

Parent Partnership Services and Schools



Most schools will have worked with the parent partnership service. But how much do you know about it? This article describes some aspects of their role, with particular reference to their work with schools.

Parent partnership services (PPSs) provide information, advice and support to parents/carers of children and young people with SEN.

They also have a duty to ensure that parents' views are not only heard and understood, but that they inform and influence local policy and practice. While many parent partnership services (PPSs) have been in place since 1994, they became statutory in 2001 when the SEN and Disability Act (SENDA) amended the 1996 Education Act, so while there is some variation in size and resources, there is a PPS in every local authority.

Many parents of children with special educational needs (SEN) are either unaware of, or are not making use of, their local parent partnership service. Parent partnership services should be at 'arm's length' of the local authority (LA), so that parents are assured that the advice and information they receive is impartial, and that the people they receive it from are independent of any decision-making. The Government is currently

looking at strengthening this aspect to further increase parental confidence in their local service. Some parent partnership services are based in the voluntary sector, but most remain within the local authority. Many services also have independent parental supporters (IPs), who are volunteers, trained to provide individual support to parents.

What do parent partnership services do?

Parent partnerships may:

- run a confidential helpline
- give impartial information and advice around SEN issues
- offer support in preparing for and attending meetings
- help with filling in forms and writing letters/reports
- support parents/carers in resolving disagreements with school and the LA
- signpost to other statutory and voluntary services
- link to local parent support groups and forums
- ensure that parents'/carers' views help inform and influence local policy and practice
- offer training opportunities for parents and professionals

As well as setting out minimum standards for parent partnership services, the SEN Code of Practice 2001 encourages schools to work actively with their local PPS, including ensuring that details of their local service are available to parents. All services have a

CASE STUDIES

Anne Hollinger, the parent partnership officer (PPO) for **Westminster**, describes what she has put together:

I have compiled a resource file for schools to use to develop their information for parents. Each section highlights the school's responsibilities and includes additional information sources, which they can use to help them meet these responsibilities, as well as tips for working with parents and managing information requests. The hard copy of the file is in a loose-leaf folder which can be easily updated, and an electronic version will be put on the LA's schools' website. I offer to train a member of staff or a volunteer at the school to use the resource file effectively.

Staffordshire PPS advertise a range of services to local schools, including a ready made up noticeboard and a range of free training sessions, in a specially designed leaflet and further information request form for schools.

As part of the current extended services agenda and the local initiative calling for multi-agency co-operative working, **Warwickshire Parent Partnership** Service is piloting a regular drop-in coffee morning session, based within a school in Nuneaton. This is aimed at informing and reassuring parents and carers whose children have a range of needs; it also provides an opportunity for parents to meet together and lend a sympathetic ear to each other, as well as to swap strategies that have worked for them. The school provides the accommodation free of charge for two hours, and the PPS provides the specialist knowledge. Parents are invited via mailings to SENCOs through the cluster schools' system and by advertising in libraries and the PPS newsletter.

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range of literature about the services they provide and information around the SEN framework. Many PPSs also provide schools with a wide range of support, information and resources to enhance their work and relationships with parents.

School improvement and good practice

As well as ensuring that parents have access to quality, up-to-date information, advice and support, which remains the backbone of their work, PPSs have a role in school improvement and the development of good practice. Some of the ways that PPSs can do this include encouraging and helping schools and LAs to:

- become more accessible and welcoming to parents
- develop positive relationships with parents, particularly those whose children have SEN
- actively involve parents and listen to their views
- learn from parents and value their contribution
- improve access and inclusion for pupils with SEN
- improve practice relating to school exclusions – 99% of services provide some support to families of excluded children
- offer training on issues relating to special needs
- offer training on good communication and relationships with parents
- provide feedback about concerns and issues raised by parents
- adopt a conciliation role, focusing on positive solutions to problems
- involve parents in regularly reviewing their child's progress
- provide feedback on parents' experience of SEN procedures

Training

Parent partnership services have a responsibility (minimum standards, SEN CoP) to provide training for teachers, governors and staff in SEN sections of the LA. This is met in a variety of different ways, depending on local need and, of course, resources. Staffordshire, like many services, is happy to design courses to meet individual school needs, but have several core modules including:

- the SEN Code of Practice
- the parent's perspective
- effective communication
- a whole-school approach to working with parents

Essex PPS provide termly INSET training on 'Working with Parents' at the Curriculum Development Centres around the county, alongside input into new headteacher and SENCO training organised by the LA.

Teacher TV recently filmed Kent PPS delivering the conciliation skills training which was developed through the South-East Regional Partnership. As Linda Baker, PPO for Kent explained, that particular session was for primary school teachers, but they do deliver to parents, agencies and services. The aim is to help all those involved in children and young people's education to further develop their communication skills – key to developing effective relationships. They emphasise that theirs is a neutral and impartial position, aimed at empowering both parents and schools.

To find out more

Please contact your local parent partnership service for more information about what they can offer to the parents, staff and governors of your school. If you do not know their contact details you can get them from the LA, or from the National Parent Partnership Network at www.parentpartnership.org.uk or on 0207 843 6058. ●

PROFILE

Daisy Russell has been working at the Council for Disabled Children for over three and a half years. She was employed as a Senior Development Officer to run the National Parent Partnership Network. Before working at CDC, Daisy worked for five years at a parent partnership service in London. This was her first post after leaving university in Canterbury with a BA and an MA in Social Policy and Administration.




In a nutshell...

Parent partnership services have been in place since 1994 and became statutory in 2001. Every local authority must have one. Their role includes:

- providing information, advice and support to parents/ carers of children and young people with SEN
- ensuring that parents' views are heard and understood
- ensuring that parents' views inform and influence local policy and practice
- supporting school improvement and good practice
- providing training

PPS is expected to be impartial and have used a variety of methods to promote the service, which is currently underused by parents of SEN children.

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