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Engaging parents/ carers and the rural community

How can rural communities become more effectively engaged?

Research shows that parental involvement is the single most important factor related to achievement in primary school. Even between the ages of seven and 16, it is a more powerful force than family background, size of family and level of parental education.

It is useful to distinguish between *parental involvement* in school life, such as attendance at parents' evenings, and *parental engagement* in learning, which is more proactive. For G&T learners, parental support and encouragement at home can provide the impetus for high achievement, supplement classroom learning and help to ensure that the profile of G&T education is appropriately high. Greater parental involvement in the life of the school will broaden provision and raise the capacity to enable more effective support for individual gifts and talents.

Working effectively, parental engagement for G&T learners should be considered as a part of existing home-school agreements, which are required in all schools in England.

Without wishing to replace what schools already have in place these are likely to include:

- encouragement of high expectations and aspirations
- improvement of understanding of the learning needs of the child
- ensuring that identification processes involve parents and have a positive impact
- sharing of the learning process to address the needs of both the parent/carer and the child
- broadening of provision across the school and thereby raising the capacity to individualise education
- strengthening the connection between parental and community engagement and high achievement.

Community as curriculum

Parents and carers are key to the idea of *community as curriculum*. In outstanding schools, parental and community engagement often enhances and extends learning substantially beyond the taught curriculum. Many schools might use this additional capacity in order to offset the effects of socio-economic disadvantage in other parts of the school community.

Regular, frequent engagement by parents within the school is likely to lead to a greater

understanding of the needs of that school and experience shows that this may become a tipping point, beyond which whole school G&T provision becomes substantially easier to deliver. For small rural schools in particular this may be hugely significant.

The IQS presents working with parents/ carers as more or less a continuum, moving from involvement in identification and activity solicited by the school towards more active and significant engagement.

IQS Element 13: Engaging with the community, families and beyond

Entry (En)	Developing (De)	Exemplary (Ex)
i. Parents/carers are aware of the school's/college's policy on G&T provision, contribute to its identification processes and are kept informed of developments in G&T provision through the annual School Information Profile	i. Progression of G&T pupils is enhanced by home-school/college partnerships. There are strategies to engage and support hard-to-reach parents/carers	i. Parents/carers are actively engaged in extending provision. Support for G&T provision is integrated with other children's services (e.g. Sure Start, EAL, traveller, refugee, LAC Services)
<p>How does the school engage with parents to address the issues of rurality? What strategies are in place to make contact with, and offer support to, hard-to-reach rural parents? How does the home-school agreement explicitly relate to the needs of rural parents? How does the school link with other agencies over these issues (e.g. Children in Care, travellers)? How does the school engage with the community in order to sustain and extend provision?</p>		



'Hard-to-reach' groups

Schools need to be sensitive to individuals and to respond to their needs. It is difficult to ask what should be distinctive about engagement of rural parents without imposing a negative stereotype, falling into the trap of pigeon-holing some rural parents as being uninvolved and more likely to be hard-to-reach. This can lead to a downward spiral of lower expectations and communication.

The idea of hard-to-reach cuts both ways. It can also reflect the extent to which the parents feel that they can reach the school. In addition to express requests for involvement from the school, parents need to both believe that they should be involved and also to feel that they have something to offer. Family learning should be an important priority for any school's G&T strategy, but particularly in schools where the community itself is struggling.

Active engagement

The table below presents a positive model for developing parental and community engagement.

Why are we doing it?	What could this look like?	What potential challenges might you have to address?	How might you do this?
To ensure that the community understands the role of G&T education	<p>Explaining objectives and methods</p> <p>Encouraging participation in G&T activities outside the classroom, whilst being sensitive to community perceptions</p> <p>Using the community to enrich the curriculum</p>	<p>Negative effects of stereotyping</p> <p>Fear of negative consequences of social mobility to the community</p> <p>The negative self-perception of a community</p>	<p>Training TAs, HLTAs in G&T education</p> <p>Parent and community workshops which include specific elements relating to G&T</p> <p>Demonstrate the link between current learning and future expertise</p>
To raise expectations and aspirations in rural families/ communities	<p>Developing positive expectations and supportive relationships</p> <p>Challenging the community where necessary to counter negative effects of insularity and lack of ambition, etc.</p> <p>Recognising that in isolated communities some families are more isolated than others</p> <p>Developing learners' long-term aspirations beyond as well as within the community</p>	<p>Rural/isolated parents may be 'hard-to-reach'</p> <p>Narrow expectations</p> <p>Limited life experiences</p> <p>Reliance on traditional pathways to employment</p> <p>Inter-generational worklessness</p>	<p>Work from the individual child's needs/interests</p> <p>Bringing local experts and successful individuals into the school to increase expectations</p> <p>Bringing in the wider world through links to urban schools, different rural contexts, international perspectives</p>
To enable parents to support and challenge their child	<p>Improving understanding of the learning needs of the child</p> <p>Developing communication in both directions</p> <p>Sharing the parents' understanding of the child with the school</p> <p>Schools learning better how to support parents</p> <p>Equipping parents/ carers to challenge the school where appropriate</p> <p>Parents supporting and extending learning beyond</p>	<p>Parents' own fear of their capacity to support the child</p> <p>Poor levels of family (especially maternal) literacy</p> <p>Parents' negative experiences of education</p>	<p>Use whole school initiatives to explicitly involve parents and target areas of weakness, e.g. reading at home</p> <p>Engaging parental voice to tackle underachievement</p> <p>Giving shared challenges to pupils/parents, e.g. research or creative tasks</p>
To develop the cultural, social and economic capital of families, the community and the school	<p>Celebrating the traditions and skills which are the heritage of the community</p> <p>Developing positive relationships between parents</p> <p>Using community agencies to stimulate rather than replace contact with the school</p> <p>Actively engaging the community as an essential part of the curriculum</p>	<p>Fears over the sustainability of communities</p> <p>Resistances to the school's position as a centre of the community</p> <p>Engaging with community attitudes to G&T and social/cultural barriers to participation</p>	<p>Activities which gather and influence the voice of the community</p> <p>Auditing community/ parental skills</p> <p>Taking advantage of the skills and experience which parents can offer</p> <p>Exploiting the rural context as a distinct theme within school life</p>

How can we make it happen?

School as community

Many rural communities have been subjected to significant economic challenges - fragmented by the loss of traditional village hubs like the shop, pub and post office; shortages of affordable housing; and the decline of traditional rural industry.

Where the school is proactive and takes a lead in village events, it is likely that they will gain a stronger voice in village life. This can be enhanced by 'place-based learning', where the school locates learning firmly within the community, in contexts such as local history, cultural heritage and practices and enterprise. The authenticity of such experiences makes them ideal for G&T learners and also provides the opportunity for the development of important additional traits such as identity and self-concept, confidence and leadership skills.

In outstanding schools the distinctions between the two aspects of school as community and community as curriculum become helpfully blurred. Our experience suggests that this is often what characterises the most successful rural schools, the 'larger than life' dimension that makes for learning of lasting significance.

So what are the positive features of this practice? How can we learn from the huge variety of experience and quality that to other schools can be intimidating to emulate?

Use specific activities to demonstrate the impact of and potential for parental and community engagement in the school for G&T education. Consider how the school can develop confidence in the community to involve themselves and enhance G&T provision.

Engage parents, teachers and learners in a three-way dialogue around aspirations, the role of the school, responsibilities for educating, access to opportunities, challenge and support. Discuss how the school can translate current parental involvement into greater engagement.

Consider the ideas of community as curriculum and school as community and the extent to which these might overlap. Explore how further engagement between the school and the community can be of benefit for G&T provision.

