



how are schools involving parents in school life?

annual survey of trends in education 2007

This is one of a series of papers reporting the findings from the Annual Survey of Trends in Education 2007, carried out by the NFER on behalf of the LGA. During the summer term of 2007, 347 primary schools and 854 secondary schools in England took part in the survey covering a range of topics: involving parents in school life was one of the topics explored.

1 What is known about the benefits of involving parents?

The benefits to schools of involving parents/carers in their children's education are well documented. The former Department for Education and Skills (now the Department for Children, Schools and Families), for example, drew upon research evidence and inspection data (Bastiani, 2003) and identified a number of significant and lasting benefits:

- increased parental participation in, and support for, the life and work of the school
- a greater willingness for parents and school to share information and tackle misunderstandings and problems at an early stage
- improved levels of achievement – parents' active encouragement and support for children's learning produce tangible academic benefits that last throughout a child's school career
- more positive pupil attitudes and behaviour.

Desforges and Abouchaar (2003), however, found that parent-child conversations in the home were more valuable, in terms of enhancing children's school achievement, than parents' involvement in school activities, suggesting that schools should encourage parents to talk to their children about school activities at home.

The Annual Survey of primary and secondary headteachers explored the ways in which schools involved parents in school life with the aim of identifying:

- the range of mechanisms used
- headteachers' views on the most effective strategies.

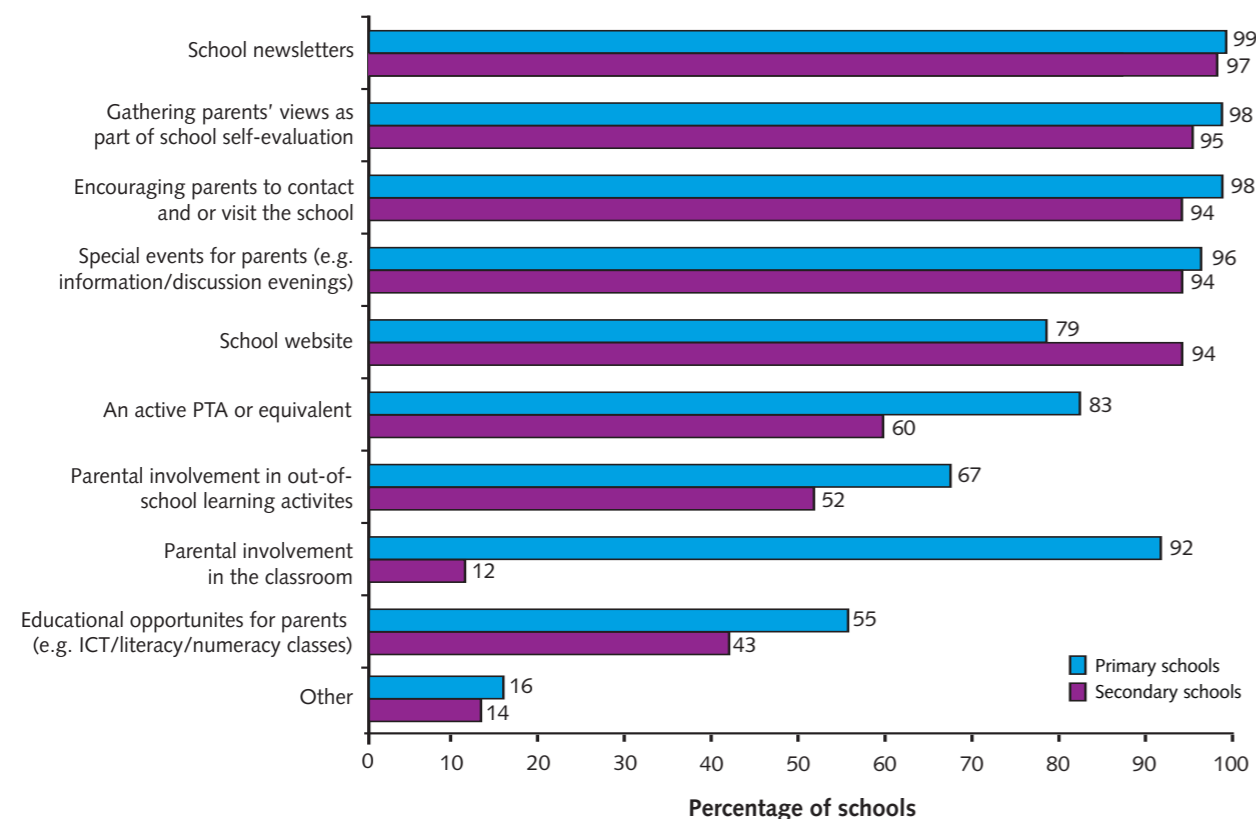
2 What are schools doing?

2.1 How do schools involve parents in school life?

Headteachers were asked to identify, from a list of mechanisms, those that were currently in place for involving parents in school life (see Figure 1). The findings indicated

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Figure 1 Ways in which schools involve parents in school life



More than one answer could be put forward so percentages do not sum to 100. A total of 345 primary schools and 839 secondary schools gave at least one response to this question.

that over 90 per cent of primary and secondary schools used the following strategies:

- school newsletters
- special events for parents (e.g. information/discussion evenings)
- gathering parents' views as part of school self-evaluation
- encouraging parents to contact and/or visit the school.

Some key differences emerged between primary and secondary schools. Over 90 per cent of primary schools compared to 12 per cent of secondary schools identified parental involvement in the classroom. Similarly, primary schools were more likely than secondary schools to indicate that they involved parents through an active PTA, through out-of-school learning activities or through educational opportunities for parents. A higher percentage of

headteachers in secondary schools, however, involved parents through their school website than was the case in primary schools.

Differences between groups

Socio-economic factors were associated with the extent to which **secondary** schools used an active PTA to involve parents. For example, higher attaining schools, those with a lower level of free school meals (FSM) eligibility, grammar schools and schools in the counties were *more* likely than their counterparts to make use of an active PTA to involve parents. In contrast, schools with more than 50 per cent of pupils identified as speakers of a first language other than English (EAL) were *less* likely than other schools to have an active PTA and to encourage parents to contact or visit the schools. Differences that were significant were also noted according to the size of the school.

The smallest secondary schools (i.e. those with fewer than 600 pupils) were more likely to use parental involvement in the classroom to involve parents in school life, but less likely to make use of educational opportunities for parents.

Among **primary** schools, similar socio-economic influences were also noted. Schools with the highest levels of FSM eligibility were *less* likely than other primary schools to make use of an active PTA or a website to involve parents in school life, but *more* likely to identify involving parents in educational opportunities (e.g. ICT/literacy/numeracy classes for parents) as a strategy. Similarly, primary schools with higher levels of attainment and those with less than 50 per cent of pupils with EAL were *more* likely than other primary schools to identify an active PTA as a way to engage parents. Higher attaining primary schools were also *more* likely than other schools to make use of a school website, but those with the highest levels of attainment were *less* likely to use educational opportunities for parents as a strategy to involve them in school life.

Other ways of involving parents

The main other ways for involving parents described by headteachers included the following.

- | | |
|--|--|
| Primary schools: | Secondary schools: |
| • parents' forums/
focus groups | • parents' forums/
focus groups |
| • on-line communication
systems/Virtual Learning
Environment (VLE) | • on-line communication
systems/VLE |
| • family learning/
parent-child workshops | • parents involved in
target setting/review days. |
| • as parent governors. | |

2.2 What are the most effective ways of involving parents?

Schools were asked to identify the two most effective ways of involving parents. The most effective ways they identified were broadly the ones being used most frequently in schools.

- | | |
|---|---|
| Primary schools: | Secondary schools: |
| • encouraging parents to
contact and/or visit
the school. | • gathering parents' views
as part of school
self-evaluation. |
| • special events for parents. | • special events for parents. |

Differences between groups

For **primary** schools, differences between groups were similar to those reported in Section 2.1. Compared to other primary schools, those with the highest levels of eligibility for FSM were *less* likely to identify an active PTA, but *more* likely to identify involving parents in educational opportunities, among their two most effective ways of involving parents in school life. Primary schools with more than 50 per cent of pupils with EAL were also *more* likely to include an active PTA among their two most effective strategies.

In contrast, the differences between groups of **secondary** schools varied from those reported in Section 2.1. Secondary schools with the highest levels of eligibility for FSM were *more* likely than other secondary schools to cite educational opportunities for parents as one of their most effective strategies. Grammar schools were *more* likely than other school types to include special events for parents and an active PTA among their most effective strategies. Special events for parents were also *less* likely to be cited among the most effective strategies by schools with fewer than 600 pupils.

2.3 How has parental involvement changed?

Overall, the frequency with which schools used particular strategies to engage parents in school life was similar to that found in previous annual surveys (Chamberlain *et al.*, 2006). The only strategy that showed a marked increase in

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comparison with the previous year's survey was the use of a school website, which increased by six percentage points to 79 per cent of primary schools, and nine percentage points to 94 per cent of secondary schools, in 2007. Among the 'other' means of involving parents suggested by headteachers, online communication systems/VLEs were also mentioned more frequently by headteachers in 2007 than in previous surveys. This probably reflects the fact that all schools are required to have a VLE (or 'learning platform') by 2008.

3 What are the implications for local authorities?

As part of the policy direction in education toward greater coordination of services, the *Five Year Strategy for Children and Learners* (DfES, 2004) indicated that parents should be part of a partnership with schools and other organisations to maximise the life chances of children and young people. The findings from the Annual Survey of Trends 2007 showed that the majority of schools use various strategies to encourage the involvement of parents.

The size and location of a school clearly have a considerable impact on the selection of such strategies. The survey highlighted how schools at opposite ends of the socio-economic spectrum have adopted different sets of strategies to involve parents in the life of the school. An increased use of online strategies was noted, with secondary schools increasing their lead over primary schools in their use of websites to involve parents.

- Local authorities may wish to consider how to work with schools to tailor their strategies to suit their individual circumstances and to support the development of online strategies amongst primary schools.

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