

Heaton St. Barnabas C of E Primary is situated on the outskirts of Bradford on a beautiful plot of land alongside ancient woodland and with wide views across the valley. We serve an area where well over three quarters of our pupils come from a minority ethnic background. Most of our pupils speak English as an additional language.

In 2008 our LEA invited us, along with nine other schools, to pilot the 'Leading Parent Partnership Award'. We were chosen as we already had a reputation for working well with parents, but I must admit that as I went to the initial meeting I suspected this might be, 'just another initiative'. I was to be proved wrong!

We were assigned an advisor from the authority who visited school and helped us with an initial audit of our position against the ten objectives of the award. (www.LPPA.co.uk) Next we prepared an action plan, agreeing specifically what was necessary in order to achieve each objective. We were to have an interim review by our authority advisor after about a year, followed by a national verification six months later.

Committing to LLPA involved informing and motivating everyone associated with school. We sent flyers to partner organisations explaining our intent and formed a working party with parent, staff and governor representation. Staff were challenged to identify new ways in which they intended to involve parents each half term. As the award is evidence based, letters home, photographs of events, notes of initiatives undertaken, etc, etc, were all kept and filed.

The working party met every three weeks to keep the momentum. We spent time in the early months ensuring that we had a firm baseline of information, so that later we could evidence impact. For instance, parental questionnaires were sent out half termly – on a variety of subjects, e-safety, home learning, suggested future courses for parents, etc..

One comment from our advisor on her initial visit to our school was that she had struggled to know which door to approach as some of our signage had faded. We decided that renewing signage gave us a perfect opportunity to survey stakeholders regarding our mission statement and school colours. As the signs would hopefully be a long term investment we needed to be sure that information would not change in the short term. This led to lots of work for the pupil council and much communication with parents and governors. The mission statement was amended, but the school uniform colour stayed the same, as preferred by parents. It had been a simple comment by a visitor, regarding how visitor friendly we were, but it impacted many other areas.

Our school office had a day every fortnight when visitors were invited to complete a survey as to their visitor experience – the improvement after the new signs were in place was clear through this feedback.

Our two mentors were key members of staff in continuing and improving the range of courses available to parents in school. Some courses were run internally others by external providers. Our weekly coffee morning is a very non threatening, informal gathering and is a perfect way for parents who are nervous about coming into school, to get involved. Many of our Asian parents have come first to coffee morning, and then moved to be a part of other courses available in school. This has benefitted the parent and also meant that they are better able to understand what happens in school, and support their child's learning. We also run various joint parent child courses which are particularly popular.

We receive children from many nurseries in the city and of course from home, and as children leave us they go to many different upper schools. Procedures for induction and transition were also a part of LPPA and were strengthened having benefitted from being re-examined.

We felt that our communication with parents was already strong, but again, we found ways to improve. Parents on the working party, responses from questionnaires, being available to talk with parents all helped to ensure that we listened to, and understood each other. Parents appreciated our weekly newsletters, information via our texting service, and plans to improve our website. The texting service in particular was very useful during the extremely hard winter giving parents early notice of snow closures, etc. However, alongside sending information about meetings, clubs, etc it is also increasingly used for sending praise and commendation for specific children.

Many of our school policies already had sections making them parent friendly. A 'parent partnership policy' was needed however and the working party helped to develop a comprehensive document. Alongside this is a helpful guide for parents working in school as volunteers, explaining routines and expectations.

Just this last week we have had a celebration event for our volunteers working in school in many different roles. Over the last year the number of people, mainly but not exclusively parents, volunteering in some capacity has tripled. Whether this is linked with LPPA needs further investigation, but we suspect that the improved links and openness with parents must be a factor.

When we were visited for verification of the award in February 2010 we have amassed lots of evidence – four lever arch files, and several smaller ones. We had always valued parents, but school had now become a place where our ideas for the future always considered parents. As a requirement for gaining the award we incorporated a further plan ensuring that in three years time we would have evidence to prove that we have continued our parental emphasis and improved further.

Yes we did have a good basis of parental involvement to start with, but LPPA caused us to really focus our efforts. We have moved to a place where our links with parents are based on having listened to parent voice and provided according to need rather than according to *our* idea of need. We had to put measures in place for baseline and later feedback to measure impact. Rather like our requirement to monitor and record progress of vulnerable groups of children, we are now much more aware of the different groups within our parent population. We work towards finding out what the barriers are for the various groups and then focussing our efforts on what we need to put in place to remove them.

It has been, and is, hard work – but it has not been, for us, 'just another initiative.'