

*The DCSF want all schools to report real-time achievement, attendance and behaviour information to parents. **Phil Neal** investigates what parents think about this.*

In researching this article, a parent told me a story about their youngest daughter's first day at secondary school. It was September last year and the new intake filled the assembly hall; one hundred or so 12-year-olds and their families, all eager to take on the fresh challenges of a new school. The head stood at the podium. "Don't look so scared," he said. Then after pausing for a minute, he smiled and added, "Clearly, I am talking to the parents."

The head's light-hearted comments, although simply designed to release the pressure on an important day, help demonstrate that when a child moves to a new school, it is often the parents that are more uncertain of what lies ahead than the child.

Marcia Walker, who has a daughter at Blatchington Mill School and Sixth Form College in East Sussex, feels this to be true: "At primary school you often drop your children at the gate or in the classroom and you get to know your children's teachers quite well. You can ask the teacher questions and chat about anything you might be unsure of. That changes significantly when your children move up to secondary school and you often only see teachers at parents' evenings.

"Things are very different from when I went to school and I was not entirely sure what to expect. In my day, exams were held in the summer. It was something of a shock to get used to modular tests throughout the year with my daughter's GCSEs.

I would say it is incredibly important when children move to secondary school that there is some way for parents to get the information they need to support their kids effectively."

Marcia is not alone. According to the Parents' Involvement in Children's Education survey (2007), 72% of parents wanted more involvement in their child's education. Further research has shown that parents believe that the education of their children is not the school's responsibility alone but is shared between the school and themselves.

The deadline

The DCSF believes that schools could be doing more to use parents as a back-up team for learning at home and in turn, help raise attainment in schools. Their stance is supported by studies which have shown that parental involvement in a child's schooling between ages 7 and 16 is a more powerful force than family background, size of family and level of parental education.*

This pattern is reflected in younger children as well. The Institute of Education published a technical paper (paper no. 8A) in 2002, which showed that parental involvement had a significant impact on children's cognitive development, literacy and number skills in the early years.

The DCSF has therefore asked all secondary schools to introduce online reporting to parents by September 2010 and in primaries by 2012, as a way of stimulating the lines of communication between schools and parents. Schools will need to give parents access to this online information on attendance, behaviour (both positive and challenging), progress, attainment and special needs for their children.

What parents want

Some schools are ahead of the government and have been communicating with parents online in this way for some time.

Blatchington Mill's parents' site has been up and running since October 2006. The school uses SIMS Learning Gateway technology from Capita, which allows parents to view information from the school's management information system (MIS) on attendance, behaviour and achievements.

"I know some parents logon to check if their child is attending all the lessons throughout the day as a way of reassuring them. But really the Parents' Portal is a focus for anything a parent would want to know about the school," says Marcia Walker.

"Where both my daughter and I found it useful in the past was if she had perhaps not fully understood her homework assignment. Previously it would have been difficult to help, but with the Parents' Portal we could log on and look at the homework log and figure it out together. I suppose that this is the sort of home support that the DCSF are looking for and why they are encouraging schools to do this."

South Dartmoor Community College also has a similar Learning Gateway for parents and the school finds they log on for different reasons, "The benefit of parents accessing information in this way is that

they can pick what they want when they want,” says Peter Kensington, an assistant head at the school. “They do not have to wait for the school to give them the information but can look it up even if it is at 10pm on Saturday night.”

Debbie Simpson, who has a daughter at the school, is a strong supporter of getting information to parents in this way. “My daughter is happy with me accessing the information and I think she likes the fact that I take an interest in her school life.”

She describes one situation where the information online really helped. Despite being an enthusiastic maths student, Debbie noticed that her daughter had lost some of her normal enjoyment when she was working on maths assignments at home. “I logged on to the Learning Gateway and saw that she had recently changed teachers and I wondered if this could be the cause. I quickly contacted the teacher to discuss the issue and suggested my daughter could be suffering from the change.” The teacher was very supportive and encouraged Debbie’s daughter a little more in class. A few weeks later, she had her old enthusiasm back for the subject again. “I think it would have been far more difficult for me to get to the route of the problem without the information online.”

This is backed up by other parents who have said that simply being able to check who the child’s teacher is for each subject has made them more likely to contact them.

“You can use as much of it or as little of it as you like. I have a friend whose young son enjoys school but is perhaps a little unorganised. She uses the Learning Gateway to look at his timetable and to double-check in the morning that he has remembered everything he needs for the day at school.

“As he gets older she will not need to do this, but for the moment I am sure it is helpful for teachers that kids turn up with their PE kit or the right project work every day,” says Debbie.

Start slow

All parents and teachers at the schools I spoke to were unanimous in their advice to other schools considering installing similar systems: “Start slow,” says Andy Lowe, assistant head at St Paul’s Catholic College in West Sussex. The school recommends using a small group of friendly parents, such as volunteers from the PTA, as your pilot so they can let you know what information is useful and easy to access and what is not. You can then iron out any hiccups before you go live to all parents.

The logo for SIMS, consisting of the letters 'SIMS' in white, bold, sans-serif font, centered within a solid blue square.

“Never over-estimate the technical skills of parents,” is the advice of Debbie, a parent at South Dartmoor Community College. “We had hands on sessions with teachers and the IT team at the school who showed us the ropes on parents evening and it was ideal. You had time to ask all the questions you wanted no matter how basic they were.”

Blatchington Mill School has taken this a stage further and is training some volunteer students to help parents if they have difficulties with the Parents’ Portal.

And will the system have an effect on parental engagement as the DCSF and Becta hope? “Most definitely. I can see my child’s grades from previous years as well as her current ones so I can see if there is a problem and can step in and help. It also makes it easier to communicate with your child about school as you know who their teachers are and what lessons they had that day,” says parent, Sherrall Baker.

The teachers at Blatchington Mill School agree. Mark Leighton, an assistant head and the school’s IT director, says, “There is definitely a greater sense of community in the school now. Everyone knows what is going on and we are getting parents contacting us all the time. This is what we were looking for. Communication is the true basis of a partnership between home and school and the technology is making it easier for this communication to happen.”

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*(Feinstein, L & Symons, J. Oxford Economic papers, 51 (1999)).

Further information:

- www.parental-engagement.com
- www.becta.org.uk/schools/parentalengagement
- The Impact of Parental Involvement on Children’s Education - publication which summarises parental engagement research, downloadable from TeacherNet www.teachernet.gov.uk