

Parents, Schools and Partnership

National Parents Council

Annual Conference

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*Men must be born free, they cannot be born wise,
it is the duty of any school to make free men wise*

Introduction

Adlai Stevenson, the American Statesman, reminds us in the words that I have just quoted - that though our children may not be born wise our common objective is that they will emerge from our schools wiser to meet the challenges of life.

I am delighted to accept your Association's invitation to speak to you today at your Conference. My main

theme today is the concept of partnership as it exists between parents and schools.

The fundamental objective of such partnership involving all in their respective roles, parents pupils teachers and managers is to provide a foundation for life, a framework within which to live and a compassion and care for others which reaches out beyond family and friends to the wider community.

In this paper I propose first of all to examine the notion of partnership as it is developing and evolving in other countries and in Ireland. The starting point of any parent school relationship and partnership is the involvement of parents in education and schooling at the micro level of the child.

I also propose to look at the role and concept of parent associations and the role of parents in school governance.

The relationship between parents and schools in Ireland has been a slowly developing one over the last number of years. There has been considerable progress in terms of that relationship at local and national level.

There still remains an inevitable tension between the school and the parent body. Perhaps this tension is always going to be there to a certain extent despite the evolving language of partnership and common interest that should exist between the school and parents.

As I have said at the outset parents teachers and school management have the same aims and goals i.e.

that of providing the best education for the young people in our collective care. Nevertheless, the particular concerns and objectives of the parent and the more overarching and at times common good agenda of the school can lead perforce to differing and at times conflicting expectations of the outcome.

This is not a bad thing but should be the starting point of the building of positive relationships between the two. It should be the foundation of the mechanisms and structures at local and national level that drive the common agenda of the best schools for all.

The local structures that we know and operate such as parent councils and parent teacher meetings serve certain purposes. But they have to move away from some of the comfort zones into which they sometimes fall or are viewed by parents and schools alike.

Partnership and Parents

Partnership as a concept and organisational dynamic has gathered pace in Ireland and abroad over the last number of years. Here in Ireland the role of partnership at national level has been acclaimed for its part in the delivery of the huge economic growth that we have witnessed over the preceding decade.

Partnership at one level is about building working dynamics and promotes positivity in working relationships.

There are some negatives that can be associated with the process too, depending on the perspective so of the partners These arise from a reluctance at times by vested interests to let go to change their mindset.

One of the most difficult things that faces any organisation is the systemic change required to work in a collaborative environment, to consult, to seek advice and most importantly to listen.

In Europe and elsewhere there has been much emphasis on the benefits of parent school partnerships.

There has not been as much research into or advocacy of it in the Irish context.

The publication in 1984 of *The Child Between* by Macbeth led to growing research into, and implementation of, school-home partnerships blossomed. This need for the development of better home school partnerships was taken up by many publications over the years.

Heywood-Everett looks critically at the concept of partnership and argues for an emphasis on individual relationships between teachers and parents.

The OECD itself has commissioned studies into the parent partnership. Various departments of education have issued their guidelines for enhancing parent-teacher cooperation.

The British Department of Education and Employment also picked up the partnership terminology, arguing “we all need to be involved: schools, teachers and parents are at the heart of the partnership”.

Tony Blair even came to power on an election platform that spoke of partnership between school and community.

The European Parents Association, which represents representing some 100 million parents in parents' associations across Europe, places prominently in its constitutional aims:

“Recognition for parents of their central place as primary educators of their children, and of the need to involve them actively at all stages of the education of their children.”

This also reflects of course the emphasis placed by our own Constitution on the role of parents as the primary educators of children

There are many initiatives across Europe that promote parent school partnerships and linkages. Europe in general is seeing a flowering of parent-school initiatives.

The Fomento movement of Spanish family schools, now numbering some 50 schools, is an example of the extension of the parent-school partnership concept to its practical conclusions.

The schools of this organization retain their professional independence from parental meddling, but are founded on the need to reinforce parental values and to empower parents in the education of their own children.

The USA is also nationally committed to fostering strong partnerships between home and school.

Federal funding has been made available to many states for projects to build school-home links.

Many states are running extensive character education programs that are founded on strong family school cooperation. A Character Education Manifesto

has been signed up to by the governors of a number of states including Colorado, Iowa, Massachusetts, Michigan, New Hampshire, New Mexico, South Dakota, and Utah. The Charter states

We strongly affirm parents as the primary moral educators of their children and believe schools should build a partnership with the home.

The Boston University Institute for Character Development includes in its charter,

“Together with parents, teachers are responsible for character education, they must be selected, educated, and encouraged with this mission in mind.”

In the United States the No Child Left Behind programme recognises the need for strong parental involvement in the process.

Under NCLB, all Title I schools, which receive special federal funding to raise the performance of disadvantaged students, must develop parent involvement policies and strategies, and all but the smallest (i.e., a district that receives under \$500,000 in Title I funding) must spend at least 1 percent of their Title I funding on parent training and education programs.

There has also been a corresponding development of Parent Advisory Councils as distinct from the much talked about PTAs in the American context.

Parent advisory councils (PACs). PACs are parent-led organizations that function at the state, district,

or school level to give parents more clout regarding their children's education. PACs promote parent influence in multiple ways, including polling communities to better understand parents' needs and wants, recommending policy, and advocating for the rights of parents to be involved in the education of their children.

The development of School Development Planning and Whole School Evaluation in the last seven to eight years has led to a further broadening of the partnership role between schools and parents. Both initiatives now clearly provide for a role for parents to be consulted and involved as part of the process.

If I may speak also from my own direct experience and remind us all of the testing of our theories of partnership in real life situations the best example of

that has been the period of industrial action from 2000 to 2003.

If any period proved the need for communication and dialogue then that situation brought it into sharp focus. It also highlighted the underlying tension that can exist between school and parents.

As you may be aware or perhaps not we in co Clare VEC recently proposed that the VEC become patron of two primary schools in the County.

Unfortunately the Department did not allow us to proceed with those proposals and instead brought forward the proposal to establish two community primary schools in Dublin. Though we are glad that we started the ball rolling.

However the point I want to make is that I have been very impressed by the tremendous symbiotic relationship between school and parents. The degree of involvement at all levels by the parent body in both schools is very significant in the development of both schools.

While the schools are Steiner schools and Steiner education place a heavy emphasis on parental involvement nevertheless the model in these school is very instructive.

Parent Involvement

The term "parent involvement" covers a very broad canvas. It includes several different forms of participation in education and with the schools.

Parents support their children's schooling by attending school functions and responding to school obligations (parent-teacher meetings, for example).

Parents can become more involved in helping children improve their schoolwork--providing encouragement, arranging for appropriate study time and space, modelling desired behaviour (such as reading for pleasure), monitoring homework, and actively tutoring their children at home.

Outside the home, parents can serve as advocates for the school. They can volunteer to help out with school activities or work in the classroom.

Or they can take an active role in the governance and decision making necessary for planning, developing,

and providing an education for the community's children.

It has been overwhelmingly demonstrates that parent involvement in children's learning is positively related to achievement. Further, the more intensively parents are involved in their children's learning, the more beneficial are the achievement effects.

This holds true for all types of parent involvement in children's learning and for all types and ages of students.

Perhaps the most effective forms of parent involvement are those which engage parents in working directly with their children on learning activities in the home.

Programs which involve parents in reading with their children, supporting their work on homework

assignments, or tutoring them using materials and instructions provided by teachers, show particularly impressive results.

Along similar lines, it has been found that the more active forms of parent involvement produce greater achievement benefits than the more passive ones.

That is, if parents receive phone calls, read and sign written communications from the school, and perhaps attend and listen during parent teacher meetings, greater achievement benefits accrue than would be the case with no parent involvement at all.

However, considerably greater achievement benefits are noted when parent involvement is active--when parents work with their children at home, certainly, but also when they attend and actively support school activities and when they help out in classrooms or on field trips, and so on.

It has also been shown that improved parent attitudes toward the school and improved parent selfconcepts characteristically result when parents become involved in their children's learning.

Parents often begin their participation doubting that their involvement can make much difference, and they are generally very gratified to discover what an important contribution they are able to make.

In this connection, it is important for school people and parents to be aware that parent involvement supports students' learning, behavior, and attitudes regardless of factors such as parents' income, educational level, and whether or not parents are employed.

That is, the involvement of parents who are well-educated, well-todo, or have larger amounts of time

to be involved has not been shown to be more beneficial than the involvement of less-advantaged parents. All parent involvement works and works well.

There is a much higher incidence of parent involvement at the preschool level and at primary level than at secondary level, and, consequently, the majority of research on parent involvement has been conducted with young children and their families.

Indeed, up to a few years ago, it was difficult to draw any conclusions about the effectiveness of parent involvement in the education of older students.

However it has been shown that parent involvement remains very beneficial in promoting positive achievement and affective outcomes with these older students.

There are various differences in the incidence and types of parent involvement as students move through the secondary years.

It becomes more difficult for parents to become involved as their children grow older for many reasons: schools are bigger and farther from home, the curriculum is more sophisticated, each student has several teachers, parents of older students are more likely to be employed, and students are beginning to establish some sense of separation and independence from their parents.

Parent involvement with older students, therefore, often involves different forms of participation

- **parents monitoring homework,**
- **helping students make postsecondary plans**
- **select courses which support these plans,**

- **parent-school agreements on rewards for achievement and behavioral improvements**

as well as some of the "standby" functions, such as

- **regular home school communication about student progress**
- **parent attendance at school-sponsored activities.**

Clearly, parent involvement is effective in fostering achievement and affective gains at all levels, and schools are encouraged to engage and maintain this involvement throughout the secondary years.

Parents Associations

The history of the existence of parents associations in schools in Ireland has been haphazard particularly in the early days.

This to some extent has been a consequence of the peculiar history of our education system which down through the years has been characterised by the denominational ownership of most of the schools.

The religious managers of schools tended until more recently to be a lone wolf without dependence on other supports such as other teachers in the school or the parent body in the school.

Support was largely sought and received from within the religious community itself.

This has led inter alia I believe to the largely underdeveloped middle management system that is still a legacy in many of our schools today.

Equally it also affected the level of parent involvement at school level in both the quality and degree of that involvement.

Both the White Paper in 1995 and the Green Paper 1992 recognised the need for more parental involvement in schools at association and at governance level.

The White paper for instance stated that

Individual parents and the collective body of parents have a central role to play in each school. A parents association in the school is an important means by which parental partnership in schools can be facilitated. A parents association can provide structured support to parents, school staff and to management.

A statutory duty will be placed on boards of management to promote the setting up by parents of a parents association in every school in receipt of Exchequer funding.

The Education Act in 1998 attempted to bring these aspirations and recommendations to statutory status.

It is worth looking at some of the stipulations of the Act. There is for instance a belief that the Act requires the establishment of a parents association in a school

Section 26 of the Education Act 1998 states;

(1)The parents of students of a recognised school may establish, and maintain from among their number, a parents' association for that school and

membership of that association shall be open to all parents of students of that school.

The Act as you can see merely stipulates that parents of students *may* establish a Parents Association.

The Act then goes on to outline the role of a Parents Association.

- **shall promote the interests of the students**
- **advise the Principal or the board on any matter relating to the school**
- **adopt a programme of activities which will promote the involvement of parents**

There is a requirement on a Board of Management to do two things arising from the Act. Section 26 3 imposes a broad duty on the school to

- **promote contact between the school, parents of students in that school and the community**
- **facilitate and give reasonable assistance to parents who wish to establish a parents' association and a parents' association when it is established.**

When it comes to the activities and role of the Parents Association there is a view that the best way an Association may support the school in a practical fashion is to involve itself almost exclusively in fundraising.

This stems from two factors firstly the historically low levels of resourcing of schools at all levels and in all sectors particularly at primary level and in the voluntary sector has meant that considerable effort has had to be expended.

There is also the view that fundraising can be used to confine parental involvement to less contentious areas of the operation of the school.

There are of course a broad number of areas that can be postulated as needing to be within the remit of Parents Association where a true partnership exists. These include school planning and development, advising school management on issues, policy development, information events, talks on topics of interest to parents.

School Governance

The term governance can be looked at in the narrow sense of involvement in Boards of Management but it does have a broader perspective in that it also includes involvement in parents associations especially in the context of where parents associations have a role in policy development as outlined earlier.

Since I have already looked at the role of Parent Associations I will confine my remarks here to

governance in the strict sense of involvement in Boards of Management.

Involvement by parents in school governance in Ireland could be characterised by the concept of steady progression. Boards of Management of community schools provided for the presence of parent members from the late seventies.

The Articles of Management of Catholic Secondary Schools also provided for the election of two parent members from the mid eighties.

More recently the restructured Boards of Comprehensive schools have also made provision for the election of two parent members. The Vocational Education Amendment Act (2001) permitted the

election of parents in their own right to the VE Committees nationwide.

In many countries, this area of parent involvement is one of the most controversial.

Surveys show that most parents would like to play a more active role in this type of involvement, whereas most school managers and teachers exhibit great reluctance to encourage parents to become partners in governance.

Many managers agree that parents should be involved with the schools in a variety of ways and that school personnel should spend time encouraging and training parents to become involved.

In some countries it has been found that there is a reluctance on the part of some in school management to see parent involvement in administrative areas such as selection processes. T

They also tend to feel that parents do not have enough training to make school decisions, although surveys of parents indicate that the majority of them feel they are capable of making sound decisions.

There has been very little research into this in Ireland. There is some anecdotal evidence to suggest that while similar attitudes were prevalent up to recently. However this is changing and there is a growing incidence of greater involvement by parents in selection processes.

The relationship between parent participation in decision making and student achievement is not nearly as extensively researched as the effects of parent involvement in students' learning.

Indeed, writers on the topic indicate that it is more difficult to assess the effects of parent involvement in decision making precisely because the connection to student outcomes is more indirect.

Of the half-dozen documents which do address the connection between parent involvement in decision making and student achievement, none were able to offer evidence of a causal relationship, though some writers seem to believe that such a relationship exists.

The lack of evidence linking parent involvement in governance and student achievement should not be

taken to mean that parents should not be included in some aspects of school decision making, however. There are benefits other than student achievement which have been found to emerge from involving parents in governance.

These include:

- The elimination of mistaken assumptions that may be held by parents and teachers about each others motives, attitudes, intentions and abilities
- The growth of parents' ability to serve as resources for the academic, social and psychological development of their children-- with the potential for much longer term influence (because of continued interaction with their children over time)
- The increase of parents' own skills and confidence

- The increase in parents serving as advocates for the schools throughout the community

It must also be said that the kinds of parent involvement mentioned above--attending parent teacher conferences and school functions, volunteering in classrooms, tutoring children at home, etc.--provide the best training ground to help prepare parents for roles in school decision making.

These activities enable parents to understand something of the school's structure and its instructional programs and provide basic experience in working with school personnel.

These experiences can expand parents' knowledge and increase their credibility with school staff as they move into decision-making roles.

There is also the issue of training in the area of school governance.

Some work has been done by VECs locally when new Board are being established. At national level the management bodies also provide training for Board members on a regular basis.

It must also be acknowledged that the growing role of parents in school governance is a service given voluntarily. This role brings with it an ever growing burden of responsibility in the increasingly complex climate that characterises the management of education in Ireland.

The issue of teacher performance is of course at the heart of much of the debate in recent years arising

from the development of greater parental participation. The tensions that I alluded to earlier derive to some extent from this context.

The issue of how to deal with underperforming teachers gives rise to often conflicting expectations of all involved. The system has suffered from a lack of workable processes and procedures for dealing with the issue down through the years.

The debate also seems to dwell on the doomsday option in most cases I.e. the underperforming teacher has to be dismissed forthwith. However, a more balanced approach needs to be taken. Firstly, it should always be possible to dismiss a person from their position but it should never be easy

Conclusion

Our common agenda and opportunity, of fairness and inclusion ensures that we can work together, Management Parents and Teachers to reach out to the potential of each and everyone of us, and to provide for the citizens to tomorrow.

We are of course talking about moral spiritual physical and cultural education in developing a society in which all can play their part and upon whom all can rely on in times of need.

Fostering the love learning, recognising the treasure within is part of that task.

I have been pleased to have this opportunity to speak to you and to share with you some thoughts on the issue of partnership in education that is of concern to

us all. I hope that we can all work together to strive to improve our schools for the benefit of all.

Even the most wise speech is not as holy as silence

Vega Carpio, 1613