

How to evaluate your partnership practice

The effective practice of partnership involving genuine collaboration and shared decision-making with families is a complex and difficult task and there may be barriers to parental involvement. While there is no one recipe for establishing effective home-school relations, research shows that schools in New Zealand tend to be weaker in relation to:

- a lack of policies for home-school partnership
- a limited range of participation activities
- minimal focus on parent education and support
- limited training for teachers on working with families
- ad hoc organisation of parental involvement
- infrequent use of home visits

Also contributing to difficulties implementing genuine partnership is the fact that the majority of school efforts to involve families in their children's education emphasise parents following advice or implementing activities determined by the child's teachers. In addition, many forms of parental involvement, such as fundraising and governance activities, are of more benefit to schools than to families. Schools maintain power over and benefit from involvement activities.

Troubleshooting questions

The following questions will help you reflect on how to develop, improve and consolidate home-school partnership practices in your school:

1. **Do you have a specific policy on parental involvement?** A policy is important to clarify parents' rights and responsibilities to partnership. Parents should be involved in developing the policy, and feedback on it should also be obtained from parents. It should be distributed to both parents and teachers, and implementation should be monitored. This will ensure that families share the same understanding and expectations as the school about the purpose of partnership activities and their benefit for children.
2. **Does partnership in your school lack input from families in key areas?** Are parents invited to contribute to assessments or discuss goals and teaching priorities? Partnership activities are not likely to lead to more equal, collaborative partnerships if teachers and schools do not seek and utilise families' contributions. Partnership should not be limited to families receiving information from the school, and families should not be excluded from decision-making about aspects of partnership or their child's education. It is important to solicit and make use of parents' insights on their child's strengths and weaknesses, likes and dislikes, and how they are likely to respond to different approaches. This makes parents feel valued and encourages further contributions to partnership.
3. **Does someone in the school have responsibility for promoting and organising partnership?** This person might organise opportunities for voluntary help, identify parents with particular talents and skills and encourage them to put their abilities to use, survey parents about the events and workshops they would like to see, and generally liaise between the school and the parent community to ensure partnership is meeting families' needs.
4. **Do your efforts to engage families tend to be school-centric?** In a 'school-centric' view, teachers and schools feel that families should serve the school's needs in supporting children in their academic work. It may lead teachers to devalue what families are already doing to support their children, such as the literacy and numeracy events that are embedded in families' everyday activities like shopping, scheduling and measuring. Partnership should be carefully planned to meet the goals of both partners, and rest on a shared understanding of the purpose of partnership which includes the aspirations of both families and schools.

5. **How equitable are your partnership practices?** Do they suit all families? Are they flexible in meeting the needs of different groups? Are parent engagement activities aimed at a relatively homogeneous group of parents and students? Are you focusing on more complex engagement activities which might be out of the reach of some families? Some families are seen as hard to reach, but it is worth considering that, from their perspective, the school might be hard to reach. It is often the case that the challenges in partnership are to do with multiple barriers to involvement in the school rather than to do with families. Consider how your school can become more reachable by making activities consistent, easy, and enjoyable.
6. **Are you offering a wide range of involvement options?** When there are limited choices for participation that tend to involve coming into school or attending a meeting, there may be fewer options for diverse families to take a meaningful role. Remember that it is not realistic to expect all families to contribute in the same way. While only some families will contribute to policy formation and governance activities, many will be able to help by volunteering in the classroom or fund-raising, and most will collaborate with reading and activities in other subjects carried out at home, and all families should be able to share information and communicate with teachers about their children.

What kind of partnership practice are you offering parents?

Protective	Conflict is avoided because professional and parenting roles are clearly separated. Parents are responsible for getting children to school, on time and with the right equipment. Teachers are responsible for educating children.
Expert	Teachers and schools regard themselves as experts on all aspects of children's learning and development. Parents are positioned as recipients of information and instructions about their children, which encourages parents to be dependent on teachers and undermines their confidence. Teachers lack information that parents hold about certain abilities or problems that children have, or difficulties parents themselves have.
Transmission	Teachers and schools enlist parents' help to support the goals of the school. Teachers and schools regard themselves as the main experts on children but recognise that parents can be used as a resource. They consider that they can transmit their expertise to parents so they can carry out school activities with their children.
Curriculum-enrichment	The school curriculum is extended by incorporating parents' expertise in order to enhance the school's educational objectives. For example, parents from various cultural groups can support teachers to develop activities and events in school that accurately reflect their cultures.
Consumer	Teachers and school professionals are seen as consultants, while parents retain ultimate decision-making power and decide what action is to be taken. Teachers and schools are responsible for providing parents with relevant information and options.
Partnership	Teachers and school professionals are viewed as experts on education and parents are viewed as experts on their children. Each partner contributes their strengths to the relationship. Partnership involves sharing expertise and control in order to provide an optimal educational experience for students

Adapted from Hornby, G. (2011). *Parental involvement in childhood education: Building effective school-family partnerships*. New York: Springer.

Further Reading

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Harris, A., & Goodall, J. (2008). Do parents know they matter? Engaging all parents in learning. *Educational Research*, 50 (3), 277-289, doi: 10.1080/00131880802309424

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References

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Hindin, A., & Mueller, M. (2016). *Getting parents on board: Partnering to increase math and literacy achievement, K-5*. Abingdon: Routledge.

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