GIVE YOUR PARENTS
MORE INPUT

A lack of information, a lack of input and a lack of certainty on the part of parents and guardians is a sure-fire recipe for conflict, writes **Gareth D Morewood...**

The best outcomes are achieved when strong partnerships exist. Put simply, pupils have better outcomes when parents or carers and the school are positively engaged. Effective collaboration between parents/carers and professionals regarding options and outcomes will lead to increased opportunities for families, pupils and the professionals who work with them.

It's no surprise to me, and should be no surprise to readers, that proper joint working and positive engagement with parents/carers can make significant differences in outcomes for young people. So why doesn't this happen in every school, area and region? The reality is that it can; if there's a real desire to collaborate, then there's no reason why it can't be achieved.

However, it's important to note that there can be obstacles to doing so from both professionals and families. A recent meta-analysis of parental involvement in student academic achievement and learning outcomes indicated that the strongest associations are found when families have high expectations for their children, develop and maintain communication with them about school activities, and help them to develop positive habits with regard to learning and engagement (1).

It's important to explicitly set out the aims of the school when first meeting parents/carers, and ensure that each others' roles in the partnership are clear. Uncertainty and misinformation is one of the biggest barriers to effective working.

When it works well, engaging positively with families allows for them to have direct and positive input into academic work, as well as other provision. Constant battling and fighting for provision will leave little space for positive engagement with school activities. Working together creates a much stronger position from which to operate.

Working positively in partnership

Working positively with families' further makes a significant difference to what can be achieved with regards to individual pupils. The Parent/Carer Confidence Measure I developed with Caroline Bond a few years ago (see tinyurl.com/gdm-parental-confidence) highlighted the key areas when it comes to facilitating these positive partnerships:

● Keep parents/carers informed
● Ensure parents/carers know how to contact key staff
● Provide honest communication; there's no long-term benefit in providing anything but the truth
● Listen carefully to parents/carers and give them time to explain and discuss things
● Try to avoid any uncertainty/misinterpretation; receiving information repeatedly is better than assumptions resulting in details not being passed on

This isn't ground-breaking stuff, but it's important to explicitly consider the key elements of positive co-production. You can download the confidence measure from my website (see tinyurl.com/gdm-confidence) and use the feedback as a baseline from which to develop more effective joint-working.

Considering the Assess-Plan-Do-Review model, it might look like this:

Assess: Use the Parent/Carer Confidence Measure
Plan: Choose two or three areas for improvement and work (co-produce) with a group of parents/carers
Do: Use resources to develop communication and add discussion groups/feedback opportunities
Review: Use the confidence measure again one year on and compare the results

This has been proven to be an extremely effective means of targeting specific areas that require improvement. Creating an action plan that meets the needs highlighted by parents/carers is an important foundation upon which improved working can be built.

Addressing Concerns

Conflict isn't good for anyone. When asked by Tucker and Schwartz (2) about whether they'd experienced any conflict with school teams, parents/carers overwhelmingly reported 'yes' (83%).

The main area of conflict identified in the research was around service provision, goals and objectives (66%), followed by placement decisions (56%), and disagreements over curricula or instructional approaches (52%).

This study notes that when conflict arose, one of the reported reasons was parent/carers not perceiving opportunities to provide input and participate fully in decision making. Indeed, when parents/carers pushed to have their input included during times of conflict, they often found themselves becoming even more peripheral to their child's team and 'making things worse'.

It's therefore vital that schools carefully consider how they engage with parents/carers and that they address these important areas of concern. Not doing so risks poorer outcomes for pupils, and in the worst cases, significant acrimony. Ensuring that there are clearly established processes through which parents/carers can address their concerns is essential for creating effective partnerships.

Reporting and Communicating

I've delivered many conference addresses and INSETs about communication being a key element in effective SEND provision. How we communicate will vary (face-to-face meetings, phone calls, emails, etc.), but one thing I'm sure of is that making our communication inclusive is an important element in engaging positively with parents/carers.

I'm a fan of the 'What went well' and 'Even better if' approach, where parents/carers can highlight good things and draw attention to areas for improvement. I advocate using this system at public events such as parent/carer evenings, school concerts, sports events and so forth. A simple box with postcards where parents/carers can highlight good areas and those that could be better can allow for both anonymous or identified responses. It could even form part of the school's website. Encouraging open discussions and information sharing can have a powerful impact.

On a similar note, how inclusively does your school report progress? Are your reports and progress updates sufficiently accessible to the parents/carers of the pupils you work with? Have you ever asked parents/carers how things could be improved?

I often think more frequent, shorter reporting is more effective than the traditional sole end-of-year summary. Half-termly updates with shorter, more accessible actions can be extremely effective and help to support positive engagement. Again, consider how often you ask parents/carers about how things can be improved, and what might be best for them.

Concluding Thoughts

Anything that involves working with others will always have areas that can be improved on. However, any changes you make should always be part of an informed response to an area of need identified through open and honest communication. Many of the aforementioned ideas and suggestions may seem like 'common sense', but in the busy world of the SENCo, one of the most valuable things we can do is to take a step back and think a little more strategically.

So take a moment, think about your current systems and consider how you can engage with parents/carers in jointly improving the outcomes of the young people with whom you work.

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REFERENCES

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(2) Tucker, V. and Schwartz, I. (2013). *Parents' Perspectives of Collaboration with School Professionals: Barriers and Facilitators to Successful Partnerships in Planning for Students with ASD. School Mental Health*, 5(3), p. 3-14