhaus, J. 2011. Review of Best Practice in Parental Engagement. London: Department for Education) and therefore the development of family engagement officer (FEO) roles is advised. We recognise that not all children and young people are educated at school. Some are educated in other settings or have elected to be educated at home. However, the values and the elements of this guidance are still applicable.

Case study: School A (Primary School)

The FEO in School A has been in post for 11 years. During that time, she has led a whole-school approach to developing family and community engagement.

An early emphasis of the school's work was to develop parental involvement, where the parents felt welcomed into the school and were offered opportunities to become involved in school events.

Over time, the emphasis of the FEO role has moved to a focus on parental engagement with children's learning and a shift has occurred allowing greater ownership and action from the parents. The family forum provides opportunities for parents to input into the decision making of the school and for the school to listen to their views. The Community Skills week enables the school to utilise the skills and strengths of the parents to broaden children's learning.

Effective communication and the use of audits and questionnaires, have allowed the school to tailor curriculum advice and guidance responding to views and needs of the parents. An example of this is the support and information offered to parents on developing early literacy skills. Workshops involving parents and their children focus on the teaching of

phonics and resources are shared to support additional learning at home. The evaluation of this programme showed a positive impact on children's attainment in phonics along with an increase in the confidence of parents in understanding how to support phonics at home.

Community engagement

The research evidence shows that, if schools are to play their full part in mitigating the impact of poverty on attainment, strong engagement is required, not only with the families of the learners but also with the wider community (Estyn, Her Majesty's Inspectorate for Education and Training in Wales. 2020.

Community Focused Schools: families and communities at the heart of school life). Schools are a key part of the local community; by developing partnerships and engagement with community organisations and by best utilising their assets, they can become an important focal point for the community. Partnership working brings benefits to the school, children and young people and their families. It also has positive benefits for the community, helping to create thriving, empowered and connected communities.

Developing wider community partnerships, local community groups as well as public and private sector organisations, can:

- strengthen the school's family engagement work
- strengthen the school, bringing in resources and enriching the curriculum
- enable schools to make a positive contribution to community life, developing community cohesion and social capital
- provide greater opportunities for adult learning, allowing community members to learn new skills and develop their confidence
- enable wider community use of the school's assets, for example, sporting and social facilities, or the school grounds, which can enhance the health

and well-being of the local community

- increase the use of wider community support services, for example, citizen's and careers advice, etc.
- enable collaboration with community group leaders for joint community projects
- allow schools to draw upon the specialist knowledge, skills and resources within the community to support the educational, social, health and well-being needs of children and young people
- help schools encourage re-engagement with learners through links with wider community and third-party providers, for example, play providers, to support additional enrichment opportunities

Case study: School B (Secondary School)

The School B Cluster engagement sessions offer valuable opportunities for parents and members of the community to benefit from the physical and human resources of the school. Staff offer a range of learning opportunities to family and community members on a regular basis. These include sessions on:

- basic ICT and internet safety
- financial maths
- 30-minute meals
- bilingualism

In addition, the school values and respects the skills, talent and resource the community can offer to the school.

By working in partnership with parents and the community, the school has contributed to a significant reduction in the percentage of young people

not in education, employment or training (NEET) and crime and anti-social behaviour in the community have reduced. The community has pride in the achievement of children and young people and contributes to raising their aspirations and self-esteem.

Multi-agency engagement

Learning does not happen in isolation. There is a close link between health, well-being and attainment; children and young people with better health and well-being are more likely to achieve. It is acknowledged that children and young people often come to the classroom with challenges that impact their ability to learn, explore, and develop to their greatest potential. Effective learning can only take place when children are engaged and are in an emotional state where they are receptive to learning (Welsh Government, 2021. [Framework on embedding a whole school approach to emotional and mental well-being](#)).

The signposting to, or co-location of, a broad range of services will ensure that all children's needs are met and that barriers to learning are minimised. Services could include those that target health and well-being as well as physical, cognitive and social needs.

It is also important to recognise the role of play in supporting the well-being of children and young people, ensuring they have time and space to play and to express themselves. This collaborative approach aligns to current models and ensures that focus is placed on overcoming barriers to learning by providing key services on site. The NHS's [Nurturing, Empowering, Safe and Trusted \(NEST\) framework](#) represents an established whole-system approach for developing mental health, well-being and support services for children and families.

Combining services and offering an integrated approach provides positive engagement and support for children from birth. Health visitors, school nurses, social workers, educational psychologists and learning mentors provide a comprehensive and highly skilled team around the child and family approach, ensuring their needs are identified and catered for.

Case study: School C (Special School)

School C provides a base for a number of key services, including social work team, Autistic Spectrum Disorder (ASD) outreach team, sensory support service and the child development centre. The school is open all year round to provide access to this provision.

This integrated services approach enables parents to attend appointments for any health-related matter onsite. This approach also ensures children get the right support at the right time.

More Case studies can be accessed in Estyn's report '[Community schools: families and communities at the heart of school life](#)'.

Evidence on parental and community engagement

There is significant research which highlights the link between parental engagement in children's learning and children's outcomes. Research shows that the effect parents can have on learning is greater than the effect schools can have (Desforges, C. and Abouchar, A. 2003. The Impact of Parental Involvement, Parental Support and Family Education on Pupil Achievement and

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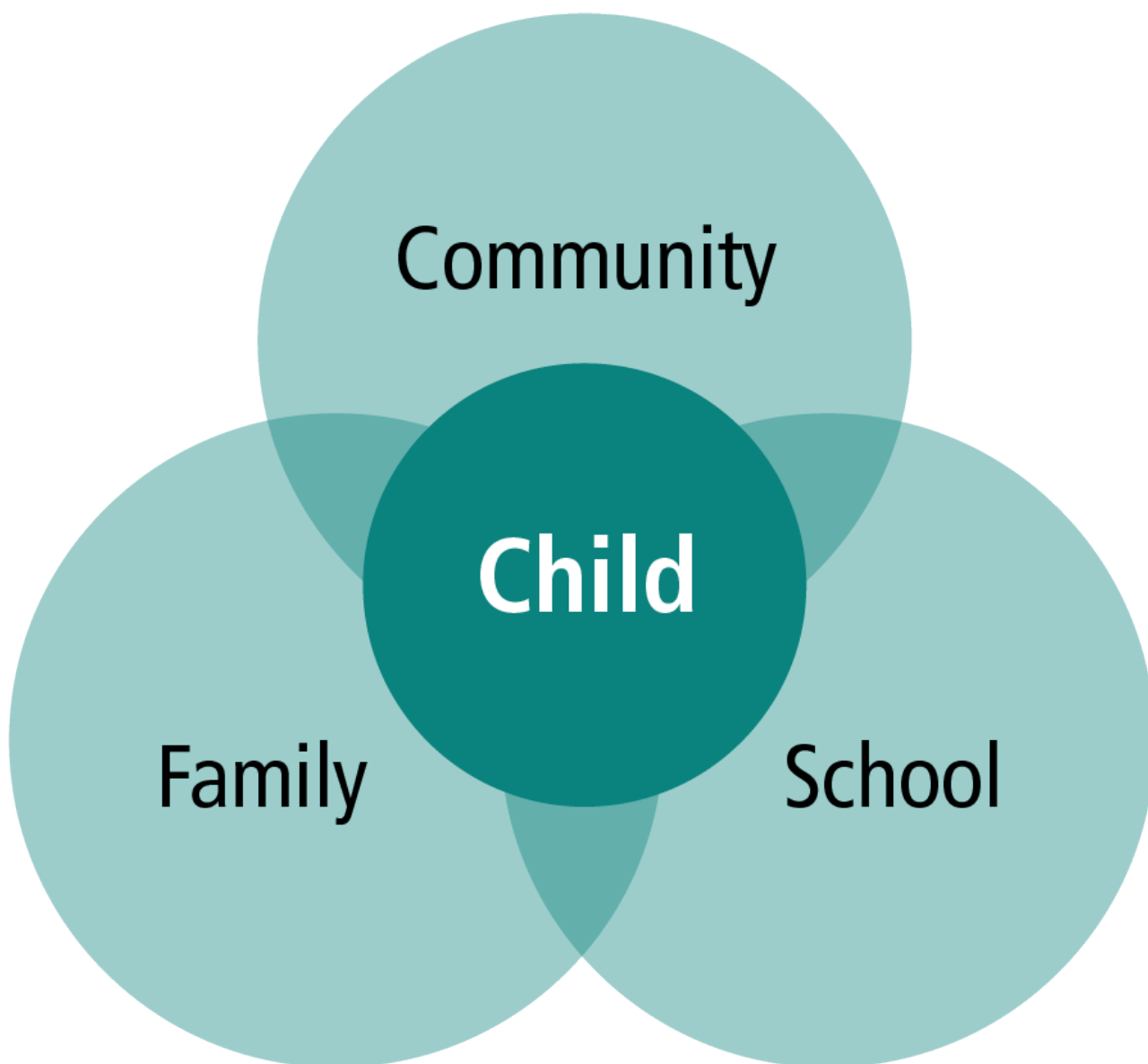
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Adjustment: A Literature Review), highlighting that most of the difference in how well children do at school is dependent on what happens outside the school gates, whether it is at home or in the community (Rasbash, J., G. Leckie, R. Pillinger and J. Jenkins (2010). Children's educational progress: partitioning family, school and area effects. *Journal of the Royal Statistical Society: Series A (Statistics in Society)* 173(3): 657 to 682).

It is unsurprising, therefore, that parental and community engagement has attracted increasing attention from those looking to secure improvements in educational outcomes.

In order to secure improvements in learning, the wider influences that affect children's learning should be acknowledged (Goodall, J. 2021. *School Reform and Parental Engagement learning in the UK*).

There are 3 overlapping spheres of influence in which children learn and grow: the family, the school and the community (Epstein, J. 2009. *School, Family and Community Partnerships: caring for the children we share*).



A Community Focused School places the child at the heart of its approach. It connects the family, school and community together in order to provide a holistic and integrated approach to learning and development (Estyn, Her Majesty's Inspectorate for Education and Training in Wales. 2020. **Community Focused Schools: families and communities at the heart of school life**). It adopts a positive approach, building on the strengths already within families, schools and communities and using these as a platform for further development.

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Schools in areas which are socio-economically disadvantaged may face additional complexities which impact the child, family and community. While schools cannot mitigate for all external factors, in order to improve learning, it is appropriate to include parents, families, and the community. This is a view which has been endorsed by the Education Endowment Foundation (EEF) who state:

‘The research is clear that the best way to support learners, including those at risk of underachievement in the current system is to work in partnership with families.’ (EEF. 2018. **The Attainment Gap**)

Estyn, the Inspectorate for Wales, has consistently promoted the use of parental and community engagement (Estyn, Her Majesty’s Inspectorate for Education and Training in Wales. 2018. **Involving Parents - Communication between schools and parents of school-aged children**). They have stated:

‘Strong schools recognise that they cannot address disadvantage caused by poverty alone. They work with families, communities and a range of partners to reduce the impact of poverty on vulnerable pupils’ (Estyn, Her Majesty’s Inspectorate for Education and Training in Wales. 2019. **The Annual Report of Her Majesty’s Chief Inspector of Education and Training in Wales 2018-2019**).

Their most recent publication calls for schools to strengthen family and community engagement, expand the use of their assets for the benefit of the community and introduce co-location of services (Estyn, Her Majesty’s Inspectorate for Education and Training in Wales. 2020. **Community Focused Schools: families and communities at the heart of school life**).

Children have multiple needs, which, if unmet, can present barriers to their motivation and ability to learn (Basch, C. 2011. Healthier Students are better Learners: A missing link in school reforms to close the achievement gap. Journal of School Health). Schools which recognise this and who have services on hand to meet these needs ensure that all children are able to access their learning

opportunities. Schools who promote family and community engagement and act as a centre for the community (bringing together education, health and social services, youth and community development) show improved learning, stronger families and healthier communities.

Supporting all learners to progress

Despite improvements in equity, there are still great differences in educational outcomes between different groups of children and young people, with those children who are deemed to be socio-economically disadvantaged doing less well than their peers (Estyn, Her Majesty's Inspectorate for Education and Training in Wales. 2020. **Community Focused Schools: families and communities at the heart of school life**).

This gap begins in the early years and is already evident when children begin school aged 5 (EEF. 2018. **The Attainment Gap**; EEF. 2021. **Impact of school closures and subsequent support strategies on attainment and socio-emotional well-being in Key Stage 1: Interim Paper 2**). Compared to the overall population, children remain more likely to be in low-income households. Between 2017 to 2018 and 2019 to 2020, 31% of children in Wales were living in relative income poverty, which equates to around 190,000 children (**Welsh Government analysis** of Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) Households Below Average Income data).

Furthermore, children and young people from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds have been more greatly affected by the COVID-19 pandemic and the subsequent school lockdowns and have experienced greater levels of learning loss (EEF. 2021. **Impact of school closures and subsequent support strategies on attainment and socio-emotional well-being in Key Stage 1: Interim Paper 2**). We do not yet know what the full impact of the pandemic will be, but emerging research on the subsequent disruption of

learning predicts a further widening of the gap in attainment (Department for Education (DFE). 2021. [Understanding Progress in the 2020/21 academic year](#)).

However, the pandemic has also made us consider a new way of working. Schools closed for onsite education for most learners, but the work of schooling continued through a blended learning approach. This highlighted the fact that learning does not need to be restricted to what happens in schools. It has emphasised the crucial role that parents, family and community members play in children's learning and has prompted a wider debate about the role they can play moving forward.

'Stronger relationships with parents and the community will help education systems bring together the different environments in which students learn and strengthen more personalised learning approaches.' (OECD. 2020. [Lessons for Education from COVID-19. A Policy Maker's Handbook for More resilient Systems](#)).

Overcoming the impact of poverty on attainment and breaking the cycle of intergenerational poverty is complex and requires a long-term strategy. Research has shown that a cohesive approach which draws together policy areas has the greatest impact (Education Policy Institute. 2021. [Education, recovery and resilience in England](#): Phase two report). Our approach to Community Focused Schools should not be seen in isolation, but as a supporting part of the wider policy areas in education. Links to these areas can be found in '[Annex 1: Links between Community Focused Schools and other policies](#)'.

How Community Focused Schools fit with our other policies

Children will come into contact with various services and institutions from the moment they are born through to adulthood. It is important these support services are working together as an effective pipeline. We know that moving from 1 sector to another can be very disruptive for children, for example the move to secondary school from primary school can be difficult for some children. It is important that services on the ground are joined up but also that policy-makers themselves are making sure that there is a package of policies that work together at strategic level.

A Community Focused School approach supports a broad range of policy areas. More information can be accessed in '[Annex 1: Links between Community Focused Schools and other policies](#)'.

Glossary

These definitions help to explain what we mean when we use the following terms:

- Families – a support system of parents, siblings, relatives and other persons focused on the well-being of its members.
- Parents – people with parental responsibilities, for example mothers, fathers, foster carers, adoptive parents, step-parents, 'kinship' parents and grandparents.
- Community – those within the local area but also all those who are interested in and affected by the quality of education. Many of our

communities are geographically, culturally and socially diverse but still share social connections and a great sense of cynefin (belonging) through the school, their children and their families.

- Parental involvement – parents taking part in school life and community.
- Parental engagement – parents actively supporting their child's learning.
- Home Learning Environment – including the physical resources available at home, but also the quality of the learning support from families.
- Diversity – all the ways in which people differ, including protected characteristics.
- Equity – allocating resources as needed, through a personalised approach, to create equitable outcomes for all.
- Inclusion – ensuring everyone feels welcomed, supported, respected and valued.
- Collaborative leadership – leadership which includes all stakeholders to ensure shared voice, decision making and goals.
- Community engagement – the working relationship between communities, community organisations and public and private bodies to help them to identify and act on community ambitions.
- Community mapping – a collective process that creates an inventory of local assets and strengths.
- Adult community learning – flexible learning opportunities, both formal and informal, for adults, delivered in venues within the community to meet local needs.
- Social capital – social networks and connections within a community, the effectiveness of local community and voluntary organisations and resources of public, private and third sector organisations that are available to support a community.
- Family learning – any learning activity that involves both children and

adult family members, with intended learning outcomes for both.

- Asset-based approach – an approach that focuses on opportunities and strengths which is forward thinking.
- Deficit-based approach – an approach that focuses on deficits, weaknesses or problems.

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