

4 Engaging with students' parents and guardians

An important part of working with parents in your school involves capacity-building so that they are aware and informed, and can contribute more fully to the school's vision and goals. This might include helping parents become effective representatives on the SMC or parent-teacher associations. It can be hard for parents to focus on the whole school rather than just their child, but in roles where they represent parents, they need to understand that it is important that they advocate for others, not just themselves.

Activity 10: Enabling parents to be representatives

Make some notes in your Learning Diary about how you might enable parents to take on roles at the school where they become the voice of the local community's parents. Perhaps think of some of the parents at your school who are accepted by the local community and could also be looked upon as leaders and so could naturally step into this role and do it well. Are there other parents who speak out but are not necessarily representative of other parents' opinions? Try to draw up a set of six guidelines you might give to a parent representative.

Discussion

You might have thought about some things you don't want parents to do (such as making personal statements about teachers), or about general guidelines such as observing confidentiality or taking a holistic view of school life. There is no doubt that an engaged parent who is well connected with other parents and who can speak up for student learning would be a real asset to you in leading the school – not just in terms of passing information to parents, but also in terms of passing ideas from parents back into the school. They could also be useful in facilitating other parents in identifying problems and solutions. But this is not necessarily a skill that all parents have, and those that come forward for these roles are not necessarily the most suitable. As a school leader you need to enable a cross-section of parents to take up roles as representatives and to support them in developing their skills and confidence.

Are there any other aspects of your school (or, more importantly, the school development plan) that they could be involved in?

You might also act to organise parents so that they can help each other more informally. If they are intimidated or anxious about coming to school or meeting a teacher, you could encourage other parents to act as intermediaries or 'friends' (see Case Study 5).

Case Study 5: Mr Chowdhary sets up a parents' friend scheme

Mr Chowdhary has recently become the school leader in a small rural school where there has not been a tradition of parents coming to school or the school communicating with parents. He sees this as a big gap that is holding the students back in their learning. It also means that he and the other teachers know very little about the students' home backgrounds.

He decided to set up a scheme run by parents, for parents. He hoped that this would bridge the gap in communication and give parents the opportunity to raise any concerns.

He talked to the local community leaders and his teachers, and they decided that it would be useful if these 'parent friends' were women, and that they initially networked with other mothers using their usual interactions and meetings. Mr Chowdhary sent out an invitation through some of the students and set a date for mothers to come along to a meeting to talk about their role. Only three mothers came to the meeting, but they were all willing to take on the role outlined by Mr Chowdhary, and were pleased when he said there would be a short training session, certificate and even a badge that they could wear.

Once the scheme had been running for a year, a suggestion was made that there should also be male parent friends and Mr Chowdhary set about recruiting volunteers from the fathers.