Understanding Barriers

There are many reasons why parents might not be engaged in their child’s education and it is important that schools and parents work together to identify what the barriers are and how they can be overcome.

Some of the barriers may include:

Practical issues such as lack of time, lack of information about the school, lack of opportunities to get involved or not knowing how to get involved with schools. Other barriers can include busy work schedules, lack of transport, lack of childcare or poor health including stress.

Negative experiences of education from their own childhood which can lead to a lack of confidence to engage, feeling distanced or alienated by schools and teachers. Similarly, parents who may not have been successful in education themselves may lack the knowledge and confidence to support their children with their homework or future career planning.

Some parents living in areas of multiple deprivation can suffer from isolation in their own community which can lead them to feel embarrassed, cautious or unable to engage with schools. Parents evenings and Parent Councils may not be an option for parents in this context.

Language and communication are common barriers to parental engagement. If a parent has English as an additional language or is not confident in literacy or communication they may not be able to access a school or a teacher’s attempts to engage them via letters, reports, newsletters or phone calls. In addition, the language of education may be a barrier itself where families with different educational or cultural backgrounds finding it intimidating or confusing.

Cultural differences can cause a barrier to families engaging. The role of families in education and views of teachers are varied across different cultures. This can lead to families from different cultural backgrounds being labelled as hard-to-reach or disengaged while they may not be aware of the expected norms of parental engagement. Evidence shows that ‘in many cultures not only are teachers highly respected and considered experts in their field, it is also considered disrespectful to question them or interfere in their work.’

Parents of children with a disability can face multifaceted barriers in engaging with education. These families’ engagement in their child’s education can be held back by the multiple concerns and challenges involved in caring for the overall wellbeing of their child. The processes for negotiating support for their child and engaging with the education system can be confusing, intimidating and discouraging for families. Families can struggle to understand all the rights their child is entitled to in order to act as their advocates. Due to this parents of children with a disability often
express feeling excluded from important discussions and decisions made about their child’s education. All these factors can significantly affect the building of relationships with schools.