

New Zealand Principals' Federation (NZPF) Submission on the Inquiry into Engaging Parents in the Education of their Children

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The New Zealand Principals' Federation (NZPF) represents the interests of 2,578 Principals of Primary, Intermediate and Secondary Schools throughout New Zealand. We acknowledge the Education & Science Select Committee's invitation to our organisation to make a submission on the inquiry into engaging parents in the education of their children and thank you for the opportunity to respond. We further request the opportunity to present our case to the committee.

Introduction

NZPF welcomes the Select Committee's Inquiry into how best to engage parents in their children's education including investigating the elements of an effective engagement strategy, identifying the best practice examples of different approaches and how to leverage the strengths existing within communities to help lift the educational achievement of children and young people.

NZPF recognises there are advantages for children's learning if strong school-parent partnerships are cultivated. Parents, whanau and the community can significantly influence the educational outcomes for children. NZPF offers the following comments for consideration in relation to the objectives put by the Select Committee:

1. How best to engage parents in their children's education - drawing on evidence from ERO (2008) 'Partners in Learning: Schools' Engagement with Parents, whanau and communities'; PISCPL; Best Evidence Synthesis Iteration

The ERO (2008) report emphasises the importance of partnerships between schools and families and NZPF agrees with the six factors that ERO identifies in its report as critical to strengthening engagement with parents. These are listed as:
leadership, relationships, school culture, partnerships, community networks and communication.

There is no doubt that when there is a shared understanding of what each of these factors means successful partnerships between school and parents can occur. There may be a natural match of expectations, in which case strong relationships can quickly develop. For some schools that does not happen naturally. In all cases, achieving success in all factors is a challenge for all schools and the difficulties involved should not be under-estimated. In particular, the challenges are greater, the more diverse the school community is. Where the community also suffers economic disadvantage, challenges are exacerbated.

Leadership

Critical to successful engagement with parents is strong leadership. The school principal can play a powerful role by creating a shared vision and encouraging whole-school commitment to it. They enable the necessary conditions to foster parental engagement. Without this leadership, it is less likely that any initiative to better engage parents in their children's learning will be successful.

Relationships

Establishing trusting relationships between the school and the parents is a pre-requisite to successful engagement. Parents need to feel welcome at school and require open access to the principal and the teacher(s) in order to develop healthy relationships with them. This requires quality two-way communication between teachers and parents and parents need full and frank information about their child's progress before they can begin supporting their learning. In many cases they may also need information or explicit instruction in how best to support their child's learning. In some cases they may first need literacy, numeracy and behaviour management skills themselves before they are ready to engage with their children's learning.

School Culture

Establishing a school culture where parents and students feel included and welcome is work initiated by the leadership team. If the school culture does not reflect the values and expectations of the school's parent community, parents will feel alienated. Much work is required by the leadership team to ensure that parents and the community own the school's culture which in turn reflects their aspirations for their children.

Partnerships

Genuine partnerships are where two parties see themselves as equally valued, equally powerful, equal contributors and equally effective. For schools to achieve true partnerships with parents there needs to be on-going dedication, persistence and active relationship building. Two-way engagement is about each party learning from the other and each sharing ideas with the other.

Community Networks

Parents are members of a wider community beyond the school and to optimise the chances of successful engagement with parents it is helpful for a school to also have strong community networks. Schools that have partnered with community networks to develop the school's aspirations, curriculum and school cultural values and norms are better placed to engage with the children's learning because family and community knowledge is already incorporated into the children's learning. This creates a better match between school, community and learning. Strong community networks are also empowering for families.

Communication

Fostering a culture for the school where open, honest and appropriate communication is the norm will enhance the chances of parents better engaging with their children's learning. Challenges for the school include language barriers, accessibility to parents, confidence of parents to engage, attendance levels of parents at parent interviews and confidence of parents to respond to communications from the school. Good leaders find ways through the difficulties, including visiting children's homes, but require appropriate support and resources to do so.

2. Barriers to Engagement

The following section addresses some of the barriers to parents' engagement with schools.

There are a number of different areas of mismatch that can exist between parents' expectations and schools. There are also a number of circumstances that can work against parental engagement.

These include:

(i) Socio-economic issues resulting in alienation and lack of hope

New Zealand has a high rate of child poverty which is presently continuing to grow unchecked. 270,000 New Zealand children or one in four, live in poverty which is reflective of the incredibly high equity gap in New Zealand. If there continues to be no plan to immediately address this problem, full engagement of parents in their children's learning is not achievable. Parents who live without hope for their or their children's future and who cannot provide the necessities of life without resorting to charity are unlikely to initiate engaging with children's learning. It can also be difficult for teachers to reliably contact parents who can't afford to maintain payments on landlines or mobile phones.

Schools alone cannot address the issue of poverty.

(ii) Cultural Alienation

As New Zealand's population becomes more diverse, especially in the Auckland region where more than 40% of New Zealanders were not born here, there is a danger of cultural alienation. For schools to meet the challenges of their diverse communities, they may require additional

resources, including setting up support groups for parents, especially recent immigrants who have no English.

(iii) Parents' own school experiences

Parents who have had unsuccessful schooling experiences themselves may be reluctant to engage with their children's school for fear of feeling inadequate. Where parents lack confidence in themselves and their own ability to succeed they are less likely to initiate engaging conversations with the teachers of their children.

(iv) Reforms in Education

Current changes in education direction are confusing for parents who want to help their children succeed and want information to do that. Recent education reforms are a recent barrier. Whilst schools' parent communities were all engaged and consulted on the latest New Zealand Curriculum, national standards were introduced by government without parental or professional consultation and engagement. Many parents have difficulty with the new emphasis on national standards literacy and numeracy rather than the broad curriculum and key competencies which they were involved in creating and which they endorsed. Whilst some assessment data can be useful, it is not helpful in isolation and national standards data is not reliable. This means that teachers have to contextualise the data so that parents have some sense of it being a minor rather than major part of showing their children's progress. National standards have become a dominant focus, detracting from those progress areas that are of more interest to parents such as the key competencies. They can therefore be seen as a barrier to parental engagement.

(v) Government priorities and budget cuts

In recent times there has been a marked reduction in the funding for Adult Community Education (ACE) programmes which have served a useful purpose in re-engaging parents in education. For those parents who did not succeed in education themselves, many have restored confidence and self-esteem through ACE community programmes. Re-engaging in education means parents have a greater interest in the education of their own children. In this way ACE programmes played a part in enabling parent engagement with their children's schools.

Conclusion

There is no doubt that having parents engaged in their children's learning is beneficial to children progressing in school. When parents understand how their children are learning, what they are learning and at what pace they are learning, they can support their children's learning better at home which assists in the child's achievement.

The barriers to parental engagement identified here are many and varied, but perhaps the most serious of all is the level of child poverty. Unless the desperate circumstances in which the parents of one in four children find themselves is immediately addressed, it is unrealistic to expect parental engagement will improve.



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