TRANSITION PARENTS

Inspiring Communities

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## CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Executive Summary</td>
<td>P2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Recommendations</td>
<td>P9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>P15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pre-transition procedures (pupils)</td>
<td>P18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parental views regarding the pre-transition experience</td>
<td>P18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parental involvement in preparing their children for transition</td>
<td>P23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parental views regarding the extent that schools had involved them in the pre-transition process</td>
<td>P25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The importance of the early post-transition phase</td>
<td>P27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parental perceptions regarding the way their children managed the transition to secondary education</td>
<td>P30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The extent to which parents feel involved in the child’s secondary education and with the school</td>
<td>P33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parental perceptions regarding the school’s readiness to engage with their views and opinions at the point of transition</td>
<td>P39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What parents perceive as the main barriers to closer involvement with the school and/or their child’s education</td>
<td>P42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The extent to which parents are consulting family, friends and others about their involvement in their children’s education</td>
<td>P45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The extent to which parents have talked to their child at the point of transition, or shortly thereafter about her/his aspirations for education and later employment</td>
<td>P47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What parents think that the school can do to make it more accessible and supportive of parental involvement</td>
<td>P49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Additional related factors raised by parents</td>
<td>P53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Literature Review</td>
<td>P56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 Why involve parents of secondary aged children in their education – and the life of their school?</td>
<td>P56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 What central support has been provided for parental involvement at secondary stage? Central policy documents relating to parents and schools</td>
<td>P61</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 Outcomes of increased parental involvement in secondary education</td>
<td>P64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 Why do parents tend to engage less with their children’s educational experiences at secondary stage?</td>
<td>P64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 Teacher views regarding parental engagement</td>
<td>P71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6 How best to secure information on parental perception of education and their part within it</td>
<td>P72</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7 Barriers to parental involvement</td>
<td>P72</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8 Involving or Engaging parents?</td>
<td>P74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9 The place of digital technologies in promoting parental engagement with schools</td>
<td>P79</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10 What specifically can the school do in refining its practice to ensure easier engagement with parents?</td>
<td>P80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11 Specific strategies, with particular focus for engaging parent of Year 7 pupils</td>
<td>P84</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12 Student perceptions and their part in enhancing home-school partnership</td>
<td>P87</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bibliography</td>
<td>P88</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Executive Summary

A Pre-transition procedures (pupils)

1. Checkers Comprehensive school already\(^1\) has in place a refined pre-transition procedure that has been developed in collaboration with its feeder primary schools. This includes introductory to the primary schools by designated members of the comprehensive school staff and familiarisation visits by the pre-transitioning pupils to Checkers School. Less attention has yet been given to addressing the parental aspect of this process however, although opportunities to familiarise them with the school procedures and culture is provided following the transition of their children.

B Parental views regarding the pre-transition experience

1 The school holds an 'Induction event' for parents of new pupils (usually in July) and care is taken to ensure that parents have an opportunity to meet with school staff. Parents are also introduced to the Checkers Home-School Contract that articulates the school’s expectations for its pupils and parents as well as what the parents and pupils can expect of the school.

2 Parents expressed a range of positive and negative views about the pre-transition process (as they did with the transition and post-transition processes). The significance of these early impressions cannot be underestimated since they can result in the formulation of long held attitudes that may be positive or negative in nature and once formed, are difficult to alter.

3 Powerful positive consequences are likely to flow from views that reflect the school’s readiness to respond to anxieties on the part of pupil and parent; informal opportunities to engage with the school from an early stage is also seen as beneficial by parents and is likely to help sustain their longer engagement with the school and their child’s educational experiences.

4 Parents also welcomed early opportunities to attend some parent-focused events and in particular, the opportunity to sample school-based and extra-curricular activities that would be available to their children. Parents also welcomed opportunities for their children to sample such activities at a pre-transition stage.

5 Unsurprisingly, parents emphasised the importance that they attach to being made to feel welcomed by the school and where the school could be seen to be transmitting a ‘caring’ attitude.

\(^1\) For the sake of anonymity, the pseudonym Checkers has been used for the case study school and its local community.
C Parental involvement with their children in pre-transition support

1 For many parents, supporting their child to “remain safe” through the transition phase was their major concern and this took many forms. The main areas of concern related to preparing their children to:
   • behave appropriately;
   • understand the secondary school culture
   • familiarising them with the different models of teaching and learning within the secondary school
   • avoid bullying
   • negotiate the journey to and from school safely

2 There was some anecdotal (but unsubstantiated) evidence presented that suggested that mothers more often than fathers tended to engage in this form of supportive role.

3 In contrast to the above, some parent were keen to emphasise that they played a minimal part in supporting their children through transition and saw this as very much the responsibility of the children themselves. There was some indication that some took this view as a result of their own ignorance of the secondary sector and/or due to their negative personal experiences of the system as pupils themselves.

4 What must be particularly disappointing for the school is that despite having invested significant time, effort and resources into devising and operating a successful transitional programme, many parents report that they fail to be aware that these exist. This may well indicate a need for the school to ensure that important information regarding transition processes reaches all parents.

5 There was some evidence that parent commitment to supporting their children’s education was not always given high priority and that this had significantly reduced by the time the children were half way though primary school education. Hence, re-engaging these parents during the secondary phase would inevitably be challenging.

D The importance of the early post-transition phase

1 Early in the new academic year, the school hosts a parents’ evening. This is usually well attended, but subsequent parent evenings which are held following the normal reporting times tend to be less popular. It is also the parents of the more engaged, and perhaps better achieving pupils, who tend to attend these meetings,

2 The subsequent Academic Review days are generally well attended. These take a significantly different form to the other parents’ events and seem to better meet the expectations of more parents.
3 As was the case with the pre-transition phase, the importance of good, clear communication procedures can be seen as paramount for child and parent alike.

4 Similarly, parents place a high degree of importance on the way that the school responds to their requests when making contact. Particular importance is given to a speedy response to their concerns or enquiries and failure to secure a response from a targeted individual generates disproportionate frustration and resentment.

**Parental perceptions regarding the way their children managed the transition to secondary education**

1 Some of the parents interviewed were able to report that their child had managed the transition from primary to secondary education without much difficulty. In contrast however, for others this had been apparently traumatic.

2. For some, this was seen as an exciting period when they could look forward to enjoying a range of new activities. Others had been assisted in the transition by the presence of a friend from primary school engaged in the same process.

3. Parents had valued the close relationships that they had forged with their children’s primary school and would welcome a similar engagement with the secondary sector. They appreciated however, that the structures and ethos of the latter made this more difficult.

4. Whilst there was a shared view that at the very start of the primary school years, parents were generally active in the school, there was also a feeling expressed that as the child worked his/her way through the school, that engagements tended to taper off.

5. Parents of pupils who were experiencing difficulty with managing their own behaviour or who were experiencing learning difficulties of various kinds and intensity tended to identify the transition period as particularly problematic. In doing this, they often attributed some blame on the school.

**The extent to which parents feel involved in the child’s secondary education and with the school [barriers and facilitators]**

1 Whilst some parents are heavily involved in their children’s education and support them from home, they may well be reluctant to become as engaged with school-based activities and saw such involvement as one-directional with the school directing any engagement. Such parents should not be viewed as disinterested.

2 Parents felt that the school viewed parents’ evenings (and other related activities), as more focused on the needs of the school, as opposed to the needs of the parents or their children. Others did not participate in such
events since they had found them to be intimidating and/or not ‘family-friendly’.

3 The importance of an interested member of staff with whom as parents felt comfortable in approaching when experiencing anxieties about their child’s progress was seen as particularly valued by many parents.

4 Others drew emphasised the difficulty that they experience in gaining ready access to the school and engaging with their child’s learning process.

5 A barrier that may prevent the school from offering greater freedom for parents to become involved in out of school activities is the PFI status of the school.

6 Some parents stated that their involvement with the school emanated from a negative source. This often related to their child's difficult behaviour or poor performance.

7 Finding ways to communicate with all parents is a real challenge to the school. Some parents suggested that they remained unclear about precisely what the school expected of them – or of how ready the school was to accommodate their involvement. A range of alternative modes of communication would be likely to help address this challenge.

8 Difficulties parents report when contacting the school by telephone and having their calls answered promptly and messages responded to rapidly when these are left for a member of staff who is engaged elsewhere when the parent calls tend to be particularly frustrating.

9 Some parents said that they are anxious about communicating with the school due perhaps to their own earlier experiences of schools as a student or concerns regarding possible negative repercussions for their child.

10 The changing practices of teaching and learning, as well as the introduction of new curriculum areas and examination programmes (and nomenclature) all make it difficult for many parents to really engage with their children’s education. It may be possible for the school to offer facilities that can support adults alongside their children in addressing this.

11 The school has already established a Parents Perspective Group in which parents’ voice their views about various school-based practices and related subjects. Whether this forum is appropriate to accommodate the voice of a wide range of parents however, is worth further consideration.

Parental perceptions regarding the school's readiness to engage with their views and opinions at the point of transition

1. Many parents expressed satisfaction with their experiences of the school to-date and that as a result, they felt confident that they could
approach the school in the knowledge that their views would be received openly and their opinions welcomed. Others however, felt that the direction of communication remained one-directional with the school dictating what action would be taken.

2. The importance of identifying ways of engaging with parents at times convenient to them and that takes account of parental commitments - as well as that of the school’s is likely to become increasingly significant. This is particularly the case of one-parent families or where both parents work.

3. Parents also cited concerns about the lack of openness experienced-with the school adopting a ‘we know best’ attitude to concerns raised by parents about their child’s specific needs

4. Others had found difficulty in gaining access to specific members of staff and identified difficulties in convincing receptionists that they should/could gain access to particular members of staff and are often frustrated at leaving a message with the receptionist which is not always followed up.

What parents perceive as the main barriers to closer involvement with the school and/or their child’s education

1. Several parents commented on their lack of understanding as to how their child would benefit from their involvement with the school or the child’s education. The school should not assume that this is self-evident to all parents and it would seem that many could benefit from an awareness-raising programme.

2. Others were anxious not to be seen to be ‘pressurising’ their children. A more effective awareness-raising programme to help educate parents about strategies that parents could usefully employ in support of their children.

3. Although the school expresses a desire to involve parents it needs to ensure that it quickly follows this up by extending specific invitations for their participation with particular activities.

4. The importance of developing a ‘family friendly’ school environment and practice was identified by many if greater participation of parents with the school is to be achieved. This would involve ensuring a more approachable, friendly and accessible ethos.

The extent to which parents are consulting family, friends and others about their involvement in their children’s education

1. Many parents indicated that they relied heavily on family and friends to discuss their child’s educational progress and their involvement in the process.
2. Whilst parents find it helpful to talk with others about school (and specifically, transitional) issues, this largely took the form of expressing negative feelings against the school and/or the transition arrangements in place.

The extent to which parents have talked to their child at the point of transition, or shortly thereafter about her/his aspirations for education and later employment

1. Some young people have a relatively clear pathway in mind, often in the form of subsequent likely employment in family related businesses, professions or trades.

2. Parents often emphasised and reinforced in the child a need to adopt a healthy work ethic that is more likely to secure for them the aspirations they have in mind.

3. Many felt that it was a little premature to involve their child in thinking about their future direction at an early stage in their secondary school career.

4. Others believed that their child’s aspirations for future employment directions were likely to change as the child grows and develops.

What parents think that the school can do to make it more accessible and supportive of parental involvement

1. Parental views were split between those who felt that the school was already doing much to encourage parental engagement and had little else that needed to be done and those who took the view that this was an issue that the school needs to take seriously and begin to explore ways of making parental engagement easier and rewarding.

2. Some parents would value the school facilitating regular informal evenings for parents where they could meet and discuss, perhaps over coffee.

3. Some suggested that the school adopt a more energetic approach by seeking ways of involving parents in the wider context of the school life and being as enthusiastic and determined in this as they tend to be when summoning parents about concerns they are experiencing with their children.

4. The importance of ensuring that the school has in place opportunities and facilities to engage parents at times that are convenient to them was again raised in discussion around the way that school practice could be refined to support parental involvement after transition.
5. Parents would welcome the school opening some of its activities so that they could be involved alongside or in parallel to their children.

6. Many parents emphasised the importance they placed on efficient and effective **two-way** communication, instigated and facilitated by the school.

7. Specific issues relating to communication within particular contexts such as that of school homework policy was raised by some to ensure consistency that could help parents play a more proactive role in supporting their children’s work.

8. It is possible that much anxiety is generated by parental unfamiliarity (possibly perceived by parents as ‘ignorance’) with secondary school education and this appears to be a major barrier that prevents greater interaction with schools and schooling.

9. It is possible that the format of the present school newsletters are not immediately appealing to many parents and some consideration as to how these might be modified could be of assistance.

10. The potential for using modern communication tools to ease and increase communication between school and parents was also raised. Particular mention was made of the way that the school’s website could be enhanced to facilitate this. Greater use of texting was also suggested.
Recommendations

This enquiry has identified a number of important issues that parents have raised as barriers and as enablers to greater engagement and collaboration with the school and in their children’s education as they transition into secondary school and beyond. Specific issues are identified towards the end of this part of the report.

It is important however, to identify recurring themes that permeate the enquiry since these are raised in differ ways when parents address the discrete sections under investigation. Briefly, these can be summarised as:

- communication issues;
- basic perception about the school
- issues of access and
- The extent to which the school is seen as a 'caring' organisation.

Interestingly, these closely match elements identified as critical within various theoretical models designed to explain the dynamics that facilitate smooth operations within complex organisations and in particular – the development of trust in institutions.

It would be naïve to suggest that some of the deep-rooted preconceptions that some respondents hold about Checkers can be completely transformed over night. Much of the reasons that underpin these perceptions are well beyond the control of the school and will only be modified as a result of a lengthy process of positive reinforcement of good practice. Others however, have expressed less negative views and initial effort would best be directed at securing the continued support of these.

The school is encouraged to resist the natural temptation to deny limitations and to adopt a defensive stance in response to what parents and others have revealed in during this exercise. Rather, a more productive approach would be to recognise the existence of these perceptions and to look to a set of coherent strategies to address them.

Communication, trust and respect are at the heart of much that can be done to enhanced trust and confidence in the school and its practices. The evidence collected for this report includes demonstrates that the perceived absence of sound communication practices will have dire consequences and can rapidly enhance parental disengagement.

Changing ethos post-transition

For some parents, it was evident from their responses that they had valued the relationships they had formed with the primary school their child attended and would very much wish for a similar structure at the secondary phase so that they might continue to be involved in the school’s activities and support their child’s learning. In practice however, the ethos and structure of secondary education systems are such that this desire is likely to be frustrated. It is important that the secondary school is sensitive to these opinions and seeks to find some strategy that
can address these feelings in a way that may help retain the parent’s interest and involvement within a radically different structure and ethos

**Difference in primary/secondary modes of communication**

At a very basic level, there would seem to be a significant difference in the way that primary and secondary schools view the task of communicating with parents. This can be typified by the way that basic information is sometimes relayed between school and home. Primary schools often view the parent as the focus of communication where information is relayed directly to them. Secondary schools tend to rely more on the child as the conveyer of information between home and school, where the child is charged with taking letters home for their parents to read. In practice, these letters frequently do not arrive in the hands of the parents, resulting in a reduction in effective communication. This has long been recognised by secondary schools and a range of alternative strategies have been developed to address the task of school-home communication. The evidence suggests that Checkers school could benefit from looking closely at its present communication strategies to identify shortcomings and to introduce appropriate refinement.

**Alternative modes of communication to meet different needs**

It would be naïve to assume that any one form of communication is likely to successfully convey all messages to all parents. Finding ways to communicate with all parents is a significant challenge to the school but it is one that is worth investing energy on if the school is serious about enhancing the involvement of more parents in the education process.

**Review of existing procedures for communication with parents**

In the first instance, it would be worth closely reviewing the present policy on communication approaches in use to determine how effective these are and how likely they are to result in increasing parental confidence and support. Not least, it would be time well spent to look critically at the format and content of the periodical Newsletters produced by the school and to elicit the support of a range of parents in reviewing its format. It may well be the case that alternative forms of presentation would be more likely to secure the interest of its recipients. As an integral part of this process, some consideration of the inclusion of ‘parental voice’ in the document might add additional interest to its readership.

**The place and format of the Checkers Home-School Contract**

Further consideration could also be given to the present form and wording of the Checkers Home-School Contract with a view to making this a more interactive document (and the process equally more engaging for all parties). In its present form, it may be perceived as an uninteresting, bureaucratic document that does not necessarily engage those at whom it is directed. At the same time, a critical consideration could usefully be given to the way that this is likely to be perceived and received by parents at an early point in their relationship with the
school. For many it is likely that it can be perceived as an austere formal statement of expectation that could be unwelcoming by parents.

It is also recommended that any process to refine both the induction process and the Checkers Home-School Contract actively involves parents. In particular, that opportunity is provided for the voices of less confident parents to be collected and that they are made aware of the use that the school makes of their contribution.

Accessing key staff
Given the importance that parents attached to being made to feel welcomed and appreciated by the school, it would seem important that the school audits its practice to ensure that all parental experience is likely to be positive.

Allied to this is the significance that many parents place on the ease with which they can access key members of staff at times when they are experiencing concerns or anxieties about their child and his/her education. The quality and speed of such access at such times can result in disproportionate parental perceptions and hence, confidence in the school as a ‘caring’ organisation. There is some evidence that parents occasionally experience difficulties in ensuring that their messages are received by the appropriate member of staff and that when requests are left for a return call at times when a member of staff is engaged, these are not always acted upon. However limited such incidents may be, they assume an inordinate significance in the eye of the anxious parent.

Familiar, friendly professional contact
The importance of an interested and approachable member of staff with whom as parents, they felt comfortable in approaching when experiencing anxieties about their child’s progress was seen as particularly valued by many parents. The fact that they raised this as significant suggests that this is not always possible at present and that entering the school is itself seen as intimidating by some - and hence, forms a barrier to greater engagement. Further consideration might usefully be given to this important facet of the school’s functioning.

Parents’ events
All parents were not totally enthusiastic about the way that the school viewed parents’ evenings and other related activities, seeing them more focused on the needs of the school, as opposed to the needs of the parents or their children. Others found them to be intimidating and/or ‘not family-friendly’. Single parents seem to find this a very important factor that whilst is remains unattended to, will continue to form a barrier to closer engagement with school related activity. This is something that could be reflected upon and considered in detail to the advantage of all concerned.
The school traditionally holds an Academic Review day (usually in November) that extends over an entire day and evening and is used to set realistic targets for each child. At this event each parent meets with one targeted teacher (as opposed to meeting briefly with all the pupil’s teachers, as is the case for normal Parent’s Evenings following report times. It is reported that these events are generally better attended than other parents’ evenings and the school can anticipate a 75% - 80% involvement by parents. Clearly, the school has taken seriously the importance of early post-transition phase and appreciates its significance in securing the subsequent engagement of parents. It is possible that were there more similar opportunities available to parents, attendance and interest might be increased.

Changing education practices
The changing practices of teaching and learning, as well as the introduction of new curriculum areas and examination programmes (and nomenclature) all make it difficult for many parents to really engage with their children’s education. Many parents reflecting on the complexities of secondary education structures and curriculum find their confidence challenged. Others interpret their lack of understanding of modern secondary education practice and policies as personal ignorance. At a time when the examination system is dramatically changing (and is likely to be modified again in light of the recent change of government), it is important that the school seeks to find innovative ways of engaging with parents and supporting them in clarifying the implications of such practices.

The school may care to consider hosting a regular series of workshops in which these issues can be communicated in a way that is accessible to a wide range of parents. Parents are unlikely to feel confident in communication with their children or with the school where basic understanding of such important factors is not possible.

Awareness raising exercise for parents
The enquiry identified the fact that for some parents the link between their active involvement and its potential in terms of benefits for their child’s progress was not self-evident. This is particularly important within the secondary sector where evidence suggests that the importance of parental interest in their child’s education at the secondary phase is especially influential in terms of its potential academic outcomes.

The introduction of some form of awareness raising exercises could be of particular value in redressing this lack of awareness and in supporting them to engage more fully with their child’s education. The introduction of the community radio initiative might serve as particularly useful vehicle through which to promote such exercises.

The school needs to ensure a willingness to involve parents in discussions about how the community radio can support them in
engaging with the school and understanding procedures, practices, policies and curriculum change

Parent voice
The school has already established a Parents Perspective Group in which parents’ voice their views about various school-based practices and related subjects. Whether this forum is appropriate to accommodate the voice of a wide range of parents however, is worth further consideration with a view of establishing alternative ‘parent friendly’ strategies to facilitate the contribution of less confident parents.

The inclusion of a parental dimension in as many facets of the schools operations as possible should not be undervalued if it seeks to enhance collaboration. Consequently, further consideration might usefully be given to finding ways of accommodating that perspective in all its communication strategies. Other parents could well be motivated to offer their services where the school is seen as actively welcoming and facilitating parental participation.

Alternative communication strategies
Mention has already been made above to reviewing the style and content of the regular school Newsletter and to structure and format of other conventional communication strategies. Further consideration could usefully be given to the potential for using modern communication tools to ease and increase communication between school and parents. Particular attention could be given to identifying ways by which greater and more accessible use could be made of the school’s website as well as the use of texting parents directly. The introduction of the Community Radio initiative at Checkers School as an integral part of the Inspiring Communities initiative provides considerable potential for greater communication with parents and the wider community. This potential needs to be maximised and the formation of a teacher/parent/community committee to assume this as an important part of its brief would be energy well used at a very early stage in development.

Opportunities for parents to meet and participate in school-based activities
Parents interviewed frequently drew attention to a desire to be more involved in the school activities. Others pointed to a wish to access curriculum related activates such as art, dance and movement and other activities. Mention was also made to the possibility of accessing specialist school-based facilities such as gymnastic space and swimming pool. In addition, some parents expressed a desire to visit the school socially, possibly to meet informally over a coffee and discuss issues of mutual interest such as their children’s educational progress and behaviour. It is clear however, that the school’s ability to provide much of this could be frustrated by its PFI status and that facilitating additional access outside the school opening hours would incur a disproportionate expense, hence prohibiting such initiatives. It would however, be worth researching ways that the school could
extend greater access to parents during its normal operating hours and hence, demonstrating a greater willingness to welcome parents on to the premises.
Inspiring Communities – an enquiry into the views of parents in Checkers regarding attitudes to education, schools and teachers and possible approaches that may result in a higher level of engagement and involvement with secondary schools in the Checkers area of Bristol

Introduction

The Inspiring Communities programme aims to support communities to raise the aspirations and educational attainment of young people. Earlier research in the area (The Futures Company, 2009) has indicated that in the case of Checkers, many parents are either disinterested in education (or hence indifferent about engaging with educational settings

“The school was viewed by parents with fear; a daunting place where they didn’t know any other parents or teachers, and in some cases, seeing it as a place where they would only receive negative feedback about their children”

or at worst, positively antagonistic and fail to see any real benefit in working with schools.

“Parental disengagement from children’s learning and school is underpinned by a perceived disconnect from education. This is characterised by a lack of parent’s own self confidence and a social attitude that places very little value on the importance of education”.

The same research draws attention to the fact that whilst many parents seem supportive and happy to engage with education settings during their children’s early years and primary experiences, this tends to dissipate as the child moves into secondary education:

“Parents often expressed that once their child had left primary school and moved onto secondary school, there was less of a need for them to be involved in their child’s education and in some cases parents felt their involvement ends once their child enters secondary school. Parent’s generally reported the only time they would get involved with the school were if they were called into the school because of a problem with a child”.

Inevitably, such dislocation quickly results in disengagement and a reduction in the level and nature of two way communication between parents-and-school and school-and-parents.

“Parents and teachers in Checkers felt it was common that once children enter secondary school communications became more difficult. This was because of the sheer size of a secondary school and the number of teachers/parents/children involved within the educational institution which made it difficult to maintain regular communication channels
These findings have resulted in some degree of speculation relating to negative parental attitudes and limited levels of self confidence that fuelled this fracture. The present study seeks to enlighten these earlier findings in the hope that it can identify a more positive prognosis and support parents (and other members of the community) in adopting a more constructive approach to engagement. Central to this aspiration will be the exploration of the attitudes of teachers and schools - to examine their preconceptions about parental involvement and to seek their views about ways of enhancing parental engagement.

For this interim report, twenty four parents were interviewed about their perceptions and reflections on the process of transition for their children moving from the local primary school into Checkers Comprehensive School. Parents interviewed were selected from a list of sixty parents who were known to the Connexions Service in the Checkers area as parents who already engaged to some extent with their child’s school but who were not viewed as totally committed to support the school in all its activities. In this way, it was felt that such parents could be described as ‘marginally engaged’ with their children’s schools and hence were representative of the group that Bristol City Council wished to targeted for this exercise. The interviews varied in length but ranged from 60 minutes to 120 depending on the interviewee’s desire to continue sharing their experiences.

The Deputy Headteacher of Checkers Comprehensive School was also interviewed as were the headteachers of two of its three feeder primary schools. One primary school headteacher was unable to be interviewed during this phase of the work but further attempts to secure a meeting will be pursued and any data generating from that interview will be incorporated into the final report.

The findings are presented and discussed under the following headings:

- Parental perceptions about the way that primary and secondary schools had prepared their children for transition
- Pre-transition procedures (pupils)
- Parental perceptions about the way that primary and secondary schools had prepared their children for transition
- Pre-transition procedures (pupils)
- Parental views regarding the pre-transition experience
- Parental involvement in preparing their children for transition
- Parental views regarding the extent that schools had involved them in the pre-transition process
- Parental perceptions regarding the way their children managed the transition to secondary education
• The extent to which parents feel involved in the child’s secondary education and with the school

• What parents think that the school can do to make it more accessible and supportive of parental involvement

• What parents perceive as the main barriers to closer involvement with the school and/or their child’s education

• The extent to which parents are consulting family, friends and others about their involvement in their children’s education

• The extent to which parents have talked to their child at the point of transition, or shortly thereafter about her/his aspirations for education and later employment

• Additional related factors raised by parents

Through focusing on local issues, there is always a danger that enquiries of this nature can become insular and limited in nature. It is important therefore, that consideration is given to whether what is being experienced at Checkers is really any different to what is happening in the wider environment. Do Checkers parents harbor views and opinions that are radically different to those held by parents elsewhere? How do people in the wider context respond to these challenges - and what can Checkers learn from the experience of other? To that end, a literature review is also included in this interim report. This can be seen as an integral part of this report – but it can also be used as a discrete document where this is seen as useful.

The involvement of parents in the education of their children has long been understood as significant and plays an important part in ensuring that their educational attainment is maximised. As a result, secondary and primary schools have long taken seriously the transition of pupils between the two sectors and pride themselves with the arrangements put in place to ensure that parents and pupils are actively involved in this process to ensure that it is as positive an experience as is possible for pupils (and parents, alike).

It is clearly an emotionally charged time for all concerned and hence, ‘induction’ programmes are put in place to familiarise pupils and parents of the differences in cultures between primary and secondary long before the start of a new academic year. In common with most schools, this process in Checkers is complex and involved close collaboration between the primary and secondary sectors. The significance placed on this was reinforced when one primary school headteacher informed us that this role was delegated specifically to a senior member of staff.

“The deputy head is responsible for the transition Year 6 and tries to keep in close touch with parents and the secondary school”.

18
Pre-transition procedures (pupils)

It is clear that Checkers School and its feeder primary schools work together to support pupils due to transfer from the primary to the secondary manage that process smoothly. They also strive to provide parents with appropriate information and to reassure them that their children’s transition is being managed appropriately.

“Checkers contact us [primary feeder school] and the parents and try very hard to put on open days for them. It would nice to have even more contact but that is difficult”.

At an early stage in this process (from Easter onwards), a Learning Mentor who is based in the secondary school, is charged to visit each of the local primary schools to meet Year 6 pupils. This might well be the first time that many primary children will have met a member of the senior school and hence, this is an occasion of significance in shaping the attitude of these pupils towards their secondary school experience. The same Learning Mentor also works closely with Year 7 pupils and hence, forms an important link once they young people become full members of the secondary school. By July prior to joining the school, the children will all have had an opportunity to visit the school and provided with opportunities to experience the environment. In addition, primary pupils will have been offered the opportunity to partake in a ‘Year 5 taster’ day.

The Learning Mentor who is charged with making contact with transitioning pupils whilst they are still on the primary school register is also charged with highlighting any learning difficulties and SEN issues identified at primary phase that are experienced by potential recruits. Subsequently the secondary school SENCO will visit these children in their primary school settings to get to know them a little better and to help supplement the information received from the primary school about their additional needs.

Parental views regarding the pre-transition experience

Every July, the school holds an ‘Induction event’ for parents of new pupils. Not surprisingly, perhaps, these events are generally well attended. Great care is taken during this early phase to ensure that every parent is seen by a member of Checkers School staff. As a part of this event, the parents are introduced to and asked to sign the Checkers Home-School Contract. This is a document that is perceived as a three directional tool which outlines an agreement between parents, pupil and the school regarding what can be expected of each of the three parties during the pupil’s time at the school. It also includes reference to the parents’ commitment to support the pupil and to engage with the school. This contract can be reviewed if and when difficulties arise with a pupil. The school might wish to consider refining this process with a view to generating a review process that adopts a more positive focus.
Some of the parents interviewed for this study expressed a number of positive views about the way they had been treated shortly before their child entered Checkers School. Others however, drew attention to what they perceived as inadequate practice that left them feeling disenchanted with the school even before their child had formally become a pupil at the school. It is likely that these initial views will have significant implications that can affect the extent to which parents are likely to engage with the school thereafter. Where parents adopt a negative perspective towards the school, this can readily prejudice the enthusiasm with which they later support their child’s education activities, and more general engagement with the school. Some parents interviewed drew attention to the care taken by the secondary school to provide a comprehensive agenda when visiting the primary school prior to transition and the attention paid to detail:

“A secondary school teacher is to visit her class and witness what sort of girl she is and explain who they are. Then she will have an induction day at the secondary where the teacher who visited her class will stay with them for the day. The secondary school also asks about who her friends are and will try to make sure she has some friends in all her classes for moral and friendship support”.

Where parents held a positive impression of their early engagement with the school, this centered on the school’s ready response to parental requests and with the positive impressions formed by parents when visiting the school at the pre-transition period. These positive views were expressed in comments such as:

“Having just moved to the area we had no connection with the local primary schools, so we phoned the secondary and asked for a visit, we were happy with what we saw and were being told so we applied for a place and were accepted”.

Others, who unlike this parent, had lived in the neighbourhood for some time drew attention to the importance of informal opportunities that are likely to enhance children’s familiarity with the Comprehensive school environment prior to transition. These were seen as important in easing the transition process for the child, which in turn could increase parental confidence and encourage a positive perception of the school.

“Not much preparation was needed, as he knows the school, because he spends half his life near and around the school because the swimming pool and leisure centre’s on school grounds”.

“He’s been inside the school lots of times with groups in the summer holidays”.

Parents held in high regard the opportunities provided by the school to familiarise themselves with various aspects of the school life. In particular,
they welcomed opportunities to attend parents’ evenings and to sample extra-curricular, after-school activities at this very early stage in the transition process.

“We have already been invited to some after school activities and other opportunities to become involved with the school”.

“We had a parent’s event to look around the school and they said they will ask for a report from the primary to ensure the correct support and help is in place for when they start”.

Similarly, parents attached a particular importance on initiatives that involve pre-transitional pupils in the school social and extended activities.

“They have invited her and her family and friends to a school performance and they send us the school’s own newsletter”

Where parents could see that the school was adopting a caring attitude accommodating approach, this was greatly appreciated. Again, where parents feel that the school goes out of its way to make them feel welcomed and where they feel confident that the school has the good of their child as its paramount concern, they are likely to reciprocate that concern in their future dealings with the school and are more likely to cooperate and collaborate in their child’s educational experiences.

“There seems to be more focus on students as individuals and not one size fits all. They made us feel welcome and as a result we are more optimistic”.

Others drew the researcher’s attention to the success of the pre-transition visits provided for pupils whilst still at primary school. Where these included an opportunity to partake in learning activities in the secondary school, children were motivated and excited by the experience, reflecting and validating the aspirations for these events as expressed by the deputy headteacher at Checkers School.

“When his brother went up, the secondary school put on a day’s activities where he could experience some different lessons. This made him very excited and keen to move up as a result of some of the things he saw”.

“The schools did workshops and other activities before moving up. They had a class visit to the big school”.

The importance of careful preparation and the provision of structured opportunities for parents to become familiar with the school before their child entered was again identified by some as an important feature that would enhance parental confidence and might well be influential in supporting further engagement with the school at a later stage.
“They had a parent's information night with a tour of the school and gave general information about the school day”.

Our enquiry however, identified many other parents who held a less favorable opinion about their experience of the pre-transition experience for their children. Whilst it is important to place some of these negative responses in context, it is equally important that the recipients of such feedback do not merely dismiss them as irrelevant or adopt an over-defensive stance that negates subsequent action. Reflecting on some of these responses may well provide schools with some indication of how refining present practice may result in a greater collaboration from parents (and pupils) as they progress into the secondary phase.

Mention has been made above to the importance that parents place on the secondary school ensuring that prior to transition; it has established precisely any specific needs that their children require to have met in order to maximize their educational experiences. Mention has also been made of some of the procedures already in place at Checkers School to address this important issue. Despite that however, parents informed the research team that:

“The school needs to get more background information about my boy, as he is a handful. His [primary] school should tell secondary what he is like before he goes there”.

The fact that such information has in all probability, already been transmitted between the primary and secondary school, it remains the case that this parent at least, was unaware of this. The issue here again is one of clear communication between school and parents – and ensuring that the schools make it abundantly clear to parents that they actively seek the maximum information to prepare for the transfer of their children. It may well be necessary to provide all parents with a clear ‘map’ of the substantial work that is undertaken during the pre- and post-transition period rather than assuming that this is self evident to all.

Clear communication was identified by many of the parents interviewed as of high significance. This view was rehearsed in a range of contexts and in one instance a parents felt that inadequate communication had resulted in his/her lack of understanding about the transition process or of any preparation that had already been undertaken by the schools involved in his child’s education:

“Not too sure if any work has been done yet [in terms of preparation for transition] as we were only notified of secondary place last week or so”.

In other cases, there was a lack of clarity about what action had been taken in preparing the child for transition since domestic circumstances had changed during this period. Such domestic circumstances are challenging for schools – but their significance in terms of identifying and implementing appropriate positive action that is likely to secure closer collaboration between parent and school subsequently is considerable:
“No idea, he was still living with his mother at that time”. [Dad not getting information].

It is possible that in such circumstances, a system whereby this kind of situation can be identified in the first place and then action taken to furnish both the parents with information that can inform them of what has already been done on the part of the child to prepare them for transition could be highly significant and important in securing subsequent collaboration between parents, school and pupil.

Occasionally, some children were unable to attend some of the preparatory activities due to illness and/or other circumstances. It is self-evidence that where this is the case, it is important that alternative provision is provided to address the situation. Where alternatives are not put in place, it is likely that many parents will be alienated and subsequent collaboration between them and their child’s secondary school is unlikely.

“Rubbish! My son was off school when they had class visit and another visit could not be arranged - so they said”.

The forceful and negative sentiments expressed by this parent clearly imply that any future engagement with the school will have been endangered well before the child has crossed the secondary school’s boundaries.

Several of the parents interviewed were of the view that what preparatory action had been provided was inadequate. Given the potential impact of the transition process and its possible emotional repercussions for some transitioning pupils, a longer period of pre-transition preparation accompanied by further activity would have installed additional confidence in some parents.

“Not very impressed. One, three hour class visit to secondary school; a year 6 assembly; giving information and awareness re all secondary schools”.

“I think the preparation from the schools was poor they could do more especially for girls who many are experiencing the menstrual cycle for the first time, that combined with the changes in school makes them very anxious and worried”.

“They need to carry out more school visits to secondary school, more awareness for the students re curriculum change”.

“They [transitioning pupils] need to understand that whilst at primary they were the elders and when they move up to secondary they will be the youngest and how to deal with the reversal of roles”
“Teachers and staff from secondary schools should make more visits so as to build up relationships with the new students”.

Parental involvement in preparing their children for transition

When interviewed, parents informed the researchers that they consciously helped prepare their children for the transition of secondary school in a number of ways. Some recalled how they discussed the differences that they would experience on entering the secondary sector and were watchful for any adverse reactions in their children during the early phase of the transition proves:

“I do remember talking to him about this particular change and we kept a close eye on him for the first few months, but all went well and exceeded our expectations”.

It was also evident that for many parents, the importance of supporting their child to “remain safe” through the transition phase was of paramount concern and this encompassed concern about a wide range of issues including managing their own behaviour:

“Yes I tell him he has to behave and stop fighting all the other kids or else they will chuck him out”.

“We did talk about her responsibilities and that she needed to be careful with the older bigger kids as they won’t put up with her behaviour”.

“Told him about being safe and reassured him about his own fears”.

Parents were also very concerned about the likelihood of their child being bullied at secondary school and this formed the focus of much of the pre- and early-transition conversations between parents and their children:

“Yes we discussed things with him, like making sure he is safe and what to do if he gets bullied”.

“We also talked about negative peer pressure, friendship choices, bullying and how to deal with it”.

Yes told him what to do if he has any trouble, tell the teachers or me”.

“Told him to speak to his older brother who is already at big school if he gets any trouble or problems and then speak to the teachers”.
Parental concerns around safety also extended to ensuring that they reinforced the importance of staying safe on the way to and from school and in making sure that their children were familiar with negotiating transport and traffic in that process:

“Yes, we needed to talk about transport to and from school, staying safe”.

Many of the parents interviewed stated that they had spent a considerable amount of time preparing and reassuring their children about the different ethos and culture that they would experience when moving into the comprehensive school including issues concerning the nature of the curriculum, teacher expectations, school uniform etc.:

“We talked to son about choice of secondary and explained what changes there would be with-in the school day”.

“Yes we told him that when he is in the big school he needs to work a lot harder and he will be getting a lot of homework to do”.

“Constantly, just to reassure him all will be fine, we have friends whose children go to the same secondary as he will be going. They also try to reassure him”.

“We explained that he will need to do more home work than when he was in the little school”.

“Yes, advised to be aware of understanding and challenging when not sure what she is being taught or the work and tasks being asked to complete”.

“School uniforms and how different the school day is going to be”.

It was suggested by one professional that generally, there was a clear difference in the attention paid by the mother and the father of children to preparing them for their transition – with the mothers being the more pro-active. This view however, seems to have been based on observation over a period of time, as opposed to being sourced through direct discussion with the parents.

“Mothers are supporters - not fathers”.

In contrast, there were other parents who had clearly taken minimal interest or responsibility for preparing their children for the change they were due to experience believing that this was the responsibility of others (notably, the schools).

“They could do a lot more preparation beforehand”.

25
“Yes but as the school was not my first choice I sent him under protest, so neither of us were keen to talk about it”.

“Not a lot, he was all right I think he got information from his mates”.

“Not really. Just told him he was going to Checkers and that was that, really”.

“Not really, told him where he had to go and what time and all that. There wasn’t a lot to talk about”.

“No. Again this is just part of growing up, and to experience things by themselves makes them more independent”.

Others stated that their own ignorance about the comprehensive environment and schools in general, had been a barrier for them in talking to their children to better prepare them for transition:

“I don’t know a lot about it myself. No one tells me anything”.

**Parental views regarding the extent that schools had involved them in the pre-transition process**

One parent only made reference at interview to being invited to engage with the pre-transition process for their child. It is clear from this response that the schools had invited them to partake in a two-directional exercise that is designed to ensure that the maximum amount of important information is gathered by the receiving school in order to best support new pupils.

“Yes, through parents induction/interview where we give feedback and info to them so as to help the school support her to get the best from her”.

Despite this very positive response, the majority of the parents interviewed had a different recollection of this issue and for whatever reason, had formed the view that their engagement in the process had not been significant for the school. Some could not recall any attempt at all to involve them in the process:

“No they don’t”.

“No. We have had no involvement yet”.

“No involvement what so ever”.

“No as far as I know, but they did with my last child”.

No not that I can remember.
“No involvement from either school. No choice to attend school visit with son, and told what was happening but not involved”.

“No involvement other than signing forms and receiving letters”.

Others did recall some involvement – but this tended to be one-directional and taking the form of an instruction to comply:

“No - just sent letter telling me when he would start and what equipment and uniform I have to buy”.

“The only involvement was me signing the behaviour action plan request”.

It is interesting that a primary school leader indicated that the parents of children in the school lacked the necessary skills to engage fully in discussions with the school and certainly not in terms of negotiating or suggesting change.

“They don't have the power to negotiate with the school – they don't know what to do so what we get is anger not discussion”.

Similarly, the view was expressed that for some parents the school needs to assume a significant role and to take the lead in supporting and guiding them. This view however, does not seem to resonate with the points made by many of the parents interviewed

“The parents need a huge amount of support – they need us to tell them what to do”.

Attempts to encourage parental involvement in their child’s primary school and after school clubs are familiar practices. In this instance however, it was suggested that despite continued encouragement to participate in this way, it was not uncommon for parental involvement of this nature to become diluted as the child grows older.

“We invite the parents to come and work with the children and also encourage them to use the after school club”.

“They bring the children along but very often after a couple of weeks the children don't want to come and the parents just let them drop out – they seem too frightened of challenging their children”.

It was also suggested that parent commitment to supporting their children’s education was not always given high priority – even by the time they were half
way though primary school. Hence, re-engaging them at the secondary phase would inevitably be challenging.

“We also selected 12 children to give extra help to – this is expensive – but we don't really get understanding and commitment”.

“We also offer one-to-one tuition but very few want to take up this even more expensive offer”.

“We aim to provide maximum support in the teaching of literacy – this is in the form of reading support but only 6 families really take it up”.

There is clearly a high degree of confusion indicated by the radically different views expressed by parents about the extent to which he school has invited them to become involved. One parent recalled a comprehensive approach adopted by the school that was very close to the process described by the Deputy Headteacher at Checkers School – while others however, provided a very negative account that amounted to little or no attempt to engage them. This may well indicate a real problem in terms of the way in which parents are invited to participate and contribute to the process. It may well be the case that the form this invitation takes is well suited to some parents but is in a form that is inaccessible to others. It may be prudent to review the process to ensure that all prospective parents more fully familiar with it.

The importance of the early post-transition phase

Checkers School has in place a series of carefully timed events to keep its parents informed and hopefully, engaged with the life of the school. It recognizes the particular importance of these events planned for the first year of the child’s time at the school.

Early in the child’s first year at the school (usually in November) parents are invited to a parents evening. Whilst this meeting is usually well attended, subsequent parent evenings which are held following the normal reporting times, are generally not so well supported and it would appear that these tend to secure the participation of around 50% to 60% attendance compared to the initial meeting. It is also of concern that it is usually the parents of the more engaged and better achieving pupils who attend these meetings, whilst the parents who are more likely to become disengaged from the school find attendance less attractive. This is a point that is given more significance by parental responses at interview:

“Yes, we go to parent’s evenings when we can, we didn't go to the last one because we forgot, but they sent his report home”.

“We are very involved with our child’s education at the moment. We help him with homework. We always attend
parents’ evenings and other things like sports day, plays, Christmas carols and school trips”.

Others seem to think that they already have had a lot of communication from the school – usually of a rather negative nature and generally relating to poor behaviour or lack of engagement in learning by their children.

The school holds an Academic Review day in November that extends over an entire day and evening and is used to set realistic targets for each child. At this event each parent meets with one targeted teacher (as opposed to meeting briefly with all the pupil’s teachers, as is the case for normal Parent’s Evenings following report times. These events are generally better attended than other parents’ evenings and the school can anticipate a 75% - 80% involvement by parents. Clearly, the school has taken seriously the importance of early post-transition phase and appreciates its significance in securing the subsequent engagement of parents. It is possible that were there more opportunities similar opportunities available to parents, attendance and with it, interest might be increased.

The importance of good, clear communication on the part of the school was highlighted as particularly important for parents and pupils alike. This can be seen as especially significant early on in the child’s attendance at the senior school when he/she may be readily confused by unfamiliar surroundings and procedures. The same may apply for parents at this time of transition.

“It’s going pretty well as the secondary we are sending her is different choice than what we made for brothers and sisters, and already we have seen improved communication with this school, some of this is directed at us but also straight at our daughter, this gives her more involvement and responsibility for her own education”.

The emphasis that these parents place on the impact on the pupil of high quality communication should not be underestimated. By treating the pupil (and parents) as a responsible participant and providing clear guidance that requires a responsible action, it would seem that all involved are more likely to be appreciative and responsive.

It would seem that secondary schools often adopt a radically different approach to communication when compared to primary schools and this in itself can cause additional difficulties that can frustrate greater collaboration between parents and school. Primary schools often see the parent as the focus of communication where information is relayed directly to them. Secondary schools tend to rely on the child as the conveyer of information between home and school where the child is charged with taking letters home for their parents to read. Often these letters do not arrive into the hands of the parents, resulting in a reduction in effective communication.

“Communication is completely different. When my child was at primary school, the teachers would see me and let me know
what was happening. Now he’s in the secondary school, he’s given a letter to bring back with him. This doesn’t always work”.

In addition to this issue of clear communication between school and parents is the importance that parents seem to place on a speedy response being taken by the school to their child’s identified additional needs. In some cases, there is little doubt that this again can result from inadequate communication by the school of what steps it is taking or has taken to address such issues.

“Disappointed, xxx primary asked me to sign a referral for a behaviour action plan to be delivered by Checkers secondary school when he went up. But nothing has been done and this has caused difficulties with my son’s transition. Still waiting for action plan to be put in place by the school”.

Another parent informed us that she too had her faith in the school reduced following a very positive initial impression of the transition phase her child was experiencing. This again is possibly the result of inadequate communication between the school and parent at a very fragile period in their relationship and a frustration that can result in the alienation of the parent at a time when boosting their confidence in the school and enhancing their cooperation is imperative if they are to be successfully encouraged to collaborate more actively with the school and their child’s education.

“First few days of school was ok but then bullying started to happen and we became frustrated with the school as result of no action being taken to sort out the bully’s. This made us lose faith in the school and now we are trying to move him out”.

It is unlikely that the school has not already taken some action to address this – but the parents remain unclear about what has been done or what plans are in the process of being drafted. If this parent is to be encouraged to take a fuller part in the life of the school and in supporting her child whilst at secondary school, that process is more likely to be fostered where she feels that she is working in partnership with the school and party to what is being done on her child’s behalf – as well as what expectation are held by the school for her part in that process.

Along with clear and speedy communication, there are other significant priorities for the school to consider if it is to ensure parental collaboration. Parents are more likely to participate productively with the school where they are clear about what it is that they have been promised by the school and what form this is to take. Any ambiguity at this sensitive period during the transitioning process is likely to result in parents adopting a view that the school is at fault and is reneging on what it had previously promised. Once such views are formed, the damage that can accrue in terms of negating parental collaboration and partnership can be difficult to redress, at best and insurmountable at worst:
“Fine at first, with one days visit to secondary for son, and one parents evening for us”. “At parents evening lots of things were said were going to happen but didn’t”.

“Promises not kept, this damaged our relationship with the secondary school straight away”.

An unexpected but potentially significant outcome from the enquiry relates to the significantly different way that pupils are viewed by both schools and parents whilst they are within the different education sectors. One parent recalled the experience of her cousin and child shortly following his transition into secondary school. Once in secondary school, her cousin took to seeing her son as a ‘little adult’ and as a result, she returned to work. As a single mother this meant that her son had to look after himself when he returned home from school because her sister did not finish work until later in the evening. The subliminal messages that schools convey to parents about their children can be seen as particularly important in supporting the parent’s views of their child and indeed, their subsequent management practices.

“When my cousin’s boy started secondary, she got a job. He had to look after himself when he got home from school until she finished work. They [the school] tell you that they are ‘little adults’ and should be treated as one”.

**Parental perceptions regarding the way their children managed the transition to secondary education**

Some parents when interviewed confirmed that their children had managed the process well and experienced little difficulty. The responses from these parents suggested that the school had in place a robust strategy to support the transition process that their children could access and benefit from:

“He settled in well. He had no worries or concerns, I had no problems getting him to go to school, in fact he always wanted to leave far too early,. He loves school. He also finds change easy to deal with”.

Some parents placed considerable importance on the fact that their child’s transition was eased as a result of the fact that it took place alongside peers with whom existing friendships formed a supportive structure to ease the process. Others identified the fact that as a result of moving schools, their child had the opportunity to meet and make new friends and that this too had been an important part of the transition experience which had helped make it successful. Some suggested that the entire process could be viewed as an exciting episode that involved many new experiences, opportunities and challenges and hence, a positive experience. This suggests that for many, the processes in place have been successful in supporting the transition process and have resulted in many parents developing a positive impression of the school, at a very influential point in their relationship with it. For these, that
early impression is likely to be a significant factor in sustaining a longer engagement with the school and in the children’s education experiences.

“All his mates went to the same school so he was all right”.

“Yes he was a bit nervous but soon got on with it, he made new mates and plays football for the school. So he’s doing OK”.

“Yes it went better than we first thought it might, I think my son looked at it as another great adventure, meeting new friends, seeing new things everything was so exciting for him then. It was a very hectic busy time for us all and I don’t think we had time to realise what problems could have arose, but fortunately things went very well”.

“She was very excited about the move to secondary school and that it signaled her growing up. She was a very confident and mature girl, and I think this helped with her transition”.

For some parents, it was evident from their responses that they had valued the relationships they had formed with the primary school their child attended and would very much wish for a similar structure at the secondary phase so that they might continue to be involved in the school’s activities and support their child’s learning. In practice however, the ethos and structure of secondary education systems are such that this desire is likely to be frustrated. It may be important that the secondary school is sensitive to these opinions and seeks to find some strategy that can address these feelings in a way that may help retain the parent’s interest and involvement within a radically different structure and ethos.

“I am involved now because I work as a school cleaner so I take him with me in the morning and get time to speak with his teacher on our own. He shows me his work and I sometimes do some work with him when we are waiting”.

“Yes I feel involved with primary education and really do hope that I can be involved when she goes up to secondary school”.

“We are really involved with his education at the moment, taking part in different school activities with him, like school trips, breakfast mornings and doing work in the class before lessons start. We read at home with him and do his times tables, things like that. With my other son, who is at secondary school, we are involved through parent’s evenings and helping with homework, where we can. When they go up to the big school, you lose that daily interaction
with the school and this impacts on how involved you can be”.

“Support was provided by primary school but the shock of being dealt with by enforcement rather than support did not sit well and made her confused and made matters worse”.

“The size of the primary school is such that you have a more personal relationship with the teachers and therefore the school”.

This view that parents are generally more fully involved in the primary phase and that they will spend considerably more time within the school and with their children is not always confirmed by what other informants told the researchers. Whilst there was a shared view that at the very start of the primary school years, parents were generally active in the school, there was also a feeling expressed that as the child worked his/her way through the school, that engagements tended to taper off. This observation suggests that considerably greater input at a much earlier stage in a child’s school life is likely to be needed if the aspiration for greater involvement of parents with schools and their child’s education is to be sustained at the secondary phase.

“In Years 1 and 2 we’re a “soft start” i.e. we let the parents come into the classroom with their children so in those years they do offer their children support and we can help them”.

“Unfortunately after Year 3 it tails off and by the middle of Year 3 hardly any parents really engage with their children's school work or with the school”.

“Even though we try to involve the parents the message we get is really it's the school's business”. [Primary Headteacher]

“We sent out a questionnaire but only got 5 returned”.

“Even so the parents always are eager to come and see the children's work particularly their art work”.

As might be expected, some parents whilst acknowledging the fact that their child had successfully transitioned into the secondary school, were reluctant to attribute this to anything that the schools had done to facilitate the process and preferring to attribute the success to other factors outside the school.

“He was ok, so I guess it went well. Don’t know why it just did”.

“It's gone ok, but no thanks to either school. I helped him with the move, taking him every morning and visiting him at
lunch time through the fence. Then he got more confident and takes himself now”.

“It must have went well because he’s still there, I think the social worker he had helped with getting him in to school because his mother never used to send him to primary”.

(Grandmother)

Others however, expressed concerns that the transition process was not at all smooth and that their child continues to experience difficulty with the secondary school experience. Interestingly, the majority of the parents who expressed this view identified difficulties their child was experiencing as a result of their inappropriate behaviour or learning difficulties and attributing blame on the school, rather than assuming responsibility for this.

“It hasn’t gone well for him, mainly due to the lack of support for his needs, he can’t cope with large class sizes and the teachers can’t cope with him”.

“More historic information about her would have helped the secondary school to offer early support”.

“She found it difficult to control her emotions and behaviour. More work could have been carried out by the secondary school so as to be more aware of behaviour issues and support needs”.

“Not well to begin with, no friends from primary school in the same lessons, the secondary need to research what the kids are like at primary and find out the best way to support them for the move. Identify their friends and try to ensure old friends share most of new lessons so as to receive moral and friendship support in class”.

**The extent to which parents feel involved in the child’s secondary education and with the school**

It is evident that some of the parents interviewed at Checkers are presently much involved in their children’s education and providing much needed support to maximise learning.

“Very involved, we are following his work very closely, giving him support, not doing the work for him, just showing him the way when he finds himself lost, confused or unsure”.

“We have always been great book lovers and started reading as a family from when he was very young, he is doing well but there is always room for improvement and we
are committed to giving him the support and involvement that all children need, to reach as high as they can”.

These responses suggest however, that this involvement is home-based and seems to exclude close engagement with the school (other than possibly in the normal form of supporting parents’ evenings etc). Some even made this very point more explicitly

“We are not so involved with the school other than parent’s evenings and supporting with fund raising and other requests for campaigns and parental support”.

Others suggested that their involvement with the school, whilst positive, was very much low-level in nature and invariably one-directional with the school seen as the ‘senior partner’.

“They send us letters and stuff, and we go in when they ask us, so yes we are involved a bit”.

“Yes they took him for a visit to show him the classrooms and stuff”.

“Only from one secondary school visit, my son came home all excited about him moving up to secondary”.

“No involvement from primary or secondary schools. Only involvement was being told by secondary school the ground rules and their expectations of her”.

All parents were not totally enthusiastic about the way that the school viewed parents’ evenings and other related activities, seeing them more focused on the needs of the school, as opposed to the needs of the parents or their children. This is something that could be reflected upon and considered in detail to the advantage of all concerned.

“PTAs don’t make clear what it does for me, - how it benefits me. They want you to do things for them like attend care boot sales. I’ve got a weekend life of my own too thank you!”

“Parents’ evenings are too formal and agenda driven. It’s usually a mad rush around for a few minutes talk with different teachers. You don’t really get much out of them”.

One parent said that she found attending parents’ evenings difficult since it involved going to the school as a single mother who had little support.

“As a single parent, attending school events is difficult on my own. Is there any way of making this easier?”
At interview, parents expressed a number of issues that might facilitate fuller engagement with school and involvement in their child’s education that was presently the case. Some drew attention to the importance of an interested and approachable member of staff with whom they could feel comfortable in approaching when they were experiencing anxieties about their child.

“I think if there is one person at the school who I can talk to, like his teacher now that would help”.

The fact that they raised this as significant suggests that this is not possible at present and that entering the school is itself intimidating and hence, forms a barrier to greater engagement. Others also drew emphasised the difficulty that they experience in gaining ready access to the school and engaging with their child’s learning process. This is possibly another example of the difficulty that some parents confront when their child leaves primary school, where as parents, they had frequent and ready access to classrooms and where their experience of teachers was less formal and approachable.

“If I can go and look at his work in the mornings like I do now, would be good”.

The school has itself identified many barriers that exist and which hinder ready engagement with parents. A significant barrier that prevents the school from offering greater freedom for parents to become involved in the school after the children have gone home is the PFI status of the school. This often precludes people becoming involved in the school activities. At interview, some parents identified the extent to which they presently make use of some amenities available within the school and would welcome these being extended.

“I use the swimming pool now and then and would use other things at the school, if that was possible”.

The company involved is primarily concerned with letting out the facilities in order to make a profit and hence, extending activities would incur further expenses on the school. The school is presently trying to re-negotiate the hours agreed for use of the buildings and in support of that, it hopes to make use of the profile and urgency of this project [Inspiring Communities]. The school believes that it is essential to get access to more school spaces out of the normal hours and it is evident from parental responses that this would be well received were it possible. The difficulty is that the managers of the PFI are not themselves actively engaged with the project and are really more concerned with making money – although, the school generally has a good relationship with the firm.

Whilst many parents offered positive views either about their present involvement with the school, others were able to only identify an involvement that was located in a negative context – frequently stating that whilst they
were closely involved with the school, this was in relationship to their child’s negative behaviour:

“And we work with the school with issues of behaviour and other problems”.

“We have had constant involvement with the school but only from the time her behaviour caused the school concern. It would have been good to have more involvement prior to problems arising”.

“We were only invited to become more involved to deal with her behaviour not general education”.

“Lots of involvement, but only based around managing her behaviour not really supporting with doing education”.

“Well they phone me now and again, when he’s been playing up, and they ask for my permission to keep him behind school when he’s naughty”.

“Secondary school needs to be more welcoming and not just call you in when there is a problem”.

“Pretty involved, but what good it is, I don’t know. The school is looking to me for the answers but I haven’t got the answers. All I know is he’s not coping in the situation he’s in. The teachers need to call in higher members of staff to sort him out all the time”.

Sadly, some parents seem to have an expectation that any involvement with the school should naturally be as a result of difficulties experienced with the child and do not seem to include engagement that is based on a positive focus:

“Not very involved. We go in to school when they asks us to, but that’s not very often as he’s a good lad, gives us no trouble so there’s no real need to go in to school a lot”.

Much has been said above about the significance of positive and clear communication. It is unfortunate therefore when a parent reports that his/her lack of engagement with the school is a direct result of communication difficulties and when others highlight communication difficulties as a prime issue that is accountable for limited engagement. Some even raise this as a problem that is highlighted when compared to their previous experiences of the way that the primary school would communicate:

“I’m not happy with the schools organisation of the school, they have sent me very personal information that
was for someone else at the school with the same surname, phone calls from them asking to speak to the same person”.

“I feel very distant with the school with hardly any communication”.

“Nowhere near as closely involved with his education as I was in the little school, due to poor communication”.

“Communication should be better, when I call the school to ask to speak to his tutor she is always teaching and there is no means of leaving a message on her answer machine because it just keeps ringing and ringing”.

“When we ask the receptionist to leave a message no one ever gets back to us and we spend ages trying to make contact”.

Finding ways to communicate with all parents is a real challenge to the school. Some parents interviewed suggested that they remained unclear about the level of engagement that they had or were experiencing with the school. It was evident that there had been communication but that this had not always registered in any detail:

“Don’t know. I think they take them to the school so they know where it is”.

“Don’t know, I think they did but not sure”.

“I think, or I hope they will be doing some work on this, but not too sure as to what or when. I will check this with the school”.

“A visit to the school - it could have been two visits, but I am not sure”.

“Not sure. As far as I know no work has been done to prepare him”.

“No, nothing just a couple of letters here and there”.

It would be understandable – but complacent to suggest that for these parents, little more could be done. Elsewhere in their interviews, it was evident that they cared passionately about their children and wanted the best for them. It is more the case perhaps that additional ways of communicating need to be attempted in order that parents such as these are more actively engaged in the transition process.
One parent recalled the painful period early in her daughter's secondary career when she experienced some heavy bullying by a group of other girls at the school. Her experience suggested that whilst the school had dealt directly with the children concerned, they had left the parents totally uninformed and uninvolved. She felt alienated towards the school in such circumstances as a result of the lack of communication.

“Teachers should involve us where bullying is involved. They deal with the child but don't involve the parents. I got her [the teacher] email address to communicate with her after this but I don't know if other parents could discuss things with her in the same way”.

Communication could be further improved were parents to feel respected and valued. Responses from some at interview would suggest that this is not always how they perceive the way the school receives them. Even where this is a misperception, it is significant and clearly needs addressing.

“The school don't even know who I am, every parent evening we have someone new who I've never met and we just seem to be talking about the same thing every meeting”.

“No one takes any notice of what we say”.

It is self-evident that this issue of communication is central and despite considerable work already undertaken by the school to facilitate better communication strategies, these responses make it evident that there is much that remains to be done. In practice, much of this is likely to be low cost and readily achievable since steps can readily be taken to ensure for example, that parents phoning the school have their calls answered promptly and messages responded to rapidly when these are left for a member of staff who is engaged elsewhere when the parent calls.

Some parents are naturally anxious about communicating with the school due perhaps to their own earlier experiences of schools as a student or concerns regarding possible negative repercussions for their child:

“I find it a little hard to complain to the school, just in case they take it out on my son”.

Some parents find that their own academic limitations form a real barrier when it comes to supporting their child’s education and feel embarrassed as a result. It is also a fact that the world of secondary education is a rapidly changing one and practice (indeed, terminologies) that were common a generation previously are unrecognized today. The changing practices of teaching and learning as well as the introduction of new curriculum areas and examination programmes (and nomenclature) all make it difficult for many parents to really engage with their children’s education. It may be possible for the school to offer facilities that can support adults alongside their children in addressing this:
“Not sure of what they are learning and I find it harder to help him with his homework which makes me feel bad and shy away from trying to help him because it makes me feel stupid not being able to understand the work - So I tell him to look it up on the Internet”.

“Not very involved at all, actually very distant. I don’t understand the work and the lesson names have all changed. When we went to school cooking was called home economics not food sciences”.

“So long as his education is going ok I don’t really know why or how we could be more involved or what impact this would have on him receiving education”.

“Yes. Help parents understand the work the kids need to do so that we can have the confidence to help. We try and help with homework and haven’t a clue what it’s all about”.

“Provide a parent and student homework group where support is available to us both”.

The school is presently planning a special Open Evening for parents to try and explain to them what the new and different qualifications available for their children mean and to try and de-mystify these. A further initiative that has been introduced to encourage parents’ to voice their views was the setting up of a Parent Perspective Group. This was established by the Head teacher soon after her appointment in 2004. This group is now chaired by a parent and the Head teacher attends as an invited guest. The 30 or so parents who comprise the group discuss issues relating to their children at the school. This innovation seems to have helped improve communication between the school and parents. Dates of the group’s meeting are published in advance and circulated via the regular News Letters. Whilst there is no evidence at present to support the view that it is possible that this involvement comes from already heavily engaged parents, it would be worth reviewing the nature of the membership of this group and its constitution to explore whether its appeal could be extended to reluctant (but interested) parents that the school is keen to engage. Since sentiments articulated by a senior leader in a primary school suggests that in her experience, this is a pattern that seems familiar:

“Even so, it tends to be the same families that turn up and are involved”.

Parental perceptions regarding the school's readiness to engage with their views and opinions at the point of transition

The time around transition is hugely significant for all concerned but not least in terms of securing greater collaboration with parents thereafter. The extent
to which parents perceive the school as receptive and welcoming at this time will be critical for many in determining their subsequent attitude to collaboration.

It should be reassuring for the school to see that parents interviewed expressed satisfaction with their experiences to-date and that as a result they felt confident that they could approach the school in the knowledge that their views would be received openly and their opinions welcomed:

“With our experience so far with the school, I am confident that should we feel the need to make suggestions they would be looked at and provided if realistic - I hope”.

Some parents stated that the school had been found to be particularly receptive to ideas and views that they had shared regarding ways of managing their child’s behaviour:

“With regard to suggestions re her behaviour they are very open and act on them”.

“Very open, because they haven’t got a clue how to support him!”

Others however, whilst expressing positive experiences regarding the school’s readiness to receive parental opinion and fuller participation, felt that the direction of communication remained one-directional with the school dictating what action would be taken whilst at the same time, making whatever modifications are seen as appropriate to facilitate greater participation by parents in a range of school related activity.

“They’re OK I suppose, but they tell me what to do, they’re the teachers”.

“They need to make it easier to talk to the school and more opportunities to become more involved in their education”.

Others drew attention to the way that existing demands on their time and the nature of their own work commitments tended to hamper further and fuller engagement in school and with their child’s education.

“Working hours would stop me being more involved, because I am at work from the end of school until about 6.30pm and then I need to look after him. So I don’t think I will have time to get involved. Not sure”.

This response highlights the reality that confronts increasingly more parents (particularly one-parent families or where both parents work) and heralds an issue that is again raised later in this report regarding the importance of
identifying ways of engaging with parents at times convenient to them and that take account of their own commitments as well as that of the school’s.

Unfortunately, several parents reported that they had negative experiences relating to the extent to which they had found the school open and receptive to their views and ideas. They cited various reasons for this but it is notable that some placed their concerns about the lack of openness experienced with the school adopting a ‘we know best’ attitude to concerns raised by parents about their child’s specific needs

“Not open at all. Many suggestions I have made have been listened to but not acted on”.

“The school is not very approachable”.

“Not open at all. We have tried to influence the school with regard to the support we feel our son needed i.e. dyslexia screening. They just ignored us and offered the wrong support in the hope to shut us up”.

“Not open at all. We have tried to influence the school with regard to the support we feel our son needed i.e. dyslexia screening. They just ignored us and offered the wrong support in the hope to shut us up”.

Even where some parents remained hopeful that the school would openly receive their views, concerns and ideas, there were those who had found earlier experiences militating against them adopting a more positive opinion about the reception that their views were likely to receive.

“Don’t know, I would hope that they would do what needs to be done, but he was having a bad time with one teacher at one point, so we asked if they could move him to a different class, but they said that because he struggles in English a bit, by moving him up a set would make matters worse as he may not be able to keep up”.

Whether accurate or not, the impression gained by some respondents regarding the way that their requests and other attempts at communicating with school staff is halted at the very earliest phase is worth further consideration by the school:

“Receptionist vet all calls wanting full information before putting you through to who you need to speak to, I feel this is a barrier to parent involvement”.

Such comments are reminiscent of those frequently made of receptionists at doctors’ surgeries and are likely to form an immediate and lasting barrier to further attempts by parents to engage more fully with the school. This issue again highlights the importance of effective ‘communication’ and is a point that
underpins so many of the negative views expressed at interview. The point raised by one informant sharpens understanding of the importance not only of the way that communication operates across both parties at transition time, but also the importance of ensuring that this is properly coordinated so that parents are less likely to receive confused and confusing information from the school that can too readily be interpreted as negative.

“I don’t think they even know him. He was off sick for seven days last term. No one rang me or contacted me. A week later I had a letter about attendance and being prosecuted. That school’s a joke”

Unlike many other issues discussed at interviews, the theme of the school’s readiness to be open and receptive to parental views and, requests and ideas was particularly interesting in that it elicited a significant number of comments that suggested uncertainty as to how receptive the school was likely to be:

“Don’t know, never asked for anything”.

“Not sure yet as this is first dealings with this school”.

“I don’t have much to do with the school so I have never made suggestions”.

“Not had the need to make suggestions as of yet so can’t comment”.

Some of these negative perceptions do little justice to strategies that the school has employed in the recent past in an attempt to make access to parents easier. A few years ago, the school made a serious attempt to meet parents in the community, as opposed to insisting that they came to the school. These events tended to typically take the form of an ‘open evening’ in one of the feeder primary schools – and hence closer to where the parents lived. Despite much advertising only two or three parents took advantage of this opportunity. It is possible that alternative venues frequented by parents (other than schools) where they might feel more at ease would have resulted in a different outcome? A senior school leader suggested however that the lack of interest owed less to the fact that parents were afraid or reluctant to come to the school – but rather that this lack of response was due more to low aspiration on their part. That it was the low aspiration on the adult’s part, rather than those of the young people that holds the child back.

He drew attention to the fact that between 2002 and 2009, despite extensive efforts on the part of the school, attendance rates in the school had risen only from 87% to 90% - and that this reflects parental apathy regarding their children’s attendance.

**What parents perceive as the main barriers to closer involvement with the school and/or their child’s education**
Refreshingly, some parents stated that they could not identify any particular hurdles or barriers that prevented them for engaging with the school or from involvement in their child’s education.

“Not really just told him he got to do his best or else he will end up like me – thick”.

“I am keen to be involved with both my sons’ education and nothing I can think of will get in the way of this as I will do everything I can to make sure they get good grades when they leave”.

“No I am not frightened to speak up and have a go at the school if I think there is something wrong”.

Some mentioned their wish to have the benefits of greater involvement in their children’s education clarified since at the time they could not see what would be gained from such activity. Perhaps schools should not assume that the benefits of engagement are self-evident to all parents and it may well be advantageous to conduct an awareness-raising programme across the region. It is possible that such a function could be hosted by the instigation of a community radio service as planned for the Inspiring Communities initiative. At the same time, this initiative may go some significant way to also address the permeating concern that was again raised within the context of barriers to involvement, namely the need for better and timelier communication between school and parents.

“Obviously if we could see the direct benefit to our son’s education by becoming more involved, then we would find the time from somewhere”.

“More communication, to let us know what is going on”.

“If the school were to invite me more I would be happy to do so. I would be willing to support with field and other trips, help out at breakfast mornings etc.”

“Provide more opportunities to get involved”.

In addition to not understanding the value of engagement in their child’s educational development, other parents indicated that they were keen not to pressure their child in any way that would raise anxiety about learning. Again, this concern may indicate a need to instigate a more effective awareness-raising programme to help educate parents not only about the benefits of involvement, but about strategies that parents could usefully employ in support of their children.

“No we feel it’s too early to start them worrying just yet”.
Where and when parents demonstrate a desire to be involved, it would seem imperative that the school finds a mechanism that ensures that this desire is acted upon very quickly and positively. Parents identify the fact that they quickly become disillusioned where the school shows a willingness to involve them but then fails to action this when the parents have indicated willingness to become involved.

“When we’ve had meetings with the school I have offered to become more involved, if they felt it would help, but nothing came of it”.

Whilst not directly blaming the school for lack of support, others felt that they could not identify specific barriers to closer involvement, this however, was placed within what can only been seen as a rather negative context, often involving a lack of awareness on the part of the parents. This latter point might be partly addressed in the wake of the introduction of the Community Radio initiative mentioned above.

“No not really. He never brings homework home so I can’t help him with that. They could give him more homework but I doubt if he would do it, and he would just kick off if I told him he has got to”.

“Like I just said, we don’t know what the school policy is? How would the school feel about me getting more involved?”

“No I don’t think so, just don’t need to be more involved. They [teachers] know what they’re doing so we let them get on with it”.

“No a lot can be done I suppose, if there is any problems they can let us know and we would sort it out with them”.

Some parents however, adopted a significantly more negative approach and expressed the view that they had no desire for further involvement under any circumstances since existing demands formed insurmountable barrier.

“Yes the school’s, got no time for them. We have to pay for equipment, uniform, trips out, swimming lessons, and now they want us to do their jobs. If I had a job I would not ask for their help just because my son goes to their school, so why am I supposed to do their job”.

“None, not interested in becoming involved more with the school”.

Failure to develop a ‘family friendly’ school environment and practice was again identified as a real barrier to greater participation of parents with the school. Similarly, a more approachable, friendly and accessible ethos was seen by
some as a necessary feature for a school wishing to develop closer parental partnership. It would seem that some parents who had made very productive links with their child’s primary school would welcome a similar structure to the early years within the secondary setting.

“Yes, lots. They should allow younger kids to come with us at parent’s evenings. I always try and attend all invites from the school to become involved”.

“With the big schools you have no contact with the teachers like you do at primary where you can go into the class from before school and after to receive feedback and talk over worries or troubles. You get to know the teacher and you find it easier to work with them. Secondary schools are too big and you don’t get to know their teacher as well”.

Working parents identified time to participate in the school activities as a major constraint and one that they found difficult to see an answer for.

“Time would be the biggest factor, with us both working and with the twins to think of I am not sure if we could find the time to be overly involved with the school”.

The extent to which parents are consulting family, friends and others about their involvement in their children’s education

When interviewed, many parents indicated that they relied heavily on family and friends to discuss their child’s educational progress and their involvement in the process. For some this was a normal part of their life but for others, it performed a significant function that helped them manage the anxieties that as parents, they are experiencing during this significant period of the transition process.

“Yes I talk to a family member and discuss/moan”.

“My husband and I talk, but other than general chit chat about school with some other parents, no not really”.

“I generally talk to me sister about school because, as you can tell I get stressed out about it, and you need to get it all off your chest a bit, because I am worried about him and its taking up all my life to be honest”.

It helps to talk to my sister, even though she is younger and has no kids of her own. It still helps to share my worries with her”.
“Yes with my sister. Helps to share my worries and concerns with her as she has school aged children herself so she knows what I am going on about”.

“Yes I talk to friends and family. We talk about school activities and general school life; find out dates for school trips dates for when they go back to school after the holidays and things like that”.

“I find it good to talk to them as I feel I am not on my own and it gives me confidence to speak up for my son with the school”.

“Yes. Friends and other parents from the school. We share and compare our experiences with the school, offloading our worries and concerns”.

“Yes my friends, we moan about each other’s kids behaviour and ways forward”.

It was perhaps surprising to learn that one primary school headteacher had formed an impression that parents did not communicate easily with each other when they met informally outside the school gates at the end of the school day. It is often assumed that this is a time when parents make use of the opportunity for social intercourse and when anxieties or aspirations experienced regarding preparation for transition might be shared and mutual support secured. In this instance however, this does not seem to be the case.

“First, many of the parents seem very isolated – they tend to stand with their children in the school playground or at the gates but not talk with each other. They don’t mix well at all”.

“The exception is a small group of Y5 parents but they are an exception”.

Others however, stated that whilst they did indeed find it helpful to talk with others about school (and specifically, transitional) issues, this was largely used as an opportunity to express negative feelings against the school and/or the transition arrangements in place.

“Yes we talk about how naughty some of the other kids are and how the school should sort them out”.

“Yes we talk to friends and family, usually to compare whose children are doing well and what problems we face with the school”.

“Receive advice and just to talk to, as trying to talk to the school is so difficult”.

47
“If your child is doing academically well, they seem to get all the support, tolerance and involvement as they need. If on the other hand they are not doing so well they ignore you and offer no support just issue threats”.

Many others however, said that for various reasons, they did not discuss their child’s educational progress or their involvement with the school with anyone.

“None, there’s none out there, is there?”

“No, not much”.

“I’ll be honest with you, I am a person who keeps my self to me self”.

“To be honest I don’t expect anything from anyone because they don’t bloody know, their all confused the same as me”.

“No. What good would that do? It would just make me mad and angry”.

“No not much, not about school, we talk about the school football team and that but that’s about it really”.

“No if I have any problem I will speak to the school”.

One might assume that for many parents, membership of social groups can be an important context within which to meet with others and discuss their children’s education generally. In this case however, it was suggested by a senior primary school leader that a dearth of social groups meant that such interchanges were likely to be hampered.

“Also as far as I can see there aren’t many social groups in the community they can or do belong to”.

The extent to which parents have talked to their child at the point of transition, or shortly thereafter about her/his aspirations for education and later employment

It would seem that many parents have already started to discuss the future direction their child might take at this early stage in their secondary career. Responses from parents indicated that some young people have a relatively clear pathway in mind, often in the form of subsequent likely employment in family related businesses, professions or trades.

“Yes he wants to be a bricklayer; his uncle is going to get him a job with the firm he works for, so he should be sorted. They earn loads of money”.

48
While others have already identified alternative futures to aim for:

“Yes he wants to join the army”.

Many others suggested that whilst they involved their children in discussions about the future and their aspirations, this would take place in terms of its implications about the present, often emphasizing and reinforcing in the child a need to adopt a healthy work ethic that is more likely to secure for them the aspirations they have in mind.

“Yes we have, we explain that we would like him to do well in his exams then move on to university, what to do at Uni. We are not so sure, but into higher education definitely”.

“Yes - we tell him he needs to think about the future, and we ask him, you want to be successful don’t you? Well you have got to play the game then”.

“Yes told him he needs to do his best at school but not to worry as he can catch up when he goes to college. He hasn’t got a clue what he wants to do, just earn loads of cash”.

“Talked about aspirations but the topic always moves on about the need to buckle down now and get on with schoolwork, and then decide what’s available for her, after her exams”.

Others whilst involving their children in discussions about their future aspirations tend to adopt a more cautious approach, believing that it is still a little premature to involve their child in thinking about their future direction at this early stage.

“We have talked about options like going straight out to work or college, but I think it is still a bit too soon to be worrying him with that stuff just yet”.

“He doesn’t know what he wants to do yet but he’s still young”.

Some had started to engage their children in discussions about their future directions but this was undertaken within a context that implied dissatisfaction with the extent to which the school at this early stage in their child’s secondary school career supported their children with thinking and planning about future employment possibilities. This is difficult to understand since the school has in place its own careers guidance specialist facility and a Connexions base.

“Yes we have. She would like to do beauty therapy. The school do offer early college entry to do this course
locally, but as she as had issues in the past, the school are not prepared to provide this. This then makes me feel I want no involvement with the school".

“I think the schools need to improve on what they are doing before asking us to get involved with education”.

Still other parents stated that they, in discussion with their children about their future likely employment, exchange ideas but only within the belief that these are likely to change in time as the child grows and develops.

“Yes but neither of us have a clue what he should do when left school. He is thinking of work as a carpenter at the moment”.

“He tells us what he wants to do when he leaves school; he wants to own his own computer games shop, for now. But that will change later on”.

There were again other parents who stated that they had not yet involved their children at all in discussion about their future:

“No we talk about other things but not the schools or that”.

“Not yet, no”.

“No it’s too early yet. He needs to settle in first and then talk about it later on when we know how well he is doing and the things he enjoys doing, because he always changes his mind”.

Career Guidance is officially offered to pupils within the school in Year 7. This is provided by an in-house Guidance Officer and a Connexions Officer who has an office within the school. Outside speakers are also invited in to speak to the pupils. Later in the child’s school career, an ‘Open Minds’ day is held when pupils are in year 10. This involves employers spending the day at the school meeting and talking to Year 10 pupils. There is also a ‘Dragon’s Den’ event held with employers off-site. Pupils undertake a one week work experience activity and backed-up to this they are given a Business Enterprise Activity. Parents however, do not seem to be actively involved in any of these initiatives and it might be worth the school reviewing its thinking about involving parents in such activities.

What parents think that the school can do to make it more accessible and supportive of parental involvement

When discussing what the school could/should do to encourage and support parents in engaging more fully during and after transition, there was a
significant view that this was something that the school was already doing well in this:

“Nothing. I talk a lot with the school so I feel pretty involved with his education already”.

“Again I am not sure how further involvement would benefit the education he is receiving at present. Yes the school is in “special measures” but they are improving and our son is making steady progress, it’s not the best school in the world I am sure, but we find it acceptable at the moment”.

Or that it needs to take seriously and begin to explore ways of making parental engagement easier and rewarding. Unfortunately, whilst signaling a need for this, parents were not always clear as to how the school should set about achieving this.

“Yes they could do a lot more”.

“I think they could yes, don’t know how though, haven’t got a clue”.

Parents also made the point that the school needs to be both more inviting (and in the case of one parent, at the same time more formal) in its approaches to parents to become involved in various aspects of the wider school life. For some, anxiety resulting from a lack of understanding as to how the school felt about their involvement resulted in a reluctance to be more actively engaged:

“To provide more formal request and or opportunities to become involved”.

“We don’t know how the land lies with us just going into school at secondary”.

Several parents indicated their regret at losing opportunities to meet informally and to discuss their children’s experiences and concerns about education. They felt that whilst their children were at primary school, they had been able to meet informally at the end of the school day. One suggested that she would value the school facilitating regular informal evenings for parents at the school where they could meet over a coffee.

“At primary, parents chat a lot and it’s surprising what you pick up. We don’t do that at secondary”.

Some however, expressed a wish that the school adopt a more energetic approach by seeking to find ways of involving parents in the wider context of the school life and being as enthusiastic in supporting parents in this as they tend to be when summoning parents about concerns they are experiencing with their children.
“To be as keen to talk and involve us with general education as they are when things go wrong”.

The importance of ensuring that the school has in place opportunities and facilities to engage parents at times that are convenient to them was again raised in discussion around the way that school practice could be refined to support parental involvement after transition. Finding effective ways of surmounting the potential barrier represented by the times that parents are working and hence, unable to partake in school-based activities was seen as especially important. Others who were also the mothers of very young children showed a desire to be more closely involved in their older children’s secondary education but hindered by the constraints imposed by rearing the younger children, pleaded for a more ‘family friendly’ approach being adopted to activities such as Parents’ Evenings.

“Tell us to come in to school more, if it needed it, be open on the weekends so that we have more time and that”.

“Yes they could be a lot more family friendly when it comes to things like open evenings. At the moment we are not allowed to bring our young children or toddlers with us, so if I can’t find a baby sitter I can’t go”.

It is perhaps not surprising that during the transition phase, some parents reflected on the benefits that they had accrued from good primary school practice and would welcome something similar being adopted by the secondary school.

“I used to help him in class with his reading and that, and helping out in class with the whole class”.

Others wondered whether there might be opportunities to open some of the school’s activities so that parents can be involved alongside or in parallel to their children.

“Activities for parents and children at the school. I enjoy art, for example and it would be good to join in some art lessons that xxx is taking – where we can work together. It would also be good to have more opportunities to go into the school and watch the children performing – dance, for example”.

Yet again, parents were keen to emphasise the importance of efficient and effective two-way communication, instigated and facilitated by the school. This was seen as especially important and was raised by several in one form or another.
“To be more approachable, improve their communication direct to parents and not relying on students to pass on letters and information”.

“Yes. Listen to our suggestions and act on them when they can”.

“Communicate in a way we [parents] can understand what they are telling us”.

Other parents tended to be a little more specific and raised issues of communication within a specific context, particularly that of school homework policy to ensure consistency that could help parents play a more proactive role in supporting their children’s work.

“School could be more organized with homework policy so that parents can support child in this”.

“They could be a lot more consistent and organised when it comes to homework, we enjoy helping her with homework when she gets it. It is hard to become more involved if we have no homework to work with”.

“Home work clubs for parents and kids to go together”.

Attention was also drawn to the fact that the school could adopt approaches that would support parents in gaining greater access to current teaching and learning methods as well as the curriculum and other facets of school practices that had changed significantly since they were pupils and that would need explaining if they are to support their children more actively. It is possible that anxiety generated by unfamiliarity (that may be perceived by parents as ‘ignorance’) is itself a major barrier that prevents greater interaction with schools and schooling.

“Don’t understand the work they do or the workings out. Very different from when I went to school”.

“Offer support to parents so that we know how the kids are learning and what it is they are learning so that we can help with homework and stuff”.

“Simplify the curriculum”.

“I would help her if I knew a bit more about their work, so now I just tell her to look on internet for the answer, if she can’t find it then her work doesn’t get done and then she gets in trouble and we end up going round in circles”.

The form of communication adopted by the school is also seen as important. It is possible that the format of the present school news letters are not
immediately appealing to many parents and some serious consideration as to how these might be modified could be of assistance. Engaging parents in this process might also prove beneficial to all concerned. One parent drew attention to the potential for using modern communication tools to ease and increase communication between school and parents. Particular mention was made of the way that the school’s website could be enhanced to facilitate this. Mention was also made to the fact that some schools communicate by parents by texting them. They cited this as a useful tool used by schools elsewhere in Bristol during the snow of last winter when many schools had to close.

Unfortunately, there were also parents who were reluctant to become involved more actively with the school, seeing the school as the appropriate instigator of fuller participation of parents. Sadly, it is unlikely that much headway can be made with parents who adopt this negative approach.

“No not really. They have got my number so they call me when they want to speak to me”.

“I don’t know, the school’s crap and I can’t be bothered with them. The sooner he is out of there the better”.

**Additional related factors raised by parents**

It is not surprising that for some parents, the experience of their child’s transition from primary to secondary school provokes much emotion and anxiety. This anxiety was expressed by one parent in particular. Whether this was the case in reality, or whether it was the mother articulating her feelings and concern, one can only speculate.

“Only that I am worried how he will cope with this big move, as he has never liked change as he can’t cope with it too well. I am worried about him having to change classes in a big school as he might get lost and confused”.

Another parent used this as an opportunity to reiterate a point that had been raised earlier in the interview. The need to ensure that all possible background information about each child is gathered by the secondary school to best prepare them to meet any specific or general needs presented by a child on transition. It was clearly an issue of considerable significance to this parent and stated that:

“More background information should be asked for and used by the secondary school to ensure a smooth transition and good preparation”.

As appears in almost every sub-section of this report, the issue of better communication between school and parents was raised again. This clearly is such a critical issue and one that extends into every aspect of the school’s functioning. The importance that parents place on being kept informed and
consulted cannot be underestimated. It is encouraging to note that there are initiatives in place at Checkers that will undoubtedly help address this issue. The school leadership informed the review that a process was already in place and that the school is presently in the process of reviewing the way it secures parental engagement and as a part of this review, consideration is also being given to the nature of report writing. It aims to provide parents with a report on their child’s progress is a form that is more succinct than has been the practice to-date and that this will support parents in engaging with the information it provides more readily. Where parents are no longer living together, the father has too often not been sent information about a child directly from the school since this tends to go directly to the mother. It is anticipated that this practice will be revised to ensure that both parents are kept informed of their child’s progress. The tone of the letters sent to parents prior to Parents’ Evenings is also being refined, so that they increasingly state that ‘this meeting is an opportunity for you to fulfill your obligation to find out about your child’s progress as per Contract….’, as opposed to ‘We invite you to attend …..’. There is a clear expectation that as a result of this approach they are expected to attend.

However, this issue of communication assumes a significance such that it is suggested that a close and comprehensive audit of how the various aspects of the school’s life is undertaken with particular attention paid to ways that parents can access related information. Equally important is the need to ensure that all communication is such that parents have a real opportunity to be a part of it – in which they see their views listened to and taken into serious consideration by the school. It is in such a context that parental confidence and support in and for the school is likely to flourish.

“Better communication”.

“More consistent approaches to sharing information and other communications and suggestions I make to help her and the school”.

“You need to sort these schools out; they don’t listen or care as long as we send the kid in that’s all their worried about, not getting in trouble with the education board and Ofsted”.

This is further frustrated as a result of the school’s history. It is evident that the school makes every effort to be as open as possible and to reach out into the community as much as is possible and to engage in all sorts of social inclusion activities. The Community Support Officer is often involved in various activities with the school. Unfortunately, many parents and other adults in the community do not feel that the school is ‘their school’. They feel that their school was taken away from them when the new school was built – as a result, a significant part of the catchment is disconnected from the present Checkers School.

A few of the parent interviewed drew attention to the fact that across the Checkers Ward, there has been a tendency to dwell on the past and to envelop
the present in negative themes relating to failure. This parent was anxious that
the community more widely, and parents of school aged children in particular,
adopted a more positive focus and took responsibility for change and
development.– to look to the future rather than being obsessed with the failings
of the past

“We have heard a lot of horror stories about poor schools
in north Bristol, but we feel it is all our responsibility to
support our children’s education and make the best of
what we have instead of looking into the past we as
parents should be more concerned with the future”.

Another emphasised the fact that whilst acknowledging past and difficulties and
failings, what was important for the future – and the future of the young people
in the neighbourhood, was that the school and the community together
surmount the challenges presented in raising aspirations within a demanding
context.

“I’ve said enough haven’t I? At the end of the day
Checkers is a good school but they are struggling to
cope with all the problems they’ve got in the school”.

The Deputy Headteacher drew attention to the fact that the school has
recently appointed a Parent Support Worker who will work outwards from the
school. The job specification for this person was being finalized at the time of
interview but is likely to reflect the role as perceived by the Teacher
Development Agency (TDA). This initiative will probably qualify for financial
support provided by the Department for Children, Schools and Families
(DCSF) for school-based parent support advisers (PSAs), as outlined in the
Children’s Plan.

http://www.tda.gov.uk/remodelling/extendedschools/whatarees/parentingsupp
ort/psa_project.aspx
Transition Parents: Literature Review

1 Why involve parents of secondary aged children in their education – and the life of their school?

1.1 The vast majority of parents view their children’s education as important. And a significant percentage (70%) wanting to be more involved than they currently are. More than 50% believing they have equal responsibility with the school for their children’s education (Reynolds, J, 2005), Peters, M, Seeds, K, Goldstein, A and Coleman, N, 2008)

1.2 Crozier, G. and Davies, J. (2007) draw attention to the fact that whilst the majority of parents show an active desire to be involved in their children’s education, there are differences in the way that parents construct their respective role. Some parents, and in particular, parents from lower socio-economic groups, tend to trust the school are less like to see the need or feel able to become involved themselves

1.3 School is not the only place where children learn. Rather, as Grant, L (2010) points out, they learn in different ways and in different settings and contexts, with friends and family at home and in other settings. On entering school, they do not leave the rest of their lives behind: they bring with them values, skills, knowledge, passions and interests from their out-of-school lives. Similarly, children take their learning from school home, continuing with school tasks such as homework, and applying the lessons from school into a broad range of contexts they encounter at home and as they engage in the wider world around them. Children’s out-of-school lives provide different kinds of opportunities and challenges that support and extend their learning experiences. “Taking this more holistic view of children’s ‘learning lives’, it is clear that to support children’s learning in the broadest sense, we need to take account of their lives and learning both in and out of school”(p5).

1.4 There is however, considerable evidence to support the view that parents who are more engaged in the work of the school are more likely to better understand the importance of education and to help their children to succeed to their academic potential (Desforges, C & Abouchaar, A (2003), Ofsted, 2009)

1.5 Research carried out by Ofsted (2006) found that “services that were used by the most vulnerable parents were reported to have transformed the lives of some parents and had positive effects on their children.” There is evidence to show that schools that work closely and effectively with parents have:
   - improved levels of achievement
   - more positive pupil attitudes and behaviour, and
• greater parent participation in, and support for, the life and work of the school.
• Where parents are engaged with the school, they are also more likely to share information, allowing problems and misunderstandings to be reconciled before they escalate.

1.6 This issue is not new. The question of parental support for secondary school and primary school students has a long history.

“The Plowden Report” notes a rising effect of parental attitudes to education in relationship to educational performance when schools are compared the percentage rise is 24% (Infants) to 28% (top juniors transfer age 11) The effect within school is similar rising from 16% to 29% (CACE 1967 paras 91-99) Influential and well constructed research conducted in the late 1960’s and 1970s confirms this

1.7 J. W. B. Douglas and colleagues carried out the work. 5362 British children’s educational progress was tracked who were born 1 to 7 March 1946 were tracked in their educational progress up to 1962 when they were 16. Students were divided by ability using many tests including IQ style tests. They were also divided into four social class groupings. These divisions into groups allowed for comparisons and contrasts, using statistical work. Douglas found significant different attainment in different social classes yet of the same ability. How long a child stayed in education was related to social class. 50% of the students from lower working class left school when 15 (fifth year) compared with 33% from the upper working class, 22 per cent from lower middle class and 10% from upper class

1.8 He also related attainment to health, family size, and school achievement. The biggest factor in student attainment was parental involvement in the child's education, measured by frequency of visits of the parents to the school. The importance of this grew as the children grew older, and these were the children who most likely stayed on. Early years primary socialisation was also important for later educational attainment. Feinstein et al (1999) came to the same conclusion stating that the most powerful parental influence for attainment at 16 is parental interest in education.

1.9 In a major review of the research, Desforges and Abouchaar (2003) have highlighted the important role that parental involvement has on children’s education “Parental involvement has a significant effect on children’s achievement and adjustment even after all other factors, such as social class, maternal education and poverty..., (have been taken into consideration)...Differences in parental involvement have a much bigger impact on achievement than differences associated with the school in primary age range. Parental involvement continues to have a significant effect through the age range (Desforges and Abouchaar, 2003) p 86.
In a recent publication, Molly and Seashore (2009) demonstrate that headteachers with more diverse leadership teams tend to be more open to community involvement and hence, by implication, to greater parental engagement. In the article they highlight how principals and teachers can better organize their efforts to involve stakeholders for increasing student achievement.

Although educational attainment is positively correlated with poverty, reviews of research show that parental intervention and support are significant. Pupils at the bottom of attainment who are deprived of the culture of ambition, stimulation and a middle class culture of putting off the present in order to gain in the future. For Rutter and Madge, in secondary research reviewing literature, fatalism is a consequence of poverty not its cause (Rutter & Madge, 1976). They state that more than half of children do not repeat the cycle of poverty of their parents, whereas intergenerational poverty would be expected with cultural deprivation theory with failure of educational attainment through the generations.

Research evidence suggests that parental involvement, and particularly support at home and interest in education, contribute significantly to improving pupils’ progress and achievement at school. (Carpenter & Lall 2005)

It is acknowledged that parents recognize this need. According to a Newsweek--PTA poll, some 40 percent of parents all across the country believe they are not devoting enough time to their children's education. What is also acknowledged is that this issue will only be solved through a joint effort involving parents, schools and the community. (North Central Regional Educational Laboratory http://www2.ed.gov/PressReleases/02-1994/parent.html - accessed 14 January 2010)

DCSF (2008) draw attention to the following aspects for which parental involvement in their children’s education is significant:

- Parental involvement in children’s education from an early age has a significant effect on educational achievement, and continues to do so into adolescence and adulthood. (Sylva et al, 200)
- The quality and content of fathers’ involvement matter more for children’s outcomes than the quantity of time fathers spend with their children. Goldman, R (2005)
- Family learning can also provide a range of benefits for parents and children including improvements in reading, writing and numeracy as well as greater parental confidence in helping their child at home (Brookes, G., et al, 1997).
• The attitudes and aspirations of parents and of children themselves predict later educational achievement. International evidence suggests that parents with high aspirations are also more involved in their children’s education (Gutman & Akerman, 2008).

• In 2007, around half of parents surveyed said that they felt very involved in their child’s school life. Two thirds of parents said that they would like to get more involved in their child’s school life (with work commitments being a commonly cited barrier to greater involvement) (Peters et al, 2007).

• Levels of parental involvement vary among parents, for example, mothers, parents of young children, Black/Black British parents, parents of children with a statement of Special Educational Needs are all more likely than average to be very involved in their child’s education. (Peters, M et al, 2007)

• Parental involvement has a positive effect on children’s achievement even when the influence of background factors such as social class and family size have been taken into account (Desforges & Abouchaar, 2003)

1.15 In general parents are interested in their child’s education, with recent research suggesting that the majority of parents surveyed in England want more involvement. Care has to be taken, however, in equating parental interest with active and visible involvement.

1.16 Widlake & McLeod, (1982), made the case for parental involvement. One of the publication’s key findings was that when parents were encouraged to help, children from less privileged backgrounds were not as likely to fail in school and, in fact, did as well as or better than their middle-class peers.

The Successful Schools Project has broken new ground in exploring the potential for schools, parents and students to work together. It has been successfully implemented in schools in England and Wales. These schools explored approaches for involving families in their adolescents’ learning, and in contributing to the life of the school. In the most positive cases, the project has revealed that parental involvement can bring about:

• a rise in students’ self-confidence and self-esteem
• practical cooperation between parents and teachers
• improvements in student behaviour and attendance
• recognition within the schools of the importance of family involvement the inclusion of parents who may have been categorized as hard to reach

• improved communication between school and home

• an increase in professional confidence among teachers in working with parents and families. (Street, P 1998)

1.17 Recent advice from Ofsted to its inspectors seems to take a low-key approach to the task and locates ‘parental involvement’ as primarily, if not exclusively, in terms of supporting students with their learning. This is treated as relatively unproblematic and in a form that is ‘school-focused’ and ‘school-lead’.

1.18 The best schools identify those parents who require additional support and provide them with tailored information and formats. In these schools, staff are undeterred by some parents’ initial lack of engagement in their children’s learning. If they try something and it does not work, they modify what they have tried and try again. Staff in these schools make school welcoming and make a conscious effort to ensure the school environment is welcoming to visitors, including parents who have had negative experiences of schooling and education themselves. There are opportunities for family learning and for aiding parental confidence to support their children’s learning. In addition, guidance on how parents can provide support for learning at home, and ways of consulting with parents, are tailored to meet the needs of the parents. (Ofsted, 2009)

1.19 The U.K. Government Education White Paper, Excellence in Learning (DfEE, 1997), acknowledges the continuing significance of parents as a major force in raising education standards and addressing issues of student performance. The report notes:

• Parents are a child’s first and enduring teachers. They play a crucial role in helping their children learn. Family learning is a powerful tool for reaching some of the most disadvantaged in our society. It has the potential to reinforce the role of the family and to change education, helping build strong local communities and widening participation in learning. We want to encourage more effective involvement of family learning in early years and primary education.

1.20 A key finding of an early enquiry by the Community Education Development Centre was that when parents were encouraged to help, children from less privileged backgrounds were not as likely to fail in school and, in fact, did as well as or better than their middle-class peers (Widlake & McLeod 1982).

1.21 Grant, L (2010) argues that supporting the home-school relationship cannot be seen as an ‘added extra’ to the core business of schools.
Rather, this relationship is an essential factor in children’s learning and can inform the work of the school on many levels, including how the curriculum is taught, pastoral care, extra-curricular development and behaviour strategies. Given the importance of children’s families and out-of-school lives for their success within school, Grant believes that embedding home-school relationships as part of a whole-school strategy with strong leadership from senior staff, is likely to see positive results for children’s learning and achievement within school.

1.22 There is some convincing evidence that suggests that strategies used by schools to ensure that parents have meaningful and timely information will support them in instigating and conducting conversations and supporting their children in other ways. At the same time, such information will help ensure that they are better informed and prepared for meetings with school staff, and be able to work more closely in partnership with their children’s schools (Becta, 2009).

1.23 Grant argues that initiatives such as those identified above are designed to view parents as playing a significant role in school improvement, through raising parents’ expectations of schools, making schools more accountable to parents, with parents influencing schools through greater involvement

2 What central support has been provided for parental involvement at secondary stage? Central policy documents relating to parents and schools

2.1 The government has long acknowledged the important influence that parents have on their children, and has continued to explore ways to harness and retain that influence in order to maximize students’ learning. In doing this however, the focus of various reports, guidance and initiatives seem to address different imperatives. In illustrating the different focus of policy relating to parents and schools, the following is taken from (Carpenter. & Lall, 2005, pp 7-8):

2.2 **Parental Choice**: For many parents, their prime mode of involvement in education is in the opportunity to exercise choice of school place for their child. Evidence relating to this field is highly contested but research findings point to inequalities with professional middle class parents being most effective in securing their choice of school place (Ball 2003).

2.3 **Home-School Links**: The School Standards and Framework Act (1998) introduced the need for maintained schools to have home-school agreements. This agreement should be a statement explaining the school’s aims and values, the school’s responsibilities towards its pupils, the responsibilities of parents, and what the school expects of its pupils. While parents are expected to sign such agreements, this is not mandatory. Concerns have been expressed about the extent to which such agreements can contribute to establishing constructive
parental involvement where this does not already exist. Approaches to further develop home-school links include the development of a home-school policy as part of a whole school policy for parental involvement. Strategies include also the identification or appointment of a home-school liaison worker.

2.4 **Governing Bodies**: Parents can become formally involved in school decision-making and policy formation by election as a parent governor. These are expected to act as ‘representative parents’ rather than ‘parent representatives’, which raises issues about the ethnicity, social class and gender distribution of those elected. Governing bodies have also a role in communicating with parents more widely. As we discuss (below), while parents generally welcome information this needs to be part of a communication process which includes two-way discussion.

2.5 **Teacher-Parent Communications**: Communication between teachers and parents takes a range of forms. All parents should receive a written report at least once a year concerning their child’s achievements, progress, areas for improvement, behaviour and attendance.

However, research suggests that some parents find written reports too general and difficult to understand. Face-to-face meetings with teachers are facilitated by parents’ evenings, which should be provided by schools at least once per year. These meetings provide an opportunity for parents to discuss their child with teachers, and also offer the potential for the school to actively involve parents in supporting their child’s school targets and learning.

There can be difficulties where teachers and parents have different expectations for the meeting resulting in frustration and mismatched expectations. Some schools are developing new forums and modes of communication to attempt to ensure improved parental involvement, for example, through academic review days, class/tutor group meetings, newsletters and the use of information technology to link home and school.

Despite a language of parent ‘partnership’, teachers’ access to school information and professional expertise may give them more authority in such meetings.

2.6 **Support for Children’s Education**: Parental involvement includes supporting their child’s learning, working as a co-educator with the schools and, from the school’s perspective, in a manner to complement the work at school. For example, parents are encouraged by the government to learn about curriculum materials and stages, target setting and action planning, and assessments (standard assessment tests – SATs) in order to support their child’s progress. Similarly, parental involvement in supporting homework is considered to be important. There is scope also for parents to act as co-learners with
their child, for example through family learning, home curriculum schemes and project work.

2.7 **Parents as Learners**: Opportunities for accreditation of parents’ learning, either alongside their child or linked to parenting programmes, are growing. More generally, parental engagement with education can encourage parents to develop their own learning, for example through adult and community education provision. Such moves are supported by the promotion of lifelong learning through adult, further and higher education and the development of extended schools as community resources.

2.8 **Parents as Volunteers**: Parental involvement can extend to parents acting as volunteers to support the school, either through activity within schools (e.g. supporting in classrooms), on governing bodies, or in fundraising and community activities associated with schools. The government’s School Workforce Remodelling promotes routes for professional development and recognition of classroom support and assistants, which may provide opportunities for some parent volunteers to extend their employment opportunities.

2.9 **Support for Parents**: Schools, and other education providers, can act as a resource and support for parents. For example, parents’ groups and classes can be provided. The movement to inter-agency working, such as through Sure Start, extended schools and crucially the Children Act 2004 also develop the practice of schools becoming part of a hub of support and provision for children, parents and families. It is clear, therefore, that there is a wide range of forms and approaches to parental involvement. Many developments tend to be localised and there can be a tension between needing locally targeted initiatives while also learning from and sharing existing practices.

Although there is formal reporting and information requirements between schools and parents, the extent to which there is full dialogue is debatable, and varies between parent groups and schools.

2.10 As is evidenced above, parental involvement in their children’s learning and the development of ever closer relationships between home and school has long been of concern to government and continues to occupy a high place on the government’s agenda and is currently a high priority for the government and for schools’ policy. *The Your child, Your schools, our future: building a 21st century schools system* (2009) white paper confirms this by proposing a ‘Parent Guarantee’ that forges a clear expectation that parents will be involved in their children’s education through understanding their child’s learning priorities and needs, understanding their responsibilities to help their child progress, as well as receiving information from school about their child’s progress and any additional needs and special provision.
2.11 In January 2010, the Secretary of State published a substantive document *Support for All*

3 Outcomes of increased parental involvement in secondary education

3.1 The Teacher Development Agency (TDA, 2009) recently established through a survey commissioned on its behalf, that more than half of parents (53 per cent) would like a closer relationship with their child’s school. The poll showed that many parents want more interaction with schools and a single dedicated point of contact.

3.2 The Community Education Development Centre's *Successful Schools Project* explored the potential for schools, parents and students to work together. These schools explored approaches for involving families in their adolescents' learning, and in contributing to the life of the school. In the most positive cases, the project has revealed that parental involvement can bring about:

- a rise in students’ self-confidence and self-esteem
- practical cooperation between parents and teachers
- improvements in student behavior and attendance
- recognition within the schools of the importance of family involvement
- the inclusion of parents who may have been categorized as hard to reach
- improved communication between school and home
- an increase in professional confidence among teachers in working with parents and families.

4 Why do parents tend to engage less with their children’s educational experiences at secondary stage?

4.1 Time constraints, work commitments and childcare duties are often cited by parents as a barrier to engaging with their children’s school experiences. This is particularly the case with working parents and with lone parents (Owen, R, Thomas, A and Joyce, L, 2008).

4.2 Others find difficulty in securing what they regard as appropriate language to communicate with parents. This is often an additional barrier for parents for whom English is not their first language (Harris, A and Goodall, J, 2008).

4.3 Grant (2010) suggests that all parents have different views about the nature and extent of their personal responsibility for their children’s
learning and that to a large extent, this is decided by the way they construct their role. ‘Role construction’ in this context is seen as the activities that parents consider to be their responsibility, and which is influenced by their own experience of education and their expectations of others’ responsibilities (Deslandes, R and Rousseau, N, 2007). Parents’ role construction, they argue, will influence the extent to which they become involved with children’s homework, or with their children’s school life and learning more generally.

4.4 At the point of transition from primary to secondary school, younger teens are at a stage in their social and emotional development where they are seeking autonomy from parents and have difficulty with compromise. Relationship skills are increasingly developed while unsettled emotions are common. Employment and education fill their need for social interaction. Independence and identity become issues of primary importance. (Williams, K. S. 2005)

4.5 Williams (2005) goes on to draw attention to the fact that there are also other developments that impact on the way that young people view the transition process and the continued involvement of their parents in the education process. For example, teenagers are likely to set goals based on feelings of personal priority and they may reject goals set by others. Upon entering secondary school, an adolescent will encounter significant changes in the numbers of students in each class and the number of teachers they encounter. They are expected to be independent learners and cognitively are in a phase where they are perfecting their cognitive reasoning skills. For the more motivated and better supported students, these advanced cognitions can lead to increased motivation to perform and to do well.

4.6 He goes on to propose that the parent can help in the transition phase by working alongside the child and the school to ease the process and support the young person where and when support is needed. In particular, he suggests that the parent can usefully contact school ambassadors that allow a peer or older student to show the child around. Often future students are permitted to sit in on classes that they will be taking during the upcoming year. He highlights the importance of parents being available after school starts. Understand that your child may need extra family time, attention, love and support. When there is a change, he or she may regress to an earlier developmental stage. Help children explore ways to cope with concerns, and continue to be available for further discussion. Being ready to problem-solve. By taking an active helpful role in the child’s academic achievements, parents can help broaden the student’s horizons, increase his or her self-esteem, and provide a foundation for the upcoming stage of higher education (Williams, 2005)

4.7 The Teacher Development Agency (TDA, 2009) demonstrated that 42 per cent of respondents wouldn’t know who to contact at their child’s school if concerned about their child’s welfare, while 40 per cent
wouldn’t know who to talk to if worried about their child’s behaviour and attendance. In addition, almost a third (29 per cent) didn’t know who to approach about a family issue affecting their child at school. These findings show there is a need for schools to have a dedicated person available to advise and support parents.

4.8 The Family and Parenting Institute draws attention to the fact that the majority of parents tend to be actively involved in their children’s education and that this tendency continues to escalate, with 51% of parents felt very involved in their child’s school life, compared to 29% in 2001 (Peters, et al 2008).

4.9 Other research indicates that most students at all levels – elementary, middle, and high school – want their families to be more knowledgeable partners about schooling and are willing to take active roles in assisting communications between home and school.

4.10 There is an important difference of parental involvement between secondary and primary schools as parents tend to have fewer contacts with schools as their children grow older. This is the case partly because children want to be more autonomous but also because parents feel less capable of helping children. The transition from primary to secondary school needs to be managed both with regard to pupils and parents and parents need to be kept on board at the start of secondary education. (Carpenter & Lall, 2005)

4.11 Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler (1997) argue that there are three constructs central to parents’ basic involvement decisions: parents’ role construction (the belief they should be involved), parents’ sense of efficacy (the belief they are capable of helping), and general invitations, demands and opportunities for involvement from the child and school.

4.12 The General Teaching Council for England (2008) established that the parents of primary school pupils were more likely than those at secondary school to be able to consult with teachers at times other than scheduled formal consultation times, but in both cases, it was often difficult to contact Head teachers. Fathers and lone parents were less likely to have informal contact with schools or be involved in the life of the school through other channels such as volunteering.

4.13 Cotton & Reed Wikelund identify various differences in the incidence and types of parent involvement as students move through the upper elementary and secondary grades. They point out that parents generally become less involved as their children grow older for many reasons: schools are bigger and farther from home, the curriculum is more sophisticated, each student has several teachers, parents of older students are more likely to be employed, and students are beginning to establish some sense of separation and independence from their parents.
4.14 Whilst engaging parents in the secondary education phase is widely acknowledged as challenging. Sophia Catsambis (1998) claims that "Parents report a serious lack of communication from schools, and the families themselves contact the schools infrequently. It seems that few middle schools have comprehensive programs for parental involvement and few parents volunteer at school (Epstein & Lee, 1995). Some schools, though, foster higher levels of communications with parents than other schools (Sui-Chu & Willms, 1996; Epstein, 1990)"(p2).

4.15 Recent research by Sherbert Research (2009) on behalf of the Department for Children Schools and Families. In their work, they found that most parents feel unable to support their children’s learning beyond practical terms such as buying them a computer, getting them ready in the mornings for school, making sure they get to the bus stop on time; especially as their academic capabilities are pushed to the limit once children reach secondary school.

4.16 Catsambis also draws attention to the critical fact that many researchers regard parental involvement as participation in school activities; whilst others, as parental aspirations for their children; and others, as involvement in children’s learning activities at home. She claims that it is only recently that researchers have recognised the multi-dimensional character of parental involvement and have tried to capture the multitude of parental activities regarding children’s education. Her study usefully conceptualises parental involvement from a perspective that considers family, school, and community as overlapping spheres of influence.

4.17 She draws on Epstein’s (1992) study to demonstrate how these spheres enter into complex interrelationships which define six different types of parental involvement:

1. **Parenting:** parents’ basic obligations for establishing a positive learning environment at home,

2. **Communication:** parent-school communications about school programs and student progress,

3. **Volunteering:** parent participation and volunteering at school,

4. **Learning at home:** parent and school communications regarding learning activities at home,

5. **Decision making:** parent involvement in school decision making and governance, and

6. **Collaborating with community:** parent collaboration with community organizations that increase students’ learning opportunities (Epstein, 1992).
This led to the National PTA creating program standards of excellence for Parent/Family Involvement Programmes that established the following:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Standard I</th>
<th>Communicating - Communication between home and school is regular, two-way, and meaningful.</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Standard II</td>
<td>Parenting - Parenting skills are promoted and supported</td>
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<tr>
<td>Standard III</td>
<td>Student Learning - Parents play an integral role in assisting student learning.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Standard IV</td>
<td>Volunteering - Parents are welcome in the school, and their support and assistance are sought.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Standard V</td>
<td>School Decision Making and Advocacy - Parents are full partners in the decisions that affect children and families.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Standard VI</td>
<td>Collaborating with Community - Community resources are used to strengthen schools, families, and student learning.</td>
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</tbody>
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The General Teaching Council for England (2008) reinforced this model in its report *Engaging Parents in their Children’s Learning*. Parents partook in various forms of involvement, ranging from instilling positive attitudes and values in their children and talking to their children about school, to more active engagement in their learning, for example, helping with homework and taking them on educational trips. Some provided private tuition for their child.

Crozier (1999) however, draws attention to the fact that whilst many parents tend to be less active in their engagement with their children’s secondary school, this is likely to be particularly acute for parents who have limited educational attainments and who themselves had difficult experiences at school. In addition, these parents may find formal involvement with the school more stressful than those who have had better educational experiences.

Erosion of parental involvement in the secondary sector?
Recent research findings (e.g. Desforges and Abouchaar, 2003) indicate that engaging parents is beneficial to pupils’ attitudes to learning and their achievement levels. In some respects, it is the simple fact that parents are seen to be interested that acts as the prime motivator. Although the degree and power of this influence wane gradually during a pupil’s progress through the education system, that influence remains as a factor throughout.

In common with Crozier (1999) and Desforges and Abouchaar (2003) show that active parental involvement in young people’s education ‘tails off’ in terms of successful outcomes once they enter secondary school. Desforges and Abouchaar (2003) suggest that, at this stage, communicating aspiration may be more important than active involvement in the learning process because, at this age parents may
not feel that they have the necessary knowledge and skills to assist, for example, with homework (DfES, 2003; Welsh et al., 2004).

4.23 Carpenter, V. & Lall, M (2005) also state in their report that there is an important difference of parental involvement in secondary and primary schools as parents tend to have fewer contacts with schools as their children grow older. This is the case partly because children want to be more autonomous but also because parents feel less capable of helping children. The transition from primary to secondary school needs to be managed both in terms of pupils and parents. The report however, clearly underlines the transferability of all four projects [that were being evaluated] from primary to secondary schools with minor adaptations and effective results.

4.24 Some parents feel that their active involvement with the school could be viewed as negative by both their children and the teachers. The General Teaching Council for England (2008) reports that Parents were concerned about going into school as their child may be singled out for ridicule by other children. Also, some parents were concerned that they may be seen as a 'pest' by the teacher and subsequent visits into school by other parents may become more difficult.

4.25 It also concluded that barriers to a greater level of engagement by parents included time pressures or a lack of confidence and specific skills.

4.26 In addition, Carpenter and Lall (2005) make the point that every school has a different set of ‘hard to reach’ parents and that it is important that the school gets to know the barriers for that particular group and work at overcoming them in a partnership. They stress that the assumption that parents are not interested in their children’s education is fundamentally incorrect and based on misunderstanding. What is important is that schools realise that a ‘one size fits all’ policy is not an option and that the preparation and the organisation of a project must be conceived as an interface between the school and those particular targeted parents and their specific external environment.

4.27 While nearly three-quarters of parents surveyed in 2007 said that they felt that it was extremely important to help with their child’s homework, nearly 60% of parents said that they frequently helped their child with their homework (i.e. they did so ‘every time’ or ‘most times’); approximately one third did so occasionally. How often a parent helps with homework is strongly tied to the school year of the child; parents of younger children helped more frequently than those in later school years. [Peters, et al. (2008)]

4.28 Carpenter & Lall, (2005), draw attention to a series of factors as identified within the literature. These can be summarised as follows:

A combination of factors, including:
social class, 
maternal level of education, 
material deprivation, 
maternal psycho-social health, 
single parent status and, to a lesser degree, 
family ethnicity

4.29 The impact of socio-economic factors is well rehearsed within the literature and it is widely accepted that this has a direct bearing on the extent to which parents are prepared to become involved with their children’s education establishments (or not) (Lareau, 1987; Crozier, 1997; Hanafin & Lynch, 2002; Ball, 2003).

4.30 Gender factors remain highly contentious and adds a further complexity to the analysis, often resulting in conflicting evidence. Anecdotally, one can cite the significance of mothers’ involvement in their children’s education from a very early age. The appearance of the same mothers in engaging with their children’s secondary schools is far less evident however. Some researchers such as David (1993) draw particular attention to the predominant role that mothers generally play in determining the choice of school for their children.

4.31 The popular press also raises concern regarding the extent to which single mothers support the education of their children – particularly where they are also in employment. More discerning research however, challenges this myth (e.g. Zick et al. (2001) who argues that women who work (and single mothers, (Standing, 2000) continue to be actively involved in their children’s education activities and progress.

4.32 Research also suggests that divorced parents tend to be less involved with their children’s education than those who remain together within a two-parent family (Colpin, Vandemeulebroecke & Ghesquiere, 2004, p. 276).

4.33 The various pressures that psycho-social problems exert on families (however defined) will inevitably have a significant impact on their perceptions of self and hence, views of how they are seen (and judged) by others. It also has consequences for the energy and motivation that they can draw upon to play an active part in the community at large, and within the education setting in particular.

4.34 Whilst the above tends to segregate the various realities confronting many parents, the reality is much more complex with a significant number of parents subjected to more than one of these factors and becoming targeted by a label such as ‘problematic’, ‘disengaged’ ‘hard-to-reach’ and the such.

4.35 This places in sharp contrast the fact that government policies tend to adopt a simplistic, uni-focused perspective that fails to acknowledge the complexity of the circumstances within which many parents
struggle to function and support their children. Over recent years, these policies have tended to focus predominantly on 'raising achievement' – often to the exclusion of other significant issue.

5 Teacher views regarding parental engagement

5.1 The GTCE's Survey of Teachers (2007) found that good communication between home and school was perceived by teachers to be the key to helping parents and carers support their children's achievement. Nine out of 10 teachers said that improving communication between themselves and parents had had a positive impact on pupil achievement, while more than three-quarters confirmed that initiatives aimed at drawing on parents or carers' knowledge of their children, and an open door policy, had proved beneficial.

5.2 The study found that relatively few teachers had had no experience of working with parents. Only a third said they had never supported parents in improving their own subject knowledge, and one in five had never provided opportunities to help parents learn about learning.

5.3 Teachers can too readily view parents as 'hard-to-reach' and label them as such on the basis that they only appear in schools occasionally. Some observers have argues however, that far from the parents being 'hard-to-reach' it is in fact the schools that could be so described (Crozier, G and Davies, J, 2007).

5.4 The General Teaching Council found that primary teachers tended to be more positive than secondary teachers about ways of involving parents in their children’s education and in the life of the school. The higher the level of linguistic or socio-economic challenge faced by the school, the more teachers said that involving parents had had a positive impact on achievement.

5.5 The five main ways identified by teachers to help parents and carers have a positive impact were: to promote high-quality, regular communication between the home and school; home visits; supporting parents’ language skills; helping with parenting skills; and helping parents to learn about learning and to develop their subject knowledge.

5.6 Other research however, suggests that teachers often think that low-income parents and single parents will not or cannot spend as much time helping their children at home as do middle-class parents with more education and leisure time (Rose, Gallup & Elam, 1997).

5.7 Deslandes, R and Rousseau, N (2007) argue that teachers and parents often hold different underlying expectations about parents’ roles. Such differences are often realized when considering how parents should support children with their homework. This difference can result in increased tension and conflict between home and school.
6 How best to secure information on parental perception of education and their part within it

6.1 The Ontario Ministry of Education offers some thoughtful ideas regarding the way that schools may become more successful in accessing parental views about their experiences with education settings and their ambitions for greater engagement. [Involving Parents in the School: Tips for School Councils [http://www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/parents/involvement/]]. In this document, they offer the following imperatives:

6.2 Use a survey to determine what would help parents become more involved in their child’s education, and in the life of the school. Such a survey needs to address certain priorities, namely:

- The survey should be distributed to all parents.
- Survey questions should address all of the ways parents may become involved in the school, rather than focusing solely on involvement in school council.
- It is often desirable to translate the survey into a variety of languages.
- Prizes, no matter how small, can encourage higher completion rates.
- In developing the survey, consider including:
  - a list of the types of specific activities – from accompanying classes on field trips to helping in the homework room – for which parent involvement is needed and welcomed;
  - an opportunity for parents to identify the special skills, talents or experience they would be interested in sharing;
  - a list of information topics about the school with an opportunity for parents to indicate which areas they would like to learn more about;
  - an invitation for parents to participate in career days, with space for the parent to indicate his or her occupation;
  - a suggestions area in which parents can indicate how they feel communication with the school could be improved;
  - an opportunity for parents to identify any barriers which prevent them from becoming involved, or attending school events; and
  - contact information, including email, telephone and mailing address, where parents would like to receive information.

7 Barriers to parental involvement

7.1 Peters et al. (2010) established that non-resident parents (42 per cent) said they were not involved in their children’s education. Although more involved than non-resident parents, involvement was lower than average for fathers (20 per cent not involved), parents under 25 (18 per
cent not involved), parents with three or more children (16 per cent not involved) and parents working full time (16 per cent not involved).

7.2 This study also shows that Involvement was highest amongst
  • mothers,
  • part time workers and
  • parents of children with an illness or disability.

7.3 Further analysis shows that parents of children with a statement of SEN were most likely to feel very involved (54 per cent). This is consistent with the PICE survey, which uncovered the same finding. It is interesting to note that parents of children with SEN (but no statement) were no more likely than average to be very involved (40 per cent). As the PICE survey also indicates, it is the presence of a statement that heightens parents’ sense of involvement. The presence of a statement may trigger various consultations with the parent, adding to this sense of involvement.

7.4 When asked who was most involved in their child’s school life - them or their partner, very few fathers said they were most involved. Mothers were five times more likely to say they were most involved. A third of parents said that they and their partner were equally involved in their child’s schooling.

7.5 Why mothers are more likely to be involved than fathers:
It is important to unpack some of the reasons for the lower levels of involvement amongst fathers. More specifically, it is necessary to see whether it is gender or working patterns that is driving perceptions of involvement. Fathers are more likely than mothers to be in full-time paid work, but this is not the most important reason. As figure 2.2 shows, 32 per cent of women working full-time said they were most involved compared with five per cent of full-time working men.

7.6 There are fewer opportunities for fathers to get involved in their children’s learning than there are for mothers (34 per cent of fathers versus 37 per cent of mothers agreed); and

7.7 It is more difficult for fathers to get involved in their children’s learning than it is for mothers (37 per cent of fathers versus 38 per cent of mothers agreed).

7.8 Frequency of helping with homework was also highest amongst
  • parents not working or
  • those working part time.

7.9 However, there were some important gender differences.
  • a fifth (21 per cent) of non-working mothers helped their child every day
  • compared with nine per cent of non-working fathers.
7.10 Other groups who claimed to be less involved include parents of three or more children - 38 per cent, fathers - 37 per cent, and non-resident parents - 45 per cent) also expressed a desire for more involvement. While the majority of fathers (62 per cent) were happy with their level of involvement, significantly more fathers than mothers said they wanted to be more involved (37 versus 27 per cent).

7.11 Significantly more fathers than mothers said they wanted to be more involved (37 versus 27 per cent).

7.12 Peters et al (2010) found that the parents who were less likely to have been in recent contact with their children’s school (within the last week) included: fathers (27 versus 48 per cent mothers); non-resident parents (11 versus 40 per cent resident parents); those working full time (32 versus 46 per cent part time and 49 per cent not working); parents of older children.

7.13 They also found that non-resident parents, fathers and parents of older children were also less likely to be service users or receive informal support, suggesting that these groups of parents are less likely to engage with their child’s development on a number of different levels.

7.14 Further, an analysis of parental contact with the child’s educational establishment using the confidence index suggests that confidence is a factor in how recently parents had been in contact with their child’s nursery, school or college. Parents in the low confidence group - which are more likely to include fathers, non-resident parents and parents of older children - were less likely to have been in contact within the last week (30 increasing to 55 per cent for the higher confidence group) and also less likely to have been in contact within the last month (60 increasing to 82 per cent for the higher confidence group).

7.15 Further barriers to school-home partnership may well be a result of unrealised or unrecognised source since teachers can readily assume that what they perceive as a ‘partnership’ is in reality one-directional with the school defining what is meant by ‘partnership’ whilst the parent’s views are given little attention or acknowledgement. (Hughes, M and Greenhough, P (2006).

8 Involving or Engaging parents?

8.1 It is important to realise that parents who have difficulty in engaging with schools are not a homogeneous group but rather, different approaches and strategies may be needed to encourage different parents to play a more productive part in the life of the school and in their children’s education (Smit, F, Driessen, G, Sluiter, R and Sleegers, P, 2007).

8.2 Grant, L (2010) draws on the work of Edwards and Warin (1999) to argue that schools often make the crucial mistake of adopting a deficit approach when assuming that parents do not possess appropriate
skills to engage with the education of their children and hence, shy away from contact with schools. They argue that such an approach is likely to alienate parents further and hence, needs to be avoided at all cost.

8.3 When we’re *involving parents*, schools tend to focus on supporting students by strengthening and assisting school programs and priorities.

When we’re *engaging parents*, schools support students by developing parent relationships and often working with parents to improve their local communities. Richard Rothstein and others have documented how schools on their own might be able to *narrow* the achievement gap, but without adequate affordable housing, accessible health care, and the availability of good jobs, it will be impossible to *eliminate* it. Schools in Texas and Los Angeles have worked with the Industrial Areas Foundation and member institutions that connect to parents of their students (e.g., religious congregations, labour unions, community groups) to gain neighbourhood, city-wide, and state-wide improvements in these areas.

8.4 When *engaging parents*, ideas tend to be elicited from parents by school staff in the context of developing trusting relationships. More parent energy drives the efforts because they emerge from parent/community needs and priorities. At Luther Burbank High School in Sacramento, we began an internationally recognized family literacy project to provide computers and home Internet access to immigrant families AFTER parents suggested the idea, organized other parents, and worked with teachers to develop an implementation plan (Ferlazzo, L).

8.5 When we’re *engaging parents*, the parent is considered a leader or a potential leader who is integral to identifying a vision and goals. He/she encourages others to contribute their own vision to that big picture and helps perform the tasks that need to be achieved in order to reach those goals. When we’re *involving parents*, school staff can fall into the role of a social worker who does things for parents, or who tends to tell them what they should be doing with their child. When we’re *engaging parents*, school staff act more as community organizers who help parents do things for themselves, and who elicit from parents ideas about what parents and school staff could be doing to better help their child and their community. (Ferlazzo, 2009)

8.6 The General Teaching Council for England (2008) also differentiated between *involvement* and *engagement* in establishing that parents generally thought that schools wished them to be actively involved in their child’s learning and assisted this involvement through various means such as letters, reports, consultation evenings and details on the school website. The report considers most of these to be involvement with learning but not direct engagement.
Carpenter, V. & Lall, M (2005) identified a series of imperatives that interventions designed to engage parents and schools can ill afford to ignore. These include:

**Flexibility and bottom up initiatives and self-evaluation:** There is a need for
- a constant evaluation of the impact of a programme or an activity.
- The projects need to be flexible and respond to the needs of the families they are trying to engage.
- The schools’ needs in this capacity have to remain secondary,
- not listening to parents’ views will defeat the original purpose of bridging homes and schools.
- Targeted local initiatives address local problems in a way that projects imposed from above cannot.
- The realisation that one size does not fit all is crucial.

**Local knowledge:**
- Having local people involved has made a significant difference across all of the projects.
- Local knowledge and cultural sensitivity seems to be essential in gaining parental trust.
- By definition home-school link workers have a wide brief, but it seems to increase trust when local residents know that they can rely on the named contact person for non-school related problems as well. Contacting all parents and accessing parents who most need the service is essential to make sure that parents know where to go and what is available and for what purpose.

**Relationships with the schools:**
- Staff and senior management have to be seen to be behind the projects. This is especially the case when dealing with difficult issues such as racial equality.

**Accessing the activities:**
- Parents can only access activities and meetings if the logistics are taken care of. This is even more the case with ‘hard to reach’ parents who could get discouraged if help with childcare or translations are not given.
- The school has to eliminate the barriers and listen to parental feedback if it is to increase involvement. Small things such as adjusting the times of meetings can make a marked difference
8.11 One of the main messages to come from the Sharrow parent group was that both the diversity of children and their similarities should be valued and celebrated [Unwin, R. Responding to Cultural Diversity with parent/ carer groups, Development Education Centre, South Yorkshire]

8.12 Carpenter and Lall (2005) found that not many parental involvement projects focus specifically on achievement. Most projects did not link attainment and parental involvement directly. Only a few projects had a direct, measurable impact on achievement.

8.13 It is beneficial for the school to work in close partnership with schools, children’s centres or other similar institutions who have a similar agenda in terms of working with parents (e.g. ‘extended schools’). This helps make the course or sessions more accessible to parents, helps with resourcing (e.g. child care, other staff members) and allows for continuity, should the parents wish to continue to meet after the end of the course. (Unwin, R)

8.14 Allow for flexibility in terms of content. Aim to start with the parents’ own agendas and aim to facilitate and empower them to follow a course of (at least in part) their own design. (Unwin, R)

8.15 Recognise that lack of confidence, poor literacy skills, lack of experience with English and other barriers may be present, especially with ‘hard to reach groups’. One way of helping overcome some of these barriers is to choose communication media, level and pace carefully and to allow more time for a parent group to develop. (Unwin, R)

8.13 Budget specifically for a crèche/childcare.

8.17 Despite schools’ aims focus on how to improve attainment, their needs have to be secondary to the needs of the parents and the children who they are trying to engage. Often parents and their involvement are seen as crucial in improving standards; however this misses the point of differing family needs.

8.18 Every school has a different set of ‘hard to reach’ parents – there is a need to get to know the barriers for each particular group and work at overcoming them in a partnership. The assumption that parents are not interested in their children’s education is fundamentally incorrect.

8.19 The Family and Parenting Institute (FPI) identifies the practice of employing a dedicated link worker as a useful strategy. That person is then charged with the responsibility for easing communication between parents and school. This they argue, has been shown to work. In some catchments, that worker will be engaged in something more akin to social work (Tickle, L 2009). The FPI report is clear that senior
management backing is critical in any effort to ensure sustained parental involvement with school.

8.20 With support from senior management, a parents’ forum has been set up, which meets every two months. Either the headteacher or a deputy attends to listen to feedback and take appropriate action. "For example, at the last one, we got a bit of a pasting about our marking, so we’ve taken those comments on board and tightened up procedures," he says. (Tickle, L 2009)

8.21 The coffee mornings are a rare chance for parents of secondary-age pupils to meet and chat. "At primary, you meet other parents at the school gate, but when they get to secondary you can feel quite isolated," says Romaine. She now helps out with the school’s orchestra trips and says that feeling able to come on to the school site on an informal basis has made it easier to volunteer. (Tickle, L 2009)

8.22 Providing opportunities for lifelong learning and founding active parents’ groups are the final two models which the FPI says have been proved to work. (Tickle, L 2009)

8.23 The Superdads club he founded three years ago - for fathers living in a traditionally macho area who felt they had no defined role in the life of the school - is also flourishing. Importantly, he says, he met them not on his territory but theirs: the local rugby club. (Tickle, L 2009)

8.24 Peters et al. (2010) established that despite three-quarters of parents reporting that they had attended a parents’ evening in the last year, figure 4.5 shows that one quarter (23 per cent) nonetheless felt that parents’ evenings should be used more, whilst one sixth (18 per cent) felt that greater use could be made of notes or letters.

8.25 This study also established that

- non-resident parents were more likely than average to state that more use should be made of text messages and phone calls from the school (10 and 20 per cent respectively).

- Parents of children who were disabled or ill were less likely than average to say parents’ evenings should be used more (16 per cent).

- Parents where English was not their first language were more likely than average to request greater use of parents’ evenings (37 per cent) and informal discussions with staff (28 per cent). However, they were less likely to want more e-mail correspondence (five per cent).

- In respect of working status, parents who worked full time were less likely to want to speak to staff informally (11 per cent), whilst those who worked part time were more likely to want to
communicate directly with their child (eight per cent). Parents who were not working were less likely to state that more use should be made of e-mails (nine per cent).

9 The place of digital technologies in promoting parental engagement with schools

9.1 Schools are expected to make information and access to learning resources available online for students and are increasingly being encouraged to involve their parents in the use of such technologies. The availability of a home computer and internet access is seen by the government as important enough for learning that the Home Access initiative announced plans to support low income families to acquire these technologies in 2008. This was based on the premise that access to technology at home benefits learners in a range of different ways:

- Improving learning and achievement
- Motivating and engaging children
- Encouraging independence and creativity
- Connecting learning at school and at home, and significantly,
- Helping parents and carers get more involved.

As a result, the government attempted to ensure that all pupils in state maintained education in England have the opportunity to have access to computers and internet connectivity for education at home via the Home Access programme. This programme was initially targeted at learners in years 3 to 9 that lacked access to computers and the internet.

9.2 Recent work by Lyndsay Grant (2010) has sought to understand the needs and aspirations of teachers, parents and children for home-school relationship, and – significantly, how the use of digital technologies may support as well as raise new issues for home-school relationships.

9.3 Grant points out that the emphasis on parental engagement, as well as much work on home-school relationships, has traditionally tended to focus on the relationship between parents and children’s schools. She argues however, that children themselves actually play an active role in mediating between their home and school contexts, making connections between the learning they do at school and home (or not), and actively facilitating or resisting their parents’ involvement in their learning. Consequently therefore, children need to be considered as at the heart of any strategies to support home-school relationships and parents’ engagement in children’s learning.

9.4 Grant argues that schools are too often reluctant to consider ways to bring the knowledges and cultures of home into ‘conversation’ with the
knowledges and cultures of school, supporting children to draw on all the resources available to them.

9.4 Importantly, Grant argues that the starting point for thinking about home-school relationships needs to adopt a ‘wealth’ rather than a ‘deficit’ model. The unique contribution of children’s home and family life needs to be valued and validated, and developed and built on to support children’s learning at home, rather than attempting to introduce a completely new and alien set of school-based requirements on children and their families.

9.5 At the same time, she draws attention to the fact that digital technologies feature highly in recent policies that seek to connect home and school and raise parental engagement, seen in the government’s Home Access initiative (2009) and Online Reporting expectations.

9.6 The Home Access initiative was designed to “Provide practical and financial support to low-income families who may not be able to afford a computer or the internet. We [the government] will support these families to ensure that the educational and social benefits of 21st century technology are available to them”. (Diana Johnson, Parliamentary Under Secretary of State for Schools, 2009).

9.7 An evaluation of the Home Access pilot study found that whilst there was clear evidence of children making use of computers acquired through this initiative and enhancing their educational achievement, “the majority of parents in the pilot study (81%) also reported that they felt more involved with their child’s learning, with parents mainly using the Home Access computer to look at school websites”

9.8 Online Reporting is expected to provide parents with access to digital reports on their children’s attainment, attendance, behaviour and special needs by 2010 (secondary) and 2012 (primary). This initiative is yet another attempt launched by the government to support and enhance parental engagement with their children’s school.

10 What specifically can the school do in refining its practice to ensure easier engagement with parents?

10.1 Early contact is critical – as is the nature of that contact. Research conducted by the NFER on behalf of the Home office (Doherty, P. et al, 2004) advocate a set of actions that specifically target the ‘hard to reach’. These include:

- Develop new targeting strategies within an existing system of service delivery, to meet the needs of target groups.
Focus on groups who are unable to express their needs, not due to difficulties with language or interpretation, but because their views were not previously sought.

Address the lack of information provided to specific groups, or absence of strategies to inform groups currently outside service provision.

Overcome the resistance of some groups to provision based on their previous experience of service delivery; specifically negative experiences of providers and agency-specific fears (such as those associated with child protection).

Address any difference in opinion between providers and recipients of services for external solutions to personal problems.

10.2 In particular, this study identified the following important issues that apply to those seeking to consult with and provide to hard-to-reach groups questions for practitioners

Commitment and strategy
- Is your commitment to consulting with service users in general, and hard-to-reach groups in particular, supported within your agency/organisation?

- Is there time to consult, and in what way does the timing of implementation affect what consultation can be planned or achieved?

- Does the service you provide lend itself to consultation, or is it configured in such a way as to limit or prevent it?

- Do you need to develop new strategies, or are there existing routes or channels that you can draw on, such as your existing points of contact with, or links to hard-to-reach groups?

Target population and the nature of consultation
- Who is to be consulted (children, parents, carers, other professionals, etc.) and what the nature of consultation are the implications of this for your approach?

- Do you need to include others in consultation, or can you focus on consultation with one group?

- At what point will consultation take place, will it be before the service is delivered, or during it?

- Will consultation be a one-off exercise, or an ongoing procedure and what are the implications of this for you as a provider?
Site and context
- What sites are used for consultation? Are these adequate and accessible for hard-to-reach groups?
- What impact (if any) does the venue have on those invited to take part?
- At what time will consultation take place, and how might this affect participation?
- Do you intend to consult with a group or with individuals, and will this have implications for a) participation and b) your workload?
- How will you deal with those who may speak for others or who represent groups?

Expectations and awareness
- How will you engage those who do not come forward, is it important that they are awareness involved, if so, how will you contact them?
- Do you have certain expectations or values that may not be shared by those you seek to consult?
- How might you gain ‘leverage’ through significant others in the professional or wider community?
- Do those you seek to engage know that you exist? What steps have you taken to raise awareness of your service before engaging users?
- What makes you different from all other providers? How do you plan to overcome any initiative fatigue, cynicism or mistrust of service providers?

10.3 Walton (2006) offers a series of questions that a ‘parent coordinator might care to consider when reviewing the readiness and suitability of the school to be best positioned to be seen as receptive by parents. The issues raised here all perform a critical part in defining the parents’ impression of the school and its readiness to welcome outsiders in a collaborative and cooperative way:
- Are the office staff trained in creating a welcoming impression when they answer the phone or do they convey the impression that any phone call is an intrusion into the school’s private domain?
- If parents visit the school, where are they asked to sit while waiting to be seen and is there anything for people to look at or read while they are waiting?
• What messages do the foyer wall displays convey?

• Are parents ever told that no one is available to see them, or is there a system that ensures someone will respond?

• Even if there is an appointments system, is there any flexibility? (for example, some schools hold a weekly parent-visiting period; parents do not have to book specific appointments in advance but know that, at that time, they can turn up for a teacher surgery. In another school, a traditional taboo is broken: parents are welcomed into the staffroom at breaks and lunchtimes. They know they can raise questions at any time. (Walton, M. 2006)

10.4 Benefits will also accrue from the school:
• designing homework with the intention of involving the parents

• ensuring that parents are fully informed about how and when they should intervene at home

• making sure that parents know the school’s policy and the part they can play in its delivery

• listening to what parents have to say about homework in practice

• involving them directly in any in-school homework support provision you may run. Some schools have set up a parent information hotline, where messages will be available concerning work being done in class or homework that has been set.

10.5 Walton also suggests that many parents could be usefully viewed by teachers as experts in their own right and that this expertise could be used to advantage by the school. In addition to inviting parents to become involved in out-of-school activities, they could be encouraged to take on additional responsibilities they have the necessary expertise and if the school gave them some guidance and support to start them off, as leaders or organisers. For example, a parent in one school is a qualified swimming instructor and helps to take the pupils swimming.

10.6 He also suggests that parents can usefully be actively involved in decision-making around school-related issues. Parents often see things from a practical angle, where schools get bound up in their own procedures. For example, parents might have constructive suggestions to make about: an alternative system for pupil dispersal at the end of the day, measures to improve security the method by which parents are notified about homework, the timing of parents’ evenings, the contents of the school handbook, sports day etc.

10.7 Peters et al (2010) found that overall, the vast majority (94 per cent) of parents involved in their study had been in contact within the last year.
Two-fifths (39 per cent) of parents had communicated with their child’s educational establishment within the last week, whilst only small proportions said there had been no contact for more than a year or never (three per cent for both).

10.8 Whilst not directly gleaned from school-based data, other information that relates to what form of communication seems to work best for parents seeking support from related agencies may also hold indicators that can be used by schools. Peters et al. (2010) found that information relating to advice services sought by parents had been secured in the form of written material (61 per cent) or in person (56 per cent); in comparison, smaller proportions used the internet (27 per cent) and telephone helplines (19 per cent) for this purpose.

11 Specific strategies, with particular focus for engaging parent of Year 7 pupils

11.1 The point of transition between primary and secondary education is critical. As noted above, this is the point when the enthusiasm and readiness with which parents have traditionally engaged with the primary school seems to diminish. It would therefore seem logical for secondary schools to do all that is possible to sustain that engagement at the point of transition. The following strategies are offered by Mike Walton

- Try to make sure that all the contact in the initial stages of a pupil’s time at your school leads to a meaningful partnership based on mutual respect and understanding, focused on the student’s learning.

- One school provides the opportunity occasionally for parents to spend a morning shadowing their child. In this first-hand way, parents are able to:
  - find out what is being taught and learned
  - experience new approaches to teaching
  - observe how their child behaves with other pupils in the class
  - gain some idea of the progress their own child is making.

11.2 At this early stage in the secondary career of a child, the school may care to consider supporting parents in sustaining the network that they may have established during the earlier years of their children’s education. For others, it may be comforting to be offered an opportunity to develop such a network. To that end, Walton suggests the following:

- Ensuring that parents’ email addresses (if they have agreed to this) are shared with fellow parents enables them to make speedy contact with each other. If they know one another, they will be more likely to attend events.
• Organising regular gatherings that take the form of a sort of communal clinic (‘Have you got a problem to do with school? Come and tell us and share it with other parents…’) might suit some schools.

• Initiating activities at which working parents who live a fair distance from the school have a chance of being present or holding twin meetings for parents (one in the daytime, one in the evening) might suit others.

11.3 Walton cautions against ‘pigeonholing’ parents into one, limited category but rather, to encourage their engagement on several levels. He offers the example of one father who may be a part-time adult student at the school; an expert on environmental issues brought in to support science teaching in Year 9; a stallholder at the summer fair; an auxiliary school gardener and a parent governor. Such a father would, because of his multiple involvement could well become a vocal advocate of the school’s strengths.

11.4 The Department for Children, Schools and Families (2009) identifies 5 distinct approaches that it advocates schools use to better engage parents. As noted above however, these are predicated on the government’s assumption that the prime aim of engagement is that of raising pupil performance and achievement. The extent to which these approaches are likely to attract the imagination of ‘reluctant’ parents is difficult to establish however.

**Approach 1**
Sharing outline curriculum plans with parents with suggestions of activities for parents/siblings to work on together as part of homework

**Approach 2**
Using homework activities to communicate key areas of learning that parents can support

**Approach 3**
Giving parents access to curriculum materials for current teaching and learning on the school website or the virtual learning environment (VLE)

**Approach 4**
Involving parents in their child’s lessons in school

**Approach 5**
Helping specific parents to work with their child on identified curricular targets

11.5 It goes on to advocate the following to secure ‘high level involvement by parents and carers’:
• using direct contact or personalised letters of invitation;

• working closely with parent and carer representatives to agree suitable approaches;

• focusing on approaches to foster positive interaction between parents and their children;

• providing specific briefings on ‘technical aspects’, for example how to access and use the VLE;

• choosing a time when parents and carers find it easier to come into school;

• using an already well-attended event as the forum to work with parents and carers on how to help their child;

• getting parents and carers to work with their child during introductory sessions in school;

• adopting an attitude of mind where they expect and are prepared to give regular reminders; and

• making use of parents as links to others in their locality and of wider Children’s Services staff, such as home school workers.

11.6 The Training and Development Agency for Schools (TDA), in partnership with the National Academy of Parenting Practitioners (NAPP), the Children’s Workforce Development Council (CWDC) and other key stakeholders offers training and development opportunities for a Parent Support Advisor workforce (PSAs)

• resources to support recruitment, deployment and development of PSAs

• a training package for PSAs new to the role and support for local authority trainers to deliver it

• funding for accredited qualifications specific to working with parents and the PSA role

• facilitating events for local authority staff support to develop their PSA workforce in schools

• facilitating events for PSAs to meet and share practice, and

• examples of effective practice in addressing professional challenges and emerging policy themes.
12 Student perceptions and their part in enhancing home-school partnership

12.1 Children themselves can and do play an active role in influencing and facilitating the nature and extent of the relationship between the home and the school and in mediating between school and home contexts. As Grant (2010) emphasises, “children are the key messengers and points of contact between school and parents, often tasked with conveying messages from one setting to another. They are parents’ first source of information about school, and their attitudes and behaviour have a strong influence on the way in which parents engage with their school and their learning in general.” (p5)

12.2 Children also have opportunities to draw upon their knowledge and experience from outside school while learning within school, and vice versa. Their active role in this three-way relationship therefore needs to be acknowledged, explored and cultivated.

12.3 The majority of participating pupils aspired to enter higher education (HE). The main reason that pupils wanted to go to HE was to ‘improve themselves’ and get a better job. More girls (82 percent) than boys (68 percent) wanted to go to HE which was consistent with the actual numbers of females going to HE in recent years compared to males. Surprisingly, also more young people from lower rather than higher socio-economic backgrounds (85 percent as opposed to 66 percent) said they aspired to enter HE. (Atherton, G., Cymbir, E. Roberts, K., Page, L. & Remedios, R. (2009)

12.4 Parental support and backing played an important role in pupils' decisions about their education. However, pupils wanted to be supported to pursue their own ambitions not necessarily ones that their parents held for them.

[How young people formulate their views about the future - exploratory research (University of Westminster) DCSF research brief 152]

12.5 Level two achievers who suggested they were likely to be applying to HE were significantly more likely to be: female, from black and minority ethnic backgrounds, from higher socio-economic groups, and or reported positive school experiences. Young white men (particularly those from lower socio-economic backgrounds) were the group least likely to suggest that they would apply to HE.

12.6 Young people from black and minority ethnic backgrounds and those from less advantaged backgrounds were (relative to white individuals and those from higher socio-economic groups) more likely to be interested in vocational or professional degree subjects and were less interested in subjects such as English, humanities and languages. (Bates, P et al, 2009)
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