

Parental Engagement in Career-Related Learning (CRL) in Primary Schools: North-East Ambition Template School Policy

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This report was researched and written by

Dr Deirdre Hughes OBE, Director, DMH Associates
Lauren Croll, Special Outreach Projects Manager, Learn by Design

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Introduction

Increasing parent involvement^A and finding new ways of communicating with parents is a priority for most schools, and yet challenges remain in being able to engage all families in their child(ren)'s education and in school-based services. Various research studies have consistently highlighted parents as major influencers in childhood learning^{1,2,3,4}. Growing evidence suggests that strategies to promote parental involvement need to be flexible and adaptive if they are to be successful by schools with varying resources and from different contexts. Here's one example of how a North East school approaches this - ['Percy Main Primary School in North Tyneside takes over Segedunum Museum'](#) - See also: International Literature Review, commissioned by North East Ambitions, for further reading.

Career-Related Learning (CRL) is a process that starts early in childhood and primary schools. This encompasses early childhood activities in primary schools designed to give children from an early age a wide range of experiences of and exposure to education, transitions and the world of work.

Getting parents to participate in career-related learning (CRL) conversations and action can be a challenge, particularly for parents from low-income communities⁵. Also, some parents may not place a priority on attending a parents classroom day, workshop or evening session when faced with other demands on their time. Barriers to engagement may include costs, time and transportation, language (for some parents for whom English is not a first language), low levels of literacy and numeracy, and a lack of confidence in supporting children's learning or engaging with a school⁶.

There is plentiful evidence to suggest that parental engagement is a critical factor in improving children's learning outcomes⁷. A critical success factor is partnerships with parents/ families as a key priority in effective CRL support systems, particularly as supporting and engaging families can extend the impact of formal schooling and continued support into the home environment.

The value of enhancing parental engagement includes (a) school systems and processes become more inviting, welcoming, and family friendly, (b) the school culture appreciates the importance of listening and valuing the input of parents, (c) parents and families are respected as equal team members and parents' input is valued in decision-making processes, and (d) relationships are based on trust and respect with children and families⁸.

^A Parent involvement is defined here to include parent(s); carer(s) and/or guardian(s).

Our School's CRL Policy

As the needs of children and families are growing and becoming more complex, a CRL integrated approach relieves the pressure on our school to “do it all alone”. We are committed to maximising the support that can be provided from parents, teachers, business volunteers and administrators.

We tailor the implementation of CRL to match the objectives of the school philosophy and staff expertise. Each school has unique needs, depending on its student body. Evidence and experience shows it is best to avoid placing all parental engagement/family CRL support responsibilities on just one individual teacher. We know that CRL programmes and/or activities should be targeted at particular groups of parents, showing sensitivity to cultural norms and expectations, and including specific, detailed and directive advice and guidance.

We know that successful schools work to help teaching staff team up with a dedicated Careers Champion to ensure that the CRL programme is available to the entire student body. An effective Careers Champion is a school leader who is well respected by school administrators, teachers, supervisors, and parents/community members, as this can facilitate support for the programme plan and successful integration into the school as a whole. The use of programme champions is supported for example by research which found that partnering with well-respected and influential teachers (i.e. key opinion leaders) is an effective strategy for building broad support for school-based programmes⁹.

We are committed to engaging with parents from the very beginning of CRL planning and implementation as we believe strongly in developing school policies and practices that support parent-teacher partnerships¹⁰.

We know that...

1. Parents want to be good parents.

Specifically, parents want (a) a good or better relationship with their child(ren), (b) to learn better ways to communicate with their children and (c) help managing challenging behaviors¹¹.

We believe despite all of the challenges faced by parents raising young children in low-income, under-resourced communities, being a good parent remains the key motivation for engagement with teachers in primary schools. It is an important strength we should never lose sight of. What parents do is pivotal for their children'. This reiterates much previous work¹³.

2. Parents need to be viewed as experts about their children.

It is not uncommon for teaching professionals to view their role as one of “the teacher expert,” and that parents come to the classroom/online meeting or parents evening sessions to learn “correct ways” to communicate or discipline children. However, children are very different and the person who knows them best is the parent¹⁴.

As professionals we strive to ensure those involved in CRL can offer parents a set of options or “toolkit” from which they can choose¹⁵. As the experts of their own children, parents retain the right to use what they wish from a career-related learning toolkit made available by the school and associated partner organisations. If parents feel that their role as “experts” of their own children is respected, they are more likely to engage, acquire the confidence they need to try some new strategies, and support other parents struggling with similar issues¹⁶.

The schools seeks opportunities to deliberately mediate the world of work to children and parents in order to combat the creation of inaccurate (e.g., stereotypic) perceptions that may take time to rectify. Parents can speak with their young children and explain aspects of occupations they notice around them that are part of their life (e.g., the doctor they visit, the librarian, and actors in movies and performances). Parents can also tell them about occupations that are not visible, e.g., those who engineered the electronic devices that they use at home or those who designed their clothes or buildings in the neighbourhood. Such information may expand and increase children's passive and active occupational knowledge.

3. Parents want their values to be acknowledged and woven into the career-related learning programme of activities .

Parents approach schools with different values and beliefs about how their child(ren) should be educated, including CRL and childrens' exposure to and experiences of the world of work. For example, many parents hold different expectations for boys than for girls¹⁷. Parents also vary widely in their tolerance of imposing a future perspective for their child(ren). These values are important to parents and if they are not acknowledged and respected, parents will typically choose not to engage in supporting the school with CRL strategies. However, most parents have not thought explicitly about (a) what it is they value for their children, (b) what they are trying to achieve as parents, and (c) the degree to which their values and parenting strategies are congruent. These are important considerations for helping parents see the relevance of acquiring a new set of career-related learning resources to draw upon.

School and parents discussions are essential because they help clarify what is important to each other and how career-related learning can improve joint work with schools in ways that are consistent with shared goals and values. For example, a Chicago Parent Program¹⁸ asked parents "Ten, fifteen years from now, how would you like your child to feel deep down about himself or herself?" Across a diverse population of parents who have attended the program, the descriptions remain relatively consistent: they want their children to feel loved, competent, respected, smart, and good about themselves. The group leader writes these descriptions on a board for everyone to see and then asks, "How will you help your children come to feel this way about themselves? What are the behaviors you see in your child now, that you need to reinforce, that are going to help them develop this core sense of self?"

4. Parents need a range of strategies from which to choose.

Because parents and children are all different, it would seem obvious that the same parental engagement strategy would not work equally well across all children. Therefore, have ensured flexibility and a child-centred approach when working with children and parents.

We help support parents to understand there are many ways parents can do this—verbal praise, hugs, smiles, star charts, a 'high five' and other strategies other parents might suggest. One of the advantages of career-related learning activities with parents is that Careers Champion/Leader can solicit alternative ideas from other parents, alternatives that may be more acceptable to the parent because they are suggested by their peers.

5. Parents need frequent reinforcement for their efforts to change.

Just as parents' use of differential attention helps to shape their child(ren)'s attitudes and behavior, it is essential that parents get a lot of positive attention for their efforts to try new strategies—regardless of whether those strategies work when parents first try them. We know that parents who do not get sufficient support to offset their efforts may prematurely disengage and we work hard to avoid this.

We nurture effective parent-teacher relationships as 'side by side and reciprocal' rather than 'hierarchical and primarily unidirectional'. We value co-generative dialogues between teachers and parents, that is, engagement in 'substantive conversations . . . while adopting an open disposition to the possibilities of learning from others' views and ideas'¹⁹. A respectful and welcoming school environment is critical to effective parent engagement and inclusive education²⁰.

How Does the Leadership Structure in Schools Affect CRL Implementation and Sustainability?

School leadership²¹ plays a critical role in the initiation and maintenance of CRL in our primary school. Not only are headteacher and principal endorsement and enthusiasm critical, but the structure and hierarchy of leadership in schools also affects the ability to effectively partner with parents, teachers and business volunteers. In some schools, headteachers/ principals preferred to be a gatekeeper; in others, they delegate CRL implementation responsibility to others. Some prefer to delegate decision making about family supports to specific staff.

Our school tailors the implementation of CRL to match the objectives of the school philosophy, values and teaching staff expertise. Every parent and child has unique needs, depending on their circumstance. We always consider whether adjustments are required to support the child(ren)'s learning. For example, the benefits of providing adjustments to students with disability are clear. Adjustments provide access to learning, increase participation, allow the student's learning to be measured, and improve engagement.

Getting the Parent Perspective

We know that parents struggling with high levels of social adversity may not be able to dedicate the time and energy to enrolling in and attending CRL activities in the school, despite their desire to be good parents. An important step our school can take in developing positive partnerships with parents is to discover, nurture and celebrate a child's abilities and strengths, as well as focus on the commonalities between the child and their peers rather than the differences. Parents have a breadth and depth of knowledge and experience regarding their children that teachers are unlikely to have and we respect this. Parents' knowledge and experience are critical to the schools' inclusive policy and practice.

We set aside designated school spaces for parents to engage in CRL conversations and/or activities. Create a whole-school 'career-related learning (CRL) culture'. Celebrate that everyone is learning together - learn with and from each other. Ensure parents contribute to the governance of the school and to staff development (e.g. local support groups).

Being proactive in establishing effective communication assists our teachers to come to know parents' experience and perspectives. This means: – developing positive interpersonal skills; – becoming skilled in listening to parents; and – developing skills to help parents express their views.

Preferred modes of communication are established, as well as how and when communication should occur. We make good use of a variety of social-media channels for those parents who welcome this. A single communication home using an App and CRL message with a photograph of their child doing an CRL activity can be a lot more meaningful to and valued by parents than a one-off school directive.

Skills development and work with volunteers

Primary school teachers engage their students in everyday learning that could be described as CRL Childhood proficiency in the skills of resilience, conscientiousness, self-awareness and motivation are found to be closely associated with educational attainment^{22,23}.

We proactively seek volunteers in CRL as these have been shown to make a positive difference to classroom activities e.g., with a control group using statistical testing, researchers found the programme to be 'effective in improving a number of reading outcomes for pupils' with impact strongest in relation to decoding, reading rate, and reading fluency. Such an approach can be applied drawing on parents' experience and expertise supporting this and other subject areas in the curriculum.

Measuring the impact of CRL

The importance of career-related decisions made during primary school has been supported both by studies of children and by retrospective studies of adults. The Education Endowment Foundation highlights parental engagement has a positive impact on average of 4 months' additional progress²⁴.

Our school policy considers how to engage with all parents to avoid widening attainment gaps. The [Gatsby Benchmarks](#) provide a practical framework for internally measuring the impact of CRL in our primary school. See [also](#).

We also draw upon the [North East Ambitions: CRL Toolkit for primary schools](#).

From overseas we have learned from: [Little Ripples Today Can Change Children's lives](#) – published by the Australian Government.

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North East LEP

1 St James Gate, Newcastle upon Tyne, NE1 4AD

Tel 0191 561 5420 | Email info@nelep.co.uk | [@northeastlep](https://www.twitter.com/northeastlep)

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