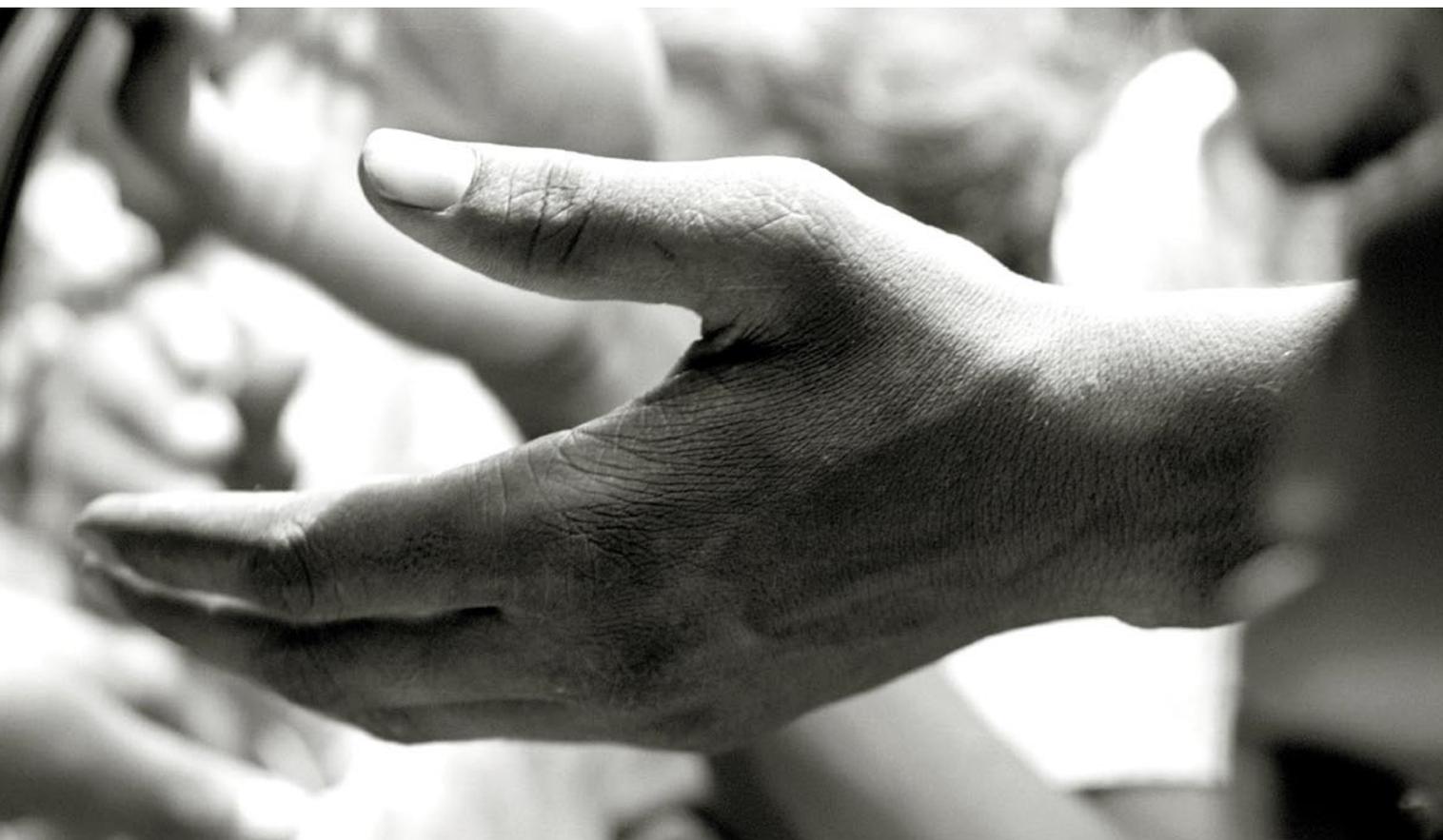


Parent involvement – who wants it?

Dennis Sleigh



Every teacher or principal understands at least something about educational change. Our lives seem to be increasingly dominated by it. No sooner do we get used to one way of doing things – it might be reporting to parents, teaching handwriting or ensuring the water safety of our students – than we have to change everything because someone has developed a new idea. The Greek philosopher, Heraclitus, wrote “All things change – nothing remains the same”. Perhaps he was a teacher too.

Too many years ago, when I first started teaching, the idea of parent involvement in school meant a few mums came along to serve in the school tuckshop and a few others attended information meetings on how to teach “New Math”. (Since we were taking the ideas of the Americans, we felt we had to take their title too, leaving the s off the end of the word). The idea that these parents would come into the classroom was not on the agenda, and the thought of parents running school boards would have been laughable in Australia. (It had been introduced in America, but we were not really sure that it was a good idea here).

All that changed with time, and many of us would argue strongly that the change was for the better – but is that opinion universal?

Attitudes

As I reflect on the current state of parent involvement in schools, I suggest that there are several people who may not agree that having mums and dads in the classroom is necessarily a good thing.

We could start with the *conservative teacher* who was trained in an age when the teacher was the only one in the room with a group of children. Such people were well trained in the art of transmitting information to their students and the idea of having other adults in the room seemed weird to them. The only time such teachers shared their room with an adult was when the principal came to see if they were teaching properly, and such occasions were not always something to look forward to. They certainly didn’t see any virtue in expanding this audience.

The second group of people who might be reluctant to have parents in the room might include *some children*. We all know that little

Johnny and Tanya love it when their mums come along to help with the reading, but what about Claude and Eva, whose parents never come? Are they also expected to like the idea of parent involvement? Why should they? After all, it is not unheard of that the children of “attending parents” might occasionally make some unpleasant comments about other parents. “How come your mum never does her fair share of the work, Claude?” A child in Stage 1 might find it hard to answer that.

Another group of opponents of parent involvement would certainly include *some parents*. I am not just talking about those parents who feel guilty because they are unable to attend – school hours clash with work hours, after all – but I will come back to them later. For now, I am thinking of the ones like Mrs Wallace who hears back, usually through a third party, that Mrs Mortimer has been talking about son, Fred. Now let’s face it: Fred Wallace might indeed be a naughty little boy but that is not Mrs Mortimer’s business. Certainly Mrs Mortimer might help with reading in the early Stage 1 classroom, but does that give her the right to bad-mouth certain

children down the street? Not in Mrs Wallace's view, it certainly doesn't. Thus is born another enemy of the idea of parent involvement.

Bringing about educational change

I list these opponents, not to suggest that parent involvement is dead in the water (thank heavens, there are many examples where it is thriving) but to suggest that in some places an excellent idea was introduced in a counter-productive manner and the idea hasn't been allowed to flourish as it should.

Almost 20 years ago, the eminent American educator Michael Fullan wrote "The closer the parent is to the education of the child, the greater the impact on child development and education achievement." Whether he is correct is uncertain – how could we tell? – but the claim was sometimes trotted out to support the idea of increasing parent interaction in our schools. Personally, I like the claim, and I have a lot of anecdotal evidence to say that increased parental involvement (whether at home or at school) does lead to enhanced educational outcomes. While it is true that there may be no convincing research evidence to support this claim (because of the number of intrusive variables in conducting such research) it is still a reasonable claim.

The best that we can say is that we can logically suggest a connection between parent involvement and enhanced student performance and anything is worth trying if it promises to improve educational opportunities.

This level of agreement is enough to justify the proposal of increasing parental involvement, so let's now apply some sensible strategies to ensure it is given a fair go.

Successful parental participation

An examination of those schools where parent participation works well indicates there are certain conditions that underpin successful educational change. Here I want to concentrate on five and I want to suggest that if these are present, there is a high likelihood of meaningful change occurring and surviving.

Share a common agenda

The first condition is that *everyone involved – the stakeholders – must share a common agenda*. Let's say the principal invites parents to come into the school and assist in the educational endeavours at the classroom level. If the teachers think this means getting parents to come in to do the tedious work that is involved in preparing sets of maths games while the parents think it means coming in to teach slow learners how to read, this is a clear example of mismatched agendas. Both are legitimate readings of the principal's invitation, but the ambiguous message will surely cause much heart-ache.

If we want parent involvement to work, we must remove such ambiguities. School leaders must make clear just what they have in mind.

Benefits for everyone involved

The second condition is that *everyone involved must see some benefit for themselves*. No matter how altruistic we might be, we won't embrace new tasks unless there is something in it for us. Teachers, parents, administrators – all must be shown that parent involvement is a real benefit to them. If parents think they are going to be used as free labour, forget it – they have enough commitments already. If teachers think they are going to be opened up to observation by negative critics, forget that too. If administrators see this as just as another task to increase their paper work, they will be unhappy and uncommitted. The benefits we hope for might not be huge but they must be real – or most of us will look for other projects that are more promising.

I am very confident that parents, teachers and principals really can benefit from the presence of dedicated parents in the classroom, but I also know that there are schools where this concept never really took off because at least one of the parties did not understand what the true benefits were.

Stakeholders must trust change mechanism

The third condition is that *the stakeholders trust the change mechanism*. In other words, everyone involved must trust the leadership in the school or they will walk away from what they see as a suspicious offer. This trust is not something that is imposed; it is earned. If people feel that they are taken seriously and that their children are really the focus of the school's operations, they are more likely to give their commitment to the scheme. If they think that they are simply being caught up in a publicity stunt or a process to bring glory to the leader, they will walk away rapidly.

This same caution applies to many school situations, of course. If there is no trust between the school leadership and the school community, there will be very little progress in any field. I would say the first task of any new leader is to set about building up that trust so that future initiatives will be able to flourish.

Dynamism in the school

The fourth condition we need for educational change to work is that *there must be a sense of dynamism in the school*. If the school is a vigorous community, where a value is placed on forward thinking and the affirmation of all involved, people are more likely to take on a new idea. If there is a sense of helplessness or inertia, or if there is a widespread acceptance of the status quo, you are wasting your time trying to bring about change unless you first reform the dominant ethos.

I have seen schools where enthusiastic leaders and staff have embraced an idea and then tried to sell it to the parents for the benefit of the children – but they failed because the parents were unwilling to accept new ideas. I once attended a meeting where the principal

was trying to introduce a simple change into the school but she was told by the parents "Most of us went to school here ourselves and we didn't have that back then, so why do we need it now?" Talk about walking through treacle!

Commitment to change is essential

Finally, *the people on the ground – the teachers and the parents who will actually staff this new project – must be committed to the change*. If the idea has been floated by a non-teaching principal (who heard about it at a recent conference) or by the president of the parent body (who doesn't actually have any time to devote to the idea if it is introduced) it is unlikely the idea will flourish. The idea is going to demand some blood, sweat and tears if it is going to really work – that is why a number of such projects in the past two decades have failed to take off. The only people whose efforts really count here are the ones who are going to do the work.

In brief, for my will to work, my workers must be willing.

Some concluding thoughts

There are countless examples in Australia of successful parent involvement projects, but there are also many where the idea has been tried and found wanting. If you want to revitalise your school, parent participation is very important. The guiding principles I have offered here can be summarised this way:

- 1 Clarify your expectations – what does parent involvement look like?
- 2 Make sure *everyone* benefits – go for a win-win situation.
- 3 Develop strong trust between school and home.
- 4 Generate a willingness to embrace positive change.
- 5 Gain long-term commitment from all those involved.

If you – whether you are teachers, principals or parents – can work on these ideas, you are far more likely to set up a successful programme of parent participation. However, don't overlook the reality of modern life: with many parents in full time employment, it is not possible for everyone to help out in school hours. Accept that fact and make sure you don't judge the non-attenders – it is often not their fault.

If you would like to contribute to a dialogue on this topic of parents and school, please email me at dennis_sleigh@stannestemora.nsw.edu.au.



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