

2010



*Parents in Partnership .....*

**A PARENT  
ENGAGEMENT  
POLICY  
FOR ONTARIO  
SCHOOLS**



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## A MESSAGE FROM THE MINISTER OF EDUCATION

Parents matter in education. They matter as vital partners who contribute much to the work of our educators, schools, and communities. They matter as parent leaders, parent mentors, and models of commitment to excellence in education, and they matter every day as they influence and support their children's academic achievement.

As a former trustee, board chair, and director on the Ontario Catholic School Trustees' Association – and the mother of four children – I know first-hand the importance of being an involved parent, and I appreciate the difference parents can make when they work in partnership with the education system towards common goals. Today, as Minister of Education, I have the privilege of introducing this province's first comprehensive parent engagement policy, which I believe to be a landmark for education in Ontario.

This important policy formally recognizes and supports the vision of our schools as places of partnership and respect, where every parent feels included. It builds on and strengthens the vital relationships between parents and schools, school boards, and the Ministry of Education. It sets new directions to help ensure that all partners will have the skills, knowledge, and tools they need to build positive partnerships and continue moving our vision of parent engagement forward.

This policy is only one of many initiatives our government has brought forward to support parent engagement in Ontario schools. The Parent Engagement Office was established to develop and implement parent engagement initiatives that support student achievement and well-being across the province. It was recently aligned with the Inclusive Education Branch of the ministry, recognizing parent engagement as an essential component of Ontario's Equity and Inclusive Education Strategy.

The Parents Reaching Out grants program continues to support local projects that remove barriers to parent engagement. Important new initiatives such as the Full-Day Early Learning Kindergarten Program, and the expansion of Parenting and Family Literacy Centres, further support the early involvement of parents in their children's education and in the education system.

In addition, the new regulatory requirement that every board in the province have a Parent Involvement Committee means that parents have a voice within our schools, through school councils across the province, as well as at the board level, where the communication of parent perspectives is an important part of parent engagement.

In presenting Ontario's Parent Engagement Policy, I would like to acknowledge the hundreds of parents, educators, and community members whose insights and advice are reflected in the pages of this document. As partners, we are making a difference for every child in Ontario and building our shared social and economic future.



The Honourable Leona Dombrowsky  
Minister of Education



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Une publication équivalente est disponible en français sous le titre suivant :  
*Partenariat avec les parents : Politique de participation des parents pour les écoles de l’Ontario, 2010.*

This publication is available on the Ministry of Education’s website, at  
[www.edu.gov.on.ca](http://www.edu.gov.on.ca)





# 1. PARENT ENGAGEMENT AND PARTNERSHIP

**Parents play a vital role in education. When parents are engaged and involved, everyone – students, parents and families, teachers, schools, and communities – benefits, and our schools become increasingly rich and positive places to teach, learn, and grow.**

## A Parent Engagement Policy for Ontario Schools

As a ministry, we have clearly articulated the government’s vision of a province in which all Ontarians have the opportunity to be their best and contribute fully to a strong, vital, and caring society. We have made significant investments in publicly funded education, and will continue to do so, because our fundamental commitment to students’ well-being remains the driving force behind everything we do. We know that parents<sup>1</sup> likewise want Ontario’s schools to bring out the very best in their children and help them reach their full potential.

Study after study has shown that student learning and achievement improve when parents play an active role in their children’s education and that good schools become even better when parents are involved. The purpose of Ontario’s Parent Engagement Policy is to provide the supports needed to connect parents at the local level and to help ensure that they have the skills, knowledge, and tools they need to engage fully in their children’s education and in the life of their schools. Designed to promote exemplary

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1. Throughout this policy, the term *parents* refers to parents, guardians, and caregivers.

practices across the province, the policy fulfils the government's commitment to support and enhance parent engagement in Ontario schools by:

- articulating a vision of parent engagement in Ontario schools;
- identifying the strategies necessary to fulfil the vision of parent engagement and support Ontario's core priorities for education;
- identifying and removing discriminatory biases and systemic barriers in order to allow participation of all parents in their children's schools, with the goal of supporting student learning and helping to close the achievement gap;
- promoting specific parent involvement practices that are known to positively influence student learning and achievement;
- identifying the roles of education partners – including the ministry, school boards, schools, Parent Involvement Committees, and school councils – in furthering parent engagement across the province.

### **Parent Engagement in Action**

Many exemplary parent engagement programs and initiatives have been developed by schools and school boards, the Ministry of Education, faculties of education, and community organizations across Ontario. The "Parent Engagement in Action" sidebars in this document illustrate some of the ways in which these organizations are breaking down barriers to parent engagement and supporting parents as welcomed and valued partners in education.



## Ontario's Vision of Parent Engagement

The Parent Engagement Policy is grounded in a vision of parents that acknowledges their importance both as valued partners and active participants in their children's education.

### Vision

In Ontario's education system, all partners acknowledge the positive impact of parent engagement on student achievement. Students are supported and inspired to learn in a culture of high expectations in which parents:

- are welcomed, respected, and valued by the school community as partners in their children's learning and development;
- have opportunities to be involved, and also a full range of choices about how to be involved, in the educational community to support student success;
- are engaged through ongoing communication and dialogue with other educational partners to support a positive learning environment at home and at school;
- are supported with the information and tools necessary to participate in school life.

## What We Know About Parent Engagement

Parents play a vital role in the development and education of their children. Parents and families, with the support of their school and community, have the primary responsibility for the development of their children's character. In addition, research clearly indicates that good schools become better schools when they are strongly connected with parents as part of the learning community. Thus, parents not only play an important role within the school community, but they also have a significant impact on their children's education through the attitudes they help to shape and the direct support they provide to their children.

Parents have a primary influence on their children's attitudes towards school, their learning, and their future success. Research has shown that positive parental aspirations and expectations for their children's educational achievement have a strong relationship with children's actual achievement. The greater the support that families provide for their children's learning and educational progress, the more likely that their children will do well in school and continue on with their education.<sup>2</sup> Parents need to hold high aspirations and expectations for their children, and schools need to work in partnership with parents so that the home and the school can share in these expectations and support learning.<sup>3</sup> The positive results of a genuine partnership between parents and schools include improved student achievement, reduced absenteeism, positive student behaviour, and increased confidence among parents in their children's schooling. Such results, in turn, have a positive impact on our province as we seek to develop and sustain a cohesive society and a strong economy that will secure Ontario's future prosperity.

### Parent Engagement in Action

The Durham District School Board developed a parent partnership initiative designed to increase the involvement of culturally and linguistically diverse parents. This initiative involved the translation of parent information and welcome packages into nine languages, a guide to multilingual literacy events for schools to use on literacy nights, and a parent information forum for Muslim families on various topics such as supporting literacy at home, assessments, evaluations, report cards, and the Ontario curriculum.

## Challenges and Opportunities

Today's global, knowledge-based, and technology-intensive economy makes the ongoing work in our schools critical to students' success in life and to Ontario's economic future. At the same time, our rapidly changing, diverse, and increasingly complex society presents many challenges – and often competing priorities – for parents.

With their busy lives, it can be challenging for parents to play as active a role as they would like in their children's education. Research has shown

2. K. L. Mapp, "Having Their Say: Parents Describe Why and How They Are Engaged in Their Children's Learning," *School Community Journal* 13, no. 1 (2002), pp. 35–64.
3. J. Hattie, *Visible Learning: A Synthesis of Over 800 Meta-analyses Relating to Achievement* (New York: Routledge, 2009), p. 70.

that parent involvement can be influenced by many factors such as language, parent educational level, the challenges of single parenthood, attitudes of school staff, cultural influences, socio-economic status, and geography (for example, the local challenges facing urban, rural, and northern communities). As well, parent engagement tends to lessen at the secondary school level, resulting in, for example, reduced parent volunteerism. In addition, parents sometimes come from countries where the school culture and opportunities to participate in school activities are different from those in Ontario. Access to knowledge about Ontario's educational system and how they may become more involved in their child's education are essential for such parents.

If society presents challenges to parent engagement in education, it also offers new ways to engage parents. In particular, new technology expands the possibilities for communication and parental engagement. Technology is increasingly woven into our social fabric. A recent poll showed that eight out of ten Canadians have Internet access at home.<sup>4</sup> A decade ago, social networking was merely a concept. Today, there are hundreds of millions of people worldwide using social networking tools as an integral part of their daily lives. As our access to information technology continues to expand, a variety of online tools and strategies are now available – and are being used – to engage parents.

Increasingly, information is being made available in a variety of forms that can be viewed, heard, or read anywhere and at anytime. Maximizing the use of these technologies is essential as we approach parent engagement in the twenty-first century.

### Parent Engagement in Action

As part of a *pédagogie culturelle* project, the Conseil scolaire catholique de district des Grandes Rivières offers a workshop, *Reaching Out to You*, to raise awareness among non-French-speaking parents about the school's French-language mandate and the resources available to them to support their children during their schooling. The workshop also enables parents who are dealing with similar experiences to create a support network.

4. Ipsos Reid poll, released October 2009, <http://www.ipsos-na.com/news-polls/pressrelease.aspx?id=4567>

## Parent Engagement in Practice

As our society changes, views of parent engagement and parent involvement are also constantly evolving. Joyce Epstein, an expert on educational partnerships, notes that *homework* no longer means only “work that students do alone but also [means] interactive activities that students have and discuss with others at home and in the community to link schoolwork to real-life experiences.”<sup>5</sup> The concept of *help at home* refers to families encouraging, listening to, praising, guiding, monitoring, and discussing schoolwork with their children, and not whether or how they teach school subjects. *Volunteer* means not only someone who helps out at school during the day but also anyone who supports school goals and children’s learning and development in any way, at any place, and at any time.

We recognize, increasingly, that student well-being is a holistic concept that, as noted by the World Health Organization in 1984, includes not only physical health but also a combination of social, emotional, mental, moral, spiritual, and cognitive dimensions.<sup>6</sup> All partners in education need to make a conscious and collective effort to work together to build and promote the well-being of students.

### Parent Engagement in Action

The Catholic District School Board of Eastern Ontario developed a strategy, *Creating Communities of Peace*, designed to help create safe and caring community schools that respect individuality, celebrate harmony, and strive to promote and develop responsible behaviour based on Gospel values. The strategy focuses on restorative justice and progressive discipline, and addresses the rights and responsibilities of students, school staff, and parents.

## Implications for Policy Development

Our policies must evolve to recognize changing conditions as we strive to support student achievement and well-being. Ontario’s Parent Engagement Policy recognizes that parent engagement encompasses a broad spectrum of activities and may take many forms as lives and circumstances change.

5. J. L. Epstein, L. Coates, K. C. Salinas, M. G. Sanders, and B. Simon, *School, Family, Community Partnerships: Your Handbook for Action*, 3rd ed. (Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin, 1997), p. 156.

6. World Health Organization, *Health Promotion: A Discussion Document on the Concept and Principles* (Geneva: World Health Organization, 1984).

The policy acknowledges all aspects of the important parental role in education. These include providing home conditions that support children as learners at all grade levels, supporting parent peers, and taking parent leadership roles. Some parents play a leadership role and serve on school councils, Parent Involvement Committees (PICs), or Special Education Advisory Committees (SEACs). Some volunteer for field trips or help with various school activities. Parents meet with teachers to discuss their children’s needs, progress, and goals, and they attend assemblies, performances, and sports events. Many parents read to their children every night or talk to them about their school day. These activities all reflect engaged parents who are contributing to their children’s education.

An effective parent engagement policy must acknowledge the importance of parent voice by providing multiple ways for parents to express their perspectives on education and to receive responses from other educational partners. We must recognize the tireless efforts of parents who share their time, energy, dedication, and commitment to support student learning. Likewise, we must recognize that strong and effective parent engagement begins with parents supporting parents at the local and regional levels – through vehicles such as school councils and PICs.

Leithwood and his colleagues note the importance of the “family path” to support student achievement.<sup>7</sup> It is important that all partners in education support this path. For example, many families have questions about how to relate to and support their

### Parent Engagement in Action

St Aloysius School in Stratford developed a weekly tutoring program to help parents work with struggling readers. The program also provides the opportunity for parents to come into the school to learn from other parents who have been trained in implementing special literacy support models for use at home.



Parenting and Family Literacy Centres (PFLCs) provide an early learning program that promotes positive parent-child interaction with young children in a school-based setting. PFLCs lay the foundations for successful transition to school, familiarizing children and their families with school routines and encouraging parents to take an active part in their children’s learning. They also help link families to community resources available for children with special needs and to health and other services.

7. K. Leithwood, S. E. Anderson, B. Mascal, and T. Strauss, “School Leaders’ Influences on Student Learning: The Four Paths”, in *The Principles of Educational Leadership and Management*, ed. T. Bush, L. Bell, and D. Middlewood (London: Sage Publications, 2009).

children’s learning from the early years through adolescence. Various activities, such as workshops for parents, can strengthen parenting skills related to their children’s education and provide parents with a greater understanding of their options for involvement. Such activities can offer helpful strategies and approaches, such as active forms of reading, specific literacy or math skills, or tip sheets that parents can use to help their children learn. Through shared experiences, these activities create an awareness of the challenges relating to parental involvement in education. Important connections are made and effective responses are shared among families. A successful parent engagement policy must break down barriers that exist for many parents in order to help support all parents with the skills and knowledge they need to be engaged and involved in supporting student achievement.

In addition, an effective parent engagement policy must actively seek to establish an understanding of families’ backgrounds, cultures, interests, concerns, goals, needs, and views of their children. Research has shown that school practices to involve families make a difference in whether or not – and which – families become involved, as well as how they become involved. Parent engagement is nurtured when parents know how to make meaningful contributions to the school’s efforts and when they believe that school staff, as well as their own children, value their participation in the school.<sup>8</sup> A parent engagement policy that supports positive links through thoughtful, concrete actions contributes to a general awareness that all parents and families are welcomed at schools. Such awareness encourages a sense of connectedness, community, ownership, and belonging. Studies have shown that this type of inclusive learning environment results in more students experiencing greater success in school.

To establish the most inclusive learning environment, communication is essential. Effective communication helps break down barriers by establishing

### Parent Engagement in Action

York Region District School Board has developed a parent engagement audit designed to identify barriers to, and increase opportunities for, parent engagement. The audit, designed as a system survey, is distributed to parents and staff at the end of the school year. A practical application of Epstein’s six-part typology of parent engagement, the audit takes the needs of families and the surrounding community into account, with the goal of increasing parent engagement in a variety of ways.

8. K. Leithwood and D. Jantzi, *A Critical Review of the Parent Engagement Literature* (Toronto: Ontario Ministry of Education, 2006).

a common language and understanding of student progress, which, in turn, helps to create a culture of high expectations that is shared by students, parents, and educators.

Many Ontario school boards and schools have developed effective parent engagement practices and programs. The success of the Parents Reaching Out (PRO) grants program and the excellent work of school councils and Parent Involvement Committees demonstrate that strong and effective parent engagement is happening at the local and regional level. But barriers to parent involvement still exist. Together we need to identify and overcome those barriers while creating the conditions in which parent engagement can thrive.

This policy represents the government’s formal commitment to parent engagement in education. It recognizes both the diversity of families and their important role in education. It provides a framework that will empower all educational partners and enable them to take concrete actions to support and encourage parent engagement so that our students can reach their full potential.

## **Parent Engagement: The Historical Context**

Our schools have inherited a rich tradition of parent and community involvement in education. This involvement has reflected a variety of experiences and perspectives, including those of the Catholic and French educational communities.

The provincial government has taken a number of steps to foster parent involvement in education. In 1980, Bill 82 amended the Education Act to require all school boards to provide programs and services for students with special education needs. It also required that all school boards establish a Special Education Advisory Committee with representatives from parent groups focused on the interests and well-being of students with special education needs.

Several initiatives to enhance parent involvement have focused on the development of school councils. A 1994 report by the Ontario Parent Council recommended the establishment of a “school parent council” in every school to help ensure equity of access and consistency of approach for

parents across the province. The 1995 report of the Royal Commission on Learning, *For the Love of Learning*, recommended that school boards and principals take the lead in establishing and supporting school-community councils and encouraged them to develop the kinds of school-community alliances best suited to their local needs. Legislation mandating school councils followed in 1997 with the Education Quality Improvement Act. The role and purpose of school councils was clarified through Regulation 612/00, which required school boards and principals to solicit input from school councils.

## Moving the Agenda Forward

Recognizing the critical link between parent engagement and student success, the government initiated the Parent Voice in Education Project, which conducted broad consultations with parents across the province and provided its report in 2005.

“Parental involvement is a broad term and includes such things as good parenting, helping with homework, serving on school councils and board committees, communicating and meeting with teachers and volunteering in the classroom or on school trips. All forms of parental involvement are beneficial. In every form, parental involvement in education shows children that their parents care about what they are doing and learning, and that they value a good education.”

Ontario Ministry of Education, *Parent Voice in Education Project Report* (2005, p. 10)

The report identified three key areas for action:

1. to empower the parent voice within the education system
2. to create a more welcoming and inclusive environment for parents
3. to recognize the differences among Ontario’s diverse communities.

Through this landmark report, parents affirmed their belief in the importance of parent engagement in education.

In the same year, the Minister of Education responded to the report with a discussion paper laying out the blueprint for a vision of parent engagement



in the school system – and we have acted upon this blueprint. Since 2005, over \$25 million has been invested to support parent engagement initiatives. In 2006, the Parent Engagement Office was established in the ministry to develop and implement parent engagement initiatives such as the Parents Reaching Out grants program. Over its first four years, this program provided over 5,500 grants to school councils and over 200 regional grants. All of these initiatives were designed to enhance parent involvement and, in particular, break down the barriers faced by many Ontario parents to engagement in their children’s education.

Parent Involvement Committees were established in Ontario school boards to enhance parent involvement in support of student achievement at the regional level and provide a direct link between parents and the director of education and trustees. The Provincial Parent Board (2007–9) provided recommendations to enhance PICs, PRO grants, and online resources, and helped guide and assist the province’s efforts to strengthen parent engagement.

Ontario’s Equity and Inclusive Education Strategy, introduced in 2009, sets out a vision of education in Ontario in which all students, parents, and other members of the school community are welcomed and respected. Parent engagement is an essential component of the strategy, which provides a framework educators can use to identify and remove discriminatory biases and systemic barriers so that students can reach their full potential. The strategy supports the engagement of all parents with their boards and schools to share their ideas and support student learning.

In 2009, the government passed Bill 177, the Student Achievement and School Board Governance Act, which allows regulations respecting Parent Involvement Committees. The minister has responded to this legislation by amending Regulation 612/00 to require each school board to have a PIC in place to support parent engagement. PICs, like school councils, recognize the role of parent leaders in supporting parent engagement, and they enable a broad spectrum of parents to provide input to school boards.

### **Parent Engagement in Action**

In partnership with anglophone parents, the Conseil scolaire de district catholique de l’Est ontarien organized a series of evening literacy workshops. At these workshops, parents were able to work together with their children on reading and writing exercises and were given the opportunity to engage constructively with their children’s teachers.



## 2. FULFILLING THE VISION OF PARENT ENGAGEMENT

**The Parent Engagement Policy recognizes that parent involvement is multidimensional and that parents and families have a role to play in fulfilling each of Ontario’s core priorities for educational excellence.**

### Strategies for Success

The Parent Engagement Policy identifies a series of key strategies designed to support parents as partners so that they have the opportunity – and the skills, knowledge, and tools – to engage with other education partners in fulfilling Ontario’s core priorities for education.

The policy acknowledges that Ontario’s education system has a rich tradition of parent engagement that continues today. Across the province, many parents and families are actively involved in their children’s education, both at home and at school. For example, parents provide their suggestions directly to the ministry through letters, emails, phone calls, and conversations. At the local and regional levels, parents are engaged as members of school councils, Special Education Advisory Committees (SEACs), and Parent Involvement Committees (PICs), and in a wide variety of initiatives at district school boards across Ontario. Parent perspectives are taken into consideration and recognized in ministry policies and programs.

#### Parent Engagement in Action

Jean Vanier Catholic School in London developed an initiative called Putting Out the Welcome Mat to help new parents become more involved and connected with the school. The initiative included the translation of the parent information handbook and school website and the offering of translation services for parent-teacher meetings.

The Parent Engagement Policy is designed to build on our successes and bring into focus those activities and initiatives that encourage and enhance parental involvement in education. It aims to ensure that parent engagement is recognized, valued, collectively understood, and practised throughout the province. It is designed to help ensure that barriers to parent engagement are addressed across the province so that all parents can have full access to the education system and meaningful representation as valued educational partners.

### Parent Perspectives

#### PARENT VOICE IN EDUCATION

The role parents play in education – both at home and at school – has grown and evolved over many years. As we have come to understand the direct links between parent engagement and student achievement, the call for a greater focus on parent engagement is stronger today than ever before. These links were highlighted in the 2005 report of the Parent Voice in Education Project, which made recommendations, based on parents' input, to strengthen the parent voice in education and to create a more welcoming and inclusive education system.

### Strategy 1: School Climate

**Foster and sustain a positive, welcoming school climate in which all parent perspectives are encouraged, valued, and heard.**

#### Current Policy and Practice

Many current policies, programs, and initiatives reflect and support this strategy, as illustrated by the following selected examples:

- Parents are members of the Education Partnership Table, which discusses substantive problems and issues facing the education system and contributes to their successful resolution.

- Ontario’s Leadership Framework of effective practices, sponsored by the Institute for Education Leadership (IEL), identifies practices, skills, knowledge, and attitudes school and system leaders need in order to effectively engage parents and promote welcoming schools.
- IPRCs take parents’ perspectives into account when making a placement decision: before considering placement in a special education class, the IPRC considers whether placement in a regular class, with appropriate special education services, would meet the pupil’s needs and is consistent with parental preferences. If placement in a regular class meets both of these criteria, then the IPRC is required to decide in favour of placement in a regular class.
- The New Teacher Induction Program (NTIP) includes resources focused on teacher communication with parents.
- Ontario’s faculties of education support parent engagement by developing teacher candidates’ ability to engage in productive parent-teacher conversations to support student learning.
- The ministry publication *Planning Entry to School: A Resource Guide* (2005) promotes a welcoming environment in schools and provides examples of effective practices for parents and school staff.
- The welcoming guideline of the *Policy Statement and Guidelines on the Admission, Welcoming, and Support of Students in French-Language Schools in Ontario* (Ministry of Education, 2009) proposes that school boards “set up, as required, an advisory committee whose composition reflects the community’s in order to develop a protocol for welcoming students and parents” (p. 4).
- Every school is required to have a safe schools team, of which at least one member must be a parent. Principals are required to share with these teams the results of school climate surveys, which are undertaken by all schools every two years to gauge the school climate and promote a safe and respectful environment where all students feel a sense of belonging.

### Parent Engagement in Action

Sudbury’s Pius XII Catholic School invited parents to attend a series of one-day workshops that were held once a month over a five-month period. During the introductory session, parents offered their ideas for workshop topics. In the workshops that followed, parents exchanged ideas on the day’s topic in the morning and listened to an expert speaker in the afternoon.

- Changes to the safe schools provisions of the Education Act and related policies have been made so that parents are more aware of measures to support positive student behaviour and promote progressive discipline.

### **A Culture of Mutual Respect**

The Parent Engagement Policy is designed to ensure that parents have a voice at every level of the education system to support a culture of mutual respect for all – parents, students, teachers, school staff, board and ministry personnel, and community members. Although the decision-making responsibilities of principals, trustees, and board and ministry officials are set out in legislation, the Parent Engagement Policy supports and encourages education leaders to solicit and consider parent opinions and input so that the recommendations of parents are weighed, along with other relevant factors, in the decision-making process.

## **Strategy 2: Eliminating Barriers**

**Identify and remove barriers to parent engagement that may prevent some parents from fully participating in their children’s learning and to reflect the diversity of our students and communities.**

### **Current Policy and Practice**

Many current policies, programs, and initiatives reflect and support this strategy, as illustrated by the following selected examples:

- The ministry’s Parents Reaching Out grants program supports school-based initiatives focused on engaging parents who may experience barriers as a result of language, recent immigration, poverty, newness to Ontario’s school system, or other factors.
- The Equity and Inclusive Education Strategy directs school boards to implement strategies that identify and remove discriminatory barriers that limit engagement by students, parents, and the community, so that diverse groups and the broader community have better board-level representation and greater access to board initiatives.

- The Ontario First Nation, Métis, and Inuit Education Policy Framework outlines strategies and performance measures designed to facilitate increased participation by First Nation, Métis, and Inuit parents, students, communities, and organizations in supporting student achievement and well-being.
- The Focus on Youth and the Community Use of Schools programs are intended to reduce barriers to accessing both school spaces and programming. They include active community outreach (including outreach to parents) to facilitate community use of school facilities.
- The Education Act requires every district school board to have a Special Education Advisory Committee. Regulation 464/97 sets the composition for the SEACs and requires that school authorities also have SEACs.
- Parent Involvement Committees and school councils provide a voice that reflects the diversity of parents in their communities.

### Strategy 3: Supports for Parents

**Provide parents with the knowledge, skills, and tools they need to support student learning at home and at school.**

#### Current Policy and Practice

Many current policies, programs, and initiatives reflect and support this strategy, as illustrated by the following selected examples:

- The Parent Engagement Office of the Ministry of Education continues to build awareness among parents of the importance of parent engagement.
- The ministry website and ministry publications provide in-depth information on the education system as well as a wide variety of tools and resources, including tips for parent-teacher conversations, to help parents foster student learning at home.

“Parents Matter”, a Ministry of Education brochure on parent engagement, and how parent engagement is building student success, is available in multiple languages on the ministry’s website.

- Fact sheets have been developed for parents on a number of key topics including PIC operations, healthy schools, inclusive education, safe schools, and the Ontario Code of Conduct.
- *Finding Common Ground: Character Development in Ontario Schools K–12* (Ministry of Education, 2006) highlights the importance of parent and community partnerships.
- *Effective Practices for Students with Autism Spectrum Disorders* (2007) is a ministry resource guide that devotes a chapter to parent involvement in program planning for students with autism spectrum disorders.
- A series of video podcasts offered on the ministry’s abc123 website has been designed for parents and provides practical ideas for reading at bedtime, establishing routines, and getting organized for school.
- *Shared Solutions: A Guide to Preventing and Resolving Conflicts Regarding Programs and Services for Students with Special Education Needs* (2007) is a ministry resource guide for parents, schools, and the community that helps facilitate effective communication and resolve conflicts when they arise.
- Introductory material in all curriculum documents explains how parents are an important partner in their child’s learning.
- The support guideline of the *Policy Statement and Guidelines on the Admission, Welcoming, and Support of Students in French-Language Schools in Ontario* (2009) proposes that school boards “ensure that schools support and communicate with parents throughout their child’s schooling” (p. 4).
- *A Question and Answer Guide for Parents: Full-Day Kindergarten with Programs Before and After School Hours* (2010), a ministry brochure for parents with children in full-day kindergarten, helps parents understand the new program and answers some questions about how it works and how it helps children.

### Parent Engagement in Action

Leslieville Junior Public School in Toronto invited the parents of kindergarten children to participate in a Family Literacy Evening. The parents were welcomed, encouraged to build peer networks, and provided with strategies to support their child’s literacy development at home to help prepare them for school.

- Support materials for parents will be available to provide information about learning activities in the ministry documents *The Full-Day Early Learning–Kindergarten Program, 2010–11 (Draft Version)* and *The Extended-Day Program, 2010–11 (Draft Version)* and about complementary activities that parents can provide for their children outside of the school day.

## Strategy 4: Parent Outreach

**Review and expand communication and outreach strategies such as local workshops, presentations, tools, and resources, to share information and strategies related to supporting learning at home and parent engagement in schools.**

### Current Policy and Practice

Many current policies, programs, and initiatives reflect and support this strategy, as illustrated by the following selected examples:

- Ontario’s Early Learning initiative strongly supports parent and family engagement, stressing the importance of effective parent-school communication and the role of parents, families, and communities in children’s education.
- Multilingual materials have been developed for parents, including a PRO grants brochure; a bullying-prevention pamphlet; parent guides to helping their children with reading, writing, and mathematics; and numerous tip sheets on topics such as helping children get ready for school, helping them with homework, and communicating with teachers.
- At Parenting and Family Literacy Centres, staff work with a wide range of learning materials that are used to promote literacy and numeracy and that can be easily adapted for parent-child activities at home.
- The *aménagement linguistique* policy for French-language schools (see *Aménagement linguistique: A Policy for Ontario’s French-Language Schools and Francophone Community* [2004]) promotes strong collaboration between educational institutions, parents, families, and the community.



- The School/College/Work Initiative funds the creation of a wide array of locally developed learning and awareness opportunities for parents and others (e.g., Parents as Career Coaches forums, Parents and Students Career Night, Picture Your Kid @ College, and Student/Parent Dual Credit Information Sessions).
- Schools participating in the Healthy Schools Recognition Program work with their school councils and are encouraged to work together with other parents, students, and school staff.
- The Specialist High Skills Major Program encourages participating school boards to invite parents to sit on board or school advisory committees to help shape the local program.
- The ministry's *Transition Planning: Resource Guide* (2002) encourages collaboration between students, parents, and the community in planning transitions for students with special education needs from secondary school to postsecondary education, the workplace, and/or the community.
- The Urban and Priority High Schools Program includes parent engagement components. In addition, parents are members of Urban and Priority High Schools school/community steering committees.
- Parent associations are participants in Curriculum Advisory Committee meetings and are invited to provide input into curriculum documents during the review process.
- Special education training materials developed by the ministry support communication between parents, the school, and the community (see, for example, the definitions of parental role and involvement in *The Individual Education Plan [IEP]: A Resource Guide* [2004] and web-based IEP training materials).

### Parent Engagement in Action

St Anthony's Elementary School in Port Hope has developed a project to better engage parents in the school community and make resources available to them. After consulting with the school council on the needs of its parent community, the school established a library of resources available to parents, focusing on a variety of topics including learning styles, parenting, discipline, and other issues relevant to education. Materials were placed in a prominent area in the school foyer so parents have easy access to them and can sign them out in the front office.

- The Ontario Provincial Education Network (OPEN) publication provides updates on important education initiatives of interest to parents.
- Ministry staff attend a variety of parent meetings and conferences, including provincial parent associations conferences/meetings and regional meetings such as PIC and SEAC meetings, to obtain feedback from parents on educational topics.
- Effective practice is shared through the ministry website. All of the projects approved for funding through PRO grants are posted and some are highlighted as examples of successful practice.
- The Ontario Leadership Framework (OLF) identifies the fostering of genuine, trusting relationships between students, staff, parents and families, and communities as a key leadership practice of principals and vice-principals. The OLF also highlights the practice of supporting school councils so that they can participate actively and authentically in their advisory roles.

### Parent Engagement in Action

École publique Le Coeur du Nord in Kapuskasing organized an open-door night that featured workshops to help parents deal with bullying issues. Non-French-speaking parents were welcome, and translation was provided. There was also a daycare service that allowed parents to bring younger children with them.

### Getting Involved

Although parent engagement takes many forms – at home and at school – there are two formal structures in Ontario’s education system that support parent engagement and provide parents with a voice at the school and district school board levels:

- *School councils* focus on increasing parent involvement within the school community as a key factor in supporting student learning and achievement, and they act as a direct link between parents and the school principal.
- *Parent Involvement Committees* enhance parent involvement at the regional level in support of student achievement and operate as a direct link between parents and the director of education and trustees.



### 3. PARENT ENGAGEMENT ACTION PLAN

**Fulfilling Ontario’s vision of parent engagement requires commitment and action by all of our partners at every level of the education system.**

#### Building on Sound Foundations

Parents in Ontario care about their children and want to be involved. They want their children to succeed in school and are willing to help in as many ways as possible. Commitment to our students’ well-being is the driving force behind everything we do in education. The entire education community – parents and families, administrators, teachers, school staff, board staff, and the government – shares this firm commitment.

A true partnership requires sustained and deliberate effort on the part of all partners as well as commitment and action at every level of the education system. Although parents can sometimes find it challenging to play an active role in their children’s education, it is important to address such challenges so that Ontario’s students have the support they need to be successful in school and later in life.

#### Parent Engagement in Action

Thunder Bay’s Ogden Community Public School held a series of three symposia for parents on bullying-prevention strategies, strategies for parents to support literacy learning at home, and math strategies for parents and children. The symposia involved Aboriginal guest speakers and writers who shared their experiences with the parents and children. The staff of the Ontario Aboriginal HIV/AIDS Strategy in Thunder Bay provided additional insight on bullying prevention, homophobia, and acceptance.

#### Supporting Parent Engagement

The Parent Engagement Policy seeks to identify and break down barriers to parent involvement and proactively reach out to parents. In order to accommodate work schedules, outside commitments, and individual preferences, the policy provides parents with choices about how they want

to be involved in their children’s education. The policy is flexible, recognizing the diversity of parents and their contributions. It provides tools to help parents support parents at the local and regional levels – reinforcing, for example, the vital link between parents and schools provided by school councils and Parent Involvement Committees (PICs), and supporting the pivotal role these groups play in disseminating information to parents, seeking parent input, providing advice to schools and boards, and actively supporting parent engagement.

The Ministry of Education is committed to supporting boards and schools in enhancing parent involvement by providing the resources they need and by recognizing and sharing effective practices and promoting the use of such practices in every region of the province. Likewise, the ministry is committed to providing supports to parents to help ensure that they are informed and knowledgeable and are able to engage fully as partners in their children’s education.

### **The Role of Communication**

Respectful, ongoing communication and transparency are essential if we are to fulfil our vision of parent engagement. Effective, ongoing communication results in positive and respectful relationships and an appreciation of the roles played by all partners in education. Multiple channels of communication about student progress that connect boards, schools, parents and families, students, and communities need to be in place, and all partners should be encouraged to use them. An effective network includes clear two-way channels for communications from home to school and school to home.

A variety of methods should be used to communicate with diverse parent communities, from newsletters, emails, face-to-face meetings, interactive websites, and online surveys to phone trees, videos, and webcasts. We need to utilize new and emerging technologies as we seek to expand outreach strategies to engage diverse families. Regardless of how it is presented, all information for students as well as parents and their families should be clear, timely, useable, and linked to children’s success in school.

#### **Parent Engagement in Action**

The Bridges Project, developed by Alexander Mackenzie Secondary School in Sarnia, combined school council meetings with a series of parent workshops on topics such as school pathways, cyberbullying, and self-esteem. Parents were encouraged to attend both the meetings and the workshops.

Surveys can be a useful tool in fostering parent engagement. In *Reach Every Student: Energizing Ontario Education* (2008), the government recognizes the importance of regular board-level parent surveys designed to gauge, and track over time, parent satisfaction with the quality of education. In addition, school climate surveys provide schools with a tool to assess perceptions of school safety from a parent perspective; they can then inform the development of school improvement plans.

Parent engagement is also a vital component of the Equity and Inclusive Education Strategy. As part of this strategy, boards include in their director's annual report information about their activities for engaging parents.

### **Realizing the Benefits of Parent Engagement**

The Parent Engagement Policy acknowledges that schools and boards across Ontario have implemented a wide variety of parent engagement strategies and have many effective practices in place. We also recognize that parent engagement takes many different forms as it continues to evolve in our schools and boards and as it responds to local needs and circumstances. Yet, much remains to be done if we are to realize the full potential of parent engagement. This is particularly true at the local level, where supports are needed to connect parents to parents, teachers to parents, and schools and boards to parents and communities. We are bringing about change by talking with one another and taking action. Together we are creating possibilities for our children and transforming these possibilities into a reality.

The result of efforts to enhance parent engagement will be beneficial for all of us – students, parents and families, teachers, administrators, school staff, and community partners – and result in increased confidence for our students, their families, and our education system as a whole. Parents will be more supportive because they understand more fully what is happening in the classroom. Educators will have a stronger connection with parents, feel supported by

#### **Parent Engagement in Action**

Iroquois Ridge High School in Oakville initiated a program for parents in the school community in order to provide information about parenting and teen issues such as sexual health, drugs and alcohol, and raising responsible and self-confident teens. A support network for parents was established, and parents received information about the school and its programs as well as issues affecting teens through different stages of adolescence. Guest speakers from community and public health agencies were included in the program.

them, and have a higher level of job satisfaction. Schools will gain greater recognition for their achievements and their valued role as an important part of community life. The achievement of whole schools as well as individual students can improve as students are supported to fulfil their potential. Relationships built on a foundation of partnership and cooperation have a positive impact on student learning and can help close the achievement gap.

The actions summarized in the following sections will help realize our promise to make Ontario a global leader in building and sustaining an equitable and inclusive education system that is enhanced by strong parental engagement.

### School Actions

- Establish and sustain a positive learning culture and welcoming school climate where parental input is welcomed, respected, and valued.
- Implement strategies to identify and remove discriminatory barriers that limit engagement by students, parents, and our diverse communities.
- Actively explore and utilize opportunities (such as Parents Reaching Out [PRO] grants) to further engage parents at school and at home to support student achievement.
- Review existing parent and community partnerships and seek to expand them to reflect the diversity of our parents and the broader community.
- Discuss learning expectations and students' academic progress with students and parents, and make efforts to assist parents who do not understand the language of the school.
- Actively support and encourage school council members and other parents to share their ideas for reducing the student achievement gap and to help inform school improvement plans.
- Support strategies (e.g., workshops, resources such as tips sheets, and translation of materials) for parents and students to develop skills and knowledge that support a positive learning environment.

- Work towards representation of diverse parent groups on all school committees, including school councils.
- Implement the board Equity and Inclusive Education Policy, and its programs and action plans, to support parent engagement and reflect the needs of students and our diverse school communities.
- Monitor school climate (e.g., through surveys and focus groups) to help identify barriers to parent involvement or issues that should be addressed in order to foster and support a safe and welcoming learning environment.
- Review self-assessment processes to determine the effectiveness of parent engagement strategies.
- Communicate progress to the board and the local community including educators, students, parents, and the public.
- Continue consulting with parents during the IEP/IPRC processes.
- Implement the directive of the aménagement linguistique policy for French-language schools, which recommends that school boards and school staff make a commitment to collaborate with parents so as to develop a shared vision of lifelong learning and francophone identity for students.
- Where schools are offering full-day kindergarten, inform parents about this new initiative and explain how it will provide young students with a stronger foundation for future learning.

## **Board Actions**

- Establish and sustain a positive learning culture and welcoming school climate where parental input is encouraged, respected, and valued.
- Identify and address barriers so that parents, diverse groups, and the broader community have better board-level representation and greater access to board initiatives.
- Actively promote the involvement and engagement (both formally and informally) of parents with boards and schools, and encourage parents to

share their ideas for improving student achievement and well-being to support board planning (e.g., through Parent Involvement Committees, Special Education Advisory Committees, school councils, focus groups, and parent surveys).

- Support PICs in their role of providing advice on parent engagement to support student achievement and well-being.
- Review existing parent and community partnerships and seek to expand them to reflect the diversity of our parents and the broader community.
- Provide timely information about board and school policies, procedures, and practices to students, parents, teachers, school staff, administrators, volunteers, and the broader community, and make efforts to assist parents who do not understand the language of the board.
- Support school councils and PICs in their efforts to reach out to and further engage parents, students, school staff, and community members in order to support student achievement and help close the achievement gap.
- Implement policies, programs, and action plans that reflect the principles of equity and inclusive education, take the parent voice into account, and reflect the needs of the board's diverse school communities.
- Monitor parent engagement in ways that support and foster student learning and achievement.
- Embed the principles of equity and inclusive education, which support and value parent involvement, in their cyclical policy review so that these principles will be an integral part of every board's operations and permeate everything that happens in schools.
- Provide opportunities for parents, students, administrators, teachers, and school staff to acquire and develop the knowledge, skills, and attitudes needed to foster varied forms of parent engagement to support student achievement and well-being.
- Communicate progress on parent engagement to the local community, including educators, students, parents, and the public.
- Highlight parent engagement within the Equity and Inclusive Education section on progress in the director's annual report.



- Encourage supervisory officers to demonstrate leadership skills identified in the Ontario Leadership Framework (OLF) by engaging in dialogue that builds community partnerships, including relations with parents, and by collaborating and networking with others inside and outside the board and across schools.
- Implement the proposal in the welcoming guideline of *The Policy Statement and Guidelines on the Admission, Welcoming, and Support of Students in French-Language Schools in Ontario* (2009) that school boards “set up, as required, an advisory committee whose composition reflects the community’s in order to develop a protocol for welcoming students and parents” (p. 4).
- Implement the proposal in the support guideline of *The Policy Statement and Guidelines on the Admission, Welcoming, and Support of Students in French-Language Schools in Ontario* that school boards “ensure that schools support and communicate with parents throughout their child’s schooling” (p. 4).
- Follow the directive of the aménagement linguistique policy for French-language schools that schools and school boards commit to providing teachers with training in areas such as effective communication strategies, strategies for welcoming parents in the classroom, and intercultural understanding and dialogue.
- Inform parents of the schools that offer full-day kindergarten.

## Ministry Actions

- Actively support and foster parent engagement through the Parent Engagement Office in the Inclusive Education Branch.
- Consider parent perspectives and seek input from parents on policies and programs that affect them and their children’s learning.
- Support the four provincial parent associations that work with parents across the province: the Ontario Association of Parents in Catholic Education, the Ontario Federation of Home and School Associations, Parents partenaires en éducation, and People for Education.

- Value the contributions and perspectives of parent organizations and groups as well as individual parents.
- Seek to identify and remove barriers to parent engagement that may prevent some parents from fully participating in their children's learning.
- Expand communication and outreach to share information and strategies that will increase parent engagement in their children's education at home and at school.
- Provide funding and tools (e.g., guides) for the PRO grants program.
- Incorporate the principles of equity and inclusive education into the PRO grants and refocus PRO funding to better help parents in high-needs areas participate in their children's education.
- Improve timelines for flowing PRO funding to school councils and regional organizations to enable projects to begin earlier in the school year.
- Review the PRO grants program and evaluate its effectiveness.
- Conduct and disseminate research on promising practices that foster parent engagement and that demonstrate the link between such engagement and improved student achievement and well-being.
- Expand the number of Parenting and Family Literacy Centres in high-needs communities.
- Engage parents and families in their children's education and in the education system through the ministry's Full-Day Early Learning Kindergarten Program.
- Provide funding through Grants for Students' Needs for school boards to support a wide range of parent engagement activities.
- Host annual meetings with PIC chairs to provide a forum for open dialogue on their challenges and opportunities to enhance parent engagement in our schools and to improve student achievement and well-being.
- Provide training opportunities and develop resources and tools to foster parent engagement and to encourage positive dialogue, skills, and leadership among parents and committee members (e.g., on

PICs and school councils), students, teachers, administrators, school staff, and volunteers.

- Develop and post a sample survey to assist boards in their efforts to monitor parent satisfaction related to parent involvement.
- Continue to enhance the ministry's abc123 website and develop additional tools and resources for parents to help them support their children's education at home.
- Use a variety of formal and informal methods and means (e.g., OPEN, the annual meetings of PIC chairs, school councils, provincial parent associations, and individual parents) to help ensure parent voice is heard and valued.
- Update the guide for school council members.
- Develop and release a PIC guide.
- Provide support to boards and parents through parent engagement representatives in each of the ministry's regional offices.
- Compile and annually release a PIC chair directory to facilitate communication among PICs and with the ministry.
- Enhance opportunities for parent participation through the regulatory requirement that all boards have PICs.
- Develop and post surveys to gather input or feedback from parents on curriculum in the curriculum review process.
- Develop and post a guide for parents at the time of release of revised curriculum.
- Develop supports to help teachers use parent-friendly language on students' report cards.
- Provide information to parents to assist in understanding assessment, evaluation, and reporting policies and procedures.
- Actively promote the Ontario Leadership Strategy, which encourages schools and leaders in the education system to foster genuine, trusting relationships with students, parents and families, staff, and communities.

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