



**EVEN BETTER TOGETHER:  
A new chapter for  
parent-school relations?**

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# Welcome

Secondary schools were presented with a major test in March 2020 which they met with extraordinary energy and resolve.

Moving teaching and learning into the virtual space in the face of a pandemic was a remarkable achievement but, despite their efforts, schools now face a new challenge: accelerate the progress of all pupils and reduce the impact the pandemic may have had on learning.

Schools will be able to rely on a reinvigorated relationship between home and school. The partnership between schools and parents/carers has been given a major boost over the past year and could be a major factor in a successful response to those post pandemic challenges.

What that relationship looks like now and how it could be further strengthened was the subject of our May 2021 roundtable.

It was a fascinating and wide-ranging discussion that encompassed the lessons schools have learnt since March 2020, the strategies that have worked and need closer attention, and the challenges that need to be overcome in order for every parent to be more closely engaged with their child's learning.

We hope you find it a thought provoking read.

*Simon Hay, Co-founder and CEO, Firefly Learning*



# Introduction

This report is based on the key themes and insights that emerged from an online round table hosted by Firefly Learning on Tuesday 11 May 2021. Our panel of experts was carefully chosen to provide insights on teaching, learning and parenting and was chaired by Cat Scutt of the Chartered College for Teaching. It was attended by:

## **Aoife Duff**

Programme Manager at the Education Endowment Foundation

## **Rob Eastment**

Head of Marketing at Firefly Learning

## **Nina Gunson**

Headteacher of Sheffield High School for Girls

## **Tom Harbour**

Founder and CEO of Learning with Parents

## **Simon Hay**

Co-founder and CEO at Firefly Learning

## **Daniel Locke-Wheaton**

Principal of Aston University Engineering Academy

## **Kerry-Jane Packman**

Executive Director of Programmes, Membership and Charitable Services at Parentkind

## **Nat Parnell**

Regional Director for the North at United Learning

## **Cat Scutt**

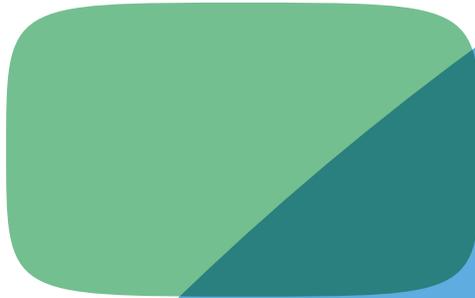
*(chair)* Director of Education and Research at the Chartered College for Teaching

## **Karen Wespieser**

COO of the parent survey app Parent Ping

We would like to express our thanks to the round table attendees for their valuable contributions and their time.

*Please note: References to parents in this report should be taken to mean parents and/or carers.*



# A shifting landscape: how parental engagement has changed since the COVID pandemic

Since the beginning of the COVID pandemic to now, we've seen a huge transformation in many parents' understanding – and their appreciation – of schools and the skill of teaching.

There has been a continuous upswing in the numbers of people becoming interested in teacher training, and many parents who have engaged in new ways with their children's learning, and some still for the first time.

The appreciation has been reciprocal, with teachers and schools developing a greater understanding of the challenges faced by parents.

This growing mutual respect is just one of the signs of an ever closer relationship between parents and schools.

Close bonds between parents and primary schools are commonplace, but it has always been a challenge at secondary level. Parent organisation Parentkind pointed out that secondary school parents had always been less confident about the quality of their children's education because they were further removed from the school. A survey carried out by the organisation during the first lockdown highlighted the fact that they did not know what their children were learning or what the curriculum was.

This, however, began to change as time went on, with many parents feeling that they had developed more of a partnership with schools over the past year because there had been more proactive engagement.

A number of the senior leaders on our panel agreed that expectations had increased on both sides.

One leader told us that asynchronous learning approaches were commonplace during the first lockdown. These often offered high quality material and had the potential to really help students, but the engagement from pupils was low. By the time of the second lockdown, parental expectations of what online learning should be contributed to a decision to make most lessons available live online through the school's VLE. And while these lessons were not of such high quality, especially at the beginning, motivating factors such as teachers, class registers and the expectations of fellow pupils resulted in greater engagement and impact.

Greater awareness of their children's learning progress, made possible through edtech platforms, has led to a transformation in parental relations, but this was not without its challenges, we heard.

One contributor said that parents were happy when they could see grades rising but as soon as there was a blip they panicked. "Part of that is that they don't understand the process," she said. "As teachers we know that it is normal for grades to go up and down. You will still get those who will react like that but at least now they are on a learning curve. The last 12 months has promoted better understanding of the education that their children receive."

One school leader added: "If you haven't heard from the school in ages and then you get some alarming data it will create that panic response," he said. "But if the communications are regular and two-way at lots of levels then it is not an issue."

The challenge, the panel agreed, was to really understand what parents enjoyed about that engagement and make sure that it continued.



# Creating a culture of good parental engagement

A senior leader told us that the pandemic had allowed schools to rethink what parental engagement meant. He suggested that in the past it was the parents who shouted loudest who were heard the most and said that from his perspective the use of edtech for parental communications and ensuring learning continuity during lockdowns had given quieter voices more of an equal footing.

“It’s not just about listening to the voices of those who turn up regularly at the school gates or parents’ evenings or those who shout the loudest,” said the senior leader. “By engaging them in a different way, encouraging and equipping them with more data and perhaps giving them the means to access learning through a VLE, we will hear the voices of every parent.”

Good parental engagement needs to be underpinned by a total commitment to getting the basics of communication right, suggested another senior leader. “Many schools seem to think good parent communication is all about the website and letters home,” he said. “But it’s not just that – it’s about making sure that if a parent has raised a query with the school, that it goes to the right people. If that approach is not catalogued in some way and there isn’t someone who is checking that they are followed up, then that is where the trouble will happen later on. This is where edtech solutions can help.”



## Parental involvement and engagement: not the same thing

Parental involvement - being 'present' at virtual or face to face school events, for example - isn't the same as parental engagement in learning, we heard.

"It's more of a stepping-stone to greater engagement in learning," said one panel member.

Parental engagement will have an especially important role in closing the disadvantage gap. We heard that the gap between low income and more affluent peers at the end of primary school was more to do with the support available at home than what happened in school. "Parental engagement in the child's learning leads to that gap," said one contributor. "It's separate from parental involvement in schooling, such as attending virtual parents' evenings. Involvement is important but it should not be an end goal, even if the school doesn't see them as involved."

Edtech businesses and organisations should make disadvantaged families and communities their focus as they were too often seen as an additional consideration, we heard. Ensuring that metrics measured access by disadvantaged families was much needed, said one contributor, adding: "Unless we measure things like that, we are not going to design solutions for those families. If we do, everyone wins because those solutions will still work for everyone."



## A conversation isn't just for parents' evening

Strong relationships are built when both sides freely exchange information and discuss concerns as they arise. One senior leader told us: "It's about the quality of ongoing conversations. It's not enough to just send a report and a nicely crafted letter home explaining targets. Every conversation now has to educate parents and set realistic expectations."

She added: "We have to be transparent from the outset. Most of us have probably had a conversation with parents about preparations for university where the parents' aspirations for the child will not be in line with reality. We shouldn't be having that conversation at that stage, we need them to begin in Year 5, 7 or 9."

We heard that edtech now had the capability to create more open and trusting school-home relationships. "All relationships need that constant ongoing conversation," said one panel member, a former deputy headteacher. "Edtech has that capability to open up channels and give complete visibility so that parents don't need to keep asking what their child is doing, and if they are happy, because that information is already available."

# Meeting the child and their parents on their own terms

A Parent Ping survey of parents showed that most primary parents felt that there was someone in their child's school who knew their child well, but this figure dropped sharply to just half at Key Stage 3.

"For their child to be happy they need someone in that school to know them really well," one of our panel commented. "That's going to be challenging for Year 7 and Year 8 pupils who have had all or most of their secondary learning in lockdown."

Shifting to more proactive parental communications during lockdowns was a chance for secondary schools to rediscover the power of closer relationships with pupils and their parents. One headteacher told us that parents thought that his school had become better at engaging with parents when it was closed than when it was open. "As an SLT we looked at why that was and how we can move forward," he said. "Lockdown has allowed, or forced, secondary schools to become more like primary schools with regards to parental engagement."

Talking about "engaged" and "hard to reach" parents was misleading, we heard. "We often talk about hard to reach parents, but no parent sees themselves as hard to reach," said one panellist. "Research shows that these parents are the same ones who find schools hard to reach."

Edtech did have a role to play in supporting these families to become more engaged.

"With some edtech platforms we can see the interactions and the engagement that is happening so we can measure it. And if we can measure that home learning we can design better solutions for disadvantaged kids," he said.



# Edtech's role in parental engagement – today and tomorrow

Technology stepped up to the plate during the pandemic and it is set to continue playing an important role.

“Things changed so much over the past 18 months,” said one headteacher. “We have real momentum now. Our staff have been on a huge learning curve and their confidence has grown as well. It’s been an opportunity to grasp changes, build on some of them - and scrap some as well.”

She said that edtech platforms had improved parental engagement, particularly around helping parents to be engaged with school life and using edtech platforms to share examples of children’s work so that it can start conversations at home.

Online parents’ evenings have been one of the higher profile shifts. “Lots of parents want to keep those,” said one headteacher. “We’ve also had better attendance at information evenings, on transition for example.”





We heard that EEF guidance on parental engagement had recommended that schools should critically review their parental engagement approaches by auditing their current practice including what had changed over the past year, looking at what works and doesn't work and then setting concrete objectives.

One secondary school had switched from school letters to video messages which had been well received by parents who spoke English as a second language. "We'd heard that some parents were having to ask a neighbour to help them read a letter but when we shifted to video these parents are engaging much more," the headteacher told us.

And we agreed that while there was strong evidence that the level of parental engagement is related to children's outcomes there was less evidence on what schools could do to impact parental behaviour. We hoped that more research could be carried out to build up that picture.

# Advice on improving parental engagement in your school

- 1 Get the basics right.** Track all incoming parent communications (particularly requests and promises) and monitor those through to completion, ticking and checking them off and picking up where they get missed. Schools can struggle with this alongside all of their other activities.
- 2 Build two-way communication.** It's not just about communicating at parents – ask them what they think and take action on their feedback.
- 3 Put the students first.** Focus engagement on the child's learning. Be child-centric rather than school centric. If a parent never speaks to you as a school but engages in their child's learning, then that's a good result for the child.
- 4 Meet parents on their terms.** That often means meeting them on mobile. If you expect them to have the latest laptops or tablets you will only engage a small proportion.



- 5** **Get critical.** Critically assess how you work with parents and try where you can to give parents concrete, practical ways in which they can help their children's learning.
- 6** **Be more primary.** Half of the work to develop parental engagement at primary schools takes place at the school gates and events like plays. That's not the reality at secondary school but those car park huddles are being recreated online, in social media platforms such as Facebook and via WhatsApp groups. Schools need to think how they engage with it.
- 7** **Look at comms through your parents' eyes.** There could be a disconnection between what the school thinks is effective communication and engagement and the actual experience of parents. They may be bombarded with calls, texts, emails from lots of your colleagues, or they may just see tumbleweed. Ask yourself: what is the holistic experience from the parents' perspective?
- 8** **Make it personal.** If you are a teacher or headteacher and you need to speak to a parent, avoid calling them 'mum'; find out their first name and speak to them on equal terms. For some parents, schools and teachers are scary – make sure you are on an equal footing.

# Conclusion

It was clear from our discussions that parental engagement was in a far stronger position than it was before the onset of the pandemic in March 2020.

The mutual awareness, understanding and appreciation that had developed between schools and parents since that time had manifested itself in a range of different responses across the country, some of which were shared by our round table guests.

We learned that a commitment to the basics of good communication was vital if effective parental engagement was to be encouraged and that engagement should not be limited to those traditional diary dates such as parents evenings. And we agreed that we should strive for a relationship characterised by the free exchange of information that encourages an ongoing conversation.

Some schools will still be a long way from this ideal. Good ideas and practice will be commonplace in schools up and down the country but a laissez-faire approach in which these ideas are left to germinate and spread on their own won't lead to a situation where parental engagement is uniformly well developed across the education system.

The EEF's advice that schools should conduct a critical appraisal of their parental engagement practice, including considering what's working well, what's not working well that could be stopped and what the evidence-base on parental engagement suggests before setting out concrete objectives was a valuable perspective.

If schools are to move forward and develop their parental engagement practice, they will find much value in this advice. Communications development models will also provide valuable guidance.

It is clear that schools and parents are entering a new chapter but it's now time to make sure that all schools are able to develop their parental engagement approaches so that they deliver the maximum benefit for their pupils.



# Recommended resources

## **EEF's Guidance Report on Parental Engagement**

[https://educationendowmentfoundation.org.uk/public/files/Publications/ParentalEngagement/EEF\\_Parental\\_Engagement\\_Guidance\\_Report.pdf](https://educationendowmentfoundation.org.uk/public/files/Publications/ParentalEngagement/EEF_Parental_Engagement_Guidance_Report.pdf)

## **EEF's Rapid Evidence Assessment on Remote Learning**

[https://educationendowmentfoundation.org.uk/public/files/Publications/Covid-19\\_Resources/Remote\\_learning\\_evidence\\_review/Remote\\_Learning\\_Rapid\\_Evidence\\_Assessment.pdf](https://educationendowmentfoundation.org.uk/public/files/Publications/Covid-19_Resources/Remote_learning_evidence_review/Remote_Learning_Rapid_Evidence_Assessment.pdf)

## **Chartered College of Teaching's reading list on parental engagement**

<https://my.chartered.college/2019/12/engaging-parents-selected-reading/>

Parentkind surveys on parental engagement:

### **Parent Survey 1**

<https://www.parentkind.org.uk/Research--Policy/Research/Coronavirus-Parent-Survey>

### **Parent Survey 2**

<https://www.parentkind.org.uk/Research--Policy/Research/Coronavirus-Parent-Survey-2>

### **Parent Survey 3**

<https://www.parentkind.org.uk/Research--Policy/Research/Coronavirus-Parent-Survey-3>

## **Parentkind's blueprint for parent-friendly schools**

<https://www.parentkind.org.uk/For-Schools/Blueprint-for-Parent-Friendly-Schools>

## **Parent Ping research on home-school relationships**

<https://parentping.co.uk/how-good-are-home-school-relationships/>

## **Communications development model from All Things IC**

[https://www.allthingsic.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/08/Channel\\_chooser\\_howICit1.jpg](https://www.allthingsic.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/08/Channel_chooser_howICit1.jpg)



## **About Firefly Learning**

Firefly creates technology for parent engagement and learning continuity. With Firefly, schools can manage all aspects of school life, helping to reduce teacher workload, streamline administrative tasks and give parents a richer understanding of their child's learning and experience of school.

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