

WELL school engagement project Evaluation

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Background to the Project

The project began in November 2020 with the following KPIs:

1. To focus on the hard to reach/disengaged parents and carers
2. To improve attendance at parents evenings in secondary
3. To increase parental satisfaction

The evaluation of the project is on how Educational settings are engaging with all families and to devise strategies to support engagement for all.

Details of schools/settings taking part

20 schools and settings have taken part. For the purpose of the report, the term 'Educational setting' will be used as an umbrella term to cover all in the study.

2 nurseries

7 Primary schools

9 Secondary schools

1 Special Education school

18 members of staff have participated including Teaching Assistants, Teachers and Senior Management. Each setting has had 8 days for the project. A suggested approach on how to use this time was for the first 3 days to be used to survey parents and carers to provide a baseline on which to build. The second bunch of 3 days was to work on strategies to communicate with all families, and to focus on those that seemed to have a reluctance to engage with the setting. The final 2 days were to develop a resource that could be used with parents/carers.

Executive Summary of Project and emerging themes to take forward to include recommendations

The project has taken place across the Academic year 2020/21. In September 2020, schools returned from a lockdown due to the Covid-19 pandemic, that had begun in March 2020 and spanned across the summer holidays. A further lockdown happened straight after the New Year, with schools not returning until April 2021. This unprecedented situation has had an impact on the original intentions of the project, and has changed and influenced the outcomes. **Five themes** have emerged across the project. **Questions have been raised around the definition of what is parental engagement** and how Educational settings measure this. An outcome of the project has changed the perception of this and influenced the relationships that staff have with families. With distance learning being the

only option for some children during lockdown, this has presented opportunities **for different approaches to be used for communication**. The development of a variety of approaches, including using designated mobile phones, texting, social media and videos, for example, have been utilised. Progress in these developments has been increased as a result of the pandemic and being put in a situation where staff and families have had to adapt quickly. **The impact on the relationship that educational settings** have with families has generally improved across all taking part, and the development of a reciprocal approach to this relationship has really begun, with some setting more advanced than others in this respect. A shift **to family centred approaches** has contributed no doubt to this. However, this has all taken a tremendous effort by staff in all settings and in some cases has taken a toll on **staff health and wellbeing**. A major outcome of this project is to consider ways to ensure that staff are working within the boundaries of a manageable workload and a good work/life balance.

To summarise the **five themes** are as follows and will be used to further explore ways forward for Educational settings within Cumbria:

1. What is parental engagement
2. Different approaches to communication and whole school approaches
3. Impact on parental and pupil relationship with educational settings
4. Family centred approaches
5. Staff health and wellbeing

Case studies for each Educational setting taking part in the project have been used to develop the themes and recommendations.

Data Collection

Data have been collected at 3 stages across the academic year 2020/21. The timescale for the project has been shifted to accommodate the pandemic, in particular, in relation to the lockdown that occurred in January 2021. This had a significant impact on the timeline for the project. In November 2020 there was an initial meeting with all participants, and this was followed in December with a baseline survey for all participants to complete. Further focus group meetings occurred in January and April 2021. These have been led by Stephanie Evans from University of Cumbria and David Sibbit from the Western Heads Consortium. These have allowed for sharing of experiences and resources across settings as well as evaluations of positives and difficulties. A final evaluation for the whole group took place early in July 2021.

Baseline Survey results December 2020

The baseline survey results focussed on several developing aspects across the educational settings. For most, the impact of the pandemic gave another way of collecting engagement data from parents/carers and emphasised even more the divide between those who do get involved with settings and those who do not. Strategies for identifying parental engagement had been introduced by some, and this had included such methods as marking parental engagement out of 5. This raised

some queries around the criteria being applied to judge 'disengagement' and the ethics of these approaches. A further difficulty raised by school colleagues was the importance of having someone in place that parents/carers would engage with and that a member of staff viewed as 'authoritarian' or 'from a different class' was a barrier to engaging for some.

Some settings used a very parent-centred approach while others were at the other end of the spectrum and were very school-centred. The provision for the youngest children see it as their responsibility to get parents engaged from the start and are keen to work with colleagues who will have that role in a child's life as they progress through education. The Special Educational Needs provision school provides education from 3-19 and they see their role as engaging with parents throughout the child's time in school.

Questions raised at the baseline stage:

1. Can triangulation methods for collecting data be used to support the recognition of what constitutes 'the disengaged'? Is this a term that should be used, given its negative connotation?
2. Consider how students in school can support with the process of engagement.
3. How can educational settings across communities support each other with engagement in the life of a child?

Between the baseline stage (December 2020) and the evaluation at the end of April 2021, settings went into a further closure of sites due to the pandemic. For the majority of children this meant returning to distant and online learning. This period of lockdown was from January 2021 to March 2021.

Evaluation by end of April and June 2021

By this stage of the project clear **themes had begun to emerge** and these themes will be taken forward as a result of the project:

Theme 1: What is parental engagement?

The lockdown period has created opportunities to better identify which parents/carers are the hardest to reach and disengaged. Staff consider that their knowledge of parents has increased and this has supported one of the most illuminating aspects as it has raised questions on what is engagement and how is this judged by settings. It has supported reflections on what parental engagement really means and what it looks like, rather than a perceived evaluation. A further revelation is that barriers to learning are much wider than pupil premium as suggested by Government data.

A further highlight is the need to build positive relationships from nurseries onwards with interventions as early as possible. A number of settings argued that they need to learn from each other, listen to ideas and implement new approaches where appropriate. Many settings, particularly the early years ones, had an 'asset based' approach to parental engagement where reciprocal engagement included drawing on parental skills and experiences. Whereas other settings appeared to adopt a 'deficiency-based' approach holding parents to account for not engaging.

Theme 2: Different approaches to communication and whole school approaches

The use of technology in settings has increased much more than it would have done without the pandemic. Developing further ways of innovative communication methods by moving on from traditional letters to using mobile phones, texting, WhatsApp groups, Social Media etc has been reported by all settings involved in the project. This includes making video communications rather than letters or in addition to written communication. The relationships with families has been built during this period, because the speed of response has improved. Many report that using texts rather than phone calls illicit responses from parents/carers who previously had not engaged. Learning the different options for communicating, and using bespoke methods to match to families has been seen as a real success. Parents have been more involved as a result of this, and this is reported in nearly all settings.

What is clear from each settings evaluations and our data collection evaluations, is that a better understanding of home environments due to the pandemic is linked to improvements in communication. This includes an increase in trust as communication strategies have been modified for individual families.

Virtual communication has been found to work well, and due to the pandemic, approaches to the project changed in the middle due to the lockdown. This has been seen as a bonus in terms of increasing engagement and using different methods to communicate.

It is clear that the pandemic has put the aims of the project into a much wider context. Those that report an improved whole setting approach with support from leaders consider a developing systematic approach to communication is working. A willingness to adapt and be flexible while maintaining a reputation for good communication is essential. Where there are pastoral staff employed, their relationship with subject staff has been more clearly cemented and closer working approaches developed. Equally, in some cases it has been hard to make changes because in some cases the management of the setting, and staff have felt there is a lack of trust in what staff are trying to do in adapting communication methods.

There is a work/life balance impact on staff, but those who have been clear on boundaries around the working day, for instance leaving work mobile phones in the work place has helped with maintaining some boundaries. This is further discussed below.

Theme 3: Impact on parental and pupil relationship with educational settings

The feedback reports positive parental feedback on communication, and that in some cases parents are now beginning communications. Parents are more involved and there has been an increase in parental meetings. The pandemic has provided a platform for there to be more information about such things as homework and this has increased parents understanding of the purpose and value of this for their child. Parents are more willing to trust the setting particularly when communication has been on their terms; also having a named person in settings as a point of contact has increased engagement.

Not being able to welcome parents into the building and communicating at a distance has proved difficult in some cases. Lack of face to face interaction for Early Years children is problematic and some parents found the concept of 'online' teaching too scary. Access to support services has been particularly problematic. The restrictions of the pandemic have led to a constant **adapting and reviewing** of approaches used and despite every effort, some interventions have not made a difference to some relationships with families.

In general, attendance and behaviour has improved for pupils. As the communication with parents has improved, this has impacted in a positive way on the relationships with pupils. A key to this is clear communication; a sharing of goals across setting teams and with parents/pupils.

Theme 4: Family centred approaches

An emerging theme from the December evaluation was the spectrum evident in settings around whether they had a school or family centred approach. By this point in the project, the feedback indicates that there has been a shift in some settings along this spectrum. Four secondary provisions report a real shift in their thinking from school centred to parent/family first. The holistic view of the child in the context of their whole environment has impacted on some of this development as a result of the pandemic and the need for bespoke forms of communication. This shift has seen settings reporting how it leads into the '**whole world of the child**'. A changed mind-set of some parents has come as a surprise through the pandemic and some settings feel that they are at a cross roads, in a positive way, in building on this progress made.

In contrast, 'negatively entrenched staff' has created some barriers as they accept the 'hard' to reach, believing that there is nothing that can be done to get them engaged. There are 'historic mind-sets' in place about some families which have led to a deficit approach to parental non engagement resulting in some parents continuing to be resistant to engagement. Such scenarios are possibly the result of different cultural values with a few staff rating their own values more highly and being unable to see things from a parent's perspective.

Theme 5: Impact on staff

Staff have worked tirelessly across the pandemic to ensure that pupils continue with their education; but it has gone beyond the 'normal' boundaries this academic year. The toll on staff workload is evident in the feedback through the project. During lockdowns, working from home has created its difficulties, with staff often having to use their own technology. It has been emotionally tough trying to keep focussed and maintain clear work/life boundaries. Smaller settings have found that there are not enough staff to do all the new emerging roles. Across all settings, the increase in communication with each family has increased the workload. In addition, there is a concerning emotional impact on staff. The worries for children and families, the support with the social and emotional, as well as the practical have been difficult to manage emotionally at times. Many settings have been providing food parcels, blankets, and resources to support throughout the pandemic. Many staff report that they feel an increased sense of 'Trying to fix the world'. Other aspects of the pandemic that have increased workload has been the impact of working in 'bubbles', the rules around isolating for staff and pupils, and the increased support for parents that has been going into weekends and evenings. This includes the time it takes to create resources such as videos, and setting up activities online.

Many settings have been teaching parents how to use platforms and dealing with some misuse of technology by pupils. Staff welfare is an area for serious consideration.

Recommendations

Participants were asked to consider what advice they would give to others as a result of being part of the project. Listed below are their recommendations and these are useful to take forward along with the identified themes:

1. To be open to collaboration and to share and learn from each other.
2. Importance of not making assumptions about parental engagement and to understand what the barriers might be.
3. Supportively challenge barriers to historic mind-set within staff and families, particularly avoiding a deficit view.
4. Keep what works well from the pandemic.
5. Avoid labelling – look at the wider world of families and their context.
6. Do not label this as a purely Pupil Premium focus or ‘hard to reach’. Disengagement comes in many different ways.
7. Keep it simple – do not over complicate and hone down as to what suits staff and parents.
8. Look at it as an investment and stick with it.
9. Be clear on who is the contact for parents within the school. Use a single point of contact with clear referral systems in place. Think who the point of contact should be eg: not SLT but rather a learning mentor for example.
10. Consider that school setting can be a real trigger for parents own experience and negative connotations associated with education, closely consider how staff and parent values may differ.
11. Have high expectations for **all** families.
12. Have a clear whole school system for communication in place with flexibility to recognise that ‘one size does not fit all’, and ensure there are not too many systems or parents can get overwhelmed.
13. Get to know families – ‘poverty proofing’ to remove inequalities such as technology access.

Conclusions

The overall conclusions of the project are varied, with some commonalities. Where full engagement has taken place, deep learning and changing of attitudes towards what engagement means has been pivotal and this has the potential to improve the outcomes for pupils.

Attitudes that have been changed include the following:

Recognising that relationships with parents/carers are as important as those with the child. This is particularly celebrated in the Early Years. In some Secondary settings, it is clear that not enough is made of the relationship with the child enhancing the relationship with the parent/carer.

How 'parental engagement' is interpreted, has really changed for the better during the case studies presented. This has included looking behind behaviours of non-engagement and removing assumption making, as there might be valid reasons why parents/carers appear to be disengaged. This was reported in 3 primary schools with a further school describing the interactions needed as being led by 'gut' instinct. 3 secondary schools agreed with this and demonstrated a real change in their attitudes towards parental engagement and the barriers they may have. In the less effective case studies, several secondary settings appear to be entrenched in their thinking towards parent/carers, and have not utilised tools from within the project to challenge this. The hard to reach are considered too hard to reach, whereas this has been effective in 2 of the nursery schools through using the time and funds of the project.

In addition, one nursery reported the effects of poverty, mental health issues and isolation, especially through Covid, on engagement, and the need to reach out to other professionals beyond the educational context to support some families.

Where Secondary settings have been successful in changing their attitudes to parent/carers, resources that have really helped include having a dedicated phone line for parents/carers to use, as well as having a key person for making the contact. It has been reflected that the most successes were when this key person was not the year leader, but rather a Teaching Assistant who parents/carers found less intimidating to engage with.

Creating bespoke ways of engaging with parents/carers has been successful in 2 primary schools and 2 secondary schools. This has included using texts rather than phone calls with some parents/carers who find this method less intimidating and less time consuming. 1 primary school and 2 nurseries reported that making early contact with parents/carers using a variety of methods is essential to lifelong engagement, and to be consistent with the contact.

Practical resources that have been developed through the project include making video guides for families, having a dedicated phone line, employing someone in the school to reach out to families, and Apps such as Dojo to use to share work with parents/carers. This has included making resources to support families that struggle with IT, and this has been highlighted through the project that there is a spectrum of ability to be addressed. Another practical element is in relation to access to staff who are in touch with parents/carers and to ensure that boundaries are set for contact so that work/life balance can be achieved.

In conclusion, the pandemic has pushed on the varieties of methods used to engage with parents/carers, and this is reflected across all within the project. Questioning what engagement means and that one size does not fit all, is a key learning point by most of the settings in the project.

Thank you to all the schools and settings that have taken part in the project. Your work will go forward to support the best interests of children and families within Cumbria.

