

Celebrating 25 years of educational partnership – what have we learned?

There is widespread agreement about the need for family and community involvement in education. Compelling research evidence in Ireland and elsewhere demonstrates that children are more successful in school, they like school better and stay in school longer when their families and schools work together to support their learning (Henderson et al., 2007). Teachers want the best for their students. They want families to influence, guide and assist their children to do their school work and they want to know how to work with parents in positive ways to improve student success. Families also want the best for their children. They want to communicate with teachers and find out how to help their children do their best. Students want to succeed in school. They need support, encouragement and guidance from their parents, teachers and other community members (Epstein, 2011).

There is less agreement on which involvement practices are most effective and on how to get most families involved. The challenge is not to 'dictate' involvement by telling parents what to do and expecting them to respond. Neither can educators simply presume that 'good' parents will become involved on their own and that those who don't are uninterested or irresponsible. We know from research that partnership is a more successful approach whereby schools, families and communities work together to share information, guide students, solve problems and celebrate successes.

So what have we learned from 25 years experience of building educational partnerships within the Home School Community Liaison (HSCL) scheme? Recent evaluations by the inspectorate in 44 DEIS schools observe that these schools "have paid particular attention to how they communicate with parents and how they involve them meaningfully in the life of the school" (DES 2015:34). Parents' views of these schools and of education were also found to be increasingly positive.

At school level, HSCL coordinators work with teachers to develop awareness of family circumstances and to promote the concept of parental involvement in learning. They liaise with staff to plan, support and implement a range of activities in the classroom and the school.



"When schools, families and community groups work together to support learning, children tend to do better in school, stay in school longer, and like school more." Henderson et al., 2007:2

HSCL coordinators have also pioneered the creation of links and collaboration between schools and community agencies (e.g., local partnership companies, family support services, youth services). Local education committees comprised of educators, parents and community work collaboratively to address school-related issues prioritised by the members.

Most DEIS schools have a parents' room that is used for parents to drop in informally or for courses and meetings. This affords parents the opportunity to engage with the coordinator, other parents or staff members in informal ways and to access information about the school. HSCL coordinators also visit homes to reach out to parents and to build bonds of trust and respect.

Courses and activities for parents usually begin with leisure-type, non-threatening activities in response to parents' expressed interests (e.g. cookery, sport, gardening, mindfulness) that are enjoyable and positive experiences and help parents to meet and get to know the coordinator and each other. The aim is that parents would progress to activities with specific focus on children's learning (e.g. maths for fun, science for fun, one book, school library, nutrition trail) and/or personal development courses (e.g. parenting, leadership skills). Some parents also complete FETAC accredited courses. Another aim is to engage parents in leadership roles and in policy making in

schools (e.g., subcommittee on code of behaviour).

Educational partnership does not have to be threatening or demanding. There are many things that educators already do and many more simple practices that would be easy for schools to adopt. We are currently working with coordinators in schools around Ireland to identify good ideas and practical activities which will be published in a book in the near future. *InTouch* will also feature a number of articles this year to celebrate 25 years of Home School Community Liaison. Please feel free to contact us about your work.

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