

[www.ncsl.org.uk](http://www.ncsl.org.uk)

## What are we **learning about...?**

Community leadership in networks

# Engaging parents through networks

Effective Partnerships with Parents (EPPa)

Illustrative examples of how  
schools connect with and  
engage parents and their local  
communities through networks.

Community Leadership Strategy

Networked Learning Communities

learning from each other

learning with each other

learning on behalf of each other

# Engaging parents through networks

The accounts of practice presented within this series aim to provide concrete examples of community leadership in networks. In particular, they provide a practical illustration of the significant elements we have found to be evident when developing community leadership within a networked context.

*“Doing business as we have always done it is unlikely to have any effect in creating a more inclusive, holistic approach to the delivery of public services. At every level, we need to re-think our approach: how we consult, how we engage others, how we meet together, how we celebrate and how we lead.”*

There are now many schools, both in the UK and internationally, that are benefiting from working together as a network. By drawing upon their experience and that of others who are actively involved in community leadership through networking and collaborative activity beyond the education sector, it is possible to identify the factors that characterise effective community leadership in networks.

## Acknowledgements

We would like to thank all those who contributed to the generation and publication of these accounts of practice: Enid Bell, Hilary Berry, Julia Duffy, Steve Edwards, Mark Fowler, Val Godfrey, Drummond Johnstone, Steve Keable, David Ling, Melissa Murphy, Simon Patton, Jean De Rijke, Rotherham Metropolitan Borough Council and their voluntary sector partners, Sue Shelley and Rob Thomas.

**Kate Bond and Maggie Farrar,**  
Lead Developers

### Four characteristics of effective community leadership in networks

- 1 *Sharing leadership with a focus on ‘bridging’ rather than ‘bonding’ relationships, processes and actions.*
- 2 *Collaborative working which builds social capital and coheres around a shared focus which is child-centred.*
- 3 *Joint planning and dialogue which promotes active participation in decision-making-for-action by all.*
- 4 *Designing local strategies for long term system-wide change.*

The accounts of practice in this series explore in different ways and with different emphases, these key characteristics of effective community leadership and in so doing they help to explain what developing community leadership in networks looks like in practice. Considering some of these factors in the process of developing community leadership within a networked context will help to ensure that future development is built from the best of what is known from current thinking and practice. We hope that these accounts of practice will, therefore, be of practical use to you – if you are considering developing community leadership activities within networks, schools or other organisations, or if you are simply interested in finding out more about community leadership in networks and its potential benefits for all. □

## Engaging parents through networks

**‘Hard to reach’** is a term associated with parents, however, it is interesting to note that teachers can also be hard to reach. A busy working schedule can prevent teachers from developing relationships with parents, yet these challenges are often the reasons preventing parents supporting teachers’ goals. An innovative strategy to address hard-to-reach parents will be explored in this account of practice which illustrates the changes in practice and attitude that are needed for teachers and parents to engage with each other.

### Effective Partnerships with Parents (EPPa)

In 1998, the Parent Teacher Associations of Plymouth, Torbay and Devon (PTA@PTD) set up a pilot project to help define what effective and productive partnerships with parents and communities mean in practice. The pilot project ran in 15 primary and secondary schools in Plymouth, Torbay and Devon, over a period of 4 years. The schools ranged in size from 150 to 1,600 pupils and were located in areas with varying socio-economic circumstances in rural, urban and inner-city locations. All schools had one thing in common: their headteachers had all expressed a wish to work more closely and effectively in partnership with parents.

Effective Partnerships with Parents (EPPa) is based upon the belief that an informed and supportive parent body will do a great deal to raise standards in schools and help children realise their potential. Many schools will already believe that they do all they can to involve parents, but may feel that they don’t get the support they want. The reasons for this perceived lack of support are often difficult to identify, but in almost all cases, it is the teachers who set the agendas and who are therefore, obliged to assume that they know what parents want.

The EPPa strategy offers a different approach, in that it is the parents who provide the leadership, working in partnership with school staff, governors and members of the local community. The advantages of this approach are greater parental support and involvement. Parents can take on much of the administration, they also have natural links with the community and are an untapped skill base. A parent-to-parent approach is seen as less daunting for some people, encouraging wider parental participation.

The EPPa strategy involves working through a parent-led ‘action team’. In this way, EPPa ensures that parents, not teachers or the governing body, take responsibility

for ensuring continuity and co-ordination of projects to support learning. Parents, not headteachers, lead the teams. In the pilot, action teams that were reliant on headteachers to lead were unsustainable. When parents led, more was achieved; community and parents were more engaged and empowered. However, senior leaders in schools *must* also be involved. Without the headteacher or other senior management participation, action teams lost the school perspective and did not thrive.

### Step-by-step guide to forming a parent network

The EPPa Toolkit provides a step-by-step guide to forming an action team, identifying local needs and carrying out projects.



## Engaging parents through networks

### Account 1 - Highfield Primary School

#### Objective

To engage families and the community in the transformation of the physical learning environment.

#### Action

Highfield is an inner-city primary school in an area of urban deprivation (amongst the 15 per cent most economically deprived areas in England). The action team has 11 enthusiastic members managing a project to refurbish unused space in the school and turn it into a 'half-way house' between the school and its local community.

The team raised over £18,000 to convert the dilapidated space into a large facility with kitchen, storage, multi-use space, computer suite and a nursery. Childcare is provided on-site for parents who are engaged in training or work, or participating in workshops in the new amenity. A regular breakfast club and after-school club now run at the facility, improving children's nutrition, concentration, confidence and social skills. Events organised by the action team are designed to support learning opportunities for children, families and the community.

#### Benefits

There have been benefits for children, families and staff.

- Pupils benefit directly from using the facility for some activities and benefit indirectly by having more informed families who can support their learning.
- The behaviour and concentration of pupils attending the breakfast club has improved.
- Action team members have undertaken ICT training, first-aid and food hygiene courses as part of their voluntary activities.
- Many of the action team parents have subsequently become valued members of the school staff as learning support assistants.

#### Leadership lessons

Don't give up. The headteacher on this action team was adamant that the group would survive despite a very slow start. His enthusiasm maintained confidence in the community.

***“ Parent leadership is essential. I hear their ideas instead of setting an agenda and guessing what parents want. ”***

## Account 2 - Queen Elizabeth's Community Technology College

### Objectives

To improve communication between parents, the school and the local community in order to address the needs of parents with teenagers and to respond to the needs of parents of children with learning difficulties.

### Action

Queen Elizabeth's Community Technology College has approximately 1,500 pupils aged 11-18 years. It is situated in a market town and the catchment area is largely rural. The socio-economic profile of the area is mixed, with houses in a designated deprived rural area, as well as relatively affluent town and village homes.

The action team at Queen Elizabeth's College has tackled a multitude of diverse projects in response to perceived local need. They fundamentally revised communications by:

- upgrading student planners after consultation with students and parents
- introducing a calendar of school events for parents
- increasing opportunities to promote the college through the use of purpose-built notice-boards sited around the town
- recruiting the support of the local newspaper which publicises events at the school and the achievements of pupils
- organising regular talks from ex-students, now at university, to Years 11-13 about life at university from a student's perspective
- introducing a 'Bud-wiser' scheme between Year 6 pupils at one local feeder primary school to ease transition for pupils and parents
- adding two, one-day Saturday workshops on the theme of coping with adolescent behaviour
- holding an evening workshop for parents of children with special needs in response to requests from parents, the parents went on to form a support group
- organising parenting workshops for parents of early years children with challenging behaviour problems
- instigating a data-base of volunteers to match volunteer skills with the needs of the school
- holding a health and fitness day for the local community. More events are planned to raise awareness of local amenities, to encourage families to visit schools on an informal basis and to contribute towards the college's 'Healthy Schools Award' bid

### Benefits

Benefits have been reported by students, teachers and parents.

- The team has made it easier and more effective for the school to reach parents in this rural community.
- Parenting and life-skills workshops for parents have given them a better understanding of children's development and more confidence to deal with their children's behaviour.
- Parents and children who attended the health and fitness workshops had the opportunity to visit the school on an informal fun day, when the usual formalities associated with school were absent.
- Matching volunteers' skills with the needs of school departments has brought benefits to students and staff alike.
- The internet buddying scheme has eased transition for parents and their children and made the primary-secondary transfer smoother.
- Action team parents on the team have used their volunteering to gain confidence and have returned to work or further training.

### Leadership lessons

School senior managers on action teams must liaise closely with the headteacher and other staff to ensure good communication. For sustainability it is vitally important that the school supports the action team and helps parents on the team to recruit new blood.

***"I think we have made a huge difference to how the school communicates with parents."***

## Engaging parents through networks

### Account 3 - Ladysmith First & Middle Schools & St Luke's High School

#### Objective

To widen participation by helping parents to support children's learning, listening to teenagers, supporting parents and improving joint-agency working.

#### Action

'Lifestyle 2000' was four weeks of family learning opportunities presented by the action teams in the three cluster schools in association with their city community. The aim was to show families in this economically deprived area of the city that learning both in and out of school could be fun for people of all ages. Organising the event was a huge achievement, and the calendar of events spread across all three schools and their local community. During the month of family learning sessions, a wide variety of workshops was offered, ranging from DIY demonstrations at the local superstore, to parenting workshops, local heritage trails, bike maintenance, computer taster sessions, and musical, sports, maths, reading and photography events. Evaluations of the events demonstrated that parents wanted more parenting workshops and computer courses which proved very successful in bringing families together online. A culture has now been created within the schools where it is seen as commonplace to come to at least one of the regular parenting sessions.

#### Benefits

There have been benefits for students, staff and parents.

- Parents and children became familiar with the three schools during the month of events held at various venues. This helped to ease transition by giving parents and children a chance to look around schools informally in advance of children attending them.
- The action team promoted inter-agency working between the schools and local support organisations in a positive and pro-active way.

#### Leadership lessons

It is imperative that home-school communications are reliable to guarantee that messages are received. It is essential for school leaders to demonstrate their commitment to projects by ensuring that teachers encourage parents and the community to participate in events.

***"We now have a structure to engage with parents, it is a great strength."***

### Account 4 - Parkside Community Technology College

#### Objective

To place the school at the heart of the local community, supporting community development.

#### Action

Parkside Action Team operates in the heart of an inner-city Education Action Zone. The team has unusually high levels of community involvement, reflecting the spirit of regeneration in the area. The team here has focused on improving its communications with local families by revising the induction procedure in Year 7, producing a local learning community newsletter and publicising computer skills workshops for families. 'Hard-to-reach' parents who originally joined the computer course have become action team members and school governors. The team was involved with organising a multi-cultural event for families and the local community called 'World-wide Wednesday'.

#### Benefits

There have been benefits for children, families and staff.

- The action team has succeeded in bridging the gap between home and school (which many parents find an intimidating environment).
- There is greater understanding of the cultures reflected in the locality.

#### Leadership lessons

Maximise opportunities presented by local community development agencies. The appointment of a professional community development worker gives the opportunity to develop and empower the action team so that it in turn can add value to the work of the school.

***"Parents are encouraged to take an active role, which is a positive way forward."*** □

## End note

**Moving away from** teacher-directed projects, apparent in a network such as EPPa, offers parents and communities the opportunity to explore new avenues of involvement with schools. By looking outside the immediate school environment, parent-led action teams can recruit support and resources from the community that will help provide long-term solutions to today's challenges. They can help build capacity in the local community and this, in turn, makes parent networks sustainable and largely independent of school staff.

School leaders who support parent networks can empower parent and community members to access increased resources – material, human and financial – that support not just individual children in schools, but families and extended families, putting learning facilities and opportunities within their reach. A well-developed parent network model of community partnership, with schools at their heart, brings short and long-term gains for students, parents, schools and the community. □

### Contact details:

**Contact:** Jean De Rijke, Mosaic Educational Ltd.

**email:** [info@mosaic-ed.com](mailto:info@mosaic-ed.com)

**Website:** [www.mosaic-ed.com](http://www.mosaic-ed.com)

# What are we learning about...?

The 'What are we learning about...?' series is designed to make public the learning that has emerged from NLCs in the last two years.

The first nine titles in the series will focus on:  
**What are we learning about...?**

- LEA involvement in school networks
- Establishing a network of schools
- **Community leadership in networks**
- *'Making mathematics count'* in school networks
- The impact of school networks
- Sustaining a network of schools
- Facilitation within school networks
- Professional development in school networks
- Leadership of school networks

To order a copy of this series, please email  
**[nlc@ncsl.org.uk](mailto:nlc@ncsl.org.uk)** quoting the reference  
**WAWLA/Community leadership**

**National College for  
School Leadership**  
Networked Learning Group  
Derwent House  
Cranfield University Technology Park  
University Way, Cranfield  
Bedfordshire  
MK43 0AZ

T: 08707 870 370  
F: 0115 872 2401

E: [nlc@ncsl.org.uk](mailto:nlc@ncsl.org.uk)  
W: [www.ncsl.org.uk/nlc](http://www.ncsl.org.uk/nlc)

**National College for  
School Leadership**  
Community Leadership  
Triumph Road  
Nottingham  
NG8 1DH

E: [communityleadership@ncsl.org.uk](mailto:communityleadership@ncsl.org.uk)  
W: [www.ncsl.org.uk/communityleadership](http://www.ncsl.org.uk/communityleadership)



**National College for  
School Leadership**