

Engaging with parents & carers

A guide for governing boards



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The National Governance Association (NGA) is the membership organisation for governors, trustees and governance professionals of state schools in England.

We are an independent, not-for-profit charity that aims to improve the educational standards and wellbeing of young people by increasing the effectiveness of governing boards and promoting high standards. We are expert leaders in school and trust governance, providing information, advice and guidance, professional development and e-learning.

We represent the views of governors, trustees and governance professionals at a national level and work closely with, and lobby, UK government and educational bodies.

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As a national charity, Parentkind give those with a parenting role a voice in education. We invest substantial resources in representing parent views on their child’s learning to local, regional and national governments and agencies because evidence tells parental participation in education benefits all children in all schools and society as a whole.

Parentkind is the network of PTA fundraisers in the UK. We bring specialist fundraising support and advice to parent volunteers so that every school can benefit from a successful PTA. Our 13,000 PTA members raise over £120+ million, placing us alongside some of the largest charities in the UK.

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Introduction

Stakeholder engagement is integral to the success of a school. Engaging with pupils, staff, parents and the wider community helps governing boards get to know their school or trust and enables robust decision-making.

Ensuring stakeholder voices are heard is a fundamental part of good governance and therefore good decision-making.

In 2020, NGA formally identified ensuring the voices of stakeholders are heard as the fourth core function for governing boards because it helps ensure:

- **The values, vision and strategy set by the governing board has the support of the community – because the community has had a role in shaping them.**
- **The governing board challenge and question school leaders from an informed position – because they know what stakeholders think and feel.**
- **The governing board itself remains accountable to the community it serves by being visible and transparent.**
- **Robust self-evaluation – listening to stakeholders helps schools to identify strengths and areas for improvement.**

Parents as key stakeholders

Parents are one of the most important stakeholders; they can offer governing boards rich and diverse insight into school life, ethos and culture.

There are two ways in which boards should view parental engagement: the whole school approach to parental engagement and the board's direct engagement with parents. These form essential elements of effective governance.

Parent governors/trustees are valuable additions to the board as they can help diversify views and broaden the knowledge and skills on the board, however, they do not represent the parent voice.

About this guide

This joint guidance from the National Governance Association and Parenikind combines extensive knowledge on engaging with parents effectively. It is designed to prompt conversations between governing boards and school and trust leaders around developing a strong approach to engaging with parents.

This guide will help governing boards to:

1. Understand why meaningful engagement with parents is an essential feature of effective governance.
2. Learn about methods that schools can put in place to maintain effective relationships with parents.
3. Put plans in place to support, influence and benefit from the school's parental engagement strategy.





Parental engagement – the board’s responsibilities

The Governance Handbook provides guidance on the roles and duties of governing boards in schools and trusts. It states that parental engagement should be used by the board to inform their strategic decision-making. Boards should be able to show how the views of parents have influenced decision-making and how this has been fed back to parents.

Therefore, governing boards should assure themselves that:

Mechanisms are in place for meaningful engagement with all parents and carers.

The mechanisms can be used by parents and carers to put forward their views at key points in their child’s education.

Boards should be able to demonstrate how they communicate with parents to seek their views, including disadvantaged families or those families where English is not their first language.

Governing boards are also required by law to consult parents on specific issues, such as the admission criteria and, in maintained schools, the behaviour policy.

Parents and carers are a key audience for the information that schools, and trusts are required to publish on their websites, such as:

The statement about the ethos and values as set by the governors or trustees

The school’s curriculum offer

Policies of the school adopted by the governing board



What Ofsted look for

Under the Education Inspection Framework, Ofsted seek to understand how schools engage with parents about the education that is provided. To help them do so, inspectors use the [Parent View](#) website, which allows parents to record their views of a school across a standard range of questions. The results (provided enough parents have submitted responses) can be viewed at any time on the Ofsted website. Inspectors will also take into account results of any past surveys the school has carried out or commissioned.

When schools receive notice of inspection, governing boards should seek assurance from their headteacher or executive leader that all registered parents (including parents of pupils who have been excluded) have been informed.



Parent representation on governing boards

Individuals eligible to serve as parent representatives (commonly known as parent governors or trustees) on governing boards include those with legally defined parental responsibility.

Governing boards in local authority (LA) maintained schools and single academy trusts (SAT) include parent representatives. Most are elected following nominations and a ballot of parents.

Academy trusts (MAT) are required through their articles of association to appoint at least two parent representatives. This could be at trust board level, or to each of their academy committees (local governing bodies).

Parent representation on governing boards is important, *but it should not be confused with boards’ responsibility to ensure effective parental engagement.* Parent governors and trustees bring the perspective of a parent to board meetings and discussions. They do not serve as the sole voice of parents or serve as their advocates.



The benefits of engaging with parents

Parental participation in schools and trusts has many benefits for pupils. When parents are involved in children’s learning there is a well-evidenced link with improved educational outcomes across a range of measures, including behaviour, self-esteem, attendance, risk of exclusion, keenness to learn and better academic results. It has also been shown that the attainment gap between young people from different socio-economic backgrounds is reduced.

“The benefits have been noted by the Social Mobility Commission (2017): The more involved the parents were in their children’s school life (including volunteering in school, participating in Parent-Teacher Association (PTA) conferences, and teaching at home), the more positive the impact became on children’s performance academically. [...] only a minority of parents in the United Kingdom are uninterested in their children’s education. Instead, the majority may experience difficulty in expressing their interest, something which is identified and acknowledged by professionals.”

Strong links between school and home have a beneficial impact on school life. The wider benefits of parental participation also include building trust between parents and teachers, developing a shared school ethos and culture, gaining cultural understanding, raising aspiration, increasing parent financial contributions, improving staff retention, and increasing access to out of school activities, business and employers.

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Using parental participation to build a positive culture

Culture – the way things get done around here – is what makes schools and trusts unique. It is influenced by, and is also a crucial component of, implementing a vision and strategy that leads to sustainable success.

It is important for the governing board to be aware of culture and climate – the way things feel in their school(s). To understand this, they must make sure they hear from parents and other stakeholders. This has often been overlooked by governing boards not wanting to confuse the lines of management.



Promoting diversity and inclusion

A commitment to equality and inclusion should be a visible element of school/trust culture, rooted in embracing and appreciating the diverse society we live in. Effective parental participation helps boards to build a culture of equality and inclusion and meet their legal duties.

We encourage governing boards and school leaders to discuss:

- **How parents are engaged in and consulted on the school's equality objectives.** These may involve, for example, raising participation of minority groups in after-school activities, reducing exclusion rates for certain groups or promoting inclusive career options.
- **How the methods of consultation with parents are made as accessible and inclusive as possible.** For example, considering what support may be needed for parents to engage with any technology that is used.

Supporting pupils with special educational needs and disabilities

A key aspect of an inclusive culture is valuing and supporting pupils with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND). Involving parents and carers as meaningful partners in decisions about SEND at individual and strategic levels has many benefits. This engagement is something that the governing board can influence, although they are not directly involved in these discussions with parents. We encourage governing boards to discuss with their executive leader and special educational needs co-ordinator (SENCO):

- **How they are engaging with parents and carers to support the development and learning of pupils with SEND.**
- **How this helps them to identify the support that is needed.**

Case studies are a good way of bringing these examples to life.

Increasing governing board visibility

Governing boards who are visible achieve a higher profile whereby stakeholders have a better understanding of what they do and why they do it. Modelling a culture of openness and transparency means that visible boards are more likely to be viewed as credible by parents.

There are many ways in which governing boards can increase their visibility to parents, including:

- Developing the governing board area of the school or trust website.
- Tasking a governor or trustee to work with the school or trust leadership team on parental participation initiatives and report back to the board.
- Providing regular board updates in parent communications or school social media.
- Communicating directly with parents (such as through a termly letter) and inviting feedback.
- Attending school events and speaking to parents.
- Engaging and collaborating with parent teacher associations and parent forums.



Managing complaints effectively

A positive and collaborative school culture is likely to reduce tensions and concerns that could escalate to become complaints. However, all schools face complaints from parents at some stage, and they are required by law to have in place and publish (on their website) a procedure for dealing with them.

It is always better to try and resolve complaints informally, without having to resort to the formal procedure. This requires the parties involved to commit to working together towards a resolution in the spirit of co-operation and reasonable compromise. For schools, this means staff to whom concerns or complaints are brought being objective and understanding of the complainant's perspective. For parents, this means being open to the school's efforts and taking a realistic view of what a satisfactory outcome looks like.

When a parent wishes to make formal a complaint, they should be signposted to the procedure. Those governing should not involve themselves outside of the procedure.

The school or trust is responsible for writing and updating the complaints procedure and the governing board is responsible for approving and maintaining oversight of it. In doing so, the board should ensure that the procedure is impartial, effective and easy to use.

An effective complaints procedure:

- **Is easy to access, understand and use.**
- **Has clear stages attached to it – the school response and if requested, review by the governing board.**
- **Impartial – most procedures contain a mechanism for ensuring this.**
- **Documented at each stage.**
- **Reviewed regularly.**

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Using parental participation to improve outcomes for pupils

Parentkind's *research* on the relationships between parents and schools has shown that parents want to play an active role in their children's education and make a meaningful contribution to school life. Parents want to have more of a say in decision-making, feel listened to, have their views considered and influence change. Harnessing parent voice and parent power represents huge benefits for children's outcomes, the effectiveness and capabilities of schools and the community beyond.



Taking a strategic approach

Meaningful engagement with parents is central to the governing board's first core function: ensuring clarity of vision, ethos and strategic direction. It is this function that drives continuous school improvement.

You can read more about how governing boards carry out this function in NGA's *guide* to Being Strategic.

Governing boards that prioritise parental participation are more likely to achieve:

- Parent 'buy-in' to the values that guide thinking and behaviour in the school/trust.
- A clearer vision for what pupils will leave the school knowing, being and having done.
- A more effective strategy for achieving the vision.
- A positive culture and shared sense of ownership.

The importance of 'buy-in'

Values underpin the culture, strategy, policies and procedures of a school and serve as a reference point for decision-making.

Parents who 'buy-in' and relate to the values are more likely to be engaged and to engage more positively with them. This impacts on relationships and creates a climate where differences are respected.

The vision describes what pupils will leave the school knowing, being and having done.

Parents who 'buy-in' and relate to the vision are more likely to support decisions made at school level, because they are confident in the direction the school is heading, and how it will make their child's educational experience the best that it can be.

Strategic priorities are the actions that achieve the vision.

Parents who understand and 'buy-in' to the school's strategic priorities are more likely to play an active role in supporting their implementation. For example, by playing their part in improving attendance, whole school wellbeing and achieving learning goals.



Achieving 'buy-in'

'Buy-in' from parents is achieved when they are involved in the process of improving a school and shaping its future.

We recommend that governing boards provide a report to parents on an annual basis outlining the progress toward achieving the school's strategic priorities. This is an opportunity to celebrate successes and to acknowledge challenges that require collective ownership, such as improving attendance. It also makes the board more visible to parents.

Communication is a two-way process; the report should provide an opportunity for parents to give their feedback and comment on the school's values, vision and strategic priorities, based on their own experiences.

Governing boards and school leaders are best placed to decide how their report should be organised and what form it should take. It should be appropriately timed so that it can support the annual strategy review. There should also be opportunities for parents to give comment and feedback in a number of ways, such as a formal survey, through their parent forum or at a specially organised event.

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Knowing your parents

Routine communication and engagement with parents takes place at school level, governing boards can be influential in ensuring that the approach is underpinned by knowledge, understanding and empathy.



We encourage governing boards to ask their executive leaders:

- How data and information (such as local area reports) is used to gain an understanding of the communities served by their school(s).
- How people with special knowledge (including faith and community organisations) are used to gain further insight.
- How the school collaborates with parent forums and parent teacher associations to gain further insight.
- What opportunities exist to meet and share experiences with parents of different backgrounds.



This should inform the decisions that executive leaders and governing boards make about:

- Creating a school environment that is welcoming and parents can relate to.
- Tailoring communication to maximise parent participation through newsletters, noticeboards, social media and face-to-face meetings.
- Tailoring communication to promote tolerance and friendship with parents. For example, by demonstrating understanding of a range of religions or cultures.
- Encouraging feedback from parents by making the process straightforward.

Governors and trustees with knowledge and/or experience of the community served by the school(s) can provide useful insight into the most effective options for communicating with parents.

Questions that governing boards can ask



The following questions can be used and adapted to help build an understanding of your school or trusts' approach to engaging with parents, its strengths, and areas for improvement.

1. Does the school meet its statutory requirements on publishing information?
2. Does the school promote and encourage engagement with Ofsted's parent view website?
3. Is the school accessible to parents who wish to share their views?
4. What methods does the school rely on to communicate with parents?
5. Are the school's methods inclusive to all parents – how do we know?
6. Does the school ensure that parents are made aware of any significant changes?
7. Are there examples of how parents' views have influenced school strategy or policy decisions?
8. How is the school involving parents in its strategic priorities?
9. Would the school benefit from having a parent forum and parent teacher association?
10. What links does the school have with its parent forum or parent teacher association – do they need to be strengthened?
11. How does the school use the support of national organisations such as Parenikind and NGA to strengthen parental participation?



The Parentkind Blueprint for Parent-Friendly Schools

Supporting and building relationships with parents takes commitment, knowledge, skills, resources and time and the approaches taken need to fit a diverse range of needs at a time when teachers and schools are under increasing financial and resource strain. Better, more tailored choices for parental participation work is needed more than ever.

It has been clear that schools need a workable model in order to implement the broad spectrum of opportunities that parental participation represents. Parentkind have commissioned extensive research into how schools can embed parental participation, and this has led to the design, consultation and refinement of a solution – the Blueprint for Parent-Friendly Schools.

The Blueprint is an evidence-based foundation for school leaders to maximise parents' contribution and to build upon to create positive partnerships with parents for the benefit of all children.

Although we know there are barriers to parental participation for both parents and teachers, the Blueprint provides a whole school approach and a solution. Built on five Key Drivers, reinforced with three guiding principles and a shared common language, the Blueprint supports the overcoming of challenges and formalises parental participation with a clear, easy-to-use framework for action, which is sustainable and effective.



The five key drivers

> Driver One: Leadership, ethos and resources

Leadership at a school determines the effectiveness of parental participation actions and the conditions to enable it to thrive. Headteachers, governors and members of the senior leadership team should be in charge of parental engagement in their schools.

- Appoint a dedicated staff member to liaise with parents and school.
- Set a direction, focus and a culture that values parental engagement.
- Establish clear boundaries and expectations for parents.
- Have appropriate policies in place, such as a complaints policy.
- Provide a forum that supports consultation and shared decision-making.
- Monitor the training available for staff on engaging with parents.
- Prioritise parents through link governors or standing agenda items.

> Driver Two: Effective two-way communication

Building a relationship of trust between school and community, parents and teachers is vital. Schools should be reassuring parents and be open to discussion about learning and behaviour so everyone can work together.

- Be accessible and find ways to hear from a diverse range of parents.
- Gauge parents views, ideas and how best to communicate.
- Actively establish different channels of communication that work for all.
- Improve communications in both directions.

> Driver Three: Supporting learning at home

Encouraging parents to share a positive attitude towards learning and school and tapping into parents' motivation to support learning at home will help raise children's levels of achievement and will complement the work of schools.

- Coordinate learning activities at home that work with their experiences at school.
- Help parents build their confidence and skills and empower them to take an active lead at home.
- Help parents understand what their child learns and the impact they can have on their child's learning.
- Work with parents to produce resources and materials together.
- Provide curriculum rationale and real-life challenges, so parents see the relevance.

> Driver Four: Involvement in school life

Involving parents as volunteers within school life builds trust and lays the foundations for positive longer-term collaborations.

- Make use of parents skills and interest and ways to make a meaningful contribution.
- Ensure volunteering activities are varied, inclusive and reflect community diversity.
- Allow parents to inform policies, improvement plans and decisions that affect them.
- Encourage parent support groups and set up a PTA to bring parents and teachers together to raise funds to support the school.
- Parentkind represents almost 13,000 PTAs and the opportunity to link to a wider network to share views, ideas, successes, and knowledge.

> Driver Five: Community engagement

Engaging with wider parent communities outside of school aids an understanding of barriers to participation, increased inclusivity and enriches the school by drawing on knowledge, skills and resources. Community engagement helps schools to respond to educational, social, health and wellbeing needs.

- Build a strong relationship with the local community and openly value what it can offer.
- Offer a range of activities, clubs and support to pupils, parents and families.
- Connect with community groups and leaders to increase your reach.
- Utilise the school as a community hub by hiring out buildings, facilities, staff and expertise.



Find out more about the
Blueprint for
Parent-Friendly
Schools

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How to engage effectively with parents

Effective engagement is a two-way process: creating opportunities for the school or trust to hear from parents is as important as the school communicating information to parents. Sometimes the decisions and actions schools take will differ from the feedback parents provide. When this is the case, it becomes even more important that schools communicate well and demonstrate that feedback has been taken into account.



Overcoming barriers

Effective parental participation requires a planned and sustained effort to overcome challenges, such as:

- **Limited face-to-face contact.**
- **The lack of time available (both parents and staff).**
- **Lack of confidence (both parents and staff).**
- **A perceived lack of interest.**

The approach to meeting these challenges will be influenced by the context of the school or trust and the strength of existing links with parents. We recommend that when discussing effective parental participation and overcoming barriers, governing boards and executive leaders refer to section eight of this guide which details Parentkind's Blueprint for Parent-Friendly Schools.

The role of academy committees in a MAT

Academy committees (local governing bodies) operate within the governing structure of MATs. They have a strong connection to their individual school and are part of the local community. As such, they are well-placed to fulfil the governing responsibilities referred to in section one of this guide. This is especially the case in larger, geographically dispersed MATs where engagement (between the trust and its school communities) can be more of a challenge.

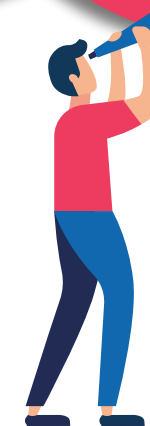
We encourage trust boards to consider how they clearly define the role of academy committees as regards parental participation, which is likely to involve:

Academy committees collaborating with their schools to build effective engagement with parents.

Academy committees having a role in consulting with parents to gain their input into the creation of a MAT vision.

Effective communication between the trust board and its academy committees (for example through holding regular meetings with chairs) will help bring further clarity as well as a sense of collective ownership.

It is imperative that academy committees understand their responsibilities relating to parental participation and what the trust board expects them to do. This should be made clear in the trust's scheme of delegation.



> Methods of engagement

There are many ways in which governing boards, working at a strategic level, can improve the methods used by the school to engage with parents and harness their voice. The following descriptions are intended to prompt discussions at governing board meetings and with executive leaders in your school or trust.



Method	Suggested approaches
Maximising your school website	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A 'governor's/trustee's blog' detailing how they are implementing their strategy, including success stories, can increase board visibility and parents' understanding of a governing board. • A resource centre dedicated to parents, indicating how they can get involved with the school, whether this is formally or more casually by attending social events and voicing their opinions in parent surveys. • Installing a clear 'contact us' function within the parent section of the site can promote inclusivity among your parent demographic. • Regularly share events for the school term and explain how parents can get involved. • Install widgets on the school website that offer language translation.
Parent forums/council	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Hold regular meetings to keep informed about parents' views about the strengths and areas of improvement. • Having focused topics on these forums/councils can help boards and leaders with their school improvement plan and pinpoint areas of concern.
Parents' evening	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Attending parents' evenings can provide a snapshot of the relationship that parents have with teachers and leaders. • Parents' evenings are an opportunity for governing boards to make themselves visible to parents, to hear their views and opinions and develop a positive, proactive relationship. • Parentkind's parent surveys have shown that a third of parents have seen alternative options for engagement with teachers, such as online parents' evenings, to be a positive outcome out of the pandemic. Boards meeting with parents virtually can be difficult but providing the option for parents to meet with governors can create an open-door culture. • School leaders and governing boards should work together to make the most of the platform they use to conduct parents' evenings so that governing boards are visible and accessible, such as a meet and greet session with the headteacher and governing board.
Focus groups	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Focus groups with different parents can help school leaders establish how pupil experiences and learning could be improved. • Allowing parents to navigate the conversation can spark ideas and ways of moving forward to support pupils in and out of school.

Method	Suggested approaches
Consultations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Seeking the views of parents on key issues can increase the confidence of parents to participate and help staff and school leaders identify where support for pupils' may be needed. • Findings from consultations can help governing boards hold their leaders to account.
Parent surveys	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Surveys support the board to gather data and views on the school's operation. The findings from these surveys can enable boards to hold their leaders to account. • This data can help school leaders identify target areas of support.
Social media and communications	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Using social media channels such as Twitter and Facebook or school communication apps such as Parent Ping allows you to actively engage with parents' social media feeds and share the information you need them to know, as well as promote parent-intensive activities. • These platforms can be an opportunity to communicate positive success stories, as this demonstrates that the school not only acts reactively to negative news but also has an vested interest in promoting the positive achievements of its pupils and the school as a whole. • These platforms can be helpful in communicating celebrations from different backgrounds and religions and share how the school is embracing these customs.
Annual reports	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • It's good practice to produce an annual report for parents to communicate, or recommunicate, the school's strategic plan, and allow accountability to parents when delivering it. It is also an opportunity to celebrate the successes of the school, and increase parental understanding of the governing board's role, illustrating the impact of governance on pupil outcomes and their school experience. • Download NGA's basic model report to support your board in creating an annual report for your school setting.
One to one attendance meetings	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Where there is concern, school leaders can host a one-to-one meeting with parents to discuss the obstacles that may prevent a pupil from attending school. Creating an open and understanding dialogue allows school leaders to communicate that parents have a legal duty to have their child attend school and offer any support that may be required to support the pupil with their learning and development.
Updates on the governing board	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • When parents are invited to attend the school, an information board about the governing board, their responsibilities and updates can offer insight to parents about the work the governing board have done that term. • Provide an update of when governors have visited the school during school hours. • Provide an update on how parent voice has influenced strategic decision-making e.g 'you said, we did'.

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Monitoring impact

There are a range of sources governing boards can use to monitor the impact of parental participation in their schools and trusts.

These include:

- Data, such as survey responses, parent view, engagement and complaints trends and patterns.

- Reports from executive leaders, for example a termly update on engagement strengths and areas for development.
- Feedback from meetings with representatives of parent forums and parent teacher associations on engagement strengths and areas for development.
- Presentations to the board on the progress and impact of parent participation initiatives.
- Visits to schools that are focused on parent participation and meeting parents.



Parent participation training for school leaders



To learn more about overcoming barriers to parental participation and to develop and create a plan to implement your schools parental participation strategy, Parentkind have a series of workshops for your school staff to receive development and training; an introductory workshop which is valuable for all school staff to attend, two masterclasses which are ideal for headteachers, governors and school senior leaders and a bespoke learning training package.

Further reading

Parentkind, Have a say as a parent governor

parentkind.org.uk/be-a-parent-governor

Parentkind, Parents as governors

parentkind.org.uk/parents-as-governors

Parentkind, Why parents matter

parentkind.org.uk/why-parents-matter

More from NGA

To find out more about NGA's fourth core function and the importance of governing boards engaging with stakeholders, watch NGA's webinar on [engaging stakeholders: the governing board's role](#).

Parent participation training

Workshop: Overcoming barriers from a parent perspective

Senior leaders and teachers will be given practical tools, techniques and actions to embed and cultivate an environment that nurtures parental participation in all areas of a child's education.

Masterclass: Whole School Approach to Parental Participation

This masterclass builds confidence in devising and implementing effective parent participation strategies, as well as being inspired to establish a parent-friendly culture in your school. Attendees will understand how to apply leadership skills and capabilities to engage parents and achieve school improvement, manage resources and bolster the school's reputation.

Masterclass: Successful Parent Consultation

This masterclass supports schools in the development of highly effective parent consultation approaches, to build a framework for listening to parent voice. Attendees will find out the benefits of encouraging parent voice, along with finding out the potential barriers to parental involvement.

Bespoke learning

As parental participation experts Parentkind are able to curate a bespoke training package for schools' needs. This can be delivered either in-person or online and will be tailored dependent on requirements. Contact schools@parentkind.org.uk for a free discovery call.



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