Case study: Primary School A, Birmingham

Improving standards through strengthening parental engagement
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Context and profile
Primary School A is of average size (295 Pupils on roll including nursery). The school is sited in North Birmingham. This estate is characterised by poor social housing, high levels of crime, poor health and high unemployment. There are high levels of deprivation and low levels of a healthy lifestyle. Index of Multiple Deprivation (IMD) score for the school is 97.9 (Pupil Postcode Analysis Deprivation Index 2008). The proportion of pupils eligible for free school meals is well above average (57.1%). The percentage of pupils with special educational needs (SEN), including statements, is 17.6%.

The headteacher, joined Primary School A in 2000. She appointed a deputy headteacher from within the school in 2004. The school underwent a complete staffing restructure in 2006 as part of workforce reform. The internal structures of the school changed significantly to allow for the development of distributed leadership.

- Key Stage 2 National Curriculum test results 2008: English 88% L4+; maths 94% L4+; science 100% L4+.

The Ofsted inspection in May 2008 stated:
‘Primary School A is a good school. It has a few outstanding features as the headteacher is uncompromising in her commitment to ensuring that all children receive the best possible care. She has created a harmonious school in which staff and parents work together to achieve the very best for the children. The exceptional improvements in recent years were the result of raising the quality of teaching and ensuring that the well-being of all children is secure.

The headteacher, supported by senior leaders, has been relentless in driving up standards, initially focusing on securing the involvement of parents and the well-being of pupils and improving the quality of teaching.

The headteacher has a clear focus on the need to drive up standards and is… determined that the high levels of deprivation experienced by many pupils will not prove a barrier in securing the best outcomes for all pupils, a commitment she has inspired all other staff to share.’

What were the barriers to be overcome?
‘There was an “us and them” situation. There was a lack of belief in the school.’ (Headteacher)

- Parents had not been welcome in school. As a result there were high levels of dissatisfaction among parents with the school and with education. There was little parental support and a lack of understanding about the role that parents could play in their children’s education.

‘When I came here the parents were not allowed in the school, they were not listened to.’ (Headteacher)

- Over many years there had been very poor communication between the school and parents.

- Staff expectations of the children were low:
‘The teachers I had then used to say, “It’s not us it’s the children because look at where they come from”. I had to say to them, “You have got to stop making judgements on the children and parents because it’s getting us nowhere, and it’s breeding low expectations”.’ (Headteacher)

**What was changed?**

- Internal structures changed to ensure school was accessible to parents.
- Communication structures – listening to parents; rigorous pursuit of parents’ attendance at parents’ evening (up to 92% attendance).
- Providing information to parents.
- Focus not just on pastoral and care issues but also on standards across the board:

  ‘This is the best, we are the best, you will have the best; we will provide the best.’ (Headteacher)

- Learning environment.
- Staffing structure.
- Nipping issues in the bud.
- Deployed people with potential to be family support workers.

**How was this achieved?**

‘I had to get to know the parents… I invited the parents to a headteacher forum… a governor took notes and I had about 60–70 parents come. I got it in the jugular about everything from parking to their children never bringing a reading book home. I made a great big list and we addressed every single one of them.’ (Headteacher)

The leadership of the school was very hands-on – highly visible both inside and outside the school. The leadership team had a clear view of what they wanted for the school and ensured that this view was shared within the whole school and also with parents and the wider community. They recognised that time and resources needed to be invested in developing good relationships with the parents, based on trust, and always consulted parents about proposed changes to the way the school worked, focusing on the benefits for the children and their families. The school focused on getting the communication right through newsletters, questionnaires and talking to parents outside school.

One of the first things the leadership team had to address was the children’s behaviour and to put systems in place to deal swiftly with concerns. A pastoral policy based on positive reinforcement was non-negotiable. Once this was adopted across the school an anti-bullying week was used to engage the parents as they had begun to see the changes in the school’s approach. Roles of the staff in school were clarified and the deputy headteacher, who takes the lead on behaviour, was made more accessible to parents. This ensured that concerns could be raised by parents, taken seriously and dealt with immediately.

‘We make sure that we get back to parents about their concerns the same day. It is the little things that turn into big issues – a little issue to us is a big issue to parents… don’t let that parent down – they are waiting at the other end of the phone.’ (Deputy headteacher)

Many parents have now become very active within school. Child and parent workshops (INSPIRE) are very well-attended. Parents come in to further their own knowledge and experience. Many attend training courses provided by the school where they are able to access qualifications. Last year alone, 12 parents returned to full-time employment through this route. Some parents just like to come along and help in school or help the school raise funds.

The parents’ group decided that they wanted to call themselves PALS (Parent and Learning Support) because of the feeling that everyone was learning together.
A significant appointment in the school was that of a family support worker (FSW) who provides direct support to parents on a whole range of issues such as domestic violence, helping with housing issues and emotional support at times of crisis. The FSW has been pro-active in accessing the wider services that she recognised parents need, and has developed a highly personalised approach in her work.

‘The parent’s problem quickly becomes the child’s problem.’ (Family support worker)

For example, the FSW has organised parents’ workshops – which started as small coffee mornings and have developed into workshops which tackle issues that come from the parents. She is also pro-active in inviting the local police and health professionals to build links within the community. A cookery group which was run for parents as part of the school’s Healthy Schools Status has led to parents gaining a qualification in food hygiene.

After-school clubs, such as archery and swimming, are run for parents and children together.

‘A significant strength of the school is its exemplary work with parents and outside agencies to support both the academic and social development of pupils.’ (Ofsted May 2008)

What is the impact?

‘Parents are particularly supportive of the school, with several commenting that they would not send their children anywhere else. They recognise that the children’s high level of enjoyment of school is due to the “wonderful support” provided by the staff, particularly the headteacher, who “always goes the extra mile to resolve any concerns about your child”.’ (Ofsted May 2008)

- **Improved standards**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>In KS1 2002</th>
<th>In KS1 2008</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>67% L2+ Speaking and listening</td>
<td>97% L2+ Speaking and listening</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>51% L2+ Reading</td>
<td>85% L2+ Reading</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>54% L2+ Writing</td>
<td>81% L2+ Writing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>76% L2 + Mathematics</td>
<td>91% L2+ Mathematics.</td>
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</tbody>
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In Key Stage 2, standards at the end of Year 6 in 2008 were above the national average in all the core subjects. For this cohort of children the contextual value added (CVA) was 101.1; average point score 28.1; 53% of this cohort was eligible for free school meals; 18.75% were on the SEN register; 37.5% have been on the SEN register at some stage in their school career.

- **Improved attitudes to learning**

‘I hardly do anything now on behaviour but at first my whole day was taken up with behaviour problems.’

(Deputy headteacher)

2002–03: – 4 exclusions, total 12 days
2008 – 0 exclusions

There has only been one exclusion between 2005–08.

The school’s internal monitoring systems show that there has been a steady decrease in incidents and mentoring interventions.
Levels of attendance have also increased steadily from 92.1% in 2002–03 to 95.6% in 2007–08.

- Improved parental engagement

Many parents and members of the local community now work in the school, for example, as learning support assistants and lunchtime supervisors. Some of these began their adult education as a direct result of training provided by the school.

‘Parents high regard for the school is such that many are employed in the school or are engaged in voluntary work on behalf of the school.’ (Ofsted, May 2008)

- Improved relationships with parents

There has been a significant decline in parental complaints and parents have positive attitudes to the school:

‘The contrast is that it is rare for me to see parents with serious issues. The home-grown parents I don’t see – it is often new parents who don’t understand our way.’ (Deputy headteacher)

- Greater parental accountability for children’s learning

Attendance at parents’ evenings is now more than 90% from a very low base of below 50%.

‘Our parents are accountable – we have taken them with us with a partnership approach.’ (Headteacher)

**Sustainability – what next?**

The school has now developed to the point in which the parents are requesting learning courses. Next year, in association with a local College, it is hoping to provide adult literacy and numeracy classes (to help address illiteracy in the area) and NVQ Hairdressing and Beauty.

The leadership team recognise that it is important to make close links with FE providers to enable courses to take place, and also for funding streams, and this will continue to be developed.

The school has committed funding from the budget this year to extend the FSW’s hours to full-time, to enable her to provide courses herself and also to liaise with FE providers.

The school is considering an application for the Leading Aspect Award for work with the parents and the community.
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